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**The Character of Theology:
Herman Melville and the Masquerade of Faith**

**A Thesis Presented to the
Department of Theology and Religious Studies
University of Glasgow**

**In Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy**

**Bradley A. Johnson
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Thesis Summary

Title: The Character of Theology: Herman Melville & The Masquerade of Faith

Candidate: Bradley A. Johnson

My task in this thesis is to assess the theological implications of Herman Melville's aesthetic understanding of the modern Subject as a duplicitous self-creation. Although Melville is obviously not a theologian, either by discipline or confession, I will argue we find in the complex theatricality of his life and fiction a means of articulating the potential of a truly radical theological thinking. Such a thinking, I argue, 'unthinks' all previous grounds, in order then to recast them imaginatively. For Melville, we shall see, that which identifies theology 'as theology' is not simply an unattainable, transcendent Thing-in-Itself. It is, on the contrary, the active emergence of unthinkable excess from the materialistic immanence of its self-characterisation. The aesthetico-theological thinking in view here highlights the necessity of a repositioning of theological discourse from the binary perspective that inevitably leads to self-present identification, be it in a discipline or a confession, to the radically *decentered / desacralized* interdisciplinarity of theology becoming-itself.

I seek to achieve this end by situating Melville close to the Germanic philosophical climate that was sweeping across the American literary landscape of the mid-19th century. Melville's ambivalent attitude toward his own desire for self-destruction, and thus, too, his desire for a non-subjective common pool of artistic genius, is strictly parallel to his misgivings about Transcendentalism and Romanticism. It is, I argue, in the dialectical materialism of Friedrich Schelling that we find Melville's philosophical analogue, in their respective efforts to understand the self-becoming of the Absolute / God / Truth. Here we find an aesthetico-theological thinking attuned to the creative inadequacy of self-becoming, whereby the finite inadequacy and perspectival duplicity of theological self-presentation carry the potential of a self-creativity that makes all things new. As such, for aesthetico-theological thinking there is truly nothing behind or beyond the materiality of experience – i.e., no *Ding an sich* or transcendental determination of being. And precisely for this reason the awareness and actualisation of something new, indeed something miraculous because it was previously impossible, is made possible.

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning is going on. Everywhere. Amidst all the endings, so rarely ripe or ready. They show up late, these beginnings, bristling with promise, yet labored and doomed. Every last one of them is lovingly addressed: 'in the beginning.' But if such talk — talk of the beginning and the ending — has produced the poles, the boundary markers of a closed totality, if 'the beginning' has blocked the disruptive infinities of becoming, then theology had better get out of its own way.

In the beginning, theology starts again.¹

1. On Introductions

An introduction, in addition to being a formal greeting or welcome, is meant to set the tone and the tenor of a particular project, so as to hint at the chorus of voices and themes that will in due course emerge. In so doing, a project's ending is translated, or, in the event of its malignancy, metastasises to its beginning. Typically written after the book's body, and sometimes even its conclusion, introductions can often be slightly shady. They are, Mark C. Taylor affirms, 'awkward, embarrassing affairs — coy games of hide-and-seek, revelation and concealment, appearance and disappearance.'² Which is to say, a conclusion is never far from its introduction. The reader will soon notice that this introduction is no different.

Replete with its as yet unsubstantiated assertions, an introduction tends to be, for no less an authority on the subject than Hegel, 'a string of random statements and assurances about truth'.³ The insidious implication of these 'random statements' and 'assurances', he fears, is that they unfaithfully portray truth as some autonomous, constructive particularity, some Kantian *Ding-an-sich*, that (for Hegel) illegitimately precedes the philosopher's attempt to develop an argument. In any narrative, be it philosophical or otherwise, such truth might range from the writer's historico-cultural

¹ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

² Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel & Kierkegaard* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 2.

³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. A. V. Miller; New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1.

preconceptions and agendas, to the intentions and purposes read into the absent author by his or her reader. Problems arise, however, when one conflates such preconceptions with (authorial) self-conscious immediacy. On this point, even Søren Kierkegaard, one of Hegel's chief critics, agrees, finding in it a rationale for his use of pseudonyms and 'indirect communication':

It gives me pleasure to see that the pseudonyms, presumably aware of the relation subsisting between the method of indirect communication and the truth as inwardness, have themselves said nothing, nor misused a preface to assume an official attitude toward the production, as if an author were in a purely legal sense the best interpreter of his own words; or as if it could help a reader that an author had intended this or that, if it were not realized; or as if it were certain that it was realized because the author himself says so in the preface; . . . or as if an author were served by having a reader who precisely because of the author's clumsiness knew all about the book.⁴

For Hegel, following his signature logic, the immediacy of truth assumed in any given introduction / preface stands opposed to its eventual emergence in and through the dialectical Absolute of identity-in-difference, and is the hallmark of naïve irrationalism. Indeed, as he famously mocks the position of his former roommate Friedrich Schelling, it is to present the '*Absolute* as the night, in which, as people say, all cows are black'.⁵ On the contrary, he continues, 'One can say of the Absolute that it is essentially a *result*, that it is only at the *end* what it is in truth'.⁶ As such,

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (trans. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 225–226. Cf., Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood*, 2–5; 90–107; *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 322–300.

⁵ As Karl Jaspers has noted, though, Hegel's jab was actually very similar to Schelling's critique of those who misunderstood the concept of intellectual intuition. He writes: 'Most people see in the being of the absolute nothing but a pure night and are unable to know anything in it; it dwindles away for them into a mere negation of multiplicity' (Qtd. in Karl Jaspers, *Schelling; Grösse und Verhängnis* [Munich: Piper, 1955], 302). Jason Wirth notes that even after Hegel noted in a letter that he was criticizing those who do not properly understand intellectual intuition and not (as it was commonly regarded) specifically Schelling, he declined Schelling's request that he say as much in future editions of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. See Jason Wirth, Introduction to *The Ages of the World*, by Friedrich W. J. Schelling (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), ix, 133–34n.7)

⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 22.

introductions are 'not only superfluous but, in view of the nature of the subject matter, even inappropriate and misleading.'⁷ The truth of a philosophical text, Hegel goes on to argue, should be self-explanatory; that is to say, the immanence of truth embodied in the dialectical poetics of such truth's *self-creation* [*Bildung*].⁸ Of course, one can but hope that Hegel appreciated the irony that his condemnation of introductions was written as a preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, itself a six-hundred-page introduction to his vaunted and often vilified philosophical system.⁹ While I do not make similar systemising claims for my project here, I dare not miss the importance of his interrogative contempt of introductions, nor its instructive irony.¹⁰

2. An Untimely Intrusion

Similarly, and true to the original sin of the Calvinist upbringing weighing heavily on his soul from birth, Herman Melville lived his life acutely aware of the untimely intrusion of its end. Like several of his most famous characters and narrators, he believed his ending to be somehow out of place, before its time. In *Moby-Dick*, for instance, Ishmael is sensitive, from the very beginning of his journey

⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 1.

⁸ Terry Pinkard describes *Phenomenology of Spirit* well:

Hegel intended the book to satisfy the needs of contemporary (European) humanity: it was to provide an education, a *Bildung*, a formation for its readership so that they could come to grasp *who* they had become (namely, a people individually and collectively 'called' to be free), *why* they had become those people, and why that had been *necessary*. . . . [I]t intended to show its readership why 'leading one's own life', self-determination, had become necessary for 'us moderns' and what such 'self-legislation' actually meant. (*German Philosophy, 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 222).

⁹ See Jacques Derrida's delight in the crafty paradox of 'the preface that Hegel *must* write to denounce a preface' (*Dissemination* [trans. Barbara Johnson; Athlone Press: London, 1981], 11).

¹⁰ For his part, Hegel was deeply ambivalent about the place of *Phenomenology of Spirit* in his philosophical system. While he describes it in the text as an 'Introduction', he never actually lectured on the original *Phenomenology* while teaching in Berlin; and by the end of his life, in fact, had gone so far as to disavow it as a true Introduction at all. And yet, he continued distributing copies of the book to friends and visitors, and even made contractual obligations to publish a revised edition (he died before he could do so) (Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 221-22).

on the Pequod, to the fact that the inevitable end of Ahab's wrathful search for Moby Dick was suicide.

All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practicably assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.¹¹

In a dialectical manoeuvre that will prove especially significant for my reading of Melville, the inevitability of Ahab's 'cardiac arrest', as it were, is that which conditions the very possibility of the 'monomania' of the Pequod's captain and crew. That is to say, the ending of *Moby-Dick* is the fundamental presumption that makes the novel itself at all possible. Neither such a manoeuvre, nor its implications for an aesthetic re-evaluation of subjectivity, is as simple as it may at first seem,

When Melville himself died in 1891 several obituaries expressed shock that he had not died years earlier. In fact, one year earlier Edward Bok had observed:

There are more people to-day who believe Herman Melville dead than there are those who know he is living. . . . Forty-four years ago, when *Typee* appeared, there was not a better known author than he, and he commanded his own prices. Publishers sought him, and editors considered themselves fortunate to secure his name as a literary star. And to-day? Busy New York has no idea he is even alive, and one of the best-informed literary men in this country laughed recently at my statement that Herman Melville was his neighbor by only two city blocks. 'Nonsense', said he. 'Why, Melville is dead these many years!'

¹¹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, in *The Writings of Herman Melville* (eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 6; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1988), 184. The narrator of *Pierre*, which was finished one year after *Moby-Dick*, also feels the prick of death's prematurity when he laments his inability to change the course of Pierre's inevitable demise: 'Are there no couriers in the air to warn thee away from these emperilings. . . . Where now are the high beneficences? Whither fled the sweet angels that are alleged guardians to man?' (Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, in *The Writings of Herman Melville* [eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 7; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1971], 186).

Talk about literary fame? There's a sample of it!¹²

For the *New York Times* he just as well should have been dead, for they could not even remember his name: in its two notices of his death, his first name was reported, respectively, as 'Henry' and 'Hiram'.¹³ And in a glaring oversight that has persisted until only recently, *The Press* claimed that 'he had done almost no literary work during the past sixteen years.'¹⁴ Seemingly silent unto the end, Melville's death is memorialised by a blank scroll chiselled onto his tombstone in the Bronx, where he is buried next to his son, Malcolm.¹⁵

What, though, of his beginning? By all accounts, it certainly seems innocent enough. But is it really? Might it be pertinent, for example, that Melville's mother added a terminal 'e' to her children's surname after the death of their father in 1832? A one-letter change is, of course, small, inconsequential. What difference does a character make? For her son Herman, however, the change would ultimately hint at

¹² Qtd. Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary of Herman Melville, 1819-1891* (vol. 2; New York: Gordian, 1969), 827.

¹³ Laurie Robertson-Lorant, *Melville: A Biography* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 614; Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 2 [1851-1891]* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 911-12.

¹⁴ 'Death of a Once Popular Author', qtd. Leyda, 2:836. In reality, Melville had written more lines of poetry than Emily Dickinson and almost as many as Walt Whitman. Moreover, Laurence Buell notes, all three poets wrote poetry for roughly the same amount of time, a little longer than twenty-five years. Melville's career as a novelist lasted but a decade ('Melville the Poet' in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville* [ed. Robert S. Levine; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 135). Granted, after *Clarel* (1876), Melville's published poetry was limited to two privately printed volumes, twenty-five copies each, *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) and *Timoleon* (1891). For more about Melville's status as a poet, see Elizabeth Renker, 'Melville the Poet: Response to William Spengemann' *American Literary History* 12 (Spring-Summer, 2000): 348-54; William C. Spengemann, 'Melville the Poet' *American Literary History* 11 (Winter, 1999): 571-609; Hershel Parker, 'The Lost Poems (1860) and Melville's First Urge to Write an Epic Poem' in *Melville's Evermoving Dawn: Centennial Essays* (eds. John Bryant and Robert Milder; Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1997): 260-75; Stanley A. Goldman, *Melville's Protest Theism: The Hidden and Silent God in Clarel* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Another premature death, Malcolm Melville had died in 1867, at the age of eighteen, by a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Originally ruled a suicide 'while laboring under temporary insanity of Mind', the questions and uncertainty surrounding the whole affair resulted in the cause of death to soon thereafter be ruled an accident (Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 2:687-91). See also, Robertson-Lorant, *Melville*, 513-17; Parker, *Herman Melville, Volume 2*, 642-46.

the inherent fluidity of his identity, a notion with which he would occasionally play by signing letters with his original surname, 'Melvill'. Consciously or not, Elizabeth Renker suggests, these acts of reversion would effectively split him in two.¹⁶ Melville himself, in fact, suggests something similar when he concludes a letter to his British publisher, John Murray, whom he had not yet met, by playfully questioning the latter's persistence 'in carrying on this mysterious correspondence with an imposter shade', that is, 'the fanciful appellation of Herman Melvill'.¹⁷

3. *Herman Melville and the Aesthetico-Theological Vision*

In this way, Melville's was a kind of paradoxical self-creation, or self-becoming, not dissimilar to that described by Maurice Blanchot:

The writer only finds himself, only realizes himself, through his work; before his work exists, not only does he not know who he is, but he is nothing. He only exists as a function of the work, but then how can the work exist? . . . If he does not see his work before him as a project already completely formed, how can he make it the conscious end of his conscious acts?¹⁸

It is the aim of this thesis is to assess the theological implications of Melville's presentation of modern subjectivity as aesthetic self-creation. Moreover, it is precisely because of the centrality of the Subject / subjectivity in modern (i.e., post-Kantian) philosophy, that is, its endeavour to re-think the role and limits of subjective imagination and spontaneity, that my argument is ultimately an affirmation of Thomas

¹⁶ Elizabeth Renker, *Strike Through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 15. For the clearest example, see his letter to Evert A. Duyckinck, 13 Dec. 1850 in Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, in *The Writings of Herman Melville* (eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 14; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1993), 172.

¹⁷ Melville, *Correspondence*, 105. Motivating this ghostly allusion was Murray's request in a previous letter to 'test the corporeality' of Melville by 'clapping eyes upon him in London'.

¹⁸ Maurice Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death' in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader* (trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster, and Robert Lambertson; Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1999), 361-62.

J .J. Altizer's provocative declaration: 'We must be prepared to accept the paradox that modern philosophy has been more deeply theological than modern theology, which is perhaps not so paradoxical if our greatest modern imaginative vision has been more fully theological than has our theological thinking.'¹⁹ For Altizer, this is true because it is the modern philosophical vision that allows theological thinking to rethink its own deepest grounds, those of subjectivity, 'a re-thinking which is initially an unthinking of every established theological ground' -- only then is truly theological thinking possible. Such is, he concludes, 'the first goal of radical theology', and is the mark of a theology that harnesses the potential of a united thinking and creativity / imagination.²⁰

My analysis of Melville's presentation of subjectivity, as the creative duplicity of self-becoming, will show him to be an exemplary model of Altizer's point. In him we will find theology (not to mention literature) characterised in ways hitherto thought unthinkable. As such, I will argue that the truest import and relevance of contemporary theology is contingent on the aesthetics of its unthought subjectivity -- namely, the free theological Subject as a revolutionary *poesis*, that is, a creative emergence from the unavoidable collisions between religion, literature, and philosophy.²¹ As we will see with Melville, while such an interdisciplinarity may

¹⁹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, 'Doing Radical Theology', unpublished manuscript, 4.

²⁰ Altizer, 'Doing Radical Theology', 2, 4-5.

²¹ In this way, the task of thinking about theology remains fully hermeneutical, as described by Rüdiger Bubner:

Hermeneutics has become more and more of a key word in philosophical discussions of the most varied kind. It seems as if hermeneutics creates cross-connections between problems of different origin. In linguistics and sociology, in history and literary studies, in theology, jurisprudence and aesthetics, and finally in the general theory of science, hermeneutic perspectives have been successfully brought to bear. In this way, the traditional philosophical *claim to universality* is renewed under another name (*Modern German Philosophy* [trans. Eric Matthews: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 45).

often seem peculiar, or perhaps even forced, it is best understood not simply as the happy or obvious convergences and coincidences of different discourses in harmonious dialogue. On the contrary, my emphasis here is on precisely the forced peculiarity of what emerges as its radically disruptive, repressed aesthetico-theological excess. Only in this way does one's thinking about theology become *theological thinking*.

David Jenkins expresses something similar when he specifies literature as theology's forgotten dialogue partner: 'Theologians need . . . to stand *under* the judgement of the insights of literature before they can speak with true theological force of, and to, the world this literature reflects and illuminates.'²² Such a forceful perspective, nevertheless, remains a marginal one. This is but one of the reasons David Jasper can candidly sigh: 'I am tired of the academic game of proving that I have read this and this – one reads about a lot of things, and what is interesting is why some strike one as desperately important and others as instantly forgettable. (Most "theology", as such, bores me to tears.)'²³ Theology, as understood by the likes of Jenkins and Jasper, amongst others, is as though an unthought, aesthetic excess that blurs discursive contours whilst blinding hegemonic systems of closure, and thus remains vital beyond its strictly confessional / disciplinary confines.

This, of course, is not to say that Melville himself is a theologian. Rather, I will contend that the aesthetico-theological potential for a truly revolutionary freedom and autonomy emerge from and sustain the complex theatricality of his life and

²² David Jenkins, 'Literature and the Theologian' in *Theology and the University: An Ecumenical Investigation* (ed. John Coulson; Baltimore: Helicon, 1964), 219.

²³ David Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction* (2nd ed.; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), xv. For a different, but related, appraisal of traditional theology's diminishing cultural role, and the potential of cultural and literary studies to revitalise see David E. Klemm, 'Back to Literature - - and Theology?' in *Postmodernism: Literature and the Future of Theology* (ed. David Jasper; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 180-90; and Michael Grimshaw, 'Tourist, Traveler, or Exile: Redefining the Theological Endeavor', *Journal of Religion* 81 (April 2001): 294-70.

fiction. Contrary to the most common postmodern reading of Melville, with which my own will surely be associated, my point in emphasizing 'theatricality' is not that Melville introduces and/or participates in a counterfeit economy, as it were, wherein classical notions of truth and identity are forever frustrated by one's epistemic inability to see beyond the mask of phenomenal limitation. His is, rather, one in which the gamble of faith that anything at all exists behind the phenomenal mask is itself betrayed as constitutive of the masquerade. For Melville, that which identifies a character 'as a character', for us the quintessential 'theological' Subject, is not simply the belief in an unattainable / disguised Thing-in-Itself, i.e., that which lies beyond and thus guarantees identity; it is, rather, the unthinkable (that is to say, repressed) possibility and freedom that unavoidably emerges from the material processes of self-characterisation / self-becoming.

What Melville's thinking suggests is that in the same way that, for instance, textuality in deconstruction remains a necessarily impossible avoidance, i.e. a primordial condition of possibility, so does the idiosyncratic eruption of theology (as a truly free Subject) in its material, objective embodiment 'as theology'. Furthermore, his reflections suggest the need for a radical repositioning of theology from the binary perspective that leads to self-present identification – be it in the veins of, for example, Spinozan immanence, Kierkegaardian transcendence, or even Aquinian confession – to the complexly evolutionary, radically decentered / desacralized aesthetic intensity of a materialistic theology. In the aesthetic rethinking opened up by the likes of Melville, the Subject (i.e., of theology) is freed, if only for a miraculous moment, from its reflection upon the destructive desire and attempts for an impossible cognisance of its own incognisance – that is, the excessive moment of its self-characterisation. In the aesthetico-theological vision of Herman Melville there is, in

short, truly nothing behind or beyond the mask of phenomenal experience. As such, it is concerned less with the necessity of what is than with the possibility of what might be, and thus with the self-creative freedom of its self-characterisation.

4. The Polytemporal Approach

One of the key features of Bruno Latour's argument in his provocatively titled book *We Have Never Been Modern* is his insistence on the reversibility of time. For Latour, reality is built around the natural proliferation and networking of 'quasi-objects' that are neither simply subjects nor objects. Their appearance or role *as* subject or object / cause or effect is, he argues, dependent upon one's particular perspective, discipline, or discourse. As such, he continues, the modern notions of temporality and progress, and thus discursive possibilities and norms, are thrown into a turbulent discord. He writes:

Modernizing progress is thinkable only on condition that all the elements that are contemporary according to the calendar belong to the same time. . . . For this to be the case, these elements have to form a complete and recognizable cohort. This beautiful order is disturbed once the quasi-objects are seen as mixing up different periods, ontologies or genres. Then a historical period will give the impression of a great hotchpotch. Instead of a fine laminary flow, we will most often get a turbulent flow of whirlpools and rapids. Time becomes reversible instead of irreversible.²⁴

It is, therefore, reasonable that some of today's most provocative thinking can only be thought provocatively at all insofar as we recognize its 'polytemporal' causes and effects.²⁵ Although I wish to ultimately resist the anti-revolutionary / anti-apocalyptic

²⁴ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (trans. Catherine Porter; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 73.

²⁵ Cf., 'Let us suppose, for example, that we are going to regroup the contemporary elements along a spiral rather than a line. We do have a future and a past, but the future takes the form of a circle expanding in all directions, and the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled. Elements that appear remote if we follow the spiral may turn out to be quite nearby if we compare loops. Conversely, elements that are quite

implications of Latour's idealisation of the evolutionary adaptation of networks, the networks in which Melville and theology participate, i.e., their interdisciplinary / hermeneutic connection, are also anything but straightforward.²⁶ In the course of this thesis, for instance, we will often find ourselves straddling generations. To this end, I will seek to flesh out the cultural-philosophical-theological networks, those obvious and immediately contemporary, as well as those not so obvious and temporally anachronistic.²⁷

In Chapter One, I present a mostly biographical portrait of a young Herman Melville consumed by the questions of his own authorial self-becoming. His writing, as is especially clear in his first novel, *Typee*, has never been without the structure of duplicity and self-doubt, or the attendant desire for self-destruction. As such, Melville echoes the opening paragraph of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, '— and so I tell my life to myself,'²⁸ and participates in the autobiographical dilemma of self-becoming heralded in the eighteenth-century by Lawrence Sterne and popularised at the turn of the twenty-first century by Dave Eggers. As we will see, it is this tradition's same appetite for self-destruction that marks the intensity of subjective freedom most evident in Melville's later novels.

In Chapters Two and Three, I argue that the ambivalence regarding self-destruction and self-assertion can only be adequately understood when held in relief

contemporary, if we judge by the line, become quite remote if we traverse a spoke. Such a temporality does not oblige us to use the labels "archaic" or "advanced," since every cohort of contemporary elements may bring together elements from all times. In such a framework, our actions are recognized at last as polytemporal' (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 75).

²⁶ Cf., Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 48.

²⁷ Obviously, I am not using the word 'anachronistic' pejoratively; but rather, in the sense that 'reading against the grain' of history may hold potential for drawing attention to certain 'indivisible remainders' otherwise repressed in every identifying closure, text or philosophical system. See e.g., Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 96.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals / Ecce Homo* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Vintage, 1969), 221.

to the philosophical climate of 18th-/19th-century Germany. While it may initially seem a departure from the narrative begun in the first chapter, Melville's presentation of subjectivity throughout his novels is far too closely aligned to the convergence of aesthetics and subjectivity found in Kant and the theory of the romantic novel developed by Early German Romantics for it to be ignored. Nevertheless, while many of the formal similarities with the Romantics outlined in Chapter Two are often stark and the influences apparent, especially in *Mardi*, Melville's enduring significance is his agonistic resistance to the appropriation of Romantic ideals by several of his American contemporaries, particularly what he regarded as the dehumanised, spiritual esotericism of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Therefore, in Chapter Three, I contend that the transition from Melville's ambivalent embrace of Romantic ideals in his essay 'Hawthorne and his Mosses' (especially regarding authorial ownership of texts and self-assertion) to the complex 'apocalypticism' of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* is symptomatic of Friedrich Schelling's aborted philosophical aim of articulating the materialistic genesis of God's self-becoming.

In this way, moreover, I will argue in Chapter Four that Melville does not truly exemplify the aesthetico-theological thinking until *after* the apocalypticism of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. As such, it is not until the poetic duplicity of his final novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, that the full implications of a fully radical theology are realised in an aesthetic theology. Here I will demonstrate that in Melville's masquerade of confidence and faith the wearing of masks does not obscure or defer the revelation of a transcendent truth or ultimate kernel of self-identity, be it that of divine revelation, mystical silence, pantheistic All, or nihilistic void. Rather, in a sense perhaps suggestive of Deleuzian immanence, and thus explosive to the simple equation of modern aesthetics and liberal humanism, Melville's masquerade is

the characterisation / materialisation of theological truth as the aesthetic intensity of unthinkable possibility.

CHAPTER ONE:
MELVILLE & THE PROBLEM OF SELF-PRESENTATION

1. Fresh From the Sea

Fresh from the sea at the age of twenty-five, following his final journey as a merchant sailor in October 1844, Melville regarded the writing of his first novel as the very beginning of his life. Indeed, as he writes in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'From my twenty-fifth year I date my life, three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then & now, that I have not unfolded within myself.'²⁹ What is especially important to note here is that such an unfolding *within himself* is only possible in the very act of unfolding *himself without*. That is to say, if we are to take Melville at his word, which he later insists we must, any sense of his self-discovery or self-consciousness as an artist and a free thinker must be held in tandem with the fact that such a discovery is only possible *in the very act* of his writing. In this way, it is particularly instructive to approach our reading of Melville as that of a certain kind of self-creation / self-becoming.

By April 1845, Melville was confident enough in his hastily written manuscript detailing his adventures on the Marquesas Islands to send portions to Harper Brothers for possible publication. Though one editorial assistant favourably compared what he read to *Robinson Crusoe*, Harpers nevertheless rejected it on the grounds that 'it was impossible that it could be true and therefore was without value.'³⁰ Not soon thereafter, Thomas Nichols, a colleague of Melville's brother in New York, feeling 'sure that the reviews of the English press would make its American success', advised Melville to send it to London. Proclaiming that the manuscript had held him

²⁹ Melville, *Correspondence*, 193.

³⁰ Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 1:196.

rapt, Nichols had no doubt of its potential for success, 'not at all sure that the process could be reversed.'³¹ Thus galvanised, Melville sent his manuscript to London with his brother Gansevoort, who had recently accepted a post there as the secretary to the American legation. By January 1846, with its acceptance by Wiley & Putnam Publishing in America³² following directly on the heels of its acceptance by John Murray for the British Colonial and Home Library,³³ Nichols' assessment had been proven true. But two months later, Melville's first novel appeared in England under the title *Narrative of a Four Months' Residence among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands*, and within the month in America as *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*.³⁴

The beginning of Melville's writing career, however, was not without its problems. John Murray, for example, was so worried about certain passages that, in

³¹ Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 1:197.

³² The first edition of *Typee* was published in America as a part of Evert Duyckinck's new series for Putnam's, the 'Library of Choice Reading'. At the time, there was not yet an international copyright law on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. As a result, cheap foreign novels were often sold at the expense of native authors; though, as William Charvat notes, American authors suffered more because they produced fewer works that appealed to an international middle-class audience, as well as the immaturity of America's publishing industry (*The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-70: The Papers of William Charvat* [ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli; Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978], 29). The fact that Duyckinck wished to feature exclusively American authors highlights the risky and tenuous nature of his business venture. For more information on the 'Library of Choice Reading' and the socio-economic conditions of the early American publishing industry, see Ezra Greenspan, 'Evert Duyckinck and the History of Wiley and Putnam's Library of American Books' *American Literature* 64 (Dec., 1992): 677-93; and Steven Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace: Thoreau's Development as a Professional Writer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 143-47.

³³ John Murray had been convinced of the merits of Melville's novel early in 1846 by no less than Washington Irving, who was currently serving as the American minister to Spain. Serendipitously, Irving had accompanied John Murray to a business meeting with Gansevoort Melville, and had reportedly praised the portions of the book read aloud as 'exquisite' and 'graphic', predicted its success, and advised Gansevoort to take the manuscript to Putnam as soon as possible. Less than a week later, Putnam, exclaiming that the chapters given him were so exciting he had to miss church, agreed to publish it in America (Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 1:202; see also, Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography* [vol. 1; Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996-2002], 393-98). For more on John Murray, see Angus Fraser, 'John Murray's Colonial and Home Library' *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 91 (Sept., 1997): 339-408; and Fraser's 'A Publishing House and Its Readers, 1841-1880: The Murrays and the Miltons' *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 90 (Mar., 1996): 4-47.

³⁴ 'Typee' was not affixed to the British version until the Revised Version later that year.

addition to Melville's editorial changes, he hired a reader to delete or change passages 'for the benefit of both author and book'.³⁵ His American counterpart was even more squeamish, particularly with regard to its frank eroticism. As a result, the orgiastic frenzy that the Marquesan girls, in all their 'abandoned voluptuousness', excited onboard the *Dolly* had to be given a very cold shower indeed by Wiley & Putnam's, and then later once again in the Revised Edition by Melville himself. It was reasoned that if Americans were presented with *Typee*'s depiction of a Marquesan queen who, wishing to display her tattoos, 'bent forward for a moment, and turning sharply round, threw up the skirts of her mantle', they, like the book's Frenchman who is accosted by this 'unlooked-for-occurrence', would quickly retreat and sales would suffer.³⁶ A similar editorial fate met the temptation and sexual insinuation of Melville's bachelor-sailors upon first meeting the island girls who boarded their ship. 'How avoid so dire a temptation?' the novel's narrator, Tommo, wonders salaciously. 'For who could think of tumbling these artless creatures overboard, when they had swam miles to welcome us?'³⁷ Unwilling to extend such a welcome to what might be perceived as deviant, Melville and his American publisher agreed that readers of *Typee* should not face any of the unbridled 'unholy passions of the crew and their unlimited gratification',³⁸ and

³⁵ Leon Howard, 'Historical Note' in *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* by Herman Melville, in *The Writings of Herman Melville* (eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 1; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1968), 282. Henry Reader, the principle editor of the manuscript, was paid a little over half the amount Melville himself was paid for writing the manuscript.

³⁶ Melville, *Typee*, 8.

³⁷ Melville, *Typee*, 15

³⁸ Melville, *Typee*, 15. Tommo tries to reassure his reader that these indulgences on shore are actually for the sailors' own good, as they are far better than the sexual temptations of those sailors stuck out at sea without a woman in sight. Surprisingly, neither publisher found questionable Melville's unsubtle suggestion of homosexuality aboard whaling ships (Melville, *Typee*, 22–23; 346–47). Cf., the 'plainly phallic' dance, as William Charvat calls it, which sneaks into both versions of the original and revised editions. Here, Tommo describes the dance as stimulating 'active, romping, mischievous evolutions, in which every limb is brought into requisition. Indeed, the Marquesan girls dance all over, as it were; not only do their feet dance, but their arms, hands, fingers, ay, their very

they were deleted in toto.³⁹

Also of concern was Melville's inflammatory hectoring of missionaries. In one of the opening anecdotes of *Typee*, Tommo tells the 'somewhat amusing' story of a missionary who, undaunted by the difficulty of proselytising the Marquesans, and 'believing much in the efficacy of female influence', brought his white wife with him to the islands. Never before having seen a white woman, the islanders initially regarded her as a new god. When reverence was eventually replaced with curiosity as to what was behind the enshrining 'sacred veil of calico', the missionary's wife was stripped of her clothes. Discovering she was but a mere woman beneath the fabric, the islanders contemptuously informed her that such 'deception' could not continue. Because she was not, Tommo wryly explains, 'sufficiently evangelised' to deal with this or the possibility of whatever might follow, she summarily 'forced her husband to relinquish his undertaking, and together they returned to Tahiti.'⁴⁰

For obvious reasons, many American Christians were not as amused as Tommo by such anecdotes. This is a 'racily-written narrative', cries the New York *Evangelist*. It 'abounds in praises of the life of nature, *alias* savageism, and in slurs and flings against missionaries and civilization. . . . We are sorry that such a volume

eyes, seem to dance in their heads. In good sooth, they so sway their floating forms, arch their necks, toss aloft their naked arms, and glide, and swim, and whirl, that it was almost too much for a quiet, sober-minded young man like myself' (152; Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America*, 213).

³⁹ It is interesting to note, however, those instances of indulgence that Melville insisted on keeping. For instance, immediately following the passage cited above, in a portion not originally deleted, he continues: 'Alas for the poor savages when exposed to the influence of these polluting examples! Unsophisticated and confiding, they are easily led into every vice, and humanity weeps over the ruins thus remorsefully inflicted upon them by their European civilizers. Thrice happy are they who, inhabiting some yet undiscovered island in the midst of the ocean, have never been brought into contaminating contact with the white man.' The implications of this passage are stark, as Tommo appears to regard colonial, perhaps even missionary, contact, as an implicit rape. For a similar discussion see Melville, *Typee*, 123–30.

⁴⁰ Melville, *Typee*, 6–7.

should have been allowed a place in the "Library of American Books."⁴¹ Though it begins similarly — i.e., 'An apotheosis of barbarism. A panegyric on cannibal delights! An apostrophe to the spirit of savage felicity!'— William Bourne's review in the *Christian Parlor Magazine* is a bit more focussed in its attack. Specifically, he focuses his ire on the statements in the book 'wherein the cause of MISSIONS is assailed, with a pertinacity the misrepresentation and degree of *hatred*, which can only entitle the perpetrator to the just claim of traducer.'⁴² A contemporary and friend of Bourne, Horace Greeley's reading is similar, if more tempered. In his assessment of *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville's second book, he describes Melville as a 'born genius, with few superiors either as narrator, a describer, or a humorist', but one whose books can 'fairly be condemned as dangerous reading for those of immature intellects and unsettled principles.' For Greeley, while Melville's writing is elusive enough to avoid being 'positively offensive', his '*tone* is bad'.⁴³

With its sexual innuendo, barbs aimed at missionaries and 'civilised' colonial powers in the South Seas, not to mention Melville's typical array of spelling gaffes and indecipherable scribbles, editorial revisions are hardly surprising.⁴⁴ What is surprising, however, is the extent to which he personally revised the American edition *twice*, deleting various passages deemed scandalous, for the sake of 'wide &

⁴¹ Watson G. Branch, ed., *Melville: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1974), 81.

⁴² Branch, *Melville*, 85–86. Branch notes that *Christian Parlor Magazine* was designed by its editor, Reverend Darius Mead, 'to combat the irreligious and immoral literature of that day.'

⁴³ Branch, *Melville*, 121–22. For a similar British reaction, see George Paston, *At John Murray's: Records of a Literary Circle, 1843–1892* (London: John Murray, 1932), 53.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Renker provocatively deals with the interesting implications of Melville's career-long difficulties with spelling and writing in her excellent book *Strike Through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing*. For examples of Melville's penmanship, the Northwestern-Newberry editions of his work include comprehensive analyses of extant manuscripts.

permanent popularity of the work.⁴⁵ William Charvat regards this interest in 'public taste' as a mark of Melville's burgeoning *professionalism* as an author, and ultimately what distinguishes his first two novels from most of his others.⁴⁶ In this way, as we will see in more detail below, a certain ending, or desired deletion, infringes and irreducibly alters his beginning as an author.

2. Melville and Self-Destruction

The problems with *Typee* were always much deeper than its editorial issues. Significantly, many of its readers refused even to believe Melville was its author. Thinking his writing too fanciful and description too vivid to be those of a common sailor, 'Herman Melville' was, they averred, but a character, a *nom de plume*.⁴⁷ Even John Murray had accepted the manuscript in spite of his reservations that it seemed more the work of a 'practised writer' than that of an ordinary sailor.⁴⁸ Apropos such suspicion, Charvat points out that this is the only time in his fiction that Melville seeks to identify himself clearly with those 'good-for-nothing-tars', as he playfully

⁴⁵ Melville, *Correspondence*, 31-32. These changes, Howard suggests, are important not simply because of their effects on *Typee* alone but also on Melville's writing in general (Howard, 'Historical Note', 280).

⁴⁶ Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America*, 217; cf., 3-29. Until the 1820s, with the advent of Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, professional, critically appreciated authorship in America was a virtual impossibility. Previous to this, the American literary scene resembled that of the British aristocracy during the reigns of Elizabeth and James, in which an author was supported by a patron and would typically only sell a novel anonymously. Charvat contends that in order to be considered professional, writing must be the main, or at least a prolonged, financial resource for the author (i.e., no anonymity). Additionally, because such writing is done with the intent of being sold in an open market, it is also heavily influenced by buyer's tastes and reading habits. In spite of its imperfections, Charvat's definition is helpful in thinking about what separates writers like Irving and Cooper from their American predecessors like Susannah Rowson and Charles Brockden Brown.

⁴⁷ Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 2:914. The London *Spectator*'s unsigned review comes close to the same conclusion, but then consents that because the author was an American sailor this doubt is in fact unfounded. Unlike in England, the review rationalises, in America there is no disrespect awaiting respectable young men who choose to become sailors. Moreover, the opportunities for education are more widespread in America, affording a 'great familiarity with popular literature and a readier use of the pen than is usual with classes of the same apparent grade in England' (Branch, *Melville*, 54).

⁴⁸ Melville, *Correspondence*, 30-31.

describes them in *Typee*, who are intent on marring an otherwise peaceful sea journey of 'state-room sailors, who make so much ado about a fourteen-days' passage across the Atlantic'.⁴⁹ In *Omoo*, for instance, he is a man of education; in *Mardi*, a gentleman; and in *Redburn* and *Moby-Dick*, he is not even the narrator.⁵⁰ There are, however, several reasons one would do well to approach Charvat's suggestion with caution, not least of which being his incomplete assessment of the complexities involved in ever at all identifying Melville as narrator. One might wonder, with James Duban, if this common assessment actually 'undervalued the aesthetic dimensions of the work of an artist who was fond of creating personae and narrators whose views . . . cannot in every instance be taken as "authorial"'.⁵¹ There is, then, an appropriate coincidence in the fact that Melville's initial defence is not even his own, but that of Gansevoort Melville, who writes to Murray:

The Author will doubtless be flattered to hear that his production seems to so competent a judge as yourself that of a 'practised writer' — the more so as he is a mere novice in the art, having had no experience; for it is within my personal knowledge that he has never before written either book or pamphlet, and to the best of my belief has not even contributed to a magazine or newspaper. In regard to the other point to which you allude I can only give you the assurance of my full and entire belief that the adventurer, and the writer of the adventure are one & the same person.⁵²

Which is to say, 'Herman Melville', the sailor *cum* author / author *cum* sailor had only just begun.⁵³

⁴⁹ Melville, *Typee*, 3.

⁵⁰ Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America*, 204, 207.

⁵¹ James Duban, 'Clipping with A Chisel: The Ideology of Melville's Narrator's' *Special Issue of Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 31 (1989): 342. Nevertheless, even Duban appears ultimately to fall prey to the same insatiable need for referential stability, without considering the dynamics of the same 'aesthetic dimensions' that make the stability he assumes (as *stasis*) impossible.

⁵² Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 199–200.

⁵³ Gansevoort's reply, it turns out, is only part true. As early as 1839, Melville's 'Fragments from a Writing Desk' had appeared in a local paper, the *Democratic Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser*, under the pseudonym 'L. A. V.'; later that year, the same paper also published 'The Death

And yet, but a mere six years later, Melville would already sense what he regarded as his imminent demise. In a much-quoted, professionally disillusioned letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne he writes:

I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian Pyramids, which, after being three thousand years a seed and nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, it developed itself, grew to greenness, and then fell to mould. . . . I feel that I am now come to the inmost leaf of the bulb, and that shortly the flower must fall to the mould.⁵⁴

Five months later, in his final letter before Hawthorne moved from nearby Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Melville even goes so far as to absolve the former of any obligation to reply, due to the possibility that 'if you do answer it, and direct it to Herman Melville, you will missend it — for the very fingers that now guide this pen are not precisely the same that just took it up and put it on this paper'.⁵⁵ How are we to understand this convergence of beginning and ending in apocalyptic annihilation, whereby the true torment of life is its natural desire for an ending that can only ever emerge from the impossibility of ever actually experiencing this ending as such? Nathaniel Hawthorne in his *English Notebooks* best describes the growing intensity of his former neighbour's ambivalent preoccupation:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had 'pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated'; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists — and has persisted ever since I knew him — in wandering to-

Craft', under the pseudonym 'Harry the Reefer' (Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, in *The Writings of Herman Melville* [eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 9; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987], 191-204, 424-27). All the same, it seems highly unlikely that Gansevoort would risk his rising reputation in the diplomatic community for the sake of his younger brother's unproven writing career. And while it is improbable that he knew nothing about Melville's previous publications, for indeed Melville had sent him a copy of the paper with the first piece (though he did not explain the pseudonym), Gansevoort either forgot these early writings, or simply regarded them as insignificant attempts of a callow twenty-year-old. Cf., Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 1:85.

⁵⁴ Melville, *Correspondence*, 193.

⁵⁵ Melville, *Correspondence*, 213.

and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us.⁵⁶

Melville, as it were, cannot truly begin without somehow ending, and yet neither can he come to his end without beginning once again.

Importantly, Melville's dialecticism stands opposed to the modern phenomenological understanding of death and apocalypse. As Heidegger famously points out a century later, 'Dying is not an event, [but] a phenomenon to be understood existentially.'⁵⁷ As such, the 'being-towards-death' that identifies an individual *as an individual* is an impossible gift and destination, for as Derrida adds, 'every relation to death is an interpretive apprehension and a representative approach to death.'⁵⁸ Unwrapping this 'gift of death', we end up only playing with its bows and strings. '[O]ne never dies now', the phenomenologist whispers from beyond the grave, for 'one always dies later, in the future — in a future that is never actual, that cannot come except when everything will be over and done'.⁵⁹ In this perspective, the grave matters because the 'beyond' is within, rendering the Subject forever separated, from its beginning and end.⁶⁰

The dialectic of Melville's beginning and ending, though, is not simply that of

⁵⁶ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The English Notebooks* (ed. Randall Stewart; New York: Russell & Russell, 1941), 432–33.

⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson; New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 284.

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (trans. David Wills; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 45. Notably, Derrida's title, *The Gift of Death* [*Donner la mort*], equivocates between the ordinary meaning ascribed to *donner*, 'to give', and the idiom, 'to put to death' (as in *se donner la mort*, 'to commit suicide').

⁵⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (trans. Ann Smock; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 164–65.

⁶⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *Faux Pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 35.

a strict circularity, and thus not reliant on phenomenologically derived notions of presence. Moreover, neither is it indicative of a commonplace wholeness or Absolute, whereby beginning and ending require each other to become themselves. In the words of Slavoj Žižek:

According to the standard *doxa*, the telos of the dialectical process is the absolute form that abolishes any material surplus. If, however, this is truly the case . . . how are we to account for the fact that the Result effectively throws us back into the whirlpool, that it is nothing but the totality of the route we had to travel in order to arrive at the Result?⁶¹

As such, and a point too seldom sufficiently appreciated or explored by the phenomenological tradition, the power of dialecticism does not lie in the hegemony of its self-reflective completion but in the creative imperative of its inherent / constitutive failure. As such, insofar as the stable, reflective differentiation between beginning and ending threatens to radically blur beyond all redemption, the assumption of a correspondent (i.e., Platonic) or analogous (i.e., neo-Platonic) identification of self, even as one divided from the impossible experience of its own death (and thus as a 'divided self'), becomes increasingly problematic.

Realising this, at least on some level, Melville pens a stammering postscript in his valedictory letter to Hawthorne:

I can't stop yet. If the world was entirely made up of Magians, I'll tell you what I should do. I should have a paper-mill established at one end of the house, and so have an endless riband of foolscap rolling in upon my desk; and upon that endless riband I should write a thousand — a million — billion thoughts, all under the form of a letter to you. The divine magnet is in you, and my magnet responds. Which is the biggest? A foolish question — they are *One*.⁶²

As we will see, this unified '*One*', the bedrock of a metaphysically stable Absolute identity, is for Melville always an irreducibly, and thus ironically, Sisyphean striving.

⁶¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 156.

⁶² Melville, *Correspondence*, 213.

Indeed, the dramatic / tragic implications of this constitutive failure and irony are particularly evident in the debates concerning the authenticity of *Typee*.

3. A 'Straitforward' Presentation

In spite of its general popularity, most mid-nineteenth-century American and British critics considered fiction a low and potentially dangerous art form, due to its meretricious degradation of fact:

The infusion of romance into history cannot, we think, but have a bad effect on the reader, by rendering the dull matter of fact of the latter, tasteless and spiritless, in comparison with the piquant extravagance of the adulterated mass, and weakening at the same time that salutary distinction, which the mind should always preserve between truth and falsehood. The imagination ought not to be pampered thus, at the expense of the other faculties.⁶³

The imagination provoked by fiction, Samuel Miller warns, poses a redoubtable danger to the individual and society because it has 'a tendency too much to engross the mind, to fill it with artificial views, and to diminish the taste for more solid reading.' Such thoughts are actually counterfeit, he warns, and will only 'cheat it [the mind] of substantial enjoyment.'⁶⁴ Therefore, lest one be foolish enough to desire such mental and spiritual privation, admonishes the Reverend James Gray, one should exercise utmost caution 'against ever making the characters of romance a standard by which to judge character in real life.'⁶⁵ To Melville's palpable consternation, the

⁶³ *American Quarterly Review* (1846): 46; qtd. Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 20. I am especially indebted to Michael Bell's *The Development of American Romance* and Philip Gura's *The Wisdom of Words: Language, Theology, and the Literature in the New England Renaissance* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981) for guiding me to the writings of Samuel Miller and likeminded adherents to Scottish 'Common Sense' philosophy.

⁶⁴ Samuel Miller, *Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (vol. 2; New York: B. Franklin, 1970), 179, 176.

⁶⁵ Qtd. Terence Martin, *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origin of American Fiction* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961], 67.

flourishes of his self-styled 'Romance of Real Life' proved an all too easy target for the purveyors of the day's critical opinion.⁶⁶ Although its reviews were generally very positive and in line with his novel's overall popularity with readers, those reviews that were not favourable to Melville's willingness to mix fact and fiction were vociferous and malignant enough to raise as much (if not more) concern than those that bemoaned the offensiveness of this mixture's actual content.⁶⁷

Tellingly, London's *Literary Gazette* chided other reviewers who treated *Typee* as 'real and authentic', suggesting instead that they had been duped by Melville's April Fool's joke.⁶⁸ If Melville was joking, however, he certainly was not the one laughing. On the contrary, his initial public reaction in the 21 April 1846 issue of the *Albany Argus* is notable first for its ambiguity, as it is altogether unclear whether the newspaper is quoting or paraphrasing him when it reports:

The author desires to state to the public, that TYPEE is a true narrative of events which actually occurred to him. Although there may be moving events and hairbreadth escapes, it is scarcely more strange than such as happens to those who make their home on the deep.⁶⁹

One month later, his blank face proved to be but a mask. In response to a review in the 17 April 1846 *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer* that Melville regarded as especially obnoxious and malicious,⁷⁰ he donned the name 'Alexander Bradford' and

⁶⁶ Melville, *Correspondence*, 55. Cf., G. Harrison Orians, 'Censure of Fiction in American Romances and Magazines, 1789–1810,' *Publication of the Modern Language Association* 52 (1937): 195–214. For the British side of the same debate, see J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England 1770–1800* (London: Constable, 1932), 210–17.

⁶⁷ For positive and negative reactions to *Typee*, see Hugh W. Hetherington, *Melville's Reviewers: British and American 1846–1891* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 20–65; and Branch, *Melville*, 3–12, 53–89.

⁶⁸ Melville, *Correspondence*, 86.

⁶⁹ Melville, *Correspondence*, 35.

⁷⁰ *Typee* was, according to this review 'in all essential respects, . . . a fiction, — a piece of Munchausenism, — from beginning to end. It may be that the author visited, and spent some time in the Marquesas Islands . . . But we have not the slightest confidence in any of the details, while many of the incidents narrated are utterly incredible. We might cite numberless instances of this monstrous exaggeration; but no one can read a dozen pages of the book without detecting them. This would be a

sent the paper an article defending the good name of 'Herman Melville'.⁷¹ Although the article was never published and was ultimately lost, 'Bradford' lives on in an accompanying letter:

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 with exactly the right sort of thing. The fact is, it was rather 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.⁷²

To aid his defence, Melville once again, as it were, returns to the water. As we have already seen, however, his intentions remain far from obvious. In an unfortunate misspelling, Melville here plunges beneath the 'strait' that he feels best describes his 'own view of the matter', in such a way that it is not simply his own view but also that of 'Bradford'.

Even the purported verification of *Typee's* truth, and thus also the truth of Melville, is watered down by ambiguity. At first, unequivocal vindication seemed at hand when Richard Tobias Greene wrote to the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* claiming to be the same 'Toby' who had abandoned Tommo (or, so the argument goes, Melville), and who the latter believed had been killed by island natives.⁷³ 'I am the true and veritable "Toby," yet living', he writes, 'and I am happy to testify to the entire

matter to be excused, if the book were not put forth as a simple record of actual experience. It professes to give nothing but what the author actually saw and heard. It must therefore be judged, not as a romance or a poem, but as a book of travels, — as a statement of facts: — and in this light it has, in our judgment, no merit whatever . . .' (Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 1:211–12).

⁷¹ In reality, Alexander Bradford was the author of *American Antiquities and Researches into the Origin and History of the Red Race*, as well as a former classmate and a friend of Melville's older brother, Gansevoort Melville, and had agreed to the ruse.

⁷² Melville, *Correspondence*, 37–38.

⁷³ Melville, *Typee*, 106–09.

accuracy of the work, so long as I was with Melville.'⁷⁴ Melville's letter to John

Murray in the wake of this revelation is suggestive:

I have to inform you that 'Toby' who figures in my narrative has come to life — tho' I had long supposed him to be dead. I send you by this steamer several pages . . . containing allusions to him. Toby's appearance has produced quite a lively sensation here — and 'Truth is stranger than Fiction' is in every body's mouth. — In Buffalo where he "turned up" the public curiosity was so great that "Toby" was induced to gratify it by publishing the draught of a letter which he had originally sent to me. This is not the letter, however, which appears in the papers I send you. — I was sorry for this on some accounts, but it could not be helped.⁷⁵

Whether Melville's disappointment is directed toward the publishing of Greene's letter, or to the fact that he could not send it himself to Murray for publication, is, once again, unclear. Subsequently, both Greene's letter to the Buffalo newspaper and the story of his fate on the island were heavily reprinted, whereas Melville's addendum, 'The Story of Toby', was almost completely ignored.⁷⁶ That Melville was even pushing his own version of events cannot help but to compel one to regard this as yet another instance of Melville's deep ambivalence about the difference between 'truth' and 'fiction'.

As one might have expected, John Murray remained unconvinced by Melville's 'straitforward' presentation of truth. While he accepted Melville's addendum, Murray refused to incorporate it into the revised, tamer edition of *Typee*, and published it instead as a short pamphlet. Toby's existence was verification

⁷⁴ Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 1:220; Melville, *Correspondence*, 578–79.

⁷⁵ Melville, *Correspondence*, 55.

⁷⁶ For Greene's letter to Melville, see Melville, *Correspondence*, 579–84. In an unfortunately lost letter, Greene would later demand a share of Melville's profits for *Typee*. He soon thereafter, though, recanted it as a 'cursed letter', pointing out that he did not compose it, but merely followed the lead of his persuasive friends. He concludes instead: 'I find on consideration that I have no right to any such thing. You must my dear friend forgive and forget all, as an old ship-mate and friend, you must remember human nature is liable to err. I am heartily sorry, that I ever penned that infernal scrawl' (588).

enough for that story alone, he argued, but not for *Typee* as a whole. Consequently, Murray once more insisted that Melville provide 'documentary evidence' of his time on the Marquesas Islands. Of course the story from this point is by now predictable. Such a request, Melville sniffs contemptuously in his response, is 'indescribably vexatious', for only a 'parcel of blockheads' would now dare question his book's veracity.⁷⁷ According to Melville, the 'resurrection of Toby' was quintessential, irrefutable proof of his book's truth; not only was no other proof necessary, there was nothing else available.⁷⁸ Knowing that Murray would not agree, Melville's exasperation is increasingly obvious as he continues his letter. Indeed, exasperation leads to desperation, as exemplified by Melville's curious array of collected evidence: a daguerreotype of Greene, a lock of Greene's hair, and an unanswered application to the owners of the *Acushnet* for proof of Melville's and Greene's desertion.⁷⁹ The 'documentary' verification Murray seeks, though, Melville insists, is simply impossible. By the end of his letter, he is so vexed that his pen is literally quaking in a panic. In his psychosomatic scrawl, and rushing to beat the day's posting deadline, Melville subsumes himself and his evidence in the written page: 'Typee however must at last be beleived [sic] on its own account — they [Americans] beleive [sic] it here now — a little touched up they say but *true*.'⁸⁰ Not surprisingly, John Murray remained unconvinced.

When the same dispute emerged regarding *Omoo*, and was accompanied by Melville's growing disappointment at the money he was receiving from Murray, his

⁷⁷ Melville, *Correspondence*, 65.

⁷⁸ Melville, *Correspondence*, 55. Cf., Melville's letter to Evert Duyckinck: 'Seriously, My Dear Sir, this resurrection of Toby from the dead — this strange bringing together of two such places as Typee and Buffalo, is really very curious. — It can not but settle the question of the book's genuineness' (50).

⁷⁹ Melville, *Correspondence*, 65–66.

⁸⁰ Melville, *Correspondence*, 65–66.

sudden transformation whilst writing his third novel, *Mardi*, is not without reason.

The first salvo of this, Melville's 'virtual declaration of literary independence', is openly expressed in his response to Murray on 25 March 1848:⁸¹

To be blunt: the work I shall next publish will in downright earnest [sic] a "Romance of Polynesian [sic] Adventure" — But why this? The truth is, Sir, that the reiterated imputation of being a romancer in disguise has at last pricked me into a resolution to show those who may take any interest in the matter, that a *real* romance of mine is no Typee or Omoo, and is made of different stuff altogether.⁸²

His new direction established, Melville concludes his letter with a flat response to Murray's repeated requests of his two previous books: 'I will give no evidence'.

Realising that he had at this point all but destroyed his professional relationship with his British publisher without having a ready replacement, Melville's prevaricating follow-up letter on 19 June 1848 effectively attempts to stall for more time. It begins by acknowledging Murray's predisposition against romances, but shamelessly hopes all the same that he will not only make an exception in Melville's case but also considerably increase the amount of his advance! To soften the blow of his audacity, or at least to keep Murray reading, Melville goes on to claim that he has recently come upon 'two original documents, evidencing the incredible fact, that I have actually been a common sailor before the mast in the Pacific'. Voilà, proof! The truth, however, is far more predictable than Melville's best fiction. On the heels of this revelation he then bemoans the fact that even though he at present has somehow misplaced the most important of the documents, his publisher's patience will be rewarded as soon as he finds them. Of course, the phantom documents were never

⁸¹ Walter E. Bezanson, 'Moby-Dick: Document, Drama, Dream' in *A Companion to Melville Studies* (ed. John Bryant; New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 176. Or, as William Charvat expresses it, 'Sometime between January 1 and March 25, 1848, Melville was transformed from a journalist to a writer' (Charvat, *Profession of Authorship in America*, 217).

⁸² Melville, *Correspondence*, 106.

found, if they ever existed, and Melville lost his British publishing contract eight months later.⁸³

4. '*And so I tell my life to myself*'

At this point it would be deceptively easy to suggest that in hiding 'Melville' behind a mask, his pseudonymous pen unwittingly splits Melville himself; that is, by virtue of his being a deconstructed 'divided self' or ideological 'symbolic fiction', the fullness of Melville's identity is structurally deferred, and thus he is never entirely himself. What we find in his use of the 'Bradford' mask, and the ensuing circularity of 'Melville' actively *characterised* as both Subject and Object, is the dynamic, inherent excessiveness of *self*-characterisation. In the complex notion of self-becoming exemplified by Melville's duplicity, subjective autonomy / freedom is only ever actualised as such in and by a self-characterisation that is not capable of encompassing or circumscribing that which it actualises. In this way, autonomy / freedom, as the irreducible excess of self-characterising 'duplicity', retroactively initiates its actualisation *as* autonomy / freedom.⁸⁴ Such is, I argue, the *aesthetico-theological* intensity of self-becoming, whereby the Subject is truly itself, and thus truly free, only inasmuch as it *miraculously* (i.e., retroactively / autopoetically) erupts from the immanence of its duplicitous self-characterisation.⁸⁵

If, as Frank Kermode has suggested, there is 'a need in the moment of

⁸³ Melville, *Correspondence*, 109, 113–15, 594.

⁸⁴ 'Retroactive' because it does not at all precede its actualisation, but actively and paradoxically *emerges from* it.

⁸⁵ Though certainly related, this stands in subtle contrast to the postmodern pessimism of one like Michel Foucault, for whom 'identity, which we attempt to support and unify under a mask, is in itself only a parody; it is plural; countless spirits dispute its possession, systems intersect and compete' ('Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* [vol. 2; ed. James D. Faubion; New York: The New Press, 1994], 386).

existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end',⁸⁶ all self-presence is necessarily a presentation whose 'subject' is only ever 'becoming'. Indeed, he continues, the redemptive self-presentation of fiction would be a necessary one.⁸⁷

Apropos Nietzsche's reflections in *The Will to Power*, Melville carries this necessity to its radical, and ultimately theological, end: i.e., a Subject constructed in and as a narrative that is never sure how to begin, whose 'becoming must be explained without recourse to final intentions . . . must appear justified at every moment (or incapable of being evaluated; which amounts to the same thing)'.⁸⁸ Such is, we might say, the autobiographical dilemma of self-becoming, whereby the Subject echoes Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*: '— and so I tell my life to myself.'⁸⁹ In other words, one cannot begin to think about the beginning and ending of the Subject without, at the minimum, a tacit acknowledgement of its autobiographical structure.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of An Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 4.

⁸⁷ Kermode goes on to suggest that 'we may call books fictive models of the temporal world' (Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 54). C.f., '[W]e experience the "fictionalization" of history as an "explanation" for the same reason that we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In both we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit' (Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978], 99).

⁸⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale; New York: Random House, 1967), 377. For further reflections on the construction of the 'fictive self', particularly in the wake of deconstruction, note also Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), 56-84; James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals / Ecce Homo*, 221.

⁹⁰ Insofar as this is true, we can affirm Derrida's instructive comment:

And since what interests me today is not strictly called literature or philosophy, I'm amused by the idea that my adolescent desire – let's call it that – should have directed me toward something in writing which was neither the one nor the other. What was it? 'Autobiography' is perhaps the least inadequate name, because it remains for me the most enigmatic, the most open, even today (Jacques Derrida, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida' in *Acts of Literature / Jacques Derrida* [ed. Derek Attridge; trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby; New York: Routledge, 1992], 34).

That is to say, the redemptive ambitions of fictive self-presentation mix with those of philosophy and aesthetics. It is precisely in this very conjunction, I argue here, similar to what Maurice Blanchot has called elsewhere 'the space of literature', that our theological thinking is at all possible.

Two experimental novels separated by more than two centuries further illustrate the enigma of autobiography exemplified by Melville's duplicitous self-presentation. On the one hand, there is Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* [1760], where the very possibilities of self-presentation are put to the test — are, in fact, pressed to their breaking point — in the introductory story of Tristram's conception. Dave Eggers, on the other hand, in his recent 'memoir-y kind of thing', *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* [2000], grapples with the material question of autobiography in his frustratingly forestalled, best-selling attempt to depict the deaths of his father and mother — deaths that, he feels, mark his own demise as tragically immanent in his life now. Both books, in their narratives of beginnings and endings, experience (and revel in) the problematic nature of writing and reading these very same narratives, and in this way further contextualise our thinking about Melville's sense of self-becoming and duplicity.

In attempting to tell the stories of his own conception and birth, Tristram Shandy recognises and admits a certain debt to his uncle Toby.⁹¹ Tristram is, of course, separated from such events, and instead must rely on Toby's avuncular anecdotes to explain, in roundabout fashion, how he came to be called 'Tristram' (versus the proper name intended by his father, 'Trismegistus', which was forgotten by the family's chambermaid just prior to the child's christening) as well as 'son'.⁹² His is, in effect, that most ironic of Socratic confessions: 'I know that I do not know' — i.e.,

⁹¹ Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (ed. Howard Anderson; New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1980), 3.

⁹² Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 207-08. The unfortunate forgetfulness of Susannah, the chambermaid, is in stark contrast to the divine association of the name 'Trismegistus' [thrice-greatest] with the Egyptian god of knowledge and wisdom, Thoth.

the infinite, empty knowledge of one's ignorance.⁹³ In light of this debt to his uncle, the originating, authorial ownership of Tristram's conception remains a mystery, for it is as much (if not more) Toby's story as it that of Tristram. On the one hand, Tristram needs Toby to fill in the blanks of what he does not and cannot know or depict; on the other hand, Toby needs Tristram not only as his anecdote's physical referent, but also for his anecdote to be made known, inasmuch as *Tristram Shandy* (the novel) is itself the autobiography Tristram is attempting to write *in Tristram Shandy*. Theirs is, like Melville's dilemma of beginning and ending, a classic dialectic of uncertain originality and authority, as the legitimate claim of each is constituted by its own fundamental failure as such a claim (and, thus, its relation with the other). Though he claims the book he is writing is *his* 'Life and Opinions', Tristram's 'patriarchal' position over the text, his inseminating moment, as it were, is always interrupted.⁹⁴

This is something Walter Shandy, Tristram's father, knows all too well. A slave to precision and routine, Mr. Shandy had made it a monthly routine ('on the first *Sunday night* of every month throughout the year') to wind by hand the household's large clock just prior to having sex with his wife Elizabeth — 'in order . . . to get them all out of the way at one time, and be no more plagued and pester'd with them the rest of the month.'⁹⁵ Unbeknownst to him, however, Mrs. Shandy had developed an

⁹³ Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates* (trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant; rev. ed.; London: Penguin, 1993), 40-45. Søren Kierkegaard characterises Socrates' ironic subjectivity similarly, as 'absolute infinite negativity'. 'It is,' he writes, 'negativity because it negates; it is infinite because it negates not this or that phenomenon; and it is absolute because it negates by virtue of a higher which is not. *Irony establishes nothing, for that which is to be established lies behind it*' (*The Concept of Irony* [trans. Lee M. Capel; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965], 278, emphasis mine).

⁹⁴ Closely related to such interruption is textual digression, for which *Tristram Shandy* is most famous. For example, see Tristram's panegyric to digression: 'Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; — they are the life, the soul of reading; — take them out of this book for instance, — you might as well take the book along with them; — one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it; restore them to the writer; — he steps forth like a bridegroom, — bids All hail; brings in variety, and forbids the appetite to fail' (52).

⁹⁵ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 4-5.

'unhappy association' between her husband's monthly duties, to the extent that she 'could never hear the said clock wound up, — but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popp'd into her head, — & *vice versa*'.⁹⁶ This, of course, leads Tristram to recount the moment of his conception on the first Sunday of March 1718, where, in a comic case of *coitus interruptus*, and to Mr. Shandy's puzzlement, his wife enquired:

*Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind the clock?-----Good G----! cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time. -- Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?*⁹⁷

Tristram's fears (inherited from his father) regarding the personal implications of this seemingly nonsensical question at the moment of his conception haunt both his life and the telling of his life's story. 'I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me', he laments.

Well, you may take my word, that nine parts in ten of a man's sense or his nonsense, his success and miscarriages in this world depend upon their motions and activity, and the different tracks and trains you them into; so that when they are once set a-going, whether right or wrong, 'tis not a halfpenny matter, — away they go cluttering like hey-go-mad; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk, which . . . the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it.⁹⁸

His is, he concludes, again parallel to what we have seen to be the case of Melville, the lot of a cursed man, whose '*misfortunes began nine months before he ever came into the world.*'⁹⁹ As such, should the details of his painful, accidental circumcision by

⁹⁶ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 5.

⁹⁷ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 2.

⁹⁸ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1-2.

⁹⁹ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 3.

way of a falling window sash surprise us?¹⁰⁰ Considering Tristram's complex relationship with Toby, should we be overly shocked by the latter's own wounded groin, 'owing to a blow from a stone, broke off by a ball from the parapet of a *horn-work* at the siege of Namur'?¹⁰¹ Are not both instances absolutely appropriate? The wounds to male pride — a scarred penis, an interrupted ejaculation — bleed forth into a loss of originating authority; or, in the specific case of the author here, Tristram Shandy, the loss of his proper name. Consequently, the lament of Tristram's father for his son is equally applicable to his son's eponymous book:

Unhappy *Tristram*! child of wrath! child of decrepitude! interruption! mistake! and discontent! What one misfortune or disaster in the book of embryotic evils, that could unmechanize thy frame, or entangle thy filaments! which has not fallen upon thy head, or ever thou camest into the world — what evils in thy passage into it! — What evils since!¹⁰²

It is enough for now simply to suggest that Tristram Shandy's (and thus, too, *Tristram Shandy's*) unfortunate 'weaknesses both of body and mind, which no skill of the physician or the philosopher could ever afterwards have set thoroughly to rights' are the problematic, ostensible effects and emblems (i.e., 'a foundation [that] had been laid') of self-presentation.¹⁰³ The surprising consequence is that such a characteristic 'weakness' also marks both the possibility *and* the impossibility of beginning *Tristram Shandy*, for its reader and writer alike.¹⁰⁴

Dave Eggers's depiction of his parents' deaths proves to be no less troubled a

¹⁰⁰ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 264–65.

¹⁰¹ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 48 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰² Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 215.

¹⁰³ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Tristram realises that his text is as broken as he, and that its fragility is what keeps it in motion, and is its truth. He writes: 'This is vile work. — For which reason, from the beginning of this, you see, I have constructed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with such intersections, and have so complicated and involved the digressive and progressive movements, one wheel within another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going; — and, what's more, it shall be kept a-going these forty years, if it pleases the fountain of health to bless me so long with life and good spirits' (Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 52).

self-presentation. Viciously playful, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* revels in its incendiary tendencies, exploring the fissures that make reading and writing possible. For instance, of its dialogue Eggers writes:

This has of course been almost entirely reconstructed. The dialogue, though all essentially true — except that which is obviously not true, as when people break out of their narrative time-space continuum to cloyingly talk about the book itself — has been written from memory, and reflects both the author's memory's limitations and his imagination's nudgings.¹⁰⁵

Here, Eggers reflects his willingness to instil in his 'true story' a significant structural play (i.e., a degree of 'give' or 'slack'), whereby nonfictional characters carry a latent *potential* as fictional creations.¹⁰⁶

Though in its original hardback release, real names (and in many cases, phone numbers) were used — 'to prove that one could be completely factual, and still tell a story that felt and read novelistic, somewhat timeless, at least fluid' — some had to be changed when certain friends, those presumably more squeamish than Eggers about openly airing their dirty laundry, requested *noms de guerre*.¹⁰⁷ Eggers, of course, is savvy enough to recognise that nobody wants to show up at a masquerade ball and be the only one in costume, so he suggests his readers should also feel welcome to change characters' names. In fact, he offers to send, upon request, a digital copy of the book on a 3.5" floppy disk, suggesting that 'using the search-and-replace function

¹⁰⁵ Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (New York: Vintage, 2000), ix.

¹⁰⁶ Admittedly, 'play' has become for some critics, often for very good reason, a game whose sense of novelty has been effectively played out (often quite poorly). My intention in using it here is neither strictly rehabilitative or corrective, but mostly a resistance to the notion that 'play' can only ever be understood as a free, frivolous or pleasurable postmodern watchword that, in my experience, has a tendency to shut down far more constructive conversations than it starts.

¹⁰⁷ Dave Eggers, '*Mistakes We Knew We Were Making: Notes Corrections Clarifications Clarifications Apologies Addenda*', Appendix to *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, 9. His rationale for changing names in the paperback edition is that he had 'lost my taste for this sort of courage. . . . In a few cases, where I had originally lashed out at real people in backhanded ways, and used their real names in doing so, I have removed or softened these parts, because in the last year, I've also, almost completely, lost my taste for blood' (12).

your computer surely features, readers should be able to change all the names within, from the main characters down to the smallest cameos. (This could be about you! You and *your* pals!)¹⁰⁸ Which is to say, the mask Eggers presents his reader is not intended solely for his book's characters. In a concession to those readers who are bothered by the notion of reading a memoir, or perhaps simply by the idea of reading his, Eggers invites his reader 'to do what the author should have done, and what authors and readers have been doing since the beginning of time: PRETEND IT'S FICTION'.¹⁰⁹ However, not unlike the self-destructive apocalypticism at the core of the duplicity in Melville's earliest correspondence and novels, Egger's invitation belies the deathly excess that ultimately renders his text disturbingly distended.

The nine-page preface to *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is but one aspect of Eggers' desperate attempt to stall writing about his parents' deaths. Because these deaths (especially that of his mother) are the impetus for both the story he tells and the fact that he is telling it at all, identifying the beginning of Egger's self-presentation, as we have seen in Melville and in *Tristram Shandy*, is no easy task. Prior to the preface, for instance, which includes explanatory notes and passages he excluded from the main text, his book would seem to begin with a one page 'Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of this Book' — wherein, again like *Tristram Shandy*, Eggers points out sections of the book that are perhaps more important to read than others, attesting to the 'nice novella length' of chapters one through four, and how 'the book thereafter is kind of uneven'.¹¹⁰ Immediately following the preface, where one typically expects a book's 'beginning' to begin (is it not normal, in fact, for many

¹⁰⁸ Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, xxix-xxv.

¹⁰⁹ Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, xxiii-xxiv.

¹¹⁰ Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, vii. Cf., Tristram's apologies and rationalisations in *Tristram Shandy* for his wanton digressions and tedious telling of details (Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 6-7; cf., 4, 203-05).

people to skip a book's preface, to consider it superfluous to the work's actual content?), Eggers unveils a table of contents, which belatedly includes the aforementioned 'Rules and Suggestions' and Preface sections. Next is a self-consciously rambling *twenty-five-page* Acknowledgements section, which Eggers tries to explain in the appendix of his memoir's paperback edition, 'Mistakes We Knew We Were Making':

[T]he Acknowledgements were written before the rest of the book, as both an organizational device and a stalling mechanism. I was not looking forward to writing the first chapter, and wasn't sure if I could write those thereafter, so I had a nice time fiddling with the front matter, which came easily, and helped me to shape the book in my head before starting into it.¹¹¹

In fact, prior even to the 'Rules and Suggestions' that precede the preface, the ostensible beginning of this most ironic of novels, Eggers goes so far as to experiment with the copyright page, where he includes, as a supplement to the obligatory legal information that details his (and his publisher's) textual ownership, his height and weight, eye and hair colour, as well as descriptions of his hands, allergies, and sexual preference.¹¹²

My point here is not to anathematise or applaud Eggers's book, or to judge the merits of his sarcastic revelry (its reviewers have already been quick enough to do both). Moreover, neither is it to contradict his claim to have included such material and played with such structures simply 'because doing so is fun.' Rather, apropos the autobiographical dilemma of self-becoming mentioned above in regard to Melville

¹¹¹ Eggers, 'Mistakes We Knew We Were Making', 16.

¹¹² Furthering the point made above about characterization, Eggers adds here: 'This is a work of fiction, only in that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people, and exact descriptions of certain things, so had to fill in gaps as best he could. Otherwise, all characters and incidents and dialogue are real, are not products of the author's imagination, because at the time of this writing, the author had no imagination whatsoever for those sorts of things, and could not conceive of *making up* a story or characters' (Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work*, copyright page).

and Tristram Shandy, I mean only to point to the parallel implications of Eggers's difficulty in beginning to *write* his text alongside that of his readers' difficulty in beginning to *read* it.

The sudden death of Eggers's parents made him feel that he, like Melville, was marked for an imminent death; that death was, in fact, already inside him, biding its time. Eggers relays this notion in his Acknowledgements section, under the section labeled 'The Aspect Having To Do With (Perhaps) Inherited Fatalism':

This part concerns the unshakeable feeling one gets, one thinks, after the unthinkable and unexplainable happens – the feeling that, if this person can die, and that person can die, and this can happen and that can happen . . . well, then, what exactly is preventing everything from happening to this person, he around whom everything else happened?¹¹³

Consequently, not only is he convinced, as he says several times throughout the memoir, that he probably already has AIDS, that disease, any disease, is almost undoubtedly already killing him, but also that 'each and every time an elevator door opens, there will be standing, in a trenchcoat, a man, with a gun, who will fire one bullet, straight into [me], killing [me] instantly'.¹¹⁴ In a perhaps unconscious nod to Nietzsche, with whom we began thinking about the linkage of autobiography and self-presentation, Eggers's memoir ends as appropriately and equivocally as it begins. That is to say, in a self-destructive sacrifice to his readers, the community with whom he wishes to identify and seek identity.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, xxxiii.

¹¹⁴ Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, xxxiv. Of this fantasy Eggers writes: 'I have no idea why I fear this, expected it to happen. I even knew how I would react to this bullet coming from the elevator door, what word I would say. That word was: *Finally*' ('Mistakes We Knew We Were Making', 17).

¹¹⁵ Cf., Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* (eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs; trans. Ronald Speirs; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). In a frenzy of modern Dionysian prose, Eggers devours himself:

Nevertheless, as was the case with Melville's desire for annihilation, death is nothing one awaits or that arrives. Although the strained and digressive self-presentations (be it of beginnings and/or endings) of Sterne, Eggers, and Melville are certainly divided, this is a far cry from the too-hastily announced 'impossibility' that so many continue to ascribe to subjectivity — i.e., as that which is wholly other and eternally deferred. Though the parlance may at first glance be the same, my premise is fundamentally different. Namely, that the purportedly deferred impossibility of the author (and thus, we might add, also the reader), the (still)birth of tragedy, as it were, is an *impossibility that happens* in the active self-becoming of subjective characterisation.

5. *The Aesthetics of Duplicitous Self-Creation*

The precipitous rise and fall of Melville's eleven-year writing career has been well-documented, with most biographers highlighting the differences between the 'early Melville' of *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville as 'truth-seeker' in *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, and Melville as 'truth-denier' in *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*.¹¹⁶ While I do not mean to suggest that one should read the all-encompassing duplicity of a novel like *The Confidence-Man* the same way one reads the (relatively) more

Don't you know that I am connected to you? Don't you know that I'm trying to pump blood to you, that this is for you, that I hate you people, so many of you motherfuckers — When you sleep I want you never to wake up, so many of you I want you to just fucking sleep it away because I only want you to run under with me on this sand like Indians, if you're going to fucking sleep all day fuck you motherfuckers oh when you're all sleeping so many sleeping I am somewhere on some stupid rickety scaffolding and I'm trying to show you this, just been trying to show you this — What the fuck does it take to show you motherfuckers, what does it fucking take what do you want how much do you want because I am willing and I'll stand before you and I'll raise my arms and give you my chest and throat and wait, and I've been so old for so long, for you, for you, I want it fast and right through me — Oh do it, do it, you motherfuckers, do it do it you fuckers finally finally finally (Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, 436-37).

¹¹⁶ For example, see Nathalia Wright, 'Form and Function in Melville' *Publication of the Modern Language Association* 67 (June 1952): 330-340.

straightforward travel epic *Typee*, thus subsuming Melville's authorial beginning and ending, I have sought in this chapter to show that the intertwining of duplicity and self-presentation is not exclusive to his final novel.¹¹⁷ Indeed, in light of the problems regarding autobiographical self-presentation highlighted above, what would it mean to accept *Typee* (and thus, too, Melville's inaugural self-presentation as an author) as Melville says we must: i.e., on 'its own account'?

Where might one begin this multitudinous text, in which the author seems to prefer outside sources over his own experiences? As Charles Anderson notes, this outside influence was so strong that Melville 'almost habitually leaned upon his authorities even in matters with which he certainly must have had a first-hand acquaintance. For some reason, he preferred to work from the descriptions of previous authors, which he found ready at hand . . . sometimes even retaining the exact phraseology of his original.'¹¹⁸ Melville copied so much, Anderson continues, 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.¹¹⁹ Hershel Parker, perhaps the most noted Melville scholar of the past forty years, agrees:

All in all, the evidence seems to show that Melville's last-minute cobbling was not inspired by his publisher but by his own desire to eke

¹¹⁷ Edgar Dryden comes to a similar conclusion in his examination of Melville's fictional form, but the openness he finds in Melville's early narrators to their outright fictionalization of identity is ultimately diluted because he unreflectively begs the question. To say that a narrator 'fictionalizes his earlier experience in an attempt to define its truth or meaning to himself and to his reader', or that by 'turning his experience into a story, he places himself outside of that experience — in effect, treats it as though it belonged to someone else' misses the evolutionary, autopoetic dynamics in which the nuances of Melville's later thinking revels (*Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth* [New York: Knopf, 1968], 35, 36–37).

¹¹⁸ Charles Robert Anderson, *Melville in the South Seas* (New York: Dover, 1939), 146. Anderson is thinking specifically of Captain David Porter's *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean in the U.S. Frigate Essex, in the Years 1812, 1813, and 1814* [1815], Charles S. Stewart's *A Visit to the South Seas, in the U.S. Ship Vincennes, During the Years 1829 and 1830* [1831], and William Ellis' *Polynesian Researches* [1829] (118-19). In a passage deleted from the American revised edition, the narrator of *Typee* admits having read Stewart and Ellis, but not Porter (Melville, *Typee*, 5-6).

¹¹⁹ Anderson, *Melville in the South Seas*, 166.

out his brief impressions from his four weeks among the Typeeans (rather than the four months he was claiming), plundering sourcebooks for passages which could be rewritten as his own experiences.¹²⁰

Although critics like Anderson and Parker resist charging Melville with outright plagiarism,¹²¹ Elizabeth Renker points out that their defences 'suggest most forcefully the felt presence of the "charge" rather than its dismissal.'¹²² The anecdotal fact that *Typee's* financial fortunes were significantly diminished by the widespread British distribution of Routledge's rogue version is but one of the parallels to Melville's own textual piracy.¹²³ Indeed, it was also in Britain that the manuscript of *Omoo* was seized as contraband by a Customs' Officer while in en route to John Murray for final approval, 'under the pretence of its being an American reprint of an English work.'¹²⁴ Like a counterfeit coin, Melville's text, from the beginning, had been manufactured by and circulated in a network of impropriety that inevitably he could not completely control.

¹²⁰ Hershel Parker, 'Evidences for "Late Insertions" in Melville's Works' *Studies in the Novel* 7 (1975): 413.

¹²¹ 'Melville transformed his borrowings with such skill that the charge of plagiarism is inadmissible', Howard Vincent concludes (*The Trying-Out of 'Moby-Dick'* [Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1980], 6). Gordon Roper, responding to similar 'borrowings' in Melville's second book, *Omoo*, argues that they 'were not those of a plagiarist'. Rather, they were simply intended to fill in the gaps of his first-hand experience ('Historical Note' in *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas in The Writings of Herman Melville* [eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 2; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1968], 325).

¹²² Renker, *Strike Through the Mask*, 3. In her chapter on plagiarism in *Typee*, Renker explores Melville's self-consciousness about his 'borrowings' and how this haunts him throughout the book in the form of tattooing (1-23).

¹²³ See Howard, 'Historical Note', 297-98; Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 2:921. Despite its general popularity, *Typee* was not an overwhelming bestseller in either America or Britain. Though Melville made \$2,000 from the book, this came over a span of forty-one years, leaving Melville in 1846-47 scrambling to make ends meet. Even after he was able to secure a more lucrative publishing contract — at least until the financial failure of *Moby-Dick* in 1851 and the complete fallout with his readers and publishers a year later — and he was making more money than most other American authors of the day, Melville had a propensity for taking on ill-advised debt. For additional reading on Melville's income, see Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America*, 190-203.

¹²⁴ Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 1:236-37.

Moreover, when Anderson suggests that one should not be too critical of Melville, because his 'borrowings' are merely the manifestations of a young man 'conscious of his own inexperience as a writer',¹²⁵ he fails to fully appreciate that the conscious inexperience that so distinguishes the beginning of Melville's writing career is itself manifested by the self-destructive appropriation of disparate voices.¹²⁶ For Melville, as seen above, when the consistent point of contention is that of one's character, be it a question of one's morality or one's identity, the true authorial victory (i.e., that of self-assertion) is always in the form of a self-violence. That is to say, it is not merely that Melville somehow furtively benefits from this violence. On the contrary, the authorial 'victory' is essentially Pyrrhic in the sense that while it has always already been won, i.e., the Subject is asserted as 'Subject', it is won retroactively, and thus by virtue of the inherent excess of a duplicitous self-characterisation. As such, unthinkable, impossible freedom erupts from and disrupts the closed circularity of self-assertion in the guise of self-destructiveness (and vice versa), but also sustains the repressive desire for such closure. What we find in Melville, in other words, is the problematic self-becoming of the modern Subject. It is precisely in this relation of subjectivity to masques and masquerades, I argue, that Melville exemplifies the profound possibilities of recasting theology in the aesthetic light of its self-characterisation / *autopoiesis*.

That Melville's creative / poetic disingenuousness is evident as early as *Typee* offers then salient credence to Warwick Wadlington's suggested 'inchoate' affinities

¹²⁵ Anderson, *Melville on the South Seas*, 126.

¹²⁶ John Bryant notes that Melville's dilemma, and what I would contend makes it peculiarly self-destructive, insofar as this is possible, is that 'he was publishing false goods and knew it' (*Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], p. 132).

between Melville's first and last novel.¹²⁷ In this way, the difference between the two books of faith that frame Melville's beginning and ending,¹²⁸ which the London *Literary Gazette* regarded, respectively, as an April Fool's joke and the product of a 'March hare with a literary turn of mind',¹²⁹ is not one simply of measured degree, but rather one of performative complexity.¹³⁰

How, then, *does* one accept *Typee* on 'its own account', in light of the confession that it has been "'spun as a yarn," not only to relieve the weariness of many a night-watch at sea, but to excite the sympathies of the author's shipmates'?¹³¹ For his part, Tommo / Melville rationalises that the three-year separation of event and narration, not to mention the 'very peculiar circumstances in which he was placed', excuses him from the normal conventions of journalistic writing. The narrative technique employed here, explains Wadlington, is that of 'the picturesque sense of

¹²⁷ Warwick Wadlington, *The Confidence Game in American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 62. I consistently refer to *The Confidence-Man* as Melville's final novel, due to *Billy Budd*'s posthumous discovery, editing, and publication, as well as my focus on the period of Melville's 'professional' writing career. In terms of William Charvat's definition of 'professional' writing, Melville's writing career was finished after the publication of *The Confidence-Man* (1857). In not considering *Billy Budd* (or his poetry, for that matter) a 'professional' work, I am not depreciating its contribution to the dynamic I find at work in Melville's fiction. On the contrary, in returning to the water yet again, even beyond his death, one cannot help but think Melville's (literary) ending as troubled as its beginning, for it *is* inasmuch as it is always being re-enacted upon the variegated imbroglio of posthumous perspectives and interactions of editors and readers who wish to regard it as Melville's 'final word'.

¹²⁸ The theme of faith, or confidence, that is seemingly so forthright in *The Confidence-Man*, is also vital to the 'journalistic' integrity of *Typee*'s narrator. Near the beginning of his tale, he pledges: 'I may here state, on my *faith as an honest man* . . .' (Melville, *Typee*, 23)

¹²⁹ See n. 43. The *Gazette*'s review of *The Confidence-Man* goes on to suggest that the book itself was 'a hoax on the public – an emulation of Barnum. Perhaps the mild man in mourning, who goes about requesting everybody to put confidence in him, is an emblem of Melville himself' (Branch, *Melville*, 373, 375). The *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, who, unlike most reviewers, actually enjoyed Melville's more imaginative fiction over his 'South Pacific travels', suggested that *The Confidence-Man*'s 'hero' was actually much 'like Melville in his earlier works, ask[ing] confidence of everybody under different masks of mendicancy' (385).

¹³⁰ This is where I part company with Wadlington, who seems to regard the difference as one of degree when he writes: 'I mean to argue that . . . in *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man* he succeeds in transposing the *merely* rhetorical-personal into the superpersonal by the sheerest and most durable of margins' (*The Confidence Game in American Literature*, 53).

¹³¹ Melville, *Typee*, xiii.

nearness-with-distance', whereby Melville creates an '*illusion* of unmediated involvement'.¹³² Indeed, while *Typee*'s Preface ends with an affirmation that the book had been written in 'the desire to speak the unvarnished truth', it is vital we not ignore the self-conscious irony that it never actually says it does so successfully?¹³³ As such, the result is a piece of writing that is neither pure journalism nor pure fiction.¹³⁴

Or, as Nina Baym argues in her important essay on Melville's 'quarrel' with the fictional form, he not only effectively breaches his 'genre contract' with journalistic travel writing, but also with that of fiction.¹³⁵ While the finality of her claim that 'none of Melville's longer works are wholly or even mainly fiction' hints at a rather limited conception of fiction, the examples she cites of Melville's repeated ruptures of the novel, as form and genre, are persuasive. In light of this, and in partial agreement with the argument developed by Gustaaf van Cromphout, I will explain in Chapter Two why this quarrel with fiction, as a self-stable genre and form, is itself indicative of Melville's complex engagement with it, whose importance is finally borne out in the conception of subjectivity that emerges from his flirtations with the early Romantic conception of the novel as the genre of infinite reflection.¹³⁶

¹³² Wadlington, *The Confidence Game in American Literature*, 57, 51 (my emphasis).

¹³³ *Typee*, xiv. Leon Howard observes this important detail in his reflections on whether *Typee* should be regarded as fact or fiction, in his 'Historical Note', 293.

¹³⁴ For fictional elements and techniques in *Typee*, see Howard, 'Historical Note', 291–93; Wadlington, *The Confidence Game in American Literature*, 56–68; John Samson, 'The Dynamics of History and Fiction in Melville's *Typee*' *American Quarterly* 36 (Summer 1984): 276–90; Robert A. Lee, "'Varnishing the Facts": *Typee* and the Art of Melville's Early Fiction' *Durham University Journal* 72 (1980): 203–09; Michael Clark, 'Melville's *Typee*: Fact, Fiction, and Esthetics' *Arizona Quarterly* 34 (1978): 351–70.

¹³⁵ Nina Baym, 'Melville's Quarrel with Fiction' *PMLA* 94 (October 1979), 910. Cf., Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker, 'The Flawed Grandeur of Melville's *Pierre*' in *New Perspectives on Melville* (ed. Faith Pullin; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1978), 162; R. P. Blackmur, *The Lion and the Honeycomb: Essays in Critique* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 162. For a contemporary re-examination of this genre, at least implicitly so, see Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre' in *Modern Genre Theory* (trans., Avital Ronell; Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 219–31.

¹³⁶ Gustaaf van Cromphout, 'Melville as Novelist: The German Example' *Studies in American Fiction* 13 (Spring, 1985): 31–44.

CHAPTER TWO:
MELVILLE AND GERMAN ROMANTICISM

1. Riding the 'High German Horse'

By 1848, due to the relative success of his first two novels, Melville was clearly enjoying the social circle afforded him by Evert Duyckinck's 'cellar', in which, amidst cigar smoke and copious amounts of brandy, he kept company with other New York artists and writers and discussed the culture of the day.¹³⁷ Of even more importance, however, inclusion in this boy's club also opened to Melville's disposal Duyckinck's massive library of sixteen thousand volumes. Drawing from the libraries of both Duyckinck and the New York Society, as well as what he could buy with his five hundred dollar advance from Harpers, Melville's intellectual appetite at this time was rapacious. Amongst the volumes he consumed between 1848 and 1850 were four volumes of Thomas Browne; three of Rabelais; Jean Paul's *Flower, Fruit and Thorn Pieces*; Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and the two-volume *German Romance*; *Frithiof's Saga*, by Esaias Tegnér; David Hartley's *Observations on Man*; a volume of Shakespeare;¹³⁸ Goethe's *Autobiography* and *Wilhelm Meister* (Carlyle's translation);

¹³⁷ Melville's relationship with Duyckinck has received a great deal of attention, most of it grounded only on scant pieces of epistolary evidence. It remains an important consideration, however, because his presence (and eventual lack thereof) cannot help but be noticed throughout Melville's career as a novelist. Their relationship is dealt with at length in Watson Branch, Hershel Parker, and Harrison Hayford, 'Historical Note' in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, by Herman Melville (eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 10; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1984), 257-76; Jonathan A. Cook, *Satirical Apocalypse: An Anatomy of Melville's The Confidence-Man* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 133-42; Donald Kay, 'Herman Melville's Literary Relationship with Evert Duyckinck' *College Language Association Journal* 18 (1975): 393-403; and Daniel A. Wells, "'Bartleby the Scrivener," Poe, and the Duyckinck Circle' *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 21 (First Quarter, 1975): 35-39.

¹³⁸ Shakespeare made a particularly strong impression on Melville: 'Dolt & ass that I am I have lived more than 29 years, & until a few days ago, never made close acquaintance with the divine William. Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired. I fancy that this moment Shakspeare [sic] in heaven ranks with Gabriel Raphael and Michael. And if another Messiah ever comes twill be in Shakespere's [sic] person. ---- I am mad to think how minute a cause has prevented me hitherto from reading Shakespeare. But until now, every

Defoe's *The Fortunate Mistress*; a complete edition of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*; Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*; and one well-thumbed copy of Seneca's *Morals by Way of Abstract*.¹³⁹

Much of Melville's choice of reading, it should be noted, was not primarily that of individual whimsy. It was, rather, highly indicative of the literary culture into which he had recently thrown himself. If, according to the *North American Review* in 1840, the positive reception of Goethe and Romanticism via the likes of Thomas Carlyle¹⁴⁰ and Samuel Taylor Coleridge¹⁴¹ portended a 'German mania' prevailing over the American literary scene, by 1848 Melville was downright infected.¹⁴² And while it is ultimately impossible to know the full extent Melville read and comprehended everything he checked out, purchased or browsed, and far beyond the aim of this chapter to even attempt to do so, it is certainly the case that what he did read (especially Carlyle and Coleridge) deeply affected the style and content of what he wanted to write.¹⁴³ Indeed, most commentators agree, such reading should probably be credited as the impetus for his declaration to John Murray during their dispute about his novels' historicity: 'My *instinct* is to out with the Romance.'¹⁴⁴

The sheer breadth of Melville's reading whilst writing his third novel, *Mardi*,

copy unendurable to my eyes which are tender as young sparrows. But chancing to fall in with this glorious edition, I now exult over it, page after page' (Melville, *Correspondence*, 119).

¹³⁹ Cf., Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Reading* (rev. ed.; Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 32-43; cf., 59-72.

¹⁴⁰ Henry A. Pochmann, *German Culture in America: German Culture in America: Philosophical and Literary Influences, 1600-1900* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 96-100.

¹⁴¹ Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 96-100.

¹⁴² Qtd. in Cromphout, 'Melville as Novelist', 32. By 1848, *The Literary World* added, 'What man or woman of cultivation does not, at this epoch', take an interest in 'the fanciful and fascinating literature of the Germans'.

¹⁴³ Cf., Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 436-440; 755-60 n.235-65. Pochmann's work remains unparalleled in its presentation of the Germanic influence so readily available to, and so eagerly devoured by, Melville.

¹⁴⁴ Melville, *Correspondence*, 106.

is, we find, strikingly parallel to its sophomoric aspirations. Though the novel is filled with instances of profound beauty, as well as many moments of drama and comedy reminiscent of his first two novels, it is difficult not to find it a very frustrating book actually to read. George Ripley's review for the *New York Tribune* sums up the general opinion at the time:

We have seldom found our reading faculty so near exhaustion, or our good nature as critics so severely exercised, as in an attempt to get through this new work by the author of the fascinating *Typee* and *Omoo*. If we had never heard of Mr. Melville before, we should soon have laid aside his book, as a monstrous compound of Carlyle, Jean-Paul, and Sterne.¹⁴⁵

If the first forty chapters were at all representative of the rest of the book, *Mardi* undoubtedly would have gone on to become another seafaring success. In these early chapters (i.e., volume one of the first British edition), the action is fast and furious. The narrator and his 'chummy' shipmate, Jarl, jump ship from the whaler *Arcturion*, taking refuge for sixteen days in a small boat out on the open seas; whereupon they encounter another ship, the *Parki*, abandoned save for an argumentative Polynesian couple, Samoa and his ill-tempered wife Annatoo, who recount the dramatic story of having survived the massacre of their shipmates by islanders; a storm sinks the *Parki*, killing Annatoo and forcing the three men back to the small boat; they happen upon another small boat filled with natives, where a beautiful woman named Yillah is held captive as a sacrifice; the three men rescue her and kill the head priest; Yillah inexplicably transforms from a olive-skinned brunette into a blue-eyed blonde, and just as inexplicably disappears. Though Melville's use of the supernatural at this point of an otherwise straightforward 'travel narrative' was risky, and would undoubtedly lose a few readers here and there, lack of any real, substantive plot from Chapter Forty

¹⁴⁵ Branch, *Melville*, 161; cf. 139-82.

on would effectively alienate those who remained. It did not take readers long to realise that the ensuing quest for Yillah, which for long portions of the massive novel is not even mentioned, was simply a means for Melville to process all too openly the new intellectual world his reading and reflecting had disclosed to him.¹⁴⁶

If the reviewers of *Mardi*, like Fitz-James O'Brien in a retrospective analysis of Melville in 1857, had hoped that a voyage to the 'Old World' might cure him and his writing of the dreaded 'German disease', i.e., that upon his return he would be ready once again 'to give us pictures of life and reality',¹⁴⁷ he was set to disappoint them greatly. As a matter of fact, but two days into such a journey in 1849, Melville was introduced to the respected German scholar George Adler, who was travelling abroad to recuperate from the completion of his multi-volume English-German lexicon, a project, it was said, that had nearly driven him insane.¹⁴⁸ For forty days, Melville's journals report, he and the 'Coleridgean' Adler were almost inseparable, eating breakfast with one another in the mornings, walking the deck of the *Southampton* or touring London and Paris during the afternoon, and drinking whiskey while talking 'high German metaphysics' late into the evening. In one entry, Melville writes:

¹⁴⁶ The result was, not surprisingly, a financial disaster. Melville's new English publisher, Richard Bentley, sums up the result in a letter to Melville: 'the first volume [the first forty chapters] was eagerly devoured, the second was read — but the third was not perhaps altogether adapted to the class of readers whom "Omoo" and "Typee", and the First Volume of "Mardi" gratified' (Melville, *Correspondence*, 596). For specific sales figures, see Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America*, 231, and Elizabeth Foster, 'Historical Note' in *Mardi and Voyage Thither*, by Herman Melville (eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 3; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1970), 670.

¹⁴⁷ Branch, *Melville*, 367.

¹⁴⁸ It should be noted, incidentally, that upon returning to New York in 1852, Adler's hallucinations and paranoia soon returned, and ultimately led in 1853 to his permanent institutionalisation. Cf., George J. Adler, *Letters of a Lunatic; or, A Brief Exposition of My University Life, during the Years, 1853-54* (New York: privately published, 1854). For additional biographical information on Adler, see Herman Melville, *Journals*, in *The Writings of Herman Melville* (ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 15; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1989), 251-52; Sanford E. Marovitz, 'More Chartless Voyaging: Melville and Adler at Sea' *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1986): 373-84.

I forgot to mention, that *last night* about 9 1/2 P.M. Adler & Taylor came into my room, & it was proposed to have whiskey punches, which we *did* have, accordingly. Adler drank about three table spoons full — Taylor 4 or five tumblers &c. We had an extraordinary time & did not break up till after two in the morning. We talked metaphysics continually, & Hegel, Schlegel, Kant &c. were discussed under the influence of the whiskey.¹⁴⁹

Such was the pattern, set early in the voyage, of Melville's intoxicated excursions of mind aboard what he called 'the high German horse'.¹⁵⁰

In the rest of this chapter, I will demonstrate that in the explicit manoeuvres / declarations of works like *Mardi* and 'Hawthorne and his Mosses', as well as the implicit structure of self-destruction / self-creation described in Chapter One, Melville shares with early German Romanticism in particular a similar conceptualisation of the Self and the Absolute. In what follows here and in Chapter Three, the theoretical and aesthetic perspectives of Romantic subjectivity, as embodied in and articulated by the Romantic theory of the novel, are read in terms of their philosophical and historical context — specifically, the critical philosophy of Kant, and then the speculative idealism of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.¹⁵¹ In this way, the profound similarities, and ultimately differences, between Melville and early German Romanticism will become explicit, and will form the basis for our thinking in Chapter Four of Melville's vital role as an exemplar for contemporary aesthetico-theological awareness.

2. Kantian Apperception and the Art of Schematism

The purpose of critical philosophy, according to Kant, was maturity, as opposed to the 'self-incurred immaturity' evident in the all-too-common 'inability to

¹⁴⁹ Melville, *Journals*, 8.

¹⁵⁰ Melville, *Journals*, 9.

¹⁵¹ I confine my reflections in the present chapter to early Romanticism's philosophical forebears, Kant and Fichte. Both Schelling and Hegel, however, will prove pivotal in Chapter Three to the re-contextualisation of Melville's reservations about the Romantic project.

use one's understanding without the guidance of another.¹⁵² Moreover, he continues, 'For enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is freedom.'¹⁵³ In the end, then, all that was necessary for mature thinking was courage — the willingness truly to think freely. Kant envisioned the intellectual progression as analogous to the stages of life, from the infancy of dogmatism to the maturity of scepticism (optimistically omitting, Melville would surely point out, the fourth stage of life, decay):

The first step in matters of pure reason, marking its infancy, is *dogmatic*. The second step is *sceptical*; and indicates that experience has rendered our judgment wiser and more circumspect. But a third step, such as can be taken only by fully matured judgment, based on assured principles of proved universality, is now necessary, namely, to subject to examination, not the facts of reason, but reason itself, in the whole extent of its powers, and as regards its aptitude for pure *a priori* modes of knowledge. This is not the censorship but the *criticism* of reason, whereby not its present *bounds* but its determinate [and necessary] *limits*, not its ignorance on this or that point but its ignorance in regard to all possible questions of a certain kind, are demonstrated from principles, and not merely arrived at by way of conjecture.¹⁵⁴

It is not, Kant continues, that scepticism is a 'permanent settlement', or an end unto itself; rather, it is a 'resting-place' [*Wohnplatz*] that affords a critical perspective on that which one holds to be dogmatically true.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"' in *Kant's Political Writings* (ed. Hans Reiss; trans. H. B. Nisbet; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54.

¹⁵³ Kant, 'An Answer to the Question', 55.

¹⁵⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. Norman Kemp Smith; New York: Macmillan, 1929), 607 (A761 / B789). Kant published two editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 and 1787. There were substantial changes in the second edition, and scholars continue to argue about the ways some very crucial issues seem to be treated differently in the two editions, which in turn leads to arguments about the alleged superiority of one edition over another, their mutual consistency or lack of consistency, and so forth. In the footnotes, I follow the well-established practice of citing both editions, the 1781 edition as the A edition, and the 1787 edition as the B edition.

¹⁵⁵ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 607 (A761 / B789). Cf., 'Reason must in all its undertakings subject itself to criticism; should it limit freedom of criticism by any prohibitions, it must harm itself, drawing upon itself a damaging suspicion. Nothing is so important through its usefulness, nothing so sacred, that it may be exempted from this searching examination, which knows no respect for persons. Reason depends on this freedom for its every existence. For reason has no dictatorial authority' (593 [A739 / B767]).

For Kant, because its focus is on what must first be the case for the Subject truly to understand the status of its knowledge about the world, the critical perspective has priority over all attempts to speak definitively about the world. Knowledge, or understanding, he explains, is dependent on the conceptual linkage of perceptions / representations (i.e., the 'manifold of experience') in rule-bound judgments. For any given intuition, such as that of a rock or a dog, we make a conceptual judgment when we identify it as such (as 'a rock' or 'a dog') due to the features it shares with other intuitions also deemed either 'rock' or 'dog'. In this way, any given instance or object of conceptual judgment is: (1) *mediated knowledge* — 'the representation of a representation' — and (2) *a synthesis of representations* — 'In every judgment there is a concept which holds of many representations, and among them of a given representation that is immediately related to an object'.¹⁵⁶ Without the conceptualising synthesis of intuition, that is, if there was nothing but sensuous experience without conceptual judgement, Kant points out that there would only be the insane chaos of endlessly undifferentiated, and thus literally unthinkable, particularity.

Kant's obvious first hurdle was to avoid the fallacy of a logical regress, whereby one is left to wonder emptily about the origin or grounds of the *first* conceptual rule, or the ultimate foundation of knowledge, because whatever was established as the first rule would itself require a conceptualising rule in order for it to be identified as 'the first rule'. Kant, thus, ascribes the basis of conceptual judgment to a 'peculiar talent' of the Subject (which is also to say, a talent peculiar to the Subject alone):

¹⁵⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 105 (A68 / B93). Following the example of Terry Pinkard, as well as Beatrice Longuenesse. I am, it should be noted, treating the A (1781) and B (1787) versions of Kant's Transcendental Deduction as reasonably harmonious. See Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 27 n.12; and Beatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. Charles T. Wolfe; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 9-10, 33-34, 59-64, 109-11.

If [judgment] sought to give general instructions how we are to subsume under these rules, that is, to distinguish whether something does or does not come under them, that could only be by means of another rule. This in turn, for the very reason that it is a rule, again demands guidance from judgment. And thus it appears that, though understanding is capable of being instructed, and of being equipped with rules, judgment is a peculiar talent which can be practised only, and cannot be taught. It is the specific quality of so-called mother-wit: and its lack no school can make good.¹⁵⁷

Kant calls this innate talent to connect images with their concept, and thus to actually see something *as* something, 'schematism', and attributes it to the art of the individual's 'reproductive imagination'.¹⁵⁸ The schema of any sensible concept, he explains, 'is a product . . . of pure *a priori* imagination, through which, and in accordance with which, images themselves first become possible.'¹⁵⁹ In this way, it is not images that underlie one's conceptual categories, but the schematic activity of one's own imagination.

Though it may not seem so immediately, the implications of this for subjectivity prove to be profound. For schematism as an innate art to make any sense at all, Kant realised he must first presuppose the necessity of a unified / unifying self-consciousness, or what he calls 'the synthetic unity of apperception'. That is to say, echoing Terry Pinkard, 'any representation of a multiplicity *as* a multiplicity involves not merely the receptivity of experience; *experiencing* it as *one* experiential *multiplicity* requires the possibility of there being a single complex *thought* of the experience.' For such a thought to occur, he continues, 'requires a single complex

¹⁵⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 177 (A133 / B172).

¹⁵⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 181-83 (A139-142 / B178-181).

¹⁵⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 183 (A142 / B181)

subject to think it'.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, as Kant famously writes in the second edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*:

It must be possible for the 'I think' to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought at all, and that is equivalent to saying that the representation would be impossible, or at least would be nothing to me.¹⁶¹

Importantly, the unifying self-consciousness that accompanies each thought, and thus makes it *my* thought, is not that of the Cartesian *cogito*, in which the thinking and the being of the subject are identical (what Kant calls the '*analytic* unity of apperception'). Rather, for Kant, this kind of awareness of oneself *as a unified Subject* is similar to one's intuition of any other sensible object, and thus is dependent on the conceptualising synthesis of different moments of consciousness. Such is, in Kant's terms, the very condition of possibility for the 'empirical consciousness' of oneself:

For the empirical consciousness, which accompanies different representations, is in itself diverse and without relation to the identity of the subject. That relation comes about, not simply through my accompanying each representation with consciousness, but only in so far as I *conjoin* one representation with another, and am conscious of the synthesis of them. Only in so far, therefore, as I can unite a manifold of given representations in *one consciousness*, is it possible for me to represent to myself the *identity of the consciousness in [i.e. throughout] these representations*.¹⁶²

In contrast, the pure self of synthetic apperception — what Kant calls the 'I think' — is a free act of unmediated 'spontaneity'; that is, it is purely self-created, the self in-itself, and thus is not dependent on its representation in time and space.

¹⁶⁰ Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 30.

¹⁶¹ Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*, 152-53 (B131-132).

¹⁶² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 153 (B133). Kant famously adds to this: 'In other words, only in so far as I can grasp the manifold of the representations in one consciousness, do I call them one and all *mine*. For otherwise I should have as many-coloured and diverse a self as I have representations of which I am conscious to myself' (154 [B134]).

Inasmuch as the self of pure apperception is both the unity of perception that synthesises all manner of intuitions according to the rules of conceptual understanding, as well as the very thought / synthesising process that thinks this unity, it never appears as such (i.e., in the empirical limits of self-presentation). As such, the Kantian subject can never truly know and apprehend itself as the pure thing-in-itself:

[I]n the synthetic original unity of apperception, I am conscious of myself, not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am. This *representation* is a *thought*, not an intuition. . . . Accordingly, I have no *knowledge* of myself as I am but merely as I appear to myself.¹⁶³

Pure apperception, rather, remains but a necessary, but ultimately empty, thought. In this, Kant concludes, apperception is the condition of possibility for empirical self-consciousness.

This, consequently, becomes the basis for Kant's withering critique of traditional metaphysics, as represented in and by those various philosophical and theological strongholds devoted to 'pure' and 'transcendent' notions, i.e., experientially ineffable and yet nevertheless thinkable, such as God and the soul. For Kant, it is *not* the case that such notions are logically contradictory or impossible. Rather, they are, in the words of Slavoj Žižek '*empty notions devoid of their (intuited objects)*. . . . The problem is precisely that while it is easy to imagine them, we can never fill out their notion with positive, intuited content.'¹⁶⁴ For this reason, Kant deemed them antinomies — i.e., objects-of-thought [*Gedankendinge*], and thus not capable of being experienced or represented as such. In short, then, because knowledge is by definition

¹⁶³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 169 (B157-158). Cf., 'I exist as an intelligence which is conscious solely of its power of combination; but in respect of the manifold which it has to combine I am subjected to a limiting condition (entitled inner sense), namely, that this combination can be made intuitable only according to relations of time, which lies entirely outside the concepts of understanding, strictly regarded. Such an intelligence, therefore, can know itself only as it appears to itself in respect of an intuition which is not intellectual and cannot be given by the understanding itself' (169 [B159]).

¹⁶⁴ Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, 109.

finite, it can only circumscribe the limits of the knowable, without denying or affirming that which necessarily is outside such a limit.¹⁶⁵

3. *The Absolute Subject as Self-Positing I*

The Kantian enquiry of and about truth / identity cuts to the core, too, of Melville's musings in *Mardi*. When, for instance, the journalistically-inclined Mohi sceptically wonders whether a legend 'seems a credible history', suggesting instead that it had been 'invented', the philosopher Babbalanja cautions that this is no reason to dismiss it:

Truth is in things, and not in words: truth is voiceless. . . . [W]hat are vulgarly called fictions are as much realities as the gross mattock of Dididi, the digger of trenches; for things visible are but conceits of the eye: things imaginative, conceits of the fancy. If duped by one, we are equally duped by the other.¹⁶⁶

Undaunted, Mohi asks the question that ultimately haunts Melville and his readers, and indeed many of Kant's: 'if all things are deceptive [or, apropos Kant, merely phenomena], tell us what is truth.' To this Babbalanja can only answer, sounding not unlike Kant with regard to his antinomies: 'The old interrogatory; did they not ask it when the world began? But ask it no more. . . . [T]hat question is more final than any answer.'¹⁶⁷

Indeed, the Kantian problematic of the antinomies, i.e., as finally and fully ineffable and uncertain, is indistinct from that of the character of the Subject in *Mardi*.

¹⁶⁵ Again quoting Žižek, By saying "the Thing *is* non-phenomenal," we do *not* say the same as "the Thing is *not* phenomenal"; we do not make any positive claim about it, we only draw a certain limit and locate the Thing in the wholly nonspecified void beyond it (*Tarrying With the Negative*, 111). Consequently, and strictly analogous to his understanding of pure apperception, both God and the soul, though unthinkable, would become for Kant the very conditions of possibility for one's ethical judgments.

¹⁶⁶ Melville, *Mardi*, 283–84.

¹⁶⁷ Melville, *Mardi*, 284.

Perhaps reflective of Melville's own character having been called into question by critics of *Typee*, in *Mardi* we find a discordant chorus of characters holding all manner of contradictory opinions, and each generally regarding the opinion of the others to be either immature, insane, or irresponsible. All of these voices, however, are themselves problematised by the narrator's silence regarding his identity — which is to say, his character.¹⁶⁸ After all, even when the inhabitants of the island Odo finally provide a name for the narrator in Chapter Forty, 'Taji', it is but a case of mistaken identity, for they only do so after mistaking him for their sun god.¹⁶⁹ As William Charvat notes, in his becoming 'Taji', the hitherto first-person narrator of *Mardi* essentially vanishes:

The 'I' of the first chapters becomes 'we' in the allegory, and even the 'we' often becomes the voice of authorial omniscience released from the control of the grammatical first person. Sometimes within the space of a page or two, Taji speaks as 'we', is addressed *by the author* as 'you', and is referred to by his companions in the third person as if he were not there.¹⁷⁰

In short, his status as omniscient commentator is diffused through his new travel companions: i.e., Yoomy, the poet; Mohi, the storyteller; Babbalanja, the philosopher; and King Media, the demigod.¹⁷¹ In this, Melville seems to be saying by the end of

¹⁶⁸ For a discussion of this ambiguity of character, both of Taji (as character) and (the nature of) *Mardi*, see Christopher S. Durer, 'Melville's "Synthesizing" Narrator: Mardi, Fichte, and the Fruhromanticker' *Romanticism Past & Present* 10 (Winter 1986): 45-60; Russ Pottle, 'The Monkey Before the Whale: "Signifyin(g)" and Melville's Mardi' *Journal of Narrative Technique* 23 (Fall 1993): 136-53; John Wenke, 'Melville's Mardi: Narrative Self-Fashioning and the Play of Possibility' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 31 (Fall 1989): 406-425.

¹⁶⁹ This is, of course, reminiscent of *Typee*, where 'Tommo' is also a kind of pseudonym — i.e., not simply because, biographically, 'Tommo' is purportedly standing in for Melville, but because of the inability of the Typeeans to successfully pronounce 'Tom' (which was not his real name either!). In this, 'Tommo' is a pseudonym *of a pseudonym* (Melville, *Typee*, 72). As was the case with Tommo, the *truth* that we generally assume lies behind a character (that is, where their characteristic identities begin and end) thus remain as elusive as that of Melville.

¹⁷⁰ Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America*, 221-22.

¹⁷¹ After the murder of the high priest and the transformation of the narrator into 'Taji', Charvat writes, 'the physique becomes insubstantial and translucent, and the continuing solidity of Jarl and Samoa are embarrassing to the story'. As such, Melville found it necessary to fade them out of his story — and, indeed, ultimately even killed them off. Melville, Charvat continues, may actually have

Mardi, it is altogether fitting that Taji's search for Yillah should culminate in his literal suicide.

Melville here, I would suggest, touches on the shared concern of Kant and early German Romanticism: namely, in the words of Piotr Parlej, for 'the production of the subject in its proper form, the production of the subject as *this subject's* subject.'¹⁷² Similar to Kant's 'peculiar talent', peculiar to the autonomous Subject, then, we find in Schlegel the Subject's 'spiritual viewing' [*Anschauung*] of itself,¹⁷³ i.e., its self-presentation as its own subject. In his emphasis on circularity and reflection, however, Schlegel's (and, we will see, Melville's) understanding of subjectivity is even more deeply indebted to the speculative idealism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, for whom philosophy was essentially a pure thinking about thinking.¹⁷⁴ The pure I of Fichte's philosophy, as such, 'looks at itself', and in this looking penetrates 'immediately all that it is'.¹⁷⁵ Or, as Hegel characterises it, an 'artistic consciousness [*künstliche Bewußtsein*], the consciousness about consciousness, so that I have the consciousness of what my consciousness is doing'.¹⁷⁶

realised that much of his reading audience would ultimately leave with them, 'for among his alternative explanations of Samoa's refusal to continue the search (he was "not the first man, who had turned back, after beginning a voyage like our own") was his distaste for Babbalanja's "disquisitions" (which were indeed distasteful to most reviewers), and for a Mardi [the island] which had not met his expectations' (*The Profession of Authorship in America*, 220).

¹⁷² Piotr Parlej, *The Romantic Theory of the Novel: Genre and Reflection in Cervantes, Melville, Flaubert, Joyce, and Kafka* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 19.

¹⁷³ Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms* (trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc; University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), 102.

¹⁷⁴ It is for this precise reason that Friedrich Schlegel characterises Fichte in *Athenaeum Fragment* 181 as 'a Kant raised to the second power', whose 'theory of knowledge is always simultaneously philosophy and philosophy of philosophy.' In his philosophy, Schlegel continues, 'one has to look as [Fichte] does – without paying attention to anything else — only at the whole and at the one thing that really matters' (Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 202).

¹⁷⁵ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Werke, 1797-1798*, in J. G. Fichte - Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (eds., Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitzky; vol. 4: Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1964), 196.

¹⁷⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, in *Werke* (eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel; vol. 20; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 393.

For Fichte, Kant's elusive 'I think' is only coherent on the condition that 'prior to all positing in the self, the self itself is posited.'¹⁷⁷ Unlike Kant, however, the unified Self is not simply a *fact* that can or should be presupposed as necessarily true. On the contrary, Dieter Henrich points out, there is, in fact, no Fichtean 'Subject-Self prior to self-consciousness'. On the contrary, 'the subject, too, first emerges at the same time as the whole consciousness expressed in the identity "I = I".'¹⁷⁸ That is to say, alongside Fichte's fundamental thesis, 'the Self posits itself absolutely and unconditionally'.¹⁷⁹ As such, the 'I' can only realise itself as such in the activity of the 'I' being itself; that is, in the 'deed-act' of reflection upon itself, 'through which I know something because I do it'.¹⁸⁰ For Fichte, then, the Self is precisely the act of self-positing / self-presentation, i.e., 'through which a Subject-Self becomes aware of itself as an Object-Self'.¹⁸¹ In this way, the Kantian distinction between self-consciousness as an intuition and concept is breached, and becomes instead a spontaneous, unitary awareness (or, in Fichte's terms, 'intellectual intuition').¹⁸²

The most obvious difficulty that strains Fichte's philosophical idealism, though, is the matter of subjective particularity. That is, if the 'I' is unlimited, endless activity, how do we account for the feeling of limitation, or differentiation, that constitutes individuality? Fichte's response is that limitation / differentiation (what he

¹⁷⁷ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Fichte's Werke I: Zur Theoretischen Philosophie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 95. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Fichte are my own, with the assistance of *Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre), with First and Second Introductions* (ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970).

¹⁷⁸ Dieter Henrich, 'Fichte's Original Insight,' in *Contemporary German Philosophy* (trans. David R. Lachterman; vol. 1; University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), 25.

¹⁷⁹ Fichte, *Werke I*, 98.

¹⁸⁰ Fichte, *Werke I*, 463. As Henrich simplifies, 'the Self posits itself absolutely as positing itself; or alternatively, self-consciousness is a 'look that sees itself and in each case is already this act of seeing ('Fichte's Original Insight', 29, 33).

¹⁸¹ Henrich, 'Fichte's Original Insight', 25.

¹⁸² Frederick Neuhausser, *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 84; Henrich, 'Fichte's Original Insight', 29-30.

calls *Anstoss*, or 'check') is itself necessary for the *activity* of self-positing to be unlimited. 'This makes sense', Andrew Bowie comments, 'in as much as a feeling of compulsion has as its *prior* condition that which can feel compelled, which must therefore be aware of its freedom.'¹⁸³ Were there no resistance or 'check', i.e., no 'not-I', there would be no 'infinite striving' to overcome such resistance or limitation, no reflective activity of self-positing, and thus no 'I'. In this way, then, the Fichtean 'I', *as infinite striving*, is prevented from ever being finally objectivised as a 'knowing subject'.¹⁸⁴

Reason steps into the method (from which Reflection arises) and determines [the imagination] to receive B [i.e., the 'not-I'] into the determinate A (the subject): but now the A presented as determinate must be once again restricted by an infinite B, at which the imagination proceeds exactly as above; and so it goes on, until the (here theoretical) reason is a complete determination of itself, where the imagination requires no restrictive B other than reason — that is, until it reaches the representation of what represents [*Vorstellung des Vorstellenden*]. In the practical sphere, imagination goes on into the infinity, up to the absolutely indeterminable idea of the highest unity, which would be possible only after a completed infinity, which is itself impossible.¹⁸⁵

In effect, Bowie concludes, Fichte's argument requires both 'a relative I and not-I within an Absolute which is still conceived of as I', but never fully explains why the 'Absolute I' should ever have split itself in the first place.¹⁸⁶

Walter Benjamin argues in his dissertation on the early German Romantics that it is here that the similarities between the idealism of Fichte and the romanticism

¹⁸³ Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 18. Cf., Pinkard, *German Philosophy, 1760-1860*, 112-20.

¹⁸⁴ Cf., '[I]f every item of knowledge really had a subject, the subject itself could not be an item of knowledge. Otherwise, we would have to assume a subject of this subject and thus surrender to the infinite regress that Fichte feared so much. The idea of the Self would sink into the abyss. The paradox of the subject-less knowing is preferable to that' (Henrich, 'Fichte's Original Insight', 36).

¹⁸⁵ Fichte, *Werke I*, 217.

¹⁸⁶ Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 18.

of Friedrich Schlegel are overwhelmed by their fundamental differences.¹⁸⁷ Whereas for Fichte, self-positing presupposes the ontological determination / reflection of the 'I',¹⁸⁸ 'the Romantics start from thinking-oneself, as a phenomenon; proper to everything, for everything is a self.'¹⁸⁹ That is to say, in contrast to the intuitive immediacy of Fichte's self-knowing and self-positing Absolute, whereby 'thinking as the thinking of thinking . . . achieves completion in the self-positing I',¹⁹⁰ early German Romanticism denies the intuitive / sensory role of the 'not-I', and instead posits the *conceptual* immediacy of the Absolute as an infinitization of the finite subject's self-consciousness and reflection. Or, as Benjamin describes it, 'the thinking of thinking of thinking (and so forth)'.¹⁹¹ In this 'third-level reflection', versus the first level of epistemological 'sense' and the second level of Fichtean 'reason', Benjamin explains, the 'thinking of thinking' can be either (indeed, ultimately, is both) the object of thought, i.e., thinking, or the 'thinking subject (thinking of thinking) of thinking'.¹⁹² The result, he concludes, are infinite levels of possible reflection, and thus an infinite plurality of meaning. In this way, he continues, the Romantics redefined the sense of infinity, from Fichte's notion of infinite advance or striving, to that of the 'full infinitude [*erfüllte Unendlichkeit*] of interconnection',¹⁹³ whereby 'reflection expands

¹⁸⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism' in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926* (ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings; Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 120-35. All translations of Benjamin's dissertation have been checked against the original German in *Gesammelte Schriften* (ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser; volume 1; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974, 9-122.

¹⁸⁸ Fichte, *Werke I*, 530n.

¹⁸⁹ Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', 128.

¹⁹⁰ Rodolphe Gasché, 'The Sober Absolute: On Benjamin and the Early Romantics' in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism* (ed. Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin; New York: Continuum, 2002), 56.

¹⁹¹ Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', 128; cf. 139-40.

¹⁹² Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', 129.

¹⁹³ Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', 126.

without limit or check, and the thinking given form in reflection turns into formless thinking which directs itself upon the Absolute'.¹⁹⁴ Where Fichte located the Absolute teleologically *in* the deed-act of positing, the Romantics regarded the Absolute immediately *as* the infinite staging of reflection / thinking.¹⁹⁵ Consequently, much to the disapproval of Benjamin, the Absolute of early German Romanticism can be distinguished from lower forms of reflection 'only in *quantity* and not in *quality*.'¹⁹⁶

4. *The Literary Absolute*

It is not hard to imagine how and why Melville found much of Romanticism so immediately engaging. Like Melville, Friedrich Schlegel (arguably, the most important philosophical voice of early German Romanticism) was also deeply ambivalent about the novel. Indeed, it is precisely this ambivalence that lends his engagement with the novel its self-admitted theological proportions. This is perhaps most illustrated when Schlegel writes: 'Only through religion does logic become philosophy; only from it comes everything that makes philosophy greater than science. And instead of an eternally rich, infinite poetry, the lack of religion gives us

¹⁹⁴ Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', 129.

¹⁹⁵ Cf., 'To take thinking . . . merely as mediate and only intuition as immediate is a totally arbitrary procedure on the part of those philosophers who assert an intellectual intuition [i.e., Kant and Fichte]. The properly immediate, it is true, is feeling, but there exists also an immediate thinking' (Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophische Vorlesungen (1804 bis 1807)* in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (ed. Jean-Jacques Anstett; vol. 12; Munich: Schöningh, 355-56).

¹⁹⁶ Parlej, *The Romantic Theory of the Novel*, 28. For further elaboration on Benjamin's strong reservations about the 'sobriety' of the Romantic Absolute (i.e., its profanation / loss of transcendence), see Gasché, 'The Sober Absolute', 63-68 (e.g., 'In short, the Romantic theory according to which the centres of reflection can be elevated to the medium of reflection itself through reflexive intensification condemns the medium of reflection, or the Absolute, to being *only* the enhanced reflection of whatever is reflectively raised to that higher level. . . . Such an understanding of the Absolute (or of consciousness) entails a loss of the force of transcendence and the relativization of difference. . . . A reflection that knows only intensification, and not the possibility of diminishing, presupposes and asserts a continuity between the profane and the Absolute that can only make the Absolute *tangible* as something profane' [63]).

only novels or the triviality that now is called art.¹⁹⁷ Elsewhere, Schlegel writes of his disdain for the modern tendency to regard the novel as a separate genre: 'It must be clear to you why, according to my views, I insist that all poetry should be romantic and why I detest the novel insofar as it wants to be a separate genre.'¹⁹⁸ As Parlej notes, on one hand, Schlegel is compelled to condemn the novel as a genre; and yet, on the other hand, he invokes its 'etymological derivative', *romantic*, as the privileged characteristic of 'all poetry'.¹⁹⁹ For Schlegel, however, such ambiguity is itself constitutive of the term *der Roman*, for it 'denotes *both* the presence of the transcendental subject to itself, as postulated by Kant's philosophy, *and* a literary genre inherited from antiquity.'²⁰⁰ In short, then, one can only understand the nature of Romantic resistance to the identifying taxonomy of genre (be it Melville's or Schlegel's resistance) in light of its Kantian-inspired conception of the 'transcendental' Subject.

According to Schlegel the 'subject-work', i.e., the subject in the process of becoming, cannot be bound by any preexisting aesthetic rules, or even the intentions of its artist or author. On the contrary, in the infinite play of the poetic absolute,²⁰¹ each work must be considered separately on the basis of its own immanent laws. He writes in *Athenaeum* Fragment 51:

¹⁹⁷ Friedrich Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments* (trans. Peter Firchow; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 242. For this and all subsequent citations of *Critical Fragments*, *Athenaeum Fragments*, and *Ideas* I have consulted the original text in *Charakteristiken und Kritiken I, 1796-1801* in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (ed. Hans Eichner; vol. 2; Munich: Schöningh, 1967).

¹⁹⁸ Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, 101.

¹⁹⁹ Parlej, *The Romantic Theory of the Novel*, 2-3.

²⁰⁰ Parlej, *The Romantic Theory of the Novel*, 3. Cf., Hans Eichner, 'Germany: Romantisch—Romantik—Romantiker' in *'Romantic' and Its Cognates: The European History of a Word* (ed. Hans Eichner; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 98-156.

²⁰¹ 'All the sacred plays of art are only a remote imitation of the infinite play of the universe, the work of art which eternally creates itself anew' (Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, 89).

The beautiful, poetical, ideal naïve must combine intention and instinct. The essence of intention in this sense is freedom, though intention isn't consciousness by a long shot. There is a certain kind of self-infatuated contemplation of one's own naturalness or silliness that is itself unspeakably silly. Intention doesn't exactly require any deep calculation or plan. Even Homeric naïveté isn't simply instinctive: there is at least as much intention in it as there is in the grace of lovely children or innocent girls. And if Homer himself had no intentions, his poetry and the real author of that poetry, Nature, certainly did.²⁰²

Such, then, is the goal of Schlegel's proposed 'transcendental poetry', which Maurice Blanchot gracefully describes as the 'the site wherein poetry will no longer be content to produce beautiful determinate works, but rather will produce itself in a movement without term and without determination'.²⁰³ Indeed, as Ernst Behler notes, this understanding of the term 'transcendental' is truer to its original Kantian sense than it was to Fichte.²⁰⁴ Inasmuch as Kant regarded knowledge as 'transcendental' when it 'is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge',²⁰⁵ he effectively bound together the subject of knowledge and its object. Schlegel's contribution to the term is, thus, to remove any determinate distinction between philosophy and poetry, and pull into the latter the transcendental / reflective activity of the former.²⁰⁶

Hence, Schlegel writes in *Athenaeum* Fragment 238, 'There is a kind of poetry whose essence lies in the relation between ideal and real, and which therefore by

²⁰² Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 167 [Athenaeum Fragment 51].

²⁰³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (trans. Susan Hanson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 354.

²⁰⁴ Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 138-39.

²⁰⁵ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 59 (B25)

²⁰⁶ Cf. 'Transcendental is what is, should be, and can be high up; transcendent what tries to be high up, but can't or shouldn't be. It would be slanderous nonsense to believe that humanity could exceed its own aim, overtax its own powers, or that philosophy oughtn't to be able to do something it wants to do and can do' (Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 225 [Athenaeum Fragment 388]).

analogy to philosophical jargon, should be called transcendental poetry'.²⁰⁷ Such poetry, he continues, must 'represent the producer along with the product'.

Consequently, he concludes, 'this poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry'.²⁰⁸ The emphasis, then, is on poetry as radicalised *poesis* (i.e., production), rather than poetry as simply a product. In this way, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy note in *The Literary Absolute*, Romantic poetry embodies the truth of *poesis*, and thus, too, the truth of its *autopoiesis* / self-production: 'And if it is true . . . that auto-production constitutes the ultimate instance and closure of the speculative absolute, then romantic thought involves not only the absolute of literature, but literature as the absolute. Romanticism is the inauguration of the *literary absolute*.'²⁰⁹

Apropos the Romantic Absolute as a 'literary absolute', Schlegel's classic formulation of Romantic poetry is that of a 'progressive universal poetry'.

Other kinds of poetry are finished and are now capable of being fully analysed. The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterise its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognizes as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself. The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic.²¹⁰

Here, the aim is not simply to find interesting connections and correlations between poetry, philosophy, and rhetoric — which even today exemplifies the most banal sort

²⁰⁷ Schlegel, '*Lucinde*' and the *Fragments*, 195.

²⁰⁸ Schlegel, '*Lucinde*' and the *Fragments*, 195.

²⁰⁹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester; Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 12.

²¹⁰ Schlegel, '*Lucinde*' and the *Fragments*, 175-76 [Athenaeum Fragment 116].

of interdisciplinarity — but actively to 'fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetic, poeticize wit and fill and saturate the forms of and with every kind of good, solid matters for instruction, and animate them with the pulsations of humour.'²¹¹

For Schlegel, because it can, more than any other form, 'hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer', the ideal form of Romantic poetry / *poesis* is that of the classical epic.²¹² Elsewhere, Schlegel pronounces that where the lyrical is 'only subjective', and the dramatic is 'only objective', the epic is 'subjective-objective' — that is, neither purely subjective nor purely objective.²¹³ Only the epic, he writes, in accord with his presentation of the Absolute in Romantic poetry, is 'free of all real and ideal self-interest, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors.'²¹⁴ The closest modern correspondence to the epic, in its self-realisation as infinite reflection, he continues elsewhere, is the novel.²¹⁵ For indeed, 'just as our literature began with the novel, so the Greek began with the epic and dissolved in it'.²¹⁶

I would suggest that Melville's inability to contain in the pages of *Mardi* the full scope of his intellectual development is perfectly in line with the infinite reflective aspirations of a *Romantic* novel. Concerning this, Elizabeth Foster's

²¹¹ Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 175.

²¹² Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 175.

²¹³ Friedrich Schlegel, *Literary Notebooks, 1797-1801* (ed. Hans Eichner; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 48. Cf., Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, 91-96; and Peter Szondi, 'Friedrich Schlegel's Theory of Poetical Genres: A Reconstruction from the Posthumous Fragments' in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays* (trans. Harvey Mendelsohn; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 75-94.

²¹⁴ Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 175.

²¹⁵ Szondi, 'Friedrich Schlegel's Theory of Poetical Genres', 89.

²¹⁶ Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, 101.

comment is particularly apt:

As *Mardi* deepened, in the travelogue chapters, into an intermittent symposium on religion, philosophy, science, politics, and the poet's art, on faith and knowledge, on necessity and free will, on time and death and eternity, Melville's reading and also his writing were rushing him into such an intellectual expansion and exhilaration that *his very being* was ringing with the voices of the great dead.²¹⁷

Consequently, *Mardi* is both *about* a fantastical journey and *is* a journey into itself.

'From first to last', William Charvat very astutely writes, 'Melville was a trial-and-error experimental writer who never quite knew what he wanted to do — or did not want to do — until he did it.'²¹⁸ What begins, then, much like its predecessors, with its stated intention intact, i.e., a story of the whaling industry in the South Seas,²¹⁹ becomes an open invitation for readers to join him on an exploratory voyage unfettered by the constraints of journalistic fact: "'Oh, reader, list! I've chartless voyaged. With compass and the lead, we had not found these Mardian Isles. Those who boldly launch, cast off all cables"'²²⁰ A journalistic travel narrative moored by the Aristotelian confines of beginning, middle, and ending is, thus, effectively replaced by an expedition through the uncharted 'world of mind; wherein the wanderer may gaze round, with more of wonder than Balboa's band roving through the golden Aztec glades.'²²¹ As we noted in Nina Baym's argument discussed above in Chapter One, where Melville is regarded as breaching his 'genre contract' with

²¹⁷ Foster, 'Historical Note', 661 (emphasis mine).

²¹⁸ Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America*, 223. In this Melville's journey as the author of *Mardi* is not at all unlike that of the poet Lombardo, as described in *Mardi*: 'When Lombardo set about his work, he knew not what it would become. He did not build himself in with plans; he wrote on; and so doing, got deeper and deeper into himself; and like a resolute traveler, plunging through baffling woods, at last was rewarded for his toils' (Melville, *Mardi*, 595).

²¹⁹ Early in the writing of *Mardi*, Melville wrote to John Murray, indicating that he was writing a sequel to *Omoo* ('a bona-fide narrative of my adventures in the Pacific, continued from "Omoo"') (Melville, *Correspondence*, 98, 106).

²²⁰ Melville, *Mardi*, 556.

²²¹ Melville, *Mardi*, 557.

journalistic writing in *Typee* and *Omoo*, in *Mardi* we find him beginning a self-conscious trend of doing the same with that of fiction as well.²²² What Baym fails to note, however, is that this resistance to fictive protocol is, in the Romantic novel, the very mark of this fiction's truth.

As Benjamin notes, if the Romantic novel is the 'comprehensible manifestation' [*fassbare Erscheinung*] of the Absolute, i.e., as both 'poetry and the poetry of poetry', it is so precisely because their notion of transcendental poetry 'has found its individuality . . . in the form of prose; the early Romantics know no deeper or better determination for it than "prose"'.²²³ On its most proper level, prose refers to ordinary speech not bound by meter or rhythm [*ungebundene Rede*]; and yet, as Gasché points out, on another, more figural / improper level, prose indicates that which is plain, ordinary, or prosaic. Importantly, though, for the Romantics there could be no such definitive differentiation.²²⁴ On the contrary, Gasché writes, 'it is this very lack of differentiation, this ambiguity of meaning, that predestines prose to become the comprehensible manifestation of the Absolute'.²²⁵ In other words, inasmuch as prose marks the failed distinction of proper and improper / subject and object, the untold ambiguity of its self-becoming in the novel (i.e., a 'writing as infinite scripting (of) scripting itself') gives form to the infinite reflection of the poetic Absolute.²²⁶

²²² Baym, 'Melville's Quarrel with Fiction', 912–13.

²²³ Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism', 173.

²²⁴ Cf., Athenaeum Fragment 395: 'In true prose everything has to be underlined' (Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 227).

²²⁵ Gasché, 'The Sober Absolute', 65.

²²⁶ Parlej, *The Romantic Theory of the Novel*, 34.

5. Romantic Irony and the Duplicity of Self-Assertion

Furthermore, in his subsequent declaration that every 'theory of the novel must itself be a novel which would reflect imaginatively every eternal tone of the imagination',²²⁷ Schlegel radicalises the existing concept of irony to the point of making it his own.²²⁸ Traditionally, irony had been merely the rhetorical trope whereby a speaker's meaning and intention are opposed to what he or she actually says.²²⁹ Aristotle, for example, highlights the irony of self-deprecating humour, regarding its use as both wise and polite.²³⁰ For him, in contrast to Plato, in whose presentation irony is often regarded as hypocritical or duplicitous, the quintessence of irony as a noble trope is the elusive and often humorous self-deprecation of Socrates.²³¹ Indeed, for Aristotle, it was precisely this ironic elusiveness that made Socrates such an effective, exemplary communicator.

Schlegel would certainly affirm this, albeit with a twist; namely, that the full truth and nobility of Socrates' ironic rhetoric cannot be reduced simply to his ability to disguise himself and his intentions.²³² On the contrary, apropos the problems of self-

²²⁷ Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, 102-03. Piotr Parlej sums this up nicely: 'The romantic novel reflects (works) on itself to produce itself (the work) and, in this production, to accomplish itself as itself' (*The Romantic Theory of the Novel*, 19).

²²⁸ Behler, *German Romantic Theory*, 141-43; cf., Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1990), 73-110.

²²⁹ Cicero, *De Oratore, I* (Loeb Classical Library; trans. E. W. Sutton; Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 1942), 2.67.270-272. I am for much that follows here indebted to Ernst Behler's elaboration of the historical rise and development of irony in his *German Romantic Theory*, 143-46.

²³⁰ Cf., 'Some of the forms befit a gentleman, and some do not; irony befits him more than does buffoonery. The jests of the ironical man are at his own expense; the buffoon excites laughter at others' (*Rhetoric of Aristotle* [trans. Richard Claverhouse Jebb; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909], 115 [3.18.1419b7]); 'Irony is the contrary to boastful exaggeration, it is a self-deprecating concealment of one's powers and possessions — it shows better taste to deprecate than to exaggerate one's virtues' (*Nicomachean Ethics* [trans. Terence Irwin; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1985], 1108a19-23, 1127a20-26).

²³¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127b22-6.

²³² Such was the explanation of Alcibiades, in Plato's *Symposium*: '[Socrates] spends his whole life pretending and playing with people, and I doubt whether anyone has ever seen the treasures that are

presentation already seen in the work of Herman Melville, for Schlegel the truth of Socratic irony is precisely that self-reference / self-presentation necessarily carries one *beyond* oneself and one's intentions. He writes in Critical Fragment 108:

Socratic irony is the only involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation. It is equally impossible to feign it or divulge it. To a person who hasn't got it, it will remain a riddle even after it is openly confessed. It is meant to deceive no one except those who consider it a deception and who either take pleasure in the delightful roguery of making fools of the whole world or else become angry when they get an inkling they themselves might be included. . . . It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. It is the freest of all licenses, for by its means one transcends oneself; and yet it is also the most lawful, for it is absolutely necessary. It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke.²³³

That is to say, Socratic irony mediates the Absolute, as a convergence of the *impossible* (i.e., stable self-reference) and the *necessary* (i.e., unavoidable self-reference), in a self-presentation whose truth is precisely that it is neither complete nor stable. Thus we have, he argues, novels like *Tristram Shandy*, *Don Quixote*, and *Wilhelm Meister* (and, we might add, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*), which attempt to present their own self-becoming, but realise it only as a structural excess that cannot be completely presented. Such novels, in fact, 'are the Socratic dialogues of our time'; that is, the unendingly ironic accounts of their own self-

revealed when he grows serious and exposes what he keeps inside' (Plato, *Symposium* [trans. Christopher Gill; New York: Penguin, 1999], 55 [216d]).

²³³ Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 155. Søren Kierkegaard characterises Socrates' ironic subjectivity (i.e., 'I know that I do not know') similarly, as 'absolute infinite negativity'. 'It is,' he writes, 'negativity because it negates; it is infinite because it negates not this or that phenomenon; and it is absolute because it negates by virtue of a higher which is not. *Irony establishes nothing, for that which is to be established lies behind it*' (*The Concept of Irony* [trans. Lee M. Capel; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965], 278, emphasis mine).

production in the face of infinite reflectivity: and, thus, only truly themselves in the active critique of their constitutive failures.²³⁴

It is in light of Romantic irony that the profound importance of Melville's review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* becomes apparent. Of course, Melville's review, 'Hawthorne and His Mosses' [1850], is already enveloped by a certain *mythos* of importance that has been created for it by contemporary scholarship. 'The action of "Hawthorne and His Mosses"', Richard Brodhead suggests, 'is of Melville's first thinking a new idea of authorship, then, on the basis of that thought, emboldening himself to assert his own literary-prophetic vocation.'²³⁵ Brodhead's assessment represents a norm, as is also the case regarding *Mardi*, to read the essay as a re-articulation of Melville's sense of independence as a writer.²³⁶ What I wish to suggest, though, is that to miss the complex irony of Melville's 'independence' as a writer is also to miss most of what sustains the aesthetic vitality of his works.

What we should not fail to notice in our reading of 'Hawthorne and His Mosses' is that even after having written five major novels Melville remains as though a character. Indeed, he is so immersed in his texts that one reviewer for *The Home Journal* notes: 'Herman Melville with his cigar and his Spanish eyes, talks *Typee* and *Omoo*, just as you find the flow of his delightful mind on paper. Those who have only read his books know the man — those who have only see the man have a fair idea of

²³⁴ Schlegel, '*Lucinde*' and the *Fragments*, 145 [Critical Fragment 26].

²³⁵ Richard H. Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29.

²³⁶ For traditional readings in this vein, see Gilliam Brown, *Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 138-43; Wai-chee Dimock, *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 140-41; and James R. Mellow, *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 333-36.

his books.²³⁷ If Melville the author cannot be unambiguously differentiated from the 'Melville' of page and pen, the problems of beginning and ending highlighted in Chapter One recur endlessly, and his declarations of authorial / creative independence must necessarily be re-thought.

Only with this in mind can we fully appreciate the irony of duplicitous self-characterisation in 'Hawthorne and His Mosses', whose purported author, 'A Virginian Spending July in Vermont',²³⁸ we know from letters to and from Evert Duyckinck,²³⁹ was Melville, a New Yorker living in Massachusetts.²⁴⁰ We have seen this kind of behaviour in Melville before, of course, but nowhere is it as significant. For, indeed, as Ellen Weinauer points out, inasmuch as here Melville disguises himself when declaring his creative autonomy, he is also in essence 'disclaiming ownership of his own text'.²⁴¹ That is to say, we have Melville at a distant remove from his declared freedom — i.e., Melville playing 'Melville' playing 'a Virginian' declaring his authorial freedom.²⁴² And thus returns the formative problem of all of Melville's

²³⁷ Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 1:320 (emphasis his).

²³⁸ Melville, *The Piazza Tales*, 239.

²³⁹ Melville, *Correspondence*, 165–68. Duyckinck published the two-part essay in the 17 August and 24 August editions of the *Literary World*.

²⁴⁰ Melville's identity remained a secret to Hawthorne for a few weeks after publication, until Melville admitted his authorship during his first visit to Hawthorne's home. Of this tendency of Melville to communicate more through silence and secrecy, see, Sophia Hawthorne's letter to her sister:

[Melville] told me he was naturally so silent a man, that he was complained of a great deal on this account; . . . He said Mr Hawthorne's great but hospitable silence drew him out — that it was astonishing how *sociable* his silence was. . . . He said sometimes they would walk along without talking on either side, but that even then they seemed to be very social. (Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 2: 924–25)

²⁴¹ Ellen Weinauer, 'Plagiarism and the Proprietary Self: Policing the Boundaries of Authorship in Herman Melville's "Hawthorne and His Mosses"' *American Literature* 69 (Dec., 1997), 701.

²⁴² Yet another layer of duplicity, or at least ironic ambiguity, is the Virginian's claim to have never met Hawthorne. Whatever one wishes to make of such a claim when it comes from a fictional narrator, the general consensus of Melville's biographers is that it most likely was not true of him. Melville's meeting with Hawthorne has taken on epic proportions in Melville / Hawthorne studies. The meeting took place on 5 August 1850, at a picnic on Monument Mountain, when Evert Duyckinck introduced him to Hawthorne and Oliver Wendell Holmes, among others. For the best discussion of

previous novels: to whom should we accredit a novel whose author suggests 'the names of all fine authors are fictitious ones'?²⁴³

For Schlegel, the infinite unfolding of this question — that of the relationship between propriety and impropriety, universal poetry and prose — is the task of a philosophical thinking that is also a progression of mind.²⁴⁴ Such irony, he adds elsewhere, is 'logical beauty'.²⁴⁵ As Andrew Bowie explains, this is because it is dependent on an assertion (*logos*) that 'negates itself without leading to a final opposed positive position. The final position is, for Schlegel, only ever pointed to by the failure of attempts to ground a philosophical system.'²⁴⁶ Therefore, for Schlegel and the early Romantics, it is only in an ironic failure of self-assertion that the world is ever meaningful at all.²⁴⁷

the events surrounding the composition and publication of the essay, see Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography: Volume I, 1819–1851* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 752–81. For a range of insights, see Merton M. Sealts, Jr., 'Historical Note', *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839–1860*, by Herman Melville (eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 9 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*; Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), 471–76; Leon Howard, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), 154–58; Edwin Haviland Miller, *Melville* (New York: Venture Books, 1975), 19–36. Laurie Robertson-Lorant is one of the remaining voices of dissent who maintain that Melville wrote the essay prior to meeting Hawthorne; see her *Melville: A Biography*, 244–55.

²⁴³ Melville, *The Piazza Tales*, 239.

²⁴⁴ Cf., 'The philosophy of a human being is the history, the becoming, the progression of his mind, the gradual formation and development of his thoughts' (Friedrich Schlegel, *Wissenschaft der Europäischen Literatur: Vorlesungen, Aufsätze und Fragmente aus der Zeit von 1795–1804* in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* [ed. Ernst Behler; vol. 11; Munich: Schöningh, 1958], 118). Ernst Behler cites Platonic / Socratic 'dialectics' as the most technical example of this for Schlegel (*German Romantic Literary Theory*, 147). Indeed, Schlegel notes, for Plato 'never finished with his thought, and this constant further striving of his thought for completed knowledge and the highest cognition, this eternal becoming, forming, and developing of his ideas, he has tried to shape artistically in dialogues' (Schlegel, *Wissenschaft der Europäischen Literatur*, 120).

²⁴⁵ Schlegel, '*Lucinde*' and the Fragments, 148 [Critical Fragment 42].

²⁴⁶ Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 86–87. Cf., 'A work is cultivated when it is everywhere sharply delimited but within those limits limitless and inexhaustible; when it is completely faithful to itself, entirely homogenous, and nonetheless exalted above itself' (Schlegel, '*Lucinde*' and the Fragments, 204 [Athenaeum Fragment 297]).

²⁴⁷ Although they agree that it heralds the infinite unfolding of temporal meaningfulness, Schlegel's assessment of Socratic irony stands in significant contrast to that of Wayne Booth, for whom it is 'infinite but somehow stable'. As 'the ironist of infinities', Booth asserts, the lesson of Socratic

As such, meaningfulness, beauty, and truth are bound together in the early Romantics' characterisation of irony as the continuous fluctuation 'between self-creation and self-destruction'.²⁴⁸ In a manner at first similar to what we have already seen in Chapter One regarding Melville's sense of self-assertion as self-violence, Schlegel holds this as the ideal (i.e., 'naïve') counterpoint to the self-consciousness of intention or instinct, that 'the most intense passion is eager to wound itself, if only to act and to discharge its excessive power'.²⁴⁹ Here, truth emerges only in its continual recontextualisation and the necessary rejection of any teleological notion of its being 'absolute truth'.

Truth arises when opposed errors neutralise each other. Absolute truth cannot be admitted; and this is the testimony for the freedom of thought and of spirit. If absolute truth were found then the business of spirit would be completed and it would have to cease to be, since it only exists in activity.²⁵⁰

irony is 'that there is, after all, a Supreme Ironist, truth itself, standing in his temple above us, observing all authors and readers in their comic or pathetic or tragic efforts to climb and join him' (*A Rhetoric of Irony* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974], 268-69). Schlegel, however, cannot abide any sense of truth as an 'untouched' transcendence; on the contrary, it is either already involved in the ironic play of infinite reflectivity, or it is not truth at all.

²⁴⁸ Schlegel, '*Lucinde*' and the Fragments, 167 [Athenaeum Fragment 51]; cf., 146-47 [Critical Fragment 37].

²⁴⁹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Studien des Klassischen Altertums* in Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe (ed. Ernst Behler; vol. 1; Munich: Schöningh, 1979), 403. In other contexts, Schlegel describes irony as 'permanent *parabasis*', those digressive moments in ancient Greek dramas and comedies where the chorus interrupts the action of the play and addresses the audience (*Philosophische Lehrjahre, 1796-1806: nebst Philosophischen Manuskripten aus den Jahren 1796-1828* in Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe [ed. Ernst Behler; vol. 18; Munich: Schöningh, 1963], 85). As such, his comments on *parabasis* in the comedies of Aristophanes are especially appropriate to his overall theory of irony: 'This self-infliction is not ineptitude, but deliberate impetuosity, overflowing vitality, and often has not a bad effect, indeed stimulates the effect, since it cannot totally destroy the illusion. The most intense agility of life must act, even destroy; if it does not find an external object, it reacts against a beloved one, against itself, against its own creation. This agility then injures in order to excite, not to destroy' (Schlegel, *Studien des Klassischen Altertums*, 30).

²⁵⁰ Friedrich Schlegel, *Transzendentalphilosophie* (ed. Michael Elsässer; Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1991), 93.

As with the 'prosaic' nature of the Romantic Absolute discussed above, then, Schlegel describes 'all-highest truths' as 'thoroughly trivial'; that is, only absolute insofar as they are infinitely, and thus contradictorily, expressed anew.²⁵¹

6. *The Poet and Author as Romantic Ideal*

For Schlegel, the problem with modern literature is, in effect, that it had lost its soul. In his *Dialogue on Poetry*, he writes:

I will go right to the point. Our poetry, I maintain, lacks a focal point, such as mythology was for the ancients; and one could summarize all the essentials in which modern poetry is inferior to the ancients in these words: We have no mythology.²⁵²

By 'mythology', Schlegel refers here to the 'firm basis' of poetic activity, i.e., a communal matrix of metaphor, image, and allegory through which an age communicates truth and beauty. The absence of this, he argues, is the saddest philosophical and cultural legacy of the Enlightenment. Inasmuch as it lost sight of infinite thought, he reasoned, it also lost the deep meaningfulness of beauty and truth. Schlegel, nevertheless, can but speak only in the broadest of terms when it comes to his prophetic conviction that 'we are close to obtaining one [a mythology]; or, rather,

²⁵¹ Schlegel, *Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 263 ['On Incomprehensibility']. This is illustrated perhaps best in the aphoristic nature of Schlegel's 'Critical Fragments', 'Athenaeum Fragments', and 'Ideas'. Although many of the individual fragments make universal claims, the Romantic Absolute can only be understood through the juxtaposition of such fragments with others that often intimate contradictory universal claims. Hence, Bowie points out, the Romantic philosophical disposition toward literature: 'Literature depends on the freedom of the imagination to move beyond any particular determination, without any obligation to arrive at a conclusion, and its goal . . . is continually to render the world meaningful by connecting its aspects in new constellations' (Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, 78). The obvious danger of this, of course, is that such an emphasis on individuality and freedom might degenerate into incoherence, whereby each person is freed to craft his or her own meaning. Schlegel avoids the nihilism of this trap, however, by maintaining that Romantic poetry is focused on an aesthetic truth, whose infinite, active unfolding of itself *as fragmentary* allows conflict or differentiation between meanings to be recognisable as such. Andrew Bowie likens this to the shattering of metaphysical correspondence theories of truth in the early Heideggerian sense of 'world-disclosure'. See *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, 138-44, 170-82.

²⁵² Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, 81.

it is time that we earnestly work together to create one.²⁵³ Later in his *Dialogue on Poetry*, he describes this hope for 'an age of rejuvenation', that moment in time in which 'all disciplines and all arts will be seized by the great revolution':²⁵⁴

And thus let us, by light and life, hesitate no longer, but accelerate, each according to his own mind, that great development to which we were called. Be worthy of the greatness of the age and the fog will vanish from your eyes; and there will be light before you. All thinking is divining, but man is only now beginning to realize his divining power. What immense expanse will this power experience, and especially now! It seems to me that he who could understand the age — that is, those great principles of general rejuvenation and of eternal revolution — would be able to succeed in grasping the poles of mankind, to recognize and to know the activity of the first men as well as the nature of the Golden Age which is to come. Then the empty chatter would stop and man would become conscious of what he is: he would understand the earth and the sun.²⁵⁵

Schlegel's goal in and for Romanticism, as such, is nothing less than the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

By the mid-1830s in the United States no one took upon himself the revolutionary zeal of Romanticism quite like Ralph Waldo Emerson. Indeed, if Melville were to have an equal, and quite possibly a greater, in terms of his Germanic philosophical disposition, it would be found in Emerson.²⁵⁶ Drawing deeply from his readings of Coleridge and Carlyle, and then the likes of Kant, Schelling, Schlegel, and Hegel (amongst others),²⁵⁷ Emerson's Transcendentalism is a perfect embodiment of the Romantic spirit that would both attract and repel Melville.

²⁵³ Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, 81.

²⁵⁴ Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, 83.

²⁵⁵ Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry*, 88.

²⁵⁶ Cf., Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 158-207; Gura, *The Wisdom of Words*, 75-105.

²⁵⁷ Pochmann, *German Culture*, 172.

As with Schlegel, Emerson's aesthetic inquiries are charged with his theologico-revolutionary language and intentions. He begins his essay 'The Poet' [1844], for example, with a radical, aesthetic redefining of the Trinity:

For the Universe has three children, born at one time, which reappear, under different names, in every system of thought, whether by be called cause, operation, and effect; or, more poetically, Jove, Pluto, Neptune; or, theologically, the Father, the Spirit, and the Son; but which we will call here, the Knower, the Doer, and the Sayer. These stand respectively for the love of truth, for the love of good, and for the love of beauty. These three are equal.²⁵⁸

Emerson's point is reiterated throughout the essay: the poet is as Christ, and Christ is as the poet. Like Christ, the poet is 'the [sovereign] representative of man', the one who 'stands among partial men for the complete man'.²⁵⁹ While exploring this thought, as Philip Gura writes, 'Emerson sounds as though he were making a narration of the influence of saving grace upon his soul.'²⁶⁰ For, indeed, as Emerson writes, poets are 'liberating gods', who 'in any form, whether in an ode, or in action, or in looks and behavior, [have] yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene.'²⁶¹

The purpose of Emerson's theologising, as such, remains very much in the vein of Schlegel's 'new mythology'. In contrast to the mystic, who mistakes 'an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one', the poet knows that 'all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries

²⁵⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Poet' in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1993), 67.

²⁵⁹ Emerson, 'The Poet', 66-67.

²⁶⁰ Gura, *The Wisdom of Words*, 101. Cf., 'With what joy I begin to read a poem, which I confide in as an inspiration! And now my chains are to be broken; I shall mount above these clouds and opaque airs in which I live, -- opaque though they seem transparent, -- and from the heavens of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations. That will reconcile me to life, and renovate nature, to see trifles animated by a tendency, and to know what I am doing' (Emerson, 'The Poet', 69).

²⁶¹ Emerson, 'The Poet', 77, 78.

and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead.²⁶² As a result, then, the beauty and truth of poetry is not in its being written or spoken.

For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem.²⁶³

As 'the Sayer', the poet represents *primordial* beauty. For it is not the case, Emerson writes, that God simply 'made some beautiful things'. Rather, in line with his Trinitarian aesthetic, the world 'is from the beginning beautiful', and thus 'Beauty is the creator of the universe'.²⁶⁴

The parallel between Emerson's 'The Poet' and Melville's 'Hawthorne and His Mosses', like that between Melville's self-violent subjectivity and that of early German Romanticism, is at first striking. For instance, regarding Hawthorne's short story 'The Master Genius', Melville writes:

May it not be, that this commanding mind has not been, is not, and never will be, individually developed in any one man? And would it, indeed, appear so unreasonable to suppose, that this great fullness and overflowing may be, or may be destined to be, shared by a plurality of men of genius?²⁶⁵

Here, both Emerson and Melville suggest a common, collective pool of originality. However, what 'The Poet' explores abstractly as a deferred Ideal, 'Hawthorne and The Mosses' anatomises materially as an immanent Reality. That is, while Emerson

²⁶² Emerson, 'The Poet', 79.

²⁶³ Emerson, 'The Poet', 67. Cf., 'All the classical poems of the ancients are coherent, inseparable; they form an organic whole, they constitute, properly viewed, only a single poem, the only one in which poetry itself appears in perfection. In a similar way, in a perfect literature all books should be only a single book, and in such an eternally developing book, the gospel of humanity and culture will be revealed' (Schlegel, '*Lucinde*' and *the Fragments*, 249-50 [Idea 95]).

²⁶⁴ Emerson, 'The Poet', 67.

²⁶⁵ Melville, *The Piazza Tales*, 252.

'look[s] in vain for the poet', declaring that 'we have yet had no genius in America',²⁶⁶ Melville suggests the primordial pool of originality / genius actually makes it possible, advisable even, to regard Shakespeare and Hawthorne as 'on the same page'. Melville, however, goes one step further, when he writes: 'There are minds that have gone as far as Shakespeare into the universe. And hardly a mortal man, who, at some time or other, has not felt as great thoughts in him as any you will find in Hamlet. . . . Believe me, my friends, that Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio.'²⁶⁷ In a sense of material immanence that Emerson's essay and sense of genius does not exhibit,²⁶⁸ Shakespeare is thus separated from his creations, and is replaced by a more generic sense of aesthetic autonomy that encapsulates individual acts of creative genius.²⁶⁹ Which is to say, for Melville, we need not *await* the poetic or the genius, because it is already here.

7. *An Ambivalent Embodiment*

It is, in fact, what he regarded as their highlighting of immateriality that made Melville especially wary of whole-heartedly embracing either Emerson's Transcendentalism or Schlegel's Romanticism. Though he appreciated, for instance, the 'nobility' of Emerson's intellect,²⁷⁰ and obviously noted the similarity between their

²⁶⁶ Emerson, 'The Poet', 80.

²⁶⁷ Melville, *The Piazza Tales*, 245.

²⁶⁸ Cf., 'If I have not found that excellent combination of gifts in my countrymen which I seek, neither could I aid myself to fix the idea of the poet by reading now and then in Chambers's collection of five centuries of English poets. These are wits, more than poets, though there have been poets among them. But when we adhere to the ideal of the poet, we have our difficulties even with Milton and Homer. Milton is too literary, and Homer too literal and historical' (Emerson, 'The Poet', 80).

²⁶⁹ Ellen Weinauer makes this explicit in her excellent essay on the 'proprietary self', that is the sense of identity wrought by possession. See Ellen Weinauer, 'Plagiarism and the Proprietary Self', 697–717.

²⁷⁰ In the margins of his copy of 'The Poet', Melville writes: 'All this is nobly written, and proceeds from noble thinking, and a natural sympathy with greatness' (qtd. William Braswell, 'Melville as Critic of Emerson' *American Literature* 9 [Nov. 1937]: 321).

respective philosophical dispositions, he could not help but find him cold and smug.²⁷¹

In a letter to Duyckinck, whose disdain for every shade of Transcendentalism caused him to revile Emerson, Melville's ambivalent response ('I was very agreeably disappointed') upon hearing Emerson lecture in Boston is stark.²⁷²

[F]or the sake of the argument, let us call him a fool; — then had I rather be a fool than a wise man. — I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more; & if he don't attain the bottom, why, all the lead in Galena can't fashion the plummet that will.²⁷³

Notwithstanding this, Melville continues, the 'gaping flaw' of this 'Plato who talks thro' his nose' is all too apparent; namely, the insinuation 'that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions.'²⁷⁴

Just as damning for Melville, though, is Emerson's emotional stuffiness and absolute absence of any 'convivial' spirit. He writes:

²⁷¹ Once again, in the marginalia of his copy of 'The Poet', Melville writes: 'This is admirable, as many other thoughts of Mr. Emerson's are. His gross and astonishing errors & illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name. Another species of Mr. Emerson's errors, or rather blindness, proceeds from a defect in the region of his heart' (qtd. Braswell, 'Melville as Critic of Emerson', 331).

²⁷² Like the debate surrounding Melville's relationships to Duyckinck and Hawthorne, no less ink has been exhausted detailing Melville's opinion of Emerson. Though the two men apparently never met or corresponded, weaned as he was by Evert Duyckinck and his New York coterie, Melville could not have avoided the former's sometimes hyperbolic dislike for Transcendentalism. For a discussion of Melville's relationship to Emerson see Braswell, 'Melville as Critic of Emerson', 317–34; Merton M. Sealts, Jr. 'Melville and Emerson's Rainbow' *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 26 (2nd Quarter, 1980): 53–78; Hershel Parker, 'Melville's Satire of Emerson and Thoreau: An Evaluation of the Evidence' *American Transcendental Quarterly* 7 (Summer 1970): 61–67; Elizabeth Foster, Introduction and 'Explanatory Notes' in *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*, by Herman Melville (New York: Hendricks House, 1954), lxxv–lxxxii, 350–52; and Watson Branch, et al, 'Historical Note', 257–59, 285–90.

²⁷³ Melville, *Correspondence*, 121.

²⁷⁴ Melville, *Correspondence*, 121. Cf., a similar criticism of philosophers like Plato, Spinoza, and Goethe, who, in their claims to have found the 'Talismanic secret' of life, which would reconcile the world with one's soul: 'Certain philosophers have time and again pretended to have found it; but if they do not in the end discover their own delusion, other people soon discover it for themselves. . . . Plato, and Spinoza, and Goethe, and many more belong to this guild of self-imposters, with a preposterous rabble of Muggletonian Scots and Yankees, whose vile brogue still the more bestreaks the stripedness of their Greek or German Neoplatonical originals. That profound Silence, that only Voice of our God, which I before spoke of; from that divine thing without a name, those imposter philosophers pretend somehow to have got an answer; which is as absurd, as though they should say they had got water out of stone; for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence' (Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, 208)

You complain that Emerson tho' a denizen of the land of gingerbread, is above munching a plain cake in company of jolly fellows. & swiging [sic] off his ale like you & me. Ah, my dear sir, that's his misfortune, not his fault. His belly, sir, is in his chest, & his brains descend down into his neck, & offer an obstacle to a draught of ale or a mouthful of cake.²⁷⁵

In short, there remains in Emerson a very problematic lack of anything resembling the vitality and intensity of humanity and life.

And yet, we should note once again, Emerson is merely exemplary of the greater malaise Melville sees in the very philosophical disposition even he often entertains. Like the preacher in Melville's *White-Jacket*, Melville, too, had tasted 'the mystic fountain of Plato'; his head, as well, 'had been turned by the Germans'; and, indeed, with Adler at his side, one could well imagine him walking the deck of a ship with Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* in hand. Perhaps, then, there is little surprise that *Mardi* had proven as unpalatable to its readers as the preacher's sermons had been 'ill calculated to benefit the crew'.²⁷⁶ Ultimately, however, Melville bristles at the blindness to the material realities of life exhibited in Romantic maxims like that of Goethe's '*Live in the all*'. He writes in a letter to Hawthorne: 'What nonsense! Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. "My dear boy," Goethe says to him, "you are solely afflicted with that tooth; but you must *live in the all*, and then you will be happy!"'²⁷⁷

As Lewis Mumford notes, 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, where 'though in many of its aspects this visible world seems

²⁷⁵ Melville, *Correspondence*, 122.

²⁷⁶ Herman Melville, *White Jacket: or, The World in a Man-of-War*, in *The Writings of Herman Melville* (eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle; vol. 5: Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 155; cf., Sealts, Jr., 'Melville and Emerson's Rainbow', 66.

²⁷⁷ Melville, *Correspondence*, 193-94.

formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright'.²⁷⁸ Mumford writes:

Emerson was the perpetual passenger who stayed below in bad weather, trusting that the captain would take care of the ship. Melville was the sailor who climbed aloft, and knew that the captain was sometimes drunk and that the best of ships might go down.²⁷⁹

Melville's complex relationship with the aims of Romanticism and Transcendentalism is, we will see more fully in Chapter Three, strictly parallel to that of Ahab, in his monomaniacal desire to strike through the 'pasteboard mask' of reality to reveal 'some unknown but still reasoning thing [that] puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask.' For indeed, as Ahab admits, 'Sometimes I think there's naught beyond.'²⁸⁰

Where Emerson's reading of German philosophy led him to affirm the transcendental unity of *Yes*, Melville found in it the ironic materiality of *No*.²⁸¹ 'What plays mischief with the truth', he concludes of Goethe, 'is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion'.²⁸² As such, then, in 'Hawthorne and His Mosses', authorial identity is neither wholly affirmed nor denied, but is instead regarded *as authorial identity* only inasmuch as it is materially embodied in the necessarily duplicitous oscillation between his self-assertion and self-denial. Why duplicitous? For if the story of its composition and publication shows anything clearly at all, it demonstrates Melville's unease about being divided too far from his own work. The surviving fair-copy manuscript of the essay, for instance,

²⁷⁸ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 195.

²⁷⁹ Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville: A Study of His Life and Vision* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1929), 143.

²⁸⁰ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 164. Cf., 'By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid — and no body is there! — appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man!' (Melville, *Pierre*, 285).

²⁸¹ Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 439-40.

²⁸² Melville, *Correspondence*, 194.

indicates that Melville's mysterious 'Virginian' was actually an afterthought included only after a draft had already been written.²⁸³ Moreover, even within the text itself, the narrator, fictive or not, cannot help but maintain his priority. Most notable is his admission: 'I have more served and honored myself, than him [Hawthorne]'.²⁸⁴ An author, be it Melville or a Virginian, cannot, in spite of *and* because of such a self-conscious desire, *complete* the separation from / self-denial of his or her texts. Indeed, pivotal to 'Hawthorne and His Mosses' is the nationalistic expression of pride that American writers are as good as, if not better than, those of the rest of the world.

[W]e want no American Goldsmiths; nay, we want no American Miltons. It were the vilest thing you could say of a true American author, that he were an American Tompkins. Call him an American, and have done; for you can not say a nobler thing of him. — But it is not meant that all American writers should studiously cleave to nationality in their writings; only this, no American writer should write like an Englishman, or a Frenchman; let him write like a man, for then he will be sure to write like an American. Let us away with this Bostonian leaven of literary flunkeyism towards England. If either must play the flunkey in this thing, let England do it, not us.²⁸⁵

Consequently, James Mellow notes that in 'Hawthorne and his Mosses' Melville's attempts at a universally-accepted common pool of originality is tempered considerably by his desired inclusion in the inner circle of the American literary masters he was touting.²⁸⁶

The important insight to be gained from this discussion of irony, duplicity, and disguise is that Melville himself goes out of his way to highlight it. The complexity of his assurances and suggestions about Hawthorne — and thus, too, about himself — are self-consciously masked in an intricate and ultimately paradoxical scheme.

²⁸³ Merton M. Sealts, Jr. 'Historical Note', 471. For a detailed analysis of extant copies, see the 'Notes On Individual Prose Pieces' section in Melville, *Piazza Tales*, 652–690.

²⁸⁴ Melville, *Piazza Tales*, 249.

²⁸⁵ Melville, *Piazza Tales*, 248.

²⁸⁶ Mellow, *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times*, 336.

Consider the following two sentences:

'The truth seems to be, that like many other geniuses, this Man of Mosses takes great delight in hoodwinking the world, — at least, with respect to himself.'

*'[I]t is certain that some of [Hawthorne's titles] are directly calculated to deceive — egregiously deceive, the superficial skimmer of the pages.'*²⁸⁷

Melville, as we have seen, is deeply aware of the necessity of self-presentation in any conception of subjectivity. In the self-presentation of his own genius, then, Melville is not unlike the proverbial Cretan liar, who confesses that the only certain truth is that he is in fact a liar. As an author, Melville is torn: he wants to assert his genius by freeing his text, but never so much that it is no longer *his* text to free. Moreover, as readers of Melville, we have no sure way of knowing where or how to enter his texts; or, for that matter, which texts are truly his own. Which is to say, the reader, too, is torn: she needs a text to engage in order to be a reader, but can engage a text of Melville only insofar as she is uncertain where or how to begin it. As we will see in Chapter Three, this paradoxical dilemma, that of the *materialistic genesis of self-becoming* (i.e., as a reader or as an author), situates our understanding of Melville very close to the theologically explosive philosophy of Friedrich Schelling.

²⁸⁷ Melville, *Piazza Tales*, 250–51 (my emphasis). In December 1849, in a letter to Duyckinck, one can see Melville's progression to such an admission, as well as his understanding of the implications: 'What a madness & anguish it is, that an author can never — under no circumstances — be at all frank with his readers (*Correspondence*, 149).

CHAPTER THREE:
THE DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM OF MELVILLE AND SCHELLING

1. The Decision to Begin

Thus far, we have established a striking symmetry, however ambivalent, between the ironic literary manoeuvres of Herman Melville and the philosophical ambitions of early German Romanticism. We have not yet, however, explicitly addressed the key theological implications of Melville's contribution to that symmetry. I am here referring specifically to the apocalyptic self-presentation that unfolds in most of his novels. Such an inquiry, we will see below, is profoundly theological in its scope, if not in its genre. We will recall Thomas J. J. Altizer, who identifies theological thinking not as a discipline, but as that which 'truly re-thinks the deepest ground of theology, a re-thinking which is initially an unthinking of every established theological ground'. Only in this 'unthinking', he adds, 'can a clearing be established for theological thinking, and that is the very clearing which is the first goal of radical theology.'²⁸⁸ In this, apropos the ironic dissolution of genre in Romanticism, radical theological thinking is not confined strictly to religious or confessional discourses, but defined by its implications for the thinking of theology's self-becoming / self-presentation *as theology*.

Religion, so goes the common wisdom, is *sui generis*, and is thus inherently distinguishable from modern, secular culture. Edward Said, for example, asserts without any supplemental argument that 'beginning is basically an activity which ultimately implies return and repetition rather than simple linear accomplishment, *that*

²⁸⁸ Altizer, 'Doing Radical Theology', 2.

beginning and beginning-again are historical whereas origins are divine'.²⁸⁹ Not content with Said's simplistic privileging of the secular, Catherine Keller argues that theology, too, has classically abided by the same logic, albeit with a reversal of its binary fortune. According to traditional theology, she argues, the divinity of origin subordinates and ontologically precedes the historicity of 'beginning', thus securing 'God's unfettered sovereignty'.²⁹⁰ For her part, Keller finds this notion of origin *ex nihilo*, the whim of a wholly autonomous, omnipotent God, as problematic as Said's secular reductionism:

This dogma of origin has exercised immense productive force. It has become common sense. Gradually it took modern and then secular form, generating every kind of western originality, every logos creating the new as if from nothing, cutting violently, ecstatically free of the abysses of the past. But Christian theology, I argue, created this *ex nihilo* at the cost of its own depth. It systematically and symbolically sought to erase the chaos of creation. Such a maneuver . . . was always doomed to a vicious cycle: the nothingness invariably returns with the face of the feared chaos — to be nihilated all the more violently.²⁹¹

As noted above, this tragic, absolute originality is not exclusive to theology proper.

Contemporarily, the secular and the sacred blur most clearly in the modern conceptions of the artistic genius and the avant-garde, wherein 'the purer, the more abstract, the creativity, the more fully it replaces the divine originality, the freedom of a creator *a se*, unconstrained by creaturely interdependence'.²⁹² On this issue Clement Greenberg is even more explicit:

It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at 'abstract' or 'nonobjective' art — and poetry, too. The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a

²⁸⁹ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), xiii (emphasis mine).

²⁹⁰ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 159.

²⁹¹ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xvi.

²⁹² Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 160.

landscape—not a picture — is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or part to anything not itself.²⁹³

Arising from, and perfect unto, itself and its own purpose, absolute / divine originality has made an indelible claim on our understanding of beauty and art.²⁹⁴ It is, however, a claim that, before we can proceed further, we must vigorously challenge.

In contrast to origins, be they divine, secular, or both at once, beginnings are an exercise in learning how to lose. Indeed, when we attempt to think *beginning* and *theology* together, the loss at first may seem irreparable. The decision to begin, *to exist*, Keller counsels, is one of profound, inevitable violence and guilt: 'A cloud of missed possibilities envelops every beginning: it is always *this* beginning, *this* universe and *not* some other. Decision lacks innocence. Around its narrations gather histories of grievance: what possibilities were excluded?'²⁹⁵ In the face of the unthinkable absolute singularity that beckons us to begin, the decisions we make cut us off from all the other decisions and stories that might have been enacted or narrated with the best of intentions.²⁹⁶ Nevertheless, what we find in Melville is that the so-

²⁹³ Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' in *The Collected Essays* (ed. John O'Brian; vol. 1; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 8.

²⁹⁴ See Immanuel Kant on the work of art as 'self-propagative' and organic 'purposiveness without purpose' in his *The Critique of Judgement* (trans. J H. Bernard; New York: Hafner, 1951), 218-31.

²⁹⁵ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 160.

²⁹⁶ Cf., Jacques Derrida's description of the ethical dilemma at the core of religious and secular responsibility and decision-making:

I am responsible to the other as other, I answer to him and I answer for what I do before him. But of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility (what Kierkegaard calls the ethical order). I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. . . . As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. (*The Gift of Death*, 68)

called 'undecidable' violence of his beginning (i.e. his self-presentation) is not merely a description of infinite ethical uncertainty; rather, at its most primordial, it is the active, albeit necessarily repressed, condition for the creative / poetic possibility of beginning at all.

2. An 'Unfolded' Subjectivity

As we noted in Chapter One, if it is true for Melville that, from the age of twenty-five, 'three weeks have scarcely passed . . . that I have not unfolded within myself', this is only possible in the *unfolding of himself without* in the act of writing.²⁹⁷ The result of this 'unfolded' subjectivity is a latent violence, which, as we have already hinted, leads him perilously close to the self-destructive condition of several of his most famous characters.

For instance, we learn at the beginning of *Moby-Dick* that Ishmael, like Melville, is drawn to the water. When he recounts the suicidal thoughts that lead him to sea and his dangerous flirtations with the fate of Narcisuss, 'who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned',²⁹⁸ it is important to recall that Ishmael's confession is that of a narrator distanced from himself as a narrated character. Much of the enduring significance of *Moby-Dick*, in fact, is missed if one overlooks the paradox of its reflective complexity, whereby Ishmael-as-character retroactively / anachronistically informs his own characterisation by Ishmael-as-narrator. Hence the latter's 'realisation' as he begins his tale that the same perception of self that draws him to the water is also 'the

²⁹⁷ Cf., p. 18.

²⁹⁸ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 5.

image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.²⁹⁹ Which is to say, the phantom of life for Ishmael-as-narrator, that which makes him what he is, is the incessant, suicidal return to the sea of his story's retelling. Ishmael-as-narrator (i.e., as Subject) is truly 'alive', then, only inasmuch as he is *characterised* (i.e., as Object) as plunging toward his death.

Indeed, it is the miraculous 'resurrection' of Ishmael-as-character in the novel's epilogue that effectively conditions the possibility of his suicidal narration in the novel's beginning. Moreover, it marks the site of Ishmael's subjective autonomy as a production / eruption of excess from the self-violent circularity of his necessarily being a Subject that is also an Object. Suicidal desire hints at this subjective surplus, though, not because it somehow precedes or motivates Ishmael-as-narrator. In Ishmael, rather, such a desire itself is the Subject's sublimation of the immanent self-violence *that emerges from, but cannot finally be contained by, its (subjective) narration*. It is, in fact, precisely the excessiveness of his narrated (suicidal) desire, and thus the absolute necessity of its failure as such, that makes Ishmael-as-narrator what he is in and through his endless self-narration.

A similar dynamic is at work in *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*, Melville's follow-up to *Moby-Dick*, whose eponymous protagonist attempts to write the story of his life, in order to fill the void left after he rejects the memory of his formerly idealised father and his mother rejects him as a son. The first half of the novel is a slow-burning dark Romance. Here, the idyllic love between the rich, handsome Pierre and the equally rich, beautiful Lucy is suddenly darkened by the revelation that a brooding brunette

²⁹⁹ Peter Bellis and John Irwin read this passage similarly. See Peter Bellis, *No Mysteries Out of Ourselves: Identity and Form in the Novels of Herman Melville* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 104, and John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 288-89.

actual!

named Isabel is the illegitimate daughter of Pierre's revered father. Rationalising that he must make reparations for his father's sin, whilst protecting his family's name, Pierre rejects Lucy and takes upon himself the protection of his sister, albeit in the disguise of their being instead husband and wife. Rejected by his mother, Isabel and Pierre move to the city, where the narrative takes an abrupt turn and Pierre endeavours to write a novel like no other, that is, a *true* one.

Pierre's's melodramatic attempt to re-construct his identity *in truth*, in lieu of the identity and self-presentation that he had discovered was false when faced with the revelation about his father, is fraught with problems. The narrator, for instance, notes that in trying to rewrite himself, at times both figuratively and literally, Pierre must first break ground so that he might mine the marble for the temple of the self:

[I]t is often to be observed, that as in digging for precious metals in the mines, much earthy rubbish has first to be troublesomely handled and thrown out; so, in digging in one's soul for the fine gold of genius, much dullness and common-place is first brought to light. Happy would it be, if the man possessed in himself some receptacle for his own rubbish of this sort: but . . . [n]o common-place is ever effectually got rid of, except by essentially emptying one's self of it into a book; for once trapped in a book, then the book can be put into the fire, and all will be well.³⁰⁰

Pierre's writing, in other words, is nothing but the emptying of the rubbish that *does not* compose his identity. And yet when the narrator surreptitiously peers over Pierre's shoulder to see what he is writing, the frenzy of wet ink reveals that 'he seems to have directly plagiarized from his own experience.'³⁰¹ Inasmuch as plagiarism, the stealing of words, is related to abduction, Ellen Weinauer points out, Pierre's self-

³⁰⁰ Melville, *Pierre*, 258.

³⁰¹ Melville, *Pierre*, 302.

plagiarism is an attempt to write himself away.³⁰² The narrator, however, is quick to see the inherent problem this creates:

For though he naked soul of man doth assuredly contain one latent element of intellectual productiveness; yet never was there a child born solely from one parent; the visible world of experience being that procreative thing which impregnates the muses; *self-reciprocally efficient hermaphrodites being but a fable*.³⁰³

That is to say, when the representative self (i.e., Pierre-as-narrator-as-abductor) is generated by self-abduction, one's sense of self is simultaneously trapped *and* made free in an apparent tautology that knows no end.³⁰⁴

In Melville's essay 'Hawthorne and His Mosses', the excess that is a void generated by this inherent, paradoxical tautology is characterised as the 'blackness of darkness beyond', around which even Hawthorne's most diaphanous allegories 'but fringe, and play upon the edges of thunder-clouds'.³⁰⁵ Michael Bell describes the writing of Hawthorne similarly:

³⁰² Weinauer, 'Plagiarism and the Self', 699. *Plagiāre*, Weinauer points out, is the Latin verb meaning 'to kidnap', and a *plagiārius* is a kidnapper or seducer.

³⁰³ Melville, *Pierre*, 259 (emphasis mine). Cf., 'If a man be told a thing wholly new, then — during the time of its first announcement to him — it is entirely impossible for him to comprehend it. For — absurd as it may seem — men are only made to comprehend things which they comprehended before (though by in the embryo, as it were). Things new it is impossible to make them comprehend, by merely talking to them about it. True, sometimes they pretend to comprehend; in their own hearts they really believe they do comprehend; outwardly look as though they *did* comprehend; wag their bushy tails comprehendingly; but for all that, they do not comprehend. Possibly, they may afterward come, of themselves, to inhale this new idea from the circumambient air, and so come to comprehend it; but not otherwise at all (209).

³⁰⁴ See Parlej, *The Romantic Theory of the Novel*, 114–56. Melville's tautology, Parlej suggests, 'no longer follows the metaphysical model of language; it reveals, as repetition, the subject of repetition as such. This subject occurs only in repetition, as the non-objective content of the act of repetition' (121).

³⁰⁵ Melville, *The Piazza Tales*, 243. Traditionally, Melville and Hawthorne are contrasted, with Melville representative of the symbolist, and Hawthorne the allegorist. For classic examples, see F. O. Matthiessen, *Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford UP, 1941), 242–315; and Charles Fiedelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953), esp. pp. 14–15, 32. Michael Bell's discussion of the proposed contrast is one of the most helpful at questioning what had become an assumption. See his *The Development of American Romance*, 130–42.

His plots are not didactically generated by his efforts to tell us what his symbols mean, what abstract notions they picture forth; they grow instead out of his characters' efforts to find out what the symbols mean or at all events to make them mean something. It is these characters who are, in intention, the allegorists. *Moreover, their allegorical tendency almost always leads to a distortion of life, a refusal to face it directly in its full complexity.* Hawthorne thus apparently adopts the allegorical mode in order to turn it against allegorical intentions.³⁰⁶

For Melville, it is from this darkness and distortion of life that characters like Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago emerge. In them, Melville celebrates the 'sane madness of vital truth' and the outlet they offer Shakespeare to say or insinuate those things 'we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them.'³⁰⁷

What I wish to suggest in what follows is that Melville's emphasis (particularly in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*) on embodiment, i.e., his sense that there is no free Subject prior to its being 'plagiarized' / to its materialisation as such, and his consequent realisation of the 'sane madness' at the heart of this paradox, brings out his close affinity to Friedrich's Schelling's 'dialectical materialism'.

3. The Real as Spoken Unspeakability

From his earliest days as a teenage philosopher, Schelling's philosophical reflections were informed by his theological concerns. By the early 1840s, though, while teaching at the Berlin lectern that made Hegel famous, his theological bend had become even more apparent. Here, as recorded in *The Philosophy of Revelation*, he described to his students the aim of what he called 'positive philosophy':

I do not begin with the concept of God in the positive philosophy, as former metaphysics and the ontological argument attempted to, but I must drop precisely this concept, the concept of God, in order to begin

³⁰⁶ Bell, *The Development of American*, 134 (my emphasis).

³⁰⁷ Melville, *The Piazza Tales*, 244.

with that which just exists, in which nothing more is thought than just this existing — in order to see if I can get from it to the divinity. Thus I cannot really prove the existence of God (by, for instance, beginning with the concept *God*) but instead the concept of that which exists before all possibility and thus without doubt — is given to me.³⁰⁸

Much of Schelling's philosophy at this point of his life and career was justly criticized by many of his contemporaries, such as Søren Kierkegaard ('I have totally given up on Schelling') and Karl Marx's friend Arnold Ruge ('To still consider Schelling as a philosopher is the dumbest thing one could do').³⁰⁹ The aim of the positive philosophy was truly ambitious: to develop a philosophically viable religion by radically reengaging and refuting the ontological proof of the existence of God (in the spirit of Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*), and thus also reinterpreting the historical / mythological development of Christianity.³¹⁰ Nevertheless, as Andrew Bowie notes, 'it was not least Schelling's failure to achieve this latter aim that led to many of the valid aspects of the later philosophy's being ignored.'³¹¹ And yet, it must be asked further, to what extent might it be possible to say that Schelling's lasting insight — i.e., 'that philosophy cannot arrive at a conceptually determinate *prius*'³¹² — actually emerges from this very failure?

As early as 1804, in his *Philosophy and Religion*, Schelling had already introduced the problem that would beset him the rest of his career and still faces us today:

³⁰⁸ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, in Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's *Sämtliche Werke* (ed. Karl F. A. Schelling; vol. 13 [Part 2, band 3]); Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856-61), 158.

³⁰⁹ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung, 1841/42* (ed. Manfred Frank; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 455, 464.

³¹⁰ For one of the best assessment of Schelling's late philosophy, see Andrew Bowie, Introduction to *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, by F. W. J. Schelling (trans. Andrew Bowie; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1-37.

³¹¹ Bowie, Introduction to *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, 3.

³¹² Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 181.

[T]here is no constant transition from the Absolute to the Real, the origin of the world of the senses can only be thought as a complete breaking off from absoluteness, by a leap. If philosophy is to deduce the origin of real things in a positive manner from the Absolute, then there would have to be a positive ground in the Absolute. . . . Philosophy only has a negative relationship to things that appear, it rather proves that they are not than that they are. . . . The Absolute is all that is real: finite things, on the other hand, are not real; their ground cannot lie in a *communication* of reality to them or to their substrate, which would have emanated from the Absolute, it can only lie in a *move away*, in a *fall* [*Abfall*] from the Absolute.³¹³

What makes this explication of the Absolute so theologically profound is the materialistic spin Schelling ultimately puts on its most fundamental terms in his largely unfinished masterpiece, *Die Weltalter* [*Ages of the World*] [1811/15]. The question he poses here, apropos what we have seen repeatedly in Melville, is that of the self-becoming / self-presentation of the Absolute. For Schelling, as for Melville, the most fundamental question is '*Where to begin?*'

Schelling's 'creation myth', as Judith Norman appropriately calls it, begins in the primal chaos of 'potencies'.³¹⁴ In the potency Schelling calls 'A = B', the being of primordial Freedom (A) can only be realised as Absolute Indifference (B) — or, as Schelling calls it, potentiality In-Itself.³¹⁵ That is to say, the In-itself of Freedom *qua* Absolute Indifference cannot tolerate any positive, developmental content; and, moreover, is itself only in a 'will-to-contraction' that wants nothing. For this potency to play itself out, however, the will-to-contraction that wants nothing is necessarily countered by a latent 'will-to expansion' that actively *wants this 'nothing'*, which

³¹³ F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke, 1804* (ed. K. F. A. Schelling; vol. 6 [Part 1, Band 6]; Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856-61), 38.

³¹⁴ Judith Norman, 'The Logic of Longing: Schelling's Philosophy of Will' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 10.1 (2002): 91-92.

³¹⁵ F. W. J. Schelling, *Ages of the World* [2nd draft] (trans. Judith Norman; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 131-33, 143. Unless noted otherwise, my citations of *Ages of the World* are from the second draft.

Schelling calls A^2 .³¹⁶ The clear, contradictory antagonism between $A = B$ and A^2 , and thus between the affirmation of Freedom as Indifference (A) and the negative force of Freedom actually *being as* Indifference (B), he explains, is overcome by their necessary unity in A^3 .³¹⁷ Once 'predicative being' (A^2) is established, though, the 'pronominal being' of $A = B$ becomes the negative force, inasmuch as the aim of the latter is to maintain Absolute unity against the differentiation implicit in the will-to-expansion (i.e., the Fichtean necessity of 'not-A' for the assertion of 'A'). Consequently, the unity of A^3 is one of inherent, necessary conflict, whereupon the result is the primordial madness of rotary repetition. As a result, in Slavoj Žižek's graphic description, God (or the Absolute Subject, the True, etc.)

repeatedly dashes himself against His own wall: unable to stay within, He follows His urge to break out, yet the more He strives to escape, the more He is caught in His own trap. Perhaps the best metaphor for this rotary motion is a trapped animal which desperately strives to disengage itself from a snare: although every spring only tightens the snare, a blind compulsion leads it to make a dash for it again and again, so that it is condemned to an endless repetition of the same gesture.³¹⁸

With regard to this impasse, the problem of beginning is not that of classic Idealism, whereby the Absolute In-Itself, *sans* determinate phenomena, is somehow (mystically / philosophically / eschatologically) ascertained as such; Schelling's, rather, is the far more material, 'flesh and blood',³¹⁹ question of how and why the Absolute split from

³¹⁶ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 176-78.

³¹⁷ To avoid possible confusion, Judith Norman points out, it is helpful to remember that, 'in a sense, the potencies really are identical, but appear under different powers (hence the term 'potency'); their differences consist not in their compositional structure so much as which aspect they manifest. (To state the case in terms of Schelling's formulae, the potencies are all A. The first potency . . . posits the one essence (A) in concealment; the second potency, (A^2), posits the essence (A) in expansion, and so forth)' (Norman, 'The Logic of Longing, 92 n.5).

³¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 23.

³¹⁹ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries Into the Nature of Human Freedom and Matters Connected Therewith* [1809] (trans. James Gutman; Chicago: Open Court, 1936), 30.

itself in the first place.³²⁰

Such, then, is the pertinence of dialectical materialism as articulated in the philosophy of Schelling and the fiction of Herman Melville. For both are concerned with, in the words of Schelling, the singularity of the 'primordial [i.e., groundless] deed', in which the Absolute Subject contracts (in the double sense of 'condenses' and 'catches' [as though a disease]) its individual, contingent consciousness of being:³²¹

That primordial deed which makes a man genuinely himself precedes all individual actions; but immediately after it is put into exuberant freedom, this deed sinks into the night of unconsciousness. . . . For man to know of this deed, consciousness itself would have to return into nothing, into boundless freedom, and would cease to be consciousness. . . . Likewise that will, posited once at the beginning and then led to the outside, must immediately sink into unconsciousness. Only in this way is a beginning possible, a beginning that does not stop being a beginning, a truly eternal beginning. For here as well, it is true that the beginning cannot know itself. That deed once done, it is done for all eternity. . . . If, in making a decision, somebody retains the right to reexamine his choice, he will never make a beginning at all.³²²

The crucial thing here is that the deed is accomplished in the 'beginning that does not stop being a beginning, a truly eternal beginning'. That is to say, that which is done as the very foundation of the present is eternally (i.e., always-already) done; moreover, it belongs to a past that was itself *as such* never present. The free Subject (Self / God) that emerges from the maddening deadlock of the rotary drive, via the primordial deed, effectively speaks itself into Existence. Indeed, for Schelling, it is only in 'the Word', or deed, that God and humanity *are* at all. Consequently, prior to the Word of God, i.e., the 'disclosure' of Creation, and thus prior to Existence as such, there is only

³²⁰ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 14.

³²¹ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 123-24.

³²² Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 181-82. Cf., Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries Into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 63-64.

'the will that wills nothing',³²³ the non-subjective, Dionysian void and inert indifference of absolute freedom. Strictly speaking, prior to the Word, God, as the Absolute In-Itself, does not exist.³²⁴

When in search of Truth unvarnished, we are not unlike Pierre, who seeks his identity outside the authority of his father's name: 'we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid — and no body is there! — appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man!'³²⁵ Which is to say, like Ishmael of the Whale, the In-Itself of that which is sought is but a 'vague, nameless horror'.³²⁶ And yet, unlike Pierre, Ishmael is compelled to explain himself: 'But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught'.³²⁷ What distinguishes Ishmael from the tragic passivity of Pierre, then, and thus ultimately keeps him creating himself / becoming himself anew in the telling of his tale *as narrator*, is his understanding that the formless abyss must be given shape; or, in the case of the Whale, colour.

Ishmael begins by describing the whiteness of the Whale with a litany of positive metaphors denoting beauty or grandeur. But, by the end of his page-length sentence, we learn what he has in mind is in fact *none* of these: 'yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet and honorable and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of

³²³ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 132.

³²⁴ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 149-50, 156.

³²⁵ Melville, *Pierre*, 284-85; cf., 339.

³²⁶ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 188.

³²⁷ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 188.

panic to the soul than the redness which affrights in blood.³²⁸ For Ishmael, the ultimate horror of the Whale's whiteness is that it is simultaneously surface and depth, emptiness and fullness, life and death; both the 'very veil of the Christian's deity' and the defining mark of this deity's absence:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows — a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?³²⁹

As Peter Bellis argues, the whiteness of *Moby Dick* is analogous to the empty page on which the purportedly ineffable Whale is described *as such*.³³⁰ In this, Ishmael realises what neither Ahab nor Pierre can accept: that the truth itself is not elusive, i.e., hidden behind the 'pasteboard mask' of reality and phenomena, but is precisely the immanent, intensifying excess of its characterisation *as elusive*.

Likewise, Schelling describes 'the Real' not as some noumenal Thing-as-such, but as 'the incomprehensible *basis of reality in things*, the irreducible remainder which cannot be resolved into reason by the greatest exertion but always remains eternally in the depths'.³³¹ The provocative thing to note here is that the materiality of Ishmael's sense of whiteness and Schelling's sense of the Real are similar in their dialectical materiality: that is, both are ineffable voids that emerge *in reality*, rather than an external limit somehow divined by mystical silence or eschatological solicitation.

Žižek's clarity is particularly helpful in this regard:

³²⁸ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 189.

³²⁹ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 195.

³³⁰ Bellis, *No Mysteries Out of Ourselves*, 124-25.

³³¹ Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 34. Cf., Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 151.

[T]he Real is not the abyss of the Thing that forever eludes our grasp, and on account of which every symbolization of the Real is partial and inappropriate; it is, rather, that invisible obstacle, that distorting screen, which always 'falsifies' our access to external reality, that 'bone in the throat' which gives a pathological twist to every symbolization, that is to say, on account of which every symbolization misses its object. (Or with reference to the notion of the Thing as the ultimate traumatic unbearable Referent that we are unable to confront directly, since its direct presence is too blinding: what if this very notion that delusive everyday reality is a veil concealing the Horror of the unbearable Thing is false, what if the ultimate veil concealing the Real is the very notion of the horrible Thing behind the veil?³³²)

When the Real is the inherent excess of reality, i.e., when the 'radical antinomy that seems to preclude our access to the Thing *already is the Thing itself*',³³³ the very bases and media of one's monomaniacal quests (be they of Ahab, Pierre, or the late-Schelling) are always already perverted from within. In this way, the Unspeakable end of such quests emerges only after it is first spoken.

4. *A Necessary Madness*

According to Schelling, at least before his confessional turn later in life, this perversion of ontology goes beyond the scepticism of Kant and is the basis for 'the veil of sadness' he espied 'spread over all of nature, the deep, unappeasable melancholy of all life'.³³⁴ And yet, for Schelling and Melville alike, the failure to own up to life's deep melancholy provoked by the general insanity at the heart of reality and reason is symptomatic of the walking dead. Schelling writes:

Nothing great can be accomplished without a constant solicitation of madness, which should always be overcome, but should never be utterly lacking. One might do well to assess people as follows. One should say that there is a kind of person in which there is no madness

³³² Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 67.

³³³ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 77.

³³⁴ Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 79.

whatsoever. These would be the uncreative people incapable of procreation, the ones that call themselves sober spirits. . . . But where there is no madness, there is certainly no proper, active, living intellect (and consequently there is just the dead intellect, dead intellectuals. . . . Hence the utter lack of madness leads to another extreme, to imbecility [*Blödsinn*] (idiocy), which is an absolute lack of all madness.³³⁵

Melville, of course, had been flirting with such darkness since his earliest novels. By April 1849, one year prior to the ironically self-assertive 'Hawthorne and His Mosses', his flirtations had become overt advances. Here, in a letter to Duyckinck discussing the insanity of Charles Fenno Hoffman, Duyckinck's short-term successor as editor at *The Literary World*, Melville's pity is infused with Schellingian understanding and empathy. He writes:

Poor Hoffman — I remember the shock I had when I first saw the mention of his madness. — But he was just the man to go mad — imaginative, voluptuously inclined, poor, unemployed, in the race of life distanced by his inferiors, unmarried, — without a port of haven in the universe to make. . . . This going mad of a friend or acquaintance comes straight home to every man who feels his soul in him, — which but few men do. For in all of us lodges the same fuel to light the same fire. And he who has never felt, momentarily, what madness is has but a mouthful of brains.³³⁶

As would be demonstrated further later in Melville's life, the artistic greatness described by Schelling comes at a potentially high price. For indeed not only do his next two novels, *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, feature two of the most memorable madmen of the American Renaissance, rivalling those even of Poe, it would not be long before

³³⁵ F. W. J. Schelling *Ages of the World* [Third Draft] (trans. Jason Wirth; Albany: State University of New York, 2000), 103. As Jason Wirth points out, though, Schelling's point is not to advocate 'an utter surrender to madness', but that 'Reason remains at the disposal of madness, enchanted by it, humbled by it, continually solicitous of it, but not such that this drunken ground annihilates Reason (Jason Wirth, Introduction to *The Ages of the World* [Third Draft], xiv). Cf., 'Stupidity is not error or a tissue of errors. There are imbecile thoughts, imbecile discourses, that are made up entirely of truths; but these truths are base, they are those of a base, heavy and laden soul. . . . In truth, as in error, stupid thought only discovers the most base — base errors and base truths that translate the triumph of the slave, the reign of petty values or the power of an established order' (Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* [trans. Hugh Tomlinson; New York: Columbia University Press, 1983], 105).

³³⁶ Melville, *Correspondence*, 128.

Melville himself was feared insane.³³⁷ Though it is questionable he was ever examined for mental illness, as was once suggested by Merton Sealts, Jr.,³³⁸ his wife's fears for her own safety were all too real. If the actual evidence of Melville's spousal abuse remains highly circumstantial, the relative silence on the subject until recently, as in many instances of modern abuse, was not wholly indicative of domestic bliss.³³⁹ For instance, though she refused to participate in a fake kidnapping scheme in May 1867, which was intended to get her away from what she had described in previous letters to Rev. Henry Bellows as her husband's insanity and ill treatment, that there was such a plan at all speaks volume.³⁴⁰ Although the full extent of this treatment and the manifestation of his purported insanity are not at all definite, alcohol likely played a significant role.³⁴¹

³³⁷ While most reviewers of *Moby-Dick* simply did not know how to take it, and thus wrote it off as bad fiction, many reviewers of *Pierre* went several steps further and regarded it as the work of an insane author. Of the latter, one reviewer writes: "That Herman Melville has gone "clean daft", is very much to be feared; certainly, he has given us a very mad book. . . . The sooner this author is put in ward the better. If trusted with himself, at all events give him no further trust in pen and ink, till the present fit has worn off. He will grievously hurt himself else – or his very amiable publishers' (Branch, *Melville*, 31).

³³⁸ See Merton M. Sealts, Jr.'s classic essay on Melville's possible mental examination just after completing *Pierre* in 'Herman Melville's "I and My Chimney"' *American Literature* 13 (May, 1941): 142–54. Also see his rejoinder to two decades of scholarship that took his suggestion as rock-solid fact in 'Melville's Chimney, Reexamined' in *Themes and Directions in American Literature: Essays in Honor of Leon Howard* (ed. Ray B. Browne and Donald Pizer; Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Studies, 1969), 80–102. According to Lewis Mumford, one of Melville's early twentieth-century critics, *Pierre* marked the beginning of a full-blown psychosis. See his *Herman Melville*, 171, 176.

³³⁹ Parker, *Herman Melville, Volume 2*, 628-35.

³⁴⁰ Dr. Henry Whitney Bellows was the minister of the All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, where the Melvilles had been renting a pew since 1849. See Walter D. Kring and Jonathan S. Carey, 'Two Discoveries Concerning Herman Melville', in *The Endless, Winding Way in Melville: New Charts by Kring and Carey* (eds. Donald Yanella and Hershel Parker. Glassboro, N.J.: Melville Society, 1981), 11-15. The two letters from Samuel S. Shaw and Elizabeth Melville to Bellows are reprinted in Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, 857–60. Elizabeth Renker's treatment of the letters is easily the most comprehensive to date. See *Strike Through the Mask*, 49–68.

³⁴¹ After the failure of *Moby-Dick*, Melville's increasing consumption of alcohol became more of a silent 'solace' than it was social. See Eleanor Melville Metcalf, *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), 215; and Edwin Haviland Miller, *Herman Melville*, 321.

As much as Schelling always ultimately privileges Reason over madness, due to the fact that madness can never be actualised *as such* without being embodied in Reason, i.e., as Reason's ground, at times Melville (in his life and in his fiction) exemplifies the potential danger of this logic. In characters like Ahab and Pierre, Melville thinks the Truth of this 'world of lies' as only ever caught in glimpses, perhaps even in madness — be it clinically or chemically induced.³⁴² And yet, I argue, the significance of Melville's sense of madness arises from his related notion of the 'Great Art of Telling the Truth', and thus the mark of true genius like that of Shakespeare, as the art of the mask.³⁴³ In this, the 'sane madness of vital truth' described above is not simply the Truth that eludes. On the contrary, the very elusiveness of this Truth deferred is but a retroactive projection of a Truth far more harrowing:

And perhaps, after all, there is no secret. We incline to think that the Problem of the Universe is like the Freemason's mighty secret, so terrible to all children. It turns out, at last, to consist in a triangle, a mallet, and an apron, — nothing more! We incline to think that God cannot explain His own secrets, and that He would like a little information upon certain points Himself. We mortals astonish Him as much as He us. But it is this Being of the matter; there lies the knot with which we choke ourselves. As soon as you say Me, a God, a Nature, so soon you jump off from your stool and hang from the beam. Yes, that word is the hangman. Take God out of the dictionary, and you would have Him in the street.³⁴⁴

³⁴² For more on Melville and madness, as a theme in his literature and his life, see especially Paul McCarthy, *The Twisted Mind: Madness in Herman Melville's Fiction* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990). See also, Alisa von Brentano, 'Herman Melville and "The Sane Madness of Vital Truth"' in *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness* (ed. Branimir M. Rieger; Bowling Green, Oh.: Popular, 1994), 149–67; Marty Roth, 'Melville and Madness', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 41 (Summer 1985): 119–30; Jean Magretta, 'Radical Disunities: Models of Madness in *Pierre* and *The Idiot*', *Studies in the Novel* 10 (1978): 234–50; Bellis, *No Mysteries out of Ourselves*, 136–40.

³⁴³ Melville, *The Piazza Tales*, 244.

³⁴⁴ Melville, *Correspondence*, 186.

It is here that the 'sane madness' of Melville and Schelling meet. For, indeed, in the words of Perry Miller, writers like Melville and Hawthorne 'do not inaugurate a "renaissance" in American literature: they constitute a *culmination*, they pronounce a *funeral oration* on the dreams of their youth, they intone an elegy of disenchantment.³⁴⁵

Moreover, I argue, they represent in literature the explosive theological implications of Schelling's thinking. For here the eternal *sine qua non* of God, the Absolute, or the True, as it were, only *is* inasmuch as it 'contracts' (finite) Existence in the act of freedom; that is, the decisive moment of 'eternity in time' that thus opens time and represses the egoistic madness of its Ground. In radical contrast to the traditional notions of time (i.e., as the distortion of an eternal Order, or as a particular mode of temporality) '*eternity begets time in order to resolve the deadlock it became entangled in.*'³⁴⁶ This is to say, using David L. Clark's succinct unpacking of the 'fantastic logic' that structures this entanglement:

[P]rimal longing excites in 'man' and 'animal' a craving for that which they already need to be in order to respond to its call: namely, creatures. 'It' — primal longing — somehow triggers in the creature a desire to become what it in fact is. The creature surges up, stirs into life, but this upsurge and stirring must always, in some minimal way, have already happened and thus is always happening — an originary event that beckons from the 'future' because it recedes into a 'past' that could never be present as such.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 255 (emphasis mine).

³⁴⁶ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 31. Cf., It is therefore misleading to conceive the constitutive displacement of man as the division between the finitude of his bodily existence and the infinity of the Spirit. The Infinite becomes actual, living Spirit only when it 'attains itself', when it becomes aware of itself, in a finite creature 'raised from the creaturely to the super-creaturely'. That is to say: what is Spirit? The domain of signification, of the symbolic; as such, it can emerge only in a creature that is neither constrained to its bodily finitude nor directly infinite, but in between; a finite entity in which the Infinite resounds in the guise of a shadowy phantasmagoria, a presentiment of 'Another World' (60-61).

³⁴⁷ David L. Clark, 'Heidegger's Craving Being-On-Schelling' *Diacritics* 27.3 (1997), 19.

The groundless deed, then, is the actualisation of Absolute potentiality and freedom; in this unconscious act that always already precedes and conditions any self-generative presentation or characterization, the free subject is witness to and necessarily represses the *Ungrund* (the Non-Ground, Void) of Absolute Indifference.³⁴⁸ With this in mind, Melville and Schelling come face-to-face with the self-characterising / self-embodying materialism at the heart of natural theology.

5. *Self-Creation as an Act of Love*

The key difference we are describing here is that between desire and love. For Schelling, as noted above, at the heart of the insane cyclical movement that precedes the Beginning of being and time is 'mere craving or desire', that is, the desire for / addiction to the In-Itself of contractive identity.³⁴⁹ Before the Word or Logos, David Clark notes, 'there was the hunger for the Word';³⁵⁰ or, alternatively, what psychoanalysis would designate 'the drive whose true aim is the endless reproduction of its circular movement'.³⁵¹ Drive, then, is desire In-Itself, unactualised in the 'subjectless' fury of the Absolute, in which there is only the indifferent flux of

³⁴⁸ Cf., '[I]t is a well-known fact that nobody can be given character, and that nobody has chosen for himself the particular character he bears. There is neither deliberation nor choice here, and yet everyone recognizes and judges character as an eternal (never-ceasing, constant) deed and attributes to a man both it as well as the action that follows from it. Universal moral judgment thus acknowledges that every man has a freedom in which there is neither (explicit) deliberation nor choice [*Grund*]. . . . But most men shy away from this freedom that opens like an abyss before them, just as they are frightened when faced with the necessity of being wholly one thing or another. . . . They feel themselves crushed by this freedom, as by an appearance from an incomprehensible world, from eternity, from a place entirely devoid of any ground at all [*Ungrund*]' (Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 175-76).

³⁴⁹ Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 38.

³⁵⁰ Clark, 'Craving Being-On-Schelling', 16. Cf., '[T]he Logos appears mysteriously and precipitously out of this longing like a word out of the random lettering of an anagram, the latter a figure for the meaningless, differential markings that form the condition of the possibility of language. (It is as if God were always already hooked on phonics.)' (n. 10)

³⁵¹ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 87 n. 69.

Freedom, but no free Subject as such.³⁵² With the 'eternally past' advent of the Word, the embodied spirit (Self) that emerges is free only inasmuch as it is not completely itself; it is, rather, an embodied spirit, marked by finitude, death, and decay.³⁵³ Insofar as it is not itself, the spirit is made ravenous flesh:

The spirit is consequently nothing but an addiction to Being. . . . The base form of the spirit is therefore an addiction, a desire, a lust. Whoever wishes to grasp the concept of spirit at its most profound roots must therefore become fully acquainted with the nature of desire . . . for [desire] is a hunger for Being, and being satiated only gives it renewed strength, i.e., a more vehement hunger.³⁵⁴

Constituted as a free subject by virtue of its inherent lack of self-presence, the desirous-Self cannot be satisfied. On the contrary, its desire, embodied in history and subjectivity, is 'always and by definition unsatisfied, metonymical, shifting from one

³⁵² Cf., 'Drive . . . involves a kind of inert satisfaction that always finds its way; drive is nonsubjectivized ('acephalous'). Perhaps its paradigmatic expressions are the repulsive private rituals (sniffing at one's own sweat, sticking one's finger into one's nose, etc. . .) that bring us intense satisfaction w/out us being aware of it, or, insofar as we are aware of it, w/out us being able to do anything about it, to prevent it' (Slavoj Žižek, 'The Abyss of Freedom' in *The Ages of the World*, by F. W. J. von Schelling [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997], 80).

³⁵³ This perspective is not limited to its philosophical articulation in Schelling and literary embodiment in Melville. Indeed, even that most sentimental of Romantics, Goethe, is ambivalent about the nature he had very nearly divinized:

Nature! We are surrounded and embraced by her – without being able to exit from her or to enter into her more deeply. Unmasked and unwarned, we are taken up into the circuitry of her dance; she has her way with us, until we grow weary and sink from her arms. . . .

We live in the midst of her and are foreign to her. She speaks to us ceaselessly and does not betray her secret to us. We work our endless effects on her, yet have no dominion over her.

She seems to have invested all her hopes in individuality, and she cares nothing for the individuals. Always she builds, always she destroys, and we have no access to her workshop.

She lives in a profusion of children, and their mother, where is she? – She squirts her children out of nothingness, and does not tell them where they came from and where they are going. Their task is to run; *hers* is to know the orbit (qtd. in David Farrell Krell, *Contagion: Sexuality, Disease, and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998], 3).

³⁵⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, 'Stuttgart Seminars' in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F. W. J. Schelling* (trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 230.

object to another since I do not actually desire what I want.³⁵⁵ Be careful of what you wish for, so the saying goes, because you just might get it. The same logic is at work here: 'What I actually desire is to sustain desire itself, to postpone the dreaded moment of its satisfaction'.³⁵⁶

If *desire* is related to Schelling's will-to-contraction, and thus to the *impossible singularity* of one's desire, i.e., identity and wholeness, *love* is related to the will-to-expansion, the emergence of the free Self that is not itself. Or, as Žižek explains:

[L]ove is to be opposed here to desire: desire is always caught in the logic of 'this is not that', it thrives in the gap that forever separates the *obtained* satisfaction from the *sought-for* satisfaction, while love FULLY ACCEPTS that 'this IS that' — that the woman with all her weaknesses and common features IS the Thing I conditionally love; that Christ, this wretched man, IS the living God. Again, to avoid a fatal misunderstanding: the point is not that we should 'renounce transcendence' and fully accept the limited human person as our love object, since 'this is all there is': transcendence is not abolished, but rendered ACCESSIBLE — it shines through in this very clumsy and miserable being that I love.³⁵⁷

In love, according to Schelling, the impossible, the wholly other, is what cannot be, what never has been, nor never will be; and yet, nevertheless, it remains the paradoxical excess, the Real, which emerges from the contingency of reality.

Schelling's point is not nearly as obscure as it may at first seem. Again, we need only think back to the insane rotary repetition described above, wherein the pure will that wills nothing (God) contracts being:

[T]here were from the very beginning two different though not distinguishable aspects of the will that willed nothing. First, it was pure will in itself; but as such, it was also the will that willed nothing. Now only this second aspect has become a positively negating will; besides this, it still remains a pure will, and this quality of being a will cannot be destroyed. It is even impossible that another, opposed, will

³⁵⁵ Žižek, 'The Abyss of Freedom', 80.

³⁵⁶ Žižek, 'The Abyss of Freedom', 80.

³⁵⁷ Žižek, *On Belief*, 90.

not produce itself in it, to the extent that it remains a will, and precisely because it became a positively negating will. This opposed will is one that actually wills itself as what-is, and as being; it is, in a word, an affirming will, *a will of love that does not will nothing but rather will something*.³⁵⁸

The insanity of the rotary motion Schelling describes here is that of a 'psychotic' God unable to tolerate any Otherness; such is the 'fury of his egotism' that this includes, especially, any actualised notion of Himself as either Free or Creator. For Schelling, however, the groundless deed, 'as a will of love', disrupts the contractive dominance of the egoistic Ground,³⁵⁹ thereby actualising, in the 'Word', the Groundless, inexpressible potentiality and freedom that unites the contradictory potencies of will-to-contraction and will-to-expansion.³⁶⁰ Schelling's logic is a paradox of materiality:

It is apparent that none of these — not the negating, not the affirming will, and not the merely potentially extant will that is their unity — is that absolute I of divinity as it was before the activation; but precisely because it is *none* of these and yet is all three, precisely thereby it appears as *actual*, as what is in principle inexpressible.³⁶¹

In other words, the God of Creation is not the Absolute In-Itself, the purity of indifferent and undifferentiated freedom. For God to create freely, divine freedom itself must be actualised as such. It is only in the primordial deed that the Absolute actualises itself *as* the free Creator-God; and thus, consequently, actualises the abyssal void of Absolute Freedom inherent to self-creation. The In-and-For-Itself endeavour of Freedom's autopoietic self-becoming, according to Schelling, is the quintessential

³⁵⁸ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 169 [emphasis mine].

³⁵⁹ Cf., 'If the force of individuality were alone, there would be nothing but the eternal state of closing oneself off and being closed off. Nothing could live in this state, created things would be impossible, and the concept of a being of beings would be lost. For this force of self-ness or individuality in God is captured in that barbaric term *aseity*. This force is the white heat of purity, intensified to all created things, and would rage against every creature like ruinous fire, an eternal wrath that tolerates nothing, *fatally contracting but for the resistance of love*' (Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 171 [emphasis mine]).

³⁶⁰ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 129-30, 169-78.

³⁶¹ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 170.

act of love.³⁶²

Of course the comedy of love here is that, in the Word, God is no longer (simply) Himself. In fact, in even more theologically scandalous terms, it is only in 'original sin' (*qua* the decision to act) – the Fall of God, as it were — that God is at all. Schelling is unambiguous on this point, at least in this period of his philosophy. The God that makes reality intelligible in the decisive act of love, i.e., of free creation, he reasons, must also relate to the 'contracted' Ground of his own existence. Therefore, the God of Creation 'is not God viewed as absolute, that is, insofar as he exists. For it [the Ground of existence contracted by the deed] is only the basis of His existence, it is *nature* — in God, inseparable from him, to be sure, but nevertheless distinguishable from Him'.³⁶³ In short, then, after the primordial deed, the quintessential, eternally past moment of love and freedom, the (contractive) desire for wholeness can only ever be frustrated by the (expansive) love that must, in effect, lose. It is in this sense of love as loss that we find the basis of a truly radical gospel, in which salvation of self is theologically *less* redemptive than the fall that sets it free.

The latter is a only slightly more provocative way of rearticulating the critical implications of Schelling's related discussion of Evil. Evil, he argues, is only truly possible in a free subject that 'loses' itself; as such, Evil must be freely chosen.³⁶⁴ For

³⁶² Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 137-38.

³⁶³ Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 32. As Žižek aptly notes in his commentary on Schelling's understanding of Freedom, 'either a thing is *not yet* itself and dwells in the state of virtual proto-existence, or it becomes itself, is "posited as such", but this positing is achieved by the supplement of the Word — that is, the thing is already re-marked, *no longer* merely itself' (*The Indivisible Remainder*, 60). Cf., Andrew Bowie, Introduction to *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, 20.

³⁶⁴ Cf., 'On the one hand, nature can spiritualize itself, it can turn into the medium of Spirit's self-manifestation; on the other hand, with the emergence of the Word, the obscure principle of Ground and Selfhood which hitherto acted as an anonymous, impersonal, blind force is itself spiritualized, illuminated; it becomes a Person aware of itself, so that we are now dealing with an Evil which, in full awareness of itself, *wills itself as Evil* – which is not merely indifference towards the Good but an active striving for Evil' (Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 64).

Schelling, the possibility of this choice 'consists in the fact that, instead of keeping his selfhood as the ground or the instrument, man can strive to elevate it to be the ruling or universal will, and, on the contrary, try to make what is spiritual in him into a means'.³⁶⁵ Evil, therefore, emerges from the Subject's misguided sense of having 'fallen' from (the truth of) itself, and thus believing it has lost something that can be regained. This, Schelling notes, is the root of the free Subject's 'spiritualized' desire to 'return' to its status as (contractive) Universal / Ideal:

For even he who has moved out of the center retains the feeling that he has been all things when in and with God. Hence there springs the hunger of selfishness which, in the measure that it deserts totality and unity becomes even needier and poorer, but just on that account more ravenous, hungrier, more poisonous.³⁶⁶

Thus, Schelling effectively explodes from within the traditional notion of Evil as imperfection or privation. For, on the contrary, Evil is constitutive of the free Subject's actual (sinful) existence, insofar as this existence is the material embodiment of the Subject's ongoing duplicitous attempt to present as 'essential truth' that which is necessarily a retroactive characterisation / projection.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁵ Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 68.

³⁶⁶ Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 69. Cf., Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 63-70; Clark, 'Heidegger Being-On-Schelling', 21-23.

³⁶⁷ On this point Schelling could not be any more clear: 'the mere consideration of the fact that man, the most perfect of all visible creatures, is alone capable of evil, shows that [the ground of evil] can by no means consist of insufficiency or deprivation'. (Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 44). Cf., Jean Baudrillard's similar thoughts in an interview with *Der Spiegel*: 'Good and evil are inextricably bound together, this is fatal in its original meaning: an integral part of our fate and destiny. . . . Evil was interpreted as misfortunate because misfortune can be fought against: poverty, injustice, oppression, etc. This is how the humanitarian views things, the emotional and sentimental vision, the permanent empathy for the suffering. Evil is the world as it is and has always been. Misfortune is the world as it never should have been. The transformation of evil into misfortune is the most profitable business of the twentieth century' ('Das ist der vierte Weltkrieg' *Der Spiegel Online* [15 June 2002]: paras. 50, 52. PURL: <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/0,1518,177013,00.html>)

6. *Khora and the Masquerade of Femininity*

The repercussions of Schelling's and Melville's dialectical materialism become radically apocalyptic in the complex relationship they describe between the embodied Self / Absolute and that which is more profound than Good or Evil (and thus, too, God). Schelling writes:

If we wish to bring this Being nearer to us from a human standpoint, we may say: *It is the longing which the eternal One feels to give birth to itself.* This is not the One itself, but is co-eternal with it. This longing seeks to give birth to God, i.e., the fathomable unity; but to that extent it has not yet the unity in its own self. . . . Man is formed in his mother's womb; and only out of the darkness of unreason (out of feeling, out of longing, the sublime mother of understanding) grow clear thoughts. We must imagine primal longing in this way — turning toward reason, indeed, though not yet recognizing it. . . . This primal longing moves in anticipation like a surging, billowing sea, similar to the 'matter' of Plato, following some dark, uncertain law, incapable in itself of forming anything that can endure.³⁶⁸

Schelling's maternal imagery in this passage is not unlike that of Plato's *Timaeus*, on which Schelling had provided a commentary in 1794.³⁶⁹

In the *Timaeus* Plato calls this characterless non-place from which everything that exists arises — in thought as well as in material form — *khora*, 'the receptacle and, as it were, the nurse of all becoming and change'.³⁷⁰ As such, he continues,

that which is going to receive properly and uniformly all the likenesses of the intelligible and eternal things must itself be void of all character. Therefore we must not call the mother and receptacle of visible and sensible things either earth or air or fire or water . . . but we shall not be wrong if we describe it as invisible and formless, all embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp.³⁷¹

Khora, in short, is 'eternal and indestructible', 'provides a position for everything that

³⁶⁸ Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 35.

³⁶⁹ See David Farrell Krell, 'Female Parts in *Timaeus*' *Arion* 2/3 (1975): 400-21.

³⁷⁰ Plato, *Timaeus and Critias* (trans. Desmond Lee; London: Penguin, 1965), 49.

³⁷¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 50-51.

comes to be', and 'is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning and is so hard to believe in — we look at it indeed in a kind of dream'.³⁷²

Schelling's anthropomorphic images of 'primal longing' — such as 'womb', 'billowing sea', 'gravity' (*Schwere*), 'feeling', 'the ruleless' (*das Regellose*), 'the sublime mother of knowledge', 'the darkness of unreason' — are striking in their similar intertwining of femininity, violence, and mystery.³⁷³ Though it would be foolish to attribute it solely and directly to Schelling, such images are highly suggestive of Isabel's role — as sister, as wife, as enigma — in Melville's *Pierre*. In her, the narrator suggests, Pierre finds the most fundamental question of life, placing the 'unraveled plot' of her life on par with all other mysteries throughout the ages, of all history and all peoples, even that of 'the unravelable inscrutableness of God'.³⁷⁴ As she tells the inquisitive Pierre, who wishes to discover and uncover the truth, 'far sweeter are mysteries than surmises: though the mystery be unfathomable, it is still the unfathomableness of fullness; but the surmise, that is but shallow and unmeaning emptiness.'³⁷⁵ Her words not only foreshadow Pierre's failure, but form the basis of his love for Isabel — be it that of a brother or that of husband.³⁷⁶

Is Isabel victim or victimizer; passive or active; knowing or unknowing; sister

³⁷² Plato, *Timaeus*, 52.

³⁷³ See Clark, 'Heidegger Being-On-Schelling', 14. For a more thorough analysis of Schelling's anthropomorphizing of the Ground, including that derived from the *Timaeus*, also see David L. Clark, "'The Necessary Heritage of Darkness": Tropics of Negativity in Schelling, Derrida, and de Man' in *Intersections: Nineteenth-Century Philosophy and Contemporary Theory* (eds. David L. Clark and Tilottama Rajan; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 79-146. Also see, John Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato's Timaeus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

³⁷⁴ Melville, *Pierre*, 141.

³⁷⁵ Melville, *Pierre*, 153.

³⁷⁶ Cf., Pierre's description of love built on the necessary bedrock of secrecy: 'For, whatever some lovers may sometimes say, love does not always abhor a secret, as nature is said to abhor a vacuum. Love is built upon secrets, as lovely Venice upon invisible and incorruptible piles in the sea. Love's secrets, being mysteries, ever pertain to the transcendent and the infinite; and so they are as airy bridges, by which our further shadows pass over into the regions of the golden mists and exhalations; when all poetical, lovely thoughts are engendered, and drop into us, as though pearls should drop from rainbows' (Melville, *Pierre*, 81).

or wife? Ultimately, neither Pierre nor the narrator is ever quite sure. As Wilma Garcia writes:

As for their blood relationship, and the suggestions of incest that possibility raises, Isabel seems to believe she is Pierre's sister, and Pierre believes it enough to forsake his mother and his bright future for her sake, or perhaps his sacrifices are for the sake of his own heroic self-image. . . . He is never so sure of the truth of her story again. But Isabel does not change; she follows Pierre wherever he leads her, even to the grave. In her mysterious being are the merging images of the prize of the hero's quest — helpmate, lover, damsel in distress, perhaps even passive temptress — yet all of these images are so tinged with irony and ambiguity that we are never really sure of who or what she is.³⁷⁷

In revealing herself as his half-sister, no matter how ambiguous the evidence, Isabel marks the femininity of the decisive moment and mysterious ground of Pierre's tragic self-presentation.³⁷⁸ That is to say, upon her revelation and his decision, neither he nor *Pierre* is recognizable as what had come before. Consequently, one need not appeal strictly to biographical details to understand the sudden change of course that occurs in the novel; it is, in fact, explained *within*.³⁷⁹ For in Isabel remains the absolute mystery of Self, from which emerges Pierre's (and Melville's) disastrous decision to claim her as his own:³⁸⁰

Ay, Pierre, now indeed art thou hurt with a wound, never to be completely healed but in heaven; for thee, the before undistrusted moral beauty of the world is forever fled; for thee, thy sacred father is no more a saint; all brightness hath gone from thy hills, and all peace from thy plains; and now, now, for the first time, Pierre, Truth rolls a

³⁷⁷ Wilma Garcia, *Mothers and Others: Myths of the Female in the Works of Melville, Twain, and Hemingway* (New York: Peter Lang, 1983), 85.

³⁷⁸ Indeed, even Isabel says of her mother: 'I never knew a mortal mother. If, indeed, mother of mine hath lived, she is long gone, and cast no shadow on the ground she trod. . . . I seem not of woman born' (Melville, *Pierre*, 114).

³⁷⁹ Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker make the convincing argument that this inexplicable and very cynical turn in *Pierre* is primarily attributable to the very poor sales and savaging reviews of *Moby-Dick*, which probably came to light while Melville was writing his follow-up novel. See their 'The Flawed Grandeur of Melville's *Pierre*', 162-96.

³⁸⁰ Judith Fryer, *The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 49-50.

black billow through thy soul! Ah, miserable thou, to whom Truth, in her first tides, bears nothing but wrecks!³⁸¹

Her dying words, thus, are a fitting final assessment of Pierre's poisoned self-presentation: 'All's o'er, and ye knew him not!'³⁸²

It is, I would argue, regarding this notion of the mysterious Ground of self-presentation (or *khora*) as an undifferentiated femininity that Richard Kearney's otherwise brilliant critique of the postmodern fetish of absolute Otherness is inadequate.³⁸³ *Khora* is, Kearney suggests, 'neither identical with God nor incompatible with God but marks an open site where the divine may dwell and heal'; moreover, this is why 'God and *khora*, like theism and atheism, are two sides of the same coin. If God without *khora* risks dogmatism, *khora* without the possibility of God risks desolation. Perhaps *khora* could be reinterpreted as the primordial matrix of the world which God needs to become flesh.'³⁸⁴ Kearney's motivation for such a position is his deep suspicion of the 'postmodern obsession with absolutist ideas of exteriority and otherness', which he finds in the likes of, amongst others, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Derrida, Žižek, and, in passing, Schelling. Theirs is, he argues, an obsession that ultimately leads to an ethically problematic idolatry: 'that of the immemorial, ineffable Other', in which there is no discernible difference between the divine Good and the horrific Abject.³⁸⁵ The key, on the contrary, is to acknowledge the division between the self and the other without separating them so far that there is no relation at all. To do otherwise is to make ethical, responsible — and, for Kearney, *necessary* — discernment impossible.

³⁸¹ Melville, *Pierre*, 65.

³⁸² Melville, *Pierre*, 362.

³⁸³ Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 193-211.

³⁸⁴ Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 194, 211.

³⁸⁵ Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 229.

The problem with this lies not in Kearney's ethical appeal to 'diacritical hermeneutics', wherein the other is not 'so exterior or so unconscious . . . that it cannot be at least minimally interpreted by a self'. (In fact, his hermeneutical spirit resonates in my own project here.) Neither does he necessarily privilege the redemptive desire of wholeness and salvation; for him, rather, otherness is a debt 'inscribed within me as an uncontainable call from *beyond*'.³⁸⁶ The weakness, on the contrary, is most strikingly apparent in Kearney's odd claim that neither Plato's notion nor its psychoanalytic (and thus, implicitly, Schellingian) reappraisals, specifically those of Žižek and Julia Kristeva, regard *khora* 'as an explicit player in the religious drama.'³⁸⁷ Kearney's rationale for this assessment is based on the crucial difference between his privileged notion of a disembodied God who simply 'may be' and Schelling's dialectically embodied God who 'actually is'.³⁸⁸ For the former, God is Good *a priori*, and thus knowable only in a hermeneutic / interpretive engagement; whereas, for the latter, God is Good only in the primordial pronouncement of His Word that creates order out of chaos, and can thus only be known in and as a materialistic self-presentation, i.e., 'as God'.³⁸⁹ In this precise sense, God / the Absolute Subject, as motherly *khora*, gives birth to itself.

The effects of this on our thinking about sexual differentiation and gender are

³⁸⁶ Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 81.

³⁸⁷ Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, 204; cf. 194-97. On Schelling's profound influence on aspects of crucial aspects of psychoanalysis, especially his notion of the Unconscious and Uncanny, see Dale Snow, 'The Role of the Unconscious in Schelling's System of Transcendental Idealism' *Idealistic Studies* 19.3 (1989): 231-50. Cf., Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 96-97, 156.

³⁸⁸ Cf., Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

³⁸⁹ This is the important difference between God and humanity: that God, as evidenced by the unconscious deed of Creation, inevitably chooses the (expansive) Good, whereas humanity inevitably suffers the Fall (sin). As Žižek puts it, 'in both cases, the choice is simultaneously free and "forced"' (*The Indivisible Remainder*, 33).

by no means peripheral. This comes to light most clearly in the sharp sexual distinction Schelling seeks to make between his dialectical materialism and the strict Idealism of, for instance, Hegel.³⁹⁰ In this, he agrees with Friedrich Schlegel, his brother-in-law once removed, who writes in *Lucinde*: 'Mysteries are female, they like to veil themselves but still want to be seen and discovered.'³⁹¹ In effect, as has been well rehearsed by David Farrell Krell, both regard femininity as fullness *and* lack, fecundity *and* emasculation, the In-Itself of Absolute Freedom *and* the sign of necessary weakness. Femininity, as such, is regarded as a lack — i.e., inasmuch as it must be actualised, made real, in the (male) Word, it 'still wants to be seen' — *and* as the inaccessible ('veiled'), fecund Ground of its own being.

Schelling's point is easy to misunderstand. On the one hand, Žižek points out '[i]nsofar as "subject" is the Ground that asserts itself "as such", in the very medium of Existence, against every determinate form of actual existence, subject is a potentiality, never fully actualized, and the feminine Ground asserted against the "masculine" existence-logos.'³⁹² On the other hand, insofar as femininity can only ever be actualised / embodied, and thus desired, as that which is not itself, it is itself only in the masquerade of masculinity.³⁹³ In its disavowal of corporeal nature and desire for a

³⁹⁰ The following discussion is indebted to David Farrell Krell, 'The Crisis of Reason in the Nineteenth-Century: Schelling's Treatise on Human Freedom' in *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum: The First Ten Years* (eds. John Sallis, Giuseppina Moneta, and Jacques Taminiaux; Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 13-32; and David L. Clark, 'Mourning Becomes Theory: Schelling and the Absent Body of Philosophy' *Romantic Circles Praxis Series: Schelling and Romanticism* (June 2000): 16 pars. PURL: <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/schelling/clark/clark.html>

³⁹¹ Friedrich Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 253. For more on Schlegel's sense of femininity and its relation to that of Hegel's, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The Unpresentable' in *The Subject of Philosophy* (trans. Claudette Sartillot; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 116-57).

³⁹² Žižek, 'The Abyss of Freedom', 7-8.

³⁹³ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 158-67. Cf., Judith Butler's argument that desire, the very heart of this masquerade, is marked by a pursuit of mastery (through consumption or negation) of 'what is different or unassimilable in the Other', and is typically engendered as masculine ('Desire' in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* [eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995], 377, 379).

spiritual Absolute that reflects itself *back* to itself, Schelling reasons, Idealism renounces its own actualisation / embodiment.³⁹⁴ Consequently, as Krell points out, 'precisely when the (masculine) philosopher ignores (feminine) nature he sacrifices his own (masculine) nature'³⁹⁵ — i.e., by excluding the feminine potency of nature, the manly men of Idealism actually reveal themselves to be decidedly 'girly'.

Mark Lloyd Taylor illustrates this brilliantly in his analysis of gender and the theological roles of God and Jesus in *Moby-Dick*.³⁹⁶ Ishmael's narration, Taylor argues, blurs the distinction between Reformed Christianity and Emersonian Transcendentalism.

In the former, one has a God of absolute doing; in the latter, a God of absolute being. In both cases, the world and the human self cease to have any real meaning or value. The God of absolute doing and the God of absolute being collide, merge, and cancel each other, leaving the all-powerful, all-present, indefinite blackness that swims behind Moby Dick, both the whale and the book. This white God is existentially useless, for no inferences concerning human life can be drawn from such indifferent power and inscrutable presence.³⁹⁷

In Ahab's inscrutable God, for instance, there is but the inevitability of destruction, 'of being rammed or crushed or penetrated', whereas the Transcendentalist God of absolute being, that which preys on those who idealise the 'gentle, dreamy participation of the individual self in the divine, oceanic All as the source of human equality and the banishment of discord and evil', destroys by 'swallowing or dissolving or drowning the human self' in its awful reality.³⁹⁸ Although both forms of destruction in *Moby-Dick* are repeatedly identified as masculine, in contrast to the

³⁹⁴ Much of what I say here owes a debt, in spirit if not in word, to David Farrell Krell's discussion of hermaphroditism in Hegel. See Krell, *Contagion*, 126-44.

³⁹⁵ Krell, 'The Crisis of Reason', 18.

³⁹⁶ Mark Lloyd Taylor, 'Ishmael's (m)Other: Gender, Jesus, and God in Melville's "Moby-Dick"' *Journal of Religion* 72 (July 1992): 325-50.

³⁹⁷ Taylor, 'Ishmael's (m)Other', 346.

³⁹⁸ Taylor, 'Ishmael's (m)Other', 346.

stifling weakness of femininity of life on the shore, Taylor notes Ishmael's unwillingness to abide by either. As a matter of fact, in his transition to the sea, Ishmael is not so much moving away from women as he is, in the words of Jennifer Wing, 'delving deeper into his own struggle to create a definitive image of "woman" that like the 'pasteboard' mask does not exist.'³⁹⁹ That is to say, an unthinkable image of Woman as hermaphroditic 'Other-as-Same', as that which 'exists solely as a mirror to reflect back the image of the male self to himself.'⁴⁰⁰

The 'manly' description of the Idealist philosopher / seeker of truth in Schelling and Melville is once again not unlike the young protagonist of *Lucinde*, Julius, who in the act of writing sublimates (through what is described by Martha Helfer as 'an ideational erection'⁴⁰¹) his 'mental lust' and 'sensual spirituality' for his beloved Lucinde:

These words are dull and turbid. . . . A great future beckons me to rush deeper into infinity: each idea opens its womb and brings forth innumerable new births. The farthest reaches of unbridled lust and silent intimation exist simultaneously in me. I remember everything, even my sufferings, and all my former and future thoughts bestir themselves and arise against my will. Wild blood rages in my swollen arteries, my mouth thirsts for union, and my imagination, alternately choosing and rejecting among the many forms of joy, finds none in which desire can finally fulfil itself and be at peace at last.⁴⁰²

What at first appears as strict, 'straight' heterosexuality, however, is really anything

³⁹⁹ Jennifer Wing, 'Defining Women in *Moby-Dick*' in *Misogynism in Literature: Any Place, Any Time* (ed. Britta Zangen; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004), 122.

⁴⁰⁰ Taylor, 'Ishmael's (m)Other', 348 (emphasis mine). Taylor regards the presence of Jesus in *Moby-Dick* as an alternative to the traditional male-female binary. Nevertheless, his interpretation of what this means is not radical enough to be adequate for our purposes here. Taylor is content that this Jesus remain 'subversive of the God of absolute power and absolute presence' by playing the functional role of 'Other-as-Same'; but, in truth, he is 'truly other, never merely our reflection, and thus never really Other, never Separated from us, since she is beyond the structures that constitute such reflectivity and separation in the first place' (350). Ultimately, Taylor cannot submit to the scandalous implications of the dialectically materialistic Christ, whose functional, subversive role cannot be differentiated from his being as such.

⁴⁰¹ Martha B. Helfer, "'Confessions of an Improper Man": Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde*' in *Outing Goethe and His Age* (ed. Alice A. Kuzniar; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 177.

⁴⁰² Schlegel, *Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 46-47.

but. Julius' 'autoerotic narcissism' is unabashed.⁴⁰³ 'I'm not afraid to admire and love myself in such a mirror [i.e., Lucinde]. Only here do I see myself complete and harmonious, or rather, see all of humanity in me and in you.'⁴⁰⁴ Helfer draws our attention to a surprisingly stark homoeroticism that runs throughout *Lucinde*, where Julius continually wishes, in both senses of the phrase, *to find himself inside the female*:⁴⁰⁵

[H]is narcissism is an expression of the self-positing subject, 'I am I'; he overcomes the male subject's limitations both by defining itself homoerotically as a woman and by extending his self-love to Lucinde, hence rewriting the male subject's self-positing as 'I am woman'. This homoerotic substitution . . . allows Julius to conclude 'I am mother', therefore 'I am poet' and 'I can define myself as poesy'. . . . His vicarious appropriation of Lucinde's maternal status then allows him to complete his apprenticeship with the statement that just as his painting has reached perfection, his life has become 'a created story', a 'work of art': in the self-reflexive act of writing his autobiography, Julius actually transforms himself into poesy.⁴⁰⁶

In his provocative 'camp reading' of *Pierre*, James Creech finds Pierre's apparently heterosexual, incestuous relationship with Isabel following a similar path.⁴⁰⁷ From the beginning of the novel, Creech notes, Pierre proleptically mourns for the sister he never had,⁴⁰⁸ when in fact his life's real loss was that of his father

⁴⁰³ Helfer, "'Confessions of an Improper Man'", 177.

⁴⁰⁴ Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 46.

⁴⁰⁵ 'Almost paradoxically, Julius' self-love becomes synonymous with homoeroticism when he engages in heterosexual intercourse with Lucinde' (Helfer, "'Confessions of an Improper Man'", 189). For a similar reading of Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, see Alice A. Kuzniar, 'Labor Pains: Romantic Theories of Creativity and Gender' in *The Spirit of Poesy: Essays on Jewish and German Literature and Thought in Honor of Géza von Molnár* (eds. Richard Block and Peter Fenves: Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 74-88.

⁴⁰⁶ Helfer, "'Confessions of an Improper Man'", 190.

⁴⁰⁷ James Creech, *Closet Writing / Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's Pierre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 114-18.

⁴⁰⁸ Cf., 'So perfect to Pierre had long seemed the illuminated scroll of his life thus far, that only hiatus was discoverable by him in that sweetly-writ manuscript. A sister had been omitted from the text. He mourned that so delicious a feeling as fraternal love had been denied him' (Melville, *Pierre*, 11).

when he was twelve.⁴⁰⁹ Pierre's 'strange yearning for a sister', the narrator suggests,

had part of its origin in that still stranger feeling of loneliness he sometimes experienced, as not only the solitary head of his family, but the only surnamed male Glinding extant. A powerful and populous family had by degrees run off into the female branches; so that Pierre found himself surrounded by numerous kinsmen and kinswomen, yet companioned by no surnamed Glinding, but the duplicate one reflected to him in the mirror.⁴¹⁰

Creech does not fail to notice that Pierre's desire for a sister is built around his desire for a male companion.⁴¹¹ As such, 'homosexuality is explored from the perverse perspective of its impossible place, and thus its closeted space, within the still-sacred configuration of the family.'⁴¹²

Nevertheless, by the end of both *Lucinde* and *Pierre*, heterosexuality overcomes the seductive force of homoerotic self-creation / self-presentation. Because men are obviously not women and cannot bear children, Schlegel's *Bildungsroman* concludes, the narcissism of homoeroticism leaves one utterly alone and barren.⁴¹³ For his part, too, Melville was deeply aware (if subtly critical) of societal norms and institutions, and ultimately serves up in *Pierre* a dark, cautionary

⁴⁰⁹ Creech, *Closet Writing*, 115-16.

⁴¹⁰ Melville, *Pierre*, 12.

⁴¹¹ Creech's reading ultimately assumes Melville's own repressed incestuous desire and its origin in the desire for homosexual incest. This argument, however, is neither necessary nor assumed in my development here. For other accounts of homosexuality in *Pierre*, see Henry A. Murray, Introduction to *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*, by Herman Melville (New York: Hendricks House, 1949), xci-xcii; John D. Seelye, "'Ungraspable Phantom' Reflections of Hawthorne in *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*", *Studies in the Novel* 1 (Winter 1969): 436-43.

⁴¹² Creech, *Closet Writing*, 120. Cf., 'The straight mind continues to affirm that incest, and not homosexuality represents its major interdiction. Thus, when thought by the straight mind, homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality' (Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* [Boston: Beacon, 1992], 28).

⁴¹³ Compare to Schelling's discussion of 'sexless bees' in the university: 'Whatever cannot be incorporated into this active, living whole [i.e., the ideal university] is dead matter to be eliminated sooner or later – such is the law of all living organisms. The fact is, there are too many sexless bees in the hive of the sciences, and since they cannot be productive, they merely keep reproducing their own spiritual barrenness in the form of inorganic excretions. (F. W. J. Schelling, *On University Studies* [trans. E.S. Morgan; ed. Norbert Guterman; Athens, Oh.: Ohio University Press, 1966], 11. (Qtd. Clark, 'Mourning Becomes Theory', n. 6)

tale of the disembodied, solipsistic end of finally 'finding' the truth. Indeed, in a perverse twist of ambiguous morality, Pierre's innocence — i.e., his desire to follow his heart, to find and assert the truth of himself — ultimately incites moral indignation, social and familial exile, economic downfall, professional failure, and even death.⁴¹⁴

The difficult point being made here is that because the feminine is, in effect, the subject *par excellence*, the Absolute Ground from which the subjective decision to begin emerges, she has never been spoken as such. For, as Schelling writes:

Uninhibited being is always that which does not know itself; as soon as it becomes an object to itself it is also already inhibited. Apply these remarks to the issue in hand and the subject is, in its pure substantiality, *as nothing* — completely devoid of attributes — it is until now only Itself, and thus, as such, a complete freedom from all being and against all being (*Seyn*); but it inescapably attracts itself [*sich anzieht*, with the sense of 'putting on' and thus being inauthentic, and of 'drawing itself to' itself]. . . . But the subject cannot grasp itself *as what it is*, for precisely in attracting itself (*im sich Anziehen*) it *becomes* an other, this is the basic contradiction, we can say the misfortune, in all being — for either it *leaves* itself, then it is as nothing, or it attracts itself, then it is an other and not identical with itself.⁴¹⁵

Which is to say, then, in a crucial supplement to its presentation in Plato, the 'uninhibited ground' / motherly *khora* can only ever be when as 'characterized by an original "masquerade", in so far as all her features are artificially "put on".⁴¹⁶ This is not, though, a case of simple male chauvinism. Rather, what we find in Schelling and Melville is the primordially of duplicitous self-characterisation — of the masquerade *par excellence*. Consequently, from the emergence of 'straight' males like Pierre, who feminise themselves in the course of their male, heterosexual pursuits, to the

⁴¹⁴ Creech, *Closet Writing*, 122-23. For a slightly different perspective, focusing on Pierre's inability to 'fulfill the promise of his manhood', see Garcia, *Mothers and Others*, 80-86.

⁴¹⁵ Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy: Munich Lectures [ca. 1833-1834]* (trans. Andrew Bowie; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 115-16.

⁴¹⁶ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 160.

masculine characterisation of femininity as 'Other' and 'veiled', the modern Subject is marked as such by its constitutive contingency and artifice.⁴¹⁷

As we will see in Chapter Four, it is precisely in his recognition of the inherent duplicity of the Subject's search for the truth about itself that Melville most fully embodies the aesthetic vitality and intensity immanent to theological thinking. My contention will be that the full, most radical implications of the apocalypticism of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* are fully realised only in his final novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. As we will see, in this Masquerade all self-presentation is as though a disguise, but one that conceals no hidden truth or identity. In Melville's Masquerade, we find a theological thinking attuned to the *creative* duplicity of self-presentation, whereby the 'apocalypse of self' immanent to self-presentation in his earlier novels carries with it the potential of a *self-becoming* that is a *self-creation*. Here, the radical theological vision of Melville becomes-itself in and as the intensity of an aesthetico-theological awareness of an immanent freedom to make all things new.

⁴¹⁷ In this way, Žižek adds, the female is, in fact, 'more subject than man, since according to Schelling, what ultimately characterizes the subject is this very radical contingency and artificiality of her every positive feature, that is, the fact that 'she' in herself is a pure void that cannot be identified with any of these features' (*The Indivisible Remainder*, 160-61).

CHAPTER FOUR:
MELVILLE AND AESTHETIC THEOLOGY

1. Secrecy and Self-Becoming

Enveloped in its pseudonyms, plagiarism, and hoaxes, Melville's fiction, from its beginning to its end, bears the dubious marks of that which has secrets to tell and faces to disclose. His is, we have seen in the previous chapters, something like a puppet-show proscenium, a performance with strings attached; or, more fittingly, the secretive silence of a masquerade.

Before fully considering the theological implications of Melville's Masquerade, though, it is important also to recall Jacques Derrida's famous discussion of secrecy, in all its ambiguity, in his essay '*Dénégations: Comment ne pas parler*' [Denials: How to Avoid Speaking].⁴¹⁸ Here Derrida asks: 'How not to divulge a secret? How to avoid saying or speaking?'⁴¹⁹ That is to say, how does one speak a secret in such a way that it maintains its secrecy? A secret does not remain a secret as such if it is untold; and yet the condition of its possibility, i.e., the telling of the secret, undermines its secrecy. In light of his essay's title, what exactly is Derrida trying to 'deny'? Indeed, is he denying anything at all?

As Mark C. Taylor points out, perhaps the problem is in the translation.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' in *Derrida and Negative Theology* (eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay; trans. Ken Frieden; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1992), 73-142.

⁴¹⁹ Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', 94.

⁴²⁰ For Derrida, what isn't a problem of translation? Philosophy is, he contends 'the fixation of a certain concept and *project of translation*. . . . What does philosophy say? What does the philosopher say when he is being a philosopher? He says: What matters is truth or meaning, and since meaning is before or beyond language, it follows that it is translatable. Meaning has the commanding role, and consequently one must be able to fix its univocality or, in any case, to master its plurivocality. If this plurivocality can be mastered, then translation, understood as the transport of a semantic content into another signifying form, is possible. There is no philosophy unless translation in this latter sense is possible' (Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida* [ed. Christie V. McDonald; trans. Peggy Kamuf; New York: Schocken Books, 1985], 120) (emphasis mine).

Dénégations, Taylor explains, is also the French translation of Freud's *Verneinung*, which is typically translated into English as 'negation'. The latter translation, however, is also problematic because *Verneinung* suggests *both* the presence and absence of negation, or 'an affirmation that is a negation and a negation that is an affirmation'.⁴²¹ Consequently, Taylor is not alone in his contention that it might be better to follow the French translation and render it simply 'denegations'.⁴²²

To de-negate is to un-negate, a peculiarity that in his essay Derrida argues differentiates it from the implicit apophasis of 'negative theology'. His point is that we are left confounded by the 'impossibility' of the secret. It is, on the one hand, that which cannot be spoken if it is to remain a secret; and yet, on the other hand, without it having always already been spoken, i.e., mediated by language *as a secret*, there is no secret to keep. As such, for Derrida, the final / phenomenological truth of the secret effectively annuls the secret, unsaying all saying by rendering all spaces empty and all words hollow.⁴²³ In this, Derrida locates his provocatively theological point:

[A]t the moment when the question 'How to avoid speaking' arises, it is already too late. There was no longer any question of not speaking. Language has started without us, in us, and before us. This is what theology calls God, and it is necessary, it will have been necessary to speak. This 'it is necessary' (*il faut*) is both the trace of undeniable necessity — which is another way of saying that one cannot avoid denying it, one can only deny it — and of a past injunction. Always already past, hence without a past present. Indeed, it must have been possible to speak in order to allow the question 'How to avoid

⁴²¹ Mark Taylor, *Notes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 36.

⁴²² Cf., Jean-Luc Marion: 'I have chosen to render the French "Dénégations" as "Denegations" rather than "Denials" because this seems to better capture the sense intended by the author of the present study; namely, it is not simply a matter of denying that one, be it deconstruction or "negative theology", does something, be it predicates God or "negative theology"; rather, at issue is whether or not in claiming not to speak about X, or in denying that they do Y, negative theology and/or deconstruction are in fact speaking about X, doing Y' (Jean-Luc Marion, 'In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of "Negative Theology"' in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* [ed. John D. Caputo and Robert Scanlon; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999], 48-49 n. 7).

⁴²³ Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 42; see also Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (trans. Barbara Johnson; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 168.

speaking?' to arise. Having come from the past, language before language, a past that was never present and yet remains unforgettable — this 'it is necessary' thus seems to beckon toward the event of an order or of a promise that does not belong to what one currently calls history; the discourse of history or the history of discourse.⁴²⁴

Appropriate to my discussion in this chapter, therefore, Derrida ultimately ends up critiquing onto-theology, specifically negative theology, but only by attempting to avoid doing so.

Ultimately, however, Derrida's notion of the secret as 'impossible' is weakened by the disembodied status of his phenomenological requirements, in a manner not unlike Schelling's criticism of Idealism. For the more strictly materialistic Melville, though, where there is an inequality of knowledge between two or more parties, there is a secret. Such is the difference between playing a game and being played for the fool. As we have seen in the previous chapters, even the complex masquerade of subjective consciousness Melville enacts in his novels does not preclude the *happening* (or becoming) of cognition and sensibility. On the contrary, the character 'I' emerges as the unavoidable, retroactive agent of its own self-characterisation. We are, in the words of Philip Goodchild, who is drawing deeply from Gilles Deleuze,

already immersed in fields of subjectivity, where thoughts and passions are shaped by dominant strategies of subjectification; we are immersed in fields of signification, where meanings are regulated by hegemonic discourses; and we are immersed in fields of organization, where segments of bodies and materials are distributed through machinic interactions with segments of discourse.⁴²⁵

In short, Melville's masquerade of subjective consciousness is a giving and a taking, truth and lie, disclosure and duplicity. Moreover, in agreement with Derrida, it is thus

⁴²⁴ Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', 99.

⁴²⁵ Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 159; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. Brian Massumi; London: Athlone, 1988), 159.

closely parallel to the character, i.e. the being-itself, of theology, and thus the condition of confidence and faith in others, in oneself, and in one's God. Contra Derrida, though, it is also the immanent, materialistic condition of theology's self-characterisation / self-becoming, whose aesthetic potency and truth is precisely the intensity of its creative potential to make all things new.⁴²⁶

Such is, I wish to suggest, the aesthetico-theological impulse that propels the steamship *Fidèle* down the Mississippi River in Melville's final novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, towards the city of the American Mardi Gras, New Orleans. The novel begins on April Fool's Day, with a blindingly white stranger boarding the *Fidèle*, and ends in an uncertain, by no means absolute darkness, as the steamer's final candle is snuffed out for the evening. But this is a day in the life of a black and white world only insofar as it arises from Melville's paper and pen. As its seemingly random episodes of peddlers and beggars of uncertain character and intent accumulate, one's confidence is strained. That is to say, although Melville's novel ostensibly pulls the wool over its readers' eyes, with nothing ever fully denied or affirmed, completely stable or unstable, his reader is never entirely sure who the joke is on, or whether there is in fact a joke at all. In this way, Melville takes on the equivocal character of character itself: that of the nature of his novel, of himself as an author, as well as that of those on board his fictional vessel. What one discovers in the midst of the novel's multifaceted irony and reflective vertigo is that the very mask Melville had self-consciously suffered behind for years is now shared by his reader.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁶ Cf., 'From "impossible TO HAPPEN" we thus pass to "the impossible HAPPENS"', Žižek pronounces. 'This, and not the structural obstacle forever deferring the final resolution, is the most difficult thing to accept' (Žižek, *On Belief*, 84).

⁴²⁷ See Baym, 'Melville's Quarrel with Fiction', 917-918. In her essay on its 'unreadability', Elizabeth Renker's summation of *The Confidence-Man's* place in Melville's oeuvre is apt: '*The Confidence-Man* . . . presents a fundamental reconception of the author's relation to his text and, in turn, to his readers. Melville no longer burns, with Ahab, to strike through the mask of the dead, blind

Though loving his novel and his role as its author, as we saw in 'Hawthorne and His Mosses', Melville now would set both adrift down the mighty Mississippi River, and neither it nor his contemporary readers would ever return. Indeed, with *The Confidence-Man* Melville effectively ends his professional writing career, notwithstanding the novel's final words: 'Something further may follow of this Masquerade.'⁴²⁸

In Melville's *Masquerade*, similar in some ways to Derrida's analysis of the secret, we find asked the all-too-often neglected question of a truly modern theology: *What is the character of theology?* Such a question, of course, is riddled by its equivocality, for the 'of' may just as well be objective as subjective genitive. Is this the question asked of theology, or is it the question theology asks? When one dares to think about the character of theology *theologically*, a radically 'transcendental' analysis in so far as we are thinking about the beginnings and endings that condition our understanding of subjectivity and objectivity, and thus when the questions we ask in and of this enquiry proliferate beyond their neo-Platonic / Kantian tethers, how do we begin at all?⁴²⁹ Divorced from its metaphysical stability, the question of theology functions like a Melvillian masquerade of faith, and can only ever beg to be asked

wall; instead, he turns the mask on a bewildered reader and delights in its obscuring powers' ("A _____!": Unreadability in *The Confidence-Man*' in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville* [ed. Robert S. Levine; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 116-17).

⁴²⁸ Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, 251. For a few commentators, Melville's esoteric conclusion suggests his hope to write a sequel. See Howard Horsford, 'Evidence of Melville's Plan for a Sequel to *The Confidence-Man*' *American Literature* 24 (March 1952): 85-89.

⁴²⁹ Immanuel Kant defines the 'Transcendental Analytic' in the First Critique as 'the hitherto rarely attempted *dissection of the faculty of the understanding* itself, in order to investigate the possibility of concepts *a priori* by looking for them in the understanding alone, as their birthplace, and by analysing the pure use of this faculty. This is the proper task of a transcendental philosophy' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 103 [A65-66; B90-91]). In other words, the analysis of the mind's necessarily unifying contribution to the intelligibility of sensual experience. Kant distinguishes this from the Transcendental Aesthetic, which concerns itself with the *a priori* conditions of sensation (i.e. time and space), and the Transcendental Dialectic, whose object is the unconditioned metaphysical realities outside 'pure' human sensation, experience, and understanding (i.e. the *noumena* — God, the world, the Self).

again. Such is, we might suggest, the dilemma of theological reflection's creative consideration of its problematic beginning: i.e., it finds itself, like the early German Romantics mentioned above, beginning in the middle, 'like an epic poem'.⁴³⁰ But, as we will see below, theology is neither stymied nor rendered absolutely (or mystically) silent in the face of its impossible task; it is, on the contrary, radically opened to the creative awareness and freedom of theology speaking-itself / becoming-itself.

2. *The Character of The Confidence-Man*

For a book so decisively rejected by readers, the earliest English reviews of *The Confidence-Man* were actually not as negative as one might imagine. The *Athenaeum*, for instance, pronounced it 'full of thought, conceit, and fancy, of affection and originality', calling Melville the master of his 'luxuriously picturesque' narrative.⁴³¹ The *Leader*, though not as lavish in its praise, regarded the book as charming and original, due to 'its constant flow of descriptions, character-sketching, and dialogue, deeply toned and skilfully contrasted'.⁴³² The *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* eagerly awaited the story's continuation, hailing 'the first part' as a 'remarkable work', and praised Melville as the quintessence of American writing.⁴³³

Melville's countrymen, however, were neither as enthusiastic nor as thoughtful in their assessments. Indeed, all but three of the reviews are fewer than three sentences long, while the rest seem to have been based upon the reading of other reviews rather than the book itself. For example, one month after the Boston *Puritan Recorder* suggested that the book was a possible cure for dyspeptics, the Newark

⁴³⁰ Schlegel, 'Lucinde' and the Fragments, 171 [*Athenaeum* Fragment 84].

⁴³¹ Branch, *Melville*, 371-72.

⁴³² Branch, *Melville*, 372-73.

⁴³³ Branch, *Melville*, 385-86.

Daily Advertiser suspiciously suggested that Melville himself had dyspepsia when he wrote it. According to Philadelphia's *North American*, actually finishing the book is regarded as the equivalent of 'being choked off . . . like the audience of a Turkish story teller'.⁴³⁴ And *The Cincinnati Enquirer* minces no words nor pulls any punches:

[Melville's] last production, "The Confidence Man," is one of the dullest and most dismally monotonous books we remember to have read, and it has been our unavoidable misfortune to peruse, in the fulfillment of journalistic duty, a number of volumes through, which nothing but a sense of obligation would have sustained us. "Typee," one of, if not the first of his works, is the best, and "The Confidence Man" the last, decidedly the worst. So Mr. M's authorship is toward the nadir rather than the zenith, and he has been progressing in the form of an inverted climax.⁴³⁵

If the book's English and American reviews were a mixed bag, its receipts certainly were not. Of the one thousand copies published in England, only 343 were sold during the first fifteen months. After two years, 386 copies were sold, thirty-two presented (three to Melville), sixty-six disposed of at a trade sale, and 516 sold as scrap paper — and even then its English publisher did not break even.⁴³⁶ In America, however, things were even direr. Less than a month after cheekily releasing *The Confidence-Man* on April Fool's Day in 1857, its American publisher, Dix, Edwards, & Co., went out of business, taking with it what little chance of success the novel ever had.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁴ Branch, *et al.*, 'Historical Note', 319. The three most complete sources of reviews are Branch's *Melville*, 369-87 and Hetherington's *Melville's Reviewers*, 255-64.

⁴³⁵ Hershel Parker, ed., 'Reviews' in *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*, by Herman Melville (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971), 279.

⁴³⁶ For the most thorough research on publishing records in England, see Branch, *et al.*, 'Historical Note', 317. In an interesting note that I have not seen corroborated anywhere else, the editors of this edition note: 'These figures account for the full 1,000, but after the Longman's buildings in Paternoster Row were burned down in 1861 someone added a memorandum to the closed-out ledger: "6 Copies cl[oth] Burnt." If these were not phantom copies, they had at least an apter fate than the wasted quires — six heretical volumes consumed in flames.'

⁴³⁷ Elizabeth Foster cites the 'gathering financial panic of 1857' as the reason for the firm's dissolving; whereas John Seelye, more provocatively, and perhaps more fittingly, suggests it was 'due to the finagling of one of the partners'. See her Introduction to *The Confidence-Man* (1954), xxxi; and

The revival of interest in Melville that began in the 1920s did very little at first to change the book's fortunes. For his first biographer, Raymond Weaver, it was a 'posthumous work';⁴³⁸ for John Freeman, not only was it 'negligible in quality' and a 'failure in intelligence', but it was also 'an abortion'.⁴³⁹ Once again, as it were, Melville is unable to escape the prematurity of death.⁴⁴⁰ Indeed, if Melville was dead before his time, for Newton Arvin he most likely was also damned, for he had penned 'one of the most *infidel* books ever written by an American; one of the most completely nihilistic, morally and metaphysically.'⁴⁴¹ And so went the funeral march of critical comments for at least half of the twentieth-century.

Richard Chase, in his simply titled *Herman Melville*, almost single-handedly changed the course of Melville's sunken ship of a novel. According to Chase, *The Confidence-Man* was unquestionably Melville's 'second best book' (just behind *Moby-Dick*), for 'more than any of his other writings, it establishes Melville's claim to moral intelligence'.⁴⁴² Chase's assessment subsequently proved to be a rallying cry for a new generation of scholars in the last half of the twentieth century who sought to vindicate

John Seelye, Introduction to *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, by Herman Melville (San Francisco: Chandler, 1968), xiv.

⁴³⁸ Raymond Weaver, *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* (New York: George H. Doran, 1921), 348. Fourteen years hindsight would do little to change Weaver's opinion of the book, as he then regarded it as an instance of Melville's 'perverse self-indulgence of the "spontaneous Me"' (Introduction to *Journal up the Straits: Oct. 11, 1856 - May 5, 1857* [New York: The Colophon, 1935], xx.).

⁴³⁹ John Freeman, *Herman Melville* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 62, 141. One year later, Van Wyck Brooks would echo Freeman, calling the book 'an abortion . . . broken off in the middle, apparently, but not before the author has lost the thread of his original idea', which is nothing less than the 'product of premature artistic senility' (*Emerson and Others* [London: J. Cape, 1927], 177-79).

⁴⁴⁰ Interestingly, the pessimism of these early critics may be more understandable than one today might wish to credit it. After all, as late as 1953 the novel had yet to be reprinted in America, and only once in London, in 1923, as Volume XII of in the Constable Edition of Melville's *Works*.

⁴⁴¹ Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (London: Methuen & Co., 1950), 250-51.

⁴⁴² Richard Chase, *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 185, 205.

the novel's place in America's literary canon.⁴⁴³

No sooner was *The Confidence-Man* highly valued as an important piece of literature, and thus worthy of academic appreciation, than this value was assessed and declared most fervently by a 'standard line' of scholarship, led by its doyenne Elizabeth Foster. Hershel Parker first invoked this label to describe those like himself who subscribe to Foster's assumption 'that Melville tried to write a coherent book . . . and [who] look for interpretations that satisfy every detail of the text and fit into a self-consistent whole'.⁴⁴⁴ While the editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition, which has been generally considered the authoritative edition of the text since its publication in 1984, attempt to represent faithfully the divergent, non-standard lines of interpretation that have arisen since the late 1960s, they remain openly whimsical about the good old days. 'The single most important study to date is that of Elizabeth S. Foster, in the comprehensive introduction and notes to her 1954 Hendricks House edition', they conclude, just before drawing a strict line of distinction between the 'scholarship' of old and the 'critical commentary' that has since tended to marginalize Foster's commentary.⁴⁴⁵

Clearly, for Melville's contemporaries as much as his modern commentators, *The Confidence-Man* is many things to many different people. For some of its earliest critics, it was not even a novel. 'A novel it is not', the *Literary Gazette* wryly notes,

unless a novel means forty-five conversations held on board a steamer, conducted by personages who might pass for the errata of creation, and so far resembling the Dialogues of Plato as to be undoubted Greek to

⁴⁴³ The apotheosis of this contemporary reassessment is likely that of Roelof Overmeer, who asserts without any hint of apparent hyperbole that *The Confidence-Man* is 'a novel whose modernity no twentieth-century novelist has yet surpassed' ('"Something Further": *The Confidence Man* and Writing as Disinterested Act' *Etudes de Lettres* 4 [1987]: 43).

⁴⁴⁴ Foster, Introduction to *The Confidence-Man* (1954), xlvi; cf., Parker, Foreword to *The Confidence-Man* (1971), ix.

⁴⁴⁵ Branch, et al., 'Historical Note', 335.

ordinary men.⁴⁴⁶

The reviewer for London's *Illustrated Times* sums up the only real agreement to which most of the novel's readers could come, that is, that they found it incoherent and unreadable. The frustration of the reviewer in London's *Illustrated Times*, for example, is palpable:

We can make nothing of this masquerade, which, indeed, savours very much of a mystification. . . . After reading the work forwards for twelve chapters and backwards for five, we attacked it in the middle, gnawing at it like Rabelais's dog at the bone, in the hopes of extracting something from it at last. But the book is without form and void.⁴⁴⁷

The temptation of the contemporary reader of *The Confidence-Man*, however, is to conclude much the same about the modern scholarship and criticism that now surrounds the novel. Like many works that have been deemed 'important' or 'canonical', most of the contemporary scholarship on *The Confidence-Man* is in fact about the scholarship itself.⁴⁴⁸ This, however, is hardly surprising, and indeed perhaps ultimately even appropriate, for as William Ramsey notes, though 'Melville failed to find a popular 'audience' for the book . . . he succeeded cleverly in capturing multiple and divergent "audiences". . . . [W]hat Melville's book has to say to us is what we say about it.'⁴⁴⁹ Which is to say, whatever one brings to Melville's most duplicitous of

⁴⁴⁶ Branch, *Melville*, 373.

⁴⁴⁷ Branch, *Melville*, 379, 380. The decidedly mixed review in *Mrs. Stephens' New Monthly Magazine* would also make use of this image of a confused beginning and ending, and come to a very similar conclusion: 'The book ends where it begins. You might, without sensible inconvenience, read it backwards. You are simply promised in the last line, that something further shall be heard of the hero; until which consummation, the riddle must continue to puzzle you unsolved' (384). Elizabeth Foster, too, notes the same thing, but regards it as a positive tautology. See her Introduction to *The Confidence-Man* (1954), xci-xcii. For more on Melville and tautology, see Renker, *Strike Through the Mask*, 178-99.

⁴⁴⁸ For two of the most explicit examples of this, see Lawrence Grauman, Jr., 'Suggestions on the Future of *The Confidence-Man*' *Papers on English Language and Literature* 1 (Summer 1965): 241-49; and Marc Dolan, 'Four Faces of the Confidence Man: An Academic Blind Man's Zoo' *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 39 (2nd and 3rd Quarter 1993): 133-60.

⁴⁴⁹ William M. Ramsey, 'Audiences of *The Confidence-Man*: Consensus versus Interpretative Communities' *Melville Society Extracts* 72 (February 1988): 9.

texts ultimately determines what one finds there.

Ramsey's observation in his short article has more critical importance than he likely intended. By privileging the reader's observations, assumptions, and expectations about the book, the priority of the most significant interpretive questions is reversed. In a traditional mystery novel, for instance, the operative question is 'Who did it?' The mystery is not the nature of the crime, be it murder or theft or otherwise, but the identity of he or she who committed the act. Here, the author and/or narrator have privileged information that the reader is attempting to glean by a careful reading. Only from the identity is it finally possible to know the true nature of the crime, the criminal, and the mystery itself — i.e., was the crime that of passion, of revenge; how did the criminal hide his or tracks; etc.? When priority is switched to the reader, though, so too is the priority of the questions switched. No longer is the secret information of an author or narrator primary; the onus, rather, is on the reader to locate the nature of the mystery itself, that is, whether and/or where there is a mystery at all. With regard to *The Confidence-Man*, then, the operative question is no longer 'Who is the Confidence Man?' but 'What is the Confidence Man?'

As already noted, Ramsey's analysis itself does not explore the critical significance of his observation. Far more adequate to the task are the respective readings of Roelof Overmeer and Edward Mitchell.⁴⁵⁰ For Overmeer, the Confidence Man is identified as such — if not wholly identified 'as whom' — by the use of duplicitous stratagems, in which 'speech acts are strategies of a role'.⁴⁵¹ In this way,

⁴⁵⁰ Overmeer, "'Something Further'", 43-53; Edward Mitchell, 'From Action to Essence: Some Notes on the Structure of Melville's *The Confidence-Man*' *American Literature* 40 (March 1968): 27-37. For variations on this emphasis see Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 207-211; John Wenke, *Melville's Muse: Literary Creation and the Forms of Philosophical Fiction* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1995), 205-16.

⁴⁵¹ Overmeer, 'Something Further', 51.

and much in keeping with the standard line interpretation, Overmeer identifies as swindlers a variety of characters from the first half of the novel, regarding each as 'avatars of the Confidence Man'. Such, then, is the power of the Confidence Man, that he alone recognises that language is always strategic, and not the representation of an essence.⁴⁵² Overmeer writes:

That which makes the Confidence Man a sign: his name, his dress, his speech, his actions, never give his interlocuter access to a knowledge of how he will act. He, on the contrary, once he has found out what a prospective victim takes himself to be a sign of, knows exactly what it will take to have him or her act in the way that he desires, and he plans his strategy accordingly. . . . The different avatars of the Confidence Man are signs whose appearances do not correspond to an essence but to a strategy; his victims, on the other hand, are all appearances from which it may be deduced what they think their essence is.⁴⁵³

Inasmuch as these stratagems and signs can be isolated as such, and thus make it possible to identify the different appearances of the Confidence Man, Overmeer very subtly maintains a significant level of characteristic stability in spite of his objections to isolating a correspondent essence.

For Edward Mitchell, too, 'the attempt to define or describe the confidence men, or their victims either for that matter, in terms of their essence is an impossibility in this novel.'⁴⁵⁴ Rather, he continues, there are two types of characters in *The Confidence-Man*, confidence men and victims, and they are distinguishable only in terms of their actions; that is to say, there is 'constancy of activity rather than constancy of character'⁴⁵⁵ On the one hand, anyone who puts confidence in another

⁴⁵² 'This is why', Overmeer concludes, 'in the novel he [the Confidence Man] is often likened to the serpent of the allegory, for his role is also a conscious-creating role' ('Something Further', 51). For three often neglected but profound readings in this vein see R. W. B. Lewis, Afterword to *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (New York: Signet, 1964), 261-76; Wadlington, *The Confidence Game in American Literature*, 137-70.

⁴⁵³ Overmeer, 'Something Further', 49-50.

⁴⁵⁴ Mitchell, 'From Action to Essence', 32.

⁴⁵⁵ Mitchell, 'From Action to Essence', 36.

person is a potential victim; on the other hand, anyone who solicits confidence from another is a potential confidence man.⁴⁵⁶ Moreover, inasmuch as 'essence is determined by action' and the social exchange of confidence is rarely one-directional, the roles of conman and victim are interchangeable.

In Melville's novel we see this most clearly in the example of the ostensibly pure-hearted country merchant, Henry Roberts. In Chapter Four, a mournful-looking stranger with a long weed in his hat approaches Roberts, insisting that he is an old acquaintance.

'Can I be so changed? Look at me. Or is it I who am mistaken? — Are you not, sir, Henry Roberts, forwarding merchant, of Wheeling, Virginia? Pray, now, if you use the advertisement of business cards, and happen to have one with you, just look at it, and see whether you are not the man I take you for.'

'Why', a bit chafed, perhaps, 'I hope I know myself.'

'And yet self-knowledge is thought by some not so easy. Who knows, my dear sir, but for a time you may have taken yourself for somebody else? Stranger things have happened.'

The good merchant stared.

'To come to particulars, my dear sir, I met you, now some six years back, at Brade Brothers & Co.'s office, I think. I was travelling for a Philadelphia house. The senior Brade introduced us, you remember; some business-chat followed, then you forced me home with you to a family tea, and a family time we had. Have you forgotten about the urn, and what I said about Werter's Charlotte, and the bread and butter, and that capital story you told of the large loaf. A hundred times since, I have laughed over it. At least you must recall my name — Ringman, John Ringman.'

'Large loaf? Invited you to tea? Ringman? Ringman? Ring? Ring?'

'Ah sir', sadly smiling, 'don't ring the changes that way. I see you have a faithless memory, Mr. Roberts. But trust in the faithfulness of mine.'⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁶ Mitchell, 'From Action to Essence', 33.

⁴⁵⁷ Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 19.

As soon as Roberts hesitatingly trusts the memory of Ringman over his own, however, thus aligning him squarely within Mitchell's designation above as 'potential victim', the roles are seemingly reversed. Seeing that Roberts is not at all comfortable with his request for a shilling, Ringman reverses the roles and begs for patience and a friend in whom he might confide his sorrowful state:

'For God's sake don't leave me. I have something on my heart — on my heart. Under deplorable circumstances thrown among strangers, utter strangers. *I want a friend in whom I may confide.* Yours, Mr. Roberts, is almost the first known face I've seen for many weeks. . . . I need not say, sir, how it cuts me to the soul, to follow up a social salutation with such words as have just been mine. I know that I jeopardize your good opinion. But I can't help it: necessity knows no law, and heeds no risk.'⁴⁵⁸

Of course, in keeping with the reflective complexity of *The Confidence-Man*, the story of Ringman's plight itself can be accepted only through faith. It is, after all, not actually narrated for the reader at all until Chapter Twelve, and even then only after certain details have been filled in for Roberts by yet another character (the 'man in the gray coat' introduced in Chapter Six, who, according to the standard-line interpretation, may be the *same* character as Ringman in disguise) seeking the confidence and charity of other passengers on behalf of widows and orphans of the Seminole Indian tribe.⁴⁵⁹ Nevertheless, this serves only to strengthen Mitchell's point

⁴⁵⁸ Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 21. (emphasis mine)

⁴⁵⁹ Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 60-63. As noted above with regard to the reading of Overmeer, the novel's eponymous Confidence Man is traditionally regarded as appearing in a variety of avatars, most of who are foreshadowed in Chapter Three by the crippled beggar, Black Guinea. When accused of faking his deformity for the sake of procuring the charity of others, Guinea affirms his innocence by appealing to the testimony of other passengers, should they find them on board:

'Oh yes, oh yes, dar is aboard here a werry nice, good ge'mman wid a weed, and a ge'mman in a gray coat and a white tie, what knows all about me; and a ge'mman wid a big book, too; and a yarb-doctor; and a ge'mman in a yaller west; and a ge'mman wid a brass plate; wiolet robe; and a ge'mman as is a sodjer; and ever so many good, kind, honest ge'mman more aboard what knows me and will speak for me. God bress 'em; yes, and what knows me as well as dis poor old darkie knows hisself, God bress him! Oh, find 'em . . . and let 'em come quick, and show you all, ge'mmen, dat dis poor ole darkie is werry well wordy of all you kind ge'mmen's kind confidence' (Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 13).

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regarding the inevitability and the interchangeable malleability of confidence in social exchange. A character's coherence or constancy, his or her essence, then, is available to the reader only by way of repetition or constancy of a certain type of action — e.g., whether one *consistently* solicits confidences from others or one places confidence in others.⁴⁶⁰

Nevertheless, it is precisely this essential coherence qua constancy that David W. Maurer's classic study of the confidence game deeply undercuts. Indeed, according to Maurer, for one to be conned, he must already have 'larceny in his veins':

In other words, he must want something for nothing, or be willing to participate in an unscrupulous deal. If a man with money has this trait, he is all that any con man could wish. He is a mark. 'Larceny', or 'thieves' blood', runs not only in the veins of professional thieves; it would appear that humanity at large has just a dash of it — and sometimes more. And the con man has learned that he can exploit this human trait to his own ends; if he builds it up carefully and expertly, it flares from simple latent dishonesty to an all-consuming lust which drives the victim to secure funds for speculation by any means at his command.⁴⁶¹

There is no end to the problems of accepting Guinea's list alone as definitive evidence of any one character being a confidence man or in cahoots with Guinea, not least of which being its ambiguity. In Chapter Six, for example, we find a short conversation between 'a well-to-gentleman in a ruby-colored vest' (i.e., 'a ge'mman in a wiolet robe?') and 'a man in a gray coat and a white tie' (i.e., 'a ge'mman in a gray coat and a white tie?'). Using the perspective offered by Mitchell, the essential difference is that the man in the ruby-colored vest disdains the giving or accepting of charity, whereas the man in the gray coat clearly does not. The fact that the former is presented as 'hard-hearted' would seem in keeping with Mitchell's concluding claim that humanity 'is itself distinguishable in terms of the one, single, constant activity which is the sine qua non of its existence, which in turn suggests that any individual who can neither solicit nor place confidence is outside the realm of humanity' (Mitchell, 'From Action to Essence', 36).

⁴⁶⁰ For a similar emphasis upon thematic repetition in *The Confidence-Man* see Walter Dubler, 'Theme and Structure in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*' *American Literature* 33 (November 1961): 307-19. John Bryant presents Melville's ruptured repetition as the key to any discussion of Melville's breakdown of allegory in 'Allegory and Breakdown in *The Confidence-Man*: Melville's Comedy of Doubt' *Philological Quarterly* 61 (Winter 1986): 113-30.

⁴⁶¹ David W. Maurer, *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man* (rev. ed; New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 117. We again see this exemplified in *The Confidence-Man* by Mr. Roberts. In gratitude for his charity, Ringman tells Roberts that the transfer-agent of the Black Rapids Coal Company is also aboard the steamer, and that Roberts would be wise to purchase the currently depreciated stock immediately:

'A month since, in a panic contrived by artful alarmists, some credulous stock-holders sold out; but, to frustrate the aim of the alarmists, the Company, previously advised of their scheme, so managed it as to get into its own hands those sacrificed shares,

The effectiveness of many cons is, thus, dependent not only on the greed of the victim, but his or her desire to scheme and connive against those who introduced the potential for easy, illicit fortune. The aim, then, is to empower the victim as a potential victimizer, whereby the giver of confidence feels like its recipient.

While I am sympathetic to efforts such as those of Overmeer and Mitchell to disrupt the basis for (if not the manifestation of) stable identification of character in *The Confidence-Man*, their shared inadequacy is that neither takes seriously enough the complex interplay between reader, interpretive circle / agenda, and text as itself a *play of confidence*. Much is to be gained from their rejection of unequivocally following various strands of the standard-line interpretation, and thus avoiding all manner of ingenious identifications of the Confidence Man — e.g., as God,⁴⁶² or Satan,⁴⁶³ or Death,⁴⁶⁴ or even Melville⁴⁶⁵ — but this is only the first step. Such, then, is the value of Gustaaf van Cromphout's philosophical assessment of the 'theatricalization' in *The Confidence-Man*.⁴⁶⁶ There is, Cromphout contends, a strained

resolved that, since a spurious panic must be, the panic makers should be no gainers by it. The Company, I hear, is now ready, but not anxious, to redispense of those shares; and having obtained them at their depressed value, will now sell them at par, though, prior to the panic, they were held at a handsome figure above.' (Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 22)

Per the standard line interpretation, while the sure-bet tip may be spurious, and the transfer-agent yet another disguise, the point we are making is simply that the motivation set before Roberts is that of unnaturally easy money.

⁴⁶² Merlin Bowen, 'Tactics of Indirection in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*' *Studies in the Novel* 1 (Winter 1969), 406.

⁴⁶³ Watson G. Branch, 'The Genesis, Structure, and Composition of *The Confidence-Man*' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 27 (1973): 424-48; James E. Miller, 'The Confidence-Man: His Guises' *Publication of the Modern Language Association* 74 (March 1959): 102-11; Hershel Parker, 'The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating' *Publication of the Modern Language Association* 18 (September 1963): 323-31.

⁴⁶⁴ Dan G. Hoffman, 'Melville's "Story of China Aster"' *American Literature* 22 (May 1950), 148.

⁴⁶⁵ Wadlington, *The Confidence Game in American Literature*, 55, 61, 62.

⁴⁶⁶ Gustaaf van Cromphout, 'The Confidence-Man and the Problem of Others' *Studies in American Fiction* 21 (Spring 1993): 37-50.

'cognitive relationship of the subject (reader, narrator, character-as-perceiver, Melville) to others', which takes the form of depersonalisation.⁴⁶⁷ He writes:

Melville repeatedly, on the level of characterization, draws his readers' attention to the utter inaccessibility of the characters to each other and to the narrator. Melville's perceivers cannot interpret the facts because they cannot get hold of the facts in the first place. They are prevented from doing so by the impenetrable thicket of mystery, incongruity, and alienness isolating every character.⁴⁶⁸

It is, then, no accident that the word 'stranger' is used over fifty times in the novel.⁴⁶⁹

Melville can sustain this level of characteristic estrangement, Cromphout continues, through his use of dialogue:

In a novel largely made up of dialogues, Melville repeatedly resorts to dialogue as a means of blocking the reader's access to the characters and the characters' access to each other. Melville's interlocutors do not achieve meaningful identity, and hence mutual knowability, because their dialogues never allow them to do what dialogue at its best requires of its participants, namely, to engage their true self and to be willing both to reveal their true self and to recognize the true self, that is, the real humanness, of the other(s).⁴⁷⁰

In Cromphout's estimation, the Confidence Man takes advantage of this theatricalization by 'remain[ing] throughout the man of many masks, the unrivaled obfuscator. Like God's, his essence remains "past finding out." From beginning to end, his "Masquerade" conceals him, and ultimately the concealment was as impenetrable to Melville as it is to his readers.'⁴⁷¹

Again, though, this notion of an advantage gained seems problematic. The

⁴⁶⁷ Cromphout, 'The Confidence-Man and the Problem of Others', 38.

⁴⁶⁸ Cromphout, 'The Confidence-Man and the Problem of Others', 38.

⁴⁶⁹ John Bryant, 'Citizens of a World to Come: Melville and the Millennial Cosmopolite' *American Literature* 59 (Mar. 1987), 29.

⁴⁷⁰ Cromphout, 'The Confidence-Man and the Problem of Others', 39. Cf., 'By not making ourselves present to other people, we theatricalize them, turning their lives into a spectacle and their world into a stage that we (only) view' (Michael Fisher, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989], 96).

⁴⁷¹ Cromphout, 'The Confidence-Man and the Problem of Others', 48.

'other', as described by Cromphout, does not simply stand against the Subject, but also *within*. That is to say, the Subject itself has been made the stranger. In this way the identification / differentiation of Subject and Object is a necessarily masked, and thus theatrical, affair — whereby essence is not concealed by the mask but *is itself* precisely only insofar as it is masked. As we have seen in Chapter Three, it is Cromphout's assumption of an ineffable essence or Truth on the far side of reality / deception that I contend Melville ultimately comes to find deeply problematic.

Consequently, even the common identification of the Confidence Man as, if nothing else, a swindler is all-too-easily rendered.⁴⁷² It is this tendency, however, that lends an early commentator like Philip Drew — who was bucking the standard-line interpretation long before it was common to do so — such an important place in our thinking about *The Confidence-Man*, and perhaps even Melville's career as a whole. Of the novel he writes: 'Every incident narrated is innocent in itself and innocent to a trusting eye, but filled with dubious circumstance to the reader who is himself [*sic*] without confidence.'⁴⁷³ In other words, the reader of *The Confidence-Man* does not have the privileged view of the past or the future — the twin conditions of the constancy Mitchell seeks above — that would bear out his or her suspicion that anybody in the novel is ever actually deceived. As a result, the degree to which Melville deceives the reader, through his ironic manipulation of her confidence in

⁴⁷² Other identifications of the title character include: the Devil, God, Christ, Antichrist, trickster god, avatar of Vishnu, and a host of other less specific appellations. The common thread of each (be it of an insidious or ultimately benevolent identity, 'essence', or 'function') is duplicity. For a dated, though helpful review of identifications, see Mary K. Madison, 'Hypothetical Friends: The Critics and the Confidence Man' *Melville Society Extracts* 46 (May 1981): 10-14. For two examples that propose a problematised sense of identity but in the end fail to own up to the implications of their insights see Leon Seltzer, 'Camus's Absurd and the World of Melville's *The Confidence-Man*' *Publication of the Modern Language Association* 82 (March 1967): 14-27; and John G. Cawelti, 'Some Notes on the Structure of *The Confidence Man*' *American Literature* 29 (Nov. 1957): 278-88.

⁴⁷³ Philip Drew, 'Appearances and Reality in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*' *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 31 (1964): 441.

both her capacity as a discerning reader and in Melville as a coherent author, remains, as it were, undecidable.⁴⁷⁴

Nevertheless, as noted in Chapter Three, the undecidable is *decidedly* opposed to indecision. In characterisation, as much as in consciousness, one cannot escape identification; a coherent role (if not a stable, correspondent identity) is necessarily and retroactively assumed. What I contend is that the undecidability of Melville's theatrical role-play marks the aesthetico-theological intensity and freedom of the decision to become. Indeed, what Cromphout (amongst others) regards as Melville's passive acceptance of uncertainty, we find instead to be a creative awareness that carries the potential of recasting theology from its traditional transcendental repose to the materialistic evaluation of its aesthetic / poetic immanence *in the Masquerade*.

3. *The Character of Theology*

In much the same way as in *The Confidence-Man*, then, the operative question of a truly modern theology is not 'Who is the character (or Subject) of theology?' On the contrary, for reasons that are parallel to Melville's concerns, it is 'What is the character of theology?' Of course, the polyvalence of the question, i.e., identifying where it might begin and end, is as dizzying as its profound implications. Such is the interminable depth of the question of beginnings and endings that has loomed throughout the preceding chapters. One may well wish to reach the heavens, so as to extend one's purview, and thus to afford a divine vantage from which to ascertain where the truth of all characterisation begins and invariably ends; but the lesson

⁴⁷⁴ For a similar assessment, in regard to Melville's final novels, see Yvor Winters: 'In *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man* alike it is assumed that valid judgment is impossible, for every event, every fact, every person, is too fluid, too unbounded to be known' (*Maule's Curse: Seven Studies in the History of American Obscurantism* [Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1983], 79).

taught by Melville is that when neither depth nor height escapes the dialectical circularity that renders one dizzy, the assumed vantage point of a transcendent or symbolic meaning is as rent and elusive as the breath or the echo of a dead god's laughter.

While reflecting on the Jewish proverb, 'Man thinks, God laughs', Milan Kundera cannot help but wonder why God might be laughing. His conclusion is appropriate to the dilemma described above: because 'man thinks and the truth escapes him. Because the more men think, the more one man's thought diverges from another's. And finally, because man is never what he thinks he is'.⁴⁷⁵ Which to say, in its expectations of beginnings and endings that stabilise meaning and significance, and thus seek to fill an absence, humanity misses the joke, and thus, too, the 'sudden transformation of a strained expectation into *nothing*' that Kant ascribes to laughter.⁴⁷⁶ As we will see, though, the intensity of this excessive 'nothing' is a joke that gets out of hand. The punch line of reality is simply too much, leaving us in stitches on the floor with our most insane of laughs, screaming 'No! Stop! No more!' — unsure whether we mean it or not.

For Charles Winquist, the most proper characterisation of theology attuned to such intensity is that of a 'lover's discourse'. He writes:

Love is an intense valuation of specificities in the finite display of experience. It is precisely because finite experience is highly variegated that the "yes" to the importance of any specific person or object is meaningful. In Love, we are making life meaningful, but it is a meaning that can be neither contained nor controlled. Love makes

⁴⁷⁵ Milan Kundera, for one, is pleased by the thought 'that the art of the novel came into the world as the echo of God's laughter' ('Jerusalem Address: The Novel and Europe' in *The Art of the Novel* [London: Faber & Faber, 1988], 158).

⁴⁷⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 177.

life unsafe. This is its frightening and wonderful transformational power.⁴⁷⁷

Inasmuch as this is true, theology is a kind of engagement — a violent battle as much as it is a formal promise of marriage — but with/to whom? Might we then strip it bare, this question theology asks and/or is asked, to get beneath its textual, textile surfaces, and behold it in its natural glory? Moreover, might we yet behold the question of theology's character, for us the fundamental problem of theology, in its essential, naked truth and origin, as it strives to understand all it can of, and indeed to fashion the very categories of thinking about, God?

And yet, we cannot stop here — for, indeed, what would be the character of this undressing? Would it be rape or consensual; would this act of love be violence or foreplay? When surfaces are compound, when theology's flesh is textual and textile (i.e., published, bound, and disseminated in an endless array of monographs), its undressing cannot go simply skin-deep. Like the instrument of torture in Kafka's harrowing fable, 'In the Penal Colony', where vibrating needles engrave into the skin of the convicted his or her transgression, the piercing of theology is a sort of tattooing and judgment that unveils its very truth. As in Kafka's tale, the result of 'the Harrow' is inevitably death, but just before death comes understanding:

It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. Nothing more happens than that the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. To be sure, that is a hard task; he needs six hours to accomplish it. By that time the Harrow has pierced him quite through and casts him into the pit, where he pitches down upon the blood and

⁴⁷⁷ Charles Winquist, *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 149-50.

the water and the cotton wool. Then the judgment has been fulfilled, and we, the soldier and I, bury him.⁴⁷⁸

In the words of Freud, the theological Subject, as it were, in its attempt to assess and to judge, 'wants to incorporate [its] object into itself, and . . . it wants to do so by devouring it.'⁴⁷⁹ Unable to escape the limits of its ontological and perspectival dilemma, the Subject's most ingenious and meticulous attempt at theology's dissection / analysis, i.e., to bring it into accord with the Subject's rule and/or method, be it through systemising, narrating, or even deconstructing, is also a verdict and a sentence.

Tyler Roberts is to be credited for recognising this tendency in the seminal works of two of America's most prominent contemporary theologians, Stanley Hauerwas and Mark C. Taylor.⁴⁸⁰ Each thinker, he argues persuasively, falls prey to the metaphysical recalcitrance of narrative. For instance, while Hauerwas claims that self-identity, or, in his apposite term, 'character', is derivative of one's knowledge of and submission to God, one's knowledge and trust are always already deeply embedded in a *preexistent* Christian narrative in which humanity recognises itself as 'contingent', 'historical', 'sinful' creatures of God.⁴⁸¹ According to Roberts, this is the very sort of 'master narrative' postmodern theologians, those who have been made wary by those most incredulous insights by the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, Frederic

⁴⁷⁸ Franz Kafka, 'In the Penal Colony' in *The Penal Colony: Stories and Short Pieces* (trans. Willa and Edwin Muir; New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 204.

⁴⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' in The Pelican Freud Library [*On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*] (vol. 11; trans. James Strachey; ed. Angela Richards; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 258.

⁴⁸⁰ Tyler Roberts, 'Theology and the Ascetic Imperative: Narrative and Renunciation in Taylor and Hauerwas', *Modern Theology* 9 (April 1993): 181-200.

⁴⁸¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 27-29, 46-49.

Jameson, and François Lyotard, are instinctively wary.⁴⁸²

Nevertheless, even Mark C. Taylor — who is as suspicious as they come, especially of beginnings and endings, and who is delighted by the notion of a 'nomadic self' who endlessly errs and sempiternally puns in carnivalesque discourses that would make Bakhtin blush and Zarathusa proud — is undermined by an 'internal narrative':⁴⁸³

Once there was a pre-modern subject who embraced faith in God. But in its journey to modernity the subject overturned the God-human relationship, making God its own creation as well as dominating others and hoarding possessions in a futile attempt to secure a foundation for itself and escape from death. But, when the subject recognized this futility and embraced the difference at the core of its identity, it emerged into postmodernity, an eternity of play. There the subject threw off lacerated consciousness, entered the divine milieu, and erred happily ever after.⁴⁸⁴

What makes Roberts's essay so compelling is not simply that he questions whether Hauerwas adequately addresses the disruptive implications of the interplay between 'history and the world' and the 'unity and plot of the Christian narrative',⁴⁸⁵ nor that he calls out Taylor's slippage back into the metaphysical mooring of narrative. Rather, it

⁴⁸² 'Is it not important, then, to think about how theology interprets and even constructs (and reconstructs) the Christian narratives?' (Roberts, 'Theology and the Ascetic Imperative', 188).

⁴⁸³ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 149-65.

⁴⁸⁴ Roberts, 'Theology and the Ascetic Imperative', 186. Roberts rounds out his critique with much the same conclusion as Walter Lowe: 'Taylor purports to end narrative (and metaphysics, the self, history) only by telling a story that will end all stories — one that has been told for millennia' (A Deconstructive Manifesto?: Mark C. Taylor's *Erring*', *Journal of Religion* 66 [July 1986], 324-31). Criticisms of Taylor are nothing new. As with Jacques Derrida, the academe's reception has often been either love or hate. Interestingly, most of the negative theological appraisals aimed at Taylor and Derrida have been, and are still, levelled upon earlier, ostensibly more 'play'-affirming, writing. Indeed, one might easily substitute his name and works in Graham Ward's evaluation of an inadequate assessment of Derrida: 'He concentrates upon [Taylor's] earlier work and does not see how [Taylor's] work has developed. [Taylor] has moved from the discursive style of . . . [*Erring*], through the mix of genres in [*Tears*], to the essays in [*About Religion*] which deepen the questions of his earlier work both in terms of form and theme' (*Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 227 n. 21).

⁴⁸⁵ Roberts, 'Theology and the Ascetic Imperative', 188.

is in his insistence that disruption and narrative are not mutually exclusive, and that disruption is as structurally necessary to narrative as narration is to disruption.

Unable to free itself fully from the beginnings and endings of narrative, or the contingencies of life, the peculiarities of what Gordon Kaufman has described as its 'imaginative construction' cannot be lost on or in our theology. Kaufman writes:

Although it may be obvious to us that the constructive work of the imagination has in this way always been constitutive of theological activity, theologians have seldom understood themselves to be engaged primarily in imaginatively constructing a theistically-focused worldview; on the contrary, they have largely regarded themselves as attempting to express in human words and concepts what the divine King had objectively and authoritatively given the church or synagogue in revelation. The fact that their work was thoroughly imaginative and constructive in character was simply not recognized.⁴⁸⁶

On the contrary, has not the more common modern tendency been for the theologian to peek inside and g(r)asp, as though an exact science? Eschewing aesthetics and embracing the methods of the natural sciences, post-Cartesian theology became, according to Hans Urs von Balthasar, yet another 'specialisation' devoid of *sensus spiritualis*.⁴⁸⁷

Consequently, traditional theological discourse has become not unlike an infant, as observed by Friedrich Schlegel in his erotic novel *Lucinde*.

Unquestionably there lies deeply rooted in the nature of man a desire to eat everything he loves and put every new object he encounters immediately into his mouth in order to break it down. A healthy hunger for knowledge makes him want to apprehend the objects completely, to penetrate and bite through to its inmost core.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁶ Gordon D. Kaufman, 'Theology as Imaginative Construction' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (March 1982), 78; also see his *An Essay on Theological Method* (3rd ed.; Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1995) and *In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁴⁸⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (vol. 1; trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis; eds. Joseph Fessio S.J. and John Riches; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 74-76.

⁴⁸⁸ Schlegel, *'Lucinde' and the Fragments*, 51.

Indeed, in the Christian tradition, the theologian's desire to 'know' God, i.e., what lies beneath the fleshly masquerade of the Incarnation, has often taken on overtly sexual tone. In his study of depictions of the Crucifixion in medieval Europe, for instance, Richard Trexler notes that it was customary for Jesus' crucified body to be regarded as a 'volume to be penetrated'.⁴⁸⁹ Thus one might find Jesus appearing and quickly embracing Rupert von Deutz in a dream, kissing him, and then opening his mouth, 'so that I could kiss him more deeply'.⁴⁹⁰ Battista Varani is even more literal with his desired penetration when he expresses the wish to wriggle into Christ's dying body in search of his heart.⁴⁹¹ In this way, theology becomes as though a sacrament, upon and into which, traditionally, the theologian cannot help but attempt to gaze or probe; furthermore, from which the theologian cannot be fully differentiated.⁴⁹²

⁴⁸⁹ Richard C. Trexler, 'Gendering Jesus Crucified' in *Iconography at the Crossroads: Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 23-24 March 1990* (ed. Brendan Cassidy; Princeton: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, 1993), 108-09.

⁴⁹⁰ Cited in Trexler, 'Gendering Jesus Crucified', 109.

⁴⁹¹ Cited in Trexler, 'Gendering Jesus Crucified', 109.. Also see Jean Wirth, *L'image médiévale: naissance et développements, VI^e-XV^e siècle* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1989), 323; and 'La naissance de Jésus dans le coeur: étude iconographique', *Publications du Centre européen d'études bourguignonnes, XIV^e-XVI^e siècle* 24 (1989): 149-58. Citing Wirth once again, Trexler notes also: 'Long before modern psychoanalytic insights, the genital implications of such penetrations were clear among late fifteenth-century German printmakers, who might, for instance, provocatively place the crucified Jesus' pierced, externalised heart over the space where his genitals belonged' (Trexler, 'Gendering Jesus Crucified', 109; also see Wirth, *L'Image médiévale*, 323).

⁴⁹² While Robert Smith is describing Hegel's philosophical method, he may just as well be describing the sacramental desire of theology when he writes:

Its method, tacitly supposed to be plastic or protean, adaptable and therefore free a priori, *sacrifices itself* in taking on as exactly as possible the imprint of what it helps to describe, its 'object', in order to maximize the object's phenomenon unto noumenal reception. Like any power of mediation philosophical method invites being thought of as a virtue, since it gives itself up for the sake of what it mediates, as though it had a free will and, as such, one that might have been less altruistically trained. . . . Hence the oblique ontological make-up of 'method', existing only to the extent that it vanishes in fulfilling the task that makes it what it is — *disappearance would be the greatest scope of its being*. (*Derrida and Autobiography* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 14 [emphasis mine])

4. *When Repression is Creation*

As we have already alluded, writing about *The Confidence-Man* has also taken on a character strangely resembling its composition. Upon examining the twenty-six handwritten fragments of *The Confidence-Man*,⁴⁹³ the only such fragments available for any of Melville's novels after 1850, Elizabeth Foster concludes that Melville's style indulges in

understatement, underemphasis, litotes, and complexity that looks like simplicity. As we see him in his revisions moving always in these directions, and away from the loose structure, open clarity, and directness of his earliest versions of passage, we watch many ideas growing less and less obvious.⁴⁹⁴

By clustering qualifiers in a doggedly elusive attempt to diffuse meaning through apparent understatement and clausal subordination, Melville insinuates a 'syntax [that] abets the hinting and whispering which are the language of this novel', and which have proven constitutive of most of its commentaries.⁴⁹⁵ Steven Kemper notices this same dynamic in the novel's first chapter, in the barber's sign that reads 'NO TRUST', which the narrator describes as:

An inscription which, though in a sense not less intrusive than the contrasted ones of the stranger, did not, as it seemed, provoke any corresponding derision or surprise, much less indignation; and still less, to all appearances, did it gain for the inscriber the repute of being a simpleton.⁴⁹⁶

Kemper astutely notes that the description here is entirely negative; that is, the

⁴⁹³ The fragments consist of various versions and emendations to chapter fourteen, a list of possible chapter titles, and an unused section entitled 'The River'. The fragments are discussed and presented in the NW-NB edition, 401-499; cf., Foster, 'Textual Notes' in *The Confidence-Man* (1954), 373-78.

⁴⁹⁴ Foster, 'Textual Notes' in *The Confidence-Man* (1954), 376. Some of Foster's examples of this conversion are quite telling: 'proof sufficient' first became 'proof presumptive', and then 'some presumption'; 'prove otherwise' was diluted to 'prove not so much'; 'many characters' was obscured in 'no few characters'; 'it would' was qualified to 'it ought to'; and 'a fatal objection' was made ambiguous by 'an adequate objection'.

⁴⁹⁵ Foster, 'Textual Notes' in *The Confidence-Man* (1954), 377.

⁴⁹⁶ Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 5.

narrator provides details as to what the sign and audience are not, but offers no hint as to what they actually are.⁴⁹⁷

The composition of the book, as proposed by the three main genetic theories,⁴⁹⁸ for the most part builds upon the foundation laid by such indeterminacy. While the differences between the theories are substantial, and the specifics regarding each are highly conjectural and often fraught with problems, they remain united in their assumption that Melville substantially and for a variety of reasons altered his original text.⁴⁹⁹ Most commentators agree, for example, that the order in which one now reads *The Confidence-Man* does not come close to the order in which Melville wrote it. Though Watson G. Branch's theory is the only one that explicitly displaces the first chapter, the arrival of the deaf mute aboard the *Fidèle*,⁵⁰⁰ the standard line interpretation as a whole agrees that the book's ending was not what Melville originally had in mind.⁵⁰¹ For one reason or another, they argue, he deviated from his

⁴⁹⁷ Steven E. Kemper, 'The Confidence-Man: A Knavishly-Packed Deck' *Studies in American Fiction* 8 (Spring 1980): 30. For a similar development of related issues, see Cecelia Tichi, 'Melville's Craft and Theme of Language Debased in *The Confidence-Man*' *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 39 (Dec. 1992): 639-58.

⁴⁹⁸ Cf., Leon Howard, *Herman Melville*, 227-32; Watson G. Branch, 'The Genesis, Composition, and Structure of *The Confidence-Man*' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 27 (1973): 424-48; and Tom Quirk, *Melville's Confidence Man: From Knave to Knight* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982). For a summary of the theories, though one that leans towards Branch's — not surprising, since he is one of the contributing editors of the volume— see Branch, et al, 'Historical Note', 294-310.

⁴⁹⁹ For a logical and an aesthetic critique, respectively, see Hershel Parker, 'The Confidence-Man and the Use of Evidence in Compositional Studies: A Rejoinder' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28 (June 1973): 119-24; and Michael S. Kearns, 'Interpreting Intentional Incoherence: Towards a Disambiguation of Melville's *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*' *Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 16 (Spring 1983): 35-54.

⁵⁰⁰ Thomas P. Joswick was one of the first poststructuralists to get his hands on *The Confidence-Man*, and he too homes in on this most enigmatic of beginnings, arguing that it in fact displaces itself. 'Figuring the Beginning: Melville's *The Confidence-Man*' *Genre* 11 (Fall 1978): 389-409.

⁵⁰¹ To the best of my knowledge, the 'standard line' of interpretation, because of its historical-critical approach to the book, is the only branch of scholarship to broach this particular issue with any significant fervour.

path, and, for better or worse, embarked on a different course.⁵⁰²

In this reading of the novel, *The Confidence-Man* flowed forth not unlike the Mississippi River on which it is set. Perhaps, one might even suggest, like 'The River', Melville's excised, silenced (possible) first chapter:⁵⁰³

[T]he unhumbled river ennobles himself now deepens now purely expands, now first forms his character & begins that career whose majestic serenity if not overborne by feirce [sic] onsets of torrents shall end only with ocean.⁵⁰⁴

Melville's text, too, so the compositional theories go, at first glided on 'glad and content', ostensibly innocuous and well on its way to becoming a fine novel, until it reached St. Louis, its purportedly misplaced beginning, where the raging torrent of the Missouri awaited in ambush.⁵⁰⁵

But at St. Louis the course of this dream is run. Down on it like a Pawnee from ambush foams the yellow-painted Missouri. The calmness is gone, the grouped isles disappear, the shores are jagged & rent, the hue of the water is clayed, the before moderate current is rapid & vexed. The peace of the Upper River seems broken in the Lower, nor is it ever renewed.⁵⁰⁶

The Missouri River, as such, 'dethrones his sire and reigns in his stead', usurping the 'benign name Mississippi' until its ineffable entry into the sea, 'long disdain[ing] to

⁵⁰² This deduction is based mostly upon Black Guinea's description of those passengers who can apparently substantiate his claims to truly being a poor, black cripple. It is surmised by most standard line commentators that because Guinea is one of the guises of the Confidence Man, his list is a telling outline for Melville's originally intended progression of the subsequent guises. The degree to which it adheres to the novel has been debated *ad nauseam*. For some of the more interesting discussions see the following: Foster, Introduction to *The Confidence-Man* (1954), lxx-lxxii; Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics*, 334-35; Peter Bellis, 'Melville's *The Confidence-Man*: An Uncharitable Interpretation' *American Literature* 59 (Dec. 1987), 557-59; and H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 157-65.

⁵⁰³ Branch, 'The Genesis, Composition and Structure', 438-39; 'Editorial Appendix: Manuscript Fragments' in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1984), 490-99.

⁵⁰⁴ 'Editorial Appendix: Manuscript Fragments' in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1984), 497.

⁵⁰⁵ 'Editorial Appendix: Manuscript Fragments' in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1984), 497.

⁵⁰⁶ 'Editorial Appendix: Manuscript Fragments' in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1984), 497-99.

yield his white wave to the blue'.⁵⁰⁷ As we have already seen, especially in Chapter Three, Melville is not instinctively content with the notion of serene union, of mystical peace, or of tranquil nature. For him, rather, the tendency is toward an ironic destructivity that is also creativity. Although the destructive rage of 'The River' is ultimately silenced by the deaf mute in Chapter One of *The Confidence-Man*, the observations of Foster and Kemper above inform us of the possibility that the silence is but a show.

Insofar as it is a fictive put-on, the repression of destruction paves the way for Melville's most consciously creative novel, wherein characteristic malleability and potential are privileged over essence. Which is to say, the deaf mute that supplants the Missouri River screams the possibility of a truly living Subject existing precisely *as character*. It is this concern with subjectivity qua characterisation that links Melville, undoubtedly in ways even he was unaware, to the post-Kantian theoretical developments of the nineteenth-century. Moreover, it is in this refracted light that Melville's contribution to our thinking about theological discourse emerges, within and as the radical theatricality of his *Masquerade*. Only in this, we will see below, is the creative apocalypticism of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* most fully realised — i.e., in the aesthetico-theological immanence of materialism.

As rehearsed thus far, my contention is that insofar as modern theology is necessarily concerned with itself (dialectically) as both Subject and Object, it is not distinct from the imaginative enquiry of Herman Melville. Their linkage, however, goes beyond the popular professional desire for interdisciplinarity, and is, in fact, bound by their complex engagements with what Michel Foucault in *The History of*

⁵⁰⁷ 'Editorial Appendix: Manuscript Fragments' in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, (1984), 499.

Sexuality calls the genealogy of 'deep subjectivity'. Indeed, what Foucault says here of the individual is, I would argue, as applicable to theology as is to Melville and his Masquerade:

For a long time, the individual was vouched for by the reference to others and the demonstration of his ties to the commonwealth (family, allegiance, protection); then he was authenticated by the discourse of truth he was obliged to pronounce concerning himself.⁵⁰⁸

In keeping with my aim here, Foucault relates this shift to the emergence of the literature and philosophies of self-consciousness, those 'long discussions concerning the possibility of constituting a science of the subject, the validity of introspection, lived experience as evidence of the presence of consciousness to itself.'⁵⁰⁹ For Foucault, of course, this is especially problematic because it is built around a forgotten / repressed, and sometimes forced, confession.⁵¹⁰ In this way, he actually longs for the self-present, apocalyptic anonymity that he resists as an illusion provoked in and by language and power.

I would really liked to have slipped imperceptibly into this lecture, as into all the others I shall be delivering, perhaps over the years. I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne way beyond all possible beginnings. At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no was looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to beckon to me. There would have been no beginnings: instead, speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path — a slender gap — the point of its possible disappearance.⁵¹¹

By the end of his life, in a manner reminiscent of Melville, Foucault attempted to

⁵⁰⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality; Volume One: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 58.

⁵⁰⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality; Volume One*, 64.

⁵¹⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality; Volume One*, 59-60. Cf., Michel Foucault, *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (trans. Alan Sheridan; ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman; New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 14, 50, 95.

⁵¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge; and The Discourse on Language* (trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith; New York: Vintage, 1982), 215.

come to terms with his ambivalence regarding autonomy and anonymity, and ultimately settled on an 'aesthetics of existence', which he defined as 'an analysis of the relation between forms of reflexivity — a relation of self to self — and hence between forms of reflexivity and discourse of truth, forms of rationality and effects of knowledge.'⁵¹² It is, he concluded, only in this critical act of *ascesis*, the active engagement with the formation of oneself, that the self-becoming of a free Subject is possible.⁵¹³

While Foucault is almost certainly correct when he relates the emergence of personal identity to modern literature and philosophy, we should not necessarily be so quick to follow his scepticism about the subjectivity derived from either. In his appeal for an authentic, 'pure self-stylization, which would not be imposed as a universal norm, but would rather be open to the choice of the individual',⁵¹⁴ Foucault is deeply under the influence of a conception of subjectivity qua presence that is as inadequate as it has been pervasive.⁵¹⁵ He would often have done well to recall his

⁵¹² 'Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: An Interview With Michel Foucault' in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984 [Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology]* (vol. 2; ed. James D. Faubion; New York: The New Press, 1994), 444. Cf., Marli Huijer, 'The Aesthetics of Existence in the Work of Michel Foucault' *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25.2 (1999): 61-85.

⁵¹³ For further elaboration on the related themes of critical philosophy and *ascesis* see Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984 [Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth]* (vol. 1; ed. Paul Rabinow; York: The New Press, 1997), 315-17; 'Self Writing' in *Essential Works of Foucault*, 1:207-09; *The History of Sexuality; Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure* (trans. Robert Hurley; New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 72-77; 'Technologies of the Self' in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, 1:223-51.

⁵¹⁴ Peter Dews, 'The Return of the Subject in late-Foucault' *Radical Philosophy* 51 (Spring 1989), 40. Foucault's inspiration in this regard is clearly Nietzsche, who writes in *The Gay Science*: 'To give style to one's character — a great and rare art! It is practised by all those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature, and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even the weaknesses delight the eye' (*The Gay Science* [trans. Walter Kaufman; New York: Vintage Books, 1974], §290).

⁵¹⁵ Cf., Andrew Bowie's persuasive criticism of Heidegger's myth that the modern Subject has always oppressively laid claim to truth as self-certainty. Bowie contends that while Heidegger's subversion of the *cogito, ergo sum* is correct, he does not adequately own up to his philosophical debt to the repressed subjectivities of Romanticism, and thus paints a reductionistic picture (*From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* [London: Routledge, 1997], 182-92).

own characterisation of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the literature and philosophy of the profoundly paradoxical self-positing self truly took hold in the wake of post-Kantian idealism. For indeed, such was the emergent age of modern aesthetics, Foucault points out elsewhere, 'when words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things'.⁵¹⁶

Consequently, we might note, neither should we reject Hegel as quickly as has been the postmodern tendency. Hegel, of course, sought a systematisation of identity-in-difference, and, therefore, the culmination (or 'end') of all philosophical reflection. Personal subjectivity, he thus argues, is 'pure self-recognition in absolute otherness', in which the Subject 'relates itself to itself and is determinate, is other-being and being-for-self, and in this determinateness, or in its self-externality, abides within itself; in other words, it is in and for itself'.⁵¹⁷ The Subject, then, is never self-present. On the contrary, subjective identity becomes itself only in-and-through difference, and difference becomes itself only in-and-through identity. In other words, to affirm itself, identity must negate itself and become its very opposite, that is, difference, for 'identity is different from difference'.⁵¹⁸ At the same time, because identity is in-difference, its relation to its other is naturally a subjective, redemptive relation to itself.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970), 304-05. For an elaboration on the development of philosophical aesthetics in this period, see Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

⁵¹⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 14, 18.

⁵¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (trans. A. V. Miller; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), 413-17. Hegel explains that 'identity is the reflection-into-self that is identity only as internal repulsion, and is this repulsion as reflection-into-self, repulsion, which immediately takes itself back into itself. Thus it is identity as difference as difference that is identity with itself' (413).

⁵¹⁹ 'Difference in itself is self-related difference; as such it is the negativity of itself, the difference not of an other, but of itself from itself; it is not itself but its other. But that which is different from difference is identity. Difference is, therefore, itself and identity. Both together constitute difference; it is the whole and its moment' (Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 417).

It is, of course, no coincidence that in developing the all-encompassing implications of his System, with regard to subjectivity, that Hegel also incorporates the three classical arguments for the existence of God: the cosmological, teleological, and ontological proofs. First, with the cosmological proof, Hegel demonstrates that the finite is not simply self-identical, but inherently and self-contradictorily needs the infinite.⁵²⁰ With the teleological proof, he continues, God's purposeful wisdom and activity are demonstrated. Purposefulness, he writes, 'marks the beginning and end of the process . . . hence it is the final end.'⁵²¹ That is, it demonstrates the consequences of the cosmological argument, and is the identification of individuals by virtue of the self-realising ends of his dialectic.⁵²² Furthermore, the reunion of beginning and end, of subjectivity and objectivity, Hegel continues, is demonstrated in the ontological proof, which essentially replays the double-negation at work in his System. This unity of subject and object, in sum, is truth (or the Absolute Idea),⁵²³ and the 'pure being' of God, in turn, is the self-realised eschatological 'essence of all reality.'⁵²⁴ Such is the symmetry of thought I have been developing throughout these pages between the formation / becoming of the Subject and formation / becoming of God. The two finally cannot be distinguished.

⁵²⁰ 'Humanity rises from the finite to the infinite, rises above the singular and raises itself to the universal, to being-in-and-for-self. Thus religion consists in this, that human beings have before them in their consciousness the nothingness of the finite, are aware of their dependence, and seek the ground of this nothingness, of this dependence—in a word, that they find no peace of mind until they set up the infinite before themselves' (G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* [trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987], 2: 254-55).

⁵²¹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 2: 405.

⁵²² 'It [teleological purposefulness] is something fixed that is exempt from the process; it is not determined by anything else, but has its ground in the subject — it is determined by the free self-determining of the subject' (Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 2:405; cf., 2: 404-21, 703-719, 748-52).

⁵²³ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 756.

⁵²⁴ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 86. Or, to return to the body metaphor: 'When we grasp this life-force in its true nature, it is seen to be one principle, one organic life of the universe, one living system. All that is, simply constitutes the organs of the one subject' (86)

Importantly, though, we must not fail to recognize that even Hegel's 'pure being', the self-creative end of self-emptying, is itself always already an *act of autopoiesis*. That is, self-becoming is ultimately a self-creative projection of the possibility and desire of the very subjective immediacy it must also avoid and disavow. Indeed, Hegel admits as much:

But this pure being is not an immediacy, but something to which negation and mediation are essential; consequently, it is not what we *mean* by 'being', but is 'being' defined as an abstraction, or as the pure universal; and our 'meaning', for which the true [content] of sense-certainty is *not* the universal, is all that is left over in face of this empty or indifferent Now and Here.⁵²⁵

Inasmuch, then, as Hegel shows a kind of perspectival inadequacy (and thus, we will say, duplicity) itself to be constitutive of the Subject, he provides the ontological grounds for the vitality of Melville's literary recasting of the aesthetics of existence as that of the Masquerade *par excellence*.

Admittedly, this language of 'aesthetics' and 'becoming', and thus of 'existence' and 'life', would seem far removed from the systematically redemptive fetish that, its cries of protest notwithstanding, still grips traditional theology. And yet, in keeping with the self-creative poetics of Melville's Masquerade, it is only when theology takes seriously the unthought autopoiesis of its self-becoming that it fully realises its radical, creative potential. Indeed, such is the supplementary relationship of Melville's apocalypticism in *Moby-Dick* with the creative duplicity of the Masquerade in *The Confidence-Man*, that the possibility of a radical theology is ultimately unthinkable

⁵²⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 61 [para. 99]. Cf., 'What we encounter here is again the ultimate ambiguity of Hegel. According to the standard *doxa*, the telos of the dialectical process is the absolute form that abolishes any material surplus. If, however, this is truly the case with Hegel, how are we to account for the fact that the Result effectively throws us back into the whirlpool, that it is nothing but the totality of the route we had to travel in order to arrive at the Result? In other words, is not a kind of leap from "not-yet" to "always-already" constitutive of Hegelian dialectics: we endeavor to approach the Goal (the absolute form devoid of any matter), when, all of a sudden, we establish that all the time we were already there? Is not the crucial shift in a dialectical process the reversal of anticipation — not into fulfillment, but — retroaction?' (Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative*, 156)

without an aesthetic theology; that is to say, a theology attuned both to the constitutive inadequacy and miraculous potential of theology as a fully incarnate theological Subject.⁵²⁶

Contra Balthasar, though, the aesthetically aware theology in view here is not simply an appropriation of aesthetic concepts, such as that of beauty; and neither is it only 'the attempt to do aesthetics at the level and with the methods of theology', thus 'betraying and selling out theological substance to the current viewpoints of an inner-worldly theory of beauty.'⁵²⁷ And yet, following his important distinction, neither is an aesthetic theology necessarily the same as theological aesthetics. For the latter, Beauty is the transcendental determination of Being that can only be known in full by a theology guided by faith.⁵²⁸ In contrast, the aesthetic theology insinuated by Melville's *Masquerade* attends to the suffering / *ressentiment* wrought by the sovereign presence of some *Ding an sich* or transcendental determination of Being beyond the limits of phenomenal experience, and thus also to the attendant desire that maintains subjective attachment to the status quo and existing horizons of expectation.

There is, in short, for aesthetic theology truly nothing behind or beyond the mask of phenomenal experience; and this is why, paradoxical though it may seem, something new, something miraculous because it was previously impossible, is made

⁵²⁶ Cf., especially, Thomas J. J. Altizer's important reminder of apocalypse as both a beginning and an end: 'Ultimately apocalypse is the apocalypse of God. If ancient Christianity could reverse an original Christian apocalypse by knowing the absolute immutability and the absolute transcendence of God, a reversal of that transcendence and immutability is surely an apocalyptic reversal, one giving witness to, if not embodying, a new apocalypse of God. Certainly the Christian can know an apocalypse of God as having occurred in the crucifixion, for if the crucifixion is finally the crucifixion of God, it unquestionably embodies a truly and even absolutely new realization of the Godhead. . . . Thus an absolute transformation of the Godhead, a transformation which is apocalypse, is simultaneously an apocalyptic ending and an apocalyptic beginning. It is an apocalyptic ending of God, and thus truly the death of God, and the apocalyptic beginning of an absolutely new Godhead' (*The Contemporary Jesus* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997], xxv-xxvi).

⁵²⁷ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:38; cf. 1:79-117.

⁵²⁸ John Riches, 'The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Part 1', *Theology* 45 (1972), 565.

possible in the immanent materiality of lived experience. This is not, however, a philosophical denial of theological discourse, of its possibility or its content; moreover, neither does it ignore the differences between theology and philosophy. It is, rather, the creative recasting of theological grounds in general, whereby theological discourse is fundamentally an imaginative reflection upon the problematic desire and attempts for an impossible cognisance of its own incognisance, i.e., the necessary excessiveness or repressed remainder of its self-becoming or characterisation *as theology*.

5. *Theology as Aesthetic Intensity*

It should, of course, go without saying that this aesthetic theology, due in part to the unabashed debt it owes modern literature and philosophy, is not in concert with 'the aesthetics of Christian truth' professed by the guardians of ecclesiastical theology.⁵²⁹ Neither is it, though, an apophatic exercise in mystical silence,⁵³⁰ a deconstructive affirmation of 'hyperbolic alterity',⁵³¹ nor a confessional 'sacralizing' of its discourse / liturgy.⁵³² When theology betrays some necessary, immaterial essence

⁵²⁹ E.g., David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003). Hart (alongside John Milbank) is the undisputed heir to Balthasar's aesthetic project, forcefully carrying it into the new century alongside an (overly?) aggressively polemic attack on (primarily postmodern) philosophical encroachments into theological territory. For Hart, the 'engagement' between philosophy and theology is only ever a fight to the death.

⁵³⁰ The best contemporary representatives of this position, one an analysis and the other an actualization are, respectively, Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

⁵³¹ John D. Caputo is certainly the most prolific philosopher cum theologian today writing about deconstruction and theology. For representative examples, see his 'God is Wholly Other — Almost: *Différance* and the Hyperbolic Alterity of God' in *The Otherness of God* (ed. Orrin F. Summerell; Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 190-205; *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001); as well as his forthcoming work *The Weakness of God*.

⁵³² I am thinking here, in particular, of Radical Orthodoxy. Cf., James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker

that is to be unveiled, the Good or the True behind (or analogously transcendent to) the phenomenal mask, its character is that of a phenomenological, teleological or liturgical revelation. On the contrary, aesthetic theology cannot abide in the immediacy or immateriality of 'pure being', the *analogia entis* of 'theological metaphysics',⁵³³ nor can it be in the interest of a 'structurally deferred' presence.⁵³⁴ For, indeed, as Theodor Adorno memorably wrote in *Minima Moralia*, any such authenticity, be it immediate, analogical, or as a hope deferred, 'itself becomes a lie the moment it becomes authentic, that is, in reflecting on itself, in postulating itself as genuine, in which it already oversteps the identity which it lays claim to in the same breath.'⁵³⁵

By the time he wrote *The Confidence-Man*, Melville seems to have understood this point well. Deftly, he situates his reader into the same predicament as the old man at the end of the novel, who, while examining a banknote with his newly purchased 'Counterfeit Detector', laments: "'there's so many marks of all sorts to go by, it makes it a kind of uncertain.'⁵³⁶ To make matters even more complex, the old man recognizes that some signs, such as red marks, which by their absence hint at a counterfeit, also cannot always be trusted because "'some good bills get so worn, the red marks get rubbed out. And that's the case with my bill here — see how old it is — or else it's a counterfeit, or else — I don't see right — or else — dear, dear me — I

Academic, 2004); John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁵³³ Cf., John Milbank, 'Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics' *New Blackfriars* 76.895 (July/August 1995): 352-43.

⁵³⁴ Cf., once again, Foucault: 'this rather weak identity that we try to preserve behind a mask is in itself merely a parody' ('Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', 386).

⁵³⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: New Left Books, 1974), 154.

⁵³⁶ Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 248.

don't know what else to think."⁵³⁷ His search for the bill unsullied by falseness, and thus for a clearly marked identification of authenticity, is paradigmatic of the desire of the reader of *The Confidence-Man* to identify the contours of its network of deception—that is, the differences between, and thus the identity of, conned and con man. Both are, as we have seen above, wild-goose chases.

'Stay, now, here's another sign. It says that, if the bill is good, it must have in one corner, mixed in with the vignette, the figure of a goose, very small, indeed, all but microscopic; and for added precaution, like the figure of Napoleon outlined by the tree, not observable, even if magnified, unless the attention is directed to it. Now, pore over it as I will, I can't see this goose.'

'Can't see the goose? why I can; and a famous goose it is. There' (reaching over and pointing to a spot in the vignette).

'I don't see it—dear me—I don't see it. Is it a real goose?'

'A perfect goose; beautiful goose.'

'Dear, dear, I don't see it.'⁵³⁸

The old man's concern about bank notes of uncertain value and authenticity reaches beyond the obvious ambiguities of a nascent nineteenth-century American capitalism. More provocatively, it engages and participates in the thoroughly *theological* assumption of / desire for authenticity; an authenticity that, in the process, is betrayed as a confidence game *par excellence*.

The theological confidence game of *The Confidence-Man*, as it were, is characterized on one level by the subtle intertwining of duplicity and sacrifice in its unsubtle biblical and eschatological allusions, which culminate in the novel's prophetic conclusion: 'Something further may follow of this Masquerade.' And yet, like the apocalyptic return of a sacrificed Christ and the forgiveness wrought by the

⁵³⁷ Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 248.

⁵³⁸ Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 248.

blood of a bull, both of which are often believed to be evoked in the final act of the novel,⁵³⁹ that which was sacrificed remains just beyond the clouds or behind the temple's veil, an infinite object of theological desire. Is perhaps something similar occurring in the Gospel of St. Matthew, where the resurrection, from which Jesus ostensibly claims his identity and authority (Matt. 28.18-20), is also presented and regarded by some, even amongst the disciples (Matt. 28.17), as a 'deception' (Matt. 27.63-66; 28.11-15), a counterfeit? Does not the Gospel of Matthew quickly conclude with an affirmation — 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matt. 28.18) — that Jacques Derrida might paraphrase, 'There is no secret as such; I deny it.'⁵⁴⁰ Much like sacramental wine, the presence and memory of Christ, affirmation and denial continually bleed into one another, confusing the sacred 'good news' with the indeterminate, deferred desire of a secret, sacrificial passion.

What, then, can one possibly say of theology in the midst of the Masquerade? If, as above, it betrays some essential truth or identity or essence that is to be (impossibly) unveiled, something behind the mask, the character of the Masquerade is that of a revelation — i.e., a miraculous unmasking. But, of course, as we have seen, this unmasking never 'happens' as such — or at least is deferred to the inaccessible horizons of a 'messianic' self-presence and/or nestled safely away in the 'sacralized' immanence of its discourse / liturgy — for where there is no mask, there is no truth or identity to disclose. The reflective economy of theology's self-becoming in view here, i.e., where the Subject of theology is that of a self-characterising return to/of itself, poses a dual threat. On the one hand, there is the (retroactively) imposed sovereignty of systematic, transcendent order, in the guise of coherence, beauty, and efficiency: on

⁵³⁹ See especially Wadlington, *The Confidence Game in American Literature*, 137-70

⁵⁴⁰ Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', 95.

the other hand, there is the confused nihilism of deified immanence. Which is to say, the transcendental Subject of theology can but loathe the material immanence of its embodied reflection, which knows not what it does or is without the transcendental criteria of the Subject. The Object of theological reflection, then, in the name of the sovereign Subject, suppresses and hates the sovereign-shattering surplus of freedom and autonomy without criteria that emerges from the dialectic of the Subject's self-becoming but cannot itself be contained by it.

To return to the language of Schelling and dialectical materialism of Chapter Three, then, the unconscious state of theology is the pursuit of that which would fill the void left by the Subject-Object split of its 'sinful' condition. Of course, as seen throughout our analysis of Melville, such a pursuit is self-deceptive insofar as it chases that which it cannot actually want. That is to say, without its reflective split, there would be no theology. Its lack of wholeness, its own original sin, makes it what it is. The transcendental ambition for sovereign wholeness, the pure night of 'theology without theology', is theology's end: its purpose for being *and* its impossible suicide / annihilation. Therefore, its *real* aim is to pursue, in the insane circularity of unrequited desire, wholeness without truly wanting it, in order that 'the vomit of its loathed identity' (i.e., the autonomous excess that emerges from and paradoxically sustains the desire of its suicidal self-violence) might be effectively held within.⁵⁴¹ The objects of its desire, from the Christian significance of the historical Resurrection to the universal possibility of justice, are the means by which the anticipation of and passion for wholeness are given their faces, but actually function as the forestalling obstacles / masks to it.

⁵⁴¹ Melville, *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*, 171.

The complex relationship between the transcendent ambitions and immanent materiality of theology is not, though, that of a balanced co-determination. At its root, rather, is a desire fraught with an inherent undecidability, which Slavoj Žižek describes well:

Two characteristics of this paradoxical causality should be retained: a cause is inherently undecidable — it can enhance the feature it stands for or its opposite; and above all, there is no 'proper measure' in the relationship between a cause and its effect — the effect is always in excess of its cause, either in the guise of the upward spiral (aggressivity leads to more and more aggressivity) or in the guise of the counteraction (awareness of aggressivity brings forth a fear of 'overreacting' that deprives the subject of the 'normal' measure of aggressive self-assertion).⁵⁴²

Consequently, the aesthetico-theological awareness of Melville's *Masquerade*, in its rethinking of self-becoming as self-creation, is just as concerned with the apparently chaotic freedom of shape and mask as it is with the unexpected order and homogeneity of self-organisation. My argument here is that the conscious constituents of its network of confidence-seekers and confidence-givers, are necessarily in the precarious, creative state of becoming, and thus do not preexist the game / duplicity itself.⁵⁴³ Indeed, such has been the 'undecidable' praxis and character of theological discourse and confidence games (i.e., their communication and maintenance), forever performed as though on a precipitant point in which a small, seemingly isolate change has the potential to push it into chaotic madness or lock it in

⁵⁴² Žižek, 'The Abyss of Freedom', 80.

⁵⁴³ In writing about the flexibility and fluidity of the 'big con', David Maurer notes the seemingly infinite variations any given con game might take depending on the situation. The best con, as such, is infinitely adaptable. Maurer writes: 'Whenever a mark objects at any stage of the game, his arguments are met immediately by one or the other of the con men; for instance, if, after the convincers, the mark wants to back out, the roper professes to be so thoroughly convinced that he offers to sign an agreement by which he will buy out the mark's interest in the deal for a liberal consideration; usually, after one of these "chills" the mark comes back into the deal with greater confidence than he has ever had before. Any one play may involve a great number of deviations of this sort, impossible to include in a written version of the game because it is impossible to determine where any given mark may balk, and it is even more difficult to foresee how the con men might meet his objections' (*The Big Con*, 100-01).

an inert stasis — there being, in the end, very little functional difference between the two.

The performance of theological discourse qua confidence game, then, is as epic as it is tragic, for the transcendental ambition for sovereign wholeness qua adaptive order cannot ultimately quell the spontaneous eruption of creative / imaginative autonomy. The idiosyncratic character of theology becoming-itself we are unfolding here is, thus, not unlike what Gilles Deleuze has described in one of his final essays as 'a life':

We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that is in nothing is itself a life. A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss. . . . it is an absolute immediate consciousness whose very activity no longer refers to a being but is ceaselessly posed in a life. . . . The transcendental field is defined by a plane of immanence, and the plane of immanence by a life.⁵⁴⁴

For Deleuze, the potency of immanence lay in the indefinite article because *a life* is not the same as the one who lives it. On the contrary:

A life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualised in subjects or objects. This indefinite life does not itself have moments . . . but only between-times, between-moments; it doesn't just come about or come after but offers the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come and already happened, in the absolute of immediate consciousness.⁵⁴⁵

In this way, too, the aesthetic theology embodied by Melville's *Masquerade* is that of a living discourse attuned to the self-becoming of experience, and thus to the intense potential of making all things new. Such 'a life', Philip Goodchild writes of Deleuze, is no longer modelled simply on 'the true', but is 'an attempt to generate an ethos of

⁵⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life* (trans. A. Boyman; New York: Zone Books, 2001), 27-28.

⁵⁴⁵ Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, 29.

thought that expresses an intensification of life'; in this way, he continues, the unity of thought and being, i.e. 'the true', 'is replaced by an aspiration for the unity of a living thought and the unthought which gives life to it.'⁵⁴⁶

In close, then, theology gains its comprehensibility in the midst of the self-reflection of its discourse and discipline; but, vitally, remains altogether inadequate to explain why this is so. It is precisely in his embodiment of something not unlike Deleuze's description of 'pure immanence', which we have cast here as aesthetic intensity, that Melville emboldens theological thinking to reimagine the possibilities of a non-sovereign, materialistic holiness in non-dualistic terms.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁶ Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion*, 165.

⁵⁴⁷ This is wholly at odds with the presentation of immanence as nihilism in Radical Orthodoxy. Cf., Milbank (et al), *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3-4.

CONCLUSION

My contention in the previous pages has been two-fold: (1) it is only when theology takes seriously its unthought self-becoming (i.e., as theological Subject) that it has any chance of thinking itself radically; and (2) that any vision of radical theology is ultimately unthinkable without an attendant 'aesthetic theology' sensitive to both *the constitutive inadequacy* and the *creative potential* of the theological Subject becoming-itself. I have contended, moreover, that radical theological thinking, that rethinking which occurs after the death of God which unthinks all established theological ground, is not sufficient simply as an apocalyptic silence, but is it itself only when given its creative voice by the aesthetic genius, i.e., the autonomous one who 'gives the rule to art',⁵⁴⁸ whose word and work continually do and/or create something new, perhaps even miraculous, out of the existing structures of a discourse and discipline.⁵⁴⁹ Of such a genius, Horkheimer and Adorno write:

The greatest artists were never those who embodied a wholly flawless and perfect style, but rather those who used style as a way of hardening [*Härte*] themselves against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth. The style of their works gave what was expressed that force without which life flows away unheard. Those very art forms which are known as classical, such as Mozart's music, contain objective trends which represent something different to the style which they incarnate.⁵⁵⁰

That is to say, the aesthetic genius, perhaps even in the manner of a prophet, at first

⁵⁴⁸ Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 150.

⁵⁴⁹ Cf., Carl Dahlhaus' essay on Arnold Schoenberg's 'aesthetic theology', in which he quotes the composer's 'inner biography': "This is also the place to speak of the miraculous contributions of the subconscious. I am convinced that in the works of the great masters many miracles can be discovered, the extreme profundity and prophetic foresight of which seem superhuman' (*Schoenberg and the New Music: Essays by Carl Dahlhaus* [trans. Derrick Puffett and Alfred Clayton; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], 81).

⁵⁵⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. John Cumming; New York: Herder & Herder, 1944), 130.

must breach the existing horizons of possibility in any given language, genre, artistic style, as well as religious or political order, in order then to broaden the realm of thought with that which had hitherto remained unthought.⁵⁵¹ Although such a genius is not necessarily a theologian, and perhaps precisely *because* of his or her earnestly irreligious intentions, the theological significance of the genius lies in the seemingly miraculous surplus of his or her freedom and autonomy, and the embodied awareness of an aesthetico-theological intensity of life. It has been my contention here that Herman Melville's conception of subjectivity is precisely such an embodiment.

While my intention has not been to cast Melville as a theologian, per se, my use of Melville certainly has theological intentions. I have argued here that theological thinking is a self-reflective thinking conditioned by the evolutionary complexity of its pragmatic adaptability and its reified systemisation. In reading theology through Melville, then, I have sought to highlight the interdisciplinary stage on which this complex self-reflectivity is enacted (that is, as a kind of performance). Although it should be noted, my use of Melville is but one way of unpacking the implications of this refined, radical sense of self-identification for theological discourse.

We have noted that it is a commonplace of contemporary Melville studies that in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, Melville himself is the novel's title character. As I illustrated in Chapter One, though, it is necessary that we go even further and suggest that his entire career as a professional author, from its very beginning, bears the dubious marks of that which has secrets to tell and faces to

⁵⁵¹ For, indeed, as William Blake concludes in 'There is No Natural Religion': 'If it were not for the Poetic and Prophetic character the Philosophic and Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again'. Thomas Altizer expands on William Blake's prophetic role as the first 'Christian atheist' in his *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1967).

disclose, and is thus a con game *par excellence*. As such, we find that the genius of Melville's complex theatricality is that it marks a significant discursive model for thinking the aesthetics of theological self-becoming: namely, as a kind of confidence game. The confidence game, we have seen, co-opts desire and the fluid possibilities of identity and narrative, and adaptively manipulates the social / discursive networks in which they are related, quite often in shocking, spontaneous ways. I have suggested that the self-organizational economy of theology is always already a *counterfeit* dependence upon the intimate miscegenation of the Subject of theological sovereignty and the Object of theological materiality. My point is not, however, that a true theology finally unmask; on the contrary, it is that, as with Melville's complex presentation of subjectivity, the coherence of the confidence game qua theological discourse is beset, indeed retroactively (i.e., dialectically) sustained, by the structurally excessive, incomprehensible freedom of its untold possibilities and unactualized adaptations.

Ultimately, the aesthetic fecundity of a theological self-becoming which is a self-creation cannot be limited to the interplay between (or analogy between) the productivity of its material immanence (i.e., of its discourse) and the transcendence of its sovereign ambitions to unmask, but actively emerges as a subversively creative symptom of the duplicitous dialectic between the two.⁵⁵² It is my closing conviction that without the creative genius, such as exemplified in Herman Melville, the radical implications of theological thinking are too readily appropriated, in order that they might then be ultimately repressed, by the intellectual / political / economic /

⁵⁵² My casting of this dialectic as 'counterfeit' and 'duplicitous', but fraught with excess, is highly influenced not only by Bruno Latour's characterisation of modernity described above, but even more importantly by the description of the subtle subjugation of immanence by sovereignty, particularly that of Capital, in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 69-90.

confessional regimes of the status quo.⁵⁵³ In short, then, it is in its awareness of the profound intensity of that unthinking that emerges as the excess of thinking that the radical theological vision (i.e., after the death of God) is for the first time fully freed to resist its repression and/or pacification; and in so resisting, freed to create-itself anew.

⁵⁵³ While many of my reflections regarding the adaptive order of the aesthetico-theological vision are deeply inspired by the network and complexity theories made most accessible by the likes of Bruno Latour, Murray Gell-Mann, Ilya Prigogine, and Roger Lewin, I remain deeply disappointed at the degree to which the emergent structure of freedom and excessiveness, not to mention intensity, has been repressed by sovereign models of adaptation, most evident in the incorporation of complexity theory in and by the 'biopolitics' of contemporary globalism. As it relates to theology, this frustrating development is most clearly evident in the recent work of Mark C. Taylor, especially his *Confidence-Games: Money and Markets in a World Without Redemption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's alternative reading of network culture, and its revolutionary import, has proven to be an invaluable supplement. See their *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

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