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MELVILLE'S GALAPAGOS:
DARWINISM REVISITED.

If Luther's day expand to Darwin's year
Shall that exclude the hope, foreclose the fear?
Clarel

"The Encantadas" is an invitation to explore the Galapagos in depth in the wake of Darwin. The archipelago, as it is revisited by Melville, no longer appears as the enchanted scene that led to the discovery of the origin of the species but as an appalling arena in which dying-out degenerates of all ilk struggle for life. The sketches retrace the gradual extinction of mankind and record "signs of vanishing humanity" (172).¹ The debt to Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* is denied although the work was extensively quoted in the opening section of *Moby-Dick* (77th extract)² whereas the testimonies of obscure sailors are expressly mentioned:

¹ All quotations from *The Encantadas* are drawn from Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern U. P. and the Newberry Library, 1987), and the page number will be given parenthetically in the text.

² "On one occasion I saw two of these monsters [whales] probably male and female, slowly swimming, one after the other, within less than a stone's throw of the shore" [Terra Del Fuego] "over which the beech tree extended its branches. *Darwin's Voyage of a Naturalist*" (Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. G. Thomas Tanselle [New York: The Library of America, 1983], p. 793).

"Here it be said that you have but three eye-witness authorities worth mentioning touching the Enchanted Isles: — Cowley, the buccaneer (1684); Colnet, the whaling-ground explorer (1798); Porter, the post captain (1813). Other than these you have but barren, bootless allusions from some few passing voyagers or compilers." (143)

The scientist's journal is not acknowledged as a source of inspiration. Melville deliberately turns away from Darwin in the sense that his disenchanted sketches depict a catastrophic ending rather than the dawn of Creation, but he also deviously turns Darwin's work to advantage through pastiche and parody. For instance, he picks up vivid images such as the comparison of the volcanic islands to the industrial landscape of England, or he caricatures Darwin's tabulations by listing in a mock scientific way "Men," "Ant-eaters," "Men-haters," "Lizards," "Snakes" and "Devils" (140). Such eccentric statistics deride Darwin's methodical inventory.³ By lifting such passages, Melville does not merely fake Darwin's text but pirates it altogether. Indeed, writing under the pseudonym of "Salvator R. Tarnmoor" (125) implicitly involves taking as a model a painter (Salvator Rosa) who achieved fame partly through pictures of wild shores that feature wreckers or bandits.⁴

We shall argue that these sketches are variations on Darwin's variations, a supplement to *The Voyage of the Beagle* predicated on degeneracy as opposed to the generation of species. Taking the opposite view, Melville lays bare obliterated aspects of the genealogy of the theory of evolution, playfully reinterprets in a literal way Darwin's key notion of hereditary

³ See H. Bruce Franklin, "The Island Worlds of Darwin and Melville," *The Centennial Review* (Summer 1967), pp. 353-70.

⁴ See Sharon Furrow, "The Terrible Made Visible: Melville, Salvator Rosa, and Piranesi," *ESQ*, 19, 4 (1973), pp. 237-53.

and acquired characters by spotting on an ordinary-looking map an alphabetical character, the letter E, that was added to Melville's family name on the demise of his father.

The Formation of Misfits

Voyage of the Beagle, Journal of Researches (1839), which was to pave the way for the discoveries later expounded in *The Origin of Species* (1859), can be read as the fabulous genesis of a scientific finding. The seemingly erratic exploration of this life-size laboratory sets the stage for the construction of an evolutive system of nature. The distribution of wild life across the archipelago as it is described (notably the varying kinds of finches and tortoises) lays the groundwork for the table of distinctive species as each species is ascribed a clearly delineated space of its own:

It was confidently asserted, that the tortoises coming from different islands in the archipelago were slightly different in form; and that in certain islands they attained a larger average size than in others. Mr Lawson maintained that he could at once tell from which island any one was brought.⁵

The topology of the isles is potentially tantamount to a tentative typology.⁶ Besides, the various islands in which the different species are spaced out are so many telling landmarks in the history of Evolution so that space virtually means time since it encapsulates the whole process of natural creation.

⁵ Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, eds. Janet Browne and Michael Neeve (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1989), p. 279. All quotations refer to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁶ On Darwin's and Melville's taxonomies, see Agnès Derail, "Melville, Linné, Darwin: des taxons et des monstres," *Etudes Anglaises*, 53, 1 (2000), pp. 3-18.

The natural history of these islands is eminently curious and well deserves attention. Most of the organic productions are aboriginal creations found nowhere else; there is even a difference between the inhabitants of the different islands, yet all show a marked relationship with those of America, though separated from that continent by an open space of ocean between 500 and 600 miles in width. The archipelago is a little world within itself, or rather a satellite attached to America whence it has derived a few stray colonists, and has received the general character of its indigenous productions [...]. Hence, in both space and time, we seem to be brought somewhat near to that great fact — that mystery of mysteries — the first appearance of new beings on this earth. (50)

The fieldwork reported in *Voyage of the Beagle* lends support to the future theory and, conversely, *The Origin of Species*, that presents itself in retrospect as an attempt at systematizing the random observations made earlier during the expedition, might be re-read, paradoxically enough, as an unavowed latter-day, all-encompassing Book of Genesis retelling Creation in a scientific way.

The archipelago as it is described by Melville harbours a highly Darwinian struggle for life, but survival in this case does not seem to entail the growing perfection of the species. The degenerate cock that Oberlus pretends to bequeath exemplifies disastrous adaptation to the environment: "The fowl proved a starveling rooster, reduced to a sitting posture by sheer debility" (169). It recalls its equally pathetic congener in *The House of the Seven Gables* that emblemizes blatant degeneracy.⁷ The domesticated animal that seems to embody

⁷ "Nor must we forget to mention a hen-coop, of very reverend antiquity, that stood in the farther corner of the garden, not a great way from the fountain. It now contained only Chanticleer, his two wives, and a solitary chicken. All of them were pure specimens of a breed which had been transmitted down as an

the hereditary flaws of the Pyncheon line invalidates the apology of native breeds vindicated by Jefferson in his *Notes on Virginia* in response to Buffon's belittling contention that in America "la nature vivante est beaucoup moins agissante, beaucoup moins forte."⁸ Oberlus's rooster is no transcendentalist Chanticleer. It mirrors somehow the debasement of its owner, depicted as "a wild white creature" (162). Tellingly enough, the bunch of rascals under the sway of Oberlus are specimens of mankind gone wild. By grafting claws onto their bodies, they produce an unrecorded crossbreed between men and birds of prey, not unlike Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible.⁹

Now, sword or dagger, human arms are but artificial claws and fangs, tied on like false spurs to the fighting cock. So, we repeat, Oberlus, czar of the isle, gaffles his four subjects; that is, with intent of glory, puts four rusty cutlasses into their hands. Like any other autocrat, he had a noble army now. (167)

heirloom in the Pyncheon family, and were said, while in their prime, to have attained almost the size of turkeys, and, on the score of delicate flesh, to be fit for a prince's table [...]. It was evident that the race had degenerated, like many a noble race besides, in consequence of too strict a watchfulness to keep it pure [...]. The distinguishing mark of the hens was a crest, of lamentably scanty growth, in these latter days, but so oddly and wickedly analogous to Hepzibah's turban, that Phoebe — to the poignant distress of her conscience, but inevitably — was led to fancy a general resemblance betwixt these forlorn bipeds and her respectable relative" (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, ed. Milton Stern [Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1986], pp. 88-9).

⁸ See Frank Kermode, *The Classic* (Harvard, MA: Harvard U. P., 1983), pp. 100-01.

⁹ "The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar; and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagle's feathers and his nails like birds' claws" (Daniel 4, 33).

Those sub-human creatures seem doomed to cockfights that raise the spectre of cannibalism in *Robinson Crusoe*.¹⁰ The native population of the islands is reduced to a zoomorphic mob. The sailors who land up there are the scum of the earth, and threaten to backslide into beastliness. In *The Tempest*, Caliban was jeeringly called a tortoise ("Come thou, Tortoise," I, 2, 318). The mariners dread the curse of undergoing such a horrendous metamorphosis: "They earnestly believe that all wicked sea-officers, more especially commodores and captains, are at death (and in some cases, before death) transformed into tortoises" (128).

Still, the kind of barbarity that prevails does not merely involve reversion to a prior state of nature for it is a radically unnatural perversion: "Indeed, the sole superiority of Oberlus over the tortoises was his possession of a larger capacity for degradation; and along with that, something of an intelligent will to it" (164). The settlement degrades itself into cynical tyranny before utterly lapsing into anarchy ("*Riotocracy*," 149).¹¹ In the course of this catastrophic evolution, slavery, the subjection of men, is instituted: "On their way up the mountain he exultingly informs the negro, that henceforth he is to work for him, and be his slave, and that his treatment would entirely depend upon his future conduct" (165). Marooned survivors fall prey to insanity and seem to be doomed to a Darwinian fate ruled by the overriding law of predation: "Dire sight it is to see some silken beast long dally with a golden

¹⁰ "I observ'd a Place where there had been a Fire made, and a Circle dug in the Earth, like a Cockpit, where it is suppos'd the Savage Wretches had sat down to their inhumane Feastings upon the Bodies of their Fellow-Creatures" (Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel [New York: Norton, 1994], p. 120).

¹¹ "But no, the insurgents had confederated themselves into a democracy neither Grecian, Roman, nor American. Nay, it was no democracy at all, but a permanent *Riotocracy*, which gloried in having no law but lawlessness" (149).

lizard ere she devour. More terrible, to see feline Fate will sometimes dally with the human soul, and by a nameless magic make it repulse a sane despair with a hope that is but mad" (156). On the whole, Melville seems to subscribe to the tenets of social Darwinism even before the word was coined and intimates that faith in God might be but a gaudy varnish to cover up the basic instinct of self-preservation. It is in order to live on that Oberlus is driven to behave like a criminal. The reader is left with a mournful vision of a vanishing humanity heading for ruin.

The Genealogy of the Origin of Species

Melville, in Darwin's footsteps, carries on the survey of the islands that begins, naturally enough, with the geological description of those volcanic islands. But, adding a sequel to the scientist's journal, he introduces specimens of fallen men into the artificial paradise disclosed by Darwin who, like Adam, had taken hold of this sanctuary of the state of nature by naming the various living species. What Melville picks up from *Voyage of the Beagle* is, strikingly enough, an apparently displaced image in the *Journal of Researches* that reads like an odd combination of personal anecdotes and systematic inventory, subjective impressions and rigorous observations:

The *Beagle* sailed around Chatham Island, and anchored in several bays. One night I slept on shore, on a part of the Island where some black cones — the former chimneys of the subterranean heated fluids were extraordinarily numerous. [...] From their regular form, they gave the country a workshop appearance, which strongly reminded me of those parts of Staffordshire where the great iron-foundries are most numerous. (270)

Through such haphazard association of ideas, Darwin to all appearances strays away from the strict collecting of data.

Melville in his turn takes up the image and superimposes the picture of a desert island covered with clinkers onto that of an industrial area:

In many places the coast is rock-bound, or more properly, clinker-bound; tumbled masses of blackish or greenish stuff like the dross of an iron-furnace, forming dark clefts and caves here and there. (127)

One seamed clinker from top to bottom; abounding in black caves like smithies; its metallic shore ringing underfoot like plates of iron; its central volcanoes standing grouped like a gigantic chimney-stack. (139)

Conversely in *Israel Potter*, the workers who plod along the city thoroughfares are compared to the Galapagos tortoises that toil like convicts:

Whichever way the eye turned, no tree, no speck of any green thing was seen; no more than in smithies. All labourers, of whatever sort, were hued like the men in the foundries. The black vistas of streets were as the galleries in coal mines; the flagging, as flat tomb-stones minus the consecration of moss; and worn heavily down, by sorrowful tramping, as the vitreous rocks in the cursed Gallipagos, over which the cursed tortoises crawl.¹²

Both for Darwin and for Melville, the archipelago functions as the nexus of strange trafficking. The no man's land at the far end of the world looks like an industrial wasteland while the Galapagos islands surface in the heart of the metropolis. Nature/Culture transfers across the continents occur. The two places that are poles apart collapse into each

¹² Herman Melville, *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd*, ed. Harrison Hayford (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 604.

other as if by magic. By picking up in Darwin's text an incongruous image that is somewhat marginal in the context of the account of a scientific expedition, Melville somehow underscores a tell-tale sign that betrays Darwin's scientific "unconscious," his unacknowledged debt to underlying ideological assumptions. The key concept of a vital struggle for survival might be traced back to Malthus's view of fierce competition between men for ever-dwindling resources, in Darwin's own admission¹³:

Hence as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual, with another of the same species, or with the physical conditions of life. It is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms.¹⁴

True, in his *Recollections of the Development of My Mind and Character* (composed in 1876) Darwin made the following confession in private:

In October 1838, that is, fifteen months after I had begun my systematic enquiry, I happened to read for amusement Malthus on Population and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this one would be the formation of new species. Here then I had at last got a theory

¹³ On Malthus's determining influence on Darwin dating from October 1838, see Patrick Tort, *Darwin et le Darwinisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), pp. 18-22. See also J. Dupaquier, "Malthus" in *Dictionnaire du darwinisme et de l'évolution*, ed. Patrick Tort (Paris, 1996).

¹⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. J. W. Burrow (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1986), p. 117.

by which to work; but I was so anxious to avoid prejudice, that I determined not for some time to write even the briefest sketch of it.¹⁵

Yet, in Darwin's case, the strife for survival that pits men against one another within the social arena has been transposed, translated in every sense of the word, into the natural environment. Social competition for life, of paramount importance in Malthus's work, has been obliterated and naturalized in the process. The economic battlefield has been displaced to the other end of the world in what passes for an unspoiled sanctuary of the state of nature, if only one could overlook the fact that the Galapagos islands served as a penal colony, as Darwin incidentally remarks:

"September 23rd — The *Beagle* proceeded to Charles Island. This archipelago has long been frequented, first by the Bucaniers, and latterly by whalers, but it is only within the last six years that a small colony has been established here. The inhabitants are between two and three hundred in number: they are nearly all people of colour, who have been banished for political crimes from the Republic of the Equator (Quito is the capital of this state) to which these islands belong. (271)

Whereas social Darwinism is usually considered as a late extrapolation based on the naturalist's work, a bold and arbitrary generalization to the social sphere made by his followers (Herbert Spencer, Francis Galton), Melville might hint through an eerie reference to industrial England that Darwin in the first place had always been keenly aware of the social context of competition for life although he had disowned Malthus's influence as a chief source of inspiration by lending primacy to the so-called natural foundation over its social offshoot.

¹⁵ *Charles Darwin's Autobiography*, ed. Francis Darwin (New York: H. Schuman, 1950), p. 54.

True, Melville starts his narrative with geographical descriptions and observations of wild life. But he departs from Darwin's *Journal of Researches* by adding a social sequel that brings to light the overshadowed competition for life between men that may have been uppermost in Darwin's mind. By emphasizing the internecine struggle between a bunch of survivors lowered to the level of reptiles or birds of prey, the nature/culture hierarchy underlying Darwinism is unsettled and turned upside down. Melville exposes the social origin of the origins of species — raised and erased into an abstract scientific concept.

The nightmarish mutations undergone by the human wrecks in this life-size laboratory seem to be at variance with the theory of Evolution based on the assumption of ever-increasing differentiations between the kingdoms and an unceasing process of perfection of the human species that supposedly checks the drive towards the survival of the fittest by reasserting social bonds of solidarity and sympathy and curbing natural selection.¹⁶ If the obsession with degeneracy, typical of end-of-the century America, was already so haunting in Melville's case, it was maybe because, by a sort of obscure prescience, Melville sensed that Darwinian concepts derived from the social field were bound to be reintroduced into that sphere, in the name of normalization for dubious purposes. Those who were not fit for survival in a context of economic crisis, like Melville's father, were already liable to be put under supervision by medical superintendents. Herman Melville's

¹⁶ See *Darwinisme et société*, ed. Patrick Tort (Paris: PUF, 1992). Patrick Tort has repeatedly underlined how ethical behaviour overturns and reverses natural selection, or rather, how, paradoxically enough, natural selection is ultimately self-cancelling, opting out against itself as it were. Tort has also emphasized Darwin's own staunch opposition to social Darwinism and eugenism (spawned by his would-be disciples Herbert Spencer and his cousin, Francis Galton). A committed abolitionist, Darwin was highly critical of the racialist uses made of his theories for the sake of colonialism. See *Darwin et le Darwinisme*, *cit.*, pp. 64-80.

father-in-law, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw, was instrumental in the implementation of the systematic commitment of the insane in state hospitals (January 1845, Josiah Oakes vs. Mc Lean Asylum Decree).¹⁷

Shadowy Sketches of Ghostly America

Contrary to Darwin, Melville does not describe the dawn of creation but a decaying world that is coming to an end. It testifies to the gradual extenuation of the human species and heralds its final extinction against a backdrop of fading faith. From one sketch to another, a relentless if erratic process can be traced: the lapse of God's creature into a "dog-king" (146) who enforces cynical tyranny and, in a second stage, the further degradation of the mob into a ruthless democracy. The Brave New World seems doomed beforehand to decline and to run to waste in the shifting sands of the wilderness. Amid such a rabble of downfallen desperadoes, a single character commands admiration. Hunilla alone miraculously endures.¹⁸ Yet, she too is merely a transient figure. If she is last seen passing by on a donkey, not unlike Jesus Christ entering Jerusalem, the prominent bones of the wasted animal only vaguely recall the shape of a cross on which the worn-out features of God Incarnate have become hardly recognizable.¹⁹ One may seriously wonder whether the spectre of Christianity

¹⁷ See Stephen Knadler, "Hawthorne's Genealogy of Madness: *The House of the Seven Gables* and Disciplinary Individualism," *American Quarterly*, 47, 2 (June 1995), p. 306, note 42.

¹⁸ See Philippe Jaworski, *Melville, le désert et l'empire* (Paris: Presses de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure, 1986), p. 316.

¹⁹ Another passage from the same sketch is revealing in this respect: "Hunilla was partly prostrate upon the grave; her dark head bowed, and lost in her long, loosened Indian hair; her hands extended to the cross-foot, with a little brass crucifix clasped between; a crucifix worn featureless, like an ancient graven knocker long plied in vain" (161).

still haunts that carcass: "The last seen of lone Hunilla she was passing into Payta town, riding upon a small gray ass; and before her on the ass's shoulders, she eyed the joint workings of the beast's armorial cross" (162).

The settlement of Charles's Isle is a parodic re-enactment of the American legend. Hailed at first as a quest for the Promised Land, as a haven for the oppressed of all nations, it ends up offering an ominously dark counter-example in the age of Manifest Destiny.²⁰ The nightmarish human masquerade performed on this disenchanted stage somehow echoes Spencer's dismal visions. The ornate epigraphs to the text are matched by the utterly prosaic narratives that serve as a counterpoint as if history but repeated itself to the point of extinction and boiled down to the relentless rehearsal of some predictable disappearance. The cycle of grotesque figures still imperfectly quarried from the stone of the island climaxes with Oberlus who seems to typify beforehand the wide spectrum of fin-de-siècle degeneracy: he is in his own freakish person the epitome of the criminal and of the madman who may potentially become a criminal and that criminal anthropology, another Darwinian by-product, will strive to contain into neat categories.

²⁰ "He now sends forth a proclamation inviting subjects to his as yet unpopulated kingdom. Some eighty souls, men and women, respond; and being provided by their leader with necessities, and tools of various sorts, together with a few cattle and goats, take ship for the promised land" (147). "Great inducements being offered to deserters, their ranks were swelled by accessions of scamps from every ship which touched their shores. Charles's Island was proclaimed the asylum of the oppressed of all navies. Each runaway tar was hailed as a martyr in the cause of freedom, and became immediately installed a ragged citizen of this universal nation" (149). See Jonathan Beecher, "Variations on a Dystopian Theme: Melville's 'Encantadas'," *Utopian Studies*, 11, 2 (2000), pp. 88-95. Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State U. P., 1980), pp. 109-20. François Specq, "Du divin au grotesque: grotesque et prophétie dans 'The Encantadas'," *The Piazza Tales, Herman Melville*, ed. Bruno Monfort (Paris: Armand Colin, 2002), pp. 161-67.

The correspondences between Darwin's and Melville's works suggest a sort of implicit epistolary exchange via the Galapagos islands: Melville replies to Darwin, diverts the latter's work without owning it, just as Darwin had lifted Malthus's illuminating intimation of vital strife for life from its social context to accommodate it to the natural environment. Writing, whether it be scientific or literary works, seems to consist in countless unacknowledged thefts, ceaseless acts of piracy, dealing with purloined letters in one way or another. Significantly enough, Melville may have picked up another key Darwinian concept, that of the transmission of hereditary or acquired characters and distorted it by re-interpreting it in a literal way, as an alphabetical character instead of a genetic one but still, as a character that precisely remains closely related to the family heritage.

As he maps out the archipelago, which he endeavours to decipher like a scroll, the narrator makes out some outlandish typographical character inscribed in the scenery. The configuration of a group of isles evokes by its shape, spells out as it were, the letter E in reverse. The looming of an alphabetical letter in the midst of the Enchanted Isles may account for "the spell within a spell involved by this particular destination" (142). This encounter with types ingrained in the natural landscape is probably fraught with literary reminiscences. It reminds us of the esoteric figures or ciphers of Tsalal in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (ch. XXIII), or the living hieroglyphs shaped by a dissolving bank in spring in *Walden*.²¹ Above all, it brings to mind the game alluded to by

²¹ Henry Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966), pp. 202-03.

Dupin during his search for the purloined letter when he advises to look for characters that are so large that they become invisible:

"There is a game of puzzles," he resumed, "which is played upon a map. One party playing requires another to find a given word — the name of town, river, state or empire — any word in short, upon the motley and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious."²²

Melville comes across a childhood memory engraved in the mineral setting, as if he too embarked on a geological and genealogical search for origins. Through a sort of anamorphosis, the islands mirror back and reverse the meaningful letter E, the would-be letter of nobility added to Melville's original family name spelt Melvill, in order to restore the family reputation after the father's bankruptcy, presumably to blot out the infamy of the father's bad name on account of his lapse into insanity.²³ The forged patronymic was to become Melville's

²² Edgar Allan Poe, *Great Short Works*, ed. G.R. Thomson (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 447.

²³ "Gansevoort and his mother began spelling their surname with a final *e*, as *Melville* — perhaps for no reason other than that Gansevoort thought an extra letter afforded an aristocratic flourish, and certainly for no nefarious reason, since *Melville* was a variant spelling, in common use, which would not have misled any of Allan's creditors for a moment (Uncle Thomas and his children retained the shorter spelling, although after Herman made Melville famous, his cousin Priscilla sometimes spelled her last name with a final *e* also)" (Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography* [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins U. P., 1996], p. 67).

penname. This single additional character is therefore shorthand for the death of the father, the birth of a writer, the transmission of the family heritage and of letters. It is the purloined letter that encapsulates the initial falsification of family origins. Significantly enough, Melville happened to misspell his own name in a letter to his publisher dated from 1st January 1848²⁴ and blamed John Murray (who, oddly enough, dwelled and worked on Albermarle Street) for endorsing the misnomer and reproached him with conjuring up a ghost: "Will you still continue, Mr Murray, to break seals from the Land of Shadows — persisting in carrying on this mysterious correspondence with an imposter shade, that under the fanciful appellation of Herman Melvill still practices upon your honest credulity?"²⁵

The remark may allude in passing to Melville's first novel published by John Murray that had been accused of being a fake testimony, a counterfeit. But the suppressed traumatic memory kept surfacing at intervals. It was encoded in the very title of the autobiographical narrative, *Typee*, that reads like Type E. It was inscribed again in the title of Plotinus Plinlimmon's pamphlet in *Pierre*, "EI," that can be interpreted, ambiguously enough, either as "El" (the name of the eternal father in the Bible) or as "Ei," that might point to the inner split within the self that sunders the E that encapsulates the modified family name and the I (Me) it covers up, besides hinting enigmatically at the Greek word *ei* meaning "if." Not to mention queer journal entries such as that odd encounter with the other half, Melville's double, met as if under the auspices of St Thomas etymologically associated with twinning:

²⁴ "In Some Haste / Very Truly Yours, Dear Sir / Herman Melvill" (Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth [Chicago: Northwestern U. P. and Newberry Library, 1993], p. 102).

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

Sunday, December 16, 1849.

Thence walked to St Thomas's Church, Charter House, Goswell Street to hear my famed namesake (almost) "the Reverend H. Melvill." I had seen him placarded as to deliver a Charity Sermon. The church was crowded. The sermon was admirable.²⁶

The haunting letter E, descried amid islands whose original Spanish names "were generally effaced on English charts by the subsequent christenings" (141), conjures up the spectre of the dead father that cannot be dispelled. Albermarle, on the equatorial Line²⁷ that maybe intertwines at once the family line and literary lines, is strangely mentioned in connection with another "furious old man." By a strange coincidence Ahab's fiery character is associated precisely with the line that splits the group of isles like a geological fault:

"I've heard that the isle of Albermarle, one of the Gallipagos, is cut by the Equator right in the middle. Seems to me some sort of Equator cuts yon old man, too, right in the middle. He is always under the Line — fiery hot, I tell you." (1357)

Launching in Darwin's footsteps into an inquiry into the transmission of characters, the narrator comes across a letter that maybe covers up the remains of the dead father. Redburn already remarked that letters could serve as a fitting memorial

²⁶ Herman Melville, *Journals*, eds. Howard C. Horsford and Lynn Horth (Chicago: Northwestern U. P. and Newberry Library Northwestern-Newberry Edition, 1989), p. 41.

²⁷ "Did you ever lay eye on the real genuine Equator? Have you ever in the largest sense, toed the Line? Well, that identical crater-shaped headland there, all yellow lava, is cut by the Equator exactly as a knife cuts straight through the centre of a pumpkin pie" (139).

to enshrine the dead: "And more enduring monuments are built in the closet with the letters of the alphabet, than even Cheops himself could have founded, with all Egypt and Nubia for his quarry."²⁸ The hushed memory of the father buried beneath the letter E threatens to animate itself, like some wild animal deprived of the power of expression:

Narborough and Albermarle are neighbours after a quite curious fashion. A familiar diagram will illustrate this strange neighbourhood.

E

Cut a Channel at the above letter joint, and the middle transverse limb is Narborough, and all the rest is Albermarle. Volcanic Narborough lies in the black jaws of Albermarle like a wolf's red tongue in his open mouth. (140)

A ground-breaking utterance seems on the point of being articulated. A word for word parallel might be drawn with the slaves' final struggle (a desperate and speechless one) on board the *San Dominick*²⁹: "Exhausted, the black now fought in despair. Their red tongues lolled, wolf-like from their black mouths. But the pale sailors' teeth were set; not a word was spoken; and in five minutes more, the ship was won" (102).

We might venture that under the pseudonym of Salvator Rosa (sub rosa?), Melville seeks to unearth the unspeakable secret of origins that strives to ex-press itself. The hardly legible E sketched by the plot of land of "this self-transforming and bemocking isle" (143) looms like some ocular illusion that

²⁸ Herman Melville, *Redburn*, ed. G. Thomas Tanselle (New York: Library of America, 1983), pp. 177-78.

²⁹ I thank heartily Professor Sterling Stuckey for drawing my attention to those similarities.

deceptively promises oracular revelations and seems to call back eloquently memories of family extraction (e, short for *ex* in Latin, equivocally points to descent and to a revoked past). Does the uncanny broken landscape of those God-forsaken volcanic isles betoken some "slumbering volcano" (68), now dormant, that still spells out unutterable "death, explosive death" ("Benito Cereno," 115), or is it the ultimate surface remains of a family past that sunk without trace (except for the tell-tale E), thus testifying to the last of the Melville's "voiceless end" (116)? The true sense of the spell(ing) of the bewildering type formed from sediment remains forever inscrutable and untold. "Keep silence before me, O islands": ironically enough, Isaiah's prophetic words (Isaiah, 41: 1) have literally come true since the indwelling incantation of the Encantadas underlying the cant of would-be gentility will not be voiced out. The "dissonant din" (136) heard in the vicinity of Rock Rodondo, fading down into a hiss elsewhere, seems about to mute into the prevailing stillness altogether:

It is deemed a fit type of all-forsaken overthrow, that the jackal should den in the wastes of weedy Babylon; but the Encantadas refuse to harbor even the outcast of the beasts. Man and wolf alike disown them. Little but reptile like is here found: — tortoises, lizards, immense spiders, snakes, and that strangest anomaly of outlandish nature, the *iguana*. No voice, no low, no howl is heard; the chief sound of life here is a hiss. (127)

Incidentally, Melville's text might echo here "in a dim random way" Darwin's observations on tortoises that "uttering a deep hiss fall to the ground with a heavy sound as if struck dead" (273) and, more generally, the Galapagos archipelago might function "at large" (165) as *poste restante* between Darwin and Melville, both published by John Murray located at 50, Albermarle Street Tellingly, the series of sketches ends

with the evocation of a decaying kind of post office or letter-box used for the delivery of messages that are conveyed riskily.³⁰

The relics of hermitages and stone basins are not the only signs of vanishing humanity to be found upon the isles. And curious to say, that spot which of all others in settled communities is most animated, at the Enchanted Isles presents the most dreary of aspects. And though it may seem very strange to talk of post-offices in this barren region, yet post-offices are occasionally to be found there. They consist of a stake and a bottle. The letters being not only sealed but corked. They are generally deposited by captains of Nantucketers for the benefit of passing fishermen; and contain statements as to what luck they had in whaling or tortoise-hunting. Frequently, however, long months and months, whole years glide by and no applicant appears. The stake rots and falls presenting no very exhilarating object. (172)

³⁰ The scene described refers to an actual place, called Post Office Bay on Charles's Island established by Captain James Colnett with a barrel nicknamed 'Hathaway's Post-Office.' Harold Beaver remarks that it was this barrel which the American Captain Porter used to his advantage for information on English vessels and their cargo in the War of 1812 (Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, ed. Harold Beaver [Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1967], p. 435). David Porter, dubbed "the post captain" (143), owed his naval victory to his indiscreet perusal of private letters left behind for some homewardbound British ship to collect. This obscure business of purloined letters was to launch the irresistible rise of the US Navy. "On arriving opposite to Charles's Island, we could perceive no vessels; but understanding that vessels which stopped there for refreshments, such as turtle and land tortoise, and for wood, were in the practice of depositing letters in a box placed for the purpose near the landing-place (which is a small beach sheltered by rocks, about the middle of the bay) I despatched lieutenant Downes to ascertain if any vessels had been lately there, and to bring off such letters as might be of use to us, if he should find any. He returned in about three hours, with several papers, taken from a box which he found nailed to a post, over which was a black sign, on which was painted *Hathaway's Postoffice*" (*Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean*, 1822, chapter VI).

The same motif of a decrepit dead letter office in the middle of nowhere recurs obliquely in "John Marr":

There was no reachable post-office as yet; not even the rude little receptive box with lid and leather hinges, set up at convenient intervals on a stout stake along some solitary green way, affording a perch for birds, and which, later in the unintermitting advance of the frontier, would perhaps decay into a mossy monument.³¹

In such a world of uncertain transmissions, messages and their carriers that seemed bound for their destination may get lost in the meantime.³² Just as in "Bartleby," vivid words "on errands of life" (45) end up in the dead letter office, similarly here the narrative begins with the evocation of the torments of tortoises that relentlessly carry on their backs, through their "living mail," a *memento mori* in live letters, a reminder of their final destination that, revealingly enough, has already started to fade away:

Nay, such is the vividness of my memory, or the magic of my fancy, that I know not whether I am not the occasional victim of optical delusion concerning the

³¹ Herman Melville, "John Marr," *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, ed. Harold Beaver, *cit.*, p. 314.

³² One of the underlying themes of Jacques Derrida's *La Carte Postale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982), particularly appropriate to "The Encantadas." Belief in Manifest Destiny is undermined by such erratic transmissions. "The Encantadas" is a far cry from the hymn to the providential postal system extolled in *White Jacket*: "As a man-of-war that sails through the sea, so this earth that sails through the air. We mortals are all on board a fast-sailing, never-sinking world-frigate, of which God was the shipwright. [...] And though far out of sight of land, we continue to sail with sealed orders, and our last predestination remains a secret to ourselves and our officers; yet our final haven was predestinated ere we slipped from the stocks of Creation" (Herman Melville, "The End," *White-Jacket*, ed. G. Thomas Tanselle [New York: The Library of America, 1983], p. 768).

Gallipagos. For often [...] I have drawn the attention of my comrades by my fixed gaze and sudden change of air, as I have seemed to see, slowly emergency from those imagined solitudes, and heavily crawling along the floor, the ghost of a gigantic tortoise, with "Memento ****" burning in live letters upon his back. (129)

The great feeling inspired by these creatures was that of age: — dateless, indefinite endurance [...] consider that impregnable armor of their living mail. What other bodily being possesses such a citadel wherein to resist the assaults of Time? (131)

The postal imagery is expanded throughout the narrative, which ends symmetrically with the description of a rotting letter-box containing unclaimed missives doomed to oblivion. In-between, Albermarle serves a postal relay in the protracted history of transmissions. The spell that lures the narrator towards the Enchanted Isles that were the cradle of the theory of evolution may have something to do with the conveyance of a single isolated character that signs a death-warrant.