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Configurations of Cultural Amnesia



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Introduction: Amnesiac Reading

As a mode of knowledge, psychoanalysis is caught in a singular paradox. It is, on the one hand, an undeniably momentous chapter in the history of human self-understanding. It makes available to systematic description and inquiry a clandestine region of psychic life, hitherto revealed only in the scattered intimations of poets and philosophers. Not content with casting light on this uncanny territory, psychoanalysis cultivated an instrument to bring it under the rule of knowledge, "to enable the ego to achieve a progressive conquest of the id" (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 56). The scale and gravity of this achievement is aptly conveyed in Freud's imperial metaphor: the id's recalcitrant indigenes, ferociously resisting the incursions of the knowing ego, are painstakingly induced to yield to it. The conquistador's abundant reward is nothing less than knowledge of the fundament of psychic life itself.

But even as it celebrates its hard-won triumphs, psychoanalysis gives us abundant reason to suspect them. For in penetrating the origin of the human subject, it appropriates to itself precisely nothing. Seeking to possess its object, it finds itself dispossessed by it. The *Ich*'s friendly overtures are met by the sovereign indifference, the impenetrable *It*-ness of the *Es*. Like Eurydice, the unconscious is apt to dissolve under the gaze that would make it conscious. Indeed, this dissolution is its essential logic. The contents of the unconscious, Freud tells us in his 1915 essay, exempt themselves from the logical, temporal and perceptual differentiation necessary for the constitution of any discrete, integral object of knowledge.

Might this corrosive logic be brought back under the rule of a knowing ego by pointing to its developmental origin in infantile sexuality, that is, in a complex of historical 'events' which determines and so 'explains' the unconscious? The problem is that this seems only to displace rather than resolve the predicament, for infantile sexuality will equally refuse to yield itself to inquiry: "...infantile amnesia, which turns everyone's childhood into something like a prehistoric epoch and conceals from him the beginnings of his own sexual life, is responsible for the fact that in general no importance is attached to childhood in the development of sexual life" (Freud, *Three Essays* 176). The very force that conditions my history, in other words, simultaneously erases itself from its records. Infantile amnesia is structural rather than contingent, and as such cannot be remedied by an appeal to memory—or, more precisely, to purposive memory. Unconscious phenomena demand a mode of remembering that, as W. R. Bion writes, "must be sharply distinguished from...memory" (107). The distinction hints at the meaning of Bion's enigmatic injunction to the psychoanalyst, more often cited than read, to renounce 'memory and desire.' The remembering proper to analytic observation involves a suspension of the differentiated perception and judgement that makes everyday life possible: "The nearer the analyst comes to achieving suppression of desire, memory and understanding, the more likely he is to slip into a sleep akin to stupor" (Bion 47). Psychoanalytic listening, in other words, must partake of the amnesia at the heart of its object; for this stupefied collapse of perception is also "an increase of perception" (Bion 47), correcting the misrecognition of the analytic object as a discrete datum of sensuous reality. Bion cites a letter from Freud to Lou Andreas-Salomé, in which he speaks of "blinding myself artificially" in order to reach into spots of particularly recondite obscurity in the psyche. Only by means of such a blinding can the analytic eye bring the blindness of its object into focus. The ego's purposive memory is taken over by the "dream-like 'memory'" (71) of the unconscious.

Celebrating the contribution of psychoanalysis to the sum of human knowledge is thus as misleading as it is just. It is misleading insofar as it involves less a contribution to, than a depletion of, positive knowledge. It is just insofar as it brings us into proximity to the *other* of positive knowledge—to a comprehension of what dissolves comprehension, a remembering of what erases memory.

In this article, I want to ask what the implications of this ‘amnesiac’ construal of psychoanalysis might be for the theory and practice of literary reading. The question takes on a particular resonance, I suggest, when cast in the light of Maurice Blanchot’s interrogations of the literary object. Just as for Freud and Bion analytic phenomena solicit a particular and paradoxical mode of perception, so for Blanchot literature can be known only by way of knowledge’s renunciation: “...reading, seeing, hearing the work of art demands more ignorance than knowledge” (*Space* 192). Reading, in other words, must implicate itself in the ignorance induced by its object, enter into the incomprehension that is its element.

In avowing that the poets had discovered and elaborated the forms of unconscious life long before him, Freud inaugurated an uneasy intimacy between poetry and psychoanalysis that persists to this day. In keeping with the more general tendency of ‘applied’ psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic reading has typically understood its task as making conscious the unconscious of the artwork. Such a reading aims for a kind of epistemic victory over its object, gaining for knowledge and communication those subterranean psychic processes the work had, wittingly or not, sought to keep out of sight. Under such a gaze, the literary text becomes an object of knowledge, subject to the possessive mastery of its reader. Such a gaze forgets the elemental obscurity that conditions the analytic object, perpetually withholding it from memory and knowledge.

Like the Bionian analyst, Blanchot’s writer is given over to a remembering that sabotages its own fulfilment: “the tool he uses in order to recollect himself is, strangely, the very element of forgetfulness: writing” (Blanchot, *Space* 29). And evoking Freud’s darkening of the path to the other’s darkness, the writer sees by way of blindness: “vision that is not longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing” (Blanchot, *Space* 32). What is seen through this impossibility is no longer the sensible world of daylight reality, but the formless density of the being that precedes and haunts it, “a sordid absence, a suffocating condensation where being ceaselessly perpetuates itself as nothingness” (Blanchot, *Space* 243). Literary reading and analytic listening alike demand the suspension of everyday cognition and perception, and a yielding to the stupor of non-knowledge.

Such a practice of reading can only begin from an immersion in the literary object itself. Psychoanalysis, from this perspective, is not a means of bringing to light the concealed contents of the text. Psychoanalytic reading can of course pretend to scientific status, impelled by (as Blanchot puts it in his essay on “The Speech of Analysis”) “the desire to immobilize the truth so as to have it comfortably at hand” (234). Or, on the contrary, the literary text and its enigmas can become the means by which psychoanalysis rediscovers itself, experiences the dispossessing force of its object. Rather than ‘immobilizing the truth’ of the text, psychoanalysis would be returned by the text to its own amnesiac logic.

This return well describes the movement of the analytic relation as delineated by Jean Laplanche. For Laplanche, this relation derives its power from “the fundamental anthropological situation” it recapitulates, that is, from its derivation in the original enigma the adult carer presents to the infant. The infant’s biological helplessness is from the first overlain by a kind of communicative helplessness induced by the excess of verbal and non-verbal ‘messages’ emanating from the adult other, “swamping the child’s capacity for apprehension and mastery” (“Drive” 126). Cognitive and affective mastery are undone by the indecipherably doubled content of the adult message, the insinuation of unconscious erotic investments into the vital functions of feeding and sheltering the infant. This ‘excess of message’ leaves behind residues resistant to ‘translation’ by the infant which will coalesce to form the unconscious. These untranslatable elements implant themselves in the psyche as signifiers without referents, or “designified signifiers” (Laplanche, *Short* 97). As such, “the passage to the unconscious is correlative with a loss of referentiality” (Laplanche, *Short* 90).

I want to argue here that the aim of a properly psychoanalytic reading would be to follow this passage to the loss of referentiality and the depletion of meaning, rather than seek to reverse it. We might, again following Laplanche, find the model of such a passage in analytic *transference*. The term, of

course, denotes the process whereby the unconscious imagos of the analysand's internalised objects—parental, erotic and otherwise—are displaced onto the analyst. The discovery of those others of the past in whose guise the analyst appears might seem to be the terminus of the transference, the point at which the mask is removed from the truth of the analysand's inner life. Yet what this classical definition, designating what Laplanche calls the “filled-in” transference, leaves out of account is the enigma that accompanies the object from the first, dissolving its determinacy. This enigma conditions another experience of transference, in which what is brought to light is the originary ‘hollow’ of the other. The encounter with this hollow reveals, strictly, nothing, for it is not “the transfer of another thing” (“Transference” 229). ‘Originary,’ ‘hollowed-out,’ this ‘transference of transference,’ far from returning us to a determinate point of origin, reveals the origin itself as always doubled, always displaced. Transference is interminable because it never ceases to be transference, never arrives at a destination that would bring truth to final term.

American Amnesia: *Pierre*

This interminable transference of an impossible origin is the movement I want to trace in the reading that follows. Of course, any number of texts might serve equally well for such a task. In choosing Herman Melville's 1852 novel *Pierre or The Ambiguities*, I am conscious of the ready availability of its narrative and rhetoric to psychoanalytic explanation. *Pierre* is a novel likely, as Melville's biographer Raymond Weaver would write in 1921, “to send a Freudian into rapture” (63). Its parricidal and incestuous motifs undoubtedly offer themselves as confirmatory evidence for psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalytic reading, in other words, can premise itself on a construal of the text as a fictive displacement of a determinate psychic reality, that is, on an explicit subordination of literature to theory.

But I want to argue that *Pierre* offers a way into a very different conception of the text's relationship to theory, founded in the primacy of literature itself. Founding psychoanalytic reading in literature rather than theory has implications for the latter as much as the former. For psychoanalysis can determine the ‘truth’ of the text only by reducing psychic reality itself to a set of determinate phenomena. Thus, to take more than an example, the infantile sexuality whose meaning for Freud consists precisely in its excess to memory and knowledge, becomes a fixed datum of knowledge. What Bion calls a “possessiveness” (48) of knowledge defensively forecloses the *dispossession* proper to a psychoanalytic mode of knowledge. Sexuality in Melville's novel can be read possessively, such that the troubling ambiguities alluded to in its subtitle are resolved in theoretical elaboration. Alternatively, and as I hope to show, its reading can be a way of disclosing to psychoanalysis the ambiguity at its own heart. The key events of *Pierre*, and above all its incest plot, are plunged by their very excess into what we might call the abyss of the fictive, the doubling proper to the transference of transference.¹

As Eric Sundquist has shown, this abyssal logic attests to *Pierre*'s place in nineteenth-century American literature, where familial crises of identity and its transmission persistently figure the vicissitudes of the American nation's self-understanding. American literature can in this sense be thought of as a privileged locus of the amnesia of writing. Struggling from the outset to extricate itself from the modes and histories of its European counterpart, American literature seeks a key role in the fashioning and cultivation of a new national identity. The founding narratives of America envision the nation above all as an unprecedented source of light, bringing the promise of a divine moral and political transparency to the world. But Puritan writing shows us that this imperative of light bears within it the intimation of an ineliminable obscurity and darkness in the soul that will become the preserve of many major writers—Hawthorne, Poe, Dickinson as well as Melville—of the American nineteenth century.

Mimicking the logic of the Freudian unconscious, this founding obscurity both demands and refuses to be remembered. American writers repeatedly imagine the establishment of a tradition whose driving ambition is its own erasure. Such an amnesiac genealogy is envisioned, for example, by *The*

House of the Seven Gables's Holgrave, when he proposes that "once in every half-century, at longest, a family should be merged into the great, obscure mass of humanity, and forget all about its ancestors" (Hawthorne 209).

This injunction to insinuate forgetting into the continuity of American memory is equally at the heart of *Pierre*'s narrative of traumatic disruption in the paternal line. But the story of Pierre's discovery of and subsequent entanglement with an illegitimate sister maintains this forgetting at a discretely thematic level. With the abrupt narrative shift of the novel's last part, amnesia becomes less a theme of the novel than its essential condition. Pierre's mortal struggle with his interminable novel mimes the experience of the novel we are reading, and not simply in its echoes of the latter's protagonist and narrative. The "bungled" book Pierre is committing to paper, the narrator tells us, is shadowed by its impossible double, a "larger" and "infinitely better" book that can take form only in the privacy of his soul (304). Pierre's novel, like *Pierre*, is not so much a positive narrative of its events as an unwitting attestation to the void these events leave in memory and representation. If psychoanalytic reading seeks to fill this void, to recover its events for representation, it misconstrues not only the novel but itself. For what gives psychoanalysis its affinity for literature is not its capacity to comprehend it, but the domain of incomprehension it shares with it.²

Fictions of the Paternal Order

As the novel begins, Pierre is "emerging from his teens" (3), happily playing out his Oedipal ambitions in the shadow of his dead father's portrait. Envisioning his future in the grounds of Saddle Meadows, the Glendinning family estate, he nourishes fond hopes of "glory in capping the fame-column, whose tall shaft had been erected by his noble sires" (8). Such knowing metaphoric extravagance should make us wary of approaching this passage in the heat of Freudian 'ravishments.' Indeed, it is precisely because Melville's rhetoric so explicitly evokes the authority of the phallus that psychoanalytic interpretation here becomes dubiously tautological. If we refer the "tall shaft" to a determinate concept, we miss its intrication in the web of writing, its consignment to the truth of the *fictive*. It is not simply the subsequent course of events that will put paternal authority in question. The ironic excess of Melville's writing points up the shaft as the fictive displacement of a fiction, more precisely of a *founding* fiction, concealing behind it no determinate object, external or psychic.

Indeed, writing affirms the fictive status of the phallus for a psychoanalysis prone to forget it, to treat as substantial the emptiness of the authority it commands. The narrative trajectory of the novel, in taking us from the disruptive trauma of an incestuous desire experienced by Pierre as psychically 'full,' to the abyss of his impossible novel, charts the inexorable discovery of this essential emptiness. It is the discovery of what Blanchot calls literature's "honesty": "as soon as honesty is in play in literature, imposture is already present. Here bad faith is truth, and the greater the pretension to morality and seriousness, the more surely will mystification and deceit triumph" ("Literature" 308). The failure of Pierre's novel is the sign and seal of this triumph.

As the novel opens, Pierre is ensnared in the misrecognition of deceit as morality, the confusion of the paternal and natural orders. This confusion is first registered in what the narrator calls "*the choice fate of Pierre to have been born and bred in the country*" (13, Melville's emphasis). In America, we are told, aristocratic transmission is sealed by Nature herself, who thus plants Pierre in the country intending his "rare and original development." "Never mind," the narrator continues, "if hereby she proved ambiguous to him in the end..." (13). The effect of this narrative meditation is to insinuate the deceitful logic of writing into the supposedly transparent order of Nature. For the imposture the novel will expose at the heart of the paternal order can only have its source in Nature herself. Presiding over the rural idyll in which Pierre passes his charmed early life, Nature "whispered through her deep groves at eve, and gentle whispers of humanness, and sweet whispers of love, ran through Pierre's thought-veins, musical as water over pebbles" (14). Nature's whispered music is also an inescapably literary artifice—no sooner is it voiced than it is consigned to the 'ambiguities' of human thought and

speech. Literature structures Pierre's perception of his familial landscape and memory to the point that they are mistaken for Nature.³

In his early readings of Freud, Laplanche places this confusion at the very origin of the human organism. More specifically, he identifies an organism under the sovereignty of a primary "vital order" of natural needs and satisfactions "whose paradigm is hunger" (*Life* 14). But no sooner is such an order operative than it gives birth to its other: "simultaneous with the feeding function's achievement of satisfaction in nourishment, a sexual process begins to appear" (*Life* 17). The breast that feeds the mouth also stimulates it, introducing the ambiguity of the sexual into the transparency of the vital. Sexuality alienates and displaces the original object of hunger and self-preservation, such that it is always and from the outset lost to us: "Therein lies the key to the essential 'duplicity' situated at the very beginning of the sexual quest" (*Life* 20). This duplicity invisibly conditions the history of the Glendinning family. The novel's narrative ironies are directed against Pierre's unwitting excision of this duplicity from the world he perceives. The narrator seems repeatedly, in the opening chapter, to affirm the identification of American society with Nature: "political institutions, which in other lands seem above all things intensely artificial, with America seem to possess the divine virtue of a natural law" (9).

The novel thus puts in question not so much the naturalness of American institutions, as the divine transparency of naturalness itself. For Nature, precisely insofar as sexuality has entered it, is revealed by the novel as essentially duplicitous. American institutions, after all, only 'seem to possess the divine virtue of a natural law,' a seeming which conceals their *ambiguity*, their confounding of the very opposition between nature and artifice. The "sweet whispers of love" that "ran through Pierre's thought-veins" intimate this ambiguity as the point where the erotic and the literary converge. Just as sexuality, as Laplanche has shown, effects the irrevocable loss of its own origin, insinuating deceit into the heart of the organism, so writing's honesty is always already its imposture. This paradox is nicely compressed in the Melvillean compound "thought-veins," with its self-conscious confusion of the registers of biological immediacy and conceptual mediation.

Psychoanalytic reading runs aground when it forgets this paradox, when it reads its categories and narratives into the text as though, rather than putting it in peril, they were "in harmony with the reality principle" (Bion 48). The duplicity of writing cannot be remedied by the honesty of reading, as if reading could avoid implication in this duplicity. Blanchot's comment with regard to Kafka, that whoever reads him is "forcibly transformed into a liar" ("Reading" 4) acutely captures this predicament. The "honesty" of Melville's narrator can only mime the imposture of Nature herself, forcing the reader into the same lie.

At the level of the narrative, the paternal order's dissimulation of its own duplicity is fragile from the beginning. The swelling phallic authority of the fame-shaft is already under deflationary pressure from Pierre's ominously playful casting of his mother as 'sister,' anticipating the various displacements and perversions of familial relations to come. Presiding over the ambiguous banter of mother and son is the gaze of the dead father's portrait. This imposing image "of a middle-aged, married man...seemed to possess all the nameless and slightly portly tranquilities, incident to that condition when a felicitous one" (72-73). The portrait, then, keeps watch over the steady transmission of the father's place and authority. What is excised from the transmission of these "portly tranquilities" is the troublesome noise of the unconscious, which is nonetheless made audible in the unknowingly erotised chatter of mother and son.

It is only in the (in every sense) *other* portrait of his father, banished from sight by his mother, that the unconscious enters and interrupts this process of transmission. The likeness of Pierre's father as a young bachelor returns the destabilising force of desire to the paternal image. After years of unsatisfied curiosity regarding this portrait, its meaning is intimated to Pierre *après-coup*, following the discovery of his illegitimate sister. The receipt of Isabel's letter recalls a boyhood exchange with his aunt regarding the origin of the portrait of his young father, painted by his Cousin Ralph. Concealing

the activity of painting, Ralph thereby 'steals' his portrait, capturing him in a posture animated by his passion for a beautiful French refugee aristocrat, with whom he will go on to father Isabel. The expression that emerges becomes the object of insistent narrative fascination over the pages that follow. The face appears to look at his sister and child "frankly, and cheerfully, as if there was nothing kept concealed; and yet again, a little ambiguously and mockingly, as if slyly winking to some other picture" (80). The honesty of the expression is thus its imposture, its open frankness the most effective dissimulation of its duplicity. Ambiguity surfaces at precisely the point that the subject's gaze, consigned to the abyss of permanent displacement -Laplanche's "transference of transference"- seems to shift from its viewer to "some other picture."

Returning to the portrait in the wake of his sister's revelation, Pierre discerns in it an apostrophe from his father, assuring him that it is this rather than the later portrait that reveals him as he is: "in youth we *are*, Pierre, but in age we *seem*" (83). But this distinction between being and seeming is subject to ironic reversal. Where the 'seeming' of age manifests itself in the guise of substantial being, the "portly tranquilities" of the paternal order, the 'being' of youth is such precisely in its duplicity, expressed exemplarily in the portrait's enigmatic smile: "Consider; for a smile is the chosen vehicle of all ambiguities. When we would deceive, we smile; when we are hatching any nice little artifice, Pierre; only just a little gratifying our own sweet little appetites, Pierre: then watch us, and out comes the odd little smile" (84). It is hard to avoid perceiving the trace of portraiture's most famous smile in this imagined address. What Freud describes as the "remarkable...fascinating and puzzling" smile of the Mona Lisa, with its "contrast between reserve and seduction" (*Leonardo* 107-108), finds an uncanny echo in the play of frankness and openness on the face of Pierre's father. The smile is the embodiment of the secret that manifests itself by withholding itself. It provokes a desire to know that the father's imagined apostrophe tauntingly enjoins: "Something comes of all persistent inquiry; we are not so continually curious for nothing, Pierre; not for nothing, do we so intrigue and become wily diplomatists, and glozers with our own minds, Pierre; and afraid of following the Indian trail from the open plain to the dark thickets, Pierre..." (84). What might this "something" promised by "persistent inquiry" turn out to be? An answer is intimated in the trajectory of the Indian trail "from the open plain to the dark thickets." Inquiry stages a passage from the evident to the incomprehensible, drawing its subject out of light and into obscurity. This is the passage described by Freud as the ultimate itinerary of dream interpretation, during which we always reach a point at which "there is a tangle of dream-thought which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches into the unknown" (*Interpretation* 525). With Freud's tangle as with Melville's dark thickets, that which solicits inquiry finally and fatally obstructs it. The drive to know can only arrive at that spot in the unknown which dispossesses it.

American familial genealogy serves as the vehicle for figuring this dispossession. The "Indian trail" brings into visibility the history of violence which founds the Glendinnings' claims on Saddle Meadows. Pierre's grandfather, founding patriarch of the estate, is remembered at once as "a sweet-hearted, charitable Christian...fit image of his God", and as having, "in a night-scuffle in the wilderness before the Revolutionary War...annihilated two Indian savages by making reciprocal bludgeons of their heads" (29-30). The original obscurity into which inquiry leads is inseparable from an original violence: "[g]enealogical source and ethical motive become lost in an inexplicable tangle of obscurity and ambiguity opening out of an abyss" (Sundquist 161).

The smile of the chair-portrait, in its play of "reserve and seduction," concealment and display, makes this abyss paradoxically manifest. More specifically, it reveals the source of this spot in the enigmatic address of the human other, for Laplanche the origin of creative *inspiration*. Aesthetic experience is a means of insistently recalling and remaking the traumatic enigma of the infant's encounter with the adult other. Leonardo's series of "mysterious pictures...characterised by the enigmatic smile" (Freud, *Leonardo* 133-34) are in this sense "persistent inquiry" into this encounter which finally lead only into the "dark thickets" of non-knowledge. To give the name of "inspiration" rather than the more familiar

“sublimation” to this movement is to mark its being “conjugated via the other” (Laplanche “Sublimation” 48) rather than the ego:

Creation, in Leonardo and...in Giacometti, is as if *shot through by the trajectory of ‘investigation’*... But in what direction does this trajectory point? No doubt investigation, like creation, comes from the individual and in this sense it is centrifugal. But what calls it forth and orients it is a trajectory that comes from the other. For *Leonardo*, ‘the eye is the window of the soul’, indicating an opening, an exposure of the soul, to the trauma of the other. (Laplanche, “Sublimation” 47)

The window of inspiration, then, opens onto the “dark thickets” rather than the “open plain” of the other. Its taunting ambiguity at once demands and blocks reading, and as such provides an exemplary figure for the specific predicament of psychoanalytic reading. Psychoanalytic reading can construe itself as a theoretical mechanism for apprehending and so mastering the trauma of otherness that births the text. But it does so at the expense of the essential experience of both itself and the text. The affinity of psychoanalytic and aesthetic experience lies in the dispossession, common to both, by the very knowledge each aims to possess.

Blank Truth

Writing appears insistently in the narrative as the agent of this dispossession, frustrating Pierre’s ongoing quest to resolve the ambiguities of his past and present. The sly wink of the young father’s portrait to “some other picture,” referring one representation to another, is emblematic of the abyssal logic of Pierre’s investigations.

From the outset, Pierre is driven by a struggle to extirpate the obscurity plaguing his affective and perceptual experience. The struggle is figured above all in the erotic contrast of Lucy and Isabel. The predominance of whiteness in the former’s cheek and the dazzle of her teeth “dived for in the Persian Sea” (24) point to a kind of ideal luminosity, registered affectively in the form of “blessed serenity,” “Joy” and “Life” (42). This serenity is anxiously wrested from the oppressive “vagueness” which has haunted Pierre since his first glimpse of the mysterious girl soon to be revealed as Isabel: “Oh! Wretched vagueness — too familiar to me, yet inexplicable—unknown, utterly unknown!” (41). It is hard to avoid hearing here the anticipatory echo of the Freudian uncanny, not least because the paradoxical binding of the “too familiar” to the “utterly unknown” will turn out to be an effect of Pierre’s incestuous desire. But once again, it is not so much a matter of invoking the uncanny as a conceptual key to Pierre’s state of mind—on the contrary, it is the insistent murmur of the “utterly unknown” that brings Freud’s terms into focus. When Freud contends that “an uncanny experience occurs...when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression” (“Uncanny” 249), he hints at a psychoanalysis which is not merely a thinking of the uncanny, but thinking *become* uncanny, undergoing a movement from the contrived clarity won by repression to the undifferentiated vagueness of infantile life. The uncanny, from this perspective, is less a means to theoretical illumination than to delineating an experience of accumulating darkness, the inexorable disappearance of the known world.

This darkness is less the other of light than “a light shining on the dark, a light bright from the clarity of this darkness” (Blanchot, *Space* 226). It is the paradoxical light associated with reading, doubling the obscurity it is intended to relieve. Thus when Pierre briefly dispels the troubling apparition of Isabel’s face, he recovers a joy felt as “a coat of iron-mail,” which “seems to grow round, and husk me now; and I have heard, that the bitterest winters are foretold by a thicker husk upon the Indian corn; so our old farmers say. But ‘tis a dark similitude” (42). The flow of Pierre’s interior monologue stumbles on the obstacle of analogy. The husk, intended to signify an enhanced protection against the encroachments of the other in all their traumatic obscurity, becomes instead a figure of fatal exposure to the same. Reading consigns meaning to “dark similitude,” to its permanent displacement or transference.

That Pierre feels this permanent transference as a repetitive torment is aptly indicated by his resolution to spend a “pretty time” with Lucy reading in Flaxman’s Dante, “Night’s and Hell’s poet” (42). The resolution is annulled as soon as he associates “pensive, sweet Francesca’s face” to the mournful face now haunting him. The renunciation of the book leads to the chapter’s dramatic crescendo: “‘Damned be the hour I read in Dante! more damned than that wherein Paolo and Francesca read in fatal Launcelot!’” (42). The allusion to Virgil showing Dante the shades of the lovers murdered by their husband and brother after falling in love reading the romance of Launcelot and Guinevere plunges Pierre’s own narrative into an abyss of “dark similitudes.” The reverence he has felt a few pages earlier on entering Lucy’s chamber becomes, under the narrator’s gaze, an instance of the “rubric” of “his book of Love,” a book now doubled by its infernal other. The narrative that he seeks to resolve in serene union with Lucy is repeatedly displaced and unbound by the intrusion of a death-driven sexuality, an excess that threatens whenever Pierre exposes himself to the risks of reading.

Nor does the serene reverence associated with Lucy finally offer any hope of binding this excess. Lucy’s sublime whiteness would seem to oppose sexual and narrative stasis to Isabel’s disruptive obscurity. But in offering herself as a non-sexual companion to Pierre in his fictive marriage to Isabel, she ceases to embody the steady constancy of bound erotic love. Her radical renunciation of any reciprocity in love puts her more on the side of death than Eros. In his extraordinary narrative of biological pre-history, let us recall, Freud identifies the beginning of life as the insinuation of some force “of whose nature we can have no conception” into the inanimate. The resulting tension seeks immediately ‘to cancel itself out. In this way, the first drive came into being: the drive to return to an inanimate state’ (Freud, *Beyond* 38). The drive’s first aim is thus its own extinction. It seeks not to establish but to discharge itself. For Pierre Aulagnier, this constitutes “the major scandal of psychic functioning: ...the original presence of a rejection of living in favour of the search for a state of quiescence, of *non-desire*, which remains the aim, unknown, but always at work, of desire” (17).

Lucy’s self-sacrifice surely stages this original aim of desire as its own annulment. In her letter to Pierre announcing her imminent arrival, she presents her proposal not as compensation for, but as the sublime fulfilment of, her love for him: “I...once did love thee but too fondly, and with earthly frailty. But now I shall be wafted far upward from that; shall soar up to thee, where thou sittest in thine own calm, sublime heaven of heroism” (310). The sexual drive’s tendency to self-extinction is not an exit from, but the original expression of desire: “The death drive is the very soul, the constitutive principle, of libidinal circulation” (Laplanche, *Life* 124).

Lucy’s movement across the novel from erotic constancy to self-extinction is figured in the changing signification of her whiteness. In her first appearance, the predominating white of her skin is alloyed with tints of red. With her reappearance towards the end of the novel, this seductive beauty, in which the blankness of death is concealed in the warm redness of bodily life, gives way to “a fascination partaking of the terrible.” The tints of red dissolve, “[a]nd as if her body indeed were the temple of God, and marble indeed were the only fit material for so holy a shrine, a brilliant, supernatural whiteness now gleamed in her cheek” (327-28).

It is hard to miss a self-referential allusion to *Moby-Dick*, published just a year before *Pierre*. Ishmael’s meditations on “the whiteness of the whale” in the chapter of that title point up the terror the colour induces when uncoupled from “more kindly associations” (288). This chapter leads us to the void which conditions the entire matter of the world, and so “stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation” (295). White is the original death concealed in all life: “the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge – pondering this, the palsied universe lies before us like a leper...” (296).

Lucy’s erotic self-sacrifice makes visible this cosmic blankness at the heart of all meaning, the death secretly governing life. The fascinating terror of her whiteness lies in its disclosure of the leprous state

of the universe itself. It is a whiteness rhymed in the abyss of Pierre's novel, and in the progressive destitution of meaning that governs our own reading.

The novel is replete with narrative interventions attesting to the impossibility of burrowing down to a truth which would not itself open onto a further truth—or, put another way, to a transference that would not itself be transferred. “The world,” the narrator opines in reference to Pierre's novelistic struggles, “is forever babbling of originality; but there never was an original man, in the sense intended by the world; the first man himself – who according to the Rabbins was also the first author – not being an original; the only original author being God” (259). Human authorship, then, never comes to rest in its own origin, but is always referred to a prior instance.

Nor does God provide the guarantee of this absent origin. Remarking the strange chain of events that leads him to Isabel, the narrator speaks of Pierre's “poetic” wonder at “that all-controlling and all-permeating wonderfulness...so significantly denominated The Finger of God” (139). “But,” he continues, “it is not merely the Finger, it is the whole outspread Hand of God; for doth not Scripture intimate, that He holdeth all of us in the hollow of His hand?—a Hollow, truly!” The novel carries Pierre from faith in God as the all-controlling Finger of his own narrative to the discovery of God as the very Hollow of that narrative. What Blanchot calls “the clarity of the beginning,” the point at which the matter of the work seems to issue from what precedes it, is gradually revealed to Pierre as “the obscurity of the origin” (Blanchot, *Space* 204), the origin that withdraws into dissimulation in the face of every attempt to apprehend and master it.

Pierre's novel becomes the impossible project of appropriating this origin, and as such reduces him to a condition of radical impotence, “a cripple” (301). Seated at his writing desk, his sole mobility consists of dragging any needed objects in his vicinity with a crook-ended cane. The whiteness of the paper inexorably drains the sight from his eyes, such that he can write only by rolling his pupils into “their own orbits,” sitting “suspended, motionless, blank” (341). The physical act of writing, then, finally suspends Pierre's relationship to a determinate space outside itself, as if miming the passage to the impossible origin staged by the words on the page. Pierre's blind, motionless gaze is “solitude's gaze...the gaze of the incessant and the interminable. In it blindness is vision still, vision which is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing...” (Blanchot, *Space* 32). To sink into this impossibility of not seeing is to renounce the possibilities of worldly vision, creative and erotic alike.

The Hollow of Incest

It is towards this profound scandal of renunciation, rather than the more worldly scandal of transgression, that incest leads the narrative. Incestuous desire, indeed, seems to disclose the sexual drive as essentially “unfavourable to the realisation of complete satisfaction” (Freud, “On the Universal” 188-89). If incest, Freud continues, is at the origin of desire, our consequent consignment to “an endless series of substitutive objects” (189) puts frustration at the very heart of desire. But Isabel, Pierre finds, does not provide a means of recovering the original object that would complete this “endless series.” As incestuous object, she opens Pierre instead to “the obscurity of the origin” concealed in “the clarity of the beginning,” the blank Hollow into which all meaning sinks.

The hope of returning to the clarity of the beginning is fleetingly held out by the climactic visit of Pierre, Lucy and Isabel to an art gallery displaying on opposite walls portraits of Beatrice Cenci and a “Stranger's Head by the Unknown Head” (351). The seraphic head of the former is set against the anomaly of her “most horrible crimes” of “incest and parricide” (351). The Stranger, in turn, portrays “a dark, comely, youthful man's head, portentously looking out of a dark, shaded ground, and ambiguously smiling” (351)—that “other picture” perhaps, at which the father of the chair-portrait is winking. Pierre's wonder at the Stranger's likeness to the chair-portrait is echoed in Isabel's at its evocation of the ‘father’ she remembers from childhood. The ambiguous Stranger, in other words,

promises to remedy the tormenting amnesia afflicting Isabel and Pierre, to bring them into cathartic contact with their own origin.

But the Stranger finally only exacerbates the enigma of the origin, tearing at Pierre's belief in the substance of the biological links between his father, Isabel and himself. The Stranger leaves him a stranger to his own presumed knowledge, abandons him to the bald question which, unbeknownst to him, has silently pursued him throughout the novel: "how did he *know* that Isabel was his sister?" (353). Pierre's journey of discovery can only terminate in this impasse of non-knowledge, the very impasse of reading itself. The fictitious marriage into which he enters with the intention of concealing an unspeakable truth, is finally revealed to have covered only another fiction, or rather the nullity of the very distinction between truth and fiction.

Far from bringing Pierre into contact with the source of all transferences, Isabel embodies the destabilizing force of transference, or 'ambiguity' itself: "Always in me, the solidest things melt into dreams, and dreams into solidities" (117). Pierre's desire for Isabel, like the endless project of writing, can only terminate in this zone of indistinction. Penetrating beyond the "first superficiality" of appearances, Pierre the novelist "fondly weens he has come to the unlayered substance":

But, as far as any geologist has yet gone down into the world, it is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies. 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! (285)

Mining the pyramid, the ultimate repository of deep memory, promises to yield the subterranean secrets of the past in all their fullness. But such secrets void any such efforts to recover them for memory, disclosing their 'appalling' bodilessness at the very moment of their revelation.

Psychoanalytic Reading: Two Itineraries

I have sought in this article to delineate, by way of this long excursion into Melville, two itineraries for psychoanalytic reading. The first proceeds in the manner of Pierre's fond illusion of penetrating to "the unlayered substance" underlying the transferential layers of the narrative. It is governed by the conviction that its concepts can regain the immemorial for memory and knowledge, take possession of that which dispossesses reading. It seeks to coerce the "Silence" by which "[a]ll profound things, and emotions of things are preceded and attended" (204) into the transparency of language, or to make conscious the unconscious of the work.

The second itinerary involves submission to the truth of the pyramid whose contents we nonetheless mine assiduously—namely, that the endlessly "superinduced superficies" of the work finally yield not its long-sought substance but its appalling vacancy, a vacancy that haunts not only *Pierre* but the broader and ongoing American literary project of self-invention. If psychoanalytic reading misrecognises its own enterprise as a quest for "the clarity of the beginning," whether textual or historical, in being exposed to the play of the text it will discover—in spite of itself—its proper destination as "the obscurity of the origin."

Nor, in spite of the separation I have contrived between these itineraries, are they really dissociable, for both are part of the destiny of the text and of its reading. The text cannot escape becoming "a given thing...which one reads for instruction, for increased self-knowledge, to cultivate the mind" (Blanchot, *Space*, 205). Its "contentless affirmation" is fated to appropriation as "an enduring reality" (Blanchot, *Space*, 206).

Psychoanalytic reading cannot be immune from this doubled fate. Its terms will inevitably be brought to bear on the text in the interests of rendering it "known, subjugated, communicated" (Blanchot,

“Literature” 330). Psychoanalytic reading cannot renounce this drive to know; but it can disclose the amnesia that is both its condition and destination.

¹ Edgar Dryden offers an important reading, in a somewhat different register, of this logic of doubling in the novel. Dryden focuses especially on the consignment of any ‘extra-textual’ truth to the entanglements of the textual: “Since the only non-textual entity is the silence of the crude forms of the natural earth, any act of speaking and writing is bound to be a repetition, a displacement or a representation or a purely textual entity, and necessarily derived, secondary and inessential” (170). Recoded in a Laplanchean vocabulary, the analytic quest for the event or memory engendering the transference yields only a further movement of the transference.

² My primary concern in this article to elaborate the implications of this experience of incomprehension may seem to displace the more explicitly socio-political questions and ambiguities raised by *Pierre* and elaborated by a wide range of readers of the novel. No judgement on my part of the significance of these questions should be inferred from their being left relatively underdeveloped here. Indeed, the importance of William V. Spanos’s work on the novel lies in its insistence on the inextricability of its ontological and socio-political motifs: “...the de-centering that *Pierre* undergoes is essentially ontological, a question of the being of being. But insofar as this ontological emergence also involves unnamings, that is, the disintegration of language, it is also socio-political” (109). Spanos’ claim is that the social and ontological orders converge in the novel in its implicit critique of the appropriation of the immemorial ‘nothingness’ of being to the order of representation—put another way, in the bringing of the traumatic force of the amnesiac under the rule of memory.

³ These remarks on the self-consciously excessive figurality of the ‘natural’ idyll of Saddle Meadows are partly informed by Paul de Man’s well-known reading, in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” of the “erotic garden” of Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. De Man shows here how the apparent naturalism of Rousseau’s perceptual language slyly conceals its intertextual artifice: “Far from being an observed scene or the expression of a personal *état d’âme*, it is clear that Rousseau has deliberately taken all the details of his setting from the medieval literary sources, one of the best-known versions of the traditional *topos* of the erotic garden” (203). For Samuel Otter, this rhetorical excess is the means by which Melville disrupts ‘the antebellum ideology’—embodied in particular by Thomas Cole and the Knickerbocker school of picturesque American painters and writers—“of the unmarred, apotheosized imperative American landscape” (58).

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