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**READINGS / RENDERINGS OF AMERICA**


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1. Like an echo to bygone times, an old couplet returns: “Oh my America, my new found land, how blessed am I in this discovering thee!”<sup>1</sup> Slowly, oh, so slowly, you remember, the object of the poet’s desire was lured into casting off what still concealed her from his penetrating sight and what, much like a book’s gay coverings, stood in the way of his licentious, roving hands. Qualms though surreptitiously arose: what would those hands find beyond those liberating bonds, behind those gems? Slowly, oh, go slowly, the poet seemed to plead, abetting his desire, for what would remain when unclothed she must be, all coverings peeled off that he (and you, you hoped, through the transparency of his idiom), the truth and dignity of her mystic book, might see revealed?

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2. Before its eventual—accidental as it turned out—discovery, “America,” you muse, may have always been and, to some extent, may even remain one of those words which might mean nothing without quotation marks. What you mean is that “America” is perhaps as much a textual space on to which fictions of desire might be projected, as a geographical or historical reality. Arthur Bird's prophetic vision of a colossal America—“bounded on the north by the North Pole; on the south by the Antarctic Region; on the east by the first chapter of the Book of Genesis and on the west by the Day of Judgment”<sup>2</sup>—concomitant with his superimposition of the biblical text onto the American continent both as a reminder and perpetuation of the Puritan eschatology, reminds you that the American text as such has, from the penning of its very first words, failed again and again to yield the expected meaning or to comply with its pre-ordained, pre-scripted reading(s). Time, in this America, no matter how closed American Jeremiahs may have wished it to be, kept opening up onto unexpected perspectives, erasing old projections and covering them with ever new, conflicting ones. Yet leafing through the pages of the past backwards in the hope of fixing miscalculations, mistakes—miscarriages?—proved impossible: Bird's vision may have been colossal indeed, it remained *bounded* in all directions, whereas America as text-in-progress could never find place within a book's binding.

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1 J. Donne, “Elegy 19: To His Mistress Going to Bed.”

2 A. Bird, *Looking Forward*, 6-7.

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3. Fragments of the couplet linger: “America... new found land... discovering thee...” And in your understanding of it—call it *reading*, if you will—gaps are widening as you suddenly feel the oxymoronic tension between “new” and “found” or “found” and “discovering.” Something is amiss, or so it seems from your newly-gained perspective. What if, somehow, this “America” whose discovering never seems to cease, enacted anew, as it is, from text to text—what if this “America” was but the outcome of a radical misreading that keeps pointing to the absolute discrepancy between a text-in-progress still largely to be (re)written and a fixed meaning always projected in advance, thus partly covering or erasing the text it is meant to reveal? As an object of desire the very concept of “America” (and, as Babs Masters muses in William Gass' *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, “[h]ow close, in the end, is a cunt to a concept—we enter both with joy”<sup>3</sup>) thrives on its enticing eclipse, keeps luring the poet onwards, leads him to stage and deploy the whole scenography of his desire, thus pre-inscribing the meaning he lusts for before the completion of his obtuse, silent text: “To teach thee, I am naked first, why then / What needst thou have more covering than a man.” What the poem reveals in the (mere) form of a rhetorical question that begs no answer, is the unbridgeable gap between desire and its fulfilment through a text whose prescribed meaning (“Until I labour, I in labour lie”) somehow precludes its very reading: the progressive stripping bare, through the poet's performative language, of what essentially remains a textual construct—as exemplified by the poet's diverse invocations and use of deictics—rather contributes to making the object of his desire, if not altogether disappear, at least quite uncertain and hypothetical (“Then since I may know, / As liberally, as to a midwife, show / Thyself”). In any case, in the poem's concluding lines, it seems as though—if you dared—the poet's persona were falling short of his own expectations; as though the act aimed at were, at best, but a precocious one...

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4. If you take your cue from it, it is mainly because, in its metaphorical rendering of “America,” John Donne's elegy may serve as a prototype or blueprint for later American fiction. For similarly, there seems in the end to be—and somehow always has been—something that remains out-of-sync about those fictions of America, about the way its projection always precedes and precludes, or obliterates its “discovering”—thinking this, you are suddenly reminded of those

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3 The text, the better to lose you, is not paginated.

“piece[s] of time neatly snipped out” in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*: “a few feet of film run backwards... the blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound—then growing *out of it* the roar of its own fall, catching up to what's already death and burning... a ghost in the sky...” (48) And, indeed, what other outcome than catastrophe can such out-of-sync effects have? It thus strikes you as quite relevant that Pynchon's narrative makes such systematic use of ellipses throughout; for whereas Puritan typological hermeneutics, as the first mode somehow of American reading, mainly aimed at closing the gap between types and antitypes as a legitimation of the settlers' enterprise, American fiction has from the start elected those very gaps as its main locus of action and resistance. So far as it is possible to generalise, American fiction may be but the deliberate attempt to loosen the gaps and perforate new holes into the American fabric, however not so much with a view to denounce potential misreadings—as this would unavoidably confine the writer into the role of the American Jeremiah, thus protracting the all-consuming ideology he or she strives and writes against—as to resist and challenge reading proper, to counter and invalidate hermeneutic apparatuses of any kind: meaning becomes elusive, and more than ever your interpretation appears uncertain at best, unsure as you are of where (if...) it remains possible for you to ground it when all those texts, each in its own way, present you with all the signs of your own *interpretosis*.

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5. The first symptoms were made manifest to you while you were grappling with Herman Melville's “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” a story in which Bartleby somehow acted as a blank in the narrator's account: try as he might, the narrator was constantly drawn back to the same *initial* conclusion—stated as a conditional preliminary to the text itself—that not only did he not know much about his employee, but that there might actually be nothing much or more to know about him, give or take an unverifiable rumour or two maybe. For the more the text moved on—or failed to, rather—the more Bartleby's existence appeared to be wedged into the very loopholes of the text. “A bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic” (32) first appearing on the narrator's “office threshold” (19), the figure of Bartleby soon came to embody in-betweenness, not only as a go-between in the narrator's mind with regards to Nippers' and Turkey's opposite tempers, but also given his location in the narrator's chambers, apart from his colleagues on the narrator's side of the office, yet isolated from the latter's sight by a screen (19). Contrary to the narrator's initial expectations when hiring him, Bartleby, far from making his business more functional and efficient, will eventually introduce some play and loosen the gaps within the narrator's whole system. To a certain extent at least, the whole text might even be seen as the progressive deregulation of the narrator's “method” (14),

constantly held in check by Bartleby's formula which, albeit grammatically and syntactically correct as Deleuze showed, nevertheless turns grammar loose insofar as it acts as “a kind of limit-function” (*Essays Critical and Clinical*, 68) which, as such, invalidates all possibility for the narrator to *articulate* a proper response of his own; any “ordinary” response is denied him and he significantly realises that he “should have as soon thought of turning [his] pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors.” (21) Eloquence and rhetoric are somehow beaten on their own turf as the formula's first occurrence leaves the narrator “awhile in perfect silence, rallying [his] stunned faculties.” (20) Not only is all attempt at authentic discourse or conversation jammed or defused by the formula, but Bartleby's *unspeech*, as it were, further contaminates the other characters' discourses, the narrator's included: “Somehow,” he says, “of late I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions.” (31) In such circumstances, all the narrator can do is to put off his own reaction or reply and, repeatedly, “to postpone the consideration of this dilemma to [his] future leisure.” (22) What Melville's story repeats throughout is a crisis which, again and again, fails to match its solution or remedy, whose *dénouement* is either anticipated—“I assumed the ground that depart he must; and upon that assumption built all I had to say.” (34)—or postponed—“But my business hurried me. I concluded to forget the matter for the present” (21)—but ultimately to no avail. As such, on a different scale from *Moby Dick* or *The Confidence-Man* perhaps, “Bartleby” may give shape to the gaps that threaten any logical, rational and legitimising system to go bankrupt: the narrator's only success is, in this regard, to comply with his own sense of failure announced at the very beginning of his narrative which he presents in the form of “an irreparable loss to literature.” (13) In a way, the text's negativity—in the photographic sense of the word: this tendency, exemplified, among other things, by the narrator's abundant use of litotes (“I was not insensible” [14], “not a little resembled” [14], “a not inhumane temper” [23], “this mood was not invariable” [24], “not without sundry twinges” [27], etc.), might be another hint at the contamination of the narrator's account by Bartleby's formula, itself halfway between an assertion (*I would prefer...*) and a negation (*not to*); the narrator's own comment upon the formula (“it was generally understood that [Bartleby] would prefer not to—in other words, that he would refuse point-blank.” [25]), turning it into a refusal pure and simple, thus unavoidably appears as a misreading of sorts...—the text's negativity, then, turns it into a blank text, or literally a “text for nothing” since the text's opening, thus possibly short-circuiting its very reading, already points and directs you to its postscript. Yet, built as it is upon a rumour whose grounds and truth the narrator cannot vouch for, this “sequel” (13) to the narrative “proper” forcefully re-inscribes Bartleby's own

“unaccountability” at the very moment when it tries to account for him, in what appears to be a desperate attempt at making him and the text *signify*: with the ultimate mention of those mere fragments of texts and lives left for dead and all but forgotten about, of those “dead letters” he comes to identify with Bartleby himself, the narrator inadvertently stresses that both Bartleby and the text he conceived of in terms of “a few passages in [his] life” (13), are forever deprived of the possibility of a reply or exchange... The text, in the end, appears indeed as the articulation of a few “passages” leading nowhere, mere sallies outside the text, that is, in the same way that *Moby Dick* could be seen, as ambiguously suggested by Ishmael himself, as a series of perforations into the text's fabric: “This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught.” (128)

6. This “vague report” concluding “Bartleby,” untrustworthy as it may be, in any case strikes you as an afterword directed at you—this “little item of rumor” was after all offered for your own curiosity—in the form of a radical interrogation, maybe even a challenge of sorts. Among the narrator's first words on first hearing Bartleby's strange formula, was a question, you remember: “What do you mean? [...]” (20) A question whose very formulation you are bound in turn to make *yours* (unless, that is, the narrator merely impersonated your own idiosyncrasies) as, you become aware of this, your text merely amplifies it. Can you, now, resist the narrator's belated answer: “Poor fellow, poor fellow! thought I, he don't mean any thing” (36)?

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7. And, precisely, what would it mean for you to do so? If—for such (you are not sure) is your own reading of the text—Melville's story deconstructs any attempt at *legitimising* meaning, making it, as is the narrator's job, both legitimate and legible, how then can you in turn pretend to inscribe or graft your own interpretation of and on a text which quite explicitly severs all ties with anything surrounding it, which deliberately projects itself, as “A Story of Wall-Street,” into a critical dead-end? The text's only “truth” suddenly seems to dawn upon you: that each—yours being ultimately no exception—(mis-)reading of the story, deprived as the latter is, like the narrator's chambers (14), of any perspective, is a forceful breach of the text, something of which Jean-François Lyotard may have had the intuition before you:

How can a commentary not be a persecution of what is commented upon? Doesn't it bring forth the proof (from the sole fact that the reader speaks up) that in formulating his or her request, he or she supposes that he or she knows it or at least supposes it to be knowable, and that this request ceases to be a marvel to which writing makes itself accessible? Is the request then no more than a prescription

provided with a content, a sense, to which the work is held, as a hostage is held for the observance of a promise?<sup>4</sup>

8. If, in Philippe Jaworski's words, the figure of Bartleby “reflects the question of literature—what is it that you desire from me?—back to the person interrogating him,”<sup>5</sup> the interpretive graft you wish to operate is thus, because of the text's very nature, rejected in advance: your prospective response to the text is unavoidably reflected to you in the form of a question to which, you have to admit, you cannot “suppose” or “assume,” to use the narrator's term in Melville's story, to know the answer: the “unaccountable Bartleby” (37) remains so to the very end and, as such, thwarts all narrative and interpretive attempts as, in both cases, those are but the obliteration of an original, *irreparably lost* text, “held hostage” by the projection or *pre-scriptio*n of a meaning which, in the end, remains utterly alien to it.

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9. What is it that you desire from me? This, you fear, might not be a generous offer so much as the expression of a radical misunderstanding—what can you possibly want to know? what is there for you to know that you do not know already? or what is there that could be so dignified by your own knowledge of it? or is it, rather, that its assumed knowability dignifies you?

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10. “I knew Willie Masters’ missus before becoming acquainted with the gentleman himself, knew her, that is, in the Biblical sense, which is the only way any of us knew her or can know her, and as I am knowing her now,” says Phil Gelvin in Robert Coover's “On Mrs. Willie Masters” (10). Beyond (or because of) the humour and the parody, Coover's tribute to William Gass' *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*—halfway between fiction and criticism—says much about the critical act and the desire and lust for knowledge that underlies it. Gass' text already was a performative, experimental attempt to play with, frustrate and arouse the reader's desire in ways so radical that, Coover's response suggests, the only possibility left for the reader—here (as in Gass' original) standing in Gelvin's shoes, so to speak—is to engage with it in unusual, unconventional ways: textual knowledge—what the critic somehow strives for—thus becomes an act of pleasure akin to Roland Barthes' sensuous conception of interpretation as a construction of the text's “significance,”<sup>6</sup>

4 J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend*, 114

5 Bartleby “renvoie à qui l'interroge [...] la question de la littérature : que désires-tu de moi?” (P. Jaworski, *Le Désert et l'empire*, 19)

6 In French, *la signifiante*. (R. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, 82)

that is “meaning, insofar as it is sensually produced”<sup>7</sup>. Hence Babs Masters' complaint and regret towards the end of her performance in *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* that her lover-cum-reader “did not, in his address, at any time, construct me. He made nothing, I swear—nothing. Empty I began, and empty I remained.” Often considered an exemplary metafiction, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, you realise, may also be—as suggested by the intertextual resonance of Willie Masters' name—an ironical *Bildungsroman* of sorts in which you, its reader, would be cast into the lead role.

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11. Were you to generalise, you could even go as far as boasting that Robert Coover's work as a whole might be but the constant reappraisal of a same initial basic scenario tailor-made for you; be that as it may, you know all too well that even were this the case, there would actually be nothing to boast about... You still shudder to recall some of the parts you have had to play, quite reluctantly most of the time: in *Pricksongs & Descants*, for instance, you ended up, as it were, a noose around your neck in “Panel Game” after having been “dragged protesting from the Audience,” thus summoned, “Unwilling Participant” though you were, to answer “THE BIG QUESTION” that, with hindsight, you realise was never even asked (79-80); or, you suspect Jason, the main character in “The Marker,” book in hands, to be but your own *impotent* reflection onto the page. Yes, you are now suddenly reminded of the narrator's sense of impotency in Melville's “Bartleby”:

incontinently I slunk away from my own door, and did as desired. But not without sundry twinges of impotent rebellion against the mild effrontery of this unaccountable scrivener. Indeed, it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were. For I consider that one, for the time, is a sort of unmanned when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his own premises.<sup>8</sup>

12. Like Melville's narrator, Jason in Coover's story has to account for what remains unaccountable: putting his book aside as he has caught sight of his desirable wife, Jason undresses, turns the light off, and blindly goes in search of the bed and his wife—a search that will last three weeks, abruptly ended when a police officer enters the room and turns the light back onto Jason making love to the rotting corpse of his dead wife, “[h]er eyes [...] open, but glazed over, staring up at him, without meaning [...]” (90) The better to emphasise the sterility of Jason's choice—reading on or making love?—his genitals are “[pounded] to a pulp with the butt of [the policeman's] gun.”

<sup>7</sup> R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> H. Melville, “Bartleby”, 27.

(91) The marker sensually inserted within the book's covers as a sign of Jason's possession of it eventually falls down; Jason's reading has been cancelled out.

13. Given the context, though, you have second thoughts about what you have just said; for you know somehow that you too have been “unmanned,” as it were, “ordered away from your own premises” as the text impinges upon your own reading territory; it seems you have no real choice but to acknowledge those images of you reflected and diffracted from text to text, casting you again and again as the misreader, this “sucker for words [who]'ll read anything, afraid of missing something if he doesn't,” for “[i]f there is something to be read, [you] cannot but, fearful of missing a message, *the* message, read it.”<sup>9</sup> No matter what you do or how you do it, the text seems to have anticipated your every move, hinting on each of its pages at what *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* proclaims in bold letters at some point—**You've been had, from start to finish.** For even trying to keep your distance from all those characters implies your projecting meaning into the text, as illustrated in *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* when one character's plea for meaninglessness is equated with yet another reductive assertion of meaning:

—Nonsense. [...] I don't think this has anything to do with so-called soul-searching or with any other kind of meaning whatsoever. Just the opposite. Cassandra is, as always, in her mindless anarchic way, trying to obliterate all meaning, to force the mind away from logical constructions and toward an acceptance of meaningless associations, beautiful only in their denial of meaning. Isn't that right?

— ...!

—Well, there's your answer, you ol' quack. Smack on the snoot!<sup>10</sup>

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14. You wonder, though: what is it that you are supposed to do and somehow fail to achieve again and again? Will you ever be up to the text's expectations? Babs Masters, you know, is a pro, knowing all too well what strings to pull and how to pull them, for your own pleasure. Yet, she insists: nothing comes without its price—“I give as good as I receive. If [you] will be attentive, thoughtful, warm and kind, I shall be passionate and beautiful.” (*Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*) Empty she began, empty she remained—a mere projection, a fantasy cut loose from all gravity, yet all too real for that, endowed with the reality of poetry: an empty space to be investigated and constructed, a place to lose yourself into, to be sensually experienced and poetically, performatively elaborated, or, the old word is coming back to you, *laboured*. Yes, it may be indeed that “[i]n place

9 R. Coover, *Pinocchio in Venice*, 46 / 308.

10 R. Coover, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, 158.

of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”<sup>11</sup>

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15. Reading on or making love? Jason, in Coover's story, made his painful choice. In William Gass' *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, as in Gass' overall aesthetics, reading *is* an actual, sensual act of love. As Gass explained in his essay “The Medium of Fiction”:

The purpose of a literary work is the capture of consciousness, and the consequent creation, in you, of an imagined sensibility, so that while you read you are that patient pool or cataract of concepts which the author has constructed; [...] a consciousness electrified by beauty—is that not the aim and emblem and the ending of all finely made love?<sup>12</sup>

16. The very materiality of the text, as initially conceived by Gass and the book's designer Lawrence Levy when *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* was first published in 1968 on pages differing in weight, texture and colour, along with the rhythm implemented by the various devices used throughout the four stages of the text—the layout, the use of different fonts, of footnotes and diverse visual elements—entailed a very sensuous approach to the text that the later reprinted versions have, if not altogether eliminated, considerably reduced. At any rate, in whatever format the book is made accessible, what *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* shows and performs is that the book—and any book for that matter—is a “medium” to be entered or penetrated by the reader in the same way that, in *Cartesian Sonata*, “Emma enters a sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's.” The very title of *The Tunnel* also points to the same idea: not only do you have to *enter* the book—not an easy task to do; or, quite the opposite, as Gass himself writes of Lowry's *Under the Volcano*: “How easy to enter. How difficult to remain.” (*Fiction and the Figures of Life*, 55)—but you come to realise that the book you feel your way into has also been conceived as a secret passage buried between the pages of the narrator's historical study *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*; the title of Gass' novel thus refers as much to the tunnel dug by the narrator in the basement of his house as to what happens to language, which is progressively emptied out of its referential substance as Kohler's story slowly supersedes his attempt at historiography; *The Tunnel's* opening paragraph may even start the digging process into referential language, as the “ways out” Kohler looks for can be read as his first step out of historical writing *into* fiction proper: “It was my intention, when I began, to write an introduction to my work on the Germans. Though its thick folders lie beside me now, I

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11 S. Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 14.

12 W. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, 33.

know I cannot. Endings, instead, possess me... all ways out.”<sup>13</sup>

17. As Gass explained in “The Medium of Fiction”:

it is a stubborn, country-headed thing to say: that there are no events but words in fiction. Words mean things. Thus we use them everyday: make love, buy bread, and blow up bridges. But the use of language in fiction only mimics its use in life.<sup>14</sup>

18. Useless, isn't it, to grope for meanings in those circumstances, to try and provide the texts with some content or sense when the language of fiction is but an imitation of everyday language, and language turned topsy-turvy and inside-out, for, as Gass writes in *On Being Blue*:

such are the sentences we should like to love—the ones which love us and themselves as well—incestuous sentences—sentences which make an imaginary speaker speak the imagination loudly to the reading eye; that have a kind of orality transmogrified: not the tongue touching the genital tip, but the idea of the tongue, the thought of the tongue, word-wet to part-wet, public mouth to private, seed to speech, and speech... ah! after exclamations, groans, with order gone, disorder on the way, we subside through sentences like these, the risk of senselessness like this, to float like leaves on the restful surface of that world of words to come, and there, in peace, patiently to dream of the sensuous, imagined, and mindful Sublime. (57-58)

And as long as you don't “subside through the text's sentences,” as long as you don't enter the book and let the text enter and become you—Emma the virgin recluse, in *Cartesian Sonata*, abandons herself to erotic dreams of what reading means to her, dreams cued on Elizabeth Bishop's poetry: “that was making love the way she imagined it would be if it were properly done. Everyone was entered. No one was under.” (168)—as long as you don't realise that the book's only content is and can only be you, then you will have perversely misread it.

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19. “There are Muses for the several sorts of writing, but none for any kind of reading.”<sup>15</sup> What other kind of reading, though, could there be of a book like *The Tunnel* by Gass, or *Lolita* by Nabokov, or *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* by Coover, but a creative, poetic and/or performative reading? Not that such novels may be intrinsically different from any other, but because they somehow elicit answers and reactions from their readers that are condemned in advance by the poetic games they play, such texts might make visible in their provocative or obscene perversity

13 W. Gass, *The Tunnel*, 3.

14 W. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, 30.

15 W. Gass, *The Tunnel*, 71.

what other novels simply take for granted, namely, in Gass' words, that ultimately “the object of every novel is its reader,”<sup>16</sup> the capture, that is, the invention, the electrification of your own consciousness. Programming misreading in its very fabric as it keeps sabotaging its own plot, cutting it loose from any solid grounds, *Lolita* makes it quite clear that its only concern is and remains that of its own reading, and thus ironically opens on a negative image of the (mis-)reader in the person of “John Ray, Jr.,” who poses in his preface to Humbert's confessions as an expert reader “[having] just been awarded the Poling Prize for a modest work ('Do the Senses make Sense?')” (3). “Sense-making,” Ray's *leitmotiv*, is precisely what the text's involutions somehow invalidate in favour of a more sensual reading.

20. Kohler, as for him, recalls an essay about reading he wrote in high school and muses in accents close to William Gass' own reflection:

I became the consciousness of the poem or the paragraph: I grew great and ornate like Browne or severe as Swift or as rich and thick as Shakespeare, snappy as Pope. There is Büchner, Raspe, Richard Dehmel. There is Stefan George and Stephen Spender. Ah, Guido Cavalcanti. A cave. A cunt. Camus<sup>17</sup>.

There is of course nothing transparent about the way the diverse names remembered by Kohler are linked, whose list eventually ends up mentioning “Nietzsche, Hölderlin, Hitler. The most beautiful name of all. Oh? So? Gotcha now. Which name? Whose? What's that you say? Lorca and Calderón? How convenient. How classy.” (72) “What's in a name but letters, eh? And everyone owns them,” Babs Masters had, for her part, reflected. The proper names here, as in Coover's *The Public Burning*, act as interferences in the text and, if according to Barthes historical characters usually are “superlative effects of the real,” only its “minor importance [...] gives the historical character its *exact* weight of reality [...]; for if the historical character were to assume its *real* importance, the discourse would be forced to yield it a role which would, paradoxically, make it less real.”<sup>18</sup> Because it is consistently set against a specific historical background, and because Kohler's discourse is consistently tinged with provocative overtones and playfully or gratuitously recycles obscene clichés derived from this historical background, *The Tunnel* does not so much blur the frontiers between reality and fiction as it stresses and stages its own blatantly fictional nature. In other words, Gass' “Hitler” here—much like Coover's “Richard Nixon” in *The Public Burning* or Ben Marcus' “Ben Marcus” in both *The Age of Wire and String* and *Notable American Women*—has no more substance nor historical weight than, say, Babs Masters, and he remains, “first of all, [...]”

16 W. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, 70.

17 W. Gass, *The Tunnel*, 72.

18 R. Barthes, *S/Z*, 101-2.

the noise of his name, and all the sounds and rhythms that proceed from him.”<sup>19</sup> “Which name? Whose? What's that you say?” maliciously asks Kohler, the better, somehow, to emphasise the name's absolute autonomy from any sort of referential reality or the unbridgeable gap (*What's that you say?*) between you and the text, that is, between everyday conversational language and the autonomous language of fiction.

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21. “Ben Marcus,” Ben Marcus' part-time narrator in *Notable American Women*, may point to the same idea. What would normally appear as a metalepsis—the fraudulent intrusion of the real into the fictional world—is here blatantly short-circuited by an aesthetics which radically does away both with normality and the possibility of differentiating between fiction and reality in the first place, that is, of keeping them safely apart. For such distinction, you are partly inclined to believe, remains ultimately grounded on a specific, call it “normal” or “normalised,” use of language; after all, if fiction is literally what is deprived of any real referent, the possibility for it to refer remains, albeit hypothetically or, as Aristotle would have it, generally rather than particularly. In other words, such conceptual categories as “fiction” and “reality” could be dependent on two different uses of language, one that does not attempt to match reality in its particulars, another that does<sup>20</sup>; yet in both cases, the referential dimension of language is not fundamentally questioned or challenged: in order for you to register the metalepsis, you need to sense that those two uses of language overlap and interfere while remaining distinct, which may dent or warp referentiality, but does not eliminate it altogether; on the contrary, it might even be a prerequisite.
22. Ben Marcus' aesthetics, on the other hand, renders such distinction impossible:

The word “heart” means “wind,” unless it follows the word “my,” in which case it can mean “mistake,” in a world where weather functions as the combustible error produced by people, although sometimes the word “heart” indicates the social intermission people use to feel sorry for themselves, when self-pity is medically treated by vocal noises of certain volume (a type of song some bodies produce, called “sympathy”). (54)

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19 W. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, 49.

20 The only way for you to distinguish the character from the author is to resort to inverted commas: “Ben Marcus” as character is not Ben Marcus as author; yet the interference is such that the only distinction you can make within your own discourse is significantly by way of a purely textual convention. The real Ben Marcus—supposedly; for you have no illusion that the “real” Ben Marcus you refer to here, as an author, is also and already a construct of sorts (his, yours, publishing houses' or marketers', etc.)—is thus dependent on the specific use of language you rely on at any given moment, as much as “Ben Marcus” is. Nabokov was undoubtedly right when he claimed that “reality” was “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes” (V. Nabokov, *Lolita*, 312).

In authoritatively re-ascribing ever-shifting fictional meanings to words, Ben Marcus somehow plays referentiality against itself, thus dismantling and reinforcing in the same gesture the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. As Marc Chénétier observed about Marcus' *The Age of Wire and String*, “[i]f fiction, as Frederick Karl once proposed, is the 'intensification of a verbal universe,' this is fiction in extremis”<sup>21</sup>; that is, fiction doubled and redoubled so as to appear for what it truly is: a purely verbal, involuted universe cut off from any aspiration towards the *mimesis* of the outside world, which, according to Susan Sontag, goes hand in hand with the separation of the work's “form” from its “content” and the concomitant “[assumption] that a work of art *is* its contenté”<sup>22</sup>. Marcus' fictional enterprise may thus give a literal and radical illustration of the way fiction works according to Gass, only mimicking the meaningful, referential use of everyday language in life; *mimesis* as such may not be eliminated—nor does it need to—but it is oriented towards language and some of its specific uses (scientific, rhetorical, metalinguistic, critical...). As a result, Marcus, it seems, turns language into its own simulacrum: such practice thus persistently and perversely condemns you to perpetual misreadings—for the process is endless: if the word “heart” can mean “wind,” “[w]ind, when used in a sentence, means danger.” (54)—unless you in turn persistently and perversely indulge in a perpetual *un*-reading of the text, going “against interpretation,” that is, and systematically erasing the last vestiges of sense and sense-making that still may be encroaching upon both you and the text, finally to realise with Ben's mother that “Understanding is overrated. To hell with it.” (228)

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23. Despite or because of their overly fictional quality—fictional in the sense that they turn referentiality against itself, cutting all moorings with the real while implying it—“Ben Marcus” and the historical characters in *The Tunnel* or in *The Public Burning* act, unlike any other fictional characters perhaps, in a specific way; for if, as Gass writes, “[a] proper name begins as a blank, like a wall or a canvas, upon which one might paint a meaning,”<sup>23</sup> names like “Hitler,” “Nixon” or “Ben Marcus” are, although differently, already saturated with a historical or actual meaning or reference that your role as reader should push you to erase. What those characters, *as characters*, reveal is indeed “a stubborn, country-headed thing” that Hawthorne may have intuited in persistently (re-)defining his aesthetics in the prefaces to his romances, or that Melville's *Confidence-Man* had somehow already stressed, albeit implicitly and ambiguously, with the narrator's pseudo-theoretical

21 M. Chénétier, "'Ostranenye Goes Gevortsing,' or, 'the Dethompsoning of Quiddity': an Eyewitness Report".

22 S. Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” 4.

23 W. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, 51.

defence—what he eventually refers to as a “comedy of thought” (71)—of his main character's apparent inconsistency:

True, it may be urged that there is nothing a writer of fiction should more carefully see to, as there is nothing a sensible reader will more carefully look for, than that, in the depiction of any character, its consistency should be preserved. [...] But if the acutest sage be often at his wits' ends to understand living character, shall those who are not sages expect to run and read character in those mere phantoms which flit along a page, like shadows along a wall?<sup>24</sup>

Reading this—or misreading this, for what *credit* are you to give the narrator here, what *trust* are you to put in him and his “comedy of thought” that ends up revolving upon itself, cancelling itself out somehow the same way the title of the chapter tautologically does, being “*Worth the consideration of those to whom it may prove worth considering*” (69)?—you are meant to feel that the character's (any character's for that matter) only solid substance, its only real weight, resides in the mere flitting characters that (de-)compose it on the page.

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24. Well, you seem to have trespassed and wandered far beyond your ken, leaving lady “America” waiting on her own all this time, her clothes on, while you were courting mere passing figments; Babs Masters was right: you are but a poor lover, no doubt about that. But the reason you have been led astray somehow may have been that this conceptual “America” the texts try to give shape and body to is one whose distant contours remain blurry and shifting in the end, one that *in fine* resists any appropriation, yours better than anyone else's. Hence, maybe, Hawthorne's constant misgivings about the *propriety* of the enterprise, as exposed especially, but not only, in *The House of the Seven Gables* by a narrator who insistently and patiently deconstructs his own fictional edifice, pointing to its artificial nature and the two-dimensionality of the characters peopling it; it is as though he had wished to contradict Hawthorne's words in the preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, by “render[ing] the paint and pasteboard of their composition but too painfully discernible,” thus depriving them of “a propriety of their own” (2), something Hawthorne claimed he wanted to avoid by maintaining his characters at a safe remove from any “positive contact with the realities of the moment.”<sup>25</sup> Be that as it may, Hawthorne's narrator relies on and subtly plays with the ambiguity of his historical plot which, like the Pyncheon-house, truly rests on flimsy grounds; the “historical connection, (which, though slight, was essential to [the Author's] plan)” (4), here betrays the superficiality, the

<sup>24</sup> H. Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 69.

<sup>25</sup> H. Melville, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 4.

insubstantiality and inauthenticity of a narrative though elevated, before it opens, to the rank of moral allegory. The text as such thus unavoidably misreads as a mere footnote or caption to Hawthorne's preface which, anticipating it, also obliterates it; not only is the required "moral purpose" of the work given beforehand, but it is also simultaneously and implicitly discarded by Hawthorne who claims that the only reason he "has provided himself with [it]" was "[n]ot to be deficient" in what "[m]any writers lay very great stress upon" (3). So doing, Hawthorne, as later his narrator, is raising the question of the text's reading which he programs along moralistic lines that are bound to be superfluous; as is, for that matter, the whole story itself in that it repeats a former, though dubious one, originating in an obscure dispute (itself fashioned on the historical context) between Matthew Maule, a man "[whose] place and memory among men" has however been obliterated (7), and Colonel Pyncheon, the redundantly "original founder" of the Pyncheon dynasty whose traits will mechanically resurface "in almost every generation" (16). In Holgrave's terms, the "original" Pyncheon, seems to "have perpetuated himself" (132) in what appears to be the self-generation of a pure simulacrum—"reproducing itself in successive generations" (170)—to which the later Judge Pyncheon owes much, not to say all of his superficial "character." As you read on, the narrator's double game—building a plot while systematically undermining the grounds it rests on—forces you to unread the text, to refuse his explanations or, more precisely, to accept them *as such*, that is, pure gloss compensating for his lacklustre narrative, deprived as it is of any depth and foundations: none of the hinted murders (the Colonel's, old Jaffrey Pyncheon's and the Judge's) happened *as insinuated*, and each Pyncheon eventually died of a disease mentioned as early as the first chapter and whose hereditary nature throws another, ironical light on the so-called moral of the story, directed as it is towards the unfortunate inheritance of "ill-gotten gold, or real estate" (3)...

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25. Against the perspective of rewarding your reading with a "definite moral purpose" then, *The House of the Seven Gables* instead reads, as it were, for nothing. Marx famously recalled that "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great incidents and individuals of world-history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."<sup>26</sup> As the past, in Hawthorne's romance, keeps repeating itself and folding back onto the present and *vice versa*, the potential historical depth of the novel is cancelled and, indeed, superseded by a farcical dimension; even the text seems to loop back upon itself when Dixey and his friend reappear towards the end to comment anew on Hepzibah's "poor business" (36/205), thus framing the plot. Such an impression

<sup>26</sup> K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *The Portable Karl Marx*, 287.

of *déjà-lu* prevails throughout the text and is reinforced by Ned Higgins' regular visit to Hepzibah's cent-shop as a kind of textual *ritournelle* which, as defined by Clément Rosset who borrows the term from Gilles Deleuze, “repeats nothing, strictly speaking.” As such, the child's initial purchase does not start the series of repetitions so much as they re-present it, give it, that is, an actual presence it initially lacked. The original purchase from this “first customer” is indeed inscribed in the text as the paradoxical or antedated repetition of all the forthcoming ones by the very fact that Hepzibah would not have the child pay for what, therefore, is *not* a purchase and cannot act as the repetitions' starting point, the latter being but the results of “wholly unprecedented” circumstances in more senses than one (38): the order of the repetition and the whole linear temporality that underlies it is thus short-circuited and the “first time” already appears as a mere “repetition effect of something that has not yet been enunciated.”<sup>27</sup> Such effects of replication destabilise the text's linear progress, and it looks as though the text were deprived of actual memory; if Dixey's friend at the end of the romance seems aware that the scene he performs in is a mere repeat—“I foretold, you remember” (205)—the narrator, as for him, is strangely forgetful of the repetition, failing, it seems, to recognise the characters: “A man, one of two who happened to be passing by, caught the urchin's arm.” (205) This sense of forgetfulness is enhanced several times throughout the text by the narrator's subtle focalisation, which allows him not to name the Judge when he passes by, for instance, thus making it necessary for him to undertake his description again as though for the first time: “Towards noon, Hepzibah saw an elderly gentleman, large and portly, and of remarkably dignified demeanor, passing slowly along on the opposite side of the white and dusty street.” (42) “At length, just as an elderly gentleman of very dignified presence happened to be passing, etc.” (122-3) The text is thus progressively emptied of all its substance, gnawed at, so to speak, from the inside by textual time itself as embodied in Ned Higgins whose apparitions through the text are far less anecdotal than they might appear at first sight:

This remarkable urchin, in truth, was the very emblem of old Father Time, both in respect of his all-devouring appetite for men and things, and because he, as well as Time, after engulfing thus much of creation, looked almost as youthful as if he had been just that moment made. (83)

The child's reappearance in the narrative somehow mimics the passage of time and its negative impact on the text; “negative,” that is, in the sense that the text seems at times to *forget itself* and

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<sup>27</sup> “[La ritournelle] ne répète rien à strictement parler, [...] elle ne ‘redit’ jamais autre chose que ce qu’elle dit au moment même où elle le dit : car c’est au moment même où elle s’énonce pour la première fois qu’elle intervient comme effet de redite, de répétition de quelque chose qui n’a pas encore été énoncé.” (C. Rosset, *L'Objet singulier*, 89)

start over.

26. You thus suspect that what may be at stake in *The House of the Seven Gables* is the very temporality of your own reading and the unstoppable rhythm with which you are tempted to counterbalance the text's inner motion in *producing* something—say what you will, these pages attest to it—all the more urgently as the text, for itself, will not: you are thus, willy-nilly, *ruining* the text, turning it, that is, into the ruins, the vestiges or traces of your own voracious misreading, those very ruins perhaps that, precisely, Hawthorne later claimed did not exist, necessary though they were to the writer of romances: “Romance and poetry, like ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers, need Ruin to make them grow.”<sup>28</sup> For, as Michel Serres wondered: “that there might be nothing to read, at the end of all reading, who will stand it?”<sup>29</sup>

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27. What if American literature gave you to palpate this nothingness? What if “America” was this vacancy that somehow permeates the texts, holding your critical discourse at bay, forever compelling you to misread as you project meaning where and when there is none or where and when it has been pre-empted or precluded? From the start, haunted as it may have been by a colonial past that “[lay] upon the Present like a giant's dead body” (*The House of the Seven Gables*, 130), American literature may have been tempted to court oblivion and ephemerality instead in order to return the text, again and again, to the blankness of the page it merely flitted over. “God keep me from ever completing anything,” said Ishmael, making it the duty of future cetologists to crown his edifice with its copestone if they could<sup>30</sup>, knowing full well, you suspect, that such a task would not only prove impossible, but would also cast them, and you, as the “monomaniac man [for whom] the veriest trifles capriciously carry meanings”:

But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed. (213)

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Perhaps, when we read a book, watch a show, or look at a painting, and especially when we are ourselves the author, an analogous process can be triggered: we constitute a sheet of transformation

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28 N. Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*, 3.

29 “Qu'il n'y ait rien à lire, au bout de toute lecture, qui le supportera ?” (quoted in Rosset's *Traité de l'idiotie*, 29).

30 H. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 128.

which invents a kind of transverse continuity or communication between several sheets, and weaves a network of non-localizable relations between them. In this way we extract non-chronological time. We draw out a sheet which, across all the rest, catches and extends the trajectory of points, the evolution of regions. This is evidently a task which runs the risk of failure: sometimes we only produce an incoherent dust made out of juxtaposed borrowings; sometimes we only form generalities which retain mere resemblances. All this is the territory of false recollections with which we trick ourselves or try to trick others [...].<sup>31</sup>

28. Reflecting back upon Ishmael's project and the impact it surely has on anyone approaching it with critical aspirations, you somehow came to the realisation that writing about “America” and “American literature” also entailed the monomaniac projection of a system that was bound to appear reductive in its blatant generalisations or the smoothing over of asperities and differences from one text to the next. It may be that, in the end, you have *over-read*, caught as you were in and by the texts' peculiar regimes. These pages might indeed be but “false recollections” after all, a fake montage projecting a continuum or a medium whose result was to *actualise*, close up and pen down, what might, in its essence, remain flitting and, according to Thoreau, *extra-vagant*. If, in other words, you misread, it might be because reading and writing about it imply pinning down what is constituted or, rather, what constitutes itself in and by its very motion—an “America” lying outside or beyond historical and chronological time, a *chronic* America, as it were, whose local and temporal actualisations are not and cannot be exhaustive; hence each text somehow has to start the same process all over again in a quest that is paradoxically bound to remain intransitive.
29. You should somehow come back on what you might have implied earlier when you suggested that your reading, because the very possibility for it to remain gratuitous was insufferable in the end, “ruined” the texts it targeted, producing some remainder or other, some rest or residue. Perhaps indeed the texts somehow compel you to act so; and perhaps if they do so, it is because the texts themselves, in their performative aspect—staging their own process as they for the most part do—give themselves as pure flitting performances that leave nothing behind. Hence Coover's porn star Lucky Pierre, “the man of the moment,”<sup>32</sup> fucking his way into the streets of Cinecity whose superficial geography gets endlessly reinvented, just as a movie or computer screen, as pure surface, “is infinitely restorable”<sup>33</sup>; Lucky Pierre, much like Coover's other heroes, is a blank, carrying with him a blank memory, and for whom each new day does not add up in his experience, but again potentially celebrates the anniversary of his first date with Cleo—if, just like the text, history

31 G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 119.

32 R. Coover, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, 4.

33 R. Coover, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, 274.

repeats itself, it is mainly in the form of a *ritournelle* which reconfigures time itself beyond or outside any chronology which, though not altogether absent from the text, remains “merely one path among many” (366). Not surprisingly, those “multiply-forking paths” inscribe diverse trajectories through the text that end up cancelling one another out or point both to their transience and the frailty of your interpretive choices in the selections you operate: the linear arrangement of the text, from Reel 1 to Reel 9, fashioned on a cinematic montage, can thus be understood as one actualisation among many other possible variations. Pornography and the cinema combine to cast you, rather than as a reader proper, in the role of a *voyeur* with very little grasp on the text—as is written in a Cinecity classroom, “WHERE NOTHING IS CONCEALED, NO REVELATION IS EXPECTED” (58), which could serve as an apt definition of “the pornographic imagination”—which in turn enhances your own critical impotence *vis-à-vis* a “text,” not to say a *hypertext* of sorts, whose recombinant work points to its ephemeral arrangement or its *actualised* nature: your task may then consist in unreading the text which, being the result of a montage—the text's subtitle, *Directors' Cut*, insists on this—is here given as product rather than process, a process you in turn need to re-instantiate. It might not be so much that the text does not produce anything in the end—for it does produce your (mis-)reading, after all: as the narrator of “The Magic Poker” realises in *Pricksongs & Descants*, you, among other things, are the product of his narration: “I have invented you, dear reader” (40)—it is not so much that nothing remains, for there has to be one survivor to each catastrophe, if only “to tell thee.” Rather, the texts, as true embodiments of a “literature of exhaustion” understood reflexively, might run their motion or process down, carry it to exhaustion, the better to bring out their own virtuality.

30. One reason why you are forced to misread all the time might simply be that the text *as such* remains inaccessible to you otherwise than as one actualised version among others that needs to be unread somehow to get as close as possible to its flitting, virtual counterpart. When Coover's *John's Wife* closes and opens in a same gesture, looping its palindromic loop and erasing all traces of the text you have just read—“A withering away, a withdrawal, a subsidence, much as a fading memory sinks away and is gradually lost to recall, so too this forest so lost to sight one doubted that it ever was.” (428)—the stress inevitably falls on the last remaining word before the text's withdrawal into its framing ellipses: “...Once, there was a man named John. [...] a man was there. Once...” The text, indeed, reads *once* and once *only*, each reopening of the text, a mere *ritournelle*, worth only in and for itself as “the freshening of possibility.”<sup>34</sup> The text closes; the dice are thrown again. “Now

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34 R. Coover, *Gerald's Party*, 7.

c'mon, let's try that again! From the beginning!' No! *Now—!*"<sup>35</sup>

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31. As Giorgio Agamben writes in the preface to his *Infancy and History*, this process of permanent rediscovering—playing the texts once again, forgetting about what they were, erasing all traces of what they could have been—may be true of “every written work”:

Every written work can be regarded as the prologue (or rather, the broken cast) of a work never penned, and destined to remain so, because later works, which in turn will be the prologues or the moulds for other absent works, represent only sketches or death masks. The absent work, although it is unplaceable in any precise chronology, thereby constitutes the written works as *prolegomena* or *paralipomena* of a non-existent text; or, in a more general sense, as *parerga* which find their true meaning only in the context of an illegible *ergon*. To take Montaigne's fine image, these are the frieze of grotesques around an unpainted portrait, or, in the spirit of the pseudo-Platonic letter, the counterfeit of a book which cannot be written. (3)

Chronic texts of a chronic America, unplaceable in any chronology, in any history; *real* texts for that matter, for a *real* America—untouchable, ungraspable, unaccountable, incomprehensible. Ineffable, which, as anyone knows, might just be “a Sunday way of saying unfuckable”<sup>36</sup>. Virtual America; virgin America<sup>37</sup>, sufficient unto itself, forever deprived of any reflection in the mirror of art. Idiotic America for idiotic texts, forever precluding and obliterating their critical counterparts.

32. For yes, inevitably, “there's another rendering now; but still one text.”<sup>38</sup>

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35 *Ibid.*, 316.

36 R. Coover, *Ghost Town*, 92.

37 See C. Rosset's *Le Réel : Traité de l'idiotie*: “l'univers est sans ailleurs, le corps de la Vierge est tout, à lui seul, aux yeux de celui qui le contemple. Le monde, tous les corps qu'il contient, manquent à jamais de leur complément en miroir. Ils sont à jamais idiots.” (43)

38 H. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 388.

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