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Beasts, Sovereigns, Pirates: Melville's "Enchanted Isles" Beyond the Picturesque

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Herman Melville's "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles," included in his signature set of shorter narratives *The Piazza Tales*, remains relatively unvisited by readers and critics. So too was the archipelago generally known as the Galapagos, before becoming a chic destination for natural history excursions and eco-tourism. These ten "sketches" relate a narrator's experiences on the Pacific islands, adding a number of travelers' stories, some extrapolated (more or less accurately) from known records, some creatively transformed. One informative, comprehensive handbook suggests that Melville's description of this volcanic archipelago as Encantadas or "enchanted" in the sense of bewitched—uncanny, weird, their very positions and relations apparently forming a zone of indeterminacy—can serve as a metaphor for the critical writing attempting to chart them. That guide asks whether critics have been successful in their efforts to find something more than geographical unity here. Are these sketches just travel narratives connected merely by their subject's equatorial position six hundred miles west of Peru? Naturally, some are struck by the fact that the most celebrated visit to the islands was Darwin's, recorded in the *Voyage of the Beagle*, which Melville may have read shipboard (apparently ships' libraries were rich enough to justify Ishmael's description of his whaling life as his Yale and Harvard). There is a striking contrast between "The Encantadas"' impressions of utter inhumanity and desolation and Darwin's fascination with the rich variety of birds, reptiles, and amphibians that stimulated his eventual formulation of the
grand theory of evolution. Melville too is interested in the beasts—both native and imported—not so much as a naturalist but in terms of how they shock humans, provide food, become part of, or present analogies to our social and political structures, and whose exploitation enables a global economy.  

ISLANDS: GEO-PHILOSOPHY AND GEO-GRAPHY

The binary alternative of unified thematic reading or mere geographical survey relies on an excessively narrow understanding of geo-graphy, the art and practice of writing the earth. What after all is an island, more specifically a deserted island? Do all islands tend toward enchantment, harboring unique atmospheres, intriguing cultures, overt or insidious dangers? The theme is as old as Homer's *Odyssey*. It involves travel to Circe's and Calypso's enchanted isles, the blessed isle where Helen and Menelaus live in drugged tranquility, the Cyclops' evil island, and lovely, all too tempting, Phaiakia where Odysseus reluctantly tears himself away from nubile Nausikaa.

Melville's sketches should be read geophilosophically, specifically in relation to the complex idea of the island, as figure of singularity, creativity, isolation, and sovereignty. Islands real and imagined have been prominent in philosophical and political speculations, sometimes (e.g., Plato in Sicily) sites of adventurous projects on the ground. Islands surface in actual and figurative forms in philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Peter Sloterdijk. For example, in Deleuze's early essay "Desert Islands" they are crucial nodes in the universal antagonism of land and sea. Derrida pairs the themes of beast and sovereign in his lecture series of that name in reading the iconic island tale *Robinson Crusoe*. In that sharply framed setting he articulates the structural chiasm as the sovereign takes on roles below or beyond the level of human community in his claim to dominate beast and human. "There is no world, only islands," Derrida says, contesting the implicit totalization of a unified "world" in thinkers like Hegel and Heidegger. Sloterdijk sees the island as a prototypical paradigm or template of human life, especially in modern and postmodern times where many inhabit virtual cells or nodules within a complex he calls "foam."

Islands encourage writing, it seems, even in and on the virtually deserted Encantadas. Islands are often seen as bounded utopias or dystopias, to be recorded and remembered for the alternatives they pose to life in more expansive and diverse settings. Writing is always already there. Despite their isolated location and uncanny unchartability, we learn that visitors established a crude "post office" to exchange and forward letters and notices. Sailors' graves are marked with rhyming epitaphs. But writing is inscribed in a sort of living ur-history. Later I will consider the case
of tortoises, the signature denizens of these islands, without whom indeed there might have been no significant contact with the Encantadas. Tortoise shells intimate traces of hieroglyphic writing to the narrator, as the whale's skin does to Ishmael. As his stories unfold, the mariner cites or alludes to a vast array of texts: not only the desert island classic Robinson Crusoe but narratives by literary buccaneers, castaways, sailors, and naval captains.

THE ANTI-PICTURESQUE: WHO IS S. ROSA TARNMOOR?

"The Encantadas," like much of Melville's writing, explores the relations of the aesthetic and the political, whose typical complicity is frequently masked. One reason that Melville's writing disturbed his contemporaries was its exposure of the aesthetics of the political and the politics of the aesthetic. In this text that takes writing as constitutive of geography, Melville tantalized his initial readers with a pseudonymous authorship that anticipates this chiasm of the aesthetic and the political. When he first published the sketches in three installments in Putnam's Magazine (before incorporating them in The Piazza Tales) he did so under the name of R. Salvator Tarnmoor, suggesting both the painter Salvator Rosa and possibly (according to some) a barren Icelandic landscape. Rosa distinguishes himself from other seventeenth century landscape painters by pictures of wild, desolate, frightening scenes, including storms and volcanic eruptions. His work tends toward the sublime rather than the beautiful or picturesque.

"The Encantadas" is written in agonistic relation to a specific literary genre: the picturesque scenic and travel writing that flourished in Britain from the mid-eighteenth century on. The genre typically includes illustrations and visually evocative descriptive passages. Melville alludes to this by creating a series of "sketches." These island pictures are best read in a certain ironic relation to those British guides to picturesque travel pioneered by William Gilpin about seventy years before Melville's "sketches." These sought to naturalize and embellish the landscape, and the landscape garden, presenting them as symbols of aesthetic and social harmony, the union of nature and culture. Yet at this time land enclosures restricted the rights to the commons of rural populations, forcing many to leave the countryside. The aesthetic cult of the British landscape and landscape garden could function to legitimate aristocracy in its complicity with industry and imperialism. Melville—in his guise as S. Rosa Tarnmoor—challenges the picturesque, as we'll see, in a deeper way that raises more critical questions about humans and animals, or beasts and sovereigns.

The narrator becomes painterly in his imagination of an island after a transfiguring, hallucinatory vision of the giant Tortoises of the Galapa-
gos. His first encounter with tortoises initiates him into a new imaginative relation to the earth. The beasts—brought on board for food—provoke the painterly sailor to project a first picture of the islands. He's been continuously at sea for "five long months a period amply sufficient to make all things of the land wear a fabulous hue to the dreamy mind." The "mystic creatures . . . seemed newly crawled forth from beneath the foundations of the world." In the atmosphere of an eerie night, he looks more closely by lamplight. The complexity of their cracked shells, with moss and toadstools growing on their backs, leads him to see the tortoises transfigured into giant, spectacular ruins, perhaps in the style of Piranesi: "I seemed to see three Roman Coliseums in magnificent decay." Kept awake below deck by the sound of their ponderous crawling above him, he realizes that these stupid amphibians simply collide with objects in their paths, sometimes bringing them to a stymied halt. "Their crowning curse is their drudging impulse to straightforwardness in a beleaguered world." The nocturnal encounter with these iconic, chthonic animals provokes the sailor to visualize their island home: "I thought me of the haunt from which they came; an isle full of metallic ravines and gulches, sunk bottomlessly into the hearts of splintered mountains, and covered for many miles with inextricable thickets." Perhaps from this point on in the narrative we are to understand that the islands we encounter, no matter how desolate, are always to some extent constructed by fantasy, myth, and language.

S. Rosa explains that there are no more inhuman spots on earth than these islands, so preparing us for "sketches" of the sublimely inhuman:

It is to be doubted whether any spot of earth can, in desolateness, furnish a parallel to this group. Abandoned cemeteries of long ago, old cities by piecemeal tumbling to their ruin, these are melancholy enough; but, like all else which has but once been associated with humanity they still awake in us some thoughts of sympathy, however sad . . . the special curse, as one may call it, of the Encantadas, that which exalts them in isolation beyond Idumea and the Pole, is that to them change never comes; neither the change of seasons or of sorrows.

Here then is the most "emphatic uninhabitableness." The islands confront us with something like Lacan's real. They exhibit an uncanny indeterminacy. Although we think of islands as fixed, local currents and tides are strangely changeable, producing sailors' impressions of wandering islands. Navigation is unpredictable. Early sea charts are consequently filled with bizarre errors. Yet as we zoom in to specific islands one by one, the series of sketches gradually introduces human visitors—buccaneers, adventurers both solitary and political, whalers, naval officers and crews, and entrepreneurs seeking to process and market tortoise oil.
Deleuze notes that Melville's writerly feint often begins by seeming to adopt a convention of British writing, in order to quickly subvert it. "Everything begins à l'anglaise but continues à l'américaine, following an irresistible line of flight." The Encantadas are west of the west: a random, decentered scattering that renders locations uncanny. Deleuze describes Melville's style: "The subject loses its texture in favor of an infinitely proliferating patchwork: the American patchwork becomes the law of Melville's oeuvre, devoid of a center, of an upside down or right side up." Deleuze thinks that the texts anticipate cinema in deploying a shifting repertory of perspectives in opening up the obscured diagram of these forces. Melville's work, Deleuze says, "requires a new perspective, an archipelago perspectiveness that conjugates the panoramic shot and the tracking shot, as in 'The Encantadas.'" Like the attorney who tells Bartleby's story, the returned mariner is permanently disturbed by his encounters. If the British picturesque offers a reassuring image of a culture/nature harmony, the "Encantadas" present the natural as grotesque and the human as constantly displaced. Whatever their differences in analytic categories and emphasis, Deleuze, Derrida, and Sloterdijk would reject the picturesque's suggestion of a seamless fusion of nature and culture. They would be suspicious of the ideological uses to which that imagined fusion could be deployed by landed aristocracy and maritime empire.

The opening sketches present the islands as infernal regions, imaginatively haunted by evil spirits. Wastelands of volcanic cinders suggest "apples of Sodom." Sailors believe that souls of wicked sea captains are imprisoned in the huge, ugly tortoises. The islands seem haunted to visitors. They also haunt the narrator even after he returns to comfortable civilized life in the Adirondacks. The phantasm of rocky waste and hideous tortoises comes to him when alone in a beautiful summertime pastoral setting. Even the traveler's re-entry into society is disrupted:

In scenes of social merriment, and especially at revels held by candlelight in old-fashioned mansions, so that the shadows are thrown into the further recesses of an angular and spacious room, making them put on a look of haunted undergrowth of lonely woods, I have drawn the attention of my comrades by my fixed gaze and sudden change of air, as I have seemed to see, slowly emerging from those imagined solitudes, and heavily crawling along the floor, the ghost of a gigantic tortoise, with "Memento . . . ." burning in live colors upon his back.

If "The Encantadas" is an anti-picturesque travel report, the burning inscription—presumably, in full, "Memento Mori" (a remembrance of death)—can be read as a startling hyperintensification of the "et in Arcadia ego" theme that appears in two paintings by Poussin. In the later, better known version, shepherds in an idyllic pastoral scene discover a tombstone with this legend and are shocked to be reminded of universal
mortality. In New England the vision appears in a civilized scene of "social merriment," a message conveyed by a spectral infernal creature rather than calmly waiting to be read on a tombstone. R. Salvator Tarnmoor shifts from a Stoic, humanist warning of death into the more intensive register of the sublime and grotesque. The narrator's preface of this scene with the pastoral, less disturbing one highlights his critique of the picturesque mode while luring readers into a grotesque abyss. The islands' witchery infects even the most reassuring sites of home in country and town—scenes of natural beauty and civilized good cheer. Home has become unheimlich. Having experienced the islands' extreme isolation, the narrator now feels isolated in the most unexpected situations. The phantasmatic tortoise's warning of death isolates even more. As Heidegger says, although death is absolutely common it is also, in each case, absolutely mine. In the "Encantadas" Melville provides a deepening series of perspectives on the conditions of isolation. He is, of course, ringing changes on the Robinson Crusoe theme. As noted earlier, Derrida takes this to an extreme in his formulation "there is no world, only islands."

The Piazza Tales typically involve an ironic reversal of perspectives, a theme announced in the title story "The Piazza," where Melville constructs a visual diagram of mutual misunderstanding between distant observers. Similarly, the sixth "Encantadas" sketch presents the most conventionally picturesque scene in the series, yet undermines the conservative aesthetic-political ideology that legitimates vast private property by confusing it with the natural. For the spectators are neither landed proprietors nor the ideal cultured viewers conjured up by picturesque tour books. Now the narrator purportedly describes Barrington's Isle as a haunt of pirates and buccaneers. We soon learn more about these predators, the islands' earliest regular visitors. Now the focus is on the unexpected contrast of the isle and its furnishings with these marauders. S. Rosa finds this pirates' refuge decidedly more pleasant than everywhere else in the archipelago. He quotes a report by "a sentimental voyager long ago," who gave a detailed account of its picturesque landscape. He asks rhetorically "And here, in calm spaces at the ends of glades, and on the shaded tops of slopes commanding the most quiet scenery—what do you think I saw?" The answer parodies those guides to picturesque travel which were an eighteenth-century British vogue:

Seats which might have served Brahmins and presidents of peace societies. Fine old ruins of what had once been symmetric lounges of stone and turf; they bore every mark both of artificialness and age, and were undoubtedly made by the buccaneers. One had been a long sofa, with back and arms, just such a sofa as the poet Gray might have loved to throw himself upon, his Crebillon in hand.

The high-minded, exquisite, and cultivated taste for the picturesque, thought to be a sign of breeding and sophistication, was enjoyed by pi-
rates, conventionally described as the crudest of men. The nameless narrator ostensibly quoted by Salvator Rosa’s avatar engages in a bit of amateur archaeology to identify the buccaneers’ motives and practices:

It is highly improbable that the buccaneers ever erected dwelling-houses upon the isle. They never were here except their ships remained, and they most likely would have slept on board. I mention this, because I cannot avoid the thought, that it is hard to impute the construction of these romantic seats to any other motive than pure peacefulness and kindly fellowship with nature.  

The narrator notes the irony that the class of men who constructed these privileged vantage points for picturesque meditation “perpetrated the greatest outrages . . . some of them were mere cut-throats.” If anyone should suggest that he has misinterpreted the evidence—could the seats have been constructed by ships’ carpenters, not pirates?—the amateur archaeologist refers us to debris from daggers and other weapons at these carefully designed sites. This leads to a meditation on human nature, on the relation of the aesthetic and the ethical:

Could it be possible, that they robbed and murdered one day, reveled the next, and rested themselves by turning meditative philosophers, rural poets, and seat-builders on the third? Not very improbable, after all. For consider the vacillation of a man. Still, strange as it may seem, I must abide by the more charitable thought; namely, that among these adventurers were some gentlemanly, companionable souls, capable of genuine tranquility and virtue.

The more traditional picturesque, then, appears only as an occasional interest of roaming, landless pirates, living at best in a tenuous relation to the law, inverted images of the secure landowners at home. If we stop to reflect, we realize that the titles of the latter were no doubt based on earlier acts of violent seizure.

**TORTOISES: EARTH, TIME, ISLAND IMAGES**

Despite this picturesque interlude with all its ironies, it is the blazing hieroglyphic of the spectral tortoise shell that is the aesthetic keynote of the “sketches.” Tales will be told of these tortoises, sources of food for passing ships and oil for many uses. They are uncanny and iconic residues of an “antediluvian” earth. Despite their odd location and exotic character, these tortoises are part of the global food, fuel, and military maritime economy for Pacific whalers, buccaneers, and naval traffic.

This first sighting of tortoises shakes the observer’s temporal sense, as he conceptualizes an ur-time before historical time. The creatures “seemed newly crawled forth from beneath the foundations of the world.” Everything about these reptiles suggests immeasurable age; they
are “antediluvian” and represent “dateless, indefinite endurance.” Given Melville’s frequent Biblical allusions, we realize that tortoises would not have required Noah’s protection from the great flood. So far Melville’s sketches present the islands as not only uninhabited by humans but as “uninhabitable” by them. The animals living there are not those rescued by divinely instructed human agency. These are truly “desert islands,” trapped in a prehuman time before sacred or secular history, an eternal present appalling in its monstrosity. The tortoises impress with their age, endurance, and stupidity. The Galápagos experience also transformed Darwin’s sense of time, contributing to his projection of an incredibly long duration of biological life, leading to a newly intelligible narrative rather than a stark confrontation with time’s abyss.

Musing on these animals and their habitat, the narrator finds himself lost in “wild nightmares” and thoughts of “volcanic mazes.” The compelling intuition of the Encantadas’ uncanniness can be amplified by Deleuze’s early essay “Desert Islands,” which argues that islands are not merely physical sites but linguistic, imaginary, and even literary constructions. Deleuze distinguishes between genuine, authentic islands, those that were never attached to another land mass and emerged from the sea through natural causes, and those that were either once attached or produced by human activity (such as dredging or building upon coral reefs). Genuine islands inspire thoughts about independence, spontaneity, and creativity. Owing nothing to established continents or humans, they arise on their own. They mark the ongoing conflict of land and sea. They invite invention, appealing to the aesthetic and political imagination as places where life can be given fresh style and character. Yet Melville discerns only very disappointing versions of human invention on the Encantadas.

Recall that the first three tortoises seen were brought back from a hunt. The feast is described with great relish. From now on, the question of food plays a large part in the stories of these barren islands. Humans establish their place in the food chain by hunting and occasionally domesticating animals, or episodic cultivation of a few vegetables. There is a structure of parasitism, as animals devour and live off one another, with humans being the greatest parasites. The parasitic structure is inscribed on the tortoise shells, which provide a breeding ground for moss and toadstools. The theme of capture and consumption is crucial to narratives like *Robinson Crusoe*, where the castaway must not only labor diligently for nourishment but (as Derrida reminds us) lives in fear of being devoured himself by wild beasts or cannibals.

The eighth sketch “Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow” darkens the hunting motif with a story of tortoise hunting gone tragically wrong. It demonstrates how even the remotest interstices of the earth and the apparently timeless residues of its prehuman past are caught up in the global economic system’s predation and brutality. As the eighth sketch
“Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow” demonstrates, even limited plans for work involving the islands invite disaster. Once again, a story retailed at second hand tells of the terrible gestures at the unspeakable. The narrator recounts the rescue of Hunilla, a solitary Chola woman. She, her husband, and brother, sensing a needed economic opportunity, went there to hunt tortoises and store their very marketable oil. The French whaling captain who brought them was paid upfront for his services, including a promised return trip. He never returned. The trio successfully accumulated and processed great quantities of valuable tortoise oil. Yet “by swift doom coming like the thief at night, ere seven weeks went by, two of the little party were removed from all anxieties of land or sea.” The two men, happy with their work, celebrated by building and sailing a catamaran. As Hunilla watched with horror from shore, they were dashed against a reef and drowned.

True to the play of the picturesque and anti-picturesque in these sketches, Hunilla’s spectatorship is carefully framed. The spectator herself creates a frame out of natural materials, as if she were in an idyllic bower. It would be a superb marine picture, if not for the unfolding disaster:

The thickets were so disposed, that in looking upon the sea at large she peered out from among the branches as from the lattice of a high balcony... the better to watch the adventures of the two hearts she loved, Hunilla had withdrawn the branches to one side, and held them so. They formed an oval frame, through which the bluely boundless sea rolled like a painted one. And there, the invisible painter painted to her view the wave-tossed and disjointed raft.

Again, in the “Encantadas,” picturesque perspective reverses into the vision of catastrophe. Because of the distance she hears no sound, but silently watches the raft break up and the men disappear. “Death in a silent picture; a dream of the eye; such vanishing shapes as the mirage shows.” After burying her husband’s body, which washed up on the shore, and seeking her brother’s in vain, she waits for the French whaler’s reappearance. So far, the narrator has been paraphrasing Hunilla’s story. But at this point she becomes reticent and secretive. Hunilla finally divulges two terrible episodes involving sailors landing on the island. The narrator will not relate the shocking events, both to protect her privacy and to spare us the horror. “In nature, as in law, it may be libelous to speak some truths.” After a visit to Hunilla’s modest shelter the tortoise oil is loaded on board a boat. Sadly, she was allowed to take only a few of the ten delicate dogs who were her only companions (these are notably pacific dogs, unlike the Dog-King’s “canine janizaries” of the seventh sketch). The ship reaches Peru, where Hunilla receives the proceeds from the oil, plus a contribution from the crew. “The last seen of lone Hunilla, she was passing into Payta town, riding upon a small gray ass; and be-
fore her, on the ass's shoulders, she eyed the jointed workings of the beast's armorial cross.”

Readers naturally remark on the Christian resonance of the widowed, forsaken, and humiliated victim riding off on an ass bearing a cross. Hunilla's story, however, contains a whole menagerie of beasts. There are scores of slaughtered tortoises, processed for their oil. Many are still alive, being kept in captivity for food, and desperately moaning. Hunilla has a number of beloved dogs, most of which must be very sadly abandoned. And there would have been no sailing to the South Sea if not for the whale hunters. She and her companions practice their quest to accumulate oil on a smaller, amphibious scale by harvesting tortoises. Hunilla and her companions are small entrepreneurs of global capitalism in its capture of food and fuel. The dark forebodings of S. Rosa's first sight of the tortoises are confirmed when their human predators, recklessly overconfident with the bounty of their kills, drown and leave Hunilla to her unspeakable fate.

BEASTS, SOVEREIGNS, ORDER OF RANK

The sketches proceed by gradually and methodically approaching the human events that unfold in the archipelago. Political structure and events are introduced analogically in the third sketch "Rock Rodondo," which describes a place still devoid of humans, while insinuating a political vocabulary. The theme develops in ensuing sections as we hear of mariners' visits, castaways, buccaneers, long-term solitary inhabitants, groups, power structures, and political formations. The Rock is the archipelago's highest point, enjoying thirty miles' visibility. The predawn approach is depicted in rich painterly terms, as Melville's sailor-narrator-sketcher attempts to rival Salvator Rosa in coloring an eerie, gray, moonlit scene. He quickly drops all mention of fishing, the expedition's purpose, concentrating instead on explaining the political hierarchy he sees in the pinnacle's avian population. This virtual painter works his way up from the base of the projection to its top. We hear sequentially of its diverse denizens, beginning with penguins (said to be unclassifiable as fish, flesh, or fowl), and above them gray pelicans who are "sea Friars in Orders Gray." Rank order becomes explicit:

As we still ascend from shelf to shelf, we find the tenants of the tower disposed in order of their magnitude:—gannets, black and speckled haglets, jays, sea-hens, sperm-whale-birds, gulls of all varieties:—thrones, prince doms, powers, dominating one another in senatorial array.

The idea of "the animal kingdom" as a political hierarchy is hardly novel. Perhaps the correlation of degrees of elevation with specific grada-
tions of rank adds a more distinctive touch. Yet why does Melville introduce the analogy so emphatically in this inhuman environment? Derrida’s questions and formulations concerning beasts and sovereigns are relevant here. Throughout his work Derrida interrogates the idea and practices of sovereignty, in both its explicitly political sense and its insidious analogue in the concept of the completely autonomous subject. Sovereignty is typically defined as singular power over a population and a territory. Derrida argues at length that both the conventional concept of political sovereignty and its analogues in metaphysical and psychological theories of the completely autonomous cogito or self are unsustainable. Deconstructing or de-structuring these concepts involves showing their various leakages, inconsistencies, and internal tensions. The insistence on absolute sovereignty may very well undermine the very structures and institutions it attempts to defend. Especially after September 11, 2001, Derrida began to analyze what he calls a problem of auto-immunity in systems aspiring to sovereignty. In order to defend itself against incursions from the outside, or malfunctions and disturbances within, such a system will develop an auto-immune system to protect itself. Yet just as a biological body’s auto-immune system can turn against itself in the form of a disease like cancer, so a state’s powers, resources, and defenses may turn against itself. Derrida’s prolific writings on ethical and political themes critique the idea of self-contained sovereignty. He attempts to open thinking to the other(s), that whether we wish it or not, is already an ingredient in the political state and the subject. Friendship, for example, is not best construed as a relation between two absolutely autonomous subjects but as a genuine openness to the other, such that we can speak of a “decision of the other in me.” Even with respect to humans and (other) animals, Derrida questions whether claims of absolute difference between them can be sustained. If not, then what becomes of the assumption that humans have unlimited sovereignty over animals?

This line of thought leads to Derrida’s late lecture course *The Beast and the Sovereign*, where he interrogates such themes by close readings of literary and philosophical texts. The most relevant here is his discussion of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, where the line of questioning relates to the figure of the island. Crusoe, Derrida explains, is a sovereign in miniature, total lord of his island and its beasts. Eventually he even acquires a subject, the black man he names Friday (exercising Nietzsche’s “lordly right of giving names”). That Crusoe’s shipwreck was the failure of a slave-trading expedition to Africa adds an ironic twist. Melville’s portrayal of avian hierarchy in political terms suggests the affinity of human social structure and the rest of the “animal kingdom.” There is something comic in the polity of the birds, even though it is based on differences in species. The human political (or quasi-political) organizations that we encounter later in the “Encantadas” (and in *Crusoe*) cannot justify any such claim.
Derrida conducts his discussion of sovereignty in the wake of Carl Schmitt’s attempt at a rigorous reconstruction of traditional political theory, a reconstruction that takes sovereignty as its fundamental concept. In Schmitt’s formulation, the sovereign is the one who decides upon the exception, the occasion in which, he, she, or they suspend a law or constitution in order to save the polity and sovereignty itself—perhaps in the name of “national security.” As George W. Bush said, “I’m the deci­
der.” In this sense the sovereign is outside and beyond the human community, occupying a position analogous to God in traditional theology. Derrida accepts Schmitt’s claim that the doctrine of sovereignty derives from a political theology. Yet rather than deriving the consequences Schmitt did (notoriously in his legal theorizing in Nazi Germany), he questions both sovereignty and political theology. As the sovereign stands outside and above the human community, so the beast is thought to lie beneath it. Both are outsiders, with some unsettling similarities. Both may be fiercely predatory, submitting to no law or restraint except external force. As Derrida emphasizes in his reading, Robinson Crusoe, as virtual sovereign of his island, is haunted by the fear of being de­
voured by wild beasts. He observes that this fear reveals his kinship with the imagined predators, for both exist in realms outside the law. The sovereign is both their enemy and their secret brother.

The title of the fourth sketch “A Pisgah View from the Rock” reminds us that sovereignty was often radically up for grabs in the South Sea, despite the Encantadas nominally belonging to Peru. In Melville’s network of Biblical and theological allusions, we have left the antediluvian world. Pisgah is the mountain in the Negev desert from which God allowed Moses to see the promised land he was not allowed to enter. The sketch provides a “view” or “survey” that could inspire both a Salvator Rosa picture and a monarchical fantasy. The summit of Rock Rodondo offers the most expansive aerial view of the Encantadas. In this sketch the narrator begins to populate the archipelago with humans, as he starts to explain the history of mariners’ visits, including buccaneers and pirates. Once humanly populated, even by solitary castaways, the archipelago illustrates various forms and contestations of sovereignty, concepts arguably requiring analysis in terms of political theology. The dregs of European sailing adventures take the place of Moses’s heirs. These islands are also inhabited, we hear, by an unknown number of “devils” and “fiends,” otherwise undefined—although the narrator’s later reference to Shakespeare’s Caliban may be illuminating.
Melville derived much of his narrative of the Encantadas’ history from records left by the buccaneers. This “antediluvian” earth becomes part of a charted, humanized world, and so enters world history, through the agency of a class of men with a complex relation to law, authority, and sovereignty. These buccaneers, corsairs, and pirates play dramatic roles in Schmitt’s account of the European system of international law. The buccaneers and their like flourished from the mid-seventeenth century to the early eighteenth, coinciding with both rapid European colonial expansion and the stabilization of the nation state system marked by the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. Hobbes named his masterpiece *Leviathan* (1651) after the great sea monster and developed a theory of absolute sovereignty, which, Schmitt argues, was especially appropriate for a predatory, commercial, maritime island nation. Citing Hobbes in *Moby-Dick*’s “Extracts,” Melville could have been suggesting that empire, as an “artificial man,” is the one more manifestation of the great enemy.

Who were the buccaneers? Speaking precisely, the seventeenth-century buccaneers were a group of English, French, and Dutch mariners who preyed especially on Spanish ships and possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific. Perhaps surprisingly, buccaneers were not operating completely outside the law. Although they may have begun their activities as independent agents, they were often licensed by the anti-Spanish powers, with the monarchy entitled to a designated share of spoils. In his late *Nomos of the Earth* Schmitt describes how, after centuries of European states waging land war against each other, the opportunity for competition and aggression in new territories, especially the Americas, allowed a new arrangement. War on the European continent was to be fought within specified limits that aimed at making it more humane (of course this aim was attained imperfectly). On the other hand, “beyond the line” in the Americas and certainly on the high seas beyond Europe, very few limits obtained. In addition to piracy, this system enabled and excused genocide, enslavement of indigenous populations, and the burgeoning transatlantic slave trade, Schmitt sees it as a triumph of rational European legality.

This is the legal/extra-legal context in which the buccaneers operated. Today we might compare them with private military contractors. They are inside and outside the law, paralleling the islands’ geographical zone of indeterminacy. Schmitt argued that this arrangement effectively maintained internal European political order. Derrida and Agamben observe that it opens up a space of disorder that infects the sponsoring sovereignty. At the close of the “Pisgah view” sketch we hear that the buccaneer Cowley, a “loyal freebooter,” gave his name to one of the smaller islands, calling it “Cowley’s Enchanted Isle.” Cowley was a literary privateer,
leaving a record of his travels, in which he explained the name as due to the island always appearing in different forms and at different points of the compass. With reference to this text, Melville (or S. Rosa Tarnmoor) is not surprised to meet “all sorts of ocular deceptions and mirages.” That constant play of perspectives—highlighted in the *The Piazza Tales*’ title story and at the beginning of “Sketch Fourth”—undercuts the fetishism of the privileged view, in which the monarch surveys his territory or the landowner his landscape garden.

The sheer indeterminacy of perspectives and identities becomes the basic theme of the spare fifth sketch “The Frigate, and Ship Flyaway.” This episode draws on the published narrative by Captain David Porter of the Pacific cruise of the U.S. frigate Essex in 1813. The Essex sighted a strange ship, presumed to be an enemy English whaler—this was during the War of 1812—and attempted to overtake and destroy him (“him”: enemy ships are male). As soon as the Essex began this pursuit, the ship was beset by odd winds and currents, almost smashing into Rodondo’s rocky cliffs. Narrowly escaping shipwreck, the Essex launched boats to overtake the stranger, which now hoisted an American flag. Still believing the ship was English, Porter sent cutters after her. Yet now the mystery ship showed English colors:

But when the frigate’s boats were within a short distance of their hoped-for prize, another sudden breeze sprang up; the stranger under all sail bore off to the northward, and ere nightfall was hull down ahead of the Essex, which all this time lay perfectly becalmed.

This enigmatic craft—American in the morning, and English in the evening—her sails full of wind in a calm—was never again beheld. An enchanted ship no doubt. So at least the sailors swore.

Sovereignty itself is enigmatic. In a world of buccaneers and the like, who cross and complicate the law of land and sea, it becomes unclear who rules, an indeterminacy heightened by the odd conditions of the Encantadas themselves. No wonder that Schmitt was fascinated by Melville as his other. This theorist of continental *Lebensraum* and *Grossraum* maintained that the human is essentially a land-creature, yet had to allow that there are also “autothalassic” peoples, especially in the areas traversed in Melville’s writing:

On the isles of the South Sea, in the Polynesian seafarers, Canaks and Sawoiroi, one recognizes still the last remnants of such fish-humans. . . . To them our conceptions of space and time attained from fixed land appeared as strange and incomprehensible as, conversely, the world of these pure sea-humans signifies a hardly comprehensible world for us land-humans.
SOVEREIGNTY IN THE SOUTH SEA:
DOGS, KINGS, HERMITS

What happens when, in the no-human-land of the South Sea, beset by buccaneers and confusing oddities of air and water, someone attempts to establish sovereign rule over a fixed territory? We recall the persistent philosophico-political idea of beginning a new society on an island (actual or metaphorical). The seventh sketch, "Charles' Isle and the Dog-King" already announces a conjunction of beast and sovereign in its title. It allegedly recounts a story from the time of the South American wars of independence, a story that recapitulates in allegorical form some leading themes of political philosophy.46 A Cuban Creole soldier of fortune was awarded sole ownership in perpetuity of Charles' Isle by Peru, as compensation for services in the revolt against Spain. He is "made in effect Supreme Lord of the Island, one of the princes of the powers of the earth."47 This sovereign recruits about eighty subjects with various promises, and sets sail for his kingdom with them and a contingent of fiercely loyal dogs. Having arrived on the island, the new subjects and their king proceed to establish dwellings built from volcanic rocks, and to pasture the livestock they brought with them. Not surprisingly, many new subjects were unruly types who did not submit well to their sovereign's rule. "His Majesty was forced at last to proclaim martial law, and actually hunted and shot with his own hand several of his rebellious subjects."48 "Martial law" is equivalent to Schmitt's "state of exception." The king ultimately enforced his order with his "canine janizaries." While he tried to increase his loyal population by luring some sailors away from ships stopping at the island, these also proved rebellious. A famous political analogy: "As the foreign-born Pretorians, unwisely introduced into the Roman state, and still more unwisely made favorites of the Emperors, at last insulted and overturned the throne, even so these lawless mariners, with all the rest of the body-guard and all the rest of the populace, broke out into a terrible mutiny."49 After losing a bloody battle, in which his dogs were the king's main allies, he was soundly defeated and forced to leave the island. The rebels had in the meantime proclaimed themselves a republic and "confederated themselves into a democracy neither Grecian, Roman, nor American. Nay, it was no democracy at all, but a permanent Riotocracy, which gloried in having no law but lawlessness."50 Ships now avoided Charles' Isle, because seamen were tempted to desert and join the anarchic mob. Melville may be asking whether lawlessness is the implicit truth of absolute sovereignty.

Unlike Robinson Crusoe, who becomes sovereign by default, given the apparent absence of humans on his island, the Dog-King acquired legal title from another sovereign state. By Schmitt's standards, this was a completely legitimate establishment of sovereignty. Elevated beyond his subjects, he repeatedly resorted to his canine bodyguard. In Plato's Re-
public Socrates compares the true guardians needed by his state to dogs who recognize their friends and enemies. Yet the Dog-King is no philosopher-king—his aim is tyrannical self-aggrandizement rather than avoiding the rule of the worse—and his dogs are dumb animals incapable of the *paideia* prescribed for the guardians. Melville starkly traces a paradigmatic line of political descent: monarchy, rebellion, civil war and revolution, constitution of a republic, final dissolution into “riotocracy” or anarchy. The sovereign becomes a murderous beast toward his own subjects, employing his canine corps of vicious beasts, provoking rebellion and formless violence.

In Defoe’s story the island sovereign creates an orderly economy and polity, repeating in miniature the idealized version of Calvinist political economy that was the emerging ideology of the British capitalist Leviathan. Melville’s story is no “Robinsonade” (as Marx called Defoe’s fantasy), a pastoral mask and apology for industry and slavery, but a grotesque, anti-picturesque sketch drawn by an artist of the dark side. The “Enchanted Isles,” are presented first as the home of disgusting antediluvian tortoises. They become a true hell, hopelessly corrupt both morally and politically, when humans attempt to establish their typical institutional forms there. As Derrida reads *Crusoe*, humans attempting to establish their sovereignty become bestial. The picturesque, briefly glimpsed by the “sentimental traveler” (“Sketch Sixth”), seems possible only as a fleeting aesthetic interlude for pirates who stay on their ships, rather than appropriating and cultivating land in the mode that Schmitt calls *nomos*.

From Schmitt’s perspective, Melville is truly an epic poet of the life of the sea rather than the land. In “The Encantadas” all human attempts to dwell or settle, permanently or temporarily, on the land, are doomed to disaster. The happiest and most successful islanders in Melville are those who spend most of their time away at sea. In *Moby-Dick* the Nantucketers, Queegqueg, and others, are singled out for praise, especially in their ability to work and bond in the community of the whaling ship:

> How it is, there is no telling, but Islanders seem to make the best whalemen. They were nearly all Islanders in the *Pequod*, *Isolatoes* too. I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own. Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these *Isolatoes* were!52

Recall once more Derrida’s formulation: “there is no world, only islands.” The Pequod crew can form a community of sorts, it seems, when each is ready to renounce the somewhat illusory “common continent of men.” For Melville, a federation of such “Isolatoes” is morally and politically superior to the grotesque forms of sovereignty he describes in the final “Encantadas” sketches.

Beasts and men—“men” because Hunilla is the only developed female character in “The Encantadas”—have several possible (non-exclu-
sive) relations: men may hunt and kill beasts, they may degenerate to a solitary beastly condition, or turn beastly toward other humans. In the ninth sketch, “Hood’s Isle and the Hermit Oberlus,” it is as if Melville set out to create a hellish inversion of *Robinson Crusoe*. Like the Dog-King episode, this is an extended political allegory. As with Crusoe’s historical model, Alexander Selkirk, Oberlus was not a castaway (like Crusoe) but left his ship deliberately. Rather than feeling desperately alone and bewildered, he glories in his solitude for some years. In the British eighteenth-century culture of landscape gardens and the picturesque, estate owners would sometimes promote a gothic atmosphere by allowing a “hermit,” with rustic costume and curmudgeonly attitude to live on the grounds. Oberlus’s hardscrabble farming could be a parody of Crusoe’s industry and invention (as well as a proleptic sardonic commentary on Schmitt’s celebration of *Landnahme*). Like the hermits in the grand gardens, Oberlus became a curiosity for visitors who recorded a grotesque apparition, recalling the haunting effect of the tortoise specter in the first sketch:

His appearance . . . was that of the victim of some malignant sorceress; he seemed to have drunk of Circe’s cup; beast-like; rags insufficient to hide his nakedness; his befreckled skin blistered by continual exposure to the sun; nose flat; countenance contorted, heavy, earthy; hair and beard unshorn, profuse, and of a fiery red. He struck strangers as if he were a volcanic creature thrown up by the same convulsion which exploded into sight the isle. 53

When meeting strangers he turned his back. Everything about him, including his tools, seemed perversely warped and crooked. Those who saw Oberlus hoeing his pumpkin and potato patch reported that “his whole aspect and all his gestures were so malevolently and uselessly sinister and secret, that he seemed rather in act of dropping poison into wells than potatoes into soil.” 54

Like the Dog-King, but with no trace of legitimate claim, Oberlus is proud of his sovereignty. In his “royal state of solitude” he displays a surprising vanity to crews who occasionally stop to bargain for vegetables. The conceited misanthrope “gave himself amusing airs to captains.” 55 Rather than developing an autonomous economy like Crusoe’s, while hoping for rescue, Oberlus treated visitors with contempt and exercised a “mercantile craftiness” revealing the dark side of Crusoe’s calculating Protestant ethic. The narrator imagines him saying, like Caliban, “This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother.” 56 In possession of a musket, he saw himself as an armed sovereign, and “acted out of mere delight in tyranny and cruelty.” 57 Perversely echoing Crusoe’s meeting with Friday, his first chosen victim was a black man, a member of a ship’s crew temporarily left alone to guard a boat while the rest gathered wood in the interior. When this attempted enslavement fails, the crew confines Oberlus, whips him, and confiscates his food and money. Escaping into the
mountains "the insulted misanthrope now vows a signal revenge upon humanity."58 Echoing Circe on her island (invoked earlier), he entices a few sailors to drink with him. When they pass out, he ties them hand and foot, totally enslaving them; a few die in the process. Unlike what Defoe would have us think of as Crusoe's relatively humane mastery of Friday (he hopes for the salvation of his soul), Oberlus constantly threatens them with death and "converts them into reptiles at his feet; plebeian garter-snarbes to this Lord Anaconda." After arming the four survivors with rusty cutlasses, the sovereign uses this "noble army" to steal a boat from a visiting ship. He eventually arrives at Guyaquil in an open boat, the four captives apparently cast overboard or dead of dehydration. Fittingly, he ends his days in an oppressive jail in the Plaza, where he becomes a spectacle, "the central figure of a mongrel and assassin band."59

Oberlus ends his days as an exhibit in a human zoo. The would-be sovereign is treated as a beast in captivity, as he turned his captives into whipped animals. What was implicitly beastly in sovereignty, already thrown into relief by the island settings of his and Crusoe's careers, becomes notorious, blatant, and outrageous. To complete the parallel and contrast, Oberlus proves to be a surprisingly literate monster. The novel Robinson Crusoe purports to be Crusoe's "Life and Strange Surprising Adventures . . . Written by Himself." Melville's narrator reports that upon leaving his island Oberlus left a notice (as we might say: "to whom it may concern") offering an excuse for stealing a boat, asking the reader not to kill the chicken at his shelter, and deviously claiming to have set out for Fiji.

The "Encantadas" ends with an account of two different sorts of text, as if to remind us of the grapheme always ingredient in the geo-graphical. The tenth and final sketch "Runaways, Castaways, Solitaries, Grave-Stones, etc." offers a brief inventory of the many ways that men found themselves alone on the islands—disaster at sea, treachery, accidents in tortoise-hunting, choice, or chance. The narrator surveys "signs of vanishing humanity to be found on the islands," including such things as rude basins hollowed out to catch water." The emphasis then turns to forms of writing: "though it may seem very strange to talk of post-offices in this barren region, yet post-offices are occasionally to be found there. They consist of a stake and bottle."60 Captains leave messages for one another to report on fishing results and other maritime matters. Needless to say, many letters are never read by their intended recipients or not at all. As Derrida writes: "a letter does not always arrive at its destination, and from the moment that this possibility belongs to its structure one can say that it never truly arrives."61 The post office is also necessarily a dead letter office. The possibility of living, fully present communication is frustrated by the very conditions of writing. Wrapping up the tour that began with antediluvian monsters and the memento mori, the narrator adds: "If now it be added that grave-stones, or rather grave-boards, are also dis-
covered upon some of the isles, the picture will be complete."62 In one spot an unmarked finger-post points inland. Upon following it the traveler discovers not a welcoming hermit, but an inscription marking a sailor's death in a duel. When deaths occurred at sea, ships would head for land, if accessible, and the deceased would be interred there. Then "some good-natured forecastle poet and artist seizes his paintbrush, and inscribes a doggerel epitaph" such as this:

Oh Brother Jack, as you pass by,
As you are now, so once was I.
Just so game and just so gay,
But now, alack, they've stopped my pay.
No more I peep out of my blinkers,
Here I be—tucked in with clinkers!63

With characteristic humor, then, Melville circles back to the "Memento Mori" of the spectral tortoise, which appeared in flaming letters on its shell.64 Writing is that which can outlast my life, remains after my death, and reminds all readers of their common fate. Epitaph is epiphany. As these tales of beasts, sovereigns, and pirates demonstrate, geography is geo-thanatology. Reading the grave-boards, visiting sailors have an experience parallel to Poussin's shepherds as they discover the tomb inscribed "et in Arcadia ego."

The classic British picturesque had a political thrust, valorizing the supremacy of a landed aristocracy, while throwing an ideological veil over growing urbanization and industrialization. Melville's anti-picturesque mode samples and surveys a kaleidoscopic archipelago. There British buccaneers, following the predatory sea-going practices of their Leviathan kingdom, rested and refueled. Their enjoyment of picturesque views suggests that they and the landed gentlemen aesthetes on the other side of the world are doing complementary work on antipodal islands. The Encantadas' stories of power, captivity, betrayal, and rebellion are political narratives, even more explicitly so than their best-known fictional predecessor, Robinson Crusoe. Melville provokes us to the realization that sovereignty, even in its more splendid forms, maintains underground connections with its grotesque variations.

NOTES

1. In addition to the works cited in Newman's informative and comprehensive Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Herman Melville, see the Northwestern Newberry edition of The Piazza Tales and, indicating more recent interest, Jonik, "Melville's 'Per­manent Riotocracy.'"  
4. See, for example, Howarth, “Earth Islands: Darwin and Melville in the Galapagos.”
7. Piazza Tales, 606-07nn; the editors point out that it is not known whether the pseudonym was dropped deliberately or not (by author, editor, or compositor) when the sketches appeared together in The Piazza Tales.
8. For a comprehensive account of the picturesque garden movement, see Hunt, Gardens and the Picturesque.
9. The cult of the picturesque already provoked satires and parodies within a few years: for example, in the travels of Doctor Syntax and in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park and Northanger Abbey. See Combe and Rowlandson, The Tour of Doctor Syntax, in Search of the Picturesque: A Poem. More recently, the artist and writer Robert Smithson ironized the genre in his “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” in which industrial ugliness and ruins are photographed and described with relish. See Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings.
10. Melville, Piazza Tales, 131.
11. Ibid., 130.
12. Ibid., 131.
13. Ibid., 126.
14. Ibid., 126.
16. Ibid., 77.
17. Ibid., 87.
18. Melville, Piazza Tales, 129.
20. Melville’s Northwestern editors are careful to point out that the “sentimental voyager’s” account is a greatly expanded version of a much more mundane notice of a different island from a published report of 1798. See Piazza Tales, 610n.
21. Ibid., 145.
22. Ibid., 145.
23. Ibid., 145.
24. Ibid., 146.
25. Ibid., 131.
27. Chola: of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry.
29. Ibid., 154.
30. Ibid., 154.
31. Ibid., 158.
32. Ibid., 162.
33. Ibid., 135.
36. Schmitt, Political Theology, 5.
38. Derrida, The Beast and the Sovereign Vol. II, 9. Melville probably read an abridged version of Robinson Crusoe in 1842–1843 while at sea (Parker, Biography Vol. 1, 233). Defoe’s novel is set somewhere in the Caribbean, but the generally acknowledged model for Crusoe, the Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk (1676–1721), was alone on an island for four years in the South Sea. Selkirk had joined a privateering expedition that had mixed success. When the ship put in at the Juan Fernandez Islands for repairs, food, and water, he requested to be left ashore alone rather than continuing on a ship he judged dangerously unseaworthy. After four years alone on the island he lived to
tell the tale. Selkirk's story not only contributed to Defoe's work (published 1719) but entered more widely into the literary imagination. In 1841 Melville was on a whaler that passed the island where Selkirk had been (Parker, *Biography* Vol. 1, 193). The poet William Cowper sounded the sovereignty theme quite explicitly in "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk." I cite only the first stanza with its familiar first line:

I am monarch of all I survey,
My right there is none to dispute,
From the center all round to the sea,
I am lord of the fowl and the brute.
O Solitude! where are the charms
That sages have seen in thy face?
Better dwell in the midst of alarms
Than reign in this horrible place.

41. Defoe himself compiled a *History of Pyrates* (1724).
44. Ibid., 143.
46. Melville's Northwestern editors, citing the previous research of Von Hagen, show that this tale is probably derived, in much altered form, from the career of a certain New Orleans Creole General José Vilamil, who served Ecuador in its war of independence. See *Piazza Tales*, 612n.
47. Ibid., 147.
48. Ibid., 148.
49. Ibid., 149.
50. Ibid.
51. See also Robert Tally, who in *Melville, Mapping and Globalization* explores the "conflict between Melville's nomad thought and national narrative's State philosophy" (65).
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 164.
57. Melville, *Piazza Tales*, 165.
58. Ibid., 166.
59. Ibid., 169.
60. Ibid., 172.
63. Ibid., 173.
64. The epitaph is freely adapted from Porter's narrative. Ibid., 615n.

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