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Proserpine upon the Coin: Melville’s Quest for Greek Beauty in “Syra”

Bruno Monfort

Melville’s Journal and Melville’s Poem

1 In 1891, Melville published *Timoleon Etc*, a collection of 42 poems of varying length in a 25-copy edition. The penultimate section, “Fruit of Travel long ago,” arranged to suggest a journey that takes the prospective reader from Italy to the Holy Land, includes “Syra,” one of the longest poems in the section, much longer in any case than the other poems dedicated to evocations of Classical Greece and the Greek landscape.

2 When it comes to examining, investigating or discussing the text of the poem, editors of Melville’s poems do not usually consider the *Timoleon* collection as a relevant context. In the recently published volume of Melville’s *Poems* in the Northwestern-Newberry edition, they take it for granted that “Melville constructed the ‘Transmitted Reminiscence’ in ‘Syra’ largely out of impressions and speculations that he recorded in his journals on two separate visits to the Greek island in the Aegean in early and late December 1856.” (844-7) Howard P. Vincent had put it hardly differently in his edition of the poems dating back to 1947: “it was the return visit that furnished him with most of the details transferred to the poem.” (478) Editors tend, as is predictable, to relate the poetic text to Melville’s *Journal* and the assumed biographical information that it contains.

3 Biographically speaking, Melville visited Syra or Syros both going and returning during his 1856-1857 journey through Europe and the Near East, a journey that he could financially ill afford, but because the family feared for his mental health, his father-in-law Judge Lemuel Shaw paid for it in the hope that travel would contribute to his recovery. He arrived there for his first visit on board the steamship *Egyptian* on Tuesday, December 2, 1856. Syra was never praised or recommended in any guidebook for ruins worth the admiration of visitors (there were no ruins to speak of) and we may gather that Melville himself was not impressed by the beauties and amenities of the place (they were few). What was the point of going there?
Melville presumably never wanted to go there in the first place. But any ship sailing through the area would have made Syra her port of call. This is not mere speculation. On Syra was located, at the time, the largest and most important commercial harbor in the newly formed state of Greece. It was aptly named Hermoupolis/Ermoupoli to celebrate Hermes, the ancient god of commerce. It rose to be the main coaling station in the Aegean Sea and more broadly in the Eastern Mediterranean and the premier port and warehouse in the new Greek state. For decades, it had the busiest commercial traffic of all Greek ports (Delis, April 2015) before it was finally superseded by Piraeus in the early 1890s (notably after the opening of the Corinth Canal in 1893), subsequently losing its role as the hub of commerce in this part of the Mediterranean to gradually become a sleepy backwater after WWI. Throughout the past centuries, the 86km² island had always been poor, and it had none of the magnificence and beauty of neighboring islands such as Delos; no temples, no ruins, no associations with the ancient civilization of Greece, almost nothing of archeological interest that would have been an attraction to prospective visitors in those early days of tourism. But so much for tourists.

What, to its inhabitants, had proved to be its most tangible asset was of a religious and political order: following a long period of Venetian occupation, Syra was the seat of a Catholic bishoprick (it was known as “l’Isola del Papa” until the early nineteenth century) and a majority of the population was Catholic in an area where Muslim and Christian Orthodox creeds were strongly dominant. For this reason, and because it was constantly raided by pirates, its inhabitants had not called without good cause unto the Catholic ears of a mighty Christian prince: the island had been under protection of French authorities since the reign of Louis XIII of France, and the Turks dared not invade it as they did the rest of the archipelago during the war of Greek independence that started in 1821. It served as a refuge for a great number of Orthodox Greek families who had been evicted by the Turks from all those other islands in the vicinity, when they had not committed suicide, been killed or eliminated. They eventually settled there because they had nowhere else to go. In a matter of years, the island, which up to then had been an impoverished dry, bare and barren rock, became the thriving center of maritime traffic in the area, a major shipbuilding zone as well, and a bustling spot of economic prosperity which attracted its share of shady characters.

The first few lines of the poem offer a social and historical perspective on how Syra was settled and, though it does not tell the whole story, Melville’s account is substantially correct as to the way in which the Orthodox immigrants settled on or near the shore when they arrived on the island, while the older Catholic population kept living in its mountain fastnesses at a distance from the sea and relatively safe from marauding pirates. We may come to the conclusion that, even if we leave out all other considerations, the poem is historically far more documented and elaborate than the Journal ever was.

Compared to the poem, then, the Journal appears to have been written with a surprising lack of perspective, by a Melville who had more narrow, more immediate concerns in mind. Melville kept a day-to-day chronicle of his journey in his Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant; he recorded his impressions of his visits to Syra in a number of journal entries for December 1856. Maybe, as Hershel Parker suggests, he intended to pile up a treasury of preliminary remarks, leaving room for later elaboration, or maybe he did not. No sign is extant that Melville had any plans to revise his rough, offhand notations for use
in more definite purposes. He did not have the poem in mind when he wrote his *Journal*. Though he knew what he had written in it when he composed the poem.

Critical opinions, and critical assumptions, regarding this poem have consistently dismissed latent difficulties. They seem to have changed little over the last 60 years, and with the appearance of good reason: the assumption of most editors, those I have mentioned and others, is that Melville, when he composed his poem at some unknown period—probably during the 1880s—quarried his *Journal* for primary material that was readily available, and it would be hard to deny that Melville’s visit to Syra is documented in these two separate texts. It is, however, by mere force of critical habit that editors have come to consider the material in the journal had not reached a full degree of elaboration and can legitimately be construed in retrospect as preparatory to the poem. The close reading of the journal hardly vindicates such critical opinions, and there is little in the comparison between poem and journal to substantiate such a claim. The poem is altogether a very different text, and what it owes to the *Journal* cannot be characterized as just the “biographical material” obligingly provided by Melville in its unprepared native state: no pure “recording” of raw data occurred in the *Journal*. Poem and *Journal* were written at different periods, though the difference involves a change in perspective, and what “different” amounts to is meaningful, not merely in terms of the time elapsed between the writing of the journal and the composition of the poem. My claim is that the relationship the poem bears to the journal, and vice versa, needs to be clarified.

**The Beauty that Used to be Greece**

To give a sense of its latent complexity, let me begin by saying that, in his *Journal*, Melville does not seem to object to the fact that, of all places in the Greek Islands, Syra is probably the least likely to offer physical and visual contact with evidence that there ever was such a thing as the classical heritage that Greece as a whole owes its reputation to. Yet Melville was later to include this island visit to Syra in a series of poems that reflect an interest in the grandest beauty spots of Greece, or those visited or evoked by his poetical forebears, especially Lord Byron. Syra, however, is not much of a landmark, because it displays so few of those traces that may help measure the extent to which the classical past has been erased or adulterated there. Coming to Syra, you have to make allowance for this blunt fact that classical Greece was never lost or in decay there because it never was there at all to begin with. Comparing poem and journal gives the measure of what is implicit or unexpressed in the journal. At this stage, we need a few samples for analysis:

> Animated appearance of the quays. Take all the actors from the operas in a night from the theaters of London and set them to work in their fancy dresses, weighing bales, counting codfish, sitting at tables on the dock, smoking, talking sauntering,—sitting in boats &c—picking up rags, carrying water casks, bemired &c—will give some notion of Greek port. Picturesqueness of the whole. Variety of it. Greek trousers, sort of cross between petticoat and pantaloons. Some with white petticoats and embroidered jackets. Fine forms, noble faces. Mustache &c. […] Poor people live here. Picturesque. Some old men look like Pericles reduced to a chiffonier – such a union of picturesque and poverty stricken. […] Carpenters and blacksmiths working in the theatrical costumes. Scavenger in his opera costume going about with his opera costume through the streets, and emptying his pan into panniers of an ass.—No horses or carriages—Street merely made for foot passengers […], (83-4)
Melville’s journal writing is chaotically instinctive, repetitive and haphazard; something is going wrong; his visit to Syra is making him alarmingly self-conscious: it reveals to him the strange incapacity he was in to find anything truly authentic and original on the island (the quays are not just “animated,” Melville’s phrase may suggest their animation is an appearance) and he derived from his visit a sense as though he had been there before, as though he had already seen the many sights, though he clearly never was there on any prior occasion. The problem with Syra is that it seems to fulfill rather than frustrate Melville’s unformulated expectations, which must be the wrong kind of expectations because they cannot be reconciled. Melville discovered to his own surprise and dismay that Syra was very much that modern Greek island in the midst of an economic boom, with attendant consequences: the kind of perception entailed by the thriving economic situation existing at the time on the island was not fit to be idealized, it could hardly be poeticized. There is something disquieting in the juxtaposition of the mean and the stagey: the sanitation anecdote is extremely telling. How can you look like a conventional Greek character in a play and be materially collecting real garbage in the actual city streets? Syra, to the extent it looked like a living duplicate of all kinds of cultural stereotypes, clearly did not carry the full weight of the cultural passions that Greece had elicited in the rest of Europe for the previous 20 or 30 years. Melville realized that his appreciation of Syra could not be dependent on what Shelley’s or Byron’s heroic vision of Greece, ancient and modern, could have been.

Melville’s tentative depiction of the place in his journal conveys a sense that it did not exist except as a duplicate that owes whatever reality it may claim to its similarity with a preexistent picture of itself, an artifact depicting life as the result of its own depiction in the artifact concerned. A self-validating artifact, then. Such is the predominant weird impression of the place recorded in Melville’s Journal. He senses the unreality permeating an actual scene that looks originally like an imitation of itself, with the commercial activity that animates the cityscape looking not like the current of exchange that weaves itself into the texture of any scene in real life but already like an image of life recorded in prior pictures or frozen in stereotypes that have displaced life itself; with the topography and landscape a painted backdrop before which traders and people in various walks of life are busy performing some virtual operatic play, where events and occurrences seem entirely staged even as they are happening right there before the viewer’s eyes.

The Strange, the Real and the Spurious

The word “picturesque” summarizes Melville’s impression, a blasé feeling of déjà vu, but not even quite that. The viewer realizes that whatever detail he is in a position to record existed in his mind and eye before he was ever in a capacity to see it. No shaking off the clichés that have invaded his psyche, as he finds them present and alive and ubiquitous in all parts of the city and on the island at large. Whatever he views thus looks over-familiar, the changing scene is constantly in the act of replicating any feature that would fit the definition of the picture of them, and the Greeks look exceedingly like colorful facsimiles of themselves in a sort of large-scale tableau vivant. This is a typically Victorian form of entertainment, but it seems to have taken a disproportionate size on Syra; it is not the usual playlet patterned after a pre-existing picture or narrative that would have rejoiced family and friends during social occasions in Victorian parlors but a blown-up affair of operatic dimensions acted out by a whole community of local people, the Genius Loci.
expanding into an exhilarating parody of itself. Peculiar signs of locality and typicity of costume and dress, with their theatrical impracticality, seem to coincide with the cheap, conventional versions of them that originated in far away London, a long way from the actual place where they would be truly meaningful – the characteristics of the local garb appear to the viewer’s eye as embarrassing imitations of the artistic/iconic stereotypes that serve as the basis for all Greek-looking stage costumes at London’s many theaters and operas. It is this bizarre coalescence of the spurious with the real, the absent strangeness of the scene, which challenges Melville’s capacity for full-bodied adequate description in the journal. Unfinished nominal sentences, use of imperative, the style used for jotting down his observations is that of a “long telegram” to echo Robert Milder (Milder, 2007, 208), and it lends itself to casual treatment of the Greek figures in Melville’s various journal entries. No description is likely to be adequate when the Greeks themselves have managed to look like actors trying to look like them.

Melville’s implicit diagnosis of the secret disease affecting the scene could be phrased this way: Greeks are not Greeks except by the standards of the picturesque. Such is the ironic reward of too much interest in what Greece had come to symbolize for Europe, for Britain, and for the Romantics, such as Shelley and Byron: the heritage of Greek culture had been carried over to London like the Elgin Marbles and a derivative version percolated back to the remotest outposts in the land. London then had captured if not confiscated the true spirit of Greece; it had, poetically as well as materially, appropriated all that’s truly Greek. Greece, as Melville knew, or as Melville could not but know, had been (re-)invented in London and, in the eyes of Melville the American Poet, the Greeks had re-imported the markers of their cultural identity from that distant city in Europe, along with other commodities. Melville’s American eye registers the alien status of what supposedly constitutes visible emblems of the so-called “national character,” an entire fabrication, as they were all manufactured abroad.

The typical Greek scene, which strikes the eye as “picturesque,” inevitably bears a staged, fabricated look because its genuineness was certified elsewhere, and generates a surfeit of “Greekness” that the viewer has no choice but to negotiate with as he tries to write about it, and to convey a feeling that it contributes to the construction of the reality it purports to describe. It is hardly surprising that it should act, visually speaking, as a warning signal to Melville. As he reported about the views provided by the occasional excursion to this or that part of the city or the island of Syra, he showed a degree of resistance to the widespread Hellenomania so characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century. Hellenomania reinvented Greece to serve the dream of classical age jointly with the romantic and post-romantic ideals of the struggle for national freedom.

Complications of Irony

Never mind then that there are so few physical/material traces of the past on Syra. It is fortunate, or ironically unfortunate, that you need no stone monuments to serve as mementoes of past grandeur. The lineaments of the ancient past may survive not just in stones but in people, chiefly as glorious reminders of noble descent in a depleted present. They ironically measure in the present the social and cultural fall from the grace and glory of the classical ages: the poorest mendicant or tramp still looks like he was descended straight from Pericles, which does not greatly help him and sheds a sad light on the condition that modern economic realities have reduced a Pericles to:
primitivism revisited

Above a tented inn with fluttering flag
A sunburnt board announced Greek wine
In self-same text Anacreon knew,
Dispensed by one named “Pericles.”

Undeniably sounded in the journal, the note of derision is ambiguous enough to warrant revision in the poem. For indeed, on the other hand, the beggarly figure has effectively retained that Pericles look in his downfall: the derision need not go all the way, and the poem stops short of vindicating the reader’s sense of irony, should he be tempted to go all the way. For this purpose, the journal is revised on this point, the tramp’s status heightened, the Pericles namesake promoted to innkeeper.

That irony ceases does not mean that commiseration takes over when the poem starts, but I would argue the poem originates where the ironies inherent in the theatricality of the mercantile economic scene of Syra take up a different meaning. Journal and poem could not be more different in their tone, and in the drift of the affects and perceptions they convey. For all that, the poem is not apologetic or nostalgic or even retrospective in the least, never presents itself globally as a revised more lucid version of the journal, because the poem’s voice is simply different: it tries, with the benefit of hindsight, to make sense of the present moment in a way Melville never could on his visit to Syra, discovering at that time that, even as he was writing his journal, he was not in unmediated contact with something rugged and raw his pen attempted to record, but caught up in the entanglements of self-consciousness, and in his own deeply ironic sense of the vanishing immediacy of the scene.

The subtitle of the poem (“A Transmitted Reminiscence”) underscores the paradox of a “reminiscence” that will not serve to take stock of the past; it will simply be “transmitted” but not to vindicate the sort of romantic fallacy that casts all objects as truer and more authentic when bathed in the golden light of memory, or restored to their “pastness.” The power to “transmit” a reminiscence belongs to the poem when it reinstates the present that did not have a chance to be fully appreciated and enjoyed for what it is. The present moment of 1856 is more unmediated now in the poem than it was back then. Bridging the time gap between now and then is only part of the poem’s object; the other part is reconciling what was beautiful in “now” with an adequate perception of its beauty, and such perception may well be delayed or deferred if through deferral it is achieved at all in the iterative version of “now” that the poem offers. The poem revisits the place, not the memory of the place as recorded in the Journal, and therefore need not invalidate the terms in which the prior visit was depicted.

PRIMITIVISM REVISITED

Quite interestingly, then, the poem does, though tentatively and not too explicitly, refer to the journal (“I saw it in its earlier days”) and does not contradict or revise the journal except on a very limited number of admittedly crucial points. The impracticality and theatricality of the local scene have been largely retained in the poem, but their meaning has changed radically, for mostly, the poetic voice now insists, they contribute along with the frolicking and general childishness of the people, to the enactment of the primitive: to Melville in 1856, Syra was embarrassingly modern and mercantile, the picturesque scene the result of fabrication. To the biographical voice of 1856 Melville, reality’s presence coincided with its virtual non-existence because it was interlarded with
stereotypes. To the largely fictive voice of the poem’s utterer, Syra is very much the site where a presentified version of the ever ancient and ever primitive may materialize itself through the mercantilist features that were used against it back in 1856. They are now tentatively construed as topical manifestations of what should remain a permanent source of enjoyment that harks back to the recovery of its intimate connection to the classical period when Greece was in its early days. The poem develops a paradoxical sort of orientalist vision, which uncovers for the reader the innocence and spontaneity of the scene, not the exotic and the typical. The theatrical quality of it is still undeniable, but it is now combined with indications that none of it is calculated, not here as by design to meet the standards of the orientalist vision, even though the whole scene does indeed meet the requirements of orientalism.

20 The poetic voice never tries to detect the cliché hidden behind the apparent truth, and never complains that the scene looks overmuch like what it is supposed to look like. To a certain extent, the poem tries to remain as non-descriptive as it can, takes the form of a catalogue registering chaos and chance, to match the unpredictable, putting forward the fact that all the mercantile activity in Syra took place without, by European standards, adequate facilities: sheds and shanty-shops instead of docks and warehouses, no piers and quays available, so they used the strand. No master plan ever presided over the venues and activities that make up the attraction of the whole scene, nothing was ever planned ahead:

What busy bees! no testy fry;
Frolickers, picturesquely odd,
With bales and oil-jars lading boats,
Lighters that served an anchored craft,
Each in his tasseled Phrygian cap,
Blue Eastern drawers and braided vest;
And some with features cleanly cut
As Proserpine’s upon the coin.
Such chatterers all! like children gay
Who make believe to work, but play.
I saw, and how help musing too.
Here traffic’s immature as yet:
Forever this juvenile fun hold out
And these light hearts? Their garb, their glee,
Alike profuse in flowing measure,
Alike inapt for serious work,
Blab of grandfather Saturn’s prime
When trade was not, nor toil, nor stress,
But life was leisure, merriment, peace,
And lucre none and love was righteousness.

21 The people are “busy bees,” implying they are not self-consciously efficient; there is no explicit logic or general meaning to the juxtaposed items that follow each other in the list, just as accumulated goods suggest no latent order, and people generally do not seem to be acting for any definable purpose. They are traders, not referred to as committed to any kind of rational business model, but the trading does take place and is clearly recognizable as such. They are altogether, chatty, playful and frolicsome. “Alike inapt for serious work” this might sound definitely patronizing, and dangerously like colonialist discourse. They are languidly oriental, but not in imitation of our preconceptions regarding the character of orientals. They are morally, legally as well as sexually rather
ambiguous, but this need not detain us more than the rest, as the poem moves on to enumerate more items in non-directional sequential order.

The poetic voice thus gradually empowers itself to dissociate that sequence of impressions from the cultural logic of pre-existing representations, in the speaker’s mind or the reader’s. A strange medley of self-consciousness and spontaneity, the scene predictably brings to mind the most received notions of what an exotic place should look like, but, precisely because it does so, and does it spontaneously and not intentionally as a calculated effect, it refuses to endorse the encroachments of cultural memory, simultaneously calling upon and invalidating those signs that denote conformity with preexisting models in the field of history, economy or visual/cultural representation.

The scene is thereby rescued from the picturesque. Not representations objectified as lived events, or vice-versa, but the living of the events by the people who live them. Melville’s poetic voice thus makes the poem into the expression of a purely aesthetic moment, sharing in the enjoyment of life as it goes, no longer dependent for its significance on the recognition that it exhibits itself as the accomplishment or enactment of concepts, notions, ideas, patterns or schemes. The mediation of abstract or preexistent ideas is edited out. The joy, the pleasure that the appreciative tone of the poem emanates from, is elicited by a sense that a correspondent alacrity makes itself felt to the utterer’s level with the common life of people there. The poetic voice has immersed itself in it.

What, by the end of the poem, could appear as Melville’s renewed allegiance to the ideals of Classical Greece as the mother of western civilization should be interpreted with caution. The utterer’s words in praise of the plain equivalents that keep Anacreon, Homer and Pericles very much alive are humorously intended, but mostly tend to indicate that, to put it bluntly, the islanders have managed to effectively retain some primordial and archaic features that prove appealing to the Melvillean voice because they make them the western equivalents of the Marquesans, Melanesian or African peoples who were supplying the raw forms of a new style of art that western artists adopted from the 1880s onward. In several other poems in the same collection, Melville’s voice laments the fact that his journey through the Mediterranean made him aware of the loss he had incurred when he compared Greek islands to the lush paradise of the Pacific Islands he had known earlier. We might apply the definition of primitive as uninhibited expression, free of conventions and rules to which to conform. This would relocate/reinscribe Melville’s poem in the context of the 1880s. But this would be misleading, if not contradictory; the islanders are never presented as free of the burdens of history and traditions. What they do, their signal achievement, is that they manage to live such lives as can be a source of aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment in lieu of those works of art they seem to worry very little about. Their lives, social, economic and moral, not their art, are so “primitive” because they are in more ways than one “artless,” and for that very reason their life is reinstated as a choice subject for the poem because it is identical to, it is what life was like in the 5th century BC. Enjoyment of the period life need not be mediated by contemplation of artworks from 5th century BC. They need not produce artworks as such to be the object of the same enjoyment as anything else from that period, including the poetry of Homer and Anacreon, which we can still enjoy now because the life that inspired it is there to provide it with present relevance, and more poetry need not be written in this line because all the poetry we need was already written 2500 years ago and is still relevant.
Melville’s tentative equation of life on modern Syra with the supposed primitivism, childhood, freedom and play of 24 centuries before is not a statement inspired by aesthetic naïveté but a highly political move: we might find an echo of Schiller’s idea in his Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man that the aesthetic mode of contemplation can be extended to all phenomena and not just confined to art objects, and (especially in letters XIV and XV) that the “play drive” (or “play impulse”) promotes man’s freedom when necessity and reality lose their earnestness and man truly plays where he is satisfying no material need nor achieving any purpose, and thus expresses the purpose and destination of his humanity. Life, including economic or mercantile life, on Syra might thus be described as driven by the sense of play that contributes to the creation of an aesthetic order inherent in the life itself.

Beauty of Greek coinage

But this is something we have to read into the text. Something else, not quite of the same order, we do not have to read into it though it may look mysterious or cryptic: when the faces of some islanders are compared to “Proserpine’s on the coin,” the import of the allusion is not supposed to be lost on the reader. Melville’s obliqueness in this matter underscores the degree of sophistication that constitutes a prerequisite to interpreting the utterance of his poetic voice when it refers the modern present of Syra to its potential significance as the “primitive.” The allusion here is to one or several passages in Winckelmann’s works that Melville may have read directly, or that he may have found the substance of in The Penny Cyclopaedia, which he used for documentation on many other occasions. Roughly summarized, Winckelmann’s idea is that the beauty of Greek art was for centuries past not known to men through the contemplation of full-scale statues that had not been recovered but was in fact transmitted through attention paid to heads stamped on coins, which were themselves of superlative beauty. One of Winckelmann’s favorites, and a prime example that he repeatedly used, was a very spectacular tetradrachma from SYRACusa which the Penny Cyclopaedia, following Winckelmann, who did not differentiate between the two deities mentioned, describes thus: “a better specimen cannot be adduced than the celebrated Syracusan coin representing the head of Arethusa or Proserpine.” (article “Basso Rilievo,” 7) My claim here is that Melville, through his allusion, titillated his reader’s curiosity and relied on his reader to take the full measure of the latent implications: if, as Winckelmann claims, coins were in fact the unacknowledged source of the beauty that was handed down to us from Ancient Greece, coins were never full-fledged works of art and the beauty thus transmitted emanates from an object intimately connected to the common run of economic exchange or mercantile life. It is a signal expression of the kind of beauty that Melville’s poem claims may reside in the very existence, be it the fruit of historical forces and mercantile concerns, of a group of men when, and because, they live the same ordinary lives together at widely distant periods of time. This is something he owes directly to Winckelmann and indirectly to Lord Shaftesbury from whom is derived the political side of Winckelmann’s aesthetics, here shared by Melville, to the effect that beauty may pertain to people who live in freedom. But Melville may show himself more radical than Winckelmann: when it comes to perceiving beauty, no work of art will replace, as an object of contemplation, the insuperable, playful presentness of the day-to-day childlike existence of its inhabitants. The faces like Proserpine’s on Winckelmann’s coin are here to
suggest that the ordinary commercial activity itself generates as its (monetary) sign the same sense of beauty as the statues that happen to be unavailable, and are therefore largely superfluous for the purpose. As a result, the spectacle of trade leads to an ambiguously utopian time “when trade was not.”

When, on his landing at Syra, Melville saw the island in its commercial heyday, he seems to have known right away that the whole venture would not last beyond the two or three generations ahead. It is fascinating to contemplate the idea that Melville may have anticipated the demise of Syra at first sight. In the poem, the physical and cultural barrenness of the island has turned to an asset; the text develops an intuition that there was something beautifully gratuitous and unsubstantial to the island and the commercial activities of the people, something which made the living sights of mercantile civilization in full swing precarious, short-lived and impermanent: indeed, no statues, temples or ruins were required for admiration; the life of the people itself was art and could be enjoyed aesthetically as the ultimate freedom of men in full play.

ILLUSTRATION 1

TIMOLEON

ETC.

NEW YORK
THE CAXTON PRESS
1891
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**SYRA.**

*(A Transmitted Reminiscence.)*

FLEEING from Scio's smouldering vines  
(Where when the sword its work had done  
The Turk applied the torch) the Greek  
Came here, a fugitive stript of goods,  
Here to an all but tenantless isle,  
Nor here in footing gained at first,  
Felt safe. Still from the turbaned foe  
Dreading the doom of shipwrecked men  
Whom feline seas permit to land
Syra.

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Then pounce upon and drag them back,
For height they made, and prudent won
A cone-shaped fastness on whose flanks
With pains they pitched their eerie camp,
Stone huts, whereto they wary clung;
But, reassured in end, come down—
Multiplied through compatriots now,
Refugees like themselves forlorn—
And building along the water's verge
Begin to thrive; and thriving more
When Greece at last flung off the Turk,
Make of the haven mere a mart.

I saw it in its earlier day—
Primitive, such an isled resort
As heartless Homer might have known
Wandering about the Aegaean here,
Sheds ribbed with wreck-stuff faced the sea
Where goods in transit shelter found;
And here and there a shanty-shop
Where Pez-caps, swords, tobacco, shawls
Pistols, and orient finery, Eve's—
(The spangles dimmed by hands profane)
Like plunder on a pirate's deck
Lay orderless in such loose way
As to suggest things ravished or gone astray.

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Syra.

Above a tented inn with fluttering flag
A sunburnt board announced Greek wine
In selfsame text Anacreon knew,
Dispensed by one named "Pericles."
Got up as for the opera's scene,
Armed strangers, various, lounged or lazed,
Litch fellows tall, with gold-shot eyes,
Sunning themselves as leopards may.

Off-shore lay xebecs trim and light,
And some but dubious in repute.
But on the strand, for docks were none,
What busy bees! no testy fry;
Foolickers, picturesquely odd,
With bales and oil-jars lading boats,
Lighters that served an anchored craft,
Each in his tasseled Phrygian cap,
Blue Eastern drawers and braided vest;
And some with features cleanly cut
As Proserpine's upon the coin.
Such chatterers all! like children gay
Who make believe to work, but play.

I saw, and how help musing too.
Here traffic's immature as yet;
Forever this juvenile fun hold out

[Text provided here is from this first edition, 25 copies published]
ILLUSTRATION I shows title page of first edition of TIMOLEON ETC, table of contents and the poem as it appears in the book.
ILLUSTRATION 2a shows a tetradrachm from Syracuse minted under the Reign of Agathokles (317-289 BC), a warlike tyrant. It belongs to the second series of silver coins that were produced under his rule, and marks the beginning of a series of novel numismatic designs, deviating from traditional types. By the end of the fourth century BC, the designs of Syracuse tetradrachms and dekadrachms exclusively pictured the local spring nymph Arethusa, generally facing left. The design on this coin is of Persephone/Proserpine, facing right and wearing similar earrings to Arethusa, shown in

ILLUSTRATION 2b, whose head is shown crowned with seaweed and surrounded by dolphins. Persephone is crowned with grain and the name Kore is engraved left. Variants of the chariot with four horses led by the driver to victory were traditional on Arethusa coins, accompanied or not by an inscription to identify the city-state (as here “syrakousion”). The design of the reverse face on the Kore coin is unprecedented in Syracuse: it shows an elegantly standing winged figure of Nike—the goddess of victory—putting the finishing touches to a military trophy constructed from the spoils of war, alluding to the successful invasion and short-lived occupation of part of North Africa by Agathocles (whose name appears left instead of that of his country) and his initial victory over Carthage. It was not uncommon by the eighteenth century to mistake the figures of the two divinities, possibly due to their relatively similar designs.

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NOTES

1. By 1828, there were almost 15,000 inhabitants in Hermoupolis, a bustling harbor city created virtually from nothing only a few years before, and at the time a larger city than Athens. Its development was meteoric, just like the growth of commercial and manufacturing activity. The demographic, cultural and economic status of Syra cannot be overestimated. Syra became the first example of a modern urban-commercial society in the newly formed Greek state that was still largely rural and pastoral, and the process of urbanization brought its fair share of deviant behaviors: Syra is known by all accounts as the starting point of hashish smuggling networks that appeared in Greece after 1850, introduced from the East and rapidly spreading to the area and the mainland afterward (see C. Stefanis, C. Ballas and D. Madianou, 311).

2. See also the relevant bibliography in this important article, as well as in the other article by the same author mentioned in the “Works Cited” section of this paper.

3. The bleak, barren, desolate aspect of Syra is a staple of travel narratives to the area. Reverend Bent starts chapter XIII of his The Cyclades; or Life Among the Insular Greeks (1885) with notations to this effect: “Of all the Cyclades, none is so bleak and barren as Syra; yet the island possesses an attraction of her own, and a curious history of modern development [...] But the flourishing commercial center on the island of Syra is due to the spontaneous outburst of mercantile activity incident to the recovery of freedom. [...] Whatever was left of vitality in Greece [...] found itself drawn to rocky, ungainly Syra.” (304) Therefore Syra was a “modern” island, with very little on it to call up to mind the “classical period” that is the glory of Greece. As we are reminded by Jan Hekman’s dissertation about archeological excavations on Syra, there were very few monuments of note on the island, which is mentioned hardly more than a dozen times in the whole corpus of ancient literature. If, as I argue, Melville (or Melville’s voice in the poem) was in fact fascinated by the “innocence” of the commercial activity that was the island’s main claim to greatness, it is indeed a feature other travelers had been sensitive to, and Syra was experiencing the beginning of a paradoxical “classical period,” whose expression was trade-in-progress rather than material artworks, just when Melville visited the island. It is worth noting that Reverend Bent’s remarks about the bustling activity on the island incident on its recovery of freedom exactly parallel Winckelmann’s remarks about artworks also as fruit of political freedom among the peoples of Ancient Greece.

4. In a Melville Society Extracts article, Ekaterini Georgoudaki makes the point that because Melville is unfamiliar with Greek and local history he is somewhat confused about the difference between Ano or Pala Syra (the oldest part of Hermopolis built on a steep hilltop to escape pirates’ raids) and the far more recent harbor city dating back only a few decades, noting that “The first stanza repeats the wrong journal information that Ano Syra was founded in the early nineteenth century by refugees from Scios...” (p. 4). My joint reading of the journal and poem may suggest otherwise and lead to the following conclusion: Melville’s alleged confusion is
deliberate because history is to a certain extent irrelevant to his own way of construing life on the island. A similar objection applies to Georgoudaki’s remarks about Melville’s three visits coinciding with the context of the Crimean War, of which he seems to ignore the economic effects. A number of assumptions about the importance of Syra in the context of Ancient Greece seem to me clearly overstated. Georgoudaki’s well-documented article contains much historical and bibliographical information about Syros/Syra that is not repeated here.

5. Something of this order was also recorded in a small way by Reverend Bent in the chapter he devotes to Syra in *The Cyclades or Life among the Insular Greeks*: “The quay, too, was gay with small hucksters’ shops. One man had a pile of ikons or sacred pictures [...] another man had besoms, his neighbor sold Russian tea-bowls and large wooden spoons, whilst a third offered for sale brilliantly coloured handkerchiefs which, though made in Manchester, are particularly Eastern in appearance.” (306)

6. First of all in Germany as Constanze Guthenke explains in *Placing Modern Greece: the Dynamics of Romantic Hellenism*. As is well-known, Hölderlin, one of the major zealots of the Greek revival in German culture, never set foot in Greece.

7. Hellenomania is the somewhat polemical term now frequently used to refer to what was formerly known as philhellenism. The word, which was coined recently, suggests the pathological love of Greeks and their country. It is used to deplore the eurocentric bent of classical studies and the tradition of reverence and admiration for all things Greek, based on the primitivist notion that the highest summit of human achievement is as distant as the fifth century B.C.

8. We may quote from Letter XV in a translation that could have been available to Melville: “Then to sum up all briefly, man only plays, when, in the full signification of the word, he is a man, and he is only entirely a man when he plays. This principle, which at this moment perhaps appears paradoxical, will contain a great and deep meaning, when we have advanced so far as to apply it to the twofold seriousness of duty and destiny; it will uphold, I assure you, the whole fabric of aesthetic art, and of the yet difficult art of life. But this principle is only startling in science; it long ago lived and acted in the art and the feeling of the Greeks, as their most distinguished master; but they transplanted to Olympus what should have flourished upon earth. Guided by truth itself, they caused both the seriousness and the toil, which furrow the cheeks of mortals, and the vain pleasure which smooths the vacant countenance, to disappear from the forehead of the celestials,— they freed the ever-happy from the fetters of all motive, all duty, all care,— and made indolence and indifference the enviable lot of divinity; a merely human name for the freest and noblest existence.” (Schiller, 74)

9. My reading here differs radically from the one that might easily be derived from the notion developed by Frank M. Turner in *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*: “Winckelmann’s views on the character and environment of the Greek people were transmitted to Britain partly through translations of his books and partly through the works of late German writers [...] They also frequently portrayed the Greeks as an aesthetic people who resembled children and who were in fact the intellectual and artistic children of western civilization [...]. Greece functioned as a metaphor for a golden age inhabited, if not by prelapsarian human beings, at least by natural children who made use of their imagination to comprehend the world and their reason to restrain their passions against excess [...]. The metaphor of childhood was used variously to mean that the Greeks actually thought like children or that because of their earlier position in history their civilization was the childhood of later cultures [...]. Most often, when representing the Greeks as childlike, a British writer was simply regarding them as exemplifying human virtues and normal healthy impulses that were repressed in an evangelical Christian culture.” (Turner, 41)

10. “Coins and engraved gems, or impressions from them, are to be obtained even in lands which have never seen any admirable work from a Greek chisel, and from these the whole world can
form an idea of the lofty conceptions expressed in the heads of the divinities. [...] The head of Ceres, on silver coins of the city of Metapontus, in Magna Graecia, and the head of Proserpine, on two different silver coins of Syracuse, in the royal Farnese museum at Naples, surpass anything that can be imagined.” (Winckelmann, 1850, 152)

11. The article was probably written by Charles Eastlake, an important luminary among Victorian art critics. The text continues: “In addition to the propriety of its style, this head is remarkable for its beauty; and is classed by Winkelmann [sic] among the examples of the highest character of form.” (Penny Cyclopaedia, 7)

12. “The heads on all the coins of their free states have forms above nature, which they owe to the line that forms their profile. Might not Raphael, who complained of the scarcity of Beauty, might not he have recurred to the coins of Syracuse, as the best statues [...] were not yet discovered? Farther than those coins no mortal idea can go.” (Winckelmann, 1765, 264-5). Such a text lends itself to a reading that is a likely source of inspiration for Melville, to the effect that you need not wait until you see a statue to get a sense of the Beauty that ancient Greeks were both in quest of and in a capacity to express/display even as they transacted their daily business with such supernally magnificent coins. Winckelmann, himself an avid coin collector, was murdered because he carried his prized collection around with him as he travelled to and from Rome.

13. Such conclusions have been partly suggested by Jacques Rancière in Aisthesis. Scènes du régime esthétique de l’art. 

ABSTRACTS

When Melville visited the Greek island of Syra in 1856, he discovered a thriving harbor city with no ancient monuments to speak of, and little to remind the traveler of the glories of Ancient Greece that Shelley or Byron used to celebrate. Melville’s poem resists the still persistent hellenomania of the period: old stones and antique statues vanish from the poet’s field of vision as he comes to realize that the humble people he meets, traders, innkeepers or street-cleaners, have inherited the noble features transmitted through the ages from the days of Ancient Greece. Confronted to the mercantile realities of modern Syra, the poet acknowledges that the people there spontaneously lived primitive, innocent lives with little concern for the clichés and prejudices of Orientalism. No preconceptions of the kind encroached upon such lives, never idealized and hardly in keeping with prevailing notions of the picturesque that kept haunting the poet’s and the reader’s minds. The past is thus reconstructed as pure aesthetic enjoyment of life materialized by a coin engraved with the head of Proserpine, a hint at Winckelmann’s conception of what beauty was like when experienced by the Ancient Greeks. Not a work of art proper, such a coin was a sign that the common run of commerce could be attended by aesthetic value emerging from the freedom inherent in playful, carefree lives uncommitted to the earnestness of business transactions.

Recelant peu ou pas de vestiges antiques, l’île de Syra, lorsque Melville la visite en 1856, est essentiellement un port au commerce florissant qui n’évoque rien de la glorieuse période classique de la Grèce – telle que célébrée par un Shelley ou un Byron. Dans son poème consacré à Syra, Melville résiste à l’hellenomanie, et ainsi l’absence de vieilles pierres et de statues libère son champ de vision. C’est ironiquement dans le menu peuple, ses pauvres, ses mendians, ses
humbles commerçants, que le poète redécouvre, transmis à travers les âges, les traits hérités de Périclès, ou d'Homère et de l'antique grandeur grecque. Devant la Syra moderne et mercantile, la voix poétique célèbre l'innocence primitive et la spontanéité d'un peuple qui n'a cure de se confronter aux clichés de l'orientalisme. Le poème reconstruit alors l'expérience passée comme un moment de pure joie esthétique dans lequel « la vie comme elle va » n'est plus enrôlée au service du pittoresque ni vouée à l'illustration de schèmes ou d'idéaux préconçus. Ainsi, dans la mention un peu énigmatique d'une pièce de monnaie gravée à l'effigie de Proserpine, se repère une allusion à Winckelmann qui considérait les pièces grecques comme une source inexploitée de la beauté antique. Liée aux échanges commerciaux ordinaires, la pièce, sans être une œuvre d'art à proprement parler, apparaît néanmoins comme un signe esthétique invitant à contempler une beauté qui réside entièrement dans la liberté d'une existence joueuse et insouciante. Le spectacle de ce commerce innocent, en quelque sorte gratuit, renvoie le poète à la vie elle-même qui est au cœur de l'expérience esthétique et à l'évocation d'un temps utopique où le commerce n'existait pas.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Poèmes d'Herman Melville, littérature américaine et antiquité gréco-latine, commerce et esthétique, hellénomanie

Keywords: Poetry of Herman Melville, American literature and the Ancient World, commerce and aesthetics, Hellenomania

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