INTERREGNUM IN PROVIDENCE:

THE FRAGMENTATION OF NARRATIVE AS QUEST IN THE PROSE FICTIONS OF HERMAN MELVILLE

by

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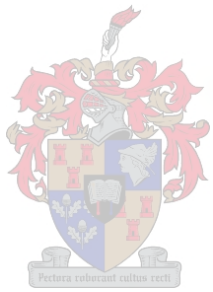

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

ABSTRACT

Herman Melville (1819-1891) remains a recalcitrant and enigmatic presence in the Western canon. This dissertation explores the radical narrative strategies engaged by Melville in the composition of his prose fictions. It is my contention that Melville's writings to an important degree constitute a subversive response to the privileged apocalyptic and teleological narratives of the day—national, ontological, metaphysical, and literary, or aesthetic—and that he primarily engages these narratives in terms of the archetypal symbolism of the romantic quest. Against this linear and goal-oriented, or plotted, progress, Melville's own narratives assert the non-redemptive forces of time, change, and natural flux, which the quest is symbolically meant to conquer and subject to a redemptive pattern.

Melville's critique of the quest takes the shape of a radical fragmentation of its agonistic, evolutionary force—its progress—which is always directed towards a resolvent end. In this sense, most of his protagonists may be defined as questers, characters who seek, by some (individuating) action, to achieve a monumental point of closure. But the Melvillean narrative (even when narrated by the protagonist) always resists this intention. His rhetoric is digressive and improvisational, his style heterogeneous and parodic, and his endings always indeterminate and equivocal. Significantly, this same quality renders his prose fictions highly resistant to an apocalyptic hermeneutics that strives to redeem the monumental "meaning" of the work from the narrative itself.

The destabilising questions raised in Melville's work with regard to redemptive plot and progress ultimately centre on the idea of Providence, in other words, the authorising telos that informs, governs and justifies the quest. By fragmenting this quest, Melville undermines the effective presence of Providence, clearing away what he perceives to be an illusion of control harboured in a dual but related image of the providential God and the providential author as external, "metaphysical" authorities directing their worlds in terms of a master plan toward final and meaningful closure. Melville's fiction, then, imaginatively (and philosophically) engages a world in which such stable authorising centres are absent. It is in terms of this absence that I intend to examine the nature of Melville's prose fictions. The focus in this dissertation is specifically on *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, *Pierre*, *Israel Potter* and *The Confidence-Man*. Throughout, however, the canonical *Moby-Dick* and the unfinished and posthumous *Billy Budd*, are also drawn into the discussion in order to clarify and extend the points raised.

OPSOMMING

Herman Melville (1819-1891) bly 'n weerspannige en enigmatiese aanwesigheid in die Westerse kanon. Hierdie verhandeling ondersoek die radikale narratiewe strategiëe wat deur Melville ingespan is tydens die komposisie van sy fiksie in prosa. Ek gaan van die standpunt uit dat Melville se werk tot 'n groot mate gedefinieer word deur 'n ondermynende reaksie teen die bevoorregte apokaliptiese en teleologiese narratiewe diskoerse van sy tyd—nasionaal, ontologies, metafisies, en literêr, of esteties—en dat hy hoofsaaklik hierdie diskoerse ondersoek in terme van die argetipiese simboliek van die romantiese soektog of "quest." Teenoor hierdie lineêre en doelgerigte, of beraamde ("plotted"), vooruitgang, beklemtoon Melville se eie verhale die nie-verlossende kragte van tyd, verandering, en natuurlike stroming, dit wat die "quest" simbolies beoog om te oorwin en onderwerp aan 'n verlossings-patroon.

Melville se kritiese beoordeling van die "quest" neem die vorm aan van 'n radikale fragmentering van die opposisionele, evolusionêre krag—die progressie—wat altyd op 'n beslissende slot gerig is. In hierdie sin kan ons die meerderheid van sy protagoniste as soekers ("questers") definieer, karakters wat poog, deur middel van die een of ander (individuerende) handeling, om 'n monumentale slot te behaal. Maar die Melvilliese verhaal (selfs wanneer deur die protagonis vertel) werk altyd dié voorneme teë. Sy retorika is uitwydend en improvisatories, sy styl heterogeen en parodies, en sy slotte altyd onbeslis en dubbelsinnig. Dit is aanmerklik dat hierdie einste eienskap sy fiksie hoogs weerstandig maak teen 'n apokaliptiese hermeneutiek wat poog om die monumentale "betekenis" van die werk uit die narratief self te herwin of "verlos."

Die ondergrawende vrae wat in Melville se werk ten opsigte van die beslissende verloop ("plot") en progressie geopper word word uiteindelik grotendeels gekoppel aan die idee van die Voorsienigheid, met ander woorde, die outoriserende *telos* wat die "quest" beïnvloed, regeer en regverdig. Deur die "quest" te fragmenteer, ondermyn Melville die effektiewe teenwoordigheid van die Voorsienigheid, en verwyder daarmee dit wat hy ervaar as 'n illusie van beheer wat behoue bly in die dubbele beeld van die bestierende God en die bestierende outeur as eksterne, "metafisiese" outoriteite wat hulle wêrelde in terme van 'n uitgewerkte plan na 'n finale en betekenisvolle einde lei. Melville se fiksie, dus, op verbeeldingsryke (en filosofiese) wyse, stel 'n wêreld daar waarin sulke outoriserende sentra afwesig is. Dit is in terme van hierdie afwesigheid wat ek beoog om die aard van Melville se fiksies te ondersoek. Hierdie verhandeling fokus op *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, *Pierre*, *Israel Potter* en *The Confidence-Man*. Die kanonieke *Moby-Dick* en die onvoltooide en postume *Billy Budd* word egter deurgaans in die bespreking opgeneem ter wille van die duidelikheid en uitbreiding van die argument.

For Adré Rheeder (1972-2002), accidentally killed in England as I considered "L'Ultima sera"—a great teacher, scholar and ironist, a wonderful friend, and a "most noble boozer."

And for René, always.

Formula of my happiness: a Yes, a No, a straight line, a *goal* . . .

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*.

For although we have given her certain and infallible principles, and though we have enlightened her steps with the sacred lamp of the truth that it has pleased God to communicate to us, we daily see, nevertheless, that if she swerve never so little from the ordinary path, and that she stray from or wander out of the way set out and beaten by the Church, how immediately she loses, confounds, and fetters herself, tumbling and floating in this vast, turbulent, and waving sea of human opinions, without restraint and without any determinate end: so soon as she loses that great and common road she enters into a labyrinth of a thousand several paths.

Montaigne on "mortal nature," in "Apology for Raimond de Sebonde."

"There's another rendering now; but still one text."

Second mate Stubb, *Moby-Dick*.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Profound thanks go out to Dr. Brian Green, of the University of Stellenbosch, for his energetic and meticulous dedication to the project. Enthusiasm is catching. I would also like to thank Prof. John Bryant, of Hofstra University, New York, for invaluable advice during its inception.

ABBREVIATIONS

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations of Melville are taken from the Northwestern-Newberry edition (1968-) of *The Writings of Herman Melville*.

C — *Correspondence*

CM — *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*

IP — *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*

J — *Journals*

M — *Mardi; and a Voyage Thither*

MD — *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*

O — *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*

P — *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*

R — *Redburn: His First Voyage; Being the Sailor-Boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman, in the Merchant Service*

T — *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*

WJ — *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War*

To date, no Northwestern-Newberry edition of *Billy Budd* has seen the light. The authoritative text remains Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts's 1962-edition, reproduced in *The Complete Shorter Fiction* by Everyman's Library.

BB — *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*

I have followed these texts closely, to the point of retaining the idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies of Melville's spelling, as they have been preserved by his editors.

INTRODUCTION

"FORMS, MEASURED FORMS," AND MELVILLE'S SUBVERSION OF THE QUEST AS PROVIDENTIAL NARRATIVE

When Montaigne described his literary method—"Others form man; I only report him"[1]—he meant to indicate that his writings made no effort at an exhaustive circumscription of monumental Being: they remained open to the related flux of nature and consciousness. For Herman Melville, too, the movement of consciousness was of great importance. And yet, he also understood the human desire for a monumental, resolvent significance. Central to his canonical book and, one might claim, at the heart of his art, in the chapter entitled "The Doubloon," we find the suggestion that "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher" (*MD* 430; ch. 99). Though it sometimes seems that Melville suspected the worst, and although he certainly recognised and proclaimed the impossibility of actually getting to that "certain significance"—an ambiguous phrase, further qualified, in the one sense tautologically, by "some"—it seems that he nevertheless clung to the diminished optimism which holds that there may be a sense, or significance, to life, even if we are doomed never to apprehend it. Ironically, it must remain unknown. This sense is hidden, occult; but because it "lurks," it begets the reciprocal urge in man to seek it out, to uncover it. Melville engaged and explored this idea throughout the course of his life. But this is not the same as saying that Melville searched for this meaning all his life. Instead, Melville set out in his work, not so much to find the actual ontological site of lurking significance—the immanent Being—as to explore the lurking, haunting promise of it in the human (and specifically, nineteenth-century American) psyche. In other words, he explored the human impulse to go searching for significance, the ways in which searchers go about their quests, and, finally, the difficulty of uncovering meaning without, in the process, simply resorting to the construction of it. His inquiries, of course, led him into the bottomless waters of epistemological relativism, in which the only certainty seems to be that offered by mad Pip, the only one of Melville's

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[1] "Of Repentance" (19; bk. 3, ch. 2). According to Jay Leyda, Melville acquired a copy of Montaigne early in 1848 (*Log* 269). In Merton M. Sealts's *Melville's Reading*, Melville's copy of *The Complete Works* is identified as either the 1842 or 1845 impression of William Hazlitt's edition (199; #366). That edition incorporated Charles Cotton's 1686 translation. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent quotations from Montaigne will refer to the Cotton translation.

characters to have the dubious privilege of seeing God, if only in the form of his "foot upon the treadle of the loom" (414; ch. 93): "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (434; ch. 99). Exploring the trajectory of the quest from the point of view of a late American Romanticism with a deviant intensity, integrity and "errancy" (to employ William V. Spanos's term) wholly his own, Herman Melville found the "Truth" it had as its goal dissipated and fragmented into mere perspectivism.

Melville's fiction, I suggest, represents a direct engagement and, in fact, conflict, with the privileged, providential discourse of linearity and unity. It is a discourse that suffuses not only nineteenth-century America, but Western culture in general, and finds its most pervasive and comprehensive expression in the apocalyptic Christian narrative. In his introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of the Bible, Stephen Prickett, for instance, makes the following sweeping claim, no less compelling for being familiar:

> Because the Bible takes it for granted that there is a meaning to the whole cycle of human existence and that every event, however trivial it might seem, has a figurative, typological, or, as we now say, symbolic relation to the whole, we have learned in other areas of our existence to look for narrative, with a pattern of hidden meaning, rather than a mere chronicle of events. This expectation runs deep in Western society, affecting not merely fiction but biography, history, and, of course, science—that distinctive product of a belief in a rational and stable universe where every part has its meaning in relation to the grand 'story' of the whole. (xv)

"Reality," then, is subjected to the Aristotelian criterion of unity, deviance from which may be considered a result either of imperfect, mortal understanding, or a more direct demonic, diabolic influence of chaos, which it is the purpose of Christianity to defeat. The upshot of this is that life or "reality" itself becomes a text, the object of a reading. And in reading, of course, there is forever the hope and expectation of understanding, of the possibility of coherence and, finally, meaning. It is, in essence, a reading for the end, that end which Peter Brooks defines as "the consummation (as well as the consumption) of its [the narrative plot's] sense-making": "The telling is always *in terms of* the impending end," because "the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*" (52). It is this apocalyptic expectation that is one of the main focal points of Melville's marriage of fiction with (auto-) biography, history and science, as is, ultimately, the impossibility of abstracting, circumscribing and communicating this narrative line, or plot, that will make the whole coherent.[2]

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[2] The need and search for unity, narrative, or plot, is obviously much more basic to human nature than Prickett's claims for the Bible suggest—it is, after all, the *raison d'être* of any system of religion and, indeed, art itself. As Aristotle insisted in *Rhetoric*, "[o]ur desire to understand things is a natural desire like hunger, and its satisfaction is pleasurable, a 'restoration to a natural state', like eating" (Russell 220). But the King James Bible takes this need for

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, as in many others, believers have tended to comfort themselves with the principle that God's purposes are sometimes also hidden—inscrutable but immanent—and that the super-plot is only to be discovered, or comprehended, after death. Ultimately this may seem an overly neat way of forswearing the growing ontological horror that Melville must have felt at the recognition that the innate, and almost instinctual, search for "Truth," and the attendant tendency to analyse the phenomena—the texts—with which we are presented, were doomed from the outset by the very multiplicity and variability of those phenomena that appeared, more and more, to have no organising principle, no grand, all-inclusive plot. And it is Melville's recognition of the absence of a coherent universal, or Providential, plot that informs the irresolute, unruly quality of his own plots—which are tentative at best, and frequently threaten to disappear almost completely.

Almost—and there lies the rub. For I would argue that however weak or tenuous one might deem the narrative plot in Melville's novels, it is never to be judged incidental. Mindful of Northrop Frye's claim—a claim, not a warning—that all literary commentary is "allegorical interpretation" (89), in the sense of being an allegorising of the text, a provisional assignment of meaning, focus and plot, I would suggest that all of Melville's novels are subversively constructed around the teleological search for meaning and salvation, i.e., *the quest*. There is nothing particularly new about this claim—more than thirty years ago, John Seelye could insist, without much controversy, that "[n]o study of Melville's structures can escape confrontation with his use of the quest pattern" (xiv). But what has become clear over the years is that the disarming simplicity of Seelye's statement is misleading. For Melville's commentators, more often than not, the "confrontation with his use of the quest pattern" has tended to become a confrontation with other critics about everything from the exact nature of the pattern itself to the certainty of its presence in the specific texts. Furthermore, a number of critics have also taken the step of transposing this inquiry into biographical terms, thereby shifting the discussion from narrative structures to a broader one that identifies Melville himself with the quester. In this case, as John Bryant has pointed out, "Quest implies [. . .] a kind of master plot which for whatever metaphysical or mythic reasons drives the artist's vision and composition of works."[3] I hope to move away from this kind of focus, back to the narrative structure of the novels, in order to

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understanding and unity to a new level, by positing the entire biblical history as a quest culminating in the figure of Christ, and the revelation and exegesis of his teachings. Not insignificantly, the Bible ends with a book called the Revelation, or the Apocalypse (even though it is by no means the most recent of the canonical books), thus ending with a vision of the End, a day of judgment, when the earthly quest will be completed, and harmony gained.

[3] E-mail to the author, 14 May 2001.

explore what it is that Melville does with his questers and their quests. Contrary to many other critics, I also insist on Melville's engagement with the quest (in some basic, essential form) in *all* of his novels, and that, in fact, his genius lies not in his variation in the realm of the plot (an archetypal, limited realm), but in his heterogeneous, whimsical and devastatingly subversive *renderings* of what one might call the ur-plot, i.e., the quest. These renderings ultimately altered the quest in ways from which it never recovered, and which helped make possible the re-emergence of the quest as a major theme in twentieth-century literature.

In order to approach the quest as a blanket figure for all teleological and providential narrative, a brief and basic genealogy seems necessary. One of the problems we are faced with in defining the quest-pattern as such is that our understanding of what a quest looks like has been irrevocably altered by the way it manifests itself in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. For us, there is nothing particularly surprising about a quest that ends in failure, or even ignominy. Thus, critics—in spite of having a clear, considered sense of their theme—may sometimes be lured into making imprecise or confusing statements, as is the case, for instance, with this essentially sound point by Tom Driver:

> In all forms of romance, man goes upon a quest. He may seek the Holy Grail, the Beautiful Woman, the Promised Land, his soul's salvation, the ideal society, or an unknown goal. He may grope for the path of search. No matter; he is on a quest. His task is not to strike a bargain or to come to terms but to find what is missing, if need be to create it. He does not imagine that the reality he seeks is in the nature of a fixed order, an unchanging truth somewhere awaiting him, but rather imagines that it is a mystery, something unsearchable that must nevertheless be searched. The hunt is therefore as important as the quarry, perhaps more so. (xiii)

Taken as a whole, especially with regard to its almost casual relativism and Montaignean acceptance of indeterminacy, it seems problematic to apply this definition to any kind of quest-literature prior to the advent of Romanticism. Driver may be acknowledging as much, though only implicitly, when he goes on to say that "[t]o a spirit more inclined toward classicism, by contrast, reality is *given*, one way or another. It is *there*, even if temporarily obscured, and wants recognition and a willingness to make whatever adjustment is required" (xiii). But the intention here seems rather to be diagrammatic opposition, between the modern and the classical, the quest and "acceptance." Such a distinction, to my mind, peculiarly ignores the rich tradition of pre-Romantic quest-romances, as well as the very basic archetype of the quest, as organising, constitutive principle at work in the construction of human "experience." In a broad sense, the journey of an individual life itself, particularly if ultimately directed toward an afterlife of revelation, initiation and assimilation, serves as the blueprint of the quest pattern, and grants it its imaginative power.

Once a quest centres on a goal or "Truth" which is known to be no longer stable or attainable, it becomes ironic, and what is misleading about Driver's definition is that it seems to make such irony a constitutional element of the quest itself. Clearly, there is no sense in seeing, for instance, *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, *The Faerie Queene*, or *The Pilgrim's Progress* as ironic works, and therefore his definition should rather be deemed a fair definition of the quest as found in post-Romantic literature—especially twentieth-century literature, with its strong bias in favour of experience, as opposed to revelation—and, to some extent, in Melville's works. As far as a more inclusive definition of the quest pattern (or narrative) is concerned, we might revert, by way of a fresh start, to Jeremy Hawthorn's broad definition of the quest as "a linear narrative in which temporal sequence is taken to signify material causation" (200). He goes on to suggest that

> this [. . .] [is] the dominant structure in nineteenth and twentieth-century Western writing, a structure which carries a particular ideological and political charge, for it privileges linear sequence rather than, say, seasonal cycles, and thus underwrites dominant discourses in our culture. (200)

In the latter part of this definition we can already get a glimpse of what it is about the quest that might have struck Melville as making it eminently suitable to his purposes (which may well have been clarified for him only in the act of writing). However, before considering this issue in greater detail, let us proceed with the business of terminology. For our purposes, the most important aspect of this definition lies in its insistence on the linear, sequential nature of the quest, which squarely aligns it with the idea of teleological progress(ion). The quester sets out to reach a goal, to achieve or attain something, and all his energies are directed toward that end, and to overcoming any obstacles that might lie in his way. The quest, then, is characterised by a unity of vision, which not only takes possession of the hero, but of the narrative that contains him. It operates strictly in the realm of romance, which, as Ulrich Wicks points out, "satisfies our impulse for vicarious participations in harmony, order, and beauty" (54). In this romantic realm, the pattern or structure becomes overt, and the reader takes comfort from the knowledge (shared with the quester who, to some extent, *is* the reader) that things will turn out fine. It is this essentially simplistic quality to romance—even more so, perhaps, than its frequent depiction of fantastical feats, creatures, or places—that has clinched its opposition to reality,[4] by suggesting a kind of gullibility or naïvety on the part of its consumers. Of course, the basic impulse in

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[4] This opposition was often couched in negative terms, such as those employed by the nineteenth-century "Common-Sense Philosophy." For a description of this "philosophy," as well as an exhaustive discussion of the status of romance in nineteenth-century America and the difficulties and debates pertaining to the term "romance" itself, see Michael Davitt Bell's *The Development of American Romance* (esp. 7-14).

romance to assign a narrative to life is no different from any other attempt, no matter how rational or scientific, but in the wake of the Age of Reason the romance encountered some resistance as a justifiable means of addressing that impulse. This may well be one of the reasons (beyond strictly expedient and economic ones) for Melville's ironic initial insistence—in his first books, *Typee* and *Omoo*—on the veracity of his narrative accounts of his journeys in the South Pacific, an idea that will be explored later.

One of the clearest definitions of the quest-romance, and by far the most useful to our purpose, is provided by Wicks, who claims that

> the essential romance situation—the fictional world mapped out by the romance mode—is that of a heroic protagonist in a world marvelously better than ours in which he is on a quest that confronts him with challenges, each ending in a moral victory leading toward a final ordered and harmonious cosmos. [. . .] Our journey into romance is a finite one ending in a goal unattainable in our world of experiential flux. (54)

The first and foremost point to glean from this is that the quest presupposes a "heroic protagonist," a romantic hero who sets out to achieve an idealised goal (and thus embodies a kind of wish-fulfilment on the part of the reader). However, the space in which this hero moves is not quite our own—it is "marvelously better than ours," for the simple reason that it is infinitely suited to heroism, providing, alongside a clear goal, a range of clear antagonists. Because the quest is inherently good, and that which seeks to confound it inherently bad, the hero may proceed on his way without ever becoming morally compromised, or tainted by expedience. His road may be fraught with peril, but it remains unambiguous, and leads "toward a final ordered and harmonious cosmos," which, retroactively, governed and legitimised his entire quest. The finality is of the utmost importance, since it suggests the possibility of closure, of fulfilment, of rest, of an archetypal homecoming. The predominant quality here is that of homogeneity—what is promised is an end to confusion, doubt, and yearning, once and for all. As with the central Christian narrative—and in distinction, say, from the Buddhist narrative—the journey is a once-off affair and, once completed, never takes place again.[5]

Once again, this boils down to the ideological privileging of the linear in a world that predominantly works by cycles and repetition. It is in terms of this logic that Nature becomes inferior and inimical to Reason (leaving aside for now the nineteenth-century Darwinian version of a narrative in Nature) as one step closer to the chaos upon which men—imitating God—

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[5] In this regard Eastern religious systems, in contrast to those of the West, come much closer to synthesising the linear and the circular, or cyclical.

should strive to impose order.[6] Seelye has recognised a similar distinction—albeit with a different ideological bias—in Melville's texts, which he characterises as founded on a tension, or diagrammatic opposition, between "line and circle" (36). And this brings us, ultimately, to Northrop Frye's thorough and fairly specific definition of the quest-romance:

> The essential element of plot in romance is adventure, which means that romance is naturally a sequential and processional form, hence we know it better from fiction than drama. [. . .] We may call this major adventure, the element that gives literary form to romance, the quest.
>
> The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. We may call these three stages respectively, using Greek terms, the *agon* or conflict, the *pathos* or death-struggle, and the *anagnorisis* or discovery, the recognition of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero even if he does not survive the conflict. [. . .] A threefold structure is repeated in many features of romance [. . .]. The central form of romance is dialectical: everything is focused on a conflict between the hero and his enemy, and all the reader's values are bound up with the hero. Hence the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world. The conflict however takes place in, or at any rate primarily concerns, *our* world, which is in the middle, and which is characterized by the cyclical movement of nature. Hence the opposite poles of the cycles of nature are assimilated to the opposition of the hero and his enemy. (186-87)

The immediate thing that strikes one about this definition is its apparent contradiction of Wicks's, regarding the setting of the quest, but I would argue that the discrepancy is not so much a direct contradiction as it is a result of a difference in purpose: Wicks hopes to effect a diagrammatic contrast of his own, between the heroic setting of the romance and the base, demonic setting of the picaresque (without suggesting that the former has *no* relation to the world we inhabit, in which case it would cease to function as wish-fulfilment[7]), while Frye is more interested in locating the site halfway between the divine and the demonic—when he refers to "*our* world," Frye is certainly not arguing for the realism of romance.

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[6] As an example of Melville's subversive position with regard to this hierarchy, we might consider his unpublished poem, "A Reasonable Constitution," which Leyda considers "[p]robably composed before 1865" (*Portable Melville* 593):

> What though Reason forged your scheme?
> 'Twas Reason dreamed the Utopia's dream:
> 'Tis dream to think that Reason can
> Govern the reasoning creature, man.

[7] Melville makes a similar point when he writes in *The Confidence-Man*: "It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie" (183; ch. 33).

In Frye's scheme the quest is undertaken in service and search of the order (or telos) of "an upper world" against the chaos of a demonic "lower world," the two of which are brought in direct symbolic opposition in "*our* world," the site of the quest itself. This last is a world of cycles, cycles being representative of some order, but an order which—due to its alliance with chaos—precludes progression, revelation and apotheosis and, instead, proceeds by a mere succession of growth and corruption, ad infinitum. Herein lies the age-old antagonism between spirit and matter, and the attempt of the former to rise above the assimilative pull of the latter.[8] In other words, a battle-line is drawn: the quest imposes a linear structure on cyclical nature, and thus bisects it, setting up diametrical oppositions (poles), analogous and allied to "the opposition of the hero and his enemy." This, in itself, imparts a plot, based on the conflict between such familiar absolutes as Good and Evil, God and Devil, Light and Dark, to a world that seems constitutionally opposed, or impervious, to the idea of absolutes in general. And thus, with an Aristotelian reverence for plot, the hero embarks on his quest, the conditions of which he, like us, knows by heart.

It is important to highlight one final point which may well be obvious, but cannot, in good critical conscience, be left unspecified: the quest, as literary subject-matter, exerts its influence on the text itself by exacting a strict narrative focus on the "conflict between the hero and his enemy," and in the process "giv[ing] literary form to [the] romance." Essentially it becomes an archetype for "plot." The quest pattern has an implicit charge that anyone can appreciate, beyond the specifics of character, place, or even the object of the quest.[9] Brooks speaks of "the movement of plot and its motor force in human desire, its peculiar relation to beginnings and ends, its apparent claim to rescue meaning from temporal flux" (90). Appropriately, too, if we bring to mind Ahab's monumental claim that "[t]he path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run" (*MD* 168; ch. 37), Brooks evokes an image of "rails" to "figure the necessary dynamic of desire, a motor insisting—as narrative ever does—toward the unnamed meaning" (58). For both author and reader, the amorphous matter of possible content is finally subjected to the delimiting, organising spirit of form, and becomes significant. This has led to various equations of either writing or reading, or both, with the quest, and lies behind the time-honoured critical tendency to explore a writer's

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[8] As Camille Paglia—sexualising the conflict—says, "[t]he quest romance of male sex is a war between identity and annihilation" (27).

[9] By this I do not mean to reiterate Driver's point about the importance of the quest itself over its object—since the quest ultimately gains its meaning from its object—but simply, that it is possible for anyone to empathise with the questing impulse, with the quest as archetypal wish-fulfilment.

artistic development in terms of the quest. But the more important point to reiterate is that it produces a very specific idea of what a narrative is—it ratifies an aesthetics of Aristotelian unity,[10] or homogeneity, and, indeed, returns us to Hawthorn's "ideological privileg[ing] of linear sequence" (200).

The demonic obverse of the quest pattern, as I have already indicated in reference to Wicks's definition, is the episodic and anti-apocalyptic picaresque narrative. Its proper definition, however, must be postponed until later in this chapter. It seems necessary, firstly, to undertake some account of the possible reasons for Melville's preoccupation with teleological forms. In fact, there seems no shortage of compelling reasons why Herman Melville, an American writing his fiction at the halfway mark of the nineteenth century, should turn to the quest pattern for his plot. Perhaps the simplest and most important of these is to be found—as intimated above—in the central, archetypal status the quest narrative has in (specifically) the Western psyche, in terms of which life is, or should be, lived strictly in service of significance. Personal success (whether artistic, financial, intellectual, spiritual or social) is the great Western preoccupation. Life must have a goal, and it is the implicit ontological duty of the individual to formulate ipseity, or selfhood, in terms of it. The movement here is linear, from or through confusion and darkness to certainty and light. Thus, the master plot of the quest to a great extent conforms to the master plot of Christianity (as it coincides with it in a work like Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*), and Melville, as a creative, sensitive and adventurous individual with metaphysical and philosophical leanings, found it to symbolise and synthesise clearly the time-locked linearity of the human lifespan, and its effect on human aspiration, which aims for closure and completion, a narratively meaningful and satisfying end.[11]

To a man raised in a deeply religious family, subject to the proddings of deep-reaching ontological questions, and experiencing a steady erosion of faith, the quest pattern may naturally suggest itself, as emblematic of his search for truth, and as a counter-narrative to his own sense

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[10] See *Poetics*, ch. 2, section B.

[11] As Hawthorne wrote in his account of Melville's visit to him in November 1856: "[He] will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and fro over these same deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other" (Melville, *Journals* 628).

of lost direction and vision.[12] In the latter instance, the driving impulse may simply be a form of teleological nostalgia; in the former, more importantly, it is philosophical and inquisitive in nature. On another level, of course, there is the simple fact of Melville's travels—as a sailor aboard whalers, and in the navy—in the South Pacific between 1841-1844, experiences which led directly to the composition of his first two novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847). To a young man having trouble finding his place in an emergent American society, such physical wandering might indeed take on the colourings of a quest, especially once seen objectified in the adventures of a character, and the account of a narrator.

None of these "reasons," however, necessarily provides a convincing rationale for the appearance and treatment of the quest in Melville's work, particularly his prose fiction. In order to identify such "reasons," it seems safer to turn away from more or less psychological speculations about Herman Melville, the alleged "isolato," to the slightly more objective realm of American national history. For it seems difficult to avoid the fact that, in general terms, contemporary America was steeped in the ideology of quest, embodied in the national tropes of expansionism and, above all, "Manifest Destiny." America—with all the energy and self-discovery of a fledgling nation—was dead set on creating a history for itself, on carving out a fresh and grand American narrative in the wilderness of the vast continent. By the nineteenth century, this quest—which had started out as a quest for religious autonomy, and had been made heroic by the struggle with a wild world full of diabolic "savages"—had metamorphosed into wholesale *con*quest. This conquest was seen in strictly epic, heroic terms and, in the public domain, the rhetoric shaped itself accordingly. Oratory was the order of the day, and its primary theme seemed to be: America was reaching for its goal, and that goal was great. Under President Andrew Jackson, this goal had been identified as "freedom," and the imposition of it on all neighbouring nations. As Wai-chee Dimock succinctly explains,

> [i]n the 1840s [. . .] the phrase "extending the area of freedom" came to have many useful meanings. Andrew Jackson had coined that phrase to justify the annexation of Texas, and, in one form or another, the word "freedom" came to be a code word for America's continental expansionism. John L. O'Sullivan (in an editorial that launched the phrase "Manifest Destiny") suggested, for instance, that America's claims to Oregon were justified by the "great experiment of liberty" to which Providence had appointed it. (9)

America was clearly in the process of constructing a narrative around the idea of the quest, replete with professions of divine sanction, or Providential "appoint[ment]," a lofty ideal in

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[12] This is the argument proffered by Donald Arthur Daiker, who credits the disillusioning "facts of personal experience" with the inauguration of Melville's "intellectual search for the absolute" (256).

"freedom," and a demonic adversary in its national enemies (those who resisted this "freedom"), especially recalcitrant Indian nations, whose failure to appreciate the glory of the American quest necessitated their virtual annihilation. In actual terms, the quest manifested itself as a narrative of progress toward an immanent destiny of a mature, fulfilled America, an inclusive, unifying, and unified "nation of nations," as Walt Whitman put it in the classic preface to the first edition (1855) of *Leaves of Grass* (741).[13] Examining the period just preceding Whitman's text (that is, the socio-political climate in which it was conceived), John P. McWilliams, Jr., speaks of "consensus" when describing the national mood:

> If one can ever justifiably use the term "consensus" in speaking of the values of an entire people, it is surely appropriate to Americans between 1828 and 1850. The consensus that intellectual historians have uncovered may have rested upon conveniently undefined abstractions, but it was nonetheless broad and widely cherished. The very survival of the American Republic, together with its undeniable growth and visible if not universal prosperity, seemed to show that divine Providence was looking upon the Great Experiment with favor. Wherever one's private forebodings might have pointed, only a diehard Federalist or a temperamental croaker would have dared publicly to oppose any of the following desiderata: man's natural right to political liberty and equality, the Constitution as the Republic's palladium of collective freedom, quality of economic opportunity in a free marketplace, private property as a spur to individual achievement, enlarging the domain of freedom, America as an asylum for oppressed peoples, and the treasured trinity of free schools, free religion, free land. (2)

McWilliams's persistent qualifications serve to remind one of the eternal gap between national realities and national ideals. But no matter what the sordid realities were—particularly racial tension, and a mounting antagonism between Capital and Labour—America considered itself (and, according to McWilliams, was more or less justified in considering itself) unified in its drive and vision. Robert M. Greenberg, relating this monumental vision to "American literature," speaks of "the narrative thought-form of unity-in-diversity" (8), a Romantic construction of containment that in theory proposes to unify and accommodate—without censorious suppression—all deviant force under the auspices of a providential telos, but in practice usually emerges as an imperial action, a subjection of difference to the monumental Being or Identity of self, God, narrative, or nation. Diversity will forever be experienced as resistance, as Prickett also points out in his consideration of the manufactured "unity" of the Bible, which, as he puts it, still retains "an inherent tension between singularity and pluralism, unity and diversity" (xiv).

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[13] This construction communicates both a hierarchical ideology and an image of heterogeneity assimilated and contained by a homogenous whole, or "nation," although, to be fair to Whitman, his adjective "teeming," not included in my quotation, may suggest a degree of spontaneous and unharnessed energy that—in his estimation—is not necessarily *directed*. Be that as it may, it remains an original poet's take on a national phenomenon, and political discourse certainly drew on the imagery of unity and focus, of shared ideals.

There would be little sense in arguing that Melville somehow transcended his time and place completely, and thus eluded the influence of the national discourse—ultimately, any such claim would do him and his work a disservice. Firstly, there is ample evidence that Melville recognised, and to some extent bought into, the rhetoric of the national programme. Both McWilliams and, more specifically, Dimock argue for such a congeniality between Jacksonian ideology and Melville's art. Dimock refers to "textual governance," which she describes as

> the formal logic by which Melville executes his authorial dictates, supervises and legitimizes, affixes meanings and assigns destinies. This textual governance, I believe, cannot be divorced from the social governance of antebellum America, for the terms of Melville's authorial sovereignty, by which he fashions his textual universe into a textual given, are ultimately analogous to the terms by which the social universe is fashioned into a social given. (7)

Insofar as this description is meant to extend beyond the rather self-evident idea that the author in some way structures his work and does things with his characters, it seems to me unnecessarily reductive and careless with regard to the very ambiguity of Melville's textual response to national ideology, and his view of the individual's place in the universe. At the very least, one might point out that, just as the "consensus" referred to above remains an abstraction which ignores the dissidence of individual voices,[14] so Dimock's version of Melville glances over the internal critical "voices" to which his alleged "authorial sovereignty" was subjected, at least in terms of the products of his authorship. Melville, I am arguing, was precisely against this sense of the providential author, as an external authority who allows events to unfold only in terms of a predetermined and meticulous plot. Spanos, referring to Ishmael, jointly credits Dimock and fellow "New Americanist" Donald Pease with "coerc[ing] what, after Heidegger, I will call the 'errancy' of Ishmael's radically temporal narrative into the inclusive, comprehensive, and fixed binary terms of this 'imperial' metaphysical scenario [. . .] the imperatives of a totalizing scenario" (38). It is merely a case, then, for Spanos, of a new, contextually determined and unjustified reading of *Moby-Dick* that strives to impose a coherent, integrative textual logic upon it. In a way, Dimock's "textual governance" of Melville is more complete and unwavering than Melville's governance of Ahab or Ishmael. It is reductive of the complexities of Melville's text. After all, it is a critical commonplace that Melville was, if nothing else, a man in possession of incisive critical faculties, and that he did not fail in penetrating the mask of national enthusiasm to expose the fallacies and inhumanity behind it.

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[14] Much like Will Brangwen, in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, in admiring the façade of the cathedral, ignores the demonic presence of imps and gargoyles, which "peeped out of the grand tide of the cathedral like something that knew better [. . .], that the cathedral was not absolute" (189).

Manifest Destiny came at a cost, primarily in terms of Indian (and Mexican) lives, but also, thanks to the economic logic of Jacksonian individualism, in terms of Americans (including Melville's father) ruined in the marketplace. From Jacksonian ideology to the later related claims of the "Social Darwinists,"[15] it became clear that the American quest had managed to legitimise social cannibalism.

For Melville, this inglorious side of the American quest was clarified, and placed in a more global context by his experiences as a sailor in the South Pacific, where he had the opportunity to witness in no uncertain terms the damnable effects of that other, more infamous, "treasured trinity"—colonisation, civilisation, Christianisation—upon the Islanders. Adding to these three years and more of observation and roving, his prefatory experiences—in the form of a voyage (in 1839) to industrialised Liverpool, and a trip through the American West with his friend Eli Fly in 1840—one might well consider that Melville was primed, upon his return to the States late in 1844, to recognise the cracks in the monolithic ideological edifice of Manifest Destiny. In a way, he had seen it all before.

A further problem with Dimock's reading lies in the fact that it seems to ignore a much broader literary-historical perspective, one that takes account of the operation of specific archetypes upon artistic (and, indeed, national) imagination. Melville's texts were conceived not only within the boundaries of an American hegemony, but also within a tradition of Western literature. Although not intended as a set of strict criteria, Frye's definition of the quest pattern could come across as being as formulaic as any expression of Manifest Destiny, and we would do well to reiterate Hawthorn's insistence on the essential "ideological and political charge" of the quest structure. What one needs to recognise in Melville's employment of this structure, it seems to me, is his awareness of the opportunity for a criticism of national ideology—and the broader "Enlightenment assumption," as Bruce L. Grenberg calls it (105)—in conjunction with a wider, humanistic exploration of ontological "realities." To put it plainly: Melville tests the archetypal quest against the realities of his context (which includes certain views of human

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[15] Even though Darwin's theory of evolution did not immediately gain wholesale recognition, its thesis of developmental progression did not long fail to be aligned with the progress of the American nation. While on the one hand, a related thinking lay behind the demonisation of Indians (as being less civilised and therefore less evolved), Darwin's theory could, on the other hand, also be harnessed to justify social inequalities (which in actuality contradicted the national agenda of "freedom" and "equality"). As Laurie Robertson-Lorant explains,

> [i]n 1868, the British philosopher Herbert Spencer's phrase "survival of the fittest" entered the jargon of American intellectuals, and before long, American sociologists such as William Graham Sumner had married Darwin's theory of natural selection to laissez-faire capitalism and spawned the bastard known as "Social Darwinism." This pseudo-scientific theory made it possible to justify class stratification and savage economic inequalities, all but obliterating the social contract. (541)

history), and finds its goal to be impossible, one of the reasons being that the process itself belies or erodes that ideal. Like the philosopher's stone or the elixir of life that alchemists used to seek, the ideal can persist only as pure abstraction, and not even the literary text, or its author, escapes being compromised by the vagaries of a "fallen" world. Such a deviant reading problematises any attempt at implicating Melville in the American hegemony.

Melville's ambivalence vis-à-vis the nineteenth-century American consciousness is evident, on a smaller scale, in his relationship to contemporary literati, particularly in relation to the proponents of "Young America," the literary version of Manifest Destiny, which encapsulated the drive to an autonomous American literature. As McWilliams has pointed out, "[t]he most likely origin for the name of the movement is the title of a public address by Emerson concerning the definition of national character" (12). In the 1844 speech, Emerson calls America "the country of the Future" (296) and, though he does not focus on authorship per se, aligns "American genius" with expansionism when he states that "now [. . .] the nervous, rocky West is intruding a new and continental element into the national mind, and we shall yet have an American genius" (296). In a country suffering from a form of post-Revolutionary cultural insecurity about the persistence of "European" themes and models in the national literary output, the figure of "The Young American" became that "mythical Messiah" (to appropriate Frye's terminology) that would come and lead America to literary maturity and independence while, at the same time, *representing* the attainment of that maturity and independence. Both the insecurity and vision come through clearly, for instance, in Evert Duyckinck's "Nationality in Literature," which appeared in *The Democratic Review* in 1847. Duyckinck, an editor at Wiley & Putnam, Melville's American publishers, became a good friend of Melville's, championed (albeit reservedly) his work for years, and provided the author with a direct link to the Young America movement. In his piece, Duyckinck laments the fact that, "[o]vermastered by the literature of England, we have consented to remain in a state of pupilage, instead of aspiring to be masters in the vocation of letters" (75), and, in the language of expansionism, insists that "[w]e would not narrow, but enlarge, the horizon of letters; we would not restrict the empire of thought, but annex our noble domain to it" (76). This rather blatant "literary patriotism" (Parker, *Biography* 372) was bound to rub off on Melville in some form or other, and the evidence suggests that it did. Indeed, it was during one of Duyckinck's visits to Arrowhead, Melville's farm, in 1850, that the author penned his most explicit account of his thoughts on the matter of the "Young American," in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," a rambling, digressive review of Hawthorne's collection of tales, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846). After arguing for the

validity of Hawthorne and his art, and expanding on Shakespeare (who remained one of his literary heroes), Melville addresses his compatriots with a rhetorical flourish:

> Believe me, my friends, that Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio. And the day will come, when you shall say who reads a book by an Englishman that is a modern? The great mistake seems to be, that even with those Americans who look forward to the coming of a great literary genius among us, they somehow fancy he will come in the costume of Queen Elizabeth's day,—be a writer of dramas founded upon old English history, or the tales of Boccaccio. (245-46)

A number of critics have pointed out that Melville, after the disappointment of *Mardi*'s reception in 1849, and midway through the writing of his most ambitious book, may have hoped that these friends would recognise in him the "genius" they had been so impatient for. Of course, they did not; neither did they retain Melville's (problematic) fidelity to their cause. By 1851, in writing his seventh novel, *Pierre*, Melville parodied this movement (and Duyckinck specifically), as well as his own capitulation to it, in a book called "Young America in Literature" (bk. 17). But such overt parody only confirmed, on the other hand, what Hershel Parker considers an early and pervasive tendency (in Melville) for "distancing himself from literary cliques," as a side-effect of "distancing himself from political factions" (*Biography* 605). This is not to lapse into a common critical view of Melville as a desperate "isolato," or loner—for, as Bryant, among others, has pointed out, Melville and his texts are constitutionally given to geniality—but simply to reaffirm the critically astute and essentially humanistic nature of his observations of his world. At any rate, it seems clear that Melville's relationship with the Young America movement was subject to the same ambivalence that characterised his feelings toward his country in general, and the quest in specific, and thus subject to the scrutiny of the same critical gaze he turned upon the latter.

I have tried to delineate what seems to me some compelling, interrelated reasons for Melville's engagement of the quest structure in his work, but one more important factor needs to be lifted out, namely the influence of European Romanticism on nineteenth-century American literature and thought. While this influence itself is not a matter for debate, much has been written on the complex questions regarding its precise nature, and how it has metamorphosed into something quite new on American soil. The scope of this thesis, however, necessitates my passing over these complexities in the interest of establishing the broader context.[16]

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[16] For an incisive exploration, see Leon Chai's *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*. Chai explores the

> development of certain governing concepts or tendencies from their rise in the Romantic period itself to their subsequent appropriation by the American Renaissance authors. Among such concepts and

Of course, the first thing one notices—in these broad terms—is the apparent contradiction between the influence of European Romanticism and the quest for national literary independence. But the fact remains that the onset of the "anxiety of influence," to apply Harold Bloom's concept to a national literature, does not automatically erase that influence—it actually underscores it. One might well argue that the Romantic revival of the quest arrived at a time when America was most ready to assimilate and appropriate its symbolism into the national consciousness[17]—hence also the emergence of Transcendentalism (essentially a secularised—Romantic—refashioning of the Puritan discourse[18]). In the process America, and American literature, made the quest patently its own: while in Europe, the quest had been shifted to the inner space of the poet, the realm of the Imagination, the American version once more established a correspondence between inner and outer action, a characterisation which has remained constitutional to American literature throughout the twentieth century.

The identification of such differences, however, does not render basic comparisons between European and American Romanticism illegitimate, and a look at Harold Bloom's

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> tendencies I include the shift from allegory to symbolism, that is, from a mode of writing based upon a theory of correspondences between fictional signs and their objects to one that attempts to reveal through Nature an immanent divine presence; forms of science in the Romantic Age, including biological classification, vitalism, and the theory of probability; the secularization of religion; the gradual emergence of a historical consciousness and a philosophy of history; pantheism; the theory of subjectivity and objectivity in Romantic philosophy, that is, the relation between mind or self and external Nature; and, finally, Romantic poetics or theory of literature, with its emphasis on the role of the creative and perceiving consciousness. (xi)

Some of these ideas will be addressed, implicitly and explicitly, in the course of this thesis, as they emerge in, or as the object of, Melville's writings. Otherwise, there is nothing systematic or sustained about my approach to them. Most important, at present, is the fact that Chai's "concepts and tendencies" are all attempts at narrativising the relationship between man and his world. Significantly, Brooks speaks of

> the great nineteenth-century narrative tradition that, in history, philosophy, and a host of other fields as well as literature, conceived certain kinds of knowledge and truth to be inherently narrative, understandable (and expoundable) only by way of sequence, in temporal unfolding. In this golden age of narrative, authors and their public apparently shared the conviction that plots were a viable and necessary way of organizing and interpreting the world, and that in working out and working through plots, as writers and readers, they were engaged in a prime, irreducible act of understanding how human life acquires meaning. Narrative as a dominant mode of representation and explanation comes to the fore—speaking in large generalization—with the advent of Romanticism and its predominantly historical imagination [. . .]. (xi-xii)

[17] Here the support for the French Revolution by early Romantics—especially Wordsworth—also becomes important: while that revolution ultimately "failed," Americans could feel that their own revolution, against British rule (officially concluded with the Treaty of Versailles in 1783, a few years before the French Revolution, but already symbolically "concluded" with the Declaration of Independence on 4 July 1776), had inaugurated unstoppable national progress. They were succeeding where Europe had failed; therefore, they were now leading the world by example.

[18] See Spanos 62.

seminal text on the Romantic reinvention of the quest, "The Internalization of Quest-Romance," gives us a good sense of the quest pattern as initially transmitted to the American literary mind. According to Bloom, Romanticism as such

> is an internalization of romance, particularly of the quest variety, an internalization made for more than therapeutic purposes, because made in the name of a humanizing hope that approaches apocalyptic intensity. The poet takes the patterns of romance and transposes them into his own imaginative life, so that the entire rhythm of the quest is heard again in the movement of the poet himself from poem to poem. (5)

The Romantic poem, or text, becomes part of a vast spiritual or psychological autobiography, a marker in terms of which the progress of the poet may be measured. It is a logic that has informed literary production and criticism from the Romantics until today. It becomes particularly overt in the work of writers like Hemingway, Henry Miller, or the neo-Romantic Beats, and also lies behind the critical tendency to relate any discussion of Melville's engagement with the quest pattern to his own overall artistic development. In fact, such critical strategies have come to seem so natural that it is quite impossible to avoid them altogether.

At any rate, what we notice is that in Romantic thought, Frye's "middle" world of conflict becomes that of the psyche, the progress defined by a movement that "is from nature to the imagination's freedom" (Bloom, "Internalization" 5). The imagination moves from subjection to liberty, and becomes the integrative, unifying principle. Thus, Richard Fogle locates the "center of Romanticism" in "a new and different vision, in which everything is alive, related, and meaningful. This involves 'organicism,' according to which all reality is organically and vitally unified" (3).[19] Bloom might disagree with this, but only insofar as Fogle holds up this "vision" as a starting-point, and not a goal. Because this goal was related to the internal progress of the individual, it was only natural that the terminology of growth would enter the Romantic discourse and find expression in such forms as the *Bildungsroman*, and other narratives of Romantic development, of which *The Prelude* is a defining instance. J. H. Van den Berg credits Rousseau with creating the terms of this inner growth (61), and Bloom accordingly identifies "a very secular sense of being twice-born" (5) in specific Romantic texts. This stock image of Romantic self-reinvention through art is transmitted also to the American Romantics, including Melville himself. That he conceived of his own art as precipitating such a second birth is clear from his well-known statement, in a 1851 letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, that "[u]ntil I was

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[19] Fogle goes on to explain "organicism" as not being "a metaphysical or poetical idea alone; it rose as a distinct conception with the rise of the biological sciences in the latter part of the eighteenth century" (3). In a sense, Ishmael's relentless, if futile, anatomy of the whale in *Moby-Dick* might be seen as simultaneously an assault upon and a use of this notion, i.e., a parody. See Chai 8.

twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself" (*C* 193). This comment is significant because that "twenty-fifth year" was the year of his return to Lansingburgh, and the writing of *Typee*—thus, Melville makes his assumption of authorship *the* pivotal moment in his life, and not his experiences of the preceding years. Only once he begins to explore the implications and imaginative possibilities of those experiences in the relative tranquillity of the Lansingburgh family home, does he profess to the onset of any development at all.

It is advisable to view Melville's Romantic restructuring of his own development with critical caution.[20] In the act of writing he undoubtedly tempered his critical faculties and granted himself a glimpse of his own imaginative potential, and the intensity of a renewed engagement with a wide range of literature (from the factual to the poetic) would have effected a potent, intellectually galvanising meeting of ideas. But this does not diminish the fact that his first writings were deeply indebted to his experiences (particularly as a sailor) and, more importantly, that these experiences achieved a kind of provisional coherence in terms of a social and literary logic he had long since internalised. What he gained from his travels, more than anything, were the raw materials of his art—the literary structure he would appropriate so innovatively had been transmitted to him much earlier. Some of the reasons for such a transmission have briefly been touched on above—it remains merely to proffer some proof of the self-conscious imaginative presence of the quest structure in Melville's mind prior to his first sea-voyage in 1839.

That proof, as Seelye has pointed out, is to be found in one of the earliest pieces of Melville literature extant, namely the second of two "Fragments from a Writing Desk," published in *Democratic Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser* in May 1839. There is no point in going over the same ground as Seelye other than to stress the strong presence of stock Romantic settings and themes, replete with "rever[ies]" ("Fragments" 197), a cloaked figure, an "Atlantean arbor" (200), and a "fair enchantress" (203). As Seelye says, "[t]he oriental setting of the 'Fragment,' along with the luring cynosure and an enthusiastic plunge into erotic mystery, are devices basic to the romantic quest, as in Shelley's *Alastor*" (11). But there is an important point that Seelye overlooks, namely in relation to the self-consciousness of Melville's writing. Immediately upon reading the mysterious, fragrant invitation dropped by the cloaked figure, Melville's narrator interrupts himself with the following reflection: "Is it possible, thought I, that

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[20] That Melville did not view this development in redemptive terms should be clear from his comparison of himself, in the same letter, to "one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian Pyramids, which, after being three thousand years a seed and nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, grew to greenness, and then fell to mould" (*C* 193).

the days of romance are revived?—No, 'The days of chivalry are over!' says Burke" (197). These lines seem to me to express—in the most compressed form, if not the most artistically accomplished—the essence of Melville's sense of, and approach to, the quest. Firstly, we see him deliberately creating certain expectations in his reader by his reference to "romance"—which is important to the ultimate effect of the conclusion of his story. By introducing the notion of romance, Melville is making us think about implicit form and structure, and by suffusing his tale in Spenserian imagery, he in a sense legitimises our expectations, soothes us into thinking that our formal expectations will be met. However, the narrator's thought is qualified, at the outset, by a quote from (actually a paraphrase of) Edmund Burke, which here has the effect of suggesting a discrepancy between romance as a form and the immediate historical context of the tale itself. If the "days of chivalry are over," what is to be expected of the quest? And this question, of course, puts us firmly in the realm of Don Quixote, whose delusion, or madness, is essentially a result of the incommensurability of history, or context, on the one hand, and action and character on the other. This Quixotic dilemma remains more or less central to Melville's writings throughout his career; here, at the outset of it, it is implicitly raised, while at the same time kept in abeyance by the fact that Burke's qualification is in the form of a quotation. This creates the impression of inherited "realism" intruding upon the narrator's own wishes, and the reader is apt to hope that Burke is wrong, and will be proved so by the narrator.

This is precisely what the narrator sets out to do, and he follows the mysterious messenger through an increasingly labyrinthine landscape to the embowered beauty, who in the end turns out, to the narrator's great horror, to be "dumb! Great God, she was dumb! DUMB AND DEAF!" (204). The tale ends there, just like that, in a sudden silence (all the more striking because of the narrator's previous rhetorical embellishments) that is both stunned and playfully deliberate. Seelye stresses the former when he says that "[s]ilence, for Melville [. . .] is a token of mystery which suggests the possibility of ultimate nothingness, the "trick" of the universe" (12). The apprehension of this "truth" leads to a moment of Dionysian insight which raises the spectre of madness. The quest leads to no final, canny, meaning-dispensing "Truth"—at most, it leads to an encounter with the horrific silence that *Pierre*'s narrator identifies as "the only Voice of our God" (204; bk. 14, ch. 1), a silence which Ishmael readily and subversively ascribes to "a sort of interregnum in Providence" (*MD* 320; ch 72).[21] Yet the overall effect of Melville's ending is not that of unmitigated horror—behind the shocking finale, we discern the ironic smile of a writer

[21] Spanos identifies Melville's God as "the *deus absconditus*, i.e., the 'principle' of absence" (72). It is the God that Georges Bataille posits, for instance, in "My Mother": "In the solitude I entered, the norms of this world, if they subsist, do so in order to maintain a dizzying feeling of enormity: this solitude, it is God" (36).

who has consciously dashed his readers's expectations, and now refuses to capitulate to their formal need for closure. Leon Howard suggests that

> [a]lthough it is quite evident that he [Melville] was not above reading with unsophisticated interest the romantic and sentimental fiction introduced into the house by [his brother] Gansevoort and his sisters, his impulse was to parody rather than imitate it when he took his own pen in hand. For the second of his "Fragments" [. . .] was a narrative hoax [. . .]. It was crude humor [. . .]. (15)

For Howard the crudity lies, presumably, in the sensationalism of the ending, but the humour is not limited to the subversive conclusion. This conclusion lifts the final veil on the parodic nature of the text, and the reasons for the reader's initially uncertain relation vis-à-vis the narrator's tone are clarified at last. Howard's identification of Melville's "impulse [. . .] to parody" is highly pointed, for it clearly captures the intention behind Melville's circumlocution and self-conscious writing. When the narrator proclaims his persuasion, upon entering the lady's abode, "that this mysterious affair was now about to be brought into an eclaircissement" (213), the narrative tension is almost eradicated by the wicked absurdity of the verbal pomp—an aesthetic "blunder" Melville learned to use with a more telling effect in his later writings—and nobody would have taken seriously the narrator's early temptation to commit suicide (because of his shame at being outrun by the female messenger):

> I thought I should never survive the inexpressible mortification of the moment; and in the height of my despair, I bethought me of putting a romantic end to my existence upon the very spot which had witnessed my discomfiture. But when the first transports of my wrath had passed away, and perceiving that the waters of the river, instead of presenting an unruffled calm, as they are wont to do on so interesting an occasion, were discomposed and turbid; and remembering, that beside this, I had no other means of accomplishing my heroic purpose, except for the rather inelegant one, of braining myself against the stone wall which traversed the road; I sensibly determined after taking into consideration the aforementioned particulars, together with the fact that I had an unfinished game of chess to win, on which depended no inconsiderable wager, that to commit suicide under such circumstances would be highly inexpedient, and probably be attended by many inconveniences. (210-11)

Here, the "inexpressible mortification" is a comic portent of the sudden silence that meets us at the end—comic because the narrator does not for one moment cease, or even curb, his verbal acrobatics, and because of the ironic discrepancy between the gravity of suicide and the trifling nature of his counter-arguments. Comically, the narrator—still hopeful of the revival of romance—attempts to assign himself a heroic sang-froid, while both reality and his own recalcitrance, vanity, and sensibility confound his wishes. Incongruously, expedience intrudes into romance, and undermines it. But comic as the intention is, even here something of the horror of the story's end comes through—reality itself unsettlingly becomes "discomposed and turbid;" and in "the stone wall which traversed the road" we perhaps have an incidental metaphor for that

silent barrier beyond which the quester cannot go, lest he die in the attempt by "braining" himself against it, as Ahab—the most Romantic of Melville's heroes—would eventually do.[22] And it seems fair to say that even by 1839, Melville had developed some authorial instinct for the quest as the structure upon which to impose his tragic and comic explorations of a world both phenomenal and noumenal, and infinitely ambiguous.

There exists, then, a dual impulse for Melville's use of the quest pattern in structuring his first, and subsequent, narratives, namely to explore it as the governing teleological principle at work in contemporary national ideology, ontology, metaphysics, and literary aesthetics and, on the other hand, to question and criticise the efficacy of this quest, to confound it and ultimately judge it hopeless. This in itself seems simple enough, but it is Melville's highly complex and multi-layered use of the quest pattern that leaves room for such an abundance of approaches to his work, from a socio-historical perspective to one which is strictly mythological or archetypal. My focus will lie primarily on the rhetorical and narrative strategies Melville employs to shape his original, critical version of the quest.

By now it will be apparent that when insisting on "Melville's use of the quest pattern," I am not suggesting any wholesale employment of the structure of traditional quest-romance. Melville took over a form—for specific literary reasons—and made it wholly his own. In fact, it is the primary thesis of this study that Melville employs the archetypal structure consciously, and with subversive intentions (not because of any strict literary antagonism, but because he sensed or realised its manifold applications), ratifying a position which holds that the quest for apocalyptic meaning or significance—immutable "Truth," "God," "ideal," etc.—is doomed to failure because there is no room for absolutes in "a belittered world" ("Encantadas" 132) governed by nature. It is a world in which the monumental "forms, measured forms" (*BB* 473; ch. 27) that mankind evolves must, as Captain Vere finds out, remain forever unequal to the task of containing and governing the deviant, recalcitrant plenitude of life. In such a world, the quest itself becomes vague, or fragmented, persisted in either because of Romantic wilfulness, or because of pure folly. Although Melville tends to favour the former reading, he is aware that the

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[22] Faced with the "dead, blind wall" of the sperm whale's front (*MD* 336-37; ch. 76), Ishmael recognises its fatal power. But absolutist Ahab will not flinch from his purpose. One thinks of the relentless tortoises in sketch 2 of "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles":

> Their stupidity or their resolution was so great, that they never went aside for any impediment. One ceased his movements altogether just before the mid-watch. At sunrise I found him butted like a battering-ram against the immovable foot of the foremast, and still striving, tooth and nail, to force the impossible passage. [. . .] Their crowning curse is their drudging impulse to straight-forwardness in a belittered world. (132)

These "convict tortoises" are also referred to in chapter 24—"In the City of Dis"—of *Israel Potter* (159).

division is a slight one, perhaps merely one of mood and perspective. In ways that are not quite incidental, the position of many of Melville's questing heroes recalls that of the deluded Don Quixote—they are Romantic heroes let loose in a picaresque world that is merciless, inhospitable, antagonistic, unstable, ambiguous, resistant to spiritual and political idealism, and "fallen" in terms of moral character.[23]

The picaresque world is in essence an anti-romantic world, and hence broadly related to the demonic and deviant forces that defeat human desire. Karl Kerényi relates the development of the genre in Spain to a "revolt against the rigidity of tradition" (qtd. in Blackburn 13), while Alexander Blackburn refers to the "implied polarity [of "the myth of the picaro"] to the literature of unity and love," and the picaresque engagement of "both the distant, undifferentiated past and a creative present that continues to tell a story of social disorder and psychic disintegration" (3).

With this in mind, and by way of a contextualising approach to this counter-myth to the quest-romance, it is useful to recall Camille Paglia's claim that "American Romanticism is really Decadent Late Romanticism, a style of sexual perversity, closure, and fragmentation or decay" (572). By this, I take her to mean that America assimilates European Romanticism at a time when its principles and forms are becoming ritualised, and can be abstracted from the cultural works themselves—it becomes the convention (or set of conventions) that the next generation of artists will reject. Also, at this stage something excessive and even self-indulgent creeps into Romantic narratives, thematically and stylistically. Forms and symbols outlast their *raison d'être* in a way that recalls Robespierre's gradual reduction (by relentless *repetition*) of the guillotine into a morbid parody of itself and the ideals of the French Revolution (to many of the Romantics the inglorious and bloody aftermath of the Revolution would have helped erode the conviction of their own ideals or, at least, the incorruptibility of those ideals). Indeed, there is a sense in which all "late" art becomes parodic, but it would not be useful to forego the criterion of formal self-consciousness in the creation of parody. Suffice it to say that late Romanticism became highly

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[23] To some extent this tension may be born of the conflicting demands of Melville's own Romanticism, humanism and populism. It seems indisputable that his was a democratic spirit haunted by hierarchies, and many of his characters find themselves in a position of having inherited values (which include an inherited sense of selfhood) challenged by a world which no longer recognises those values. This conflict, in a sense, is reflected in the two main cultural movements of the twentieth century (and may lie behind its affinity for Melville): while modernism leaned in the direction of an elitist humanism (with a strong bias in favour of literary values), postmodernism countered by a movement toward an all-embracing democratisation of culture. In both instances, however, the fundamental tension remains.

prone to subversion, irony and parody—in short, one begins to see a marked shift in symbolism from what Frye calls the "apocalyptic" (or revelatory and unifying) to the "demonic":

> Opposed to apocalyptic symbolism is the representation of the world that desire totally rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion; the world as it is before human imagination begins to work on it and before any image of human desire, such as the city or garden, has been solidly established; the world also of perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly. [. . .] [O]ne of the central themes of demonic imagery is parody, the mocking of the exuberant play of art by suggesting its imitation in terms of "real life." The demonic divine world largely personifies the vast, menacing, stupid powers of nature as they appear to a technologically undeveloped society. Symbols of heaven in such a world tend to become associated with the inaccessible sky, and the central idea that crystallizes from it is the idea of inscrutable fate or external necessity. (147)

It is not difficult to recognise something of not only Melville, but also writers like Poe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson in this discussion of demonic imagery. It provides as clear a sense as possible of what it is that separates these writers from the more traditional Romantics (or Transcendentalists) such as Emerson and Thoreau.[24]

It is important to note here that this demonism is not located in any specific, personal antagonist to Good or God (Providence),[25] for instance, the Satan of Christian mythology, but in the "vast, menacing, stupid powers of nature," the chthonic, which has no moral bias whatsoever, but is allied to chaos. In this world, the object of the quest grows dim, and the world itself becomes hellish. There is no evidence that the possibility of fulfilment exists—at most, there is only the evidence that "human desire" can achieve nothing lasting, no monumental, resolvent Being. We are in the world of Dante's *Inferno* or, less spectacularly, of the preacher of Ecclesiastes (along with the Book of Job, one of Melville's favourite books and among the few in the Bible that seem to resist the grand narrative in which they are traditionally placed), who states that "all is vanity":

> What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?
> One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever.
> The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.
> [. . .]

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[24] Whitman should also be included among the latter, although there is an undeniable demonic strain in his poetry.

[25] Lawrance Thompson, in *Melville's Quarrel with God*, places Melville in an agonistic relation vis-à-vis the Father. However, it seems to me that Melville's persistent subversion of God (as Providence) is less geared to undermining his "goodness" than his effective "presence." In other words, the God that underlies the pages of Melville's work is less a bivalent God, both Good and Evil, than a mathematical cancellation of that Good and Evil into nothingness. This idea will be explored further toward the end of this introduction (see 36) and in chapter 5 (see 205-08 below).

> The things that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. (1. 2-5; 9)

The horror here is the horror of inevitability and of endless repetition without progress, what Ishmael calls "the endlessness, yea, the intolerableness of all earthly effort" (*MD* 60; ch. 13). Cycles of birth, growth, decay and death dominate human reality.[26]

In such a world there is no resolvent progression, and thus, no direction to human action. There may be a feeling of time standing still—even though, by the revolutions of the sun, it is apparent that it does not—because there is no notable continuum. It may be better to say that time loses its significance, along with everything else. The predominant sense, however, is that of being lost, of moving in an enigmatic space:

> Corresponding to the apocalyptic way or straight road, the highway in the desert for God prophesied by Isaiah, we have in this world the labyrinth or maze, the image of lost direction, often with a monster at its heart like the Minotaur. The labyrinthine wanderings of Israel in the desert, repeated by Jesus when in the company of the devil (or "wild beasts," according to Mark) fit the same pattern. The labyrinth can also be a sinister forest, as in *Comus*. The catacombs are effectively used in the same context in *The Marble Faun*, and of course in a further concentration of metaphor, the maze would become the winding entrails inside the sinister monster himself. (Frye 150)

Demonic symbolism subverts and diffuses the certainties of romance—the desert, without God's "highway," becomes a labyrinth.

Such spaces were highly familiar to Melville's imagination, and enter all of his fictions in some form or other. Many of his quests, which are demonic and parodic, take place (and "end") upon vast wastelands of water, another form of the desert mentioned by Frye. The most pervasive labyrinth in Melville, then, is of the kind referred to by Jorge Luis Borges in his "Poem of the Fourth Element":

> The sea and shift of mountains that destroys
> the ships of iron are only your disguises,
> and relentless time, that wounds us and moves on,
> only another of your metaphors, Water.
>
> Under laboring winds, you were the labyrinth,

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[26] On this point the Afrikaans translation of Ecclesiastes is even more striking: "Alles kom tot niks" (All comes to nothing). Indeed, this reformulation may here serve to clarify Melville's sense of "life"—for him, the world is not illusory, but real, and hence not "nothing." "Life," we learn in *Pierre*, is "a fact" (279; bk. 20, ch. 1). But as telos the world fails—in the end it *comes* to nothing. At any rate, Melville's sense of the "demonic," uncanonical wisdom communicated in these lines is adequately suggested in *Moby-Dick*, when Ishmael proclaims that "[t]he truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. 'All is vanity.' ALL. This wilful world hath not got hold of unchristian Solomon's wisdom yet" (424; ch. 96).

> windowless, wall-less, whose gray waterways
> for long distracted the forlorn Ulysses,
> with certain death and vagaries of chance. (lines 13-20)

Water becomes the symbol of inscrutable fate. In much of Melville, the action is shifted entirely to the world of the monster—"*our* world" being present only in the fragile buoyancy of ships (not even of iron) in which metaphysics, science (cartography, mathematics, astronomy, cetology, etc.), economics and social stratification are provisionally maintained but eventually, as in *Moby-Dick*, come to nothing in the waters of the Pacific. In Melville, the image of the bottomless sea relativises everything that occurs upon its surface. Water is the most enduring image of the inhuman, chthonic flux of nature. Frye says of water that it "traditionally belongs to a realm of existence below human life, the state of chaos or dissolution which follows ordinary death, or the reduction to the inorganic" (146). For the same reason the emergence from it is frequently seen as an act of individuation, or birth (which is also aligned, one assumes, with the idea of washing oneself in it). In it, man cannot exist—it is a strictly uncanny, alien realm. In Melville, this realm is a ubiquitous one, literally below or underneath the life of the ship, capable of swallowing it completely without leaving a trace. Mankind skims along its surface, and only occasionally manages to catch a glimpse of shapes below, or draws something from the deeps only to deepen the mystery. To shift the imagery to an age in which the idea of space travel has become quite pedestrian (as had the idea, by the 1840s, of taking a ship across all the oceans of the world in search of whales, an idea which some fifty years earlier must have sounded like science fiction), the image of the *Pequod*, the *United States*, and those other ships of Melville's lying on the open sea, is directly analogous to the image of earth drifting in space. The narrator in *White-Jacket* makes this very point: "As a man-of-war that sails through the sea, so this earth that sails through the air" (402)—somehow the charts drawn up, courses plotted, and narratives provided by science and religion provide but scant consolation.

The romance deals with (archetypal) essence; its form is largely homogenous and assimilative, or unifying. In the romance, everything gleans its value from the binary, polar conflict between hero and his antagonist. The unification occurs in terms of this conflict. The picaresque, according to Ulrich Wicks, "evolved as an antitype to romance" (45) and by extension we might suggest that the wanderings of the picaro offer an antitype to the quest of the hero. According to this view, picaresque provides a demonic mirror image of the world of romance:

> The essential picaresque situation, the fictional world mapped out in the picaresque mode, is that of an unheroic protagonist, worse than we, caught up in a chaotic world, worse than ours, in which he is on an eternal journey of encounters that allow him to be alternately both victim of that world and its exploiter. [. . .] Our journey into picaresque

> is an infinite foray into a world that is forever falling apart, disintegrating. (Wicks 54-55)

Wicks here provides a virtual point-by-point contrast to his definition of the "essential romance situation," quoted earlier. As we have the picaro substituted for the hero, we have "chaotic" substituted for "harmonious"; "worse," "eternal" and "journey of encounters" replaces "better," "finite" and "quest," and, ultimately, any sense of a goal is effaced in the face of wholesale disintegration. The most important point to be gleaned from this, it seems to me, is the fact of the picaro's journey as being infinite, which implies that it can have no clear and definable, or attainable goal. This is what confounds the protagonist, and robs his world of a narrative line, of resolvent meaning. In the picaresque narrative, human and social expedience is brought to the forefront of the action, becomes the very rationale behind it. The picaro acts strictly from frustration, hunger, poverty, greed, loneliness, and so forth. Thus it might be said that in the picaresque narrative we witness the fragmentation of the romantic *agon* into a multitude of consecutive, minor and inglorious, even sordid, conflicts (or "encounters") that are always incidental, and at best (and only occasionally) result in the temporary satisfaction of basic needs. The structure automatically becomes episodic, and the protagonist blunders from episode to episode without making any discernable progress, or moving towards a satisfactory, climactic conclusion. To revert to Aristotelian terms, there is no certain catharsis in the picaresque.

In accordance with this pattern, of course, there is very little discernable linear development or growth in the character—instead, we find a preponderance of fictional roles that the picaro assumes and discards according to the demands of his immediate situation. As Stuart Miller puts it, the picaro's "internal chaos is externally reflected in his protean roles" (qtd. in Wicks 29). In an extreme form, the picaro may be a character with no definable character at all, apprehended only in terms of his assumed identities or personas. The essential threat to the picaro's identity, then, is the threat of disintegration, or fragmentation. His fate constantly threatens to become that of his world.

There is something strangely familiar about the picaro—he is less removed from our immediate reality than the romantic hero. As in the case of his definition of romance, Wicks perhaps places too much stress on the other-worldliness of the picaresque setting and protagonist; and in this case it is even less justified—it seems to me that one of the ways in which the picaresque works as "an antitype to romance" is by presenting a world and a narrative that are more "realistic" than those of romance. It is this quality that allows for the social criticism—or satire, as Cuddon suggests in an otherwise inadequate definition of picaresque (708)—that sometimes becomes quite prevalent in such paradigmatic novels as, for instance, *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1553) and Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599-1604). As Frye

says, "the picaresque form [. . .] has the novel's interest in the actual structure of society" (310) and, as satire, it is frequently peopled by recognisable types, and may show a leaning toward anatomy. Thus, while Wicks's archetypal diagrammatic opposition between romance and picaresque is not in and of itself problematic, it can be misleading, for the world of the picaro should be considered demonic insofar as that demonism is impersonal, that of nature. Wicks essentially employs Frye's opposition of the "apocalyptic" and "demonic" without clarifying this point (as Frye does). What should be avoided is the image of the picaro as necessarily being in any way "satanic," that is, morally and intellectually opposed to (the idea of) God, for such a role belongs in romance. Instead, the chaos of the picaro's world is the chaos of a world in which clear moral poles and, indeed, God and the Devil, are either ambiguous, or completely absent. It is this very absence that informs the aimlessness of his wandering, and the inconsequence of his death, which can serve as the only conclusion to these wanderings (for thematic reasons, however, the picaro's death is usually not included in the narrative, thereby underscoring the elusiveness of closure). The picaresque narrative is open-ended and, at least theoretically, infinite or eternal, even though the picaro, by virtue of being a mere mortal, is not. And its infinity is that of the natural cycles (in terms of the logic of which the picaro is endlessly repeated), of the circle, of zero.

If the picaresque is an antitype of romance, it must also be clear that it is to some extent parodic of the form it demonically opposes, insofar as that opposition is diagrammatic and conscious of the formal characteristics of romance. Much of its impact, in the first place, relies on the reader's recollection of the resolvent forms of quest-romance, and the reader's reaction—whether of surprise, delight, or horror—to the fragmentation and subversion of these forms. Although serious in its implications, and perhaps realistic in its subject-matter, one must not lose sight of the fact that there is ultimately something playful, irreverent and comic in any presentation of the picaresque novel. As Blackburn points out, "a picaresque novel is a seriocomic form that tends to appear at times when the literary imagination is unusually threatened by catastrophe: that is, at times when the very idea of existence commingles with the world of illusion" (14). Such a world, indeed, was the demonic legacy of the Romantic insistence on reality's subservience to the imagination.

Blackburn's comment emphasises another important aspect of the picaresque novel, one which necessitates my qualified use of the word realism. The picaresque novel is realistic insofar as it deals with a world subject to general laws of physics, populated by recognisable living creatures and social types. However, as Blackburn implies, the picaresque novel is to some extent born from a recognition of this world—as mental, social construct—somehow being

illusory (i.e., having no fixed and unfailing *raison d'être* that legitimises and informs its status quo). Social and literary forms alike have no essential or objective reality, or, to state it more accurately, in the picaresque novel there emerges a consciousness of social reality as a fiction, a pluralistic carnival of forms. This consciousness is transmitted to the novel as a form, and achieves a central status in the prose fictions (what Bakhtin calls "novels") of the twentieth century. It is also present in what is frequently accepted as the paradigmatic novel, *Don Quixote*.

Don Quixote is neither a romance nor a picaresque novel. Earlier, I referred to Don Quixote as a romantic hero let loose in a picaresque world, by which I meant to distinguish Cervantes's novel not only from romance, but also from picaresque novels per se. This latter distinction remains an important one. To this day, the image of *Don Quixote* as a picaresque novel persists among many critics, in spite of authoritative qualifications introduced by others.[27] The reasons for this persistence are many, but primarily lie, thematically speaking, in the distinctly picaresque nature of the Don's world—an exploitative, unheroic world not commensurate with (chivalric) idealism—and, structurally speaking, in the rambling, episodic organisation of the narrative. However, in Don Quixote we encounter a protagonist who differs in a significant way from the picaro—he is a romantic hero, if only in his own imagination. His intentions are pure; he acts strictly in terms of certain established ideals. The romantic hero is accommodated by his world and even his conflict; the picaro and his world share essential qualities—Don Quixote, in contrast, acts *in spite of* his world. His side-kick, Sancho Panza, comes closer to the picaro and thus serves as a foil for his master's romantic delusions, and yet he is occasionally implicated in those selfsame delusions. By a complex interaction, the romantic fiction enters reality even as reality denies the fiction. Not only romance, but reality is re-read. Cervantes's book is obsessed with reading. The Don reads reality with a kind of double vision, which allows him to see both the phenomenal and that which ostensibly lies "beyond" it, on another level of reality. Sancho reads the Don as mad, yet frequently finds his reading transplanted by that of his master. These two are read, in turn, by those they encounter on the road, as well as by those left behind, namely the intrepid Doctor Pero Perez (priest) and Master Nicholas (barber), who try to establish what books in Don Quixote's library may safely be read, and which not. In the second book, in particular, the Quixotic fiction seeps into reality contained within the novel by virtue of the fact that the first book is read by the characters, all of whom now become characters to themselves, and seem to alter their acts accordingly. Samson Carrasco

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[27] See, for instance, Walter L. Reed's *An Exemplary History of the Novel*; Ulrich Wicks's *Picaresque Narrative, Picaresque Fictions*; and Alexander Blackburn's *The Myth of the Picaro*.

dons a suit of armour and goes off to battle the madman. Reality responds to the fiction, one might say, which means that the fiction is real, or vice versa. The Don, too, responds to his own fiction. The list is virtually endless. Levels are multiplied and "reality" is placed at an indefinite remove. Fictionalising Don Quixote resides in a fiction read by a fictionalising Don Quixote who is read and written by Cide Hamete Benengeli who is read and translated by Cervantes. The parodic implications are astounding.

In Cervantes's novel, ideals are primarily transmitted as literary forms. In *Don Quixote* the formal literary conventions of quest-romance (which are only implicit, and already eroded, in the picaresque) are applied to a world in which they cannot be accommodated, and therefore are put in sharp relief. It is in this juxtaposition, which draws attention to those conventions as *conventions*, that the parodic element in fiction is conceived, or constituted.

Frye, in terms of his theory of the inter-marriage of archetypal narrative forms (discussed below), identifies "strains [. . .] of novel, romance, and anatomy in *Don Quixote*" (313). Picaresque novel marries quest-romance, and produces one of the most persistent images of the plight of modern man. Melville, writing two and a half centuries after Cervantes, sneaks the Quixotic into the constituting moment of the American hegemony, and produces an "errant" text that destabilises the imperial design by offering a glimpse of the labyrinthine foundations upon which it precariously rests.

Thus far we have been focusing on the broader thematics central to Melville's fiction, but, as hinted above, it is important that we remain cognisant of the organic relation between theme and form.[28] Mary Ellen Pitts stresses such a relation between the quest and the quest narrative when she claims that "[i]f the 'line of fiction' is important to the individual's quest for reintegration of personality, the link between narrative (the narrative as Voyage, the voyage as/of knowledge) reinforces this 'line'"(177). According to this logic the voyage *in* the narrative becomes the voyage *of* the narrative, and removes one degree of differentiation between reader and quest by making the reader's contact with the text a contact with the quest itself, as opposed to a contact with an objectification of the quest. In his useful relation of plot to desire, Brooks speaks of "narrative desire [. . .] [as] the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention" (103). The effect of

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[28] In terms of Romantic "organicism," such correspondence constitutes a unifying, symbolic relation between the phenomenal and the noumenal. In Melville's demonic-parodic response to this Romantic logic, such an organic relation results in the dissolution of coherent form, leaving us with what he calls, in *Billy Budd*, "an organic hesitancy" (413; ch. 2), an irresolute postponement of completion (a state which has no organic parallel).

this is that the reader becomes the quester (especially in the case of a first-person narrator, which allows for a more immediate psychological association between reader and narrator), following the "line" toward a gratifying, consolidatory end. In Melville, of course, this is not quite what happens. The sense of the "narrative as Voyage" remains strong and functional, but since Melville is consciously exploring the conventions and conditions of the quest, the "line" is to a large extent objectified again. John Seelye also makes this point, especially in his chapter on *Moby-Dick*, where he reads the appearance of any line in the book (lines on charts, the whale-line, etc.) as being symbolically tied to the character of Ahab, the quester (60-73). For Seelye the entire book functions on the opposition between "Line and Circle," between Ahab and Ishmael,[29] and "[t]his opposition of character traits is part of the ironic diagram, an association that extends even to metaphor. Relativistic Ishmael with his relativistic cetology chapters is an exponent of circular views" (65). The thematic of line (and circle) enters the text on the level of metaphor, and is figured throughout, even in the "realistic" or "factual" prose. Thus it becomes an object of implicit comment.

If the narrative can be a voyage, a line, a quest, it follows that it can also be a labyrinth. And here, it seems to me, is where Melville achieves his most telling critique of the quest, by persistently confounding and fragmenting the very "line of fiction" in his texts, thereby creating a textual labyrinth, a maze of factual information (real and imaginary), quotes and allusions, stylistic echoes, forms, genres, myths, autobiographical material, scientific and pseudo-scientific categorisations, and so forth. Perspectives are multiplied and counter-poised; homogenous becomes heterogeneous. Here one can see the influence of some of Melville's literary heroes, such as Rabelais, Cervantes, Robert Burton (whose *Anatomy of Melancholy* parodically applies biological methodology to a psychological/metaphysical affliction), Thomas Carlyle and Sir Thomas Browne. All of these authors are difficult to accommodate within the strict outlines of genre, while several of them show a marked disregard for (and a firm understanding of) the sanctity of literary and scientific forms. This places their work loosely in Mikhail Bakhtin's category of "[p]arodic-travestying literature,"[30] which introduces "the corrective of reality that is

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[29] Insofar as Seelye's reading favours Ishmael's "circle" over Ahab's "line," Spanos would see him as belonging to the long line of Cold War critics who opposed the ruminative "liberal imagination" of Ishmael to the "totalitarian will at work in Ahab's policy" (33)—see also page 37 below. Thus the accommodating, integrative "circle" is as unifying in its inclusion (in the way that Whitman's catalogues are unifying) as the unwavering "line" is in its exclusion—both aim at homogeneity.

[30] Insofar as Bakhtin insists on the laughter provoked by such literature, I have reservations about his analysis. Laughter may well have been the inspiring impulse in the development of "parodic-travestying literature," but I

[. . .] *too contradictory or heteroglot* to be fitted into a high and straightforward genre. The high genres are all monolithic, while the 'fourth drama' and genres akin to it retain the ancient binary tone of the word" (136). In these authors, the "high genres" of science, literature (e.g., epic and romance), philosophy and metaphysics are all subjected to a cross-pollination (with each other, as well as with the "lowly"), and lose their privileged, uncompromised status. Different discourses meet and engage in dialogue—a form of Platonic "symposium." The result is a relativisation of all discourses, an erosion of their "monolithic" status. The reader enters a textual labyrinth that may be horrific or playful (or both), but which is always demonic, because it is non-unified, or "heteroglot," to use Bakhtin's term.

Bakhtin, like Julia Kristeva, Walter L. Reed, and others, has pointed out that the novel is, to some extent, a heteroglot form, and Barbara Babcock has claimed that "the insertion of the semiotic of carnival into that of the epic [is] the necessary prerequisite to the development of complex prose in the form of the novel" (qtd. in Reed 75). Reed has further qualified this idea by insisting that the specific terms of the novelistic discourse have to show an awareness of its status as a printed book (for private consumption), the ur-example for him being *Don Quixote*. According to Reed this "self-consciousness [. . .] is constitutive for the novel" (28). What this

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would argue for its replacement, as criterion, by that of humour. While laughter seems aligned more with hilarity and ribald joy, humour more readily lends itself to demonic qualification. Humour may, after all, be black. Similarly, although Melville can be quite comic, his humour frequently is quite wry, as his ultimate comment on the quest certainly is. Denis Hollier makes a related point when, writing on Georges Bataille's notion of the "carnival," he critiques Bakhtin's version in the following terms:

> Bataille's carnival has not much in common with the one Bakhtin was celebrating almost simultaneously in his 1940 book on Rabelais. "Carnival," according to a recent book on Bakhtin, "is not time wasted but time filled with profound, and rich experiences." There is no *Et in Arcadia ego* to be heard, but this is above all because there is no one to say "I" anymore in Bakhtin's carnival, because the first person has disappeared, a joyful purge has swept subjects away in the great anonymous, or dialogic, sewer: the grammar of the irreplaceable has been excluded from the festivities. Bataille's carnival, on the contrary, is the moment in which the I lives its loss, lives itself as loss. This is not a time of plenitude, it is, on the contrary, the time when time's emptiness is experienced [. . .]. The concept of heterology, a neologism invented by Bataille, does not simply indicate a warm, euphoric relationship to otherness. Otherness, in other words, is not simply a matter of pleasure or enjoyment. There is no carnival without loss. (xxiii)

This "corrective" to Bakhtin seems to me to provide a useful counterpoint when one considers Melville's examination of identity. Both Bakhtin and Bataille present a defeat of the monumental Being, the immanent "I," but they do so from different perspectives, of which Bakhtin's is decidedly the more comic and genial. One thinks of chapter 94 in *Moby-Dick* ("A Squeeze of the Hand"), which offers a counter-dissolution to that experienced by Pip in the previous chapter. But Pip's destructive experience of "the infinite of his soul" (414; ch. 93) also presents a key moment in the Melvillean thematic, and finds echoes in his other works, such as Pierre's discovery of the "appallingly vacant as vast [. . .] soul of a man" (285; bk. 21, ch. 1). This vacancy, or unknowable centre, presents an inescapable facet of Melville's engagement of ipseity and telos, and is of great importance to his subversive subjection of Providence to an "interregnum" (*MD* 320; ch. 72).

implies is that the novel, as a genre, is inherently ironic, not only because it brings together and juxtaposes different discourses, but because it also engages with itself as a discourse that functions within certain parameters. These criteria are met by most works of Melville and his heroes—but immediately one is confronted by evidence of a host of critics who have tended to find the application of the term *novel* to these very works problematic. An explanation for this is provided by Frye, who insists that works like *Moby-Dick*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, *Sartor Resartus*, and so forth, are not really novels but rather a species of, or a species influenced by, "Menippean satire," or "anatomy," which deals "with intellectual themes and attitudes" (311). In anatomy, characters are frequently representative of certain ideas, or world-views. Authorial "exuberance [is expressed] in intellectual ways, by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon" (311). Anatomy is accumulative and encyclopaedic in structure; it sports a Falstaffian girth.[31] Since such works are frequently (and carelessly) lumped under the generic term "novel," Frye suggests, they are often unfairly judged to be inferior—confusing, eccentric or undisciplined: "It is the anatomy in particular that has baffled critics, and there is hardly any fiction writer influenced by it who has not been accused of disorderly conduct" (313). Anatomy is a form of fiction separate from the novel—of which the chief interest is "in the human character as it manifests itself in society" (308)—as well as the confession, and the romance, though none of these forms is ever found in a pure state, i.e., they are always combined in specific ways in actual works of fiction (305).

Our discussion has now strayed into a labyrinth one does not willingly enter, namely the ongoing, unresolved critical and theoretical debate around the term *novel*. And while the scope of this thesis does not permit the exhaustive (and exhausting) exploration of the novel as genre, it is clear that some compromise—however provisional—has to be reached between the apparently contradictory terminologies of Frye and Bakhtin. To achieve this, however, one needs to allow that the contradiction stems strictly from the term itself—in Frye, *fiction* occurs in a meeting of forms, or discourses, in a way that mirrors Bakhtin's notion of the *novel* as a meeting of discourses. That Frye's forms are all literary poses no problem, as the fictional forms themselves are to some extent inherently heteroglossic; thus, the novel includes a range of social discourses;

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[31] Rhapsodic Melville frequently resorts to anatomy, as opposed to, say, slipping into a lyrical mode. Anatomy is not inimical to geniality—it can be generous, as well as subversive. In Whitman we have an example of a writer who apparently employed encyclopaedic form without a hint of satire. The explanation for this seems to lie in the fact that his poetry reconstitutes American national hegemony, with its vision of many unified into one. Whitman's catalogues, one might say, are assimilative rather than accumulative.

the romance includes the discourses of character, and myth, for instance, psychological archetypes; the anatomy includes scientific, philosophical and metaphysical discourses, and so on. Bakhtin's "parodic-travestying literature," for him ancestor of the novel, can be comfortably accommodated in the latter category.

Both critical wariness and personal preference dictates the use of Frye's *fiction* as opposed to *novel*. The latter term brings with it a lot of baggage, and leaves one's discussion prone to distractions which Frye's scheme renders unnecessary. More importantly, this scheme allows us to see very clearly why Melville's texts have so often been seen as problematic; a result not simply, I would suggest (in contrast to Spanos), of his extreme eccentricity, but also of our uncertain terminologies. This uncertainty is bound to cast its persistent shadow over this thesis in some way—opting for Frye's terminology, Bakhtinian terms (and those of others) may have to be translated according to the rough compromise established above. For the most part, however, the term *novel*, when used, will be used in Frye's sense of a prose fiction that "deals with personality, with characters wearing their *personae* or social masks" (305). And with this term we are brought almost a full circle, back to the romance. For this definition of the novel immediately calls to mind the image of Ahab, whose purpose in chasing the White Whale is to "strike through the mask" (164; ch. 36). Ahab, like many of Melville's romantic characters, wants to reach beyond the phenomenal to confront the noumenal. As Frye says,

> [t]he essential difference between novel and romance lies in the conception of characterization. The romancer does not attempt to create "real people" so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes. [. . .] That is why the romance so often radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks, and why a suggestion of allegory is always creeping in around its fringes. (304)

To make the distinction in terms of Melville's ship-bound societies: while, on the one hand, he does grant us a glimpse of mid-nineteenth-century seafaring life, the socially determined relationships between sailors and sailors, and sailors and their officers, never seem to be the driving force behind the narrative. These relationships always also seem an allegorical representation of a greater social edifice, of American, or human, society in essence. This is also the level at which anatomy frequently enters the fray, with its (satirical) focus on types instead of personas. But beyond all this, in romance, there seems to be the symbolic level at which the essential relation of man to his universe becomes the subject of the fiction. I would suggest that the "glow of subjective intensity" Frye senses in the romance is the very reason it is not constitutionally suited to irony, as the novel is, for instance. In romance there is an organic, vital link between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between what appears and what is Real, while the novel has little interest in anything beyond that which appears (in forms). Anatomy, again, undermines the link romance upholds by exaggeration, or by relativising the appearance—by

making nonsense of scientific naming; for instance, by parodying scientific jargon, such naming is shown to be superficial, not related to any objective, inherent quality. If romance swears by the truth of its convictions, anatomy stresses the subjectivity of those convictions.

This once more brings to mind that significant literary influence on Melville who, while he cannot be said to have written anatomy, certainly produced a range of texts of which the collection is undeniably encyclopaedic—Michel de Montaigne. W. Carew Hazlitt, in his preface to the revised Cotton translation of the *Essais*, suggests that they "were a sort of literary anatomy, where we get a diagnosis of the writer's mind, made by himself at different levels and under a large variety of operating influences" (v). Frye categorises the essay as a short form of the confession, and regards Montaigne's "*livre de bonne foy* [. . .] [as] a confession made up of essays in which only the continuous narrative of the longer form is missing" (307). Melville is deeply influenced by Montaigne's humanism, his knowledge "that opinions are not certainties, and that most human 'certainties' are in fact opinions" (Screech xiii), and his balanced, provisional exploration of everything from history and science to literature and metaphysics. But it is especially the wide-ranging, ruminative, associative and open-ended style of Montaigne's "'tentative attempts' to 'assay' the value of himself, his nature, his habits and his own opinions and those of others" (Screech xv), that left an indelible imprint on Melville's fiction. As Bryant asserts, Melville engaged not in "precise philosophical argumentation but [. . .] [in] a continual Montaignean 'essaying' of an idea in order to find out what that idea really is, a 'trying out' of [himself] [. . .] in writing, a fictive playing out of various selves" (*Repose* 13). The essays are a form of mental wandering that range across a multitude of topics—indeed, anything that takes Montaigne's fancy. With a medieval disregard for the discreteness of disciplines, the essays are accumulative, and brimful of quotes and references in a way that invites comparison with Burton's later (but virtually contemporaneous) *Anatomy of Melancholy*, the major difference between the texts being one of mode (which is whimsical and parodic in the latter) rather than one of structure. And also, perhaps, this form of democratised wandering is not wholly distinct from that indeterminate fictional form singled out earlier, namely the picaresque.

A sample from Montaigne may help, at this stage, to focus our discussion. Montaigne was a continual commentator on his own method—indeed, his method was to some extent his theme—and Melville's fiction shows a marked affinity with the essayist's indeterminate explorations. To quote from "Of Repentance," the opening words of which served also as my own:

> Others form man; I only report him [. . .]. Now, though the features of my picture alter and change, 'tis not, however, unlike: the world eternally turns round; all things therein are incessantly moving, the earth, the rocks of Caucasus, and the Pyramids of Egypt,

> both by the public motion and their own. Even constancy itself is no other but a slower and more languishing motion. I cannot fix my object; 'tis always tottering and reeling by a natural giddiness: I take it as it is at the instant I consider it; *I do not paint its being, I paint its passage*; not a passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute. I must accommodate my history to the hour: I may presently change, not only by fortune, but also by intention. 'Tis a counterpart of various and changeable accidents, and irresolute imaginations, and, as it falls out, sometimes contrary: whether it be that I am then another self, or that I take subjects by other circumstances and considerations: so it is, that I may peradventure contradict myself, but, as Demades said, I never contradict the truth. Could my soul once take footing, *I would not essay but resolve*: but it is always learning and making trial. (19; bk. 3, ch. 2, emphasis added)

This seems as representative a passage as one might abstract from the *Essays* in order to gain some sense of how Montaigne conceives of what he is doing. My emphases are meant to highlight what I take to be two related points that may prove useful in our examination of Melville's prose, and what we might call—to appropriate a term he once coined—his "Montaignism" (Leyda, *Log* 291). The first point to stress is that Montaigne's method/form, the "essay," is always provisional and precludes resolution. Because it is a "report" of his consciousness, it can never be completed. This brings us to the second, related point of importance, namely Montaigne's contrast of "being" and "passage." This "being" that Montaigne deems himself incapable of representing—elsewhere, he makes the potent statement that "[w]e have no communication with Being" ("Apology" 317; bk. 2, ch. 12)—constitutes a monumental, static and immutable ipseity, a completed act of individuation that can exist only in abstract or as ideal.[32] It is this very "being" Simone de Beauvoir has so lucidly defined as an idealised redemption from existence: "When a man projects into an ideal heaven that impossible synthesis of the for-itself and the in-itself that is called God, it is because he wishes the regard of this existing Being to change his existence into being" (14). For Beauvoir's "existence" we might substitute Montaigne's "passage" without too much presumption. Either way we are represented with a contrast between identity defined as a radical mutability, or defined as an absolute, manifest, irreducible presence. Both Montaigne and Beauvoir align themselves with the former. Beauvoir is also convincing in aligning the latter with idealism and the idea of God (telos). It is this state of being that the quester attempts to attain, the resolved, complete(d) presence figured in the idea of a panoptic God who, as Providence, casts the course of human life into a goal-oriented, resolvent and authorised progress toward completion. In other words, human life is a plot, inspiring a reading for the end. Ultimately we should not see in Montaigne

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[32] As Ishmael points out, "any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty" (*MD* 136; ch. 32).

and Beauvoir a simplistic antithesis between stasis and movement, but rather a contrast between two kinds of movement: firstly, a successional and digressional movement (a passage or existence) from moment to moment, unplotted; secondly, a progressive and dialectical movement that is aimed at (privileges and lives in hopes of) *being* as finalised "synthesis." With this second movement we associate the quest, Ahab's purposeful and "unerring [. . .] rush" toward the "fixed purpose" of his vengeance (*MD* 168; ch. 37); with the first, to pick one example among several, the narrative deviance that *Billy Budd*'s narrator calls "err[ing] into [. . .] a bypath" (415; ch. 3). It is by means of such narrative deviance—in terms of what Spanos calls a "measure of errancy" (74)—that Melville subverts the providential design that evokes the double image of providential author and providential God. The former becomes aligned with the flux of nature, while the absolute "being" of the latter becomes what Spanos has so perceptively called "an always deferred presence, which is to say, an abysmal absence" (70). We are returned to the ambiguous and ironic implications of Ahab's apparently sovereign statement of purpose: "Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!" (*MD* 168; ch. 37).

It should be clear by this stage that my own analysis of Melville's fiction to some extent aligns itself with William V. Spanos's ground-breaking work on the canonisation of Melville—more particularly, of *Moby-Dick*—to the extent that he views Melville's text as an "errant" narrative that critiques the "American errand in the wilderness" (2). There are overt echoes here of the knight-errant, the paradigmatic quester, but somewhat surprisingly Spanos does not turn his gaze upon the quest structure specifically. He does, however, posit Melville's "counterhegemonic" fiction (38) as levelled at the central site of the Aristotelian aesthetic of unity, namely *tragedy*:

> I want to suggest, provisionally, then, that Melville overdetermines the tragic in *Moby-Dick* in order to expose the discourse of "tragic vision" as a ruse constructed by metaphysical confidence men (and thus, a more subtle form of the blindness he finds in the "optimism" of the legacy of Emerson and Thoreau to the unequal, historically specific, lived experience of men and women). Far from writing or failing to write a novel that enacts the encompassing epiphanic closure of tragedy, Melville wrote a novel that exists to destroy not simply the idea of tragedy but the *metaphysical vision* that has given privileged status to tragic form, indeed, to *all* structurally teleological literary forms—including what came to be called the American romance—grounded in the certainty of an ultimate presence and a determinate meaning. [. . .]
>
> I want to suggest, in other words, that *Moby-Dick* is a destructive social text—I am tempted to call it, after Nietzsche and Foucault, a work of "genealogy" in its parodic modality, or, after Mikhail Bakhtin, a "carnivalesque" novel—that finally exists to de-structure the "competent reader's" archivally inscribed—and thus always confident—impulse to read and "master" texts spatially [. . .]. For the archival Americanist's assumption of an obsessive quest for tragic unity—the "talismanic secret," as it were—in Melville's radically elusive text is precisely analogous to Ahab's will to knowledge: a

> paranoid effort to coerce the multiplicity—the differential force—of being into Oneness. (60-61)

Spanos's "archival Americanist," the almost generic subject of his critique of criticism, is judged guilty of assuming (embarking on) a hermeneutic quest for the "talismanic secret" that would solve the book, and becomes a kind of Ahab, i.e., a subject of Melville's destructive text—insofar as Spanos is suggesting that this "Americanist" wrongly assumes that there is a quest in *Moby-Dick*, he is actually contradicting his own thesis, since the quest represents the height of teleological discourse, which *Moby-Dick* sets out to "destroy." At any rate, Spanos's text shows, devastatingly, how not only Melville's rejection by contemporaries, but also his interpretation and canonisation by three generations of critics, from the "revivalists" of the 1920s to the New Americanists of the 1980s, have been governed by such a subjection or coercion of "differential force"—in each case, according to the edicts of contemporary socio-political realities. Thus, for instance, *Moby-Dick* was assimilated by

> the Modernist cultural discourse that [. . .] was inaugurated by F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* as a response to European fascism [which shifted the focus from Ahab to Ishmael], but which was crystallized and given its essential shape by Lionel Trilling's appropriation of the (Arnoldian) "liberal imagination" to define American democracy against Soviet communism[33] (21-22)

only to be reinterpreted by the New Americanists as a text that is deeply implicated in the American hegemony of the day. For Spanos, Melville's "errant" text resists all such reductive readings, or indeed, destructively assimilates them all—what he seems to imply, without saying it, is that Melville's text is a labyrinth, a vast, encyclopaedic structure that remains vitally "differential."

Much of the "differential force" of Melville's texts—for Spanos, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, *Israel Potter* and *The Confidence-Man*—lies in his parodic (non-integrative) inclusion of a host of systems that seek to narrativise reality in terms of Aristotelian aesthetics. Thus,

> Melville's project to de-structure the world picture enabled by metaphysics is not restricted to the discourse of American theology/philosophy. It extends across a relay of American discursive practise: not simply the Calvinist Christianity and Emersonian transcendentalism (the secularized Puritanism authorized by German idealism and

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[33] The binary opposition of the Cold War—according to which virtually all nations on the globe were automatically aligned with either democracy or communism—distinctly echoes the central opposition of the romance. It seems a small wonder, then, that many of the critical texts that focus on the Melvillean quest date from this era. As suggested before, such studies did not show much interest in the quest structure per se. Less conscious of the socio-political determinants in their own arguments, these critics focused on the quest of the "liberal imagination" to achieve its apotheosis (in defiance of demonic—communist—subjection).

> mediated by Thomas Carlyle[34]) [. . .], but also, however unevenly, the affiliated discourses of positive science, Linnean natural history, Lockean political economy, Smithsonian capitalism, and, not least, American cultural, especially literary, production. For those ultimately optimistic or consolatory logocentric and teleological systems of thought, according to Melville's late texts, constitute secondary or derivative (spatial/specular) strategies of knowledge production that overlook-and-suppress the originary—e-mergent—"things themselves" in their pursuit of the "talismanic secret." That is, they reduce the differential, elusive, and ambiguous mystery of being to one kind of reassuring Book of the Word or another, to a prophetic fiction the beginning-middle-end or promise/fulfillment narrative structure of which, at least, renders being presentable and graspable and, at worst, an object of manipulation and plunder: "practically assailable," as it were. Under their encompassing eyes, the disseminations of being are, to appropriate Heidegger's critique of modern technology, subjected to "enframement" (*Ge-stell*), reified, and reduced to "standing reserve" (*Bestand*) or, to appropriate Foucault's genealogy of modern Enlightenment, to "useful and docile bodies." (62-63)

Melville clears the table of both the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment, the thought-confident Age of Reason, and the ideology of an organicist Romanticism, and accesses once again the very strangeness—the uncanny nature—of the world. In an important sense, he reinstates wonder, but of the kind that does not delimit (or "enframe") the object of that wonder we may relate to what Montaigne, in "Of Experience," calls "admiration" (323; bk. 3, ch. 13). It is a wonder free of false optimism, though not, on the other hand, linked merely to unqualified horror—Ishmael suggestively speaks of the "interlinked terrors and wonders of God" (*MD* 109; ch. 24). It is the wonder of confounded categories, which occurs in *Moby-Dick*, for instance, when the White Whale breaks the surface to annul the prevalent idea of whales as economically "useful and docile bodies."

Spanos essentially argues for the strangeness of Melville's text, and is therefore wary of any prescriptive or pre-emptive form of categorisation. Although my own point is related to his, I would like to place a much stronger emphasis on Melville's conscious engagement with the "teleological literary forms"—or Vere's "forms, measured forms" (*BB* 473; ch. 27)—of the Western canon. In other words, I would like to start with categories. The quest is not implicitly problematised—it is explicitly appropriated, only to be subverted and fragmented. Melville leads his reader into a labyrinth under false pretences. The reader's encounter with the text has to take account of the fragmentation of formal expectations. This does not solve the labyrinth, but it

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[34] This "mediation" by Carlyle is not "one-dimensional," i.e., it requires qualification—even though Carlyle and Emerson were good friends, and the latter admired his work, Carlyle's rhetorical narratives were often of a disconcertingly digressive nature, postponing meaning in a deliberate and playful "tantrum prose" (328), as Northrop Frye calls it. While transmitting German idealism to the Transcendentalists, he was merrily assisting in the transmission of a rhetoric of postponement to Melville.

does liberate the reader from a linear obsession that may preclude the possibility of joining Melville in his sometimes dark, sometimes genial, associative play. With Melville, we start out with categories, cognisant of their provisional and unstable nature.

My main point of departure from Spanos is simple: firstly, for Spanos, it is the Ishmaelian language itself that is destructive; hence, Ishmael cannot be implicated in any teleological discourse (or search). His language is already polyglossic. Thus, Spanos works from the familiar premise that there is a distinction between Ahab the quester, and Ishmael the questioner (as long as his questioning is not seen as simply a different kind of questing). He may consider the earlier narrators as being too implicated in the search for meaning (although his book leaves this question open). I hope to show, however, that Melville's "errant" critique is always present. I intend to consider all of his longer prose fiction—barring *Moby-Dick*—in terms of some narrative "errancy." Spanos focuses strictly on *Moby-Dick*, and aligns only the post-*Moby-Dick* fiction with Melville's destructive project. Very little mention is made of the five bulky books preceding Melville's canonical text. Regardless of Spanos's intentions, this introduces a binary opposition of another kind, between a capitulative early Melville and a rebellious, "counterhegemonic" later Melville. I would like to argue for a greater consistency (of "errancy," but not method) in the general thematics of Melville's oeuvre while, on the other hand, down-playing any developmental line from early works to later works. Melville subverted the teleological quest, and each time he did so, he did it anew, and not primarily in terms of some inherent, progressive logic of artistic development that I would care to isolate for scrutiny.

It is a winding road that finally leads us here, to Melville, who is a beginning, not an end. At this point, we are left with something that defies final coherence—a multiplicity of forms, examples and qualifications. But undoubtedly it is from such windings that Melville drew his creative energy. His mind revels in juxtaposition and ambiguity. And it is important to realise that, more than anything else, Melville was a voracious reader, and a writer whose reading was insolubly tied to his writing. This may have started, quite innocently, with the writing of *Typee*, when the need for factual information about the Marquesas made him turn to such books as G. H. Langsdorff's *Voyages and Travels*, William Ellis's *Polynesian Researches*, and Captain David Porter's *Journal of a Cruise Made in the Pacific in the U. S. Frigate* Essex. However, I favour Howard's point that Melville's tendency to quote and parody is evident at least as early as 1839. The point is that to write, for Melville, is in a sense to respond to and engage with what has been written. This engagement occurs on many levels—including those of form, imagery and theme. His encounter with his enigmatic world is, ultimately, a literary encounter.

In the act of writing, I would suggest—i.e., in the linguistically determined act of coupling one word to the next, one phrase to another, in order to form a narrative—Melville located the prime teleological force, and set out radically to question it. Language, his vehicle, was also his theme—the labyrinthine web to which we strive to assign hermeneutic coherence. In the process, he affirmed the eternal, slippery ambiguity of the sign. Finally, one cannot help but feel that Melville, on some level, confronted the same realisation that Georges Bataille identifies in his essay, "The Labyrinth":

> In men, all existence is tied in particular to language, whose terms determine its modes of appearance within each person. Each person can only represent his total existence, if only in his own eyes, through the medium of words. Words spring forth in his head, laden with a host of human or superhuman lives *in relation* to which he privately exists. Being depends on the mediation of words, which cannot merely present it arbitrarily as "autonomous being," but which must present it profoundly as "being in relation." One need only follow, for a short time, the traces of repeated circuits of words to discover, in a disconcerting vision, the labyrinthine structure of the human being. What is commonly called *knowing*—when a man *knows* his neighbour—is never anything but existence *composed* for an instant [. . .], which *once* made of those beings a *whole* every bit as real as its parts. (173-74)

For Bataille, existence is labyrinthine, although there are moments when man's teleological needs are suddenly met, when reality, one might say, coheres. This is, essentially, a moment of "composition," of knowledge, which, according to Denis Hollier, "always takes the form of something to end all error and errantry" (60). That something, for Hollier (writing on Bataille) takes the form of a pyramid,[35] the shape of which, as we will see, frequently emerges in Melville, as a sign of just such a moment of "composition." It is a figure for the sovereign, individuated identity, which is why Ahab appears in Stubb's dream as a pyramid (*MD* 131-32; ch. 31). The pyramidical moment is the moment in which the labyrinth is transcended, and "being" constitutes itself. However, such moments are transitory and to some extent illusory. The labyrinth, after all, remains as the unvanquished foundation, or, as Montaigne puts it, even "the Pyramids of Egypt" are subject to "incessant mov[ement]" ("Of Repentance" 19; bk. 3, ch. 2). The labyrinth abides. For Bataille,

> [i]t is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing is seen as the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form.
>
> Ever since sentences started to *circulate* in brains devoted to reflection, an effort at total identification has been made, because with the aid of a *copula* each sentence ties one thing to another; all things would be visibly connected if one could discover at a single glance and in its totality the tracings of an Ariadne's thread leading thought into its own labyrinth. ("Solar" 5)

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[35] Hollier, one assumes, takes this image of the pyramid from Bataille's "The Labyrinth," in which it appears as the figure for being (173).

The stabilising, totalising glance—a reaction against "circulation"—is essentially beyond the scope of language. Being is never autonomous, and the relations never finalised—Bataille also refers to "the innumerable being of man" ("Labyrinth" 177). At most, there is the pyramidical moment, in which a provisional "composition" is achieved. Most fiction and theory, following Aristotle, have aimed at such a moment of artistic "composition." But there are writers, like Melville, who keep alive, in the very act of "composition," the demonic and recalcitrant presence of the labyrinth which others try to overcome or obscure. It seems, then, that what Hollier says of Bataille may be applied, broadly, also to Melville:

> Therefore, in spite of their apparent opposition, one is not faced with an alternative between labyrinth or pyramid. Each implies the other. If Western ideological discourses, caught up in the system of metaphysics, have valorized the pyramid (but without success in eliminating the labyrinth, despite all the Ariadne's threads they continually take turns in proposing), Bataille does not claim to speak for the labyrinth. Or if sometimes he seems to, his writing, nonetheless, for reasons pertaining to the very nature of language—which he himself has mentioned repeatedly—must necessarily pass through a pyramidical moment. Like all writing, it is caught between vocabulary and syntactical play, between the tantalization of resemblances and the metonymic expansion of cuttoff points. (73)

Melville's work is anti-teleological and anti-monumental. In his prose fiction he overtly and subversively engages the quest-structure as a figure for the progress toward the telos of an absolute Being that presents itself as a Providence in the course of that quest. In the following chapters I will explore this basic claim in relation to eight of the nine long prose fictions—or "novels"—Melville published between 1846 and 1857, namely *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), *White-Jacket* (1850), *Pierre* (1852), *Israel Potter* (1855), and *The Confidence-Man* (1857). Out of deference to the excellent coverage which recent critics have given *Moby-Dick* (1851), I have allowed the book to permeate the discussion, acting as a constant point of reference, rather than confine it to a separate chapter—here I think specifically of William Spanos's comprehensive study, but also of the fine work done by John Bryant, Robert M. Greenberg and Bruce L. Grenberg. Consequently, given the centrality of *Moby-Dick* in Melville's oeuvre, I draw on that work throughout, freely and extensively, in order both to further my argument and to feed it into the mainstream of Melville criticism.

Chapter 1 explores *Typee* and *Omoo* as examples of Melville's subversion of Western teleological drives by confronting them with the prelapsarian, natural world of the Typees, and the hybrid world of the Tahitians. This problematic also emerges in terms of the defeat of the epistemological gaze. Chapter 2 deals with Melville's third and most bulky prose fiction, *Mardi*—also one of his most radically irresolute narratives—and examines it as a parodic

confrontation with the imperial Romantic aesthetics of unity. In chapter 3 I explore how even Melville's assumption of a more "domestic" subject matter results in a narrative that challenges Aristotelian aesthetics and the reader's expectations of temporal development, or growth. It is also the first of Melville's books to engage significantly in the search for an authorising father. Chapter 4 posits *White-Jacket* as an important document in Melville's confrontation with Being, which finds figural and narrative representation as a state of "inbetweenness," an irresolute and interstitial position between irreconcilable opposites. Chapter 5 explores another of Melville's radical narratives, namely *Pierre*, once more in relation to the formal demand for resolution and closure in the (psychological) romance. At this stage I also avail myself of the opportunity of returning to the question of ontological and metaphysical telos as a background for our confrontation with a fiction that still radically resists resolvent hermeneutics. *Israel Potter* forms the subject of chapter 6, which examines Melville's subversion of the American hegemony by means of a revision, a destabilisation, of the historical occasion of national independence (to wit, the Revolutionary War against Britain). Because *Israel Potter* is both the least well-known and the least discussed book in Melville's oeuvre, the approach in this chapter is more systematic and detailed than in the rest of the thesis. Chapter 7 discusses the enigma of Melville's last published prose fiction, *The Confidence-Man*, focusing primarily on Melville's satirical consideration of man's ideologically determined encounter with life, and his implicit confrontation of his reader with two ways of reading—one proceeding from the authorised stronghold of the status quo, exclusive and censorious; the other, *in*formal, heterogeneous, or, to employ a term suggested by the narrative itself, apocryphal. Finally, *Billy Budd*, the unfinished prose work found at Melville's death, is reserved for the concluding chapter as a means of encapsulating the salient ideas that the present study proposes and explores.

CHAPTER 1

SUBVERTING "THE CAREER OF IMPROVEMENT" IN *TYPEE* AND *OMOO*

In a letter to John Murray, his English publisher, anticipating the publication of a "Revised Edition" of a book that appeared a few months earlier as a *Narrative of a four Months' Residence among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas; or, A Peep at Polynesian Life*, Melville relished the thought of finally having the title improved:

> Rejoiced am I, My Dear Sir, that the magic, cabilistic, *tabooistic* "Typee" will hereafter grace the title-page of all subsequent English editions of the book—its judiciousness will be justified by the result. (*C* 65)

In this enthusiastic sentence we may have one of the few instances of external evidence regarding Melville's own perspective on his first book. As Christopher Sten, among others, has pointed out, "almost everything in the record about Melville's own view of his book dates from the time *after* the house of Murray began to loom as a possible publisher" (21). This is significant because Murray's Colonial and Home Library series focused strictly on the publication of true, factual accounts of global travels—burdened by exhaustive titles that meticulously and conscientiously spelled out the exact scope of the subject matter.[1] The series certainly had no place for fiction, and John Murray little taste for it. Thus, virtually from the very completion of his manuscript, the young author was forced to stand by what he called, in his preface to *Typee*, "the unvarnished truth" of his narrative account of his adventures among the cannibals of the Typee valley (xiv). Simultaneously an appeasement of Murray and an excuse for the candour of his depiction of undoubtedly "racy" material, the claim to "unvarnished truth," Melville trusted, would "gain for him the confidence of his readers" (xiv). However, as he himself later dramatised, somewhat ruefully, in *The Confidence-Man*, confidence in one's fellow man was hard to come by. Many readers mistrusted the tales of this eloquent sailor, and Melville was forced to intensify his defence, both in the interest of his newfound status as an author, and his future with an increasingly vexed Murray, who "was pressing the author for documentary evidence of the fact that he had actually visited the Pacific" (Howard 99).

Considering this climate, it is almost inconceivable that Melville should stress the "magic, cabilistic, *tabooistic*" qualities of his preferred title in a letter to John Murray. But it is

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[1] In the original English title of *Typee*, the subtitle introduces a more light-hearted tone to offset the tedious main title, and also hints at the voyeuristic quality we find in the book.

significant that Melville's burst of enthusiasm is immediately checked by an appeal to "judiciousness" and "result." This profit-driven language (which may stem also from Melville's own hopes of financial success) is designed to mollify Murray in the face of an oblique admission on Melville's part that his "factual account" ultimately works best in the atmosphere of romance.[2] And more than romance is hinted at here—in evoking the mysterious, enigmatically coded systems of the Kaballah and what *Typee*'s narrator, Tommo, calls "the inscrutable taboo" (171; ch. 24), Melville has an eye on one of the central themes of all his work, namely the impenetrability of the sign, in other words, the impossibility of getting at the "Truth." It is not only "Typee," the strange orthographical title, that is "*tabooistic*," but the narrative itself. As we read the book we find that our narrator, proffering to give us a "peep" of an exotic people, and to expose certain realities regarding both their customs and the effect of the missions on their culture, more often than not finds himself incapable of providing any insight into the phenomena that he encounters.

Earlier critics (since the "Melville Revival" of the 1920s) tended to take Melville and his narrator at face value, as a "candid fellow" (Mumford 47), and consequently focused on the socio-historical aspects of the narrative.[3] The book is read as a piece of comparative ethnography in which civilisation is found wanting, and is thus aligned with the Rousseauean project. A somewhat later example of this perspective is found in A. N. Kaul's reference to *Typee* as "criticism of Western civilization [. . .] balanced by an alternative concept of social organization" (214). In this view, *Typee* remains essentially a travelogue with certain literary embellishments, but, to some extent, lacking aesthetic unity.

Many later critics have found such an approach unduly dismissive of the complexities of the book,[4] discovering greater ambiguity in Melville's handling of the savage/civilised

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[2] In an earlier letter to Murray (dated 15 July 1846), Melville, in arguing for the title, *Typee*, stressed that it "is a title *naturally suggested by the narrative itself*" (*C* 57), and also argued that the exotic title has made the book "a decided hit" (57) in America. While the latter part of his argument makes a good case for the simpler economic advantages of the new title, the former, especially when seen in the light of the later letter, suggests that the romance of the title is in fact necessitated by the romance of the book.

[3] Interestingly, the bulk of these readings date from after the appearance of Charles Anderson's *Melville in the South Seas* (1939), in which Melville's manipulation of facts regarding his own South Sea travels was clearly identified.

[4] See, for instance, Bruce L. Grenberg's claim for a contemporary critical

> agreement that *Typee* was a simple, polarized narrative that lauded the simple native life and attacked the values of Christian civilization [. . .]. We in our own form of high morality speak of Melville's "social consciousness" and alternatively speak of his romanticism, primitivism, or self-liberation. But this prevailing view [. . .] is simplistic. (8)

dichotomy, and greater success in Melville's aesthetic integration of disparate narrative forces (integration frequently contrasted to *Omoo*'s greater formlessness and lack of unifying tension). But only recently has Sten tentatively shifted the question of *Typee*'s genre in a direction that allows us to examine what Melville was doing from a fresh perspective:

> In arguing that *Typee* fits the romance genre—in plot and character, in incident and theme, in structure, setting and style—I do not, however, mean to say that *Typee* is a romance, a work of straight fiction, or that Melville thought of himself as writing such a work, as he surely did in *Mardi* (1848). My aims are not so extreme. What I want to argue is that, in shaping the story of his Polynesian adventure, Melville borrowed liberally from the romance form. (22)

In spite of all his qualifications, it is clear that Sten considers the romance form to be the blueprint for *Typee*. In order to appreciate the book, we ought to read it as romance, as much of *Typee*'s original audience doubtlessly did (hence the suspicion towards the author's claims for "unvarnished truth"). I would suggest that Sten is right, but only insofar as the book employs the discourse of romance to set up certain expectations, many of which Melville proceeds to subvert. In short, in *Typee* Melville purports to take us on a quest, and leads us into an Eden, which turns out to be a labyrinth, or a hell. With a degree of complexity of which the young author may not have been altogether conscious, Melville dismantles Christian and expansionist ideology, Rousseauean and Transcendentalist idealism, and scientific (anthropological) inquiry. The effacement of absolutes is so complete, that no course remains open to Melville's narrator but the liminal, expedient lifestyle of the beach-comber in *Omoo*, a picaresque narrative that "necessarily begins where 'Typee' concludes" (*Omoo* xiv).

Typee is unquestionably about a quest for "Eden," both as an ideal of freedom from Western bondage and immorality (as represented by the two ships, the *Dolly*, and the French frigate), and as an object of Western anthropological scrutiny. It is the first of these that serves as the central plot to the narrative, although it may be stressed at the outset that at times this plot becomes tenuous, to say the least. Our entry into the narrative is an entry into a harsh shipboard life that immediately sets up the yearning for release:

> Six months at sea! Yes, reader, as I live, six months out of sight of land; cruising after the sperm-whale beneath the scorching sun of the Line, and tossed on the billows of the wide-rolling Pacific—the sky above, the sea around, and nothing else! Weeks and weeks ago our fresh provisions were all exhausted. (3; ch. 1)

We enter Melville's world *in medias res*, requested to imagine the trials of an interminable voyage geared to economic gain, in defiance of nature's "scorching sun" and "billows." In spite of the strong rhetorical presence of the as yet nameless protagonist-narrator, the main image created here is one that plays a significant role in all of Melville's fiction, that of mankind

dwarfed by the natural world. There may be economic progress on "the Line" (the equator), but the "tossed" ship's hold on this line is ultimately a precarious one, and leads to exhaustion—there is only "the sky above, the sea around, and nothing else!"

A mere glimpse of the relativistic, featureless world renders us sympathetic to the narrator's need for the sight of land, "for a refreshing glimpse of one blade of grass—for a snuff at the fragrance of a handful of the loamy earth!" (3). This land-longing contrasts with Ishmael's sea-longing in the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, but it proceeds from the same source: the need for distraction, for change. And it is precisely such distraction the narrator gleefully envisions once the word gets round that the ship is bound for the Marquesas:

> The Marquesas! What strange visions of outlandish things does the very name spirit up! Naked houris—cannibal banquets—groves of cocoa-nut—coral reefs—tatooed chiefs—and bamboo temples; sunny valleys planted with bread-fruit-trees—carved canoes dancing on the flashing blue waters—savage woodlands guarded by horrible idols—*heathenish rites and human sacrifices*. (5)

Melville deftly sets up reader expectations with this checklist of stock romantic images. A romantic currency is established in terms of which the reader will approach the narrative, as Tommo approaches the Marquesas (an approach for now dominated by the italicised anticipation of "*heathenish rites and human sacrifices*"). But in a way the telegraphic procession of images also figures the halting rhythms of the essentially indeterminate—or errant—narrative to follow. I call it errant because it radically resists monumental Aristotelian aesthetics by a splicing of disparate discourse and agendas, a quality not so much lamentable as crucial to Melville's critique of teleology.

That critique overtly enters Melville's narrative almost immediately after the exotic list quoted above, in his brief account of the Western discovery of the island group in 1595: "In the watery path of Mendanna, cruising in quest of some region of gold, these isles had sprung up like a scene of enchantment, and for a moment the Spaniard believed his bright dream was realized" (5). The Spaniard was wrong, of course, and therefore the islands were suffered to live on in undisturbed peace for a while longer. And thus, by means of including the kind of factual information he hoped would make the book acceptable to Murray, Melville problematises both the "bright dream[s]" of his narrator (and audience), and those of the missionaries—the very first Western contact with the islands is associated with disappointed expectations. In an ancient, alien world for which there are no maps, Western efforts go astray. Tommo and Toby, setting out for the edenic "lovely valley of Happar" (25; ch. 4), end up in the reputedly horrific valley of Typee (where many of their assumptions are challenged once again). On the other hand, the "heavenly errand" (5) of the missionaries is defeated by the playful, superficial and temporary nature of conversions in the Marquesas. With no clearly defined *agon*, the quest for conversions

is utterly trivialised[5]—this is particularly the case in the Tahitian islands of *Omoo*, where conversions were far more frequent (and effortless) than in the Marquesas. As romantic as anything in fiction, the missionary endeavour finds itself evaporating in the light of reality. In fact, the *fictionality* of essentially expansionist ideology is more than suggested in *Typee*, which John Seelye calls "Romantic in atmosphere, [. . .] [and] anti-romance in purpose, with an ironic emphasis on countering dreams with hard fact" (14). In one sense, Melville's fiction, in undermining and discrediting all Romantic fictions, gave John Murray precisely what he was asking for.

Early on in *Typee*—in anticipation of both the titillating and scientific aspects of his penetrative hermeneutic *Peep at Polynesian Life*—Melville fixes the idea of disrobing in the minds of his audience. He does this by means of two accounts designed to contrast the reserved prudery of the West with the spontaneous, unfettered character of the islanders:

> An intrepid missionary, undaunted by the ill-success that had attended all previous endeavours to conciliate the savages, and believing much in the efficacy of female influence, introduced among them his young and beautiful wife, the first white woman who had ever visited their shores. The islanders at first gazed in mute admiration at so unusual a prodigy, and seemed inclined to regard it as some new divinity. But after a short time, becoming familiar with its charming aspect, and jealous of the folds which encircled its form, they sought to pierce the sacred veil of calico in which it was enshrined, and in the gratification of their curiosity so far overstepped the limits of good breeding, as deeply to offend the lady's sense of decorum. Her sex once ascertained, their idolatry was changed into contempt; and there was no end to the contumely showered upon her by the savages, who were exasperated at the deception which they conceived had been practised upon them. (6; ch. 1)

This is a good example of the kind of comic tone that would have irked *Typee*'s more religious readers, for it is clear that the laugh is finally on the "intrepid missionary" (even though it is his wife who suffers the immediate consequences of his—and presumably, her own—folly). There is a particular sting in Melville's positioning of the "savages" as the aggrieved party. It suggests a disposition to look with a conciliatory eye upon "savage" antics, a disposition made doubly clear in the implied critique of naïve Eurocentrism in the absurdity of being offended when "savages" "overstep [. . .] the limits of good breeding." This is the "insidious" tone that American readers, according to Hershel Parker (*Biography* 401), recognised in the text. It is

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[5] T. Walter Herbert, in *Marquesan Encounters* (1980), has traced the hopeless efforts of the all-American "Alexander Party" in Nukuheva. "The strategems," he says, "adopted by the missionary have meaning as elements in a drama of liberation in which God's power demolishes the tyranny that holds the savage in thrall" (65). However, "the definition of civilization and savage they brought with them did not yield any effective program for the transformation of the Marquesan culture" (28). Defeated, the party beat a retreat after a few months.

further complicated by an undeniable sexual undercurrent, stressed by Tommo's identification of the wife as "young and beautiful." Figuring the comic assault as a "rape,"[6] in which the islanders "gratif[y]" themselves by "pierc[ing]" the woman's respectable front, the reader is placed in a voyeuristic position that compromises his moral integrity.

The passage also inaugurates the truly Melvillean theme of mankind's impulse to push through façades, or appearances, a theme that finds its most memorable expression in Ahab's sovereign intention to "strike through the mask" in order to get at the "unknown but still reasoning thing [. . .] behind" it (164; ch. 36). On one level, Tommo's reference to a "sacred veil" is strictly satirical, but on another, the veil represents that inscrutable surface that so many of Melville's characters hopelessly strive to penetrate, in the hope of getting in touch with the divine—a central, stabilising, ineffable Truth.

"Not thus shy of exhibiting her charms was the Island Queen herself, the beauteous wife of Mowanna, the king of Nukuheva" (7), continues Tommo in the very next paragraph, which gives an eye-witness account of a royal visit, in the company of the occupying French, to an American man-of-war. This passage, ostensibly contrasting the more casual, liberated behaviour of the Polynesians with Western prudery, actually serves to accentuate the epistemological problem from another—if more Rabelaisian—angle:

> The ship's company crowding into the gangway to view the sight, soon arrested her majesty's attention. She singled out from their number an old *salt*, whose bare arms and feet, and exposed breast were covered with as many inscriptions in India ink as the lid of an Egyptian sarcophagus. Notwithstanding all the sly hints and remonstrances of the French officers, she immediately approached the man, and pulling further open the bosom of his duck frock, and rolling up the leg of his wide trowsers, she gazed with admiration at the bright blue and vermilion pricking, thus disclosed to view. She hung over the fellow, caressing him, and expressing her delight in a variety of wild exclamations and gestures. The embarrassment of the polite Gauls at such an unlooked-for occurrence may easily be imagined; but picture their consternation, when all at once the royal lady, eager to display the hieroglyphics on her own sweet form, bent forward for a moment, and turning sharply round, threw up the skirts of her mantle, and revealed a sight from which the aghast Frenchmen retreated precipitately, and tumbling into their boat, fled the scene of so shocking a catastrophe. (8; ch. 1)

The play of allegiances is subtler here, as the tension lies not so starkly between the civilised and the primitive—there is a genial interaction between the sailors and the unaffected queen that any reader might appreciate, and the butt of the joke seems to be the humourless French, who are the undisputed villains of *Typee*. Thus, Melville cunningly prepares his reader for what may be considered improper in the text to follow: the reader may either stand on ceremony like the

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[6] See John Bryant's *Melville and Repose* (166).

French, and be forced to beat an embarrassed retreat; or, like democratic Americans, take the Polynesians for what they are.

But it is when read in conjunction with the preceding account that the focus of Tommo's tale becomes clear. Though too blatant to be effectively titillating, the queen's exposure, coupled with the white woman's disrobing, sets the voyeuristic tone that accounts for much of *Typee*'s appeal to its contemporary audience. It seems somebody is always getting undressed in the Marquesas. Similarly, it revisits the question of penetrative insight, or revelation, if you will, parodically—the queen's unintentionally bawdy action here freely reveals what previously had to be uncovered, but it does so only to present us with "hieroglyphics." While Polynesia—and specifically Typee—may at first seem to be characterised by an absence of the social masks that the West is heir to, Tommo will find that the culture of these open, naked people finally remains incomprehensible—impenetrable and inscrutable—to him. Brian Cosgrove, writing on *Moby-Dick*, has suggested that

> [i]f we now ask what it is that the word 'hieroglyphic' connotes, then we might reply that it suggests a particular kind of difficulty for the would-be interpreter. Simply put, it both invites and refutes comprehension, decipherment; or in other terms we might describe a hieroglyph as a 'degenerate' symbol which still declares itself as a carrier of ulterior meaning but presents itself as increasingly opaque, impenetrable, enigmatic. In this respect the hieroglyph, as it functions in a text like *Moby-Dick*, signals a shift from a (comparatively) naive trust (evident in Romanticism) in the symbol as guaranteed vehicle of significance, to that sense of the symbol as something suspect or unreliable (or possible vacuous) which is part of our modernity. (75)

Considered in the light of Tommo's perplexed encounter with much of Typee culture—especially the significance tattooing has within it—it seems indisputable that Melville's use of the word "hieroglyphics" in *Typee* stems from the same impulse that dictates its "obsessive" (Cosgrove 75) use in *Moby-Dick*. Ultimately, then, Melville presents the act of disrobing as a futile one. While a kind of transgressive eroticism may attend all attempts at gaining (forbidden, hidden) knowledge, ultimately the result will be either disappointment or perplexity.

The plot of *Typee*, for what it is, only really takes off in chapter 5, in which Tommo enlists a fellow sailor, Toby, in his project to escape the "tyrannical" "usage" (21; ch. 4) aboard the *Dolly* for Nukuheva's "gently rolling hill-sides" (23) and "deep and romantic glens [. . .] all apparently radiating from a common centre" (24; ch. 4). Tommo, an Emersonian "nonconformist" (Williams 87) asserting his inalienable individual rights, and Toby, an essentially Romantic type who belongs to "that class of rovers you sometimes meet at sea, who never reveal their origin, never allude to home, and go rambling over the world as if pursued by some mysterious fate they cannot possibly elude" (32; ch. 5), decide to go in search of "the lovely valley of Happar" (24).

A number of critics have read this endeavour as a search for an Eden of some or other kind, and Typee is in many ways a prelapsarian world upon which "the penalty of the Fall" (195; ch. 26)—hard work—has not yet been visited. And this search is frequently aligned with the Transcendentalist project. Thus John B. Williams argues that in *Typee* (and, to a lesser extent, *Omoo*),

> Melville's aim in representing a return to primal nature corresponds to both Emerson's plea in *Nature* for an original relation to the universe and to Thoreau's purpose in *Walden* "to front only the essential facts of life."
>
> Also, like the Transcendentalists, Melville vigorously attacks confirming usages in society that separate man from nature. Because the primitives Melville lived among have fewer arbitrary codes to hamper them than do civilized men, he ironically proclaims the superior virtues of his narrator's cannibal hosts. (81-82)

While the identification of Tommo with a rebellious Romantic hero may hold some water, a position like Williams's, which narrows the distance between Melville and his narrator, thus enlisting *him* in the Transcendentalist ranks, is untenable. As Melville structured it, Tommo's sojourn among the Typees, while certainly relativising his own Western perspective, cannot be said to bring him any nearer Thoreau's "essential facts of life."

By the time that Tommo and Toby embark on their quest, certain important matters have been established in the mind of the reader. The exotic and almost narcotic atmosphere (reminiscent of the Romantics' Orient) of the islands has been evoked; the French have been identified as the ultimate symbol of the generally degenerative, "contaminating" influence of the West (15; ch. 2);[7] the open, trusting nature of the islanders has been underlined, especially in terms of their unembarrassed sexuality; and the island's population has been divided into hostiles and allies, with the "dreaded Typees," those "lover[s] of human flesh" (24; ch. 4), identified as belonging to the former. These somewhat disparate images call into play the tensions that colour Tommo and Toby's tortuous and blind progress into what turns out to be the valley of Typee.

As is only to be expected, Tommo and Toby are faced with difficulties from the very outset—it is primarily the sheer wildness of the landscape beyond the quasi-civilised bay of Nukuheva that resists their progress. What from an idealising distance seemed paradisiacal, now requires "violent" exertions that draws blood and leaves a trail of "splintered fragments" (38; ch.

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[7] Not only the French are subjected to criticism, though. In fact, Captain David Porter, one of the leading lights in Western contact with the Marquesas, is identified as someone who committed "unprovoked atrocities" (26; ch. 4). Alluding to Tybalt's bitter comment on Romeo's gate-crashing—"this intrusion shall,/ Now seeming sweet, convert to bitterest gall" (1.5.91-2)—and ironically subverting the idea of "conversion," Tommo laments that "the instinctive feeling of love within their [the Marquesans'] breasts is soon converted into the bitterest hate" (26).

6). Unmistakably a subversion of Rousseauean idealism,[8] this is also simply a case of Tommo remaining true to the romance form—nature appears in its familiar guise as Northrop Frye's demonic "lower world" (187), which he identifies as the antagonist in romance.

Tommo's account of the journey is quite lengthy, and riddled with examples of the pain and discomfort they have to endure. It is almost wholly free of the factual and anecdotal digressions that have postponed the plot up to this point, and is therefore characterised by a much faster rhythm, which contrasts strongly with the past exhaustion of life aboard the *Dolly* and the future languor of life in Typee. Nevertheless, it is a journey full of false starts that test the desperate resolve of the two sailors. The first crisis, however, follows their discovery of a footpath that eventually leads them "to the verge of a ravine, where it abruptly terminated" (44; ch. 7). Taking their cue from this mysterious, inexplicable footpath, they descend into a hellish chasm:

> The sight that now greeted us was one that will ever be vividly impressed upon my mind. Five foaming streams, rushing through as many gorges, and swelled and turbid by the recent rains, united together in one mad plunge of nearly eighty feet, and fell with wild uproar into a deep black pool scooped out of the gloomy-looking rocks that lay piled around, and thence in one collected body dashed down a narrow sloping channel which seemed to penetrate into the very bowels of the earth. (45)

Essentially a cul-de-sac, this ravine is also figured as an entrance to hell—it threatens madness and dissolution. Spending a night in its cold recesses, Tommo confesses himself "almost unmanned" (46), and the next day, having left the ravine, he finds himself almost incapacitated by a strange swelling of the leg, and a fever, which he instantly associates with "the chasm from which we had lately emerged" (48).

Critics have proffered numerous readings of the swollen leg (though most of them have noted that the problem—which goes into remission and then returns forcefully toward the end of the book—tends to become acute whenever Tommo feels trapped in Typee). D. H. Lawrence associates the crippling affliction with Tommo's instinctual recoil from the regression implied by the return to Paradise, a recoil premised on Tommo's inescapable Western identity: "He wanted to fight. It was no good to him, the relaxation of the non-moral tropics" (*Studies* 147). For Milton R. Stern, the problem occurs as a kind of punishment of Tommo's individualism, and his attempt to escape the culture to which he is irreversibly tethered—hence, the pain figures as a "sharp

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[8] This subversion proceeds also by comedy, such as when Tommo, soaked by a downpour, ruefully "recommend[s] all adventurous youths who abandon vessel in romantic islands during the rainy season to provide themselves with umbrellas" (48; ch. 7).

awareness of his [self-effected] isolation" (*Steel* 48).[9] Sten considers it "a reminder of his alienation from the 'healthful physical existence' enjoyed by the natives of Nukuhiva" (30), shifting the charge of degeneracy to the West. For Edgar A. Dryden, the "symbolic leg" (41) is directly related to Tommo's need to escape Typee. John Bryant, again, links the problem to Tommo's insecurities: "On land, Tommo's awakening mixes pain and awe. His eye is dazzled, yet his leg throbs. The pain embodies his canebrake doubts [regarding "the uncertainty of his rebellion" (139)] and emergent sexual anxiety" (*Repose* 140). And, finally, Seelye views the problem in the light of Melville's quest-thematic: "In Melville's mythology, penetration into nature's mysteries is often rewarded by a mutilating shock, and Tommo's first peep into the valley is accompanied by the painful swelling of his leg" (16). All of these readings, with the possible exception of Seelye's, make the ailment a direct consequence of the meeting of the two cultures. But none of them satisfactorily explores Tommo's assumptions about the source of the condition, namely the chasm with its "swelled and turbid" streams, the gloomy cul-de-sac that almost defeats him. Seelye refers to the "penetration into nature's mysteries," but seems to miss the obvious fact that at this stage Tommo has not really penetrated into anything, except a dead end. And even when, some pages onward, Tommo and Toby do take a "mad [. . .] plunge" of sorts into the valley, it eventually becomes clear that they penetrate neither "into the very bowels of the earth," nor "into nature's mysteries"—for Typee is a place where Tommo is constantly confronted with impenetrable signs, a place where nature itself is voiceless, the very birds existing under "a spell of dumbness" (215; ch. 29). Altering the terminology ever so slightly, I would suggest that Tommo's psychosomatic malady is a direct result of the fear and frustration that stasis creates or evokes in a Western identity premised on progression, "the career of improvement" (29; ch. 4).

Tommo and Toby's "weary" journey (51; ch. 8) proceeds under the constant threat of dissolution. As soon as they grow hopeful of nearing some kind of end, they find their route "divided by dark ravines, extending in parallel lines at right angles to our direct course" (51). The very topography of "deep and romantic glens [. . .] apparently radiating from a common centre" (24; ch. 4) rearranges itself into a succession of parallel and identical barriers. It is here, too, that Tommo's narrative begins to strain our patience as readers, as he goes to great lengths to describe the crossing of one ravine, only to present us with another. Tommo, still labouring onward in "abhorrence [. . .] [of] a right-about retrograde movement" (54), has to admit that "with what definite object in view it would have been impossible [. . .] to tell" (54). Repetition

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[9] Faith Pullin reiterates this reading of "Tommo's crippling sense of alienation" (11).

clouds the object of the quest, and casts an absurd shadow on the mindless forward exertions. The only alternative that presents itself is the "mad [. . .] plunge" from which Tommo retreated before—a "vertical journey" (61; ch. 9) during which Tommo, shaking and snapping off "long roots" that "fell in fragments against the side of the gulf" (61), essentially enacts a mythical fall which effectively severs him from the world he has left behind. He has reached Eden, but he is trapped.

The valley of Typee may not be the Eden the two questers set out to reach, but it is Eden nonetheless. Tommo and Toby's very first contact with the inhabitants of the valley is in fact a contact with an iconographic tableau featuring Adam and Eve:

> They were a boy and a girl, slender and graceful, and completely naked, with the exception of a slight girdle of bark, from which depended at opposite points two of the russet leaves of the bread-fruit tree. (68; ch. 10)

The world they enter is a somnolent world in which there is no need for work, "no Money" (126; ch. 17), and no (internal) strife. The Typees are characterised by their health and beauty, and they do not exist in a state of competition with animals, of which there are no "wild" ones (212; ch. 29)—even the lizards (like the birds) are "perfectly tame and insensible to fear" (211). And finally, the Typees are all free from shame regarding their bodies and their sexuality.

The "uniform and undiversified life" (149; ch. 20) of the Typees is as close as earthly living can get to Eden, and Tommo knows this. When he accepts it—some time after Toby's mysterious disappearance—his "limb suddenly heal[s]" (123; ch. 17). Now,

> [w]hen I looked around the verdant recess in which I was buried, and gazed up to the summits of the lofty eminence that hemmed me in, I was well disposed to think that I was in the "Happy Valley," and that beyond those heights there was nought but a world of care and anxiety. (124)

Tommo is Samuel Johnson's Rasselas[10] with his restlessness momentarily cured, or suppressed. Still, we notice his use of the words "buried" and "hemmed me in," which clearly indicate that Tommo is not finally resigned to life in the "Happy Valley"—to him it must remain a death in life. He cannot endure "the quantity of sleep they [the Typees] can endure" (152; ch. 20). It is the Pacific sleep that D. H. Lawrence identified as central to Tommo's sense of revulsion in *Typee*

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[10] In fact, the very reference to the "Happy Valley" in *Rasselas*, which once again serves as a reminder of the fact that Melville also had fictional models in mind while he wrote *Typee*, recalls Johnson's dismissal of happiness as a temporally attainable ideal. As the opening lines of *Rasselas* make clear, Johnson to some extent set out to disabuse of their illusions those "who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the deficiencies of today will be supplied by the morrow" (1).

(*Studies* 141). And this static world that threatens Tommo's Occidental consciousness also threatens his narrative—Eden simply does not make for good reading. Melville is forced to place his narrator in an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the Typees—admiring of their culture, but fearful of its implications for him. These "implications" are figured in the two-pronged fear of assimilation that assails Tommo from time to time (especially after Toby disappears): the fear of being cannibalised and the fear of permanent conversion by being tattooed. Thus the narrative to some extent resists and contradicts its edenic subject matter. There is a very good reason why quest-narratives do not proceed beyond the attainment of the goal, namely that an ideal state is a static one; representing it must result either in a loss of audience or, conversely, in the discovery of cracks in the monolithic façade. As Bryan C. Short suggests,

> [i]n order to cast the valley in a Romantic light, Tommo exaggerates groundless dangers [. . .]. Without Tommo's "most dismal forebodings," the Edenic harmony of Typee valley would lose the Romantic coloring which keeps it from having the soporific effect of the sea. The world of Typee valley is presented ironically so as to provide a theater for the exercise of a heightened rhetoric designed to save Melville from muteness, the past, the neoclassic values of [eighteenth-century rhetorician, Hugh] Blair. (27)

The "muteness" Short sees Melville's rhetoric as countering is essentially the same stasis that threatens Tommo. The introduction of Western Tommo into Eden immediately calls into being a set of tensions. Melville may well have wanted to give the Polynesians a voice against Western expansionism, and focused on a laudatory Rousseauean account of unspoilt Typee life, but his romance demanded that his narrator be threatened. Thus, flying in the face of his own humanistic advocacy, Tommo hints at matters more nefarious—debauchery, tattooing, and cannibalism. It is especially with regard to cannibalism that we can clearly see the contradictions in Tommo's position: after spending many pages down-playing the evils of cannibalism, he exploits its horrifying possibilities to the utmost towards the end of his narrative. His earlier excuses and justifications appear now as only so much liberal talk—now, liberal idealism is measured against stark, physical reality, and found untenable.[11] Tommo stands contradicted. Eden turns out to be a labyrinth after all.

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[11] One is reminded of the criticism Melville levelled at one of his literary heroes, Goethe, in a June 1851 letter to Hawthorne:

> In reading some of Goethe's sayings, so worshipped by his votaries, I came across this, "*Live in the all.*" That is to say, your separate identity is but a wretched one,—good; but get out of yourself, spread and expand yourself, and bring to yourself the tinglings of life that are felt in the flowers and the woods, that are felt in the planets Saturn and Venus, and the Fixed Stars. What nonsense! Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. "My dear boy," Goethe says to him, "you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must *live in the all*, and then you will be happy!" (*C* 193)

Whether Melville—caught between two authorial impulses—was being helplessly pulled towards self-contradiction (as some critics, pointing out the aesthetic flaws of the book, have argued), or whether he recognised the opportunity to subvert his own narrator's idealism by making it run the gauntlet of experience, cannot now be established with certainty. But it seems arguable that Melville divined the implications of what he was doing. *Typee* is strangely coherent in its critique of teleological pursuits, without being insensitive to the human impulse, and Western need, for it. And one of the central ways in which this critique is pursued is in examining the problem of "reading"—Tommo's anthropological and hermeneutic pursuit dramatises the will to knowledge that led to man's banishment from Eden in the first place.

The narrative of *Typee* develops in terms of a Bataillean logic of pyramidical (or monumental) moments, "sacred" or "privileged instant[s]" ("Sacred" 241), when the labyrinthine journey is momentarily suspended, and something like a compositional peak is attained. For Tommo, "[t]here are no roads of any kind in the valley—nothing but a labyrinth of foot-paths twisting and turning among the thickets without end" (194; ch. 26). But Tommo's narrative—once he reaches the valley—does not become a mere account of aimless wanderings. There are encounters with ostensibly significant events or structures, moments in which the landscape composes itself into something that invites a reading (although Tommo often finds his attempts at reading repulsed). Such moments, in asserting their significance also on the level of narrative, invites the reader's thematising gaze, becoming landmark sites of reading. These are the infinitely quotable passages that support the critical, analytical venture; those moments when the text is aesthetically and thematically constituted, suggesting itself as an object of hermeneutic endeavour.

One such moment occurs in the well-known chapter 24, in Tommo's account of what he calls "the mausoleum of a deceased warrior chief," which, "[l]ike all the other edifices of any note, [. . .] was raised upon a small pi-pi of stones, which, being of unusual height, was a conspicuous object from a distance" (171). The construct—built next to a stream—rises from the labyrinthine world of the valley and the taboo (the perplexing system that grants meaning to everything that horrifies Tommo, from cannibalism to tattooing) as a structure that he can name with some confidence. This construct even imparts a compositional quality to its immediate surroundings—"a growth of palms, which stood ranged in order along both banks of the stream," suddenly find themselves "waving their green arms as if to do honor to its passage" (171). Nature itself is accommodated and subjected at the site of reading:

> The place was sacred. The sign of the inscrutable taboo was seen in the shape of a mystic roll of white tappa, suspended by a twisted cord of the same material from the top of a slight pole planted within the enclosure. The sanctity of the spot appeared never

> to have been violated. The stillness of the grave was there, and the calm solitude around was beautiful and touching [. . .].
>
> On all sides as you approached this silent spot you caught sight of the dead chief's effigy, seated in the stern of a canoe, which was raised on a light frame a few inches above the level of the pi-pi. The canoe was about seven feet in length; of a rich, dark colored wood, handsomely carved and adorned in many places with variegated bindings of stained sinnate, into which were ingeniously wrought a number of sparkling sea-shells, and a belt of the same shells ran all around it. The body of the figure—of whatever material it might have been made—was effectually concealed in a heavy robe of brown tappa, revealing only the hands and head; the latter skilfully carved in wood, and surmounted by a superb arch of plumes. These plumes, in the subdued and gentle gales which found access to this sequestered spot, were never for one moment at rest, but kept nodding and waving over the chief's brow. The long leaves of the palmetto drooped over the eaves, and through them you saw the warrior holding his paddle with both hands in the act of rowing, leaning forward and inclining his head, as if eager to hurry on his voyage. Glaring at him for ever, and face to face, was a polished human skull, which crowned the prow of the canoe. The spectral figure-head, reversed in its position, glancing backwards, seemed to mock the impatient attitude of the warrior. (171-72)

The "sacred" construct becomes, for Tommo, one more site at which the frequently inscrutable Marquesan culture might be read with some success. Here, in spite of the taunting presence of the sign of the taboo, is an opportunity to expose something of the encrypted meaning he feels so isolated from. In a footnote to the "roll of white tappa," the narrator provisionally explains that "White appears to be the sacred color among the Marquesans" (172). Working from this premise, white momentarily ceases to be the confounding blankness that denies any reading. Instead, it becomes a surface to write upon. The same goes for the silence, which usually signifies impenetrability, a universe void of meaning, as in the deaf and dumb woman at the end of the second "Fragment." Here, the silence allows the narrator to speak, and his voice, significantly, turns objective and analytical, scientific.

As in the so-called factual passages of the book, much is made, in this passage, of measurements, dimensions and materials. Such attention to facts and phenomena is what characterises scientific discourse and is meant to guarantee its objectivity. In order to validate his interpretation of the "mausoleum," the narrator adopts an anthropological language, replete with confessions of any gaps in his system of verifiable facts (such as his uncertainty regarding the material from which the effigy's body is made). Such honest, inquisitive attention to detail lays the solid foundational "pi-pi" for the deductive speculations that follow in the next passage. In terms of scientific logic, the "sequestered spot" becomes a representational specimen from which the principles that inform the whole may yet be deduced. It is a way in, past the inscrutable phenomenal face of Marquesan culture.

But straightaway—if obliquely—Melville exposes a conjectural impulse creeping into the objective observation. Anticipating his own interpretation of a questing spirit, Tommo's eyes lock on the plumes—sprouting from the head like thoughts made manifest—which, like his own thoughts, "were never for a moment at rest." Sensing an opportunity to counter the stasis of his life in the valley and his imperfect understanding of the taboo—for here the very construction itself works against the chaos of the labyrinth—Tommo begins to manifest action. The static effigy is seen to be "in the act of rowing," and is suddenly awakened to Western emotional life when Tommo imagines him to be "eager to hurry on his voyage." By this stage the objectivity of Tommo's observation has been completely undercut. By the time we reach the description of the skull we are privy to very little beyond Tommo's own ontological and psychological wrestlings: "The spectral figure-head [. . .] *seemed to mock* the *impatient attitude* of the warrior." We are left with a parody of anthropological observation.

When Tommo actually begins to explore the possible significance of the effigy, Melville extends the epistemological problematic by the inclusion of Kory-Kory's mediated views:

> When I first visited this singular place with Kory-Kory, he told me—or at least so I understood him—that the chief was paddling his way to the realms of bliss, and bread-fruit—the Polynesian heaven—where every moment the bread-fruit trees dropped their ripened spheres to the ground, and where there was no end to the cocoa-nuts and bananas: there they were reposed through the livelong eternity upon mats much finer than those of Typee; and every day bathed their glowing limbs in rivers of cocoa-nut oil. In that happy land there were plenty of plumes and feathers, and boars'-tusks and sperm-whale teeth, far preferable to all the shining trinkets and gay tappa of the white men; and, best of all, women far lovelier than the daughters of earth were there in abundance. "A very pleasant place," Kory-Kory said it was; "but after all, not much pleasanter, he thought, than Typee." "Did he not then," I asked him, "wish to accompany the warrior?" "Oh, no: he was very happy where he was; but supposed that some time or other he would go in his own canoe."
>
> Thus far, I think, I clearly comprehended Kory-Kory. But there was a singular expression he made use of at the time, enforced by as singular a gesture, the meaning of which I would have given much to penetrate [. . .].
>
> Could it have been then, that when I asked him whether he desired to go to this heaven of bread-fruit, cocoa-nuts, and young ladies, which he had been describing, he answered by saying something equivalent to our old adage—"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush?"—if he did, our Kory-Kory was a discreet and sensible fellow, and I cannot sufficiently admire his shrewdness. (172-73)

Tommo's first hermeneutical encounter with the place is qualified and problematised from the outset. Kory-Kory is brought on stage in order to comment authoritatively on the significance of the effigy, when Tommo has often stressed the fact that he cannot really understand the Typee language. In fact, there are numerous qualifications here of Tommo's understanding. Then also, Kory-Kory's authority regarding monuments has been called into question but a few chapters

earlier, when Tommo chances "upon a scene which reminded me of Stonehenge and the architectural labors of the Druid" (154; ch. 21):

> Kory-Kory, who was my authority in all matters of scientific research, gave me to understand that they were coeval with the creation of the world; that the great gods themselves were the builders; and that they would endure until time shall be no more. Kory-Kory's prompt explanation, and his attributing the work to a divine origin, at once convinced me that neither he nor the rest of his countrymen knew anything about them.
>
> As I gazed upon this monument, doubtless the work of an extinct and forgotten race, thus buried in the green nook of an island at the ends of the earth, the existence of which was yesterday unknown, a stronger feeling of awe came over me than if I had stood musing at the mighty base of the Pyramid of Cheops. There are no inscriptions, no sculpture, no clue, by which to conjecture its history: nothing but the dumb stones. How many generations of those majestic trees which overshadow them have grown and flourished and decayed since first they were erected! (154-155)

Modern research, placing the construction of the monument at 400 years previous to Tommo's encounter with them, disagrees with both him and Kory-Kory. But the passage is interesting specifically for its stark contrast of Western and "savage" paradigms. For Kory-Kory, the presence of the imposing structure does not rupture his unwavering felicity. He simply slots it into his theology—to the chagrin of Tommo, who cannot accept what he perceives as a glib side-stepping of a scientific puzzle. Yet he does not fare much better. His own ready theory is no less arbitrary and unfounded than Kory-Kory's, and does nothing to stave off the subjectivity of a "strong [. . .] feeling of awe." The "scientific research" turns into "musing" as Tommo once more comes face to face with the inscrutable, in the guise of "dumb stones." Here, the promise of a pyramidical moment is not met—without "a clue," there is no way of leaving the labyrinth.

This is not quite what happens in the later passage, for here Kory-Kory, for all the qualifications, is apparently taken at his word. His explanation of the effigy seems to support Tommo's earlier conjectures, although we have to keep in mind that we are dealing with Tommo's translation of that explanation. We become acutely aware of Tommo's mediation (as we do when he fails to mediate satisfactorily), a "problem" further complicated by the persistence of a comic tone, especially with regard to the impenetrable "singular expression" Kory-Kory utters. The humour ruptures the illusion of scientific integrity in Tommo's deductions—it does not function integratively, does nothing to settle the reader's interpretative discomfort. As Bryant has pointed out, Tommo's eventual interpretation of Kory-Kory's impenetrable "expression" goes astray—"the impact on the reader of this anticlimax undermines the profundity of island repose" (*Repose* 176).

Of course, it is this very "island repose"—the fact that Kory-Kory, like all Typees, "was very happy where he was"—that Tommo cannot fathom. Such incomprehension leads either to comedy or despair, and in *Typee*, Melville frequently opts for the former. But ultimately

Tommo's sanity hinges on finding echoes of his own restlessness in the landscape around him, and this is why he finds himself drawn to the effigy:

> Whenever in the course of my rambles through the valley I happened to be near the chief's mausoleum, I always turned aside to visit it. The place had a peculiar charm for me; I hardly know why; but so it was. As I leaned over the railing and gazed upon the strange effigy and watched the play of the feathery head-dress, stirred by the same breeze which in low tones breathed amidst the lofty palm-trees, I loved to yield myself up to the fanciful superstition of the islanders, and could almost believe that grim warrior was bound heavenward. In this mood when I turned to depart, I bade him "God speed, and a pleasant voyage." Aye, paddle away, brave chieftain, to the land of spirits! To the material eye thou makest but little progress; but with the eye of faith, I see thy canoe cleaving the bright waves, which die away on those dimly looming shores of Paradise.
>
> This strange superstition affords another evidence of the fact, that however ignorant man may be, he still feels within him his immortal spirit yearning after the unknown future. (173)

The primitive, alien monument becomes, for Tommo, a reconstitutive site—a pyramidical construct in which the disparate angles of his disorienting adventure are allowed to converge momentarily. Here he can maintain an illusion of sympathetic understanding, between him and the rower, and the implicit Typee "yearning" that the construction manifests. The visits are a ritual act to stave off insanity and dissolution; they function as a talismanic "charm" against assimilation by the labyrinth. Appropriately, scientific language modulates into Romantic diction. While reference is made to the "fanciful superstition of the islanders," it is more than clear to the reader that he is witnessing Tommo's Romantic "creative and perceiving consciousness" (Chai xi) at work, the effigy figuring Tommo's need to escape the Typeean land of flesh for some ideal "land of spirits." Looking now, not with the "material eye," but with the creative, Transcendentalist[12] "eye of faith" (an eye he patronisingly suppresses and rejects at the "ancient" monument of stone, as well as at Kolory's later conference with the wooden idol, Moa Artua), he sees the rower striving and yearning for a distant Paradise. As Bryant puts it,

> Tommo's sentence structure clearly indicates that he shifts not only from material eye to spiritual eyes, but from Kory-Kory's to his own. It is *he*, not the native, who sees with the "eye of faith." Thus the crucial point of *native* spirituality is lost on Tommo's increasingly skeptical audience. (*Repose* 176-77)

Tommo's status as anthropologist is completely undermined. "This strange superstition" that he deems "evidence" of teleological yearning—especially when measured against Kory-Kory's happy acceptance of his life in the valley—is much more Western than Polynesian, after all. Obliquely, Melville criticises the Western quest for ideal, for Paradise, as the result of a "strange

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[12] "The idealist, in speaking of events, sees them as spirits. He does not deny the sensuous fact: by no means; but he will not see that alone" (Emerson, "Transcendentalist" 240)

superstition." In Tommo and Kory-Kory's encounter with the effigy, finally, Melville explores the inescapability of Leon Chai's Romantic "creative and perceiving consciousness." Here it becomes the source of an absurd postponement of knowledge—an implicit critique of what Melville would later come to know as the Emersonian "self-dependent" idealist, who "takes his [cognitive] departure from his consciousness, and reckons the world an appearance" ("Transcendentalist" 242, 241). Ultimately, like the mysterious monument of stone, "[t]he mummy is an early version of the multi-interpretive 'doubloon' in *Moby-Dick*" (Bryant, *Repose* 176), insisting that no two people looking will see the same thing. Tommo's account is of an encounter of his own Occidental consciousness meeting "savage" consciousness, teleological perception contrasted—knowingly and patronisingly—with primitive absence of will. Kory-Kory, like those contented spirits in Dante's *Paradiso* (whose own free will becomes subsumed by the unifying will of God[13]), cannot yearn for anything else—there is no injunction to move elsewhere, because things cannot really get any better. For Tommo, however, the effigy signifies a persistent ontological yearning for ideality, a yearning which is, at the same time, utterly defiant of the grim realities of the mortal condition. Death haunts, or "tasks" (*MD* 164; ch. 36), Tommo in ways to which Kory-Kory must remain oblivious. The grinning, mocking skull does not fix the rower, imaginatively speaking, but instead elicits a determined, defiant pursuit. Like Ahab, Tommo's rower hopelessly strives to gain the ever-ungraspable face of mortality, the border of known human experience, and to penetrate and strike through it, in order to get at absolute principles.

Tommo may find some consolation in visiting the effigy, but he increasingly realises that he must remain an outsider. It is immediately after the account of the effigy—which so hopelessly attempts to introduce, or mediate, Typee spiritual life—that Tommo turns to a religious ceremony concerning a small wooden idol, Moa Artua, "the 'crack' god of the island" (175; ch. 24), and the "soldier-priest" (174) Kolory. While Kolory's ritual acts with the god divert his audience exceedingly, Tommo once more finds himself alienated by his Western perspective. Charged to speak by Kolory, the idol remains quiet: "But the baby-god is deaf or dumb,—perhaps both, for never a word does he utter" (175). Though here the object of comic observation, Moa Artua anticipates Pierre's desperate conclusion that "Silence is the only Voice of our God" (*P* 204; bk. 14, ch. 1). Similarly, in Tommo's applying the "material eye" to a

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[13] This unifying will finds expression here as the "unanimity of feeling" (203; ch. 27) among the islanders.

Typeean ritual, Melville expresses a more general suspicion of those who manage to get a voice from silence.

After being punished for his recalcitrance, Moa Artua apparently communicates something into Kolory's ear. Tommo begins to suspect "a vile humbug" on the part of Kolory (176), a suspicion that we have reason to apply to Tommo, who has but a few pages earlier been extracting a voice from the "silent spot" in which the effigy stands.

At length, Tommo is forced to make a confession that casts suspicion on all his statements regarding Typee:

> For my own part, although hardly a day passed while I remained upon the island that I did not witness some religious ceremony or other, it was very much like seeing a parcel of "Freemasons" making secret signs to each other; I saw everything, but could comprehend nothing. (177)

In the end, Typee culture remains impenetrable, and Tommo's anthropology fails. So does Eden. Increasingly, Tommo begins, once more, to feel himself "a stranger" (216; ch. 29), while, simultaneously, resisting assimilation. Nowhere is this resistance against belonging dramatised as clearly as in Tommo's refusal to be tattooed. Surely being tattooed makes no difference if you are not moving along (as is the case with *Omoo*'s Lem Hardy); but then Tommo was always going to be moving along. Fearing that he may "never more [. . .] have the *face* to return to my countrymen" (219; ch. 30), Tommo's need to escape becomes acute. His narrative begins to reflect something of this panic, as he begins to list, almost willy-nilly, some instances in which "the talismanic word 'Taboo' [had been] shrieked in my ears" (221). The tension between romance and anthropology also grows stronger, the text less unified or integrated, as the reader has to swallow Tommo's continued commentary on aspects of Typee culture, in the face of his growing fear for his own safety:

> Sadly discursive as I have already been, I must still further entreat the reader's patience, as I am about to string together, without any attempt at order, a few odds and ends of things not hitherto mentioned, but which are either curious in themselves or peculiar to the Typees. (226; ch. 31)

As Tommo's sense of Eden finally disintegrates, so does his anthropological system—the fragmenting narrative figuring the fragmenting world we are "re-entering." Tommo's "painful malady" returns (232; ch. 32), and suddenly the horrors of cannibalism are pushed to the fore, eradicating all of his carefully structured mitigating arguments. For Tommo, there is no greater horror now than having his "inanimate form [. . .] blended with the dust of the valley" (243; ch. 33). At this point, then, it becomes difficult to credit Bruce L. Grenberg's reading of the intentions of *Typee*'s author:

> Christian, Western culture and heathen, Polynesian naturism do form the poles of Melville's experience and mentality in *Typee*, but rather than play one off against the

> other, Melville sets himself the task of wedding the two and putting them to rest in harmonious felicity. (9)

No such "wedding" takes place in *Typee*. Tommo's Western consciousness precludes any possibility of his acceptance of static edenic life, no matter how sympathetic he might be toward it in theory. In practice, Tommo must recoil in horror from any attempt on the part of the Typees to "wed" him. In this regard, cannibalism—according to Frye, a "demonic parody" of "the Eucharist symbolism of the apocalyptic world" (148)—may well be viewed as the "demonic parody of marriage, or the union of two souls into one flesh" (Frye 149). Tommo has to flee if he is to preserve his tenuous, threatened individuality.

It is in this state that Tommo posits a new goal—"Home" and "Mother" (248; ch. 34), idealised by nostalgia. Melville shows how past events acquire positive colourings right at the outset of *Omoo*, when Tommo/Typee suddenly laments the loss of the paradisiacal valley. Distance reconstitutes the idealised vision—moving closer betrays the cracks and ultimately fragments the vision. But in spite of his yearning for "Home" and "Mother," Tommo does not aim straight for them once he has made good his escape. The logical result of his experience in Typee is a more aimless form of wandering, less concerned with the absolutes that stand central to the quest-romance.

I have argued that Melville set out to write a romance in *Typee*, but perhaps it is not so important to establish precisely what he set out to do when he tackled his first book. What is more important is to consider what he ended up doing, and what he learned from his experience. I would suggest that by the end of *Typee*, Melville had a sense of what his major theme as author would be, namely the critique of the teleological quest, of a redemptive, resolvent, or apocalypic narrative aesthetics which, in the words of the narrator of *Pierre*, merely aims to "complacently clear [. .] up at last" all auto-constructed mysteries, instead of confronting the reader with the "unravelable inscrutableness of God" (141; bk. 7, ch. 8). In *Typee* he had seen how his diverse interests—in adventure, cultures, semiotics, science, ideology—could be explored by means of a heterogeneous text, which incorporated diverse discourses and played them off against each other, an approach that would eventually result in the radical narrative of *Moby-Dick*. He had employed and undermined the conventions of (factual) travel narrative and romance alike, and showed the failure of the will to knowledge. Now he leaned, almost instinctively, toward that anti-romance form, the picaresque, to pursue his critique further in his next book, *Omoo*.

Contemporary critics of *Omoo* seem not to have considered the book as an example of picaresque. As Ellen Turner Gutiérrez has pointed out,

> [t]he nineteenth century was a time of optimism, calculated progress, and respectability, when the concept of a picaresque marginality in literature was itself marginal; consequently, there was no literary stimulus for a critical evaluation of the picaresque. (73)

Hence, critics praised or criticised Melville's style without relating it to an inherited genre. Positive reviewers noted the "genial flow of humor," the "enthusiasm," and "richly good-natured style," while negative reviewers focused on the satirical and immoral aspects, the "cool, sneering wit" or "personal blackguardism" of the narrator/author (all qtd. in Robertson-Lorant 156-57).

Since these first critics, however, the suggestion that *Omoo* has picaresque qualities has become a judgement almost wholly unattended by controversy. Critics as chronologically distant as D. H. Lawrence (1923) and Christopher Sten (1996) have come to the same conclusion. However, accompanying this classification has been a tendency to view *Omoo* as a work of lesser importance than *Typee*. Thus, wedged between Melville's first lengthy prose fiction and the experimental, highly ambitious *Mardi* (which looks forward to the canonical *Moby-Dick*), *Omoo* often appears as so much filler, a postponement of genius. Merlin Bowen, for instance, in *The Long Encounter* (1960), glosses over *Typee* and *Omoo* as "novels [. . .] relatively unconcerned with the complexities of the world within" (15), and continues to suggest that "[o]f the two, the more superficial by far is the second—*Omoo*, a rambling picaresque travelogue" (15). Seelye echoes this view when he suggests that

> *Omoo* has all the liabilities of a sequel. Perhaps the most light-hearted of Melville's novels, it is also the most formless—a picaresque ramble which lacks the structural elements associated with his other works [. . .]. If there is a quest, it is the generalized motive of the tourist, not the infatuated search of the romantic quester. (29)

Thus Seelye dismisses *Omoo* for lacking form, and for lacking a form-giving (and Romantic) "infatuated search," apparently ignoring the fact that *Omoo* is as relevant to Melville's engagement with teleological thought as anything else he wrote.

More recent critics have argued for the interest of *Omoo*, and have explored how familiar Melvillean themes operate in the earlier books, but most have treated the issue of its picaresque qualities as an almost incidental feature of the text—a text still mainly considered to be a travelogue.[14] Sten has convincingly argued for *Omoo* as a coherent example of the picaresque

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[14] In his "Historical Note" to the Northwestern-Newberry edition of *Omoo*, Gordon Roper reckons that Melville set out to provide Murray with "a solid travel book" (327), even though earlier he identifies the book as "more picaresque" (320) than *Typee*. This seems to ignore the distinction between the travel narrative and the picaresque narrative. The former lacks the ideological charge of the latter, which is actively anti-romantic. One does not expect linear resolution in travel narrative, but in its stead one does expect a certain degree of cultural elucidation, a description and revelation of that which is unfamiliar and unknown. Travel narratives are meant to give insight into

form—and for Melville's conscious appropriation of that form—but does not adequately explain *why* the form might have suggested itself to Melville, or might have been the most suitable to his themes (his Melville emerges as something of a dabbler in fictional forms).

Having to some extent shown us—in *Typee*—the relativising effects of life among the more or less unspoilt Polynesians, Melville's interest shifts to the general effect of the meeting of cultures, also on Westerners. "Nowhere, perhaps, are the proverbial characteristics of sailors shown under wilder aspects, than in the South Seas" (*O* xiii), he announces in the "Preface," as though warning us that we are about to run through an endless catalogue of the indiscretions committed by "reckless seamen" (xiii). This does not quite happen, but the tone is set—in *Omoo*, the subject is far less imbued with romance than in *Typee*. For Melville, "it is, partly, the object of this work to convey some idea of the kind of life to which allusion is made, by means of a circumstantial history of adventures befalling the author" (xiii). The narrative is infiltrated by a haphazard, "circumstantial" structure that resists a focal point and instead proceeds merely by episodes, or "adventures." The protagonist is denied control of his journey—adventures "befall" him.

Here, already, we have the essence of the picaresque situation, encapsulated perfectly by Melville's choice of title:

> The title of the work—Omoo—is borrowed from the dialect of the Marquesas Islands, where, among other uses, the word signifies a rover, or rather, a person wandering from one island to another, like some of the natives, known among their countrymen as "Taboo kannakers." (xiv)

It may be of significance that the title, which clearly refers to the narrator, is brought along from his late experiences in the Marquesas, insofar as those experiences logically result in a disillusionment with ideals and attainment (stasis). In a similar way, the narrator is known to his shipmates as "Typee"—as he later explains, most sailors were called by "the name of the place from which they hailed" (74; ch. 20)—hence, his identity is associated with and related to his sojourn in that valley. "Home" and "Mother," those mainstays of his identity that he longed for in captivity, have now completely disappeared. In fact, the narrator's original identity grows ever more distant—we have never known his true name, and Tommo, the name which he and the Typees reached by compromise (*T* 72; ch. 10), has already been discarded. Thus, in *Omoo*, we

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their subject matter. The fictional picaresque narrative, on the other hand, might be reduced to a pure succession of episodes. By calling *Omoo* "a *solid* travel book," Roper seems to suggest that Melville's focus lay not with fiction but with fact, a suggestion I find untenable.

become less and less certain of who precisely our narrator is, something that contributes to what is already a marginal position:

> Melville's title for the new work adequately signifies how firmly he had chosen to entrench himself in the marginal perspective [. . .]. Melville's refusal to yield to the canons of civilized respectability forms part of the larger intellectual adventure of his works, as does his increasing refusal to accept the public demand that romance be kept free of ethical and philosophical probings. (Herbert, *Encounters* 189-90)

To some extent that "demand" is circumvented by the sheer fact that *Omoo* veers away from romance, placing the reader in less certain waters. From the beginning, there is something more irresolute about the world Typee re-enters, a sense that is intensified by the extended action on the sea:

> [W]ith the same pale blue sky overhead, we kept running steadily to the westward. Forever advancing, we seemed always in the same place, and every day was the former lived over again. We saw no ships, expected to see none. No sign of life was perceptible but the porpoises and other fish sporting under the bows like pups ashore. But, at intervals, the gray albatros, peculiar to these seas, came flapping his immense wings over us, and then skimmed away silently as if from a plague-ship. Or flights of the tropic bird, known among seamen as the "boatswain," wheeled round and round us, whistling shrilly as they flew.
>
> The uncertainty hanging over our destination at this time, and the fact that we were abroad upon waters comparatively little traversed, lent an interest to this portion of the cruise which I shall never forget. (34-35; ch. 9)

Evoking the same sky he did in the opening paragraph of *Typee*, the narrator proceeds to create a somewhat different mood aboard the *Julia*, his current ship. Where conditions aboard the *Dolly* were initially defined by exhaustion following their economic quest upon "the Line," the mood here is essentially lethargic. Travelling across unfamiliar waters, the ship seems to proceed without any clear purpose. Typee here creates a haunting atmosphere, evoking the cursed ship in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," which for a time remains banished from the shore. What distinguishes this life from that lived in Typee valley—apart from the obvious absence of fresh fruit and "Naked houris" (*T* 3; ch. 1)—is the fact that the ship is "[f]orever advancing." There is nothing here of the Typees' maddening contentedness. Instead, we have the restless picaro's aimless "advance," which inevitably becomes implicated in nature's cycles, so that "every day was the former lived over again."

The picaresque situation is heightened by two significant pieces of information. Firstly, the *Julia* to some extent sails onward without the benefit of a captain. The ship is under command of the alcoholic first mate, Jermin; the captain being incapacitated by both his inexperience and an illness. Typee goes to some length to inform his reader of the captain's unsuitability for his position. "He was quite a young man, pale and slender, more like a sickly counting-house clerk than a bluff sea-captain" (6; ch. 1) and "in no wise competent" (10; ch. 2),

we are told upon first introduction, and in time he is reduced to "a mere cipher" (47; ch. 12). The situation aboard the *Julia* differs greatly from that aboard the *Dolly*—while there, the narrator's complaint stemmed from the captain's "tyrannical" usage (*T* 21; ch. 4), here the problem lies in the captain's ineffectuality, his absence. The *Julia*, then, does not sail under proper direction and authority, in spite of Jermin's undisputed "seamanship" (*O* 11; ch. 2).

Also of significance is the deteriorated condition of the ship itself. She is introduced as a "slatternly looking craft" (5; ch. 1) with a "free, roving commission" and, Typee points out, is "not to be confided in" (10; ch. 2). Thus, the ship's character is invested with something of the nature of the roguish picaro, cast adrift. With "bulwarks [. . .] rotten" (9) and a greater degree of leakage than other ships, the *Julia* is effectively also closer to that threatening, dissolute, demonic lower order—or the void—represented by the sea.

It is safe to say that it is in *Omoo* that Melville truly begins to sense the symbolic force of the sea, which would come to play so central a role in most of his books. Early on in *Omoo*, the sea is associated with death in Melville's rendering of a burial of two of Typee's shipmates. "A bubble or two, and nothing more was seen" (45; ch. 12), is Typee's disconcertingly clipped comment, which also reintroduces the idea of inscrutability. For in Melville, the sea remains the ultimate unsolvable mystery, both labyrinth and void. Thus Typee, standing aboard a ship "heading right out into the immense blank of the Western Pacific" (33; ch. 9), cannot help but succumbing to a reflective mood: "On such a night, and all alone, revery was inevitable. I leaned over the side, and could not help thinking of the strange objects we might be sailing over" (33). This is precisely the kind of reverie against which Ishmael warns in "The Mast-Head," in which the "unconscious reverie" upon the "inscrutable tides of God" (*MD* 159) results in an annihilating plunge into it. The sea remains that impenetrable ontological blank that serves as the backdrop to all human endeavours, and by which they are all finally relativised.

The position of the rover, or picaro, as developed by Melville, is characterised by its liminality. From the outset, *Omoo* proposes to present lives that move along borders, both in its focus on sailors—whose "proverbial characteristics" are here "shown under wilder aspects"—and in its focus on "the present condition of the converted Polynesians, as affected by their promiscuous intercourse with foreigners, and the teachings of the missionaries, combined" (xiii). The sailor is identified as a kind of orphan,[15] someone whose bonds with home, and civilization, have grown

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[15] At the burial of his shipmates, Typee remarks: "Behold here the fate of a sailor! They give him the last toss, and no one asks whose child he was" (46; ch. 12).

tenuous. In a sense, the sailor is related most closely to the American frontiersman, the morally ambiguous pioneer who has freed himself from a European past and has set out to extend and consolidate the American hegemony. Such figures are disconcerting because, although they extend the reach of a given ideology, they, like the frontier itself, cannot be easily accommodated by it. The world they inhabit is a world of flux, which infects them with its ambiguous air. Melville's contemporary detractors were keenly aware of this, and therefore used his narrator's disreputable position to invalidate his critique of the civilising process.

The essence of Typee's critique of this process lies in showing that it must inevitably succumb to the ambiguities that forever plague the frontier. No matter how pure its intentions, this quest cannot achieve what it set out to do without essentially annihilating "the Other." As a result, the agents of this civilising and Christianising process must themselves inevitably succumb to the ambiguities of their position, or must grow reactionary, becoming fastidious, mean-spirited individuals who do not negotiate across borders, but simply stamp out difference.[16] Either way, the moral purity of the ideal is utterly compromised. Therefore we must keep in mind that while Typee and his crony, Doctor Long Ghost, undoubtedly do, as Sten claims, "maintain their independence socially and politically, at the margins of the dominant culture" (48), that dominant culture has itself grown subject to flux—instability—at the frontier, and the two Western rovers are also representative of that relativising process, even as they distance themselves from the more fundamental perspective. That said, Typee's position certainly is more radical (and his narrative more errant) than that of his former "peers," a fact that he dramatises at least twice in *Omoo*, in the ill-fated attempts to extend "a courteous salute" (167; ch. 43) to Western ladies. In the case of Mrs Bell, she simply charges away on her horse (295; ch. 78), and in the case of the mother and daughter, the result is a spectacle: "Hysterics and hartshorn! who would have thought it? The young lady screamed, and the old one came near fainting. As for myself, I retreated, in double quick time" (167). Like the economically fallen naïve, Redburn, who finds that, as a sailor, his social advance upon the captain is met "in the most rude and ungentlemanly manner" (*R* 70; ch. 14), Typee learns that certain borders are rigorously maintained. Once you have fallen from grace, you become a destabilising anomaly, and unfit for inclusion.

Significantly, Typee's fellow-rover is a great deal more mysterious than the average sailor. Like Toby, "[h]is early history, like that of many other heroes, was enveloped in the

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[16] The consul to Tahiti, Wilson, falls into this category. As an impetuous Typee remarks, "No one could look at him without conceiving a strong dislike, or a cordial desire to entertain such a feeling at the first favorable opportunity" (76; ch. 20).

profoundest obscurity; though he threw out hints of a patrimonial estate, a nabob uncle, and an unfortunate affair which sent him a-roving" (12; ch. 2). As a Romantic figure, however, he is more deeply sunk, than even the melancholic Toby, into what Mario Paz has called "the Romantic agony," and thus, nearer the dissolution of Romantic decadence. This aura is intensified by the Doctor's appellation, his ghostly appearance, his "unscrupulous[ness]" (12) and, finally, his use of "laudanum" (136; ch. 35) at the "Calabooza Beretanee" (116; ch. 31) in Tahiti. Long Ghost represents the dangers that await the narrator now that he has recognised that he has outgrown the Romantic ideal of a primitivistic Eden.[17] His haunting presence is that of one who has suffered irreversible disillusionment, and has sunk into decadence (which reflects the decadence and disillusionment around him). It is only by the end of *Omoo*, when Typee has learned the implications of Long Ghost's trail, that he can leave him (to become involved, in *Mardi*, in yet another quest). Long Ghost here operates as a kind of Virgilian guide, closer to the figure Sten means when he calls him "the strange doppelgänger figure typically found in fiction [. . .] where "descent" themes are prominent—incarnations, to quote Frye, of "the hero's shadow and the portent of his own death or isolation" (56).

Typee and Long Ghost's picaresque role is most clearly enunciated once they step onto land, and fall into a career as "beach-combers" (81; ch. 21). Tommo explains the term, by means of a footnote, as designating "certain roving characters, who, without attaching themselves permanently to any vessel, ship now and then for a short cruise [. . .]. They are, mostly, a reckless, rollicking set, wedded to the Pacific" (81). Essentially, the term functions as a synonym for both "Omoo" and "rover," but it neatly captures the very liminality of Long Ghost and Typee's position. The true realm of the "beach-comber" is the beach, that narrow, ambiguous border between the threatening dissolution of the sea, and the constitutive repose of the inland bower that time and again figures itself as the site of possible meaning.

In the picaresque, narrative form is subject to the same flux and errancy that marks the fortunes of the picaro—hence it is an episodic form, devoid of the unifying narrative drive of the romance

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[17] Grenberg has argued that the character is a result of Melville's decision to "split [. . .] his protagonist into two figures" (19), since

> this dualistic personification of irresistibly intimate but conflicting orientations allows Melville to present dramatically a complex experience of single actions and, hence, to present with immediacy the multiplicity of human attitudes and responses. Thus, Long Ghost throughout his adventures embodies the vestigial force of primitivism. (19)

I have problems with Grenberg's view of Long Ghost as a embodying "the vestigial force of primitivism," because it casts him as a character that Typee has already, in a sense, outgrown.

or, indeed, fiction in general. The very tone, by turns satirical and whimsical—as can be seen in Typee's counter-institutional and non-hierarchical "Round-Robin," which he composes on a page torn from a copy of "A History of the most Atrocious and Bloody Piracies" (74; ch. 20)—underscores deviance and resistance to conformity and false harmony. So does the occasional Rabelaisian flourish, evident in Typee's description of the "devotion to the bottle" of Chips and Bungs (56; ch. 15), clear candidates for the French author's fraternity of "[m]ost noble boozers" (Rabelais 39). Even the reading-matter that the two rovers encounter on their travels—"three volumes of Smollett's novels" (292; ch. 77)—are picaresque narratives. As Typee exclaims: "Amelia!—Peregrine!—you hero of rogues, Count Fathom!—what a debt do we owe you!" (293).

But for the reader, the most immediate encounter with the picaro's irresolute world comes in the form of a constant procession of narrative postponements, omissions, improvisational digressions and cul-de-sacs, the nature of which the narrator makes no attempt to disguise. Arriving on board the *Julia*, Typee proposes to "throw together" (8; ch. 1) the information he has gleaned about her condition and history. He devotes a brief chapter to a scuffle between "Beauty" (Chips) and Jermin, only to conclude abruptly: "Nothing more ever came of this" (18; ch. 4); he "give[s] some little account [. . .] of the proceedings of the French [at Tahiti], by way of episode to the narrative" (122; ch. 32). After a number of chapters focusing on diverse aspects of life in Tahiti, he blithely announces that "[w]e will now return to the narrative" (193; ch. 50). During a hunting expedition in Imeeo, he interposes a brief chapter concerning their prey, which he acknowledges as a "digression" (211; ch. 54). Toward the end of the book, as the rovers draw closer to Partoowye, where their acquaintance comes to an end, Typee suddenly fast-forwards the narrative: "Omitting several further adventures which befell us after leaving the party from Loohooloo, we must now hurry on, to relate what happened just before reaching the place of our destination" (270; ch. 71). Such admissions bear witness to the way in which the progression of the narrative is constantly interrupted and confounded. Since these interpolations are frequently of a factual turn, they ingeniously figure the way in which the impositions of "reality" continually fragment the picaro's journey. Typee may gather fragments of his (and his sources') experience into a narrative, but it will be a narrative that resists Aristotelian unity, a picaresque narrative.

Ultimately, the narrator's impositions on his own narrative also distantiate the reader from the events recounted, and heighten our awareness of the narrative as a version, subject to the perspectival quirks of the narrator. Melville goes to some length, in *Omoo*, to single out the problematic issue of perspective. In the "Preface," he pertinently states that "the author [. . .] has

merely described what he has seen" (xv), casting the narrative as an eye-witness account. The fact that this may present certain problems for the narrator's authority is first introduced—obliquely—in chapter 17, entitled "The Coral Islands." The chapter opens with an account of Jermin's secretive navigations, which he conducts by means of a "rusty old" quadrant (61) and "an occasional lunar observation [. . .] [which] generally requires two observers to take sights, at one and the same time" (61-62). Thus, the idea is raised that one can only properly navigate—physically, scientifically and morally—once two perspectives have been collated. This relativises the narrator's eye-witness account, but Melville unleashes the full problematic upon his reader only once we get to the subject of the chapter, the Coral Islands. Here, we are presented with a scientific theory concerning the formation of the island group:

> The origin of the entire group is generally ascribed to the coral insect.
>
> According to some naturalists, this wonderful little creature, commencing its erections at the bottom of the sea, after the lapse of centuries, carries them up to the surface, where its labors cease [. . .]. These would appear to be islands in the very process of creation—at any rate, one involuntarily concludes so, in beholding them. (62-63)

This theory, which posits a progressive and creative act of formation, to some extent encapsulates a teleological rationale in which identity triumphs over the anonymity imposed by the sea. As such, it posits a pyramidical, monumental moment of individuation. But this theory is contradicted—quite literally from the margins—by means of a footnote:

> The above is the popular idea on the subject. But of late, a theory directly the reverse has been started. Instead of regarding the phenomena last described as indicating any thing like an active, creative power now in operation, it is maintained, that, together with the entire group, they are merely the remains of a continent, long ago worn away, and broken up by the action of the sea. (63)

Melville shows how two (conflicting) perspectives can conspire to achieve the dissolution of truth, while simultaneously indicating—textually—how perspectives will always be positioned within ideological hierarchies. Thus, the degenerative, "picaresque" theory of fragmentation stands in a marginal relation to the pyramidical theory of progression and growth (which may be related to Manifest Destiny's pursuit of the creation of American space, the liberation of land from the anonymity of the wilderness). The footnote destabilises the authority of the dominant perspective, or "popular idea on the subject" included in the "main" text. Something similar occurs when the marginal Tahiti (marginal from a Western perspective) resists assimilation into dominant physics—in a footnote, we are told that "[t]he Newtonian theory concerning the tides does not hold good at Tahiti" (101; ch. 27). The problem, of course—a problem that Melville's detractors raised to good effect—is that a relativising perspective becomes relativised in turn, and if it becomes too marginal, it can easily be discounted as an anomaly, or a freak, without

disturbing the institutional repose of the dominant ideology. Melville's open use of authorities in criticising the missions in chapters like "Tahiti As It Is" may indicate an attempt to counter the marginality of his text at the most critical point of ideological deviance.[18] Thus, he announces,

> [u]pon a subject like this, [. . .] it would be altogether too assuming for a single individual to decide; and so, in place of my own random observations, which may be found elsewhere, I will here present those of several known authors, made under various circumstances, at different periods, and down to a comparatively late date. (186; ch. 48)

But whatever the intention may have been, Typee's sudden insecurity about his own position only serves to undermine his own authority. As Grenberg has noted,

> [t]hus unobtrusively, Melville introduces into his art the theme of epistemology—the self's access to knowledge and potential for attaining truth and certainty [. . .]. This appeal [to authority] is much more than a modification of Tom's narrative. Under its influence his claimed objectivity and authority are rendered merely dimensional. (23)

Grenberg neatly presents the problem, although I strongly disagree with his suggestion that "the theme of epistemology" is *introduced* here—*Typee* certainly raises questions regarding the production and attainment of knowledge and, as we have seen, the problematic of perspective is raised in *Omoo* from early on. By the time that Typee broaches the issue by posing the reader with a direct question, the feigned innocence is almost snide: "Such, then, is the testimony of good and unbiased men, who have been upon the spot; but, how comes it to differ so widely from impressions of others at home?" (187; ch. 48). His answer, which evokes the difference between appearance (the outward change in Tahitian life) and "reality" (the absence of inward change), certainly does not serve to reinstate an unproblematic Truth (especially if we keep in mind that much of Typee's criticism has also been levelled at essentially outward metamorphoses).

Tahiti and Imeeo, as presented by the narrator, are picaresque worlds (especially when viewed with the edenic Typee valley in mind). Tahiti, in particular, is characterised by the kind of physical and moral disintegration associated with the world of the picaro. Officially incarcerated at the "Calabooza Beretanee" with Long Ghost and other signers of the mutinous "Round-Robin," the narrator has time to observe closely the "dissolute environment" (Sten 59). Figuring the non-linear, non-progressive state of affairs is the circular "Broom Road," which the islanders, like the missionaries, follow "round and round" (114; ch. 30). The narrator is "painfully struck by the considerable number of sickly and deformed persons" (127; ch. 33)—a clear contrast to the healthy Typees—and later "allude[s] to a virulent disease, which now taints the blood of at

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[18] Typee's occasional conciliatory remarks regarding the spirit of the missions clearly serve a similar purpose.

least two thirds of the common people of the island" (191; ch. 49)—i.e., syphilis. The friendships they strike up with the locals are of an utterly superficial nature, dependent on economic or financial status—thus, once Typee's resources have been exhausted, his friend, Kooloo, "dissolve[s]" their connection (158; ch. 40): "He was, alas! as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal; one of those who make no music unless the clapper be silver" (157). It is a world, also, in which some degree of "criminality" cannot be avoided, as the two rovers find themselves having to assist their fellow sailors in filching provisions from other ships. On Imeeo, again, the "minute species of fly" (*T* 212; ch. 29) that was a source of harmless irritation in the valley of Typee is replaced by "a plague" of mosquitoes (*O* 201; ch. 52), another foreign introduction.

It is especially in the treatment of traditional figures of authority that the picaresque theme comes into its own. Doctor Johnson, espying an opportunity to make some money off the state, proceeds to prescribe medicines to the nominally incarcerated sailors; "medicines, which, on board the ship, he told us were not needed" (133; ch. 35). It is at this time, also, that the good Doctor is reduced to a mere procurer of narcotics for Long Ghost. While generally undermining the Doctor's good standing by means of satirical presentation, Typee sometimes resorts to a more direct form of indictment: "I [. . .] felt a cool, purely incidental, and passive contempt for Johnson, as a selfish, mercenary apothecary" (193; ch. 50).

The typical anti-clericism of the picaresque novel also finds ample representation. As Sten mentions, "[t]he motif of the polluted priest [. . .] makes its appearance several times" (57) and, of course, assists in the critique of the missionary effort in general. In chapter 37 this motif is employed with particular effect:

> [W]e were honored by a visit [at the Calabooza Beretanee] from three of the French priests; and as about the only notice ever taken of us by the English missionaries, was their leaving their cards for us in the shape of a package of tracts, we could not help thinking, that the Frenchmen, in making a personal call, were at least much better bred. (141)

Here the narrator aims a sting at the English missionaries, whose good breeding is called into question, along with their methods of managing their flock. Elsewhere, Typee wryly comments on the missionaries' tendency to boast of their successful conversion of Tahitians, only to prevent any intercourse between Tahitian children and their own, for fear of "moral contamination" (188; ch. 48). It becomes clear that the missionaries do their work from a distance, which casts doubts on their own hopes for successful salvation of the islanders. The French (Catholic) priests come across as far more Christian in their approach. However, this illusion is finally also shattered when Typee exposes their domestic arrangements:

> Pity it was, they couldn't marry—pity for the ladies of the island, I mean, and the cause of morality; for what business had the ecclesiastical old bachelors, with such a set of

> trim little native handmaidens? These damsels were their first converts; and devoted ones they were. (142)

With a most irreverent wit, Typee undermines the Catholic effort—if the hypocritical Protestants are guilty of a form of apartheid, the more good-natured French priests fall victim to their sympathetic constitutions. Conversion is cast in a damaging light, as conversion to Western hypocrisy, and as having self-interest at its core. This charge is extended to the English missions—when Typee decides to sit in on a sermon, it is to find the missionary starting off with the wickedness of the French priests and sailors; stressing the link between wickedness and poverty, and hence, the link between England's wealth and goodness; and ending with a lamentation on the sad state of his own larder: "So, good friends, weave plenty of cocoa-nut baskets, fill 'em, and bring 'em to-morrow" (174; ch. 45). It is a strange logic, by which the islanders are charged to keep the missionary in clover, in order that his moral position may remain unassailable. It is, of course, the paradoxical logic on which all colonisation is based—the colonial subject is kept in place by the very power that he consolidates by means of his own exploited labour.

Conversion, which in the more romantic valley of Typee threatened to have permanent results, appears in *Omoo* as a matter of expedience. It is ethically compromised and, in most cases, of an utterly fickle nature. When the sailors at the "Calabooza Beretanee" notice that the only Catholic among them, the Irish Pat, reaps some material benefits from his religious convictions, their course of action is clear: "The interest in Pat's welfare, by his benevolent countryman [Father Murphy], was very serviceable to the rest of us; especially as we all turned Catholics, and went to mass every morning" (144; ch. 37). The protean picaro is characterised by precisely this absence of connection between outward appearance and inward conviction—in fact, in extreme cases, no trace of such inward, ethical character remains, and the picaro is only apprehended in his roles, or disguises.

The dissolution of the organic, Emersonian link between character/conviction and action also confounds the historical and pyramidical

> "Great Revival at the Sandwich Islands," about the year 1836; when several thousands were, in the course of a few weeks, admitted into the bosom of the Church. But this result was brought about by no sober moral convictions; as an almost instantaneous relapse into every kind of licentiousness, soon afterward testified. (174; ch. 45)

Here Typee attributes the superficiality of conversion to a Polynesian "indolence" (175), a racial slur somewhat complicated by his own expedient conversion to Catholicism. Polynesians are presented as essentially fickle—thus, when Typee moves on to describe the general atmosphere surrounding their Sundays, an interesting point is raised: "In short, it is their Sunday—their 'Taboo Day;' the very word, formerly expressing the sacredness of their pagan observances, now

proclaiming the sanctity of the Christian Sabbath" (176). Essentially, a comment on the fickleness of Polynesians and their superficial assumption of Christianity modulates into a comment on the fickleness of terms, or words. The superficiality of the link between signifier and signified completely undermines the Romantic, Transcendentalist, and Christian trust in the organic, stable relationship between symbol and referent.[19]

In the previous chapter I suggested that, to some extent, we may see the picaresque narrative as fragmenting the romantic *agon* into an eternal round of minor and finally inconsequential conflicts.[20] Put differently, the central quest—dissipated and defeated by the flux of the picaro's world—may find itself resurfacing in a number of minor, unsuccessful, expedient or inglorious "quests" on the part of the picaro. In *Omoo*, there are many moments that might qualify, but there are others that clearly refer back to the quest as such, if only parodically. Frederick Karl argues that "the picaresque protagonist is always on a frontier. Obviously so, since he does not know exactly what the norm is, and he must fumble around the perimeter making forays into an ideal center. The center, of course, never holds still" (201). An early example of such an attempt at linear, focused action is Typee's efforts, in chapter 42, to reach "Motoo-Otoo": "Right in the middle of Papeetee harbour is a bright, green island, one circular grove of waving palms, and scarcely a hundred yards across. It is of coral formation" (162). Belonging to the queen, and converted into a fortress (albeit decaying), Typee finds that it "struck my fancy; and I registered a vow to plant my foot upon its soil, notwithstanding an old bareheaded sentry" (163). However, the sentry—who "must have been dumb; for never a word did he utter," and "with his white cotton robe [. . .] looked more like a spook of the island than any thing mortal" (163)—proves successful in repelling Typee's advances: "At last I was obliged to retreat; and to this day my vow remains unfulfilled" (163). In this minor incident we encounter an essentially comic version of the mute blankness that tends to confound Melville's other questers. It is a parody of a quest, both in its comic tone and in its essentially anecdotal insignificance.

Typee and Long Ghost also engage in such "questing" after their departure from the "Calabooza Beretanee," and their arrival at the island of Imeeo, where they assume the names,

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[19] It is a problematic raised earlier in the chapter, in a different form, when Typee is forced to present us with "Jack's" translation of the missionary's sermon (173; ch. 45).

[20] See introduction, 26.

Paul and Peter (199; ch. 51).[21] As Grenberg argues (in a way that recalls both Karl's contrast between "perimeter" and "center," and Seelye's opposition of "line" and "circle"),

> Tom and Long Ghost's exploration of this island consists of two basic movements, one rectilinear as they penetrate to the heart of the island at Tamai, the other curvilinear as they circle the island to Taloo, Partoowye, and a new ship. The rectilinear movement is unilateral and overtly sexual (with Long Ghost assuming the dominant role), and its outcome is reflexive, sending the two wanderers back to their starting point at Martair to begin their circling of the island. The very intensity of the dance of the Tamai maidens carries its own completion and leads no further, which might suggest man's ambivalent satisfaction and dissatisfaction with sexual experience and expression. The circular motion around the island, dominated by Tom, is motivated by a desire to "see things," and in contrast to the physical-sexual experience of Tamai, this desire seems comprehensive in intent but infinitely expansive in implication [. . .]. Melville discovers in *Omoo* the basic element of plot as movement and countermovement, and he also awakens to the possibility of the journey seen as a quest, wandering expressed as wondering, and, by implication, rest conceived as attainment and completion. (19-20)

Grenberg's argument, in certain respects compelling, seems ultimately untenable because of its inability to see the presence of "quest" in *Omoo* as strictly a feature of picaresque critique of quest-romance. To some extent a refiguring of Tommo and Toby's quest into the valley of Typee, the journey to Tamai, at the end of the day, is informed and characterised not by idealism but by expedience.[22] At first, the language is romantic enough:

> The doctor was all eagerness to visit Tamai, a solitary inland village, standing upon the banks of a considerable lake of the same name, and embosomed among groves. From Afrehitoo you went to this place by a lonely pathway, leading through the wildest scenery in the world [. . .].
>
> Upon its banks, moreover, grew the finest fruit of the islands, and in their greatest perfection. The "Ve," or Brazilian plum, here attained the size of an orange; and the gorgeous "Arheea," or red apple of Tahiti, blushed with deeper dyes than in any of the seaward valleys.
>
> Beside all this, in Tamai dwelt the most beautiful and unsophisticated women in the entire Society group. In short, the village was so remote from the coast, and had been so much less affected by recent changes than in other places that, in most things, Tahitian life was here seen, as formerly existing in the days of young Otoo, the boy-king, in Cook's time. (234; ch. 61)

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[21] The names are, of course, parodic. Typee's assumption of the name Paul suggests the occurrence of some life-changing insight. While there is no dramatic point of insight readily apparent to the reader, it may be said that his general experience of the picaresque world of Tahiti prepares him for his career as rover in Imeeo. Thus, Saul's assumption of the Christian quest is parodically recast as Typee's assumption of aimless roving. Similarly, irony pervades the diffuse Long Ghost's assumption of the name Peter, the "rock" (Matt. 16. 18).

[22] Typee's departure from Tahiti flows from his "long[ing] for a change; and as there seemed to be no getting away in a ship, I resolved to hit upon some other expedient" (198; ch. 51). This initiates the sequence of adventures, to which the journey to Tamai belongs.

Figured as a romantic Spenserian bower of repose, removed from the vagaries of the coastal world, Tamai almost seems like the hyperbolic Paradise to which Kory-Kory referred in *Typee* (172; ch. 24). Images of "perfection" and "attain[ment]" abound in this vision shaped in the minds of the two rovers. But the framing picaresque narrative shapes the reader's response in a way that precludes an idealistic perspective on the journey. We are not surprised when Typee/Paul explains that "we decided upon penetrating to the village; and after a temporary sojourn there, to strike the beach again" (235). The intention to "penetrat[e]" to the "embosomed" village certainly carries a sexual charge, as Grenberg suggests, but the two rovers just as certainly do not appear to view the journey with an eye to "attainment," "completion" or "rest." Even before they set out, they intend to "strike the beach again."

The journey itself presents the travellers with the usual necessary obstacles, but the narrative glosses over these, and soon places us at the "very heart of the island," "a green, cool hollow" (237; ch. 62), characterised by the familiar silence. "The utter solitude and silence were oppressive" (238), "Paul" explains, so the rovers decide to move along. There is no sense here of an encounter with an inscrutable mystery—silence and solitude, shorn of symbolic charge, are unpleasant phenomena that the practical picaro shrugs off.

Tamai itself is much more of an "earthly," compromised Eden than Typee—the people are "nominally Christians" (239), and the "ladies" are "flavored with a slight tincture of what we queerly enough call the '*devil*'" (242; ch. 63). The outlawed pagan dance, or "hevar" (239; ch. 62), which modulates between moments of composition and moments of violent abandonment, expresses the cyclical logic of flux that informs the halting advance of the two rovers. And if the dance itself may have a provisional climax in the "wild chorus" (242; ch. 63) that announces its end, it is certainly not communicated to Paul or Long Ghost (Peter), who literally have to be "dragged [. . .] away" after presumably requesting "more 'hevars'" (242). There are no neat, unanimous conclusions in the world of the picaro.

The lack of climax and rest haunts the remainder of Paul and Long Ghost's stay in Tamai. In chapter 64, enigmatically entitled "Mysterious," the narrator recounts an anecdote about

> a little old man, of a most hideous aspect, living in Tamai, who, in a coarse mantle of tappa, went about the village, dancing, and singing, and making faces. He followed us about, wherever we went; and, when unobserved by others, plucked at our garments, making frightful signs for us to go along with him somewhere, and see something. (243)

With a preponderance of punctuation marks that prefigures Melville's reader-resistant compound sentences in *The Confidence-Man*, Paul simultaneously evokes the interruptive jerks to which they are subjected, and slows the narrative pace in a way that creates a certain amount of

suspense in the reader. The secretive and "frightful signs" of the strange figure prepare us for some revelation. Cured of all hopes for revelation, Long Ghost persists in ignoring the stranger, but Paul, who will after all abandon his comrade at the end of the book, cannot suppress his hopeful curiosity about the mysterious "something."

This "something" turns out to be nothing more than "a musty old pair of sailor trowsers" that the old man tries to sell to him (244). Disillusioned and, like his reader, rightly peeved, Paul takes off, "resolved never to disclose so inglorious an adventure. To no purpose, the next morning, my comrade besought me to enlighten him: I preserved a mysterious silence" (244). Ironically, Paul now becomes that enigmatic mute whose muteness seems to hint at a significance that is not there. His silence, like that of the initially "deaf and dumb" hermit (272; ch. 72) who turns out to be a dealer in contraband, and without any disabilities, is a lie.

Finally, Paul and Long Ghost are forced to leave Tamai,[23] just as they consider "settl[ing] down" (245; ch. 65). The rest of their journey is attended by a contradictory mixture of "sanguine expectations" (248) and "sundry misgivings for the future" (249; ch. 66), but for the most part they abandon themselves to life as beach-combers, and enjoying the hospitality of Imeeo's inhabitants.

The final "quest" in *Omoo* must be the attempt by the two rovers to visit the court of the Tahitian queen, Pomaree Vahinee I, at Partoowye, and to secure positions there. At first they find their advances "to no purpose" (286; ch. 75)—as Paul did at "Motoo-Otoo"—but eventually they do manage to obtain "admittance to the residence of the queen" with the help of a Marquesan nurse (307; ch. 81). Once inside, they are further escorted by one of the "ladies of the court," who at length takes them to the "immense hall" where they might meet the queen (308, 309). What they find, instead, is a strange junkyard montage that symbolises the world in which they have been moving:

> The whole scene was a strange one; but what most excited our surprise, was the incongruous assemblage of the most costly objects from all quarters of the globe. Cheek by jowl, they lay beside the rudest native articles, without the slightest attempt at order. Superb writing-desks of rose-wood, inlaid with silver and mother-of-pearl; decanters and goblets of cut glass; embossed volumes of plates; gilded candelabras; sets of globes and mathematical instruments; the finest porcelain; richly mounted sabres and fowling-pieces; laced hats and sumptuous garments of all sorts, with numerous other matters of European manufacture, were strewn about among greasy calabashes half filled with "*poee*," rolls of old tappa and matting, paddles and fish-spears, and the ordinary furniture of a Tahitian dwelling.
>
> All the articles first mentioned, were, doubtless, presents from foreign powers. They were more or less injured: the fowling-pieces and swords were rusted; the finest

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[23] Parodically, Paul calls their departure, or flight, the "Hegira" (245; ch. 65).

> woods were scratched; and a folio volume of Hogarth lay open, with a cocoa-nut shell of some musty preparation capsized among the miscellaneous furniture of the Rake's apartment, where that inconsiderate gentleman is being measured for a coat. (309-10)

The incongruous Rabelaisian catalogue functions as an anatomy of Tahitian royalty, which reflects badly on the queen in the light of the poverty the two rovers have encountered on their travels through her realms. In hospitality, too, she is inferior to her subjects—upon her appearance, she has Paul and Long Ghost summarily "escorted out" (310). But this royal inner sanctum also parodically represents the unattainable life of opulence that—for the picaro—represents exemption from the vagaries of chance. With some complexity, the expensive rubble functions as a trope for the ruinous, decaying nature of the hybrid, frontier culture of colonised Tahiti, as well as the mental condition of the two rovers, whose experience to some extent cannot be accommodated in any viable (ethical) schema. The centre they reach is indeed an indeterminate one.

The reference to the first plate of William Hogarth's series of engravings, *A Rake's Progress*, calls into play a number of ideas that resonate with the themes of *Omoo*. For one thing, there is a marked similarity in approach in these works of Hogarth and Melville. As Mark Hallett says of *A Rake's Progress*, it "strikingly combines the garrulous, ironic perspectives and low-life subject matter of the roving, roguish satirist with that witty focus on the hypocrisies of wealth and social status so typical of the polite satire associated with Moliere" (105). Also, Melville stresses Tom Rakewell's "inconsiderate" nature, thus evoking his shirking of ethical duties and responsibilities vis-à-vis the pregnant Sarah Young. In the context of *Omoo*, it serves to capture something of the sexual promiscuity Paul encounters in Tahiti and, more particularly, the kind of lack of responsibility that would attend Westerners' intercourse with the islanders. Again, in the image of the "Holy Bible" falling to pieces in the print, with a sole cut out of its cover, we are reminded of the frayed quality of Christianity as practised in the Islands (with the sole/soul[24] cut out of it). But ultimately the print also evokes the career of Tom Rakewell—his descent into madness—and thus appears in its properly didactic role as a warning to young Paul (*Tom*mo in *Typee*). Here, amid the clutter of the queen's "treasures," the print both reflects the mess, and comments upon it. What Ronald Paulson says of the painting applies also to the engraving: "In the first scene the objects in disrepair or disuse, unharmoniously jumbled, in unresolved motion, all foreshadow his final madness" (note to Plate 30). In this regard, the association between "reality" and "fiction" becomes so strong that the queen's rubble literally merges with that of

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[24] I am indebted to Ronald Paulson for this pun (28), although he employs it somewhat differently.

Rakewell's apartment, "some musty preparation capsized among [. . .] [his] miscellaneous furniture."

Paul does not arrive at any clear, identifiable conclusions about his life as a rover, and as a picaro, it is acceptable that he does not. But neither can he longer "resist" returning to sea (315; ch. 82). And this point of rejection of his identity as a rover—in terms of the logic of which Paul must also abandon Long Ghost—is simultaneously a rejection of the arbitrary picaresque ending. Sten correctly suggests that

> [t]hough the form of Melville's novel is picaresque in being episodic from the first chapter to the last, it does not simply come to a stop at some arbitrary point. With *Omoo*'s escape from the South Sea Islands in the final pages and the prospect of his soon returning home, it comes to a "proper" or conventional conclusion. His role as an American sailor restored, he can give up the temporary identity that had been thrust on him as a poor "omoo." His hope of working his way back home renewed, he can resist the fading enchantments of South Sea Island culture [. . .] [and] separate himself from his companion, Long Ghost, the "shadow" figure of folklore, who tempts him to stay and live an irresponsible existence in endless pursuit of pleasure. (60)

Sten's point is underscored by what he calls the "scene of recognition" (Sten 60), in which Paul has his pulse measured by a prospective captain and is "pronounced [. . .] a Yankee, every beat of my pulse!" (314). This scene clearly draws—to some extent parodically—on what Frye has identified as the final stage of "the successful quest," namely "the *anagnorisis* or discovery, the recognition of the hero" (186). We must be wary of projecting a false sense of completion onto a work that, throughout, has resisted and parodied the idea of Romantic attainment. Paul has certainly not completed a successful quest—the end of his roving days is the result of a simple recoil from dissolution—and, after all, he is merely leaving roving for the life of a sailor. "Once more," he says, "the sailor's cradle rocked under me, and I found myself rolling in my gait. By noon, the island had gone down in the horizon; and all before us was the wide Pacific" (316). We may be lulled to some sense of restful satisfaction by the rocking of "the sailor's cradle" under Paul's feet, but the final line essentially returns us to an open-endedness by which Melville defers repose. Paul is back on the featureless surface of the sea.

What emerges from Melville's first published fictions is a notable tendency on the part of the author to shape his narratives in such a way as to frustrate both the reader's and the protagonist's desire for progressive, redemptive movement toward closure. In other words, he actively dissolves "the career of improvement" (*T* 29; ch. 4), what Peter Brooks calls "the pattern of anticipation and completion which overcodes mere succession" (94). In *Omoo*, a picaresque narrative, we are essentially returned to such "mere succession" as we follow the protagonist-narrator through a series of incidents and minor adventures that attains no monumental, resolvent

end. In *Typee*, too, our initial expectations of a romance-structure receive a jolt as we find Tommo floundering, first through the demonic landscape of the Marquesan island and then in the unreadable, inscrutable world of the Typees. It is here in particular that Melville demonstrates how significating patterns are arbitrarily imposed on phenomena that remain beyond interpretation. By showing Tommo's active (if, perhaps, subconscious) role in the making of meaning, Melville calls into question, not only his ability to reveal Typee culture, but man's epistemological pretensions in general. Against the imperial act of knowing Melville sets up the recalcitrant, mysterious realm of the inscrutable, forever beyond the human capacity for understanding. In the end, both narrators circle that realm in a hopeless attempt to gain knowledge. In this respect, however, Typee/Paul seems less earnest and idealistic in his efforts, more aware of human folly. For a while he manages to abandon himself to the irredeemable and indeterminate flux of the natural world, to "rove" according to the dictates of expedience and chance instead of idealism. But he cannot sustain that role, recoiling from a dissolute life only to return, ironically, to the sea. In *Mardi* Melville would return, with a vengeance, to man's efforts to imbue a deviant, "incongruous" existence with a teleological rationale.

CHAPTER 2

"EVER UNFIXED": FRAGMENTING (NARRATIVE) IDENTITY IN *MARDI*

For a century and a half, *Mardi* has radically challenged the critical conceit of attainable felicity. Brimful of heightened, expansive imaginative diction and encyclopaedic riches that prefigure canonical *Moby-Dick*, it invites critical scrutiny as a site of accelerated growth, the adolescence of the Melvillean voice. But its wayward structure and failure to contain its rampant energies have generally led critics to qualify its achievement: *Mardi*—rebellious, indiscriminate, raw and clumsy—is only too apt a figure for Melville's artistic adolescence.

The analogy of adolescence begs extension as one explores Melville's writings peripheral to *Mardi*, as well as the scholarly material on it. The oft-quoted admission to John Murray (as Melville was writing the book) that he was abandoning facts for romance because he felt "a longing to plume my pinions for a flight" (*C* 106), finally posits Melville as an Icarus who, not equipped with the discipline or restraint to harness the new ideas—philosophical and aesthetic—acquired through his sudden, possessed explorations into the literary canon, foolishly went in pursuit of "higher purposes" (*C* 132)[1] in his narrative, and plummeted spectacularly.

Imagery of flight—with its familiar connotations of freedom and imagination—persistently recurs in *Mardi*, figuring a narrative attempt to transcend the "prosy plain" (*M* 256; ch. 84). This departure is firmly linked to Melville's liberation of himself from the experiential limits of the factual narrative. That such a departure was imminent may retrospectively be gleaned from a review (published anonymously on 6 March 1847, while he was still overseeing the final stages of the publication of *Omoo*) Melville wrote for the New York *Literary World*, on J. Ross Browne's *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*:

> From time immemorial many fine things have been said and sung of the sea. And the days have been, when sailors were considered veritable mermen; and the ocean itself, as the peculiar theatre of the romantic and wonderful. But of late years there have been revealed so many plain, matter-of-fact details connected with nautical life that at the present day the poetry of salt water is very much on the wane. [. . .]

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[1] This from a letter (dated 5 June 1849) to his new publisher, Richard Bentley, who took on *Mardi* after it was rejected by John Murray. Commenting on the critical resistance to *Mardi*, Melville hopefully states that "it will reach those for whom it is intended; and I have already received assurances that 'Mardi,' in its higher purposes, has not been written in vain" (*C* 131-32).

> Mr J. Ross Browne's narrative tends still further to impair the charm with which poesy and fiction have invested the sea. It is a book of unvarnished facts [. . .]. (205)

While Melville goes on to commend the accuracy of Browne's depictions, it is clear that his enjoyment of the book is curtailed by the absence of "poetry." This is undoubtedly unfair, as Melville is quite simply projecting onto Browne's text his own frustrations with the kind of material he has been poring over for the past two years, while constructing the so-called "unvarnished truth" (*T* xiv) of *Typee* and *Omoo*. Browne, unlike Melville, does not break what Nina Baym has called "the implicit genre contract" of the travel narrative (911)—his lack of varnish is the kind of thing John Murray rated highly.

It took Melville an entire year before he finally decided to inform Murray of his changed literary concerns. This may be because it took him some time to work out, for himself, what direction he wanted his writing to take, but the main reason probably lay with his expectation of resistance from Murray's side. On 25 March 1848, he finally decided to let Murray in on the status of his new book:

> My object in now writing you—I should have done so ere this—is to inform you of a change in my determinations. To be blunt: the next work I shall publish will in downright earnest [be?] a "Romance of Polynisian Adventure" [. . .]. I have long thought that Polynisia furnished a great deal of rich poetical material that has never been employed hitherto in works of fancy; and which to bring out suitably, required only that play of freedom & invention accorded to the Romancer & poet. [. . .] Well: proceeding in my narrative of *facts* I began to feel an invincible distaste for the same; & a longing to plume my pinions for a flight, & felt irked, cramped & fettered by plodding along with dull common places,—So suddenly abandoning the thing alltogether, I went to work heart & soul at a romance which is now in fair progress, since I had worked at it with earnest ardor.—Start not, nor exclaim "Pshaw! Puh!"—My romance I assure you is no dish water nor its model borrowed from the Circulating Library. It is something new I assure you, & and original if nothing more. But I can give you no adequate idea, of it. You must see it for yourself.—Only forbear to prejudge it.—It opens like a true narrative—like Omoo for example, on ship board—& the romance & poetry of the thing thence grow continuously, till it becomes a story wild enough I assure you & with a meaning too.
>
> —As for the policy of putting forth an acknowledged *romance* upon the heel of two books of travel which in some quarters have been received with no small incredulity—that, Sir, is a question for which I care little, really.—My *instinct* is to out with the Romance, & let me say that instincts are prophetic, & better than acquired wisdom [. . .]. (*C* 106)

That *Mardi* represented some sort of artistic liberation for Melville seems beyond question. The language in this letter communicates a sense of energy and even defiance that positions Melville as something of a Promethean Romantic, asserting his creative instinct against a narrow, cramped aesthetic of "facts." *Mardi* activates a more imaginative, ambitious language, the indicator of an authorial claim to "that play of freedom & invention accorded only to the Romancer & poet." For Wai-chee Dimock, Melville's expansion of his language (into the

province of romance and poetry) is essentially an "imperial" act, a direct result of his own emerging creative "sovereignty" (46, 43). As such, his indisputable authorial power over his characters becomes implicated in "a tradition of property rights" (45), which ultimately undercuts its rhetoric of liberation:

> Beginning with *Mardi*, Melville's first attempt at "serious" authorship, each of his novels seem to embody, in its textual governance, a principle of "empire for liberty." The novels differ enormously—from the chartless extravagance in *Mardi*, to the charted normality in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, through the relentless narratives of doom in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, and closing with the systematic unaccountability of *The Confidence-Man*—what each book invokes, affirms, and defends is always the principle of imperial freedom, a principle of authorial license embedded in a technology of control. In that regard, Melville dramatizes the very juncture where the logic of freedom dovetails into the logic of empire. (10)

It is a compelling argument, but one which rather obscurely makes no reference to the greater, informing "imperial" design of Romantic aesthetics in general. *Mardi* is to some extent a record of Melville's critical engagement with the poetics and ideology of Romanticism. His reading during the writing of *Mardi*, for instance, included Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, in which he would have encountered that most famous expression of the sovereign nature of the imagination: "the primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (167; ch. 13). Richard Kearney stresses that this "reference to the infinite I AM, which ostensibly implies the superiority of Divine Creation (the I AM WHO AM of the Bible) over human creation, may well be a veiled allusion to the 'transcendental I' (which both Kant and Schelling related to the role of *human* imagination in the transcendental unity of apperception)" (183). More Promethean than pious, Coleridge's definition of the imagination puts man on a level with a Divine Creator.[2]

There is much in *Mardi*—in terms of rhetoric alone—to suggest that Melville was thinking about the Coleridgean expression of Romantic imagination. In fact, the letter to Murray, written a month and a half after Melville bought *Biographia Literaria*, may to some extent be the result of Melville's encounter with the sovereign "I AM" expressed in the act of imagination. But Dimock makes no reference to Coleridge (or *any* of Melville's reading, for that matter), and

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[2] Martin Leonard Pops refers to Coleridge's formulation in discussing Ishmael's survival at the end of *Moby-Dick*. Quoting Mircea Eliade, he suggests that "Ishmael's 'emersion repeats the cosmogonic act of formal manifestation'" (10), and goes on to relate this act to the creative act of imagination: "Melville's unformulated vision of the sacred to some degree, then, externalizes Coleridge's romantic concept of the imagination—'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'" (11). I would suggest, however, that Melville recasts this act as one which leads to an annihilating, solipsistic "sultanism" (*MD* 147; ch. 33). Ishmael's relativistic, more diffuse self is buoyed by the symbol of that very death he did not challenge.

hence ignores an entire realm of influence at work in the constituting moment of *Mardi*'s language and thematic. She has to ignore it, in order to effect a contrast between Melville's earlier indebtedness to factual sources and servitude to experience, and his later assumption of authorial liberty. In other words, to acknowledge literary influences in *Mardi* would significantly undermine the image of Melville as a "sovereign creator," whose expression proceeds "from him and from nowhere else" (Dimock 44).

Another important aspect that Dimock treats somewhat reductively—if obliquely—is the "instinct," to which Melville refers in his letter to Murray (quoted earlier). While she does not make too much of the critical commonplace that in the figure of the famed Mardian author, Lombardo (and his book, the Koztanza) we have a fictional double of Melville (and *his* book, *Mardi*), she nevertheless employs it in order to close her argument:

> What Melville says about the Koztanza is indirectly and ironically pertinent here, for just as Lombardo has "abandoned all monitors from without," honoring only the "autocrat within—his crowned and sceptered instinct" (597), so Melville, in his very aspirations to be a "monarch," ends up yielding his book to the "autocrat within." (75)

However privileged a position Melville may have granted his "instinct"—and the letter to John Murray suggests that it was fairly privileged; more so, at any rate, "than acquired wisdom"—we must not lose sight of the nature of that instinct. Though it may have pressed him to "out with the Romance" and to be "original," it was this selfsame instinct that constantly led him to question the sovereign pretensions of any teleological scheme, even in his earliest works. That Dimock does not explore *Typee* and *Omoo* is symptomatic of her own authorial imperialism; they resist her argument, not because, as she would have it, their submission to (or determination by) "facts," sources, experience or probability initially thwarted Melville's ostensible monarchic aspirations, but because they suggest ways of reading Melville's later books that produce an image of a primarily anti-teleological (and hence, anti-imperial) authorial instinct. Hawthorne's seminal comment on Melville's metaphysics—that he "can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief" (*J* 628)—captures a more general, persistent scepticism in Melville's thought, a scepticism of which there is ample evidence in *Mardi*, even though Melville was undeniably inspired by the rhetorical possibilities unlocked for him by his reading. That Melville followed his instincts in writing *Mardi*—whether detrimentally or successfully—seems indisputable; that those instincts at bottom remained radically sceptical of any teleological pursuit, and thus maintained a leading "logic" of errancy in *Mardi*, is an argument I here intend to underscore.

Mardi—while activating a more imaginative (if excessive) language—does not do so in order to free its author from indebtedness and reference to other sources or discourses. Instead, what

Melville does (even though he may not necessarily have set out to do so) is actively to engage the teleology of imaginative (creative) writing, especially in terms of the Romantic internalised quest. Where his previous books primarily explored epistemological questions from the (modified) perspective of the genre of factual travel narratives, *Mardi* is the result of Melville's intense encounter with a heady, heterogeneous mixture of metaphysics, philosophy, poetry, Romantic aesthetics, and parodic techniques in the works of Seneca, Dante, Rabelais, Montaigne, Robert Burton, Thomas Browne and Coleridge, among others. They provided the atmosphere within which Melville would employ such factual narratives as William Ellis's *Polynesian Researches* and Frederick Debell Bennett's *Narrative of a Whaling Voyage*, as well as such scientific information as might be gleaned, for instance, from the lectures of astronomers like Professor Mitchell and John P. Nicol,[3] or the naturalist, Louis Agassiz.

Mardi is characterised, first and foremost, by its rampant diversity, something critics, regardless of their final verdict on the book, recognised from the very beginning. In the London *Critic* of 1 April 1849, the reviewer described *Mardi* as

> an extraordinary mixture of all kinds of composition, and of the strangest variety of themes. There are philosophical discourse, political disquisition, the essay, scientific and humorous, touches of poetry, and episodical adventures, with descriptions of countries and people, strung together by the slight thread of a story which is not very intelligible [. . .]. (Leyda, *Log* 295)

This impressed but somewhat windblown reviewer—in a judgment that has not much dated—evokes the labyrinthine character of the text most effectively when he gropes for the Ariadne's clew of the "thread of the story," and finds it "slight" and "not very intelligible." Dimock goes so far as to suggest that in essence there is, in fact, no plot: "*Mardi* simply does not honor those modes of causation that render the text thematically intelligible" (52). The logic runs thus: if one could get a firm grasp of the central story, or the "plot"—the axis on which the hefty tome turns—the heterogeneous material would be brought under some degree of narrative control; *Mardi* would make sense. It is a logic based on authoritative centres and Aristotelian unity; the kind of constitutive logic at work in Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar":

> I placed a jar in Tennessee,
> And round it was, upon a hill.
> It made the slovenly wilderness
> Surround that hill. (lines 1-4)

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[3] Merrell Davis, finding evidence of Melville's encounter with the theories proposed in these lectures, insists that "[w]hether or not Melville heard these lectures he must have known them in the full reports that appeared in the New York *Tribune* when he read newspapers in the reading room of the New York Society balcony" (67).

Without such a focal point, the text remains a wilderness, or a labyrinth, in which the reader either flounders or grows bored. And herein, ironically, may lie our most promising (if unsatisfactory) lead. Since the reader's troubled attempts at interpretation recall similar attempts on the part of Melville's earlier protagonist-narrators, one has to wonder whether Melville was not aware, at least instinctually, of the labyrinthine nature of his text, and its resistance to the hermeneutic endeavour.

Since *Mardi*'s publication in 1849 there have been critics and scholars who have sought to grant some shape to the "slovenly wilderness" of Melville's text, to provide the "key" the contemporary reviewer for *The Athenæum* considered hopelessly "buried in ocean deep" (Leyda, *Log* 293). But generally, and quite rightly, critics have despaired of ever encountering or producing a reading of *Mardi* that would vindicate all its excesses. The only option remaining, then, is to stress its failure—especially its failure to measure up to *Moby-Dick*, the yardstick for all critical encounters with Melville's oeuvre. As Hans-Georg Gadamer, referring to "our relation to art," has pointed out, "the judgment we make decides in the end regarding the expressive power and validity of what we judge. What we reject has nothing to say to us—or we reject it because it has nothing to say to us" (4). But the lack of "intelligib[ility]" that both Dimock and the *Critic*'s reviewer recognised in *Mardi* may well be the result of a radical revisiting of the failed site of hermeneutics in *Typee*. "Hermeneutics," says John D. Caputo, in a chapter on Heidegger, "is the countermovement to the pull of withdrawal, concealment, and fallenness. It sets about undoing the damage that fallenness does" (63). In this general scheme we recognise the interpretive efforts of Tommo, and can also easily place Paul's picaresque flirtation with "fallenness."

In its apocalyptic project against "fallenness," hermeneutics essentially repeats the pattern—as explained by Northrop Frye—set by the quester's resistance to demonic, anonymous nature. The "end" of hermeneutics is the revelation of what Peter Brooks calls the "signifying totality" of the completed plot (22). Meaning triumphs against chaos. In the case of *Mardi*, however, this triumph remains deeply qualified, partly because of emotional and intellectual excitement, and lack of discipline on the part of Melville, and partly, I would argue, because the anti-teleological import of his instinct asserted itself, in the case of *Mardi*, not merely on a thematic level, but on a textual level. *Mardi* has to be bulky because mankind's metaphysical, philosophical, scientific and literary schemata are; it has to fail because anatomically representative of those schemata (see also Grenberg 36). As Joseph Flibbert suggests, "*Mardi* is not a work of integration but of assimilation" (58). Perhaps one would convey its indeterminacy even more accurately by calling it a work of *accumulation*, "a potpourri" (Branch 124) that

narratively echoes the "incongruous assemblage" (*O* 309; ch. 81) of cultural artefacts that confronts Paul towards the end of *Omoo*, and precipitates his self-preservative rejection of Long Ghost. *Mardi*, against its narrator's grand integrative, unifying intentions, becomes a linguistic double of that heterogeneous heap, a monstrous figure of the failure of the teleological project against "fallenness."

> We are off! The courses and topsails are set: the coral-hung anchor swings from the bow: and together, the three royals are given to the breeze, that follows us out to sea like the baying of a hound. Out spreads the canvas—alow, aloft—boom-stretched, on both sides, with many a stun' sail; till like a hawk, with pinions poised, we shadow the sea with our sails, and reelingly cleave the brine.
>
> But whence, and whither wend ye, mariners? (3; ch. 1)

Thus we are launched into *Mardi*—by means of a passage bristling with activity, and straining with excitement and expectation. For the moment, we are nowhere near the dull, exhausted decks of the *Dolly* and the *Julia*, and the ship becomes a poetic force, "a hawk, with pinions poised." The image recalls (or is recalled by) Melville's reference to his own creative "pinions" in the letter to Murray quoted above, and it signifies roughly the same imaginative urge. The Romantic narrative voice is charged with self-assertive energy, and seems more than ready to meet the demands of the romance promised in the preface. It is a voice that soon modulates into the recognisable voice of Tommo or Paul as the narrator begins to take in the realities of life aboard the *Arcturian*, but here the intensity, as well as a grand rhetorical strain in the diction, evokes a hopefully defiant Romanticism as the essential characteristic of the narrator's persona. And that persona also informs the question that immediately follows the opening paragraph. Acquiring a certain poetic gravitas from the alliteration and archaic diction,[4] it essentially attempts to channel the kinetic force of the opening paragraph into a meaningful direction; a line is to be drawn between the point A of "whence" and the point B of "whither."

Point A is identified as "Ravavai, an isle in the sea" (3), a somewhat indeterminate place that therefore seems unsatisfying as a starting-point for significant action. It puts us in mind of the ending of picaresque *Omoo*, where we left Paul sailing off into the "wide Pacific" (316; ch. 82). Although the genesis of *Mardi* is not of concern here, it is useful to reiterate Merrell R. Davis's claim that "the book Melville began writing in 1847 was at first a sequel to *Omoo*" (41). It helps to clarify the surprising arbitrariness and essential anonymity of the narrator's starting-

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[4] This "gravitas" may of course also be a source of irony—the question would then function to undercut (by cutting short) the enthusiasm of the opening paragraph. If so, however, the irony is wholly Melville's, and not his narrator's, because the question produces no startled silence—the narrator immediately proceeds to answer it in full.

point, something that is important to our recognition of Melville's subversion of (his narrator's) teleology. Nothing is said about the character of Ravavai, or the nature of the narrator's sojourn there; the position of the island itself is only vaguely given in relation to the tropic of Capricorn and "Pitcairn's island, where the mutineers of the Bounty settled" (3). As a result the narrator has no clear, historically and contextually determined character—he comes close to being a transcendental, self-made man, and is therefore not wholly unjustified in assuming the fictional persona of Taji the demigod once he chances upon the Mardian archipelago. As a result, his voice, though it often modulates into warm-blooded geniality, and though it frequently speaks of recognisable phenomena, people, places and theories, becomes increasingly solipsistic, alien, and finally too diffuse to engage the reader's sympathy. Consequently, the narrative voice falls apart, and is fragmented into the disparate voices of four Mardians: Media, Babbalanja, Mohi and Yoomy. In Mardi's "world of mind" (557; ch. 169) the pyramidical sovereignty of the questing self disintegrates in the face of ontological blankness and worldly expedience. And the first stage in the disintegration is the ill-fated attempt to escape historicity and temporality (as Taji will eventually persist in trying to escape guilt). The very first passage introduces the narrator as someone who, poised for flight, looks forward only, even as it hauntingly converts the propelling breeze into something the ship tries to outrun: following them "like the baying of a hound," the breeze vaguely hints at a past which the narrator chooses to ignore, and in the process pre-emptively activates the ambiguous meaning of "flight." In other words, the imagery of flight (flying) is left prone to a demonic reading, in terms of which flight also means fleeing. More than simply figuring a contemporary view of romance as escapism, Melville here reveals a facet of his protagonist-narrator's fatal flaw[5]—his unwavering absolutist quest is maintained against a context which might have helped him to understand relativistic Ishmael's suggestion that to make life bearable one has to "lower [. . .] his conceit of attainable felicity" (*MD* 416; ch. 94). At the last, like Ahab,[6] he has to assert his Romantic purpose to the point of annihilation.

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[5] Taji's flaw cannot really be defined as tragic *hamartia* because it is not the result of an inescapable tragic destiny. As Romantic, his destiny is one of his own making—he instigates the quest and is free, at any time, to renounce it. In the form of Serenia he is even offered an escape from guilt. Thus, his self-annihilating departure into the "endless sea" (654; ch. 195) at the end of the book may be monumental, but it certainly is not tragic. It is an action for which the reader has very little sympathy, something which for many critics points to a fundamental flaw in the book, but which I would like to relate to a flaw in the Romantic character (whose heroic rejection of the everyday can easily result in a rejection of human sympathy).

[6] The comparison with Ahab should be qualified, in that Taji—unlike the larger-than-life monomaniac—cannot maintain an unflinching focus on his quest. Early on, his voice betrays something of the relativistic, ruminative playfulness of a Paul or an Ishmael, while later, as has been mentioned, his voice to some extent fades—only to

One way of reading *Mardi*, then—if one takes up the point originally made by Davis that it follows *Omoo* in the same way as *Omoo* follows *Typee*—is suggested by Bryan C. Short's claim that "[t]he synecdochic rhetoric carried over from *Omoo* to *Mardi* leads to internalization, a phenomenon common in high Romantic literature" (52). This reference to Harold Bloom's "The Internalization of Quest-Romance" makes one think about the relation of *Mardi* to Bloom's discussion of the progress of this Romantic quest:

> Implicit in all the Romantics [. . .] is a difficult distinction between two modes of energy, organic and creative [. . .]. For convenience, the first mode can be called Prometheus and the second "the Real Man, the Imagination" [. . .]. Generally, Prometheus is the poet-as-hero in the first stage of his quest, marked by a deep involvement in political, social, and literary revolution, and a direct, even satirical attack on the institutional orthodoxies of European and English society, including historically oriented Christianity, and the neoclassic literary and intellectual tradition, particularly in its Enlightenment phase. The Real Man, the Imagination, emerges after terrible crises in the major stage of the Romantic quest, which is typified by a relative disengagement from revolutionary activism, and a standing aside from polemic and satire, so as to bring the search within the self and its ambiguities. In the Prometheus stage, the quest is allied to the libido's struggle against repressiveness, and nature is an ally, though always a wounded and sometimes a withdrawn one. In the Real Man, the Imagination stage, nature is the immediate though not the ultimate antagonist. (11)

Melville's oeuvre does not neatly conform to this schema (even in a demonic or parodic sense), but there are some interesting points of intersection when one considers his first three books as an ongoing biography. The overt Rousseauism of Bloom's "Prometheus stage" is to some extent on display in *Typee*, even though, as I have argued, nature presents more of an antagonist than an ally. As far as social rebelliousness and the satirical treatment of "institutional orthodoxies" are concerned, *Typee* and *Omoo* clearly conform to the plan. Of "terrible crises" that initiate the next stage we have none, unless the very anti-climactic logic of picaresque *Omoo* serves as an inverted "crisis" that leads to Paul's rejection of Long Ghost, and *Mardi*'s narrator's pursuit of "the Imagination." In *Mardi*, at any rate—and I have already raised this point—we have a strong sense of the narrator distantiating himself from his historical identity, and aligning himself with a personal expansive vision. Even though the impulse to social satire remains strong,[7] the search is brought "within the self and its ambiguities," a process which in *Mardi* leads to fragmentation and annihilation.

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return somewhat (melo)dramatically in the closing chapters of the book. Ahab may have occasional, if infrequent, doubts, but Taji's resolve is relativised throughout, and appears somewhat artificial in the final heady chapters.

[7] The very fact of allegorisation—as, for instance, in satirical chapters 145-162—points to some degree of internalisation, since the narrator is foregoing straight social critique for a heightened, more creative *re*presentation of the actual. It is a move away from facts in favour of possibilities of expression.

That *Mardi* will explore the untenability of teleology is communicated early on. As so frequently in Melville, the quest receives an oblique cut in the opening pages of his book. The narrator boards a whaler, which sets out to hunt the Cachalot, or sperm whale—a theme to which Melville would give due attention only in *Moby-Dick*. Their course first leads them toward "the Gallipagos, otherwise called the Enchanted Islands, by reason of the many wild currents and eddies there met" (3). An image is conjured up of a labyrinth, a diffusion of purpose—an image later reiterated in *Moby-Dick*, when a tenacious Ahab pores over his charts in the attempt to "thread [. . .] a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishment of that monomaniac thought of his soul" (*MD* 199; ch. 44). Wilful Ahab plots a course into the labyrinth, where the *Pequod* perishes. But the *Arcturian* lets itself be ruled by circumstances. Its course is a detour, because

> thither, from Ravavai, your craft may not fly, as flies the sea-gull, straight to her nest. For, owing to the prevalence of the trade winds, ships bound to the northeast from the vicinity of Ravavai are fain to take something of a circuit; a few thousand miles or so. [. . .]
>
> This round-about way did the Arcturian take; and in all conscience a weary one it was. Never before had the ocean appeared so monotonous; thank fate, never since. (3-4; ch. 1)

Engaging an image of flying, the narrator emerges as one who would fly like the sea-gull—"straight to her nest." But, to his chagrin, the ship is forced to take a "round-about way." Neither does their arrival in the hunting-grounds relieve the narrator's frustration, since, finding no prey, the ship continues "day after day, daily; and week after week, weekly; [. . .] travers[ing] the self-same longitudinal intersection of the self-same Line" (4). As in the previous books, repetition and monotony lead the narrator to feelings of rebelliousness. Within the space of a few paragraphs the narrator distinguishes and distantiates himself from the crew, the captain, and the ship. But it is important to note that this time he has no convincing arguments in favour of his desertion but his own "bitter impatience" (4). In fact, the other sailors "were good fellows all," the captain "sociable," and "a trump," and the ship guilty of nothing worse than being "exceedingly dull" (4, 5). The problem lies strictly with the narrator's own taste for "sentiment and philosophy," in the light of which the crew becomes objectionable because "there was naught to strike fire from their steel," and the captain because "[h]is library was eight inches by four: Bowditch, and Hamilton Moore" (5):

> And what to me, thus pining for some one who could page me a quotation from Burton on Blue Devils; what to me, indeed, were flat repetitions of long-drawn yarns, and the everlasting stanzas of Black-eyed Susan sung by our forecastle choir? Staler than stale ale. (5)

There is more than a hint of intellectual snobbery here, and the narrator evokes a kind of Romantic isolation even as he establishes a vocal allegiance with the fanciful, anatomical, whimsically ironic work of Robert Burton. His horizons are broader than those of his peers, his ambitions greater. In this regard, John Wenke argues for a sympathetic link between Melville and his narrator—"Melville," he says, "projects his own impatience with high-sea adventure yarns into a narrator who distinctly defines his aspirations in terms of intellectual fulfillment" (28). It is a subtle and compelling point, but one which requires caution because it can easily result in a rather simplistic association of Melville with his narrator. Wenke, however, does not fall prey to this temptation.

By the time the narrator—like his predecessors—concocts a legal argument in favour of his desertion, this time because the captain ignominiously decides to steer north in order to hunt the more pedestrian Right Whale (as opposed to the Cachalot), we are not really convinced. Even the narrator seems to consider it unwise to press his point too hard:

> Now, this most unforseen determination on the part of my captain to measure the arctic circle was nothing more or less than a tacit contravention of the agreement between us. That agreement needs not to be detailed. And having shipped for a single cruise, I had embarked aboard this craft as one might put foot in the stirrup for a day's following of the hounds. And here, heaven help me, he was going to ship me off to the Pole! And on such a vile errand too! For there was something degrading in it. Your true whaleman glories in keeping his harpoon unspotted by blood of aught but Cachalot. By my halidome, it touched the knighthood of a tar. Sperm and spermaceti! It was unendurable. (6)

Very little of this argument has anything to do with legalities—the source of the problem clearly lies with the narrator's offended Romantic sensibilities. His description of himself as a leisurely aristocratic hunter having set out for "a days following of the hounds" may contribute to a general tone of genial whimsicality, but it is not meant as a joke. The reader, made a confidante, someone with whom the narrator can share sly hints and quotations, becomes implicated in his Romantic self-glorification. Here we have a glimpse of the aristocratic or sovereign man who will soon become a rebel, only to move on—unblinkingly—to captain, knight and demigod. This progression is, at the same time, a journey into romance (insofar as it is a goal of the narrator to escape the commonplace), and, in another sense, a version of Bloom's internalised quest-romance, with the Romantic poet-hero as knight. In this case, however, the rebellion is unsolicited, so to speak. Melville demonstrates how heroism is contingent on specific antagonistic historical circumstances. These being absent, the narrator is left to his own devices—he has to find something to rebel against, and finds it in the form of a "vile errand" that the captain wants to impose on him. Still maintaining a comic tone, the narrator pleads for the sanctity of the oxymoronic "knighthood of a tar," an expression which, like so many others,

actually serves to introduce and establish the image—by suggestion—of the narrator as a noble quester, a knight. That these images are not merely fanciful, or meant in play, becomes utterly clear when the narrator abandons the *Arcturian* mid-Pacific. Like Don Quixote, he sets out with an image of himself as a knight, experiencing the phenomena that greet him on just those terms. Thus, when he comes across Aleema and his sons, and finds out that they are transporting "a beautiful maiden" to a place of sacrifice, his response is immediate: "Now, hearing of the maiden, I waited no more. Need I add, how stirred was my soul toward this invisible victim; and how hotly I swore, that precious blood of hers should never smoke upon an altar" (131; ch. 41). This is the moment at which the narrator attains his knighthood, even though it is exquisitely ironised by the narrator's own interruption of his immediate action by an exposition of his rather stilted emotions. "Need I add," indeed.

The narrator's innocence to irony in this last scene is suggested by the rather excessive and floral nature of all prose related to Yillah, and particularly the couple's romantic interlude at Odo. Still, it is important to stress that the narrator, as descendant of Tommo and Paul (and in distinction from the Don), is quite capable of irony, as is clear in the direction his brief disquisition on heroes takes:

> Ah! but the warriors, like anvils, will stand a deal of hard hammering. Especially in the old knight-errant times. For at the battle of Brevieux in Flanders, my glorious old gossiping ancestor, Froissart, informs me, that ten good knights, being suddenly unhorsed, fell stiff and powerless to the plain, fatally encumbered by their armor. Whereupon, the rascally burglarious peasants, their foes, fell to picking their visors; as burglars, locks; or oystermen, oysters; to get at their lives. But all to no purpose. And at last they were fain to ask aid of a blacksmith; and not till then, were the inmates of the armor dispatched. Now it was deemed very hard, that the mysterious state-prisoner of France should be riveted in an iron mask; but these knight-errants did voluntarily prison themselves in their own iron Bastiles; and thus helpless were murdered therein. Days of chivalry these, when gallant chevaliers died chivalric deaths!
>
> And this was the epic age, over whose departure my late eloquent and prophetic friend and correspondent, Edmund Burke, so movingly mourned. Yes, they were glorious times. But no sensible man, given to quiet domestic delights, would exchange his warm fireside and muffins, for a heroic bivouac, in a wild beechen wood, of a raw gusty morning in Normandy; every knight blowing his steel-gloved fingers, and vainly striving to cook his cold coffee in his helmet. (78-79; ch. 24)

There is something anarchic about the associative narrative flow, which here modulates from a whimsical laudation to full-fledged irony—it is not clear what one is to make of the knights' undoing of themselves in the narrative context of the narrator's appreciative consideration of Samoa's heroic hardiness. In itself it is a wonderful anecdote, which thoroughly undercuts the glory of the "epic age," by pitching fully-armed knights against peasants, and, in a sense, making their very invincibility the cause of their downfall. The narrator himself is also fully in command of his tone: "Yes, they were glorious times," he ironically commiserates with Edmund Burke

(whom Melville quoted also in the second "Fragment," some nine years earlier[8]). But the subversion of knight-errantry, especially in its unfavourable contrast to "quiet domestic delights," makes little sense given the narrator's character. After all, this is someone who has by this stage abandoned a reasonably secure life aboard the *Arcturian* on the strength of a principle, and now finds himself aboard a strange, abandoned ship called the *Parki*.

This somewhat unsettling instability of character we might impute to the failure of a Romantic unification of diversity. For Dimock, it is "[t]he overlapping province of author and narrator [that] gives rise to a composite linguistic presence in *Mardi*" (59), and a number of other critics would lay the blame for such inconsistencies squarely at Melville's door.[9] But it is also the only book of Melville's to find its idiosyncrasies consistently related to a lack of craft (i.e., subjected to a patronising critical gaze). Perhaps a more fruitful approach would be to consider how narrative deviance might be necessitated, or at least, justified, by the greater thematic of the book.

It is useful, at this stage, to recall Robert M. Greenberg's "ideal of diversity" (4), which, transmitted primarily from German Romantics to the writers of the American Renaissance via Coleridge, underlies much of nineteenth-century American aesthetics. Since "Coleridge echoed the German emphasis on the transcendental imagination and on organicism—'the *power* which discloses itself from within as a principle of *unity* in the *many*,' or 'the principle of unity in *multeity*'" (Greenberg 4), and since the American democracy fostered an ideal of cultural multiplicity (Whitman's "nation of nations"), we find, "[i]n American literature, the normative thought-form of unity-in-diversity" (8), an aesthetic clearly related to the American national project.

I am in agreement with Greenberg insofar as he argues that this "ideal of diversity" self-deconstructively opens the door to fragmentation, and that many of the nineteenth century American writers succumbed to a growing sense of this fragmentation. But I would argue that Melville was *very* conscious—more conscious, that is, than any of his contemporaries—of the instability of the self precipitated by this "ideal." *Mardi*'s narrator—a Romantic quester—suffers precisely from that kind of dissolute indeterminacy of character that Melville predicted for anyone who tries to "[*l*]*ive in the all*" (*C* 193). Though it is only when we reach Mardi, the "world of mind" (557; ch. 169), that this fragmentation into distinct, inter-commenting characters becomes allegorically overt, the auto-interruptive narrative already prefigures that

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[8] Quoted there is Burke's point that "[t]he days of chivalry are over!" ("Fragments" 197; no. 2). See introduction, 18-19.

[9] See, for instance, Stern (*Steel* 69) and Matthiessen (377-90).

schizophrenic state. The occasional recognition of narrative defects—"One can not relate every thing at once" (64; ch. 20); "But all this is an episode, made up of digressions" (92; ch. 28)—reminds us of similar admissions in *Typee* and *Omoo*, but here their implication for the narrator's stability is far more severe. They represent a defeat, not only of the narrator's autonomous, unifying vision, but also of his autonomous self.

The vision that closes the opening chapter of *Mardi* is central to our provisional sense of the character of the narrator, for it underscores and extends the imagery of the opening paragraph, which establishes a Romantic currency. For the first time in his fiction, Melville has a central character ascend the mast to the look-out, a position he metaphorically associates with reverie.[10] The narrator goes "aloft one day, to stand my allotted two hours at the mast-head. It was toward the close of a day, serene and beautiful. There I stood, high upon the mast, and away, away, illimitably rolled the ocean beneath" (7; ch. 1). Suspended mid-air, the narrator feels a creative control over the broad canvas around him. Small as he seems to us, up there in the Pacific sky, there is no suggestion that the narrator feels humbled, or dwarfed, in any way. Instead, the position only serves to grant him some sense of liberation from the temporal ship-deck:

> I cast my eyes downward to the brown planks of the dull, plodding ship, silent from stem to stern; then abroad.
>
> In the distance what visions were spread! The entire western horizon high piled with gold and crimson clouds; airy arches, domes, and minarets; as if the yellow, Moorish sun were setting behind some vast Alhambra. Vistas seemed leading to worlds beyond. To and fro, and all over the towers of this Nineveh in the sky, flew troops of birds. Watching them long, one crossed my sight, flew through a low arch, and was lost to view. My spirit must have sailed in with it; for directly, as in a trance, came upon me the cadence of mild billows laving a beach of shells, the waving of boughs, and the voices of maidens, and the lulled beatings of my own dissolved heart, all blended together.
>
> Now, all this, to be plain, was but one of the many visions one has up aloft. But coming upon me at this time, it wrought upon me so, that thenceforth my desire to quit the Arcturian became little short of a frenzy. (7-8)

The narrator quite literally transcends the realities of shipboard life, and the featureless sea around him. It is difficult to fault Bruce L. Grenberg when he calls the vision itself "jejune" (28),

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[10] This association may well be inherited from Washington Irving, another strong influence on Melville. In "The Voyage" (from *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*), Irving's narrator (a passenger) confesses that

> [t]o one given to day-dreaming, and fond of losing himself in reveries, a sea voyage is full of subjects for meditation; but then they are the wonders of the deep, and of the air, and rather tend to abstract the mind from worldly themes. I delighted to loll over the quarter-railing, or to climb to the main-top, of a calm day, and muse for hours together on the tranquil bosom of a summer's sea [. . .]. (15)

In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael speaks of the "thought-engendering altitude" of the mast-head (158; ch. 35).

but its very unoriginality and staidness prompts our recognition of its conformity to Romantic conventions. The narrator's aerial architecture makes an overt reference to the Orient and the Levant, even though, by a quirk played upon him by the sphericity of the earth—which destabilises all schematic bivalence—this vision now appears in the west.[11] It is a parody of Romantic vision that simultaneously suggests the narrator's Romantic ambitions and establishes him as an equivocal authority (since we become aware of the parodying author behind him).

The cadenced progression of the vision differs from the telegraphic bluntness of Tommo's vision of "Naked houris," and so forth, in *Typee* (5; ch. 1), precisely to the extent that Romantic vision (and expression) contrasts with mere romanticised expectations. It is a hypnotic vision of unity, of "all [things] blended together." Later that unity is premised on a Christian authoritative hierarchy: "All things form but one whole; the universe a Judea, and God Jehovah its head. Then no more let us start with affright. In a theocracy, what is to fear?" (12; ch. 3). Of course, a number of suggestions emerge from the pages of *Mardi*—everything from calms to storms, from swordfish to sharks, ends up threatening man's complacent sense of security. But more importantly, this apparently orthodox statement of belief actually serves to figure the narrator's own Romantic theocracy, in which *he* features as the head. From the outset, he places himself in a position of authority, and eventually turns himself into a demigod. It is *his* vision that unifies all, an all that somehow fails to contain him, over which he remains the individuated "head." Of course, this is not quite how things work; in essence, the narrator's all-blending vision is the same kind of vision against which anti-Romantic Ishmael warns in "The Mast-head":

> [L]ulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absentminded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Wickliff's sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over.
>
> There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by the gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop

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[11] This is just another example of how Melville's Pacific destabilises cherished (Western) constructions. See, for instance, the exemption of the South Sea Islands from Newtonian theory (*O* 101; ch. 27), and the mystery of its "equatorial currents" (*M* 111; ch. 34).

> through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists![12] (*MD* 159)

The material world—the actuality of mortality—defeats all idealism. Like a snake, nature hypnotises only to devour, except that Melville takes care to keep it faceless, general and impersonal. Idealism imparts a false sense of security and benevolence that leads to fatal slip-ups. It takes the whole of *Mardi* to suggest that this Ishmaelian idea also applies to the narrator's vision. An ideal of unity is self-defeating because its logical end is the erasure of the idealising consciousness itself. His imaginative flight only sets up an archetypal fall into the annihilating dissolution of the sea.

For Wenke the image of the bird is central to our understanding of what it is that is prefigured by the narrator's vision:

> As in the "Time and Temples" chapter, the moment of imagined transcendence is depicted through the Platonic image of a bird. Here the "low arch" through which the bird flies separates the two competing experiential realms and two competing forms of narrative. The narrator's spirit soars with the bird, creating the spiritual imperative that will lead the body to follow. [. . .] His visionary experience both displaces the quotidian and imbues him with the psychological authority to pursue a life dedicated to his adventurous muse. (29-30)

For Wenke, then, this vision grants a preview of the narrator's journey from daily drudgery into romance and creativity, both in terms of experience and narrative. This is important, because, as I have indicated, many critics do not overtly implicate the narrator in the excessive nature of the narrative—the blame falls solely on Melville. However, I would suggest that the Icarean view of Melville be shifted to the narrator, who, like Ishmael's Pantheist, is a true Icarus. The "psychological authority" that the narrator gains from his vision results in an increasingly solipsistic confidence which leads to his assumption of the character of Taji, the demigod[13]—which Wenke correctly reads as "locat[ing] himself at the very juncture between the phenomenal and the noumenal, the physical and the metaphysical" (26)—and his defiant abdication into the maelstrom at the end of the book. Simply put, the narrator, in trying to escape the labyrinth, flies too high, and plummets into the dissolute, wall-less labyrinth of the sea. The "cloudy,

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[12] A paragraph earlier, Ishmael defines such a "Pantheist" as someone "who offers to ship with the Phædon instead of Bowditch in his head" (158), the very Bowditch that Taji finds so objectionable as a catalyst for conversation aboard the *Arcturian* (see *M* 5; ch. 1).

[13] In terms of standard mytho-theological hierarchies, this is a vertical self-promotion. Appropriately, the narrator's vision, as well as his communication of his plans to his companion-servant, Jarl, takes place at the mast-head. The latter occurs in a chapter appropriately entitled "A Chat in the Clouds."

supermundane flight" from which the reporter for Boston's *Weekly Chronotype* begged Melville to return (Parker, *Biography* 633), was not so much Melville's as his narrator's.

For Flibbert, the first sentence to follow the account of the vision—"Now, all this, to be plain, was but one of the many visions one has up aloft"—deals the vision itself "an ironic blow" (77). The monumentality of the vision is to some extent restored again by the very next sentence, but it does not manage to erase the irony altogether. That brief sentence, more than anything, hints at the parodic nature of the vision, though it is a quality that the narrator, at least consciously, remains unaware of. Earnest self-deprecation is something we come to expect less and less of in the narrator, for the monomaniac lacks (or has suppressed) the contextualising glance that might reveal the absurdities of his vision. It may simply be Melville here, trying to ensure his reader's critical wariness, appearing in a role similar to that of Babbalanja's "devil," Azzageddi (*M* 317; ch. 104). The narrator's autonomy, then, relativised by the "symposium" (Seelye 32) established in the archipelago of Mardi, is already problematised by signs of fragmentation. At the very outset of his apocalyptic, unifying vision, he manages to deflate it to one of those daily experiences it was meant to liberate him from in the first place. But the narrator does not realise this—instead, he proceeds to act on his convictions, in the grip of a rebellious "frenzy."

Melville's undermining of his narrator's Romantic vision becomes even more overt in his determinations at the level of plot—it is followed up, immediately, by a chapter entitled "A Calm," in which the *Arcturian* remains stuck. The chapter itself interrupts the progression of the narrator's story and produces an extensive sense of the uncertainty and doubt such a "calm" causes. The narrator, however, effectively attempts to displace the effect of the calm chronologically by describing its effect on him as a first-time sailor, "a landsman." Denying linear progression, the calm "unsettles his mind" (9), threatening his sense of stability and control, and, ultimately, the very beliefs that make his world comprehensible: the calm "tempts him to recant his belief in the eternal fitness of things; in short, almost makes an infidel of him"; "[h]is faith in [the geography of] Malte Brun [. . .] begins to fail"; "he grows madly skeptical"; he mistrusts the log, which pinpoints his geographic position; "[h]e begins to feel anxious concerning his soul"; and his voice "keeps up a sort of involuntary interior humming in him, like a live beetle. [. . .] The hollows of his bones are as whispering galleries" (9, 10). What ultimately becomes unsettled here is the stable centre of the self. The very voice—the vehicle of personal expression—becomes horrifically alienated from the will. In many ways this prefigures the demonic, interruptive voice of Azzageddi, but it also captures the larger sense of schizophrenia communicated by the narrative—the "whispering galleries" of the landsman's bones, conjuring a

sense of multiple voices, becomes the symposium of voices that virtually displaces the narrator's own for the bulk of the book. The narrator is *not* exempt from the horror induced by the calm. In spite of his ostensible aloofness, he admits that the calm "added not a little to my impatience of the ship" (9).

Merrell Davis points out that the chapter "is at once a digression [. . .] and an integral component of the narrative [. . .,] an emotional stimulus to the dramatic action" (105). He thus picks up on the narrator's early admission of "impatience" in order to help him bring *Mardi*'s divergence under control. But the irony is that the narrator's leaving the ship now begins to seem less the result of a heroic resolve to act on his vision of unity than the result of a need to flee that which threatens his vision. The narrator's quest is thus ironically kick-started by doubt, and these doubts will haunt his quest until the very end. "A Calm" is not integral to the story of the narrator's leaving the ship, but it is integral to our experience of his quest.

Several chapters later, by now cast adrift in an open whaleboat with his companion Jarl, the narrator is subjected to yet another calm, which confirms that the progress and ultimate fate of the *Chamois*—as he dubs the boat—is as subject to unthinking nature as that of the *Arcturian*, which, we are told, was never heard from again (24; ch. 7). This second calm also significantly problematises the narrator's rhetoric of flight, as

> the two gray firmaments of sky and water seemed collapsed into a vague ellipsis. And alike, the Chamois seemed drifting in the atmosphere as in the sea. Every thing was fused into the calm: sky, air, water, and all. Not a fish was to be seen. The silence was that of a vacuum. No vitality lurked in the air. And this inert blending and brooding of all things seemed gray chaos in conception. (48; ch. 16)

As the ironic title of the chapter, "They are Becalmed," makes clear, Jarl and the narrator become objects over which nature asserts its unconscious, aimless power. The narrator's intentions count for nothing. Here, the very source of his vision and libratory rhetoric—the sky—becomes indistinguishable from the sea. The *Chamois* ends up drifting in a featureless space which ironically, and demonically, represents the very "blended" unity of his vision. At the logical extreme of the ideal vision lies a world without struggle or individuation; hence, a dead, silent world—a void—that in turn becomes "gray chaos in conception." Herein lies the significance, during their "lonely voyage," of the narrator's noting that "the constellation Pisces was in the ascendant" (39; ch. 13). According to J. E. Cirlot, the sign of Pisces is

> closely bound up with the symbolism of water and of the 'dissolution of forms' [. . .]. If Capricorn marks the beginning of the process of dissolution, Pisces denotes the final moment which, for this very reason, contains within itself the beginning of the new cycle. [. . .] This twelfth house of the Zodiac, when transposed, by analogy, to the existential and psychic plane, denotes defeat and failure, exile or seclusion, and also mysticism and the denial of the self and its passions. (256)

The relevance of most of this for Melville's narrator can hardly be overlooked—the problem is that he resists this symbolic cycle (which takes its cue from natural cycles of growth and decay) at the point of breakdown. The narrator is defeated, as is his vision, but he will not see that. Instead, he maintains the autonomy "of the self and its passions," thus precluding any possibility of growth (as a character), as well as any chance of emerging from the maelstrom, as adaptable Ishmael does, for instance.

There are times, during these early chapters in which the two sailors drift upon the open sea, that the narrator does display a kind of qualifying wisdom—reminiscent of Paul, and even strangely prophetic of Ishmael—which softens the autocratic angle, and suggests that he is beginning to own the doubts he displaced so effectively aboard the *Arcturian*. He can admit that "[e]re this, I had regarded the ocean as a slave [. . .]. But now, how changed! [. . .] What a mere toy we were to the billows" (29-30; ch. 9); he can succumb to "tragico-comico moods" (34; ch. 10); he may realise that "every wise man knows himself to be [a fool]" (46; ch. 15), or that sometimes "the more light you throw on [. . .] [distant things], the more you obscure" (56; ch. 19). But we should not be misled. The deviant interpolations may stem from a more relativistic inner feature of the narrator's character, but they do not replace the governing Romantic vision—in fact, they do not even manage to alter it significantly. The narrator may announce change ("how changed!"), but there is none. At most, there is a temporary suspension of autocratic, sovereign certitude, to some extent regained once the sailors reach the firmer deck of the *Parki*. What we glimpse, rather, is that suppressed sceptical voice that, in Mardi's "world of mind," becomes peeled off from the narrator (who remains mainly as the silent force behind the quest for Yillah) and isolated in the character of Babbalanja (the babbler), whom John Seelye sees as a version of Johnson's "Imlac, a master of the circular, skeptical view" (38). Significantly also, once this voice emerges, it quickly becomes the strongest, most persistent voice of all. The only other voice maintained, with some success, against it, is that of the demigod and monarch, King Media.

From the start, the narrator is the undisputed instigator and commander of what turns out to be a "chartless voyag[e]" (556; ch. 169). While his authority may at times be diminished, it never disappears. Most importantly, he never consciously questions it himself. Thus, when he rescinds his own decision (made against all self-preservative logic) to avoid the sail on the horizon, it is only because his "own curiosity" moves him to second "my Viking's entreaties" (57; ch. 19). As a leader-master, then, he is not thoroughly unsympathetic. But the glibness with which he handles not only his own fate, but also Jarl's, firmly underscores the balance of power implied

by the widespread use of the possessive pronoun when referring to his companion (and later, to Samoa). In fact, this pronoun is nothing but a colonising term masquerading as an expression of endearment.

Such language of control is also central to the Romantic project, the aim of which is assimilation and unity. If, as Bloom has claimed, "Romantic nature poetry" actually "was an anti-nature poetry" ("Quest-Romance" 9), in the sense that it ultimately asserted the autonomous, binding powers of the poet, "the potential of an imagination too fierce to be contained by nature" (9), the logical step is to see the essentially Rousseauean high Romantic laudation of nature as a form of control, a language which seeks to assimilate nature's rampant energies into the comprehensive Romantic vision. Melville, it should be clear, does not share Rousseau's sense of a benevolent nature, one that allows itself to be assimilated, controlled, and overthrown, as in Romantic poetry. If one accepts Camille Paglia's broad sense of the Marquis de Sade—with his demonic, violent, indomitable version of nature—as revising Rousseau,[14] one would have to place Melville far nearer Sade than his humanism might at first glance seem too justify. For Melville, nature is unconscious,[15] hierarchical, brutal—and if it is incapable of malice, it is equally incapable of any form of benevolence—it simply does not conform to human moral categories. It is hard, for instance, not to ascribe to Melville a sly stab at Rousseau when, in a chapter dealing with the belligerent swordfish, the narrator recounts the tale of "the Rousseau, of Nantucket," which "was almost mortally stabbed" by a member of the species (*M* 105; ch. 32). The narrator himself certainly does not make much of this tale—but then again, he also immediately proceeds to capture the specimen that at this stage accompanies the *Parki*, thus asserting his own dominance over this "Chevalier" of the seas: "As victor, I was entitled to the arms of the vanquished; so, quickly dispatching him, and sawing off his Toledo, I bore it away for a trophy" (105). There is no suggestion that the narrator catches the swordfish, which he has spent some pages building up in stature, for such a purely expedient purpose as nourishment. The entire sequence simply functions to cast him in the role of hero and victor. In this, we are also reminded of the chapter, "My Lord Shark and his Pages," in which the narrator baits a shark, which Jarl kills, causing the pilot fish, or "pages" of the chapter heading, to transfer their allegiance to the *Chamois*, "even as they had attended their lord" (55). As far as the narrator goes, it seems, he either defeats or subjects.

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[14] See the chapter, "Return of the Great Mother: Rousseau versus Sade" in her *Sexual Personae* (230-47).

[15] Unconscious danger is most directly experienced when (once again back in the *Chamois*) the travellers drift among "an immense shoal of Cachalots" (121; ch. 38): "We were in great fear, lest without any vicious intention the Leviathans might destroy us, by coming into close contact with our boat" (122).

This brings us back to the language of control, by means of which the narrator does his utmost to enforce some degree of conformity to his will (his plans remain suitably vague—like Jarl, the reader is more or less given information only on the basis of necessity). By now it must be evident that, despite my disagreement with Dimock regarding Melville's authorial complicity in *Mardi*'s rhetoric of sovereignty, I find her argument highly relevant and compelling when limited to the realm of the narrator. And it is especially her points relating to "[l]inguistic ownership" (59) that have bearing on what I consider to be Melville's critique of his narrator's Romantic sovereignty:

> Linguistic ownership [. . .] would seem to be the supreme form of ownership in *Mardi*. And because ownership is exclusive, linguistic usage in this book is no less so. Only one person can be the proprietor here, and only one person can talk. This accounts for the volubility of the narrator and the voicelessness of his companions. Jarl is "exceedingly taciturn, and but seldom will speak for himself" (13), Melville makes the point of telling us, and the same is apparently true of Samoa and Annatoo [the two Islanders they meet aboard the otherwise abandoned *Parki*]. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that the narrator's companions comprise two South Sea Islanders and a "Viking"—savages all, with no claim to the English language [. . .]. (59-60)

Samoa—who soon enough becomes "my Islander," and gets a secondary designation, "the Upoluan" (99; ch. 30)—and Annatoo, like Jarl and, indeed, the swordfish and shark, become features of the narrative—subjects on which to elaborate (comically, philosophically, poetically), thus extending the assimilative reach of the narrator's imaginative powers. The narrator speaks *for* his subjects, a privilege which stands central to his authoritative status. One is tempted here to appropriate Wenke's concept, "creative rehabilitation" (23),[16] when speaking of what Dimock calls the "mak[ing] over" of characters' speech by the narrator (60). Dimock, because she fails to acknowledge Melville's engagement with the literary tradition, does not see this linguistic imperial design as reflective of Romantic discourse, though she does draw the link between "linguistic ownership" and the narrator's more overt assumption of dominance, especially once aboard the *Parki*, which conveniently offers little resistance to his claims of authority:

> Jarl is clearly his obedient servant, and even though he ordinarily looks upon the old sailor with "human complacency" (34), when the need arises he can easily "assume the decided air of a master" (90). His lordship over Samoa is equally unmistakable. From the very first, using the "mild, firm tone of a superior," the narrator establishes his own "unquestioned supremacy" (96). Indeed, the only intractable soul on board the *Parki* is Annatoo, who "through Samoa would then have sway" (96). But the narrator guards against this eventuality by securing "my Viking" and by keeping Samoa "docile" (96). So before long "the command of the vessel [is] tacitly yielded up to myself" (97). [. . .] But the narrator's supremacy rests ultimately not on his social origins, imagined or otherwise, but on the fact that he is a different kind of character from the others. He

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[16] Wenke's use of this concept seems to be limited to Melville's use of sources; those very sources Dimock ignores.

> does the speaking, they are spoken of. His existence is coextensive with the narrative, theirs is cursory, incidental. (Dimock 62)

As Dimock points out, Annatoo—the "Calmuc" (91; ch. 28)—shows the most recalcitrance to the narrator's sovereign designs. She remains unpredictable and is an overt source of instability and uncertainty, both social (she has assimilative urges of her own: she steals) and navigational—she is suspected of being responsible for the loss of, among others things, the "log, quadrant, and ship's papers" (93; ch. 29), the sextant, the chronometer (94), the log-reel (113; ch. 35) and, finally, the compass (114). She is also something of a virago, who remains more or less unimpressed with the narrator's assumed authority. For the latter, "[t]his contempt of my presence surprised me at first; but perhaps women are less apt to be impressed by a pretentious demeanor, than men" (92; ch. 28). The dramatic innocence displayed in the first part of the sentence rather heightens the irony of the second, but it also underscores the fact that the narrator is not aware of the effect of this statement at all. Surely he considers his pretensions to authority to be justified? But his patronising "compliment" to women redounds on him, exposing his "pretentious[ness]." Similarly, none of a series of attempts to contain Annatoo's character by means of comedy, which Martin Leonard Pops characterises as "leaden jibes—American *kitsch* humor at its worst" (45), ends up laying her to rest. In the end he is saved from her by circumstances completely beyond his control—a storm, which also destroys the *Parki*, and forces the three men back into the *Chamois*. Notably, no mention of her is made ever again—while earlier, the narrator uses the foreknowledge of her death as an occasion to exercise his lamentations, no word is said on the matter of Samoa's grief. Annatoo remains a recalcitrant presence, belonging to the group of women who "lead men into zigzags" (101; ch. 31), who divert them from a linear progression. In the end, she is less "a caricatured parallel of Yillah" (Stern, *Steel* 105), than her demonic opposite, subjected to caricature by the narrator. Cirlot writes that

> [i]n anthropology, woman corresponds to the passive principle of nature. She has three basic aspects: first, as a siren, lamia or monstrous being who enchants, diverts and entices men away from the path of evolution; second, as the mother, or *Magna mater* (the motherland, the city or mother-nature) related in turn to the formless aspect of the waters and of the unconscious; and third, as the unknown damsel, the beloved or the anima in Jungian psychology. [. . .] [T]he superior aspects of Woman as Sophia or Mary determine her function as a personification of science or supreme virtue; and when presented as an image of the anima, she is superior to the man because she is a reflection of the loftiest and purest qualities of the man. In her baser forms as Eve or as Helen—the instinctive and emotional aspects—Woman is on a lower level than the man. (375-76)

It is clear that, for the narrator, Annatoo represents the first of the three basic aspects mentioned in the first part of the quotation. But her nature as someone who primarily "diverts [. . .] men" is

problematic not only because it demonically resists the linearity ("evolution") of the quest, from a "lower level," but because she to some extent sets herself up as an equal, someone who does not acknowledge the narrator's authority (nor her husband's). She is associated with "the Amazonian character" (*M* 90) and, as Régis Boyer points out, the Greeks considered the Amazons to be "women-men, *antianeirai*, as Homer puts it [. . .]. Homer is apparently playing on the double sense of the prefix 'anti,' to imply that they are both the equals and the enemies of men" (1160). Annatoo, then, presents a potent threat to the Romantic imperialism of the narrator, who cannot abide her destabilising influence.

The other aspect of archetypal "Woman" to come into play is the third, in the form of Yillah. The second—the mother—is of course ubiquitous in the form of the sea, but perhaps finds a more explicit expression in the "[g]ood old Arcturian! Maternal craft, that rocked me so often in thy heart of oak" (24; ch. 7).[17] The narrator's act of individuation is figured precisely by his absconding from her decks. That step asserts his interrelated autonomy and idealism which, in spite of setbacks, at length leads to the "beautiful girl" and captive "maiden," Yillah (136; ch. 43).

"[N]ot only did I congratulate myself upon salvation from the past, but upon the prospect for the future" (125; ch. 39)—this is how the progressively-minded narrator feels shortly after he, Jarl and Samoa have been forced back into the *Chamois*, and shortly before he runs into Yillah. This "salvation from the past" doubtlessly refers to the loss of Annatoo, the wayward woman who threatened to undermine his sovereignty, but it also recalls, at this crucial moment, his initial act of individuation, taking place against the background of a more comprehensive and ongoing attempt to liberate himself from his context. The narrator can construct genealogies[18] for Jarl, Samoa and Annatoo, and even for Yillah, but he—as autonomous, creative "I AM"—must escape context altogether.

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[17] One is reminded of the "sailor's cradle rock[ing]" (*O* 316; ch. 82) under Paul at the end of *Omoo*, which completes the cyclical (non-progressive) nature of his picaresque wanderings.

[18] Such genealogies extend to the scientific realm—the narrator, in confronting the diverse phenomena of the sea, frequently sets out what one might call a scientific genealogy. Where such a history of theories refuses to lead to a sense of homogeneity, the narrator might proffer a more poetic solution, as in his conclusion to a discussion of the "marine phosphorescence" (122; ch. 38). Here the narrator acknowledges that he could only reiterate "surmises; likely, but not certain" (123). But he does not leave it at that—"After science comes sentiment" (123). One assumes that this "sentiment" is meant to transcend—offer an escape from—the cul-de-sac in which the narrator's genealogy of theories has deposited him. But ironically, sentiment does not quite pick up where science leaves off—it side-steps the issue completely.

Once the *Chamois* meets up with the craft of mysterious Aleema and his sons, a tremendous burst of kinetic energy ushers us through the narrator's metamorphosis into knight, murderer and demigod. The first part of the meeting is still respectably paced, with the narrator spending some time on evoking the mysteriousness of

> [t]he old priest, like a scroll of old parchment, covered all over with hieroglyphical devices, harder to interpret, I'll warrant, than any old Sanscrit manuscript. And upon his broad brow, deep-graven in wrinkles, were characters still more mysterious, which no Champollion nor gipsy could have deciphered. He looked old as the elderly hills; eyes sunken, though bright; and the head white as the summit of Mont Blanc. (130; ch. 40)

Aleema shares a kinship with all things inscrutable in Melville's oeuvre, particularly the "Sperm Whale's brow" (*MD* 347) Ishmael considers in "The Prairie."[19] A subject fit to defeat even Champollion's interpretive powers, he announces himself as a doorway to occult knowledge, or gnosis. Of the whale's brow, defeated Ishmael says, challengingly: "Read it if you can" (*MD* 347). And this is precisely what the narrator of *Mardi* proceeds to attempt—in terms of his imperial logic this once more becomes a site of homogenisation. At length, by means of interrogation, the mystery of the situation becomes focused on the tent aboard the craft:

> They pointed toward the tent, as if it contained their Eleusinian mysteries. And the old priest gave us to know, that it would be profanation to enter it.
>
> But all this only roused my curiosity to unravel the wonder.
>
> At last I succeeded. (131; ch. 41)

The curt progression utterly overrides the ruminative consideration that qualifies, for instance, Tommo's attempts in *Typee* to penetrate the inscrutable. *Mardi*'s narrator is not to be defeated. Thus, he barges his way through to a revelation that perfectly suits his own developing romance:

> In that mysterious tent was concealed a beautiful maiden. And, in pursuance of a barbarous custom, by Aleema, the priest, she was being borne an offering from the island of Amma to the gods of Tedaidee.
>
> Now, hearing of the maiden, I waited for no more. Need I add, how stirred was my soul toward this invisible victim; and how hotly I swore, that precious blood of hers should never smoke upon an altar. If we drowned for it, I was bent upon rescuing the captive. (131)

A number of things happen here, not least of which is the sudden—if subtle—shift from the real world to the fictional. The references to Tahiti and Westphalia in the previous chapter give way to references to "the island of Amma" and "the gods of Tedaidee." And the shift coincides

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[19] The relevant passage reads:

> Champollion deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man's and every being's face. Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable. If, then, Sir William Jones, who read in thirty languages, could not read the simplest peasant's face in its profounder and more subtle meanings, how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can. (347)

directly with the narrator's recognition of his heroic destiny, and a concomitant slide into a staid rhetoric of romance, vows and all. Once again, however (as pointed out in an earlier reference to this scene), an ironic flavour creeps into the tone which seems more the result of Melville's own meddling than any self-consciousness on the part of the narrator. Another source of irony stems from the narrator's own hopes for a peaceful resolution—"I waited no more," he announces, only to set about calculating the "odds" (131), and virtually attempting to barter for the captive. As Grenberg correctly points out, this chapter "clearly defines Melville's uneasy awareness of the separation between thought and act, mind and world" (33). For the Romantic, of course, this separation is minimal, or non-existent, which is precisely why the narrator has always managed to remain fairly careless with regard to his own life, and those of his companions. He lives in a world without consequences; that is, until he kills Aleema.

Once the situation comes to a head, things proceed in a flash. Before we know it, the narrator has stabbed the priest, who "fell over like a brown hemlock into the sea" (133), and the *Chamois* has pushed off from the raft with hostages. Almost immediately, he is gripped by remorse and doubts regarding the virtue of his motive (135; ch. 42), only to suppress it: "But throttling the thought, I swore to be gay. Am I not rescuing the maiden?" (135). It is this moment of doubt and guilt, interposing itself between the narrator's violent act of liberation and his claiming of his prize, that finally undermines his achievement of absolute autonomy even before he has truly attained it. In the act of reaching for the ideal, the ideal is compromised. As such, Pops is quite perceptive when he links the stabbing of the priest to the "pierc[ing of] Yillah's tent" (40)—a point which bypasses strict ethics for a more archetypal sense of the act. From here on, the narrator is utterly prone to the fragmentation he has been tenaciously staving off from the very beginning by means of his homogenising vision.

The symbolism relating to the encounter with Aleema and the rescue of Yillah has been subjected to many readings—Pops calls her "the symbolic embodiment of Sacred Reality," for Taji, "sacramental and sexual fulfillment," and for Babbalanja, "Final Truth" (39); Grenberg sees her as "nature's prized secret" (33); Milton R. Stern calls her "*Mardi*'s beautiful dream" (*Steel* 109); F. O. Matthiessen speaks of her representative "innocence" as "good [. . .] angel" (384); for Merlin Bowen she is "emblematic, perhaps, of the unreflective happiness men know in their youth (140); etc.—but more or less all of them see Yillah as representative of some kind of

ideal.[20] She quite comfortably fits the account Frye gives of the "reward" in the secular quest romance:

> [T]he reward of the quest usually is or includes a bride. This bride-figure is ambiguous: her psychological connection with the mother in an Oedipus fantasy is more insistent than in comedy. She is often to be found in a perilous, forbidden, or tabooed place [. . .] and she is, of course, often rescued from the unwelcome embraces of another and generally older male, or from giants or bandits or other usurpers. [. . .] Translated into dream terms, the quest romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality. (193)

Yillah, then, is the logical end of the quest prefigured by the narrator's vision at the mast-head. She embodies the promise of complete homogenisation of deviance, deliverance from the anxieties of reality, and the successful "contain[ment of] that reality." She vindicates the narrator's selfish designs. She is the Jungian *anima*. Perhaps she is even the Coleridgean "esemplastic imagination," attained. Whatever she is, she certainly has no character.

So why does she already appear within the first third of the book? This seems to me an important question that has not really been explored by critics, who for the most part focus on the quest-theme as something that only arises once Yillah disappears again. This is because the more genial aspect of the narrator seems to disappear from that point on, his monomania becoming more pronounced, even though it struggles for appropriate representation amid the voices of Media, Mohi, Yoomy and Babbalanja.

Just as the narrator responds to his vision by taking to his boat, the disappearance of Yillah prompts him to go in quest of her—again. Melville seems to be pointing out the cycle of repetition to which the quester / idealist / Romantic dooms himself if he persists in chasing down absolutes. Even Serenia—which with its promise of rest, and some relief from guilt and doubt, I take to be less an ideal realm than the site of Ishmael's diminished, but attainable felicity—gets passed by. This, then, is why Melville introduces Yillah, "the reward," at such an early stage—his theme is the impossibility of attainment, which in the unrepentant idealist, must lead to solipsism, monomania and death in a realm void of the consolations provided within one's historical context. Yillah may present a pyramidical moment, but the narrator is back in the labyrinth, deeper than ever.

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[20] Merrell Davis insists that she is not "a universal abstraction," but "a maiden rescued from death, the heroine of a romance whose setting is the South Sea" (128). One has to wonder about the necessity for such a claim if one bears in mind not only the archetypal charge carried by the romance as form (especially as "rehabilitated" by the Romantics), but also the fact that the action can no longer be said to take place on the South Seas as we know it.

As the narrator points out, "[i]n rescuing the gentle Yillah from the hands of the Islanders, a design seemed accomplished" (142; ch. 45). But immediately the sense of accomplishment is somewhat displaced by a matter of expedience: "But what was to be done now?" (142). As suggested earlier, there are quite a number of such essentially ironic interruptions provided by the narrator himself—unconsciously, that is—scattered throughout *Mardi*. But the narrator does not long tarry on this question. Instead, he sets about securing Yillah's devotion by "maintaining my assumption of a divine origin in the blessed isle of Oroolia" (142), the essentially Platonic ideal realm that Yillah believes herself to hail from. He even invents a shared past, which serves not only to win Yillah over, but provides a sense of continuity to his own wanderings (preceding those recounted in *Mardi*): "[O]ver the wide watery world I have sought thee: from isle to isle, from sea to sea. And now we part not" (143). In a very immediate sense, then, Yillah serves as a means of unifying the narrator's wayward experience—not surprisingly, this also marks the point at which he assumes "a divine origin." As Stern has pointed out,

> [a]fter the meeting with Yillah, he emerges as the christened Taji, a white god from the sun, and his new life, which in its pretentious other-worldly origin is an association with ideality, is the protagonist's major role throughout the rest of the book. [. . .] *He kills his historical existence in order to pursue his symbolic quest.* (*Steel* 94-95)

Though the actual name, Taji, is only acquired a few chapters later, when they land at their first Mardian isle, this is most certainly the point at which the narrator's sense of sovereignty transforms itself into a sense of divinity, the point at which he becomes "complete." All at once, with "Yillah pining for the shore" (160; ch. 52), there is no need to remain adrift anymore—they aim west and light upon Mardi, "some new constellation in the sea" (160), the "world of mind" in which the narrator will be welcomed as a demigod. Now Taji is ready to settle down: "Sweet Yillah, no more of Oroolia; see you not this flowery land? Nevermore shall we desire to roam" (161).

For Davis, the section of *Mardi* extending from the narrator's first encounter with Aleema until Yillah's disappearance may be defined as a "Romantic Interlude" (125). Grenberg, appropriating the term to designate Taji and Yillah's idyll, suggests that

> [i]n the "romantic interlude" Melville defines and attempts to dramatize the romantic dream of a perfectly conceived universe perfectly experienced. [. . .] In sum, the "romantic interlude" defines the timeless, unconfined world of unfettered mind and imagination. (33-34)

That Taji's language at this time is frequently marked by hyperbole and melodrama one is tempted to ascribe to a parodic, mocking intent on the part of Melville—he looks at the "romantic dream" well aware of its decidedly temporary, compromised nature. In keeping with this it becomes apparent, shortly after the party has been invited, by King Media, to be his guests

at Odo, that the abundance of which they are recipients is founded on the toil of an exploited working-class. Taji may find cause for criticism here, even righteous anger, but in the end it is difficult to overlook his easy dismissal of the unpleasantness: "But let all pass. To look at, and roam about of holidays, Odo seemed a happy land" (192). Any sarcasm inherent in these lines must be solely ascribed to Melville, for Taji's ruminations lead him away to a distant conclusion in an admiring appraisal of Odo's oceanic graveyard. Odo's ghettos, while clearly underlying the failure of Taji's edenic sojourn, does not unsettle his divine repose directly. And this is hardly surprising, bearing in mind his own thankless reliance on the labour of Jarl, Samoa and Annatoo.

The link between Taji and Media is established early on, in terms of their shared status as demigods. By the archetypal representational logic of the book, much that is said regarding Media as leader and monarch reflects also upon Taji. "Belshazzar on the Bench," the chapter that deals with Media's supreme judicial power, also comments on Taji's own sovereignty. For Media, "unerring justice dwells in a unity" (185); hence, one judge (of the right character, or rank) is better than twelve. The similarity between Media and Taji on this point can hardly be deemed vague.

Ultimately, however, what most characterises Taji's sojourn with Yillah is a growing solipsism. In "Taji retires from the World," we find him embowered on an islet (to which even Jarl is not welcome), which later he calls a "[f]airy bower in the fair lagoon, scene of sylvan ease and heart's repose" (193; ch. 64). Of course it cannot last. And when Yillah disappears, solipsistic self-satisfaction modulates into mania, and the threat of a dissolving madness, to the distress and embarrassment of all those around. Not insignificantly, "Media cried, 'For shame, oh Taji; thou, a god?' and placed a spear in my nerveless hand" (194). The spear, with its connotations of hunting, purpose and aim, becomes emblematic of the sovereign self's will to power.[21] One is reminded, in this brief sentence, of the mad hunter, Ahab, and his vengeful return to form after a debilitating fever brought on by the wound dealt him by Moby Dick. Within a few brief paragraphs, Taji is back on his feet, and full of purpose: "At last I turned to Media, saying I must hie from Odo, and rove throughout all Mardi; for Yillah might yet be found" (195). This purpose grows more and more monomaniacal throughout the book, until eventually, toward the end, Taji returns us to this earlier evocation of the hunter: "I am that hunter that never rests! the hunter without a home! She I seek, still flies before; and I will follow

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[21] The spear becomes linked to the idea of quest when Taji refers to Aeneas's " fine craft Bis Taurus [. . .]: its stern gloriously emblasoned, its prow a leveled spear" (481; ch. 149).

even though she lead me beyond the reef; through sunless seas; and into night and death" (638; ch. 189).

Undeniably Taji and Ahab are kin, but there is one important distinction in Melville's treatment of their monomania. In *Moby-Dick*, Ahab's madness is characterised by a demonic "interfusi[on]" (185; ch. 41), in which all his faculties and energies become "concentrated [. . .] upon its own mad mark" (185)—the demonic version of the Emersonian Transcendental artist, who "seek[s] [. . .] to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point" ("Nature" 47; ch. 3). Taji's monomania, on the other hand, seems to be the result of a fragmenting reduction of himself. In the end, thematically speaking, the implications are identical, but narratively speaking, we notice a clear difference—Ahab's stature grows (by his own rhetoric), while Taji's stature is diminished. He virtually disappears from his own narrative, or rather, within it.

Taji's expression of resolve to go searching for Yillah "throughout all Mardi" is followed by the most extraordinary statement: "But hereafter, in words, little more of the maiden, till perchance her fate be learned" (195; ch. 64). This sudden dismissal of narrative responsibilities has always irked critics, the more so because it cannot be reconciled with the overt monomania of Taji at the end of *Mardi*. However, the anomaly is to some extent explained (if not vindicated) by the sudden appearance of three new characters—Babbalanja, Mohi and Yoomy—in the very next chapter, "Taji makes three Acquaintances," for they, together with Media, will essentially carry (usurp) the rest of the narrative. As Bowen puts it,

> [t]his later [grim and laconic] Taji is certainly one of the least particularized heroes in the history of fiction. The meagreness of his development, however, is less an indication of Melville's inability to create character than the consequence of experimentation with the literary device of psychological fragmentation. Taji is a shadowy character for the sufficient reason that he was never intended to be more than one-fifth of a hero, his rightful inheritance of traits having been divided at the outset of the voyage among the five companions of the search. (139-40)

Within this kind of framework, the mad plenitude of what is to follow—the stories, the indeterminate conversations and debates, the sights, the theories—make some thematic sense, even as it remains utterly defiant of any measured economy of prose. In other words, the plenitude inscribed into Taji's Romantic designs—and this is what critics of *Mardi*'s deviance respond to—pushes the text beyond its powers of containment, and it becomes fragmented. When this happens, the narrative turns into a parody of Romantic imaginative unity, Coleridge's principle (quoted by Greenberg) of "unity in *multeity*" (4). To put it differently, part of Melville's attack on teleology and, more specifically, Romantic poetics of unity, must be to provide a demonic parody of such poetics which aims to contain phenomenal diversity (for the

same reason, the dialectic which lies at the heart of the romance needs to be muddled). Increased narrative scope relativises the importance of the quest; marginal subjects displace the central story, the plot. As a result, it is not a very "readable" book; nor one to reward critical scrutiny easily (scrutiny which, like my own attempt to read *Mardi*, must bypass most of the prose in order to focus on abstracted fragments). Grenberg comes to a similar conclusion: "The plenary concept of *Mardi* modifies severely the critical license we all employ in extracting crucial scenes, events, and passages to explain the 'total' significance of the work. In a very meaningful sense, all critics of *Mardi* are doomed to fail just as Taji is doomed to fail in his search for Yillah" (36).

In arguing for "psychological fragmentation" I am not trying to argue for a neat, schematic division of Taji into four or five representative figures. *Mardi* is not a neat enough book for that. But there is a marked anatomical quality to these characters—Media, the monarch; Mohi, the historian, "one of the Keepers of the Chronicles" (197; ch. 65); Babbalanja, the philosopher, "a man of a mystical aspect" (197) and persistent voice of scepticism;[22] and Yoomy, the poet, or "Warbler" (197). Each of them displays certain characteristics that we have had occasion to notice in Taji. Joined together in harmony, such a body politic may well provide a most representative figure of the ideal of sovereign Romantic poet.

However, Taji's companions do not function in this way. Their discourse is marked by fruitless debate and irritation. To a large extent, this stems from an unprecedented act which, more even than Taji's fever, figures the way in which Yillah's disappearance affects the solidarity of Taji's personal empire—Media suspends "all stiffness and state etiquette" shortly after the party leaves Odo (208; ch. 69). Of course, it is "a sociable decree" (208) in the spirit of a democratic exchange of ideas and stories, but the effect is at once to render impossible the unified judgment to which Media attaches such value. Consequently, we frequently find him evoking his divinity at times of crisis, and claiming a higher knowledge that he is not at liberty to divulge. The emptiness of such posturings is revealed toward the end, when Media finds himself affected on a very human level by the temporal "Paradise" of Serenia, and returns to Odo in a reforming mood.

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[22] This in spite of the fact that he assures Taji that "[y]our pursuit is mine" (197), since Taji also notices that he "seemed not so buoyant of hope, concerning lost Yillah" (197).

Quite appropriately, then, the search for Yillah disappears[23] behind a barrage of dialogue roughly centred on questions of epistemology and idealism. As angles and perspectives are multiplied, no real progress is made toward conclusions of any kind—at the same time, Taji is forced to repeat the obvious fact that Yillah is not to be found (208). A few examples from the text should suffice to grant a sense of the thematic implications of the travellers' experiences and discussions, although it is in its sheer encyclopaedic volume that the text achieves its most telling defeat of its narrator's ideal of containment.

Taji's search party sets out in a canoe fronted by "[a] grinning little imp of an image [. . .]. This image looked sternward; everlastingly mocking us" (200; ch. 66). We are reminded of the skull mocking the rower at the site of Tommo's epistemological defeat; his subjective and conjectural reading of Typee culture. Forming simply a part here of Taji's description of the canoes of Odo, it nonetheless serves as a complex figure of both Taji's impatience and frustration, and a portent of the mocking indeterminacy to which the quest is doomed.

"As the questers go forth," Wenke points out, "Yoomy echoes the ending of *Paradise Lost*: 'The dawn of day is passed, and Mardi lies before us'" (47). The relevant lines from Milton run thus:

> The World was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way. (bk. 12, lines 646-49)

By means of such allusion to *Paradise Lost*, the reader is given a clear sense of what was lost in losing Yillah. The mixture of melancholy (or elegy) and hope is also communicated by Yoomy's inaugural words to the quest, which conclude confidently that "Yillah will yet be found" (200; ch. 66). But there is a marked difference: where Adam and Eve, in spite of being confronted with the sudden multiplication of choices, still have "Providence [as] their guide," Yoomy's speech only invokes "our wits" (200). In other words, there is no a-temporal, stable, external authoritative point of reference to which the questers have recourse. In fact, there is no point of reference whatsoever. As Babbalanja, echoing Ecclesiastes in a direct criticism of the foundations of Emersonian Transcendentalism, suggests, "All vanity, vanity, Yoomy, to seek in nature for positive warranty to these aspirations of ours" (210; ch. 69). They have to rely on their

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[23] This is not the same as saying that it becomes unimportant—it remains central to our experience of the stories and dialogues in the same way that the context of a pilgrimage remains central to our encounter with the tales of Chaucer's pilgrims.

own faculties to guide them. Media later aptly concludes (though leaving himself out of the equation): "[Y]ou [mortals] are ever unfixed" (370; ch. 120).

This absence of fixity, of an axis, of that Archimedean point of authority from which one can make objective and lasting (as opposed to subjective, expedient and contextually determined) judgments—compare Ahab's "fixed purpose" (*MD* 168; ch. 37)—forms one of the most persistent topics of conversation throughout the rest of *Mardi*. Perhaps the paradigmatic insight comes in the form of Babbalanja's claim that "[t]he world revolves upon an I" (559; ch. 170), an ultimately relativistic dictum which has its unmistakable beginnings in the sovereign "I AM," to which Taji subscribes in the first part of the book. This link is also firmly established in an earlier scene when an inebriated Babbalanja proclaims that

> [i]t is this imagination of ours, my lord, that is at the bottom of these things. When I am in one place, there exists no other. [. . .] To me it is not, except when I am there. If it be, prove it. To prove it, you carry me thither; but you only prove, that to its substantive existence, as cognizant to me, my presence is indispensable. I say that, to me, all Mardi exists by virtue of my sovereign pleasure; and when I die, the universe will perish with me. (488-89; ch. 151)

A link is drawn between the sovereign "I" and its imaginative faculty. The world man inhabits is, to some extent, his own. Years after writing *Mardi*, in 1862, Melville came upon a comparable idea in his copy of Emerson's *Essays: First Series*: "The good, compared to the evil which he sees, is as his own good to his own evil" (Leyda, *Log* 648). Melville's sardonic note to this reads: "A perfectly good being, therefore, would see no evil.—But what did Christ see?—He saw what made him weep.—However, too, the 'Philanthropist' must have been a very bad man—he saw, in jails, so much evil" (Leyda 648). In Babbalanja we find the implications of Romantic sovereignty followed to their relativistic extreme, the point at which man once again becomes utterly isolated from the world around him, because he is a prisoner of his own perception. Hence Babbalanja's drunken burlesque on the imagination, which at length follows his declaration of sovereignty: "[T]he imagination is the Voli-Donzini; or, to speak plainer, the unical, rudimental, and all-comprehending abstracted essence of the infinite remoteness of things" (489). Finally nonsensical, this definition has as its central principle that of "remoteness," a sense of isolation. And cumulatively, through the course of *Mardi*, this sense of isolation from the surrounding world (first evoked—within the structure of Romantic logic—in the essentially social isolation experienced by Taji aboard the *Arcturian*) extends itself to a sense of isolation from the self (as Taji becomes isolated from his narrative), and fragmentation. Quite simply, the centre does not hold.

The defeat of the sovereign "I" is early evoked by Babbalanja when, musing on the unceasing cycles of nature, he is led to cry out, "Ah gods! in all this universal stir, am *I* to prove

one stable thing?" (238; ch. 78). The question (am I?) itself inverts the confident I AM, invoking a fragmenting doubt. This sense becomes intensified through all the indeterminate and circular debates; the fact that Babbalanja is often reliant on the wisdom of others, particularly the sayings of Bardianna; the introduction of his devil, Azzageddi; and at length reaches a radically provisional culmination in chapter 143, "Wherein Babbalanja discourses of himself." A chapter of convoluted argumentation, it is most notable for its focus on Babbalanja's unstable sense of self, and the irredeemable relativism to which this leads his arguments. By this stage, Babbalanja appears essentially schizophrenic:

> My lord,—for the present putting Azzageddi entirely aside,—though I have now been upon terms of close companionship with myself for nigh five hundred moons, I have not yet been able to decide who or what I am. To you, perhaps, I seem Babbalanja; but to myself, I seem not myself. All I am sure of, is a sort of prickly sensation all over me, which they call life; and, occasionally, a headache or a queer conceit admonishes me, that there is something astir in my attic. But how know I, that these sensations are identical with myself? For aught I know, I may be somebody else. (456)

This is as profound a statement of alienation from the self as is to be found in literature, and takes us to a position diametrically opposed to the Romantic conception of self, though directly descended from it. In himself, Babbalanja prophetically reflects a very real historical shift from Romanticism to modernism, by demonstrating what happens once the sovereign "I" becomes susceptible to doubt. "What separates us from the Romantics," Harold Bloom has suggested with characteristic pith, "is our loss of their faithless faith" (*Company* xiii). For much of the book, Media displays just such a faith; appropriately it is he who warns Babbalanja against the nihilistic implications of his argument. But Babbalanja has lost his faith, as a result of which, ultimately, the sense of impenetrability and inscrutability (that presents such observers as Tommo and Paul in interpretive deadlocks) becomes relocated internally: "By the incomprehensible stranger in me, I say, this body of mine has been rented out scores of times, though always one dark chamber in me is retained by the old mystery" (457). Taking this logic even further, Babbalanja suggests that "I seem not so much to live of myself, as to be a mere apprehension of the unaccountable being that is in me. Yet all the time, this being is I, myself" (457). This is clearly a tough state of affairs for one who "seek[s] to evolve the inscrutable" (352; ch. 114), in other words, who carries on his own evolutionary campaign against the "fallenness" that Caputo places at the opposite end of hermeneutics (63).

Babbalanja's schizophrenia, to employ an available term, is echoed in such characters as Little King Peepi, "the inheritor of souls" who is consequently "denuded of all obligation to virtue" (203; ch. 67), or the national schizophrenia of Vivenza—Melville's satirical version of America—a nation where "all [are] kings" (514; ch. 158). Together, these provide a rough

context in terms of which the emergent demonic qualities of Taji's own intermittent (interrupted) Romantic rhetoric can be put into relief.

As suggested before, Taji completely disappears from his narrative as far as the ongoing symposium aboard Media's canoe is concerned, though his voice persists in its essentially descriptive capacity. He comes across most strongly, however, in a number of rhetorical digressions of his own which recall his vision of imaginative flight at the mast-head. That such imaginative bursts only further rupture the plot and postpone the "progress," is only one of the many ironies resulting from the fragmenting narrative. The earliest of these, though briefer, and less discrete, than those that follow, occurs in the midst of a pseudo-scientific discussion on "How Teeth were regarded in Valapee," reminiscent of those anthropological explorations in *Typee* and *Omoo*. In spite of a comparative reference to Hawaii, such an exploration of the customs of a fictional people completely escapes justification as edifying or educational reading, which essentially means that Melville parodies his own earlier work at the same time that the narrator establishes the world of his romance. Of interest to me, however, is Taji's digression from his discussion of the economic and symbolic value of teeth, and the custom of knocking out teeth at funerals (as an example of which he refers to the very real funeral of Tammahammaha). Suddenly, indulging a fantasy in which elephants, unicorns and whales, among other creatures, join in the obsequies, he is gripped by another vision:

> Terrific shade of tattooed Tammahammaha! if, from a vile dragon's molars, rose mailed men, what heroes shall spring from the cannibal canines once pertaining to warriors themselves!—Am I the witch of Endor, that I conjure up this ghost? Or, King Saul, that I so quake at the sight? For, lo! roundabout me Tammahammaha's tattooing expands, till all the sky seems a tiger's skin. But now, the spotted phantom sweeps by; as a man-of-war's main-sail, cloud-like, blown far to leeward in a gale.
>
> Banquo down, we return. (206)

In this passage there is a strong suggestion of the demonic powers unleashed by the imagination—in fact, though images of sky and sailing recall the trope of flight, the act of imagination here seems figured more strongly as a haunting. A strong suggestion of elemental violence and unrest, together with the more direct reference to Banquo evokes the tale of Shakespeare's usurper of sovereignty, Macbeth. The spectre of Aleema, whom Taji kills for Yillah, is also raised, but only by association—the "spotted phantom" or "Banquo" here should not be confused with those actual appearances of Aleema's ghost, primarily in the water. Here we catch a glimpse of the greater demonic backdrop into which the ghost of Aleema, his vengeful sons, and the mysterious Hautia and her messengers all fit. Taji, then, remains in a highly suggestible state in which the threat of insanity seems ever-present. He has to suppress the imagination in order to continue.

Of the three remaining major digressions, it is only the third and most extensive, "Dreams," that strongly evokes the demonic undertone of this earlier passage. "Time and Temples"—a digression on monumentalism[24] and progress—essentially posits a universe in which form is constantly emergent: "Thus, then, though Time be the mightiest of Alarics,[25] yet is he the mightiest mason of all. And a tutor, and a counselor, and a physician, and a scribe, and a poet, and a sage, and a king" (230). Time, then, becomes something of an "All-Plastic Power" (229), progressively conceived. It is all-inclusive (not insignificantly, the last four identities listed clearly refer to Taji's companions, Mohi, Yoomy, Babbalanja and Media) and evolutionary. It is also the realm in which Taji's imagination, free from linear restraints, roams at will:

> Thus deeper and deeper into Time's endless tunnel, does the winged soul, like a night-hawk, wend her wild way; and finds eternities before and behind; and her last limit is her everlasting beginning.
>
> But sent over the broad flooded sphere, even Noah's dove came back, and perched on his hand. So comes my spirit back to me, and folds up her wings. (230)

In this passage we are returned specifically to the image of the bird featured in Taji's vision at the beginning of the book. Wenke suggests that

> [i]n "Time and Temples" Melville dissolves the distinction between the temporal and the eternal, thus indicating the possibility of transfer from one world to the next. Using a Platonic symbol, a figure from *Phaedrus*, Melville depicts the soul's transcendence and, by extension, the artist's creative transcendence of space, time, and matter [. . .]. The artist-maker, figured as a "winged soul," flies beyond the limitations of material existence. Melville images an endless process of beginning that transcends the contextual entanglements of dialectic. (25)

What is missing from this reading is a recognition of the way in which Melville subtly undercuts Taji's rhetoric of imaginative liberty, or "transcendence." Flying "deeper and deeper," Taji's soul essentially captures the tension between two opposing actions, represented by Yoomy and Babbalanja. "Yoomy soars, and Babbalanja dives" we are told elsewhere in the book (438; ch. 137), and though the impulse that drives both actions might be the same, the second—with its image of descent—is clearly of a more demonic nature. Taji's "*night*-hawk" does not quite soar; and its flight is characterised not so much by freedom as "wild[ness]." In the end, finding "eternities before and behind" creates an underlying sense of existential agoraphobia, consolidated by the image of Noah's dove, which after all returns only because it cannot find any land on "the broad, flooded sphere." Taji's returned spirit, cast as a figure of repose, is actually a

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[24] The catalogue is vast, and also includes Tommo's "Pyramid of Cheops" (*M* 229 and *T* 155; ch. 21).

[25] Alaric, the king of the Visigoths who sacked Rome (410 AD), appears here in his role of destroyer.

figure of exhaustion. What the imagination effectively reveals is man's intolerable position on the "endless sea" of the end of the book (654; ch. 195).

"Faith and Knowledge," though more of an associative ramble than a cogent argument, roughly pits faith against epistemology. Not so much a statement of Christian belief as a privileging of that "faithless faith" Bloom ascribes to the Romantics, it diminishes the importance of objective knowledge in exact proportion to the way it marginalizes it as a subject. Its only point regarding objective knowledge is that it requires distance, a principle which leads to the logical conclusion that "[i]t is because we ourselves are in ourselves, that we know ourselves not" (297). Taji does not see this in negative terms—in fact, this defeat of a demarcating, limiting knowledge (of the "straight facts" variety) is precisely what allows the free-range imperialism of the Romantic imagination. Where previously his spirit flew across Time, here it once again travels through history, by means of an expansive form of imperial metempsychosis:

> Do you believe that you lived three thousand years ago? That you were at the taking of Tyre, were overwhelmed in Gomorrah? No. But for me, I was at the subsiding of the Deluge, and helped swab the ground, and build the first house. With the Israelites, I fainted in the wilderness; was in court, when Solomon outdid all the judges before him. I, it was, who suppressed the lost work of Manetho, on the Egyptian theology, as containing mysteries not to be revealed to posterity, and things at war with the canonical scriptures; I, who originated the conspiracy against that purple murderer, Domitian; I, who in the senate moved, that great and good Aurelian be emperor. I instigated the abdication of Diocletian, and Charles the Fifth; I touched Isabella's heart, that she hearkened to Columbus. I am he, that from the king's minions hid the Charter in the old oak at Hartford; I harbored Goffe and Whalley: I am the leader of the Mohawk masks, who in the Old Commonwealth's harbor, overboard threw the East India Company's Souchong; I am the Vailed Persian Prophet; I, the man in the iron mask; I, Junius. (297)

The sovereign "I" is strung through a number of reincarnations that extend its influence across (and over) history—Taji's demigodhead modulates into full-blown divinity. The first reincarnation, we notice, revisits the story of the flood, featured in "Time and Temples," at the moment of mankind's reestablishment of a foothold. Increasingly, the "I" becomes a significant influence at work within successive empires (Egyptian, Roman, English, Spanish and American), and the face behind the veil, the mask and the pseudonym. In short, he becomes ubiquitous.[26]

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[26] We also notice that this "identity" is associated with censorship, the "suppress[ion]" of that that which is "at war with the canonical scriptures" (*M* 297). Such supervision forms a logical part of the expansion of the imperial identity, as it does of the quest itself (which portrays the defeat of deviance in the interest of apocalypse), and will be overtly considered in *The Confidence-Man*, when Frank Goodman advocates the suppression of the Apocrypha (*CM* 243; ch. 45). See chapter 7 of this thesis, 319.

The "I" remains the stable, unifying point of reference throughout the passage, the axis upon which "the world revolves" (559; ch. 170), but considering the pervasive suggestions of schizophrenia in *Mardi*, as well as the destabilisation of the "I" in general, the dangers of extending oneself to this degree are readily apparent. Indeed, by the time we get to "Dreams," Taji shows signs of strain. Here, especially, Taji's soul not only ranges across time, but also across space—it "sinks down to the depths, and soars to the skies; and comet-like reels on through such boundless expanses, that methinks all the worlds are my kin, and I invoke them to stay in their course" (367). But there is also a sense of impatient feverishness underlying the vision: "I tremble, gasp, and strain in my flight, and fain would cast off the cables that hamper" (367). These cables, in the light of the chapter's conclusion, might well refer to the limitations of narrative, but I would suggest that they also figure that "recalcitrance in the self" ("Quest-Romance" 11) which Bloom posits as the final antagonist in the internalised quest. By now, however, the mood has changed—this recalcitrance is a recoil from insanity. Taji announces that "I am full with a thousand souls" (367), and we are reminded less of the expansive "I" of "Faith and Knowledge" (to which it "refers") than of the mad King Peepi.

Again he ranges across time, imperially—"I walk a world that is mine; and enter many nations" (368)—only to recant at the last moment: "Yet not I, but another: God is my Lord; and though many satellites revolve around me, I and all mine revolve around the great central Truth, sun-like, fixed and luminous forever in the foundationless firmament" (368). Seelye considers even this expression a part of "the voice of the transcendent ego, in which self and deity become one, the all-inclusive 'I'" (40), but it is best considered an abortive attempt to reinstate—at the moment of deposing it—the central organising principle found in the concept of God, that point which is "fixed [. . .] forever," and without which, as Media points out in the very next chapter, mortals are "ever unfixed" (370; ch. 120).

But Taji's piety arrives too late. As the final paragraph of the chapter makes apparent, he is no longer quite the master of his imagination:

> My cheek blanches white while I write; I start at the scratch of my pen; my own mad brood of eagles devours me; fain would I unsay this audacity; but an iron-mailed hand clenches mine in a vice, and prints down every letter in my spite. Fain would I hurl off this Dionysius that rides me; my thoughts crush me down till I groan; in far fields I hear the song of the reaper, while I slave and faint in this cell. The fever runs through me like lava; my hot brain burns like a coal; and like many a monarch, I am less to be envied, than the veriest hind in the land. (368; ch. 119)

This passage to some extent works out the demonic implications of Taji's imagination as first raised in the form of Banquo. Turning a ghostly pallor himself, Taji is left at the mercy of his imagination: the bird that became the night-hawk in "Time and Temples" here becomes a "mad

brood of eagles" that essentially cannibalise him. His monarchic sovereignty has become a curse, which explains the "abdication" that he will announce in the end (654; ch. 195). He has become a vehicle—"a mere amanuensis" like Lombardo (596; ch. 180)—for Dionysus, that dual god of brute creativity and self-annihilating madness.

There is a certain neatness to this reading, however, that is not comfortably accommodated by *Mardi* itself. Most commentators have singled out the suicidal slant of the book's closing, and within the broad logic of the narrative, it makes sense. In terms of my own argument, too, it seems apt that Taji—like Ahab—should go down into the all-dissolving sea, in the grip of his monomania. But this leaves us with the question—not altogether pedantic—as to how he manages to recount his tale. The question becomes even more pointed here, since the reference to the act of writing means that the digression is located in the compositional moment. While thematically it may seem to prefigure and predate the end, "Dreams" actually dates from after the inconclusive ending of *Mardi*. Such narrative prolepsis further disrupts the causal logic of the book, diminishing our chances of achieving a coherent reading.

It is at this point that Dimock's argument is at its most seductive, as it seems to provide a neat solution to a problem that most critics prefer not to consider. As she sees it, "[t]he speaker is not Taji at all, but the author himself, speaking without mediation from the 'cell' where he 'slave[s] and faint[s]' in the act of writing" (65), nonetheless revealing an "extravagant pride" in his labours, a sense of "demonic grandeur" (66). This is as close as we are going to come to a satisfactory solution, but one which, I maintain, we should prefer not to accept. Given *Mardi*'s radical errancy, it seems strange to apply suddenly a strict aesthetics of narrative unity at this juncture. More importantly, Dimock's reading itself is not watertight, as she also acknowledges a narrator distinct from the author—in other words, her version, like any other, requires Taji to survive the "endless sea" he launches into. This is possible, of course, in which case one might argue that the narrator we find—glimpsed at the compositional moment—is a haunted, maddened shell of his former self. But literary texts simply do not owe any allegiance to such narrow, fastidious logic. The ending of *Mardi*[27] presents us with a demonic apotheosis, an open-ended climax that prefigures nothing so much as the annihilation of the reduced, sovereign "I." With Babbalanja in Serenia, Media back in Odo, and Yoomy and Mohi abandoning ship in fear of their lives, Taji—for the briefest of moments—seems to stand utterly alone at last:

> "Now, I am my own soul's emperor; and my first act is abdication! Hail! realm of shades!"—and turning my prow into the racing tide, which seized me like a hand omnipotent, I darted through.

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[27] The chapter's title, "Mardi behind: an Ocean before," recalls Yoomy's own echo of the end of *Paradise Lost*.

> Churned in foam, that outer ocean lashed the clouds; and straight in my white wake, headlong dashed a shallop, three fixed specters leaning o'er its prow: three arrows poising.
>
> And thus, pursuers and pursued flew on, over an endless sea. (654; ch. 195)

Taji's sense of attainment—"Now, I am my own soul's emperor"—seems to result directly from his casting off of his travelling companions, who bear the responsibility for marginalizing the quest for Yillah. Shorn of those qualities embodied by his companions, there is not much left beyond the pointless urge to move forward. He abdicates both because his launch into the sea is a launch into dissolution and because his empire of plenitude has been cast off. He flees (flies) from the non-progressive, indeterminate narrative of *Mardi* just as he flees the chaos of Mardi's "world of mind." Ironically this very act changes him from a quester into the "pursued," which echoes also his haunting by "Banquo," and his merciless possession by "Dionysius." He exits a hunted man, in full flight.[28]

Part of the defeat of *Mardi*'s narrator, as literary artist, stems from an increasing sense that, just as ideals cannot persist in the world of flux, Truth cannot be communicated by words, or language. It is a theme that runs through Taji's own insight into semantics, which holds that "words are but algebraic signs, conveying no meaning except what you please" (269; ch. 89), and is echoed in such narrative events as Doxodox's unsignifying terminology; Yoomy's uncertain translation of the language of Hautia's flowers (309; ch. 101); Media's frustration with the appearance, in discussion, of "[t]ropes on tropes!", although he cannot avoid them either, and "tell the tale,—straight-forward like a line" (494; ch. 152); Azzageddi's retreat into gibberish—"Gogle-goggle, fugle-fi, fugle-fogle-orum!" (578; ch. 175)—whenever his arguments become too confused or heated; and Babbalanja's recognition that "I am wrong in seeking to invest sublunary sounds with celestial sense" (352-53; ch. 114). Babbalanja also utters a maxim—"truth is in things, and not in words" (283; ch. 93)—that seems remarkably akin to the Platonic-Emersonian principle as adopted and formulated by William Carlos Williams: "No ideas but in things" (Tomlinson 16). It is a sentiment that may not have sustained Tommo in his hour of

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[28] Michael Davitt Bell neatly captures the basic implications of *Mardi*'s failed quest:

> [E]ven as he followed his chartless voyage into the world of imagination, Melville came more and more to recognize why his culture regarded such voyages with fear and hostility; for he discovered that the orthodox moralists, however naïve in their epistemology, had been right about what they didn't even know enough to call symbolism. In any case, Melville could not get far enough from their assumptions fully to reject them. Imagination did threaten psychological and social order. To admit the claims of romance was to open the door to nihilism. If, for romance, subjective states could become valid objects of mimesis, if no subjective state was certifiably more true than any other, and if truth could only be known subjectively, then the chaos of psychological relativism was just around the corner. (145)

failed anthropology, but which first and foremost expresses a suspicion of the mimetic abilities of language, particularly of the abstract variety. Such sentiments are remarkable in a narrative that proceeds almost exclusively by the sheer, excessive multiplication of words. But that is precisely the point. Language is the sea in which quest and quester founder.

If Melville sympathised with any character in *Mardi*, that character would have to have been Babbalanja. Though not a mouthpiece for Melville's own ideas, and far from consistent in his own opinions,[29] his voice nonetheless most consistently captures that blend of scepticism, practicality, learning, epistemological inquiry and even gnostic yearning that we encounter most overtly in characters like Ishmael and Paul. It marries the level-headed, humorous and humane intelligence of Montaigne (as well as his literary method of essaying diverse topics in order to clarify, to himself, his own provisional thoughts on them) with the somewhat more volatile metaphysical considerations of Thomas Browne, whom Melville once, according to Evert Duyckinck, appreciatively called a "crack'd Arcangel" (Leyda, *Log* 273). Babbalanja may be more extreme than his kinsmen (as *Mardi* is more extreme than *Omoo* and even *Moby-Dick*), and is certainly more ridden by his failure to reconcile himself with his scepticism (hence his own schizophrenia), but he is cut from the same cloth. Therefore it is rather surprising to see him suddenly finding religion in Serenia, and cashiering his doubts without much of a struggle (or so much as a peep from Azzageddi).

The party's arrival in Serenia is preceded by a number of dark chapters, in which Babbalanja suddenly seems to be drawing closer to the brink of insanity. In "L'Ultima sera," the sudden drowning of one of the paddlers results in a discussion of death, in which Babbalanja, claiming that Oro "is the everlasting now" (620), essentially suggests that there is no afterlife. As a result, man's existence becomes a haunted one:

> "But hoot! hoot! the night-owl ranges through the woodlands of Maramma [the seat of institutionalised and orthodox religion]; its dismal notes pervade our lives; and when we would fain depart in peace, that bird flies on before:—cloud-like, eclipsing our setting suns, and filling the air with dolor."

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[29] As Babbalanja suggests in "Babbalanja discourses of himself," "the sum of my inconsistencies make up my consistency" (459). In this he may seem to lay claim to the kind of containment of internal deviance that defeats Taji in the first place, something comparable to Whitman's famous claim, in *Song of Myself*:

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then . . . . I contradict myself;
> I am large . . . . I contain multitudes. ([51] lines 1314-316)

It is a claim that exposes Whitman's complicity in the expansionism of the national hegemony (his "nation of nations"), and one that subscribes to the possibility of Greenberg's "unity-in-diversity" (4). But Babbalanja does not quite seem to "contain" Azzageddi, and the sum of his plentiful inconsistencies is an incalculable one.

> "Too true!" cried Yoomy. "Our calms must come by storms. Like helmless vessels, tempest-tossed, our only anchorage is when we founder."
>
> "Our beginnings," murmured Mohi, "are lost in clouds; we live in darkness all our days, and perish without an end."
>
> "Croak on, cowards!" cried Media, "and fly before the hideous phantoms that pursue ye."
>
> "No coward he, who hunted, turns and finds no foe to fight," said Babbalanja. "Like the stag, whose brow is beat with wings of hawks, perched in his heavenward antlers; so I, blinded, goaded, headlong, rush! this way and that; nor knowing whither; one forest wide around!" (620-21)

Again, the image of the bird, now tormenting man as he wanders aimlessly in the labyrinth, or wilderness, represented by the forest. We are also returned to the very first question raised in *Mardi*, at the end of its opening paragraph: "But whence, and wither wend ye, mariners?" (3). At this late stage of the book, there is still no answer, "no [. . .] knowing whither," and the open end of the book will consecrate this eternal postponement of closure, which can be achieved only interjectively, in death. And yet, in Serenia, Babbalanja does seem to achieve the allaying of his doubts.

"They sail from Night to Day" presents the approach of the "storm-worn" (622) party to Serenia, "[t]he land of Love" (623), "where Alma, they say, is restored to his divine original" (622-23). Not insignificantly, they "need to repair our prows" (622)—the party in general is sorely in need of a reconstitutive experience, something to allay the feelings of building exhaustion and frustration. Not that they harbour much hope of finding this in Serenia: once an old man welcomes them to the "pleasant isle" (622), they almost decide to "refit" (623) elsewhere. It is Babbalanja and Media especially that approach Serenia with some scepticism—Babbalanja, as occupational sceptic, and Media, as monarch, cannot place much stock in a society where "men strive to live together in gentle bonds of peace and charity" (623).

The constitutive ideal in Serenia is Alma, Melville's Mardian double for Jesus. But the party soon learns that what distinguishes the idealists of Serenia from other idealists is a healthy absence of fundamentalism, even when faced with difference. Love and charity—consistently practised—result in an accepting relativism. To the reader the problems with this argument are apparent, as they are to Babbalanja, but the latter is finally won over by the fact that many of his own sceptical and anti-orthodox arguments find a place within Serenia's ideology. As their guide explains, Serenians "care not for men's words; we look for creeds in actions; which are the truthful symbols of the things within" (626); they do not claim Alma's sole possession over "Truth, Justice, and Love" (626); anticipating Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, they do not privilege an afterlife over temporal life (627); they do not "believe in man's perfection" (627) and therefore are happy to accept that their social state "is imperfect; and long must it so remain.

But we make not the miserable many support the happy few. Nor by annulling reason's laws, seek to breed equality, by breeding anarchy" (627). Laws, then, there are, though there are no temples, no priests, and no overt rituals in Serenia. Similarly, there is no expansionist urge for conversion, though "[w]here'er we go, our faith we carry in our hands, and hearts" (629). Finally, "[r]ight-reason, and Alma, are the same; else Alma, not reason, would we reject" (629).

A strong strain of humanism runs through this version of utopia, in which Rousseauean idealism seems wedded to the recognition of a flawed, deviant world. One thinks of a Montaigne or a Johnson, finally happy in his faith. However, it remains a matter of conjecture as to how the people of Serenia would deal with radical deviance, and apply their body of temporal "reason's laws."

In the end it still comes down to faith—Alma "opes the eye of faith, and shuts the eye of fear" (630); a matter of exchanging perspectives. We are reminded of the Romantic "eye of faith" (*T* 173; ch. 24) with which Tommo considers the effigy in the Typee grove, a suspension of disbelief that allows one to see, or rather, imagine, beyond the phenomenal mask. Bearing in mind Melville's critical stance there (and keeping in mind the broader context of *Mardi*), one certainly has to doubt his own acceptance of Serenia's ideology, no matter how much he, like us, may appreciate the thought.

Babbalanja, arch-sceptic—together with Yoomy, Mohi and Media—is won over, and has a Dantean vision in which he, too, takes an imaginative flight (though in the company of an angel). The central thought emerging from this vision, almost contradictorily, is that there is no end to mystery—that new knowledge simply "open[s] other mysteries" and that, therefore, one can "never gain a fixed beatitude" (634; ch. 188).[30] It is important, then, to recognise that Babbalanja never finds the answers he has searched for; that he never attains actual closure. Instead, he suspends the urge to "evolve the inscrutable." In a sense, then, he makes peace with an Ishmaelian, lowered "conceit of attainable felicity." Yillah is not found, even in Serenia. But with Babbalanja (allegorically, philosophical doubt) put to rest, together with Yoomy, Mohi and Media, Taji is also freed from eternal non-progression. One-dimensional, a parody of unity, he charges into the abyss.

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[30] The immortal soul, like Media's mortals, also remains "ever unfixed" (370; ch. 120). Such a view certainly does not conform to Dante's view of assimilated will in heaven. But then, Yillah, unlike Beatrice, is never found.

On 5 February 1849, while waiting for *Mardi* to be published, and shortly after writing his preface to it, Melville heard his first Emerson lecture,[31] in Boston. His first response, to Evert Duyckinck, was brief: "Say what they will, he's a great man" (*C* 119). A week or so later, he expanded on this appreciative judgment in a letter dated 3 March 1849:

> I was very agreeably disappointed in Mr Emerson. I had heard of him as full of transcendentalisms, myths & oracular gibberish; I had only glanced at a book of his once in Putnam's store—that was all I knew of him, till I heard him lecture.—To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible, tho' to say truth, they told me that that night he was unusually plain.—Now, there is a something about every man elevated above mediocrity, which is, for the most part, instinctively perceptible. This I see in Mr Emerson. And, frankly, for the sake of the argument, let us call him a fool;—then had I rather be a fool than a wise man.—I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more; & if he don't attain the bottom, why, all the lead in Galena can't fashion the plummet that will. I'm not talking of Mr Emerson now—but of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with blood-shot eyes since the world began.
>
> I could readily see in Emerson, notwithstanding his merit, a gaping flaw. It was, the insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions. These men are cracked right across the brow. And never will the pullers-down be able to cope with the builders-up. [. . .] But enough of this Plato who talks through his nose" (*C* 121-22)

The history of Melville's conscious engagement with Emerson's thought starts here, though unknowingly, he had been wrestling with it fictionally from the outset. He clearly had some sense of who Emerson was, and what the general leanings of his work might be—after all, he had expectations of the lecture that were not met.

The surprising thing to us is that as Melville continues, we get a sense that in evolving the character of Babbalanja, Melville was drawing on an inherited image of Emerson as someone "full of transcendentalisms, myths & oracular gibberish," one of those "men who *dive*." Babbalanja, as we know, is an accomplished diver—in *Mardi* the action appears as the demonic counterpart to Yoomy's "soar[ing]" (438; ch. 137). In terms of *Mardi*'s Icarean logic, soaring must turn into diving. According to Hautia, the once soaring Taji is also doomed to "bootless deep diving" (651; ch. 194). Heroic Prometheanism modulates into the more nefarious figure of Faust's gnostic pursuit.

The idea that a certain moral culpability adheres to the pursuit of knowledge—as opposed to the morally liberating vision of the Romantics—was one that appealed to Melville. Significantly, as he continues his praise of diving, he begins to dissociate Emerson from "the whole corps of thought-divers." "I'm not talking of Mr Emerson now"—the absence of "only"

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[31] Probably "the fourth in a course of five lectures on 'Mind and Manners in the Nineteenth Century'" (*C* 118n).

unmistakably signals his exclusion from the "corps" with which Melville felt some affinity. This sudden shift is underscored by Melville's criticism of Emerson in the very next paragraph, who becomes "this Plato who talks through his nose." The problem: Emerson's idealism, which invests him with an air of vanity. I would suggest that the shift in affections roughly corresponds to a shift in focus from "Mr Emerson," the man, to "Emerson," the thinker. As the second, Emerson finds himself ranked with those who "are cracked right across the brow," a prefigurement of Melville's scarred arch-monomaniac, Ahab.

In *Mardi*, Melville came to an irreversible sense of the impossibility of the liberating Romantic ideal—transcendent soaring. The book registers a break with the rhetoric of Romanticism at the moment of his creative immersion in it. The subversion of "the career of improvement" (*T* 29; ch. 4) that characterised his translation of experience into fiction in *Typee* and *Omoo* foreclosed any possibility of Melville's earnest, unironic assumption of the role of sovereign, providential Romantic author. This, too, is why Melville could never seriously buy into Emerson's idealism, much as some of Emerson's ideas might have appealed to him. *Mardi* presents precisely the defeat of the supervisory, monumentalising gaze of the narrator by having the narrator as the protagonist of the narrative, and tracing the double defeat of his project of containment, his attempt to gather the recalcitrant diversity of the phenomenal and mental world into the auto-constitutive plot of self and narrative. Taji's narrativised identity fails and becomes fragmented. The unimplicated, absolutist Romantic soaring that was to characterise his progress results in a fall. Melville would revisit the trope of imaginative flight on a diminished scale, in *Redburn*, for instance, but diving (and related figures like mining and digging) would replace it as the most persistent trope for the search for knowledge. As in the Genesis myth, knowledge implies "fallenness." Not until Billy Budd is hoisted aloft by his neck do we encounter an ascent not immediately associated with a violent, annihilating descent.

CHAPTER 3

"LOST IN MAZES": FALLENNESS, CHANGE AND STASIS IN *REDBURN*

> "Wellingborough, as you are going to sea, suppose you take this shooting-jacket of mine along; it's just the thing—take it, it will save the expense of another. You see, it's quite warm; fine long skirts, stout horn buttons, and plenty of pockets."
>
> Out of the goodness and simplicity of his heart, thus spoke my elder brother to me, upon the eve of my departure for the seaport. (*R* 3; ch. 1)

As with Melville's other books, we light upon events already in progress. Similarly, our narrator will pause to outline the immediate context from which the action will proceed. But in *Redburn* there are two important changes: firstly, the context will be more fully presented—in other words, the narrator will be saddled with an actual *history*—and, secondly, we find ourselves, for the first time in Melville's longer fiction, on dry land at the beginning of the narrative. Indeed, with *Redburn* critics tend to feel themselves restored to *terra firma* (whether grudgingly or with a sense of relief). Compared to *Mardi*, it seems neat, controlled and structured. As Wilson Heflin puts it, commenting on *Redburn* and its immediate successor, *White-Jacket*, "[w]ith these two books Melville made substantial gains as a creative artist in control of his material as well as in stylistic proficiency" (146). These books, then, are seen in contradistinction to errant *Mardi*, a tendency not simply born from an imposed developmental schema, but suggested by Melville himself. In 1849, Melville wrote his publisher, Richard Bentley, a letter which, though making no apologies for *Mardi* and its dire reception, must nonetheless have been intended to appease him:

> I now have in preparation a thing of a widely different cast from "Mardi":—a plain, straightforward, amusing narrative of personal experience—the son of a gentleman on his first voyage to sea as a sailor—no metaphysics, no conic-sections, nothing but cakes & ale. I have shifted my ground from the South Seas to a different quarter of the globe—nearer home—and what I write I have almost wholly picked up by my own observations under comical circumstances. (*C* 132)

This oft-quoted passage contains ample evidence of Melville's domestication of his art, the emergence of what Wai-chee Dimock tendentiously calls "a poetics of authorial subjection" (77). Certainly the claim to "personal experience" promises a restraint of imaginative creation, and the geographical shift "nearer home" signals a shift from the exotic to the "plain," the familiar, credible and verifiable. The reference to a "cast" embodies an oblique promise of structure (a narrative mould), something in which *Mardi* seemed to be suffering a sad deficiency. This suggestion of a basic structure is underscored also by Melville's later dismissive reference to

Redburn as a "little nursery tale" (*C* 141). *Redburn*, at any rate, is composed by an author deeply under the impression of public (and aesthetic) demands and economic realities. As a result, *Mardi*'s wasteful, excessive narrative—which foolishly dared to "babble in the marketplace" (*M* 396; ch. 126)—gives way to a more "economical" prose, both in the sense of being marketable and linguistically "stingy," and in the sense of dealing overtly with economical themes. This, in itself, is significant, as none of the Pacific travellers in Melville's first three books had anything to fear from financial lack.[1]

Nevertheless, Melville is writing here to a publisher who has just suffered a not insignificant financial loss by accepting *Mardi*, and by paying a most generous advance on it. In the process, the truth gets stretched. As William H. Gilman has made clear, for instance, *Redburn* is more romance than autobiography (204), and Heflin has identified a general critical recognition that *Redburn* emphatically transgresses the limits of a "cakes & ale" narrative (147), since it deals quite forcefully and graphically with themes of destitution, moral degeneration and death.

Melville's letter also alerts us to the fact that although we may expect less fireworks—and, indeed, fewer words—in *Redburn*, his capacity for complex, heady metaphors remains intact. In the passage just quoted, one's attention is constantly drawn to the worrisome trope of "conic-sections." Given the context, anybody who has read *Mardi* will have a sense of what Melville means to designate by this figure. Still, closer scrutiny raises some interesting possibilities regarding the way Melville understood what he was doing. Firstly, Melville seems to employ the figure, drawn from *Mardi*, simply to suggest complexity or diffuseness, i.e., to evoke an enigmatic and exclusive system for the purpose of self-irony—"conic-sections," then, refers to the tendency of *Mardi*'s travellers to engage in pedantic, overly analytical, and ultimately confusing discussions of the universe and man's place in it (after all, the theory of conic-sections, as explored by Kepler, impinged on the movement of heavenly bodies). However, there is a lower layer, at which Melville's catachresis actually becomes a comprehensive figure for his language in *Mardi*: the conic sections identified in Melville's beloved *Webster's Dictionary* are the parabola, hyperbola and ellipse, and these geometric figures in turn suggest certain linguistic counterparts, those stylistic aspects of *Mardi*'s narrative that required reform. Thus, the correction of "conic-sections" implies the correction of the parabolic (or allegorical) slant of Melville's errant narrative, as well as its hyperbolic and elliptic

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[1] Tommo, for instance, remains far removed from those Western socio-economical atrocities he laments and criticises.

tendencies. Things are to be told as they are, "straightforward[ly]." The reformed narrative is to provide a simple storyline—the Aristotelian "single line of development" (*Poetics* 66)—progressing from beginning to middle to end.

All this extends beyond the attempt on Melville's part to counter any misgivings Bentley may have had about continuing their professional relationship. What we see is Melville primed to pursue his critique of teleology on a more basic narrative scale in order to consider more clearly the idea of the (Aristotelian) narrative itself as a teleological construct. How the narratives we construct remain prone to the very fallenness that simultaneously informs and defeats our desire for unified, constituted experience, is one of the major themes of *Redburn*.

The sovereign Romantic imagination that runs amuck in *Mardi* and precipitates the annihilation of its narrator, Taji, is replaced in *Redburn* by a much more domestic "young inland imagination" (4; ch. 1). If Taji attempts to transcend history, to be a sovereign being, Wellingborough Redburn is a decidedly American figure—he is, furthermore, Melville's first character to be provided with a surname and a genealogy—and his imagination remains linked to his context, in spite of his aspirations to become a cosmopolitan "great voyager" (7; ch. 1). The establishment of this context has an interesting effect—the reader is much more aware, from the start, that the young Redburn is subject to irony. Diminished and humble as his dreams may seem in comparison to those of Taji, their overt juxtaposition to an immediate realistic context serves to underscore their naïvety and youthful vanity. Where in *Mardi*, the reader may spend some time recognising that Taji's mediating consciousness is a parody of self-mythologising Romanticism (a confusion exacerbated by the unclear distinction between Taji the narrator and Taji the quester), *Redburn*'s language is more accommodating. As Harold Beaver says of *Redburn*'s author, "[w]hat he had achieved was a new spare, yet compelling idiom; a new control of material" (Introduction 8), and most critics have commented on a clear narrative distinction between the older, confessing and reminiscing narrator, and the young and inexperienced protagonist, the subject of the narrative.[2] This older, disillusioned perspective problematises and narratively qualifies the earlier perspective, so that the reader is left with little uncertainty regarding the fate of Redburn's emerging imagination:

> As I grew older my thoughts took a larger flight, and I frequently fell into long reveries about distant voyages and travels, and thought how fine it would be, to be able to talk

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[2] The precise relation between these two consciousnesses, as well as the extent of Melville's own relation to the two Redburns, however, remains a matter for debate. See, for instance, Hershel Parker ("Historical Note" to *Redburn*, 348-49), Bruce L. Grenberg (59), and Edgar A. Dryden (59-60).

> about remote and barbarous countries; with what reverence and wonder people would regard me, if I had just returned from the coast of Africa or New Zealand; how dark and romantic my sunburnt cheeks would look; how I would bring home with me foreign clothes of a rich fabric and princely make, and wear them up and down the streets, and how grocer's boys would turn back their heads to look at me, as I went by. For I very well remembered staring at a man myself, who was pointed out to me by my aunt one Sunday in Church, as the person who had been in Stony Arabia, and passed through strange adventures there, all of which with my own eyes I had read in the book which he wrote, an arid-looking book in a pale yellow cover.
>
> "See what big eyes he has," whispered my aunt, "they got so big, because when he was almost dead with famishing in the desert, he all at once caught sight of a date tree, with the ripe fruit hanging on it." (5; ch. 1)

Fortunately, for Redburn, he is not perched at the top of the mast-head, since he would most likely have found himself, courtesy of Melville, suddenly hovering "[o]ver Descartian vortices" (*MD* 159; ch. 35). As it is, the reader senses that these romantic fantasies will not be actualised on his first voyage—their juvenile quality is all too apparent. Redburn still lives in "an unreal world of the pre-experiential imagination" (Stern, "Society" 452).[3] Significantly, this imagination serves proleptically to fashion him as a world-traveller in a way that suggests that it is not so much the experience he craves as the status conferred by experience.[4] Experience has value, not in itself, but as a kind of social currency. In fact—and this is something Melville, with some irony, would have understood all to well—experience may even have some economic value. The stranger Redburn sees in church has, after all, written a book, by which he presumably made some money even as he extended the realm of his enigmatic influence over others. For Redburn, then, the idea of travelling is firmly linked to his dream of reclaiming his family's status and establishing himself as a figure of awe and respect. It certainly has nothing to do with a democratic fraternising with the peoples of the world (in his case, sailors)—in part, what he seems to admire in the stranger is precisely his enigmatic inapproachability. Such hierarchical isolation—a form of snobbery—is linked to Taji's sovereign individualism, and will serve as one of the main sources for comedy once Redburn boards the *Highlander* in New York.

There are further ironies contained in the reference to the stranger's book. The correspondence between the book's account of desert adventures and its "arid-looking" cover, aligned as it is with Redburn's general imaginings (and serving to highlight his tendency to see

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[3] Stern's "unreal world" clearly implies the introduction of Redburn into its polar opposite, a "real world" of experience. My disagreement with this basic scheme will emerge in the course of this chapter.

[4] This emerges with particular clarity as the *Highlander* pulls away from New York, and Redburn reflects that

> then I would have given any thing if instead of sailing *out* of the bay, we were only coming *into* it; if we had crossed the ocean and returned, gone over and come back; and my heart leaped up in me like something alive when I thought of really entering that bay at the end of the voyage. (33; ch. 7)

an organic relation between exterior and content), may well be a parodic figure of Romantic correspondence. Melville returned to the same idea a year later when he wrote a brief "review" of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Red Rover*—first read "[lo]ng ago, and far inland, [. . .] in our uncritical days" (238)—entitled "A Thought on Book-Binding," in which he ironically discussed nothing but the inappropriateness of Putnam's choice of binding: "Egotistically, then, we would have preferred for the 'Red Rover' a flaming suit of flame-colored morrocco, as evanescently thin and gauze-like as possible, so that the binding might happily correspond with the sanguinary fugitive title of the book" (237). Michael Paul Rogin, in his incisive consideration of the review, makes the point that, "[i]n the disguise of reviewing the cover of *Red Rover*, Melville was secretly introducing its first major theme, and a major theme of his own, masquerade" (3). This theme—which, in direct contrast to Romantic or Transcendental correspondence, presents a breach between exterior and substance—may find its most overt treatment in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, but, as we have seen, it has been a central feature of Melville's work from the very beginning, as far back as "Fragments from a Writing Desk." In *Redburn*, it is also an important theme—which runs through such diverse situations as Captain Riga's "false pretenses" (71; ch. 14), Jackson's disguised joke, at which nobody laughs because his "grave face" makes them doubt his comic intentions (61; ch. 12), and Redburn's suspicion and dislike of the "kind of talking" which, even though "so true and real," is spoken in a way that is "false-hearted and insincere" (51; ch. 10)—and is signally related to the dubious signification of language itself (though it also finds some expression in terms of the signification of clothes).

Most importantly, the passage alerts us also to the fact that Melville's narrative will comment on narrative per se. As Edgar A. Dryden has remarked so perceptively, "Redburn plans to live his life as a story he is telling" (61). The Redburn referred to here is the young man who has never been to sea, whose narrative prolepsis is countered by the account of the older Redburn, whose reminiscences form the substance of the narrative. The narratives he constructs take no cognisance of experiential reality, but are based strictly on inherited romantic significations—or "imaginings" (4)—and "certain shadowy reminiscences" (4; ch. 1). Chapter 1, "How Wellingborough Redburn's Taste for the Sea was Born and Bred in Him," explores the way in which psychology and culture conspire to create such "tastes" in the individual. Redburn's taste for the sea has very little to do with the sea itself (as an experienced reality), or any mysterious and spiritual affinity he may have with it—it is strictly the result of a complex of personal and historical associations. Reading through "the long columns of ship advertisements" (3), Wellingborough responds most conventionally and, significantly (being so innocent and,

indeed, clueless in general) is quite able to break down the tropes and codes in the advertisement that cue his imagination:

> To my young inland imagination every word in an advertisement like this, suggested volumes of thought.
>
> *A brig!* The very word summoned up the idea of a black, sea-worn craft, with high, cozy bulwarks, and rakish masts and yards.
>
> *Coppered and copper-fastened!* That fairly smelt of the salt water! [. . .]
>
> *Nearly completed her cargo!* How momentous the announcement; suggesting ideas, too, of musty bales, and cases of silks and satins, and filling me with contempt for the vile deck-loads of hay and lumber, with which my river experience was familiar.
>
> *Will sail on Tuesday the 20th of May*—and the newspaper bore date the fifth of the month! [. . .]
>
> *For freight or passage apply on board!* To think of going on board a coppered and copper-fastened brig, and taking passage for Bremen! Who could be going to Bremen? No one but foreigners, doubtless; men of dark complexions and jet-black whiskers, who talked French.
>
> *Coenties Slip*. Plenty more brigs and any quantity of ships must be lying there. Coenties slip must be somewhere near ranges of grim-looking warehouses, with rusty iron doors and shutters, and tiled roofs; and old anchors and chain-cable piled on the walk. Old-fashioned coffee-houses, also, must abound in that neighbourhood, with sunburnt sea-captains going in and out, smoking cigars, and talking about Havanna, London, and Calcutta. (4)

Melville certainly is not insensitive to the aesthetic possibilities of urban settings, even when showing signs of decay—which may well extend from the picturesque appreciation of rural ruins—especially when associated with the sea. But carried away as we might get with Melville's evocation of the docks, we should not be blinded to the ultimately ironic implications of the anatomy of the advertisement. The fact that Melville here makes the process of signification such an overt theme of the narrative alerts us to metatextual implications that alienate our own growing excitement, and show it up as a kind of encoded response, inscribed in and determined by our language. For a moment, the reader in his reading chair is exposed as being one of kind with the impressionable Redburn in the cosy confines of his parental home, surrounded by foreign furniture, paintings, prints, and "long rows of old books" (7). Books will play a large role in Redburn's narrative,[5] as they have, no doubt, in the establishment of his romantic ideas, and this focus on books will constantly force the reader to reflect upon his own engagement with what he is reading—*Redburn* as a reminiscence by the narrator, as well as a product by the author, Herman Melville.

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[5] The most important of these is the father's guide-book, *The Picture of Liverpool* (the subject of chapters 30 and 31), but there are references to numerous other books, in particular Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Blunt's *Bonaparte Dream Book* (chapter 18).

Melville also prepares us for the diminishing effect that experience has on expectations when Redburn speaks of his "contempt for the vile deck-loads [. . .] with which my river experience was familiar." What Redburn fatally does not realise is that all experience will lead to feelings of contempt, given one's high expectations. Already, by the time that Redburn is forced to leave home in order to earn a living, he has become something of a "misanthrope," and feels mainly "bitterness" (10, 11; ch. 2). Neither does his first encounter with the *Highlander* serve to lighten his mood. And once again, this should not surprise us, as his anatomy of the advertisement makes no reference to the position of sailors—it merely imagines "taking passage for Bremen!"

Chapter 1's review of the sources of Redburn's inspiration concludes with a description of

> that which perhaps more than anything else, converted my vague dreamings and longings into a definite purpose of seeking my fortune on the sea, [. . .] an old-fashioned glass ship, about eighteen inches long, and of French manufacture, which my father, some thirty years before, had brought home from Hamburgh as a present to a great-uncle of mine: Senator Wellingborough, who had died a member of Congress in the days of the old Constitution, and after whom I had the honor of being named. (7)

This ship, linked for Redburn to his family's former glory, as well as his father, has been the subject of much critical scrutiny. John Samson calls it "[t]he symbol of all his romantic dreams of traveling, of gentility, of maturation, and of his father" (93); William A. Davis argues that it "awakens Redburn's imagination and eventually comes to serve as the primary symbol that leads him to seek life at sea" (147); Dryden suggests that it "is a perfect symbol for both Redburn's great expectations and for his eventual disillusionment" (61); Beaver sees it as "heraldic blazon and clue [. . .] [and a] transmutation into the realm of pure reflection [. . .] which must be shattered as he steps from home into a world of adult experience" (Introduction 8); for John Wenke it "offers an ironic encapsulation of the tyro's degrading initiation into ship life" (82); and Dimock considers it a clear "instance of what Edwin Honig calls the 'threshold symbol'—an emblematic exegesis and prefiguration of a subsequent development" (83). As a figure of Redburn's dreams, then, the glass ship is especially effective for two reasons: firstly, because of its crystallised nature—its pure rigidity—and, secondly, because of its fragility. But the critics are not in complete agreement on the precise function of the symbol—is it (in Beaver's sense) a symbol of something Redburn leaves behind in the course of the narrative, or is it (as Dryden seems to suggest) a kind of symbolic double to Redburn, i.e., a means of measuring what happens to Redburn himself? One more way of considering the ship, however, is to see it as another of those enigmatic, impenetrable signs that populate Melville fiction—one of the central

points made about the *objet d'art* is that, contrary to Redburn's claims, it certainly does *not* "repay [. . .] long and curious examinations":

> [O]ften I used to try to peep in at the portholes, to see what else was inside; but the holes were so small, and it looked so very dark indoors, that I could discover little or nothing; though, when I was very little, I made no doubt, that if I could but once pry open the hull, and break the glass all to pieces, I would infallibly light upon something wonderful, perhaps some gold guineas, of which I have always been in want, ever since I could remember. And often I used to feel a sort of insane desire to be the death of the glass ship, case, and all, in order to come at the plunder [. . .]. (8; ch. 1)

I have to agree with Martin Leonard Pops, who suggests that this incident is meant to reveal that "Redburn displays the quester's mania" (53). He seems to harbour no doubts whatsoever that the façade of the ship obscures "something wonderful," and Melville effectively blends the two quests (economic and psychological) in the image of *gold* guineas, which simultaneously represents the riches that will alleviate Redburn's poverty and that "essential element in the symbolism of the hidden or elusive treasure which is an illustration of the fruits of the spirit and of supreme illumination" (Cirlot 120). But like Tommo's *Peep at Polynesian Life*, Redburn's "peep in at the portholes" cannot reveal the essence. His only recourse, it seems, is true Ahabian violence, to try and "strike through the mask" (*MD* 164; ch. 36), to destroy the façade in order to come at essentials. The reader knows, however, that Redburn's hopes are untenable, and Melville's point seems clear: "[T]here's naught beyond" (*MD* 164; ch. 36)—"it look[s] so very dark" because there is nothing but darkness. The painted ship is itself nothing but a masquerade, or a cipher. Like Wellingborough's dreams, it has no verifiable substance.

Redburn leaves home like a knight-errant, accoutred with a hunting-jacket and a "fowling-piece" (3; ch. 1), both of which figure his role as hunter, or quester. As with Don Quixote, however, the uniform will appear woefully inappropriate to the eyes of the outside world, and will become the mark of a misguided understanding or interpretation of that world. The Don's armour gets soiled, dented and battered, while Redburn's is ultimately reduced to tatters (72; ch. 15). Still, we have a keen sense that Redburn is constantly and progressively learning from his experiences in a way that the Don is not, thus moving ever nearer the person he will become, i.e., the reminiscing narrator. Understandably, then, many critics tend to view *Redburn* as a kind of *Bildungsroman*, a narrative of growth. Christopher Sten is among those few that consider the book to be an example of a *Bildungsroman* (94), but the theme of growth has had many exponents. Dryden outlines a general sense of the structure when he suggests that, "[l]ike a hero from an eighteenth-century novel, his journey into the world is to result in the discovery of his selfhood and lead him back to his rightful place in a stable society" (61). Circular as such a pattern might seem, its

implications are undeniably progressive. In the specific case of Redburn, his journey is meant—in some dim, unforeseen way—to mark the beginning of the restoration of his family to their former lofty position in society. In this sense, his quest is directly analogous to the Christian quest, exemplified by Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, namely that of a fallen being attempting to regain a lost paradise. Significantly, then, his journey—like that of *Mardi*'s band of travellers—also starts with a reference to those final words of *Paradise Lost*, an allusion which, according to Wenke, "reinforces his imminent separation from the pre-experiential idyll" (78):

> It was early on a raw, cold, damp morning toward the end of spring, and *the world was before me*; stretching away a long muddy road, lined with comfortable houses, whose inmates were taking their sunrise naps, heedless of the wayfarer passing. The cold drops of drizzle trickled down my leather cap, and mingled with a few hot tears on my cheeks. (*R* 11; ch. 2, emphasis added)

Spring, the first flush of youth, is gone, displaced by an early onset of wintry weather. Redburn, who has just parted from his older brother, is left to become a lone "wayfarer" (which already presents a strong contrast to his glorious image of "a great voyager"), a denizen of that "long muddy road" from which those who live in "comfortable houses" can afford to hang back. The scenario is archetypal, but its implications are also undeniably economical. Destitution fragments the family, knocks away all supports, and leaves man to his own devices. Familial care is reduced to the "sage advice" (11) an older brother can proffer—scant consolation, if one considers the general defeat of authority and failure of touchstones through the course of *Redburn*. Given Redburn's own impracticality, as well as that of his older "brother's friend, whom I choose to call Mr. Jones" (15; ch. 3),[6] one has reason to doubt the advice of this surrogate father, who in fact bequeaths the ill-fated hunting-jacket.

All things considered, it remains a question whether *Redburn* may rightly be deemed a *Bildungsroman*—it is all a matter of how much *bildung* we actually think takes place in the young man's consciousness. The basic structure of the book, as Heflin has pointed out, "is uncomplicated: three main sections—the voyage to Liverpool, the stay in England, and the return to America—and two shorter sections—the preliminaries to the voyage and the aftermath" (147). These "two shorter sections" provide a contextualising frame to the central narrative, which betrays the three-stage structure that Northrop Frye deems characteristic of the quest narrative, to

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[6] Redburn's overt reference to his creative (or censorious) choice recalls Ishmael more famous choice to be "[c]all[ed] [. . .] Ishmael" (*MD* 3; ch. 1), and the effect is somewhat similar—we are suddenly made aware, and even suspicious, of the mediating consciousness through which the facts of the case are transmitted to us. Or as William Spanos has it, Ishmael "puts into question the traditional relationship [. . .] between Naming and Identity. He is not going to allow his reader/listener what he himself refuses: the habitual reliance on an absolute *arché* and *telos*" (77).

wit: the *agon*, *pathos* and *anagnorisis* (187). As Frye explains, "the romance expresses [. . .] clearly the passage from struggle through a point of ritual death to a recognition scene" (187). It is the same structure that appeared, in a more bungled form, in *Mardi*; and *Redburn* overtly engages this narrative mythos. Thus, in general terms, the outward journey corresponds to the quester's *agon* (with Jackson emerging as a particular foe); the generally infernal sojourn in Liverpool to the *pathos* (death-struggle); and the return to the homeland, *as sailor*, to the *anagnorisis*. Correspondingly, John Seelye describes this as a "structure of initiation" (44), a progression from childhood to maturity or, in Seelye's terms, from "innocence [. . .] into experience" (44), Ahabian "absolut[ism]" to Ishmaelian "relativis[m]" (45).

Ultimately, the image of Redburn standing alone outside the gates of Paradise suggests another movement in the Biblical myth, namely the movement from naïvety to gnosis, a movement irreversibly associated with falling from grace (bright Lucifer's original fall)—accordingly, we remember that the figure-head of the glass ship, "a gallant warrior" (9; ch. 1), "fell from his perch the very day I left home to go to sea on this *my first voyage*" (9). Redburn's maturation, which proceeds by his gathering of experiential knowledge, should ultimately consist in his abandonment of snobbery, and his Ishmaelian acceptance of his share in fallenness. This does seem to be the basic pattern, but Melville's treatment of the subject is highly complex, and one is left both with the inescapable fact that post-experiential Redburn is no Ishmael, and the nagging sense that for all his experience he has not managed to substitute his disgraced dreams with a viable ethos for living. Older Redburn seems way too nostalgic; about him there hangs the odour of defeat. Accordingly, his recollection and narration of events becomes suspect, or at least a matter for critical scrutiny. To examine these subtleties of Melville's critique of mythos, or narrative teleology, will form the substance of what follows.

Redburn is forced to recognise, quite soon after leaving home, that he is not the unspoilt youth he has taken himself to be. His capacity for misanthropy has been pointed out, and as soon as he is challenged by the outside world (on board the steamboat for New York) he admits that "[t]he devil in me then mounted up from my soul, and spread over my frame" (13; ch. 2). Still, he immediately tries to shirk both responsibility and implications by grasping the expedient opportunity afforded him by his fellow passengers, who "exclaimed that I must be crazy" (13), to enter a plea of insanity: "So I was at the time; for otherwise I know not how to account for my demoniac feelings" (13). In other words, Redburn is not ready or willing to recognise that his own youthful façade may house an all too human capacity for evil. On the other hand, Redburn's fellow passengers may well see no discrepancy between the eccentric exterior (the morbid

expression, hunting-jacket, patched trousers and fowling-piece) and eccentric personality of the youth. For others the correspondence is complete, and Redburn has little choice but to accept the role. His earlier vision of himself (inspired by the stranger in church) as dressed in "foreign clothes of a rich fabric and princely make" (5; ch. 1), and showing off to the admiring and intimidated eyes of one and all, now acquires a particularly ironic charge, especially when one considers the reactions that his hunting-jacket will elicit from the sailors. He certainly does get gawked at, but for all the wrong reasons. As expensive clothes would have commanded respect, patched and mismatched clothes at the most command a kind of fear, or ridicule. In ways he never thought possible, his clothes work against him. This shatters his already superficial repose, leaves him prone to insecurity and anger, and ultimately threatens his sense of identity.

The relation between clothing and identity is reinforced once Redburn enters into the ship, and is "baptized [. . .] over again" (28; ch. 6), as "Buttons," courtesy of those "stout horn buttons" on his jacket. His given names are not "handy" (28)—i.e., they give the speaker no "handle to [the] man" (28) and fail to signify the referent. By means of rebaptism his identity (name) is brought in line with his appearance, and the lack of correspondence (in the eye of the beholder) is corrected. To put it in the words of William Davis's account of the general narrative logic in Redburn, "the symbolic [. . .] must align itself with the realistic equivalent in order to be approachable, complete, and valid" (151). Or, to put it simply, Redburn is cut down to size, and forced through the first important step towards his future identity as a sailor.[7] This action severs Redburn—symbolically, if not yet actually—from his genealogy, his redemptive quest, and the "filial pilgrimage" (*R* 154; ch. 31) which is meant to re-establish continuity with a glorious past.

Such severance, even if "only" symbolic, should be viewed with suspicion, though. Even the freeloading Tommo and Paul end up yearning for "'Home' and 'Mother'" (*T* 248; ch. 34), while Taji's quest for a sovereign "I" fails. It is unlikely that Melville's most historicised protagonist to date will manage to succeed where the others failed, and escape his past. Like young Wellingborough's trip to Liverpool, Redburn's entire narrative—a reminiscence and confession—is determined by the past, and there is much to suggest that it is also the result of a haunting persistence of the past in his consciousness.[8] This preoccupation with the past is to some extent anticipated also in the young protagonist's prolepsis—in other words, his tendency to will unresolved future events into the constituted realm of the past, on which he can reflect nostalgically.

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[7] This would certainly be in line with Sten's argument for a process of "identity formation" in *Redburn* (94).

[8] See, for instance, the discussion of chapter 30 below.

Another cause for suspicion or pause should be the ambiguous treatment of clothing in *Redburn*. While Wellingborough's rebaptism may seem to bring under control a certain messiness of signification—becoming a site of reform and linguistic "re-evaluation" (53), to employ a term used by John Paul Tassoni—there are other instances in which clothing quite conspicuously fails to communicate character, at least retrospectively. For example, Captain Riga promises, at first glance, to be a pleasant man:

> As soon as I clapped my eye on the captain, I thought to myself he was just the captain to suit me. He was a fine looking man, about forty, splendidly dressed, with very black whiskers, and very white teeth, and what I took to be a free, frank look out of a large hazel eye. I liked him amazingly. (15; ch. 3)

Taking appearances for fact, Redburn feels assured that the captain "suit[s]" him. But the persistent references to looking, coupled with the aura of hyperbole[9] in the references to "*very* black whiskers," "*very* white teeth" and "free, frank[10] look," conspire to render us suspicious of what we see, and hence, of Redburn's interpretation. And our suspicions turn out to be justified: once out of sight of land, the captain not only turns out to be unavailable for fraternisation, but also turns out in "nothing but old shabby clothes," his "whiskers los[ing] their gloss," and his language becoming that of "a common loafer in the street" (71; ch. 14). Leaving aside for the moment the fact that Redburn's belief in correspondence remains intact—the "shabby clothes" now reveal the captain to be "a shabby fellow"—the reader can hardly maintain a steady trust in appearances and conclusions. All interpretations, like all correspondences, are strictly provisional, and subject to re-evaluation somewhere down the road. A true, essential closure—as Montaigne understood—is an impossible dream.

In the voyage out, Melville achieves a rhythm of emotional crests and dips, drama and comedy, action and reflection, progression and digression, which mirrors the "certain wonderful rising and falling of the sea" (64; ch. 13), which may leave Redburn feeling seasick the one moment, and ecstatic the next. He can introduce the infernal Jackson—"full of hatred and gall against every thing and every body in the world" (61)—in chapter 12, and blame him for the fact that "at last I found myself a sort of Ishmael in the ship, without a single friend or companion" (62), and

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[9] In the supercharged Romantic realm of *Mardi*, hyperbole is *de rigueur*—in the "realistic" world of *Redburn*, however, hyperbole creates a breach that frequently makes for comedy.

[10] In Melville's oeuvre the word "frank" is always imbued with ambiguity, most likely because of its dual function as character trait (positive) and as a name (in other words, a signifier, to which suspicion is due)—Melville exploits this quality most memorably in the form of the character Frank Goodman in *The Confidence-Man*.

in chapter 13, as the sails are hoisted and the ship bounds away, suddenly delight in a sense of oneness with the world:

> I felt a wild exulting in my own heart, and felt as if I would be glad to bound along so round the world.
>
> Then I was first conscious of a wonderful thing in me, that responded to all the wild commotion of the outer world; and went reeling on and on with the planets in their orbits, and was lost in one delirious throb at the center of the All. A wild bubbling and bursting was at my heart [. . .].
>
> Yes! yes! give me this glorious ocean life [. . .]. Let me roll around the globe, let me rock upon the sea; let me race and pant out my life, with an eternal breeze astern, and an endless sea before!
>
> But how soon these raptures abated, when after a brief idle interval, we were again set to work [. . .].
>
> Miserable dog's life is this of the sea! [. . .] Yes, yes, blow on, ye breezes, and make a speedy end to this abominable voyage! (66)

In the last chapter of *Mardi*—"Mardi behind: an Ocean before"—Taji charges headlong into "an endless sea" (*M* 654). Here, Redburn echoes that very phrase as he succumbs to the lure of the vast, uncontained space before him, and attempts to create a figure of freedom. While Redburn may not have read *Mardi*, Melville certainly has, and his employment here of that crucial phrase gives us ample cause to be careful in our reading. Further scrutiny reveals an echo of Paul's grateful sense that "[o]nce more the sailor's cradle rocked under me, and I found myself rolling in my gait" (*O* 316; ch. 82). This too, is an echo that calls into question the efficacy of Redburn's "transcendental moment" (Sten 104). But of all the external references that might be called into play by the critic who has the whole of Melville's oeuvre to draw on, the most direct and telling one is Melville's grudging acknowledgement—in an 1851 letter to Hawthorne—of the transient "truth" of the "'all' feeling" (*C* 194). After subjecting the Goethean "*Live in the all*" (*C* 193) to some ridicule, Melville adds, in a postscript:

> This "all" feeling, though, there is some truth in. You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion. (*C* 194)

The last sentence is crucial, for it quite authoritatively communicates Melville's denial of universal, absolute truth. The "*all* feeling," a pyramidical moment of unity and repose, nonetheless remains subject to expedience. Redburn's loss of self into "the All" is absolutely transient, as is quite clear from the way his paean to the "glorious ocean life" plays out.

As far as the internal evidence of the text is concerned, there is a certain fickleness to Redburn's moods that makes it difficult to view them as representative of significant attitudes, i.e., progressive stages in the protagonist's development. All in all, it becomes difficult to credit Sten's optimistic sense that "what comes to master Redburn's heart [. . .] is the sea and his

consequent sense of belonging to the 'All'" (104), a view which epitomises the developmental reading. If the sea masters Redburn in any way, it is by way of subjecting his character to a strange instability or inconsistency—a formless modulation between an ecstasy and despair that seems increasingly at odds with the protagonist's early juvenile consciousness. As always, the sea is linked to relativism—from the sailors who "often contradicted each other" (46; ch. 9) regarding their experience of the world,[11] to Redburn's expedient breaking of his vow to the "Juvenile Total Abstinence Association" (42; ch. 8), to his Brownean recognition that "you know nothing till you know all; which is the reason we never know anything" (121; ch. 26)[12]—but Redburn cannot seem to find the equilibrium that makes the relativist's life bearable. If this is growth, it is growth that leads nowhere in specific, for Redburn never manages, to my mind, to transform this indeterminate self into a new identity. In fact, all his experiences simply drive him more persistently to seek for salvation in the past—and the result of his experience seems to be a retraction into a nostalgic misanthropy. Regardless of the fact that he "ha[s] passed through far more perilous scenes" (312; ch. 62), our predominant sense of Redburn is not of an adventurer but of an older man, seemingly confined to his house, friendless, still living with those sisters who, together with his mother, were always his "best friends" (51; ch. 10). "May I never be a man, thought I, if to be a boy is to be such a wretch" (52; ch. 10), Redburn once thinks during his first voyage, and his wish seems to come true. In fact, he apparently skips manhood altogether, becoming as "unambitious as a man of sixty" (10; ch. 2), whose only ambition is to recollect a prelapsarian youth, and misanthropically review its passing. It is a strange form of psychological prolepsis that challenges the reader's expectations of progressive development.[13]

Chapter 13 contains yet another scene of great importance, offset by Redburn's hypnotic sense of freedom, namely the account of his trouble with the "puzzling and confounding" (65) terminology of the ship deck. It stresses once again that Redburn's encounter with the world is to a large extent an encounter with the indeterminacy of language, or the existence of many

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[11] This echoes the defeat of King Donjalolo's agents in *Mardi*—they, too, fail to arrive at any agreement on the nature of the places they were sent to study. Donjalolo is forced to a tortured conclusion: "For me, vain all hope of ever knowing Mardi!" (*M* 250; ch. 82).

[12] In *Religio Medici*, Thomas Browne contends that "heads of capacity, and such as are not full with a handful or easy measure of knowledge, think they know nothing till they know all; which being impossible, they fall upon the opinion of Socrates, and only know they know not anything" (437; pt. 2, sec. 8).

[13] Jackson, virtually fixed in his hatred like a fly in amber, is another character in whom the mythos of growth seems essentially defeated.

languages (even within the "English" world of *Redburn*: America, England, and the *Highlander*). It also revisits the matter of Redburn's rebaptism in its consideration of the proliferation of names aboard ship—"[f]or sailors have their own names, even for things that are familiar ashore" (65). In order to become a sailor, then, the "land-lubber" (65) has to review an entire system of signification he may have deemed adequate.

For Tassoni, such a sense of adequacy is, in the case of Wellingborough Redburn, woefully misplaced, since "he founds his world-view on a lexicon devoid of sensible significance" (55). Accordingly, the trip to England exposes him "to the complexities of language, in particular, to the arbitrariness of designative terms; and along with this discovery he begins to adjust his register to a more immediate consideration of experience" (55). It is a compelling and subtle argument, but one that is essentially a recasting of the terminology of growth—from the overtly psychological to the overtly linguistic. Instead of being a *Bildungsroman*, *Redburn* now becomes a *Künstlerroman* (Tassoni 51), and Redburn's main quest lies in "healing that rift between language and the referential world" (52). This echoes Davis's earlier reading of the book (quoted above), according to which "[t]he symbolic [. . .] must align itself with the realistic equivalent in order to be approachable, complete, and valid" (151). One might even argue that Melville's reformed imagination—which shifted the narrative focus from an unreal (unbelievable and fictional) Mardian quest to a real (realistic and "autobiographical") cross-Atlantic cruise—had this reconstitutive end in mind. But it is not clear at all that *Redburn* effects such a "healing"—on the contrary, it seems set on transplanting Tommo's hermeneutic difficulties in exotic, foreign Typee to the "familiar," "plain" world, thereby destabilising those very terms.[14] Initiated into ship-deck lingo, Redburn's sense is directly opposite to that of finally achieving a correspondence of language and reality:

> I wonder whether mankind could not get along without all these names, which keep increasing every day, and hour, and moment; till at last the very air will be full of them; and even in a great plain, men will be breathing each other's breath, owing to the vast multitude of words they use, that consume all the air, just as lamp-burners do gas. But people seem to have a great love for names; for to know a great many names, seems to

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[14] Melville was well aware of the role of language in man's hermeneutic quest to contain and "solve the world," and part 4 of *Clarel* offers a clear sense of what he might have thought of Davis's and Tassoni's hopes regarding redemptive resignification:

> What may man know?
> (Here pondered Clarel;) let him rule—
> Pull down, build up, creed, system, school,
> And reason's endless battle wage,
> *Make and remake his verbiage—*
> But solve the world! Scarce that he'll do:
> Too wild it is, too wonderful. (canto 3, lines 107-13, emphasis added)

> look like knowing a good many things; though I should not be surprised, if there were a great many more names, than things in the world. But I must quit this rambling, and return to my story. (66; ch. 13)

This vision—so stifling and claustrophobic—remains one of the strangest passages in all of Melville. It belongs, as the last line makes clear, to the narrating Redburn, and thus presents a strong case against the view that he regains, through either his travels or his narration, a trust in correspondence. Instead, language is directly linked to the idea of posturing, or masquerade—"seem[ing] to look like knowing" is the closest we manage to come to gnosis. There is something suspiciously baroque about language, which exceeds a strictly designative function by multiplying names for the sheer love of it. Of course this also moves us into the realm of creative writing, and, indeed, we will do well to note that Redburn's narrative—and in particular, his "rambling"—cannot help but assist in that dreaded "consum[ption of] all the air." As Bryan C. Short puts it,

> [t]hings are ultimately a secret kept from words. The only future which language can establish is one choked by more words. The image of our 'breathing each other's breath' tropes, metaphorically, the relationship of author and reader and raises the question of the audience in the impossible mode of 'confession' which, from the title page on, fragments the dream of a redeemed past. To reveal one's secret is to exhale one's breath in words that unite only to kill. (76)

In terms of the logic of his neurosis, Redburn's confession is suicidal. The only "secret" it reveals is the narrator's inability to wrest himself free from the implications of his first voyage—we are reminded of Georges Bataille's image of "an Ariadne's thread leading thought into its own labyrinth" ("Solar" 5). His attempts at redemption—the journey and the confession—only serve to confound any positive forward movement. To be fair to Tassoni, he does recognise the demonic drift of Redburn's vision, its "sense of dread [. . .] that at once looks forward to the epistemological concerns of Melville's later novels and suggests what may have been [Alexander Bryan] Johnson's greatest nightmare: an ontology comprised of meaningless words" (56). But he nonetheless insists on Redburn's "concession to the significated register"; that, through the course of the book, "Melville (re)presents [. . .] the registration of this significated language, the language of experience" (59). Ultimately, then, "[i]n *Redburn*, Melville provides a narrative frame within which a language is verified—verified, in fact, by the frame itself. Melville's perspective portrays for us the experienced sailor inscribing a lexicon empirically derived" (59).

But is "verification" by experience possible in Melville's world? Tommo is right there at the site of reading, assisted by a local interpreter in the form of Kory-Kory, yet he fails to come to any convincing conclusions. A peep at Polynesian life verifies neither the Christian-colonial, nor the Rousseauean view of "savages." And the author of *Typee* knew only too well the

difficulty of verifying anything at all—one might get people to corroborate one's story, but there is no external, universal source of authority to which one might appeal. Thus, Melville could neither back up the facts of his Polynesian adventures, nor have his fictions wholly disproved. To some extent, the past is completely inaccessible, and full of "blanks" (*R* 292; ch. 58). Redburn may be persistent in trying to "fill [. . .] up" (292) such lacunae,[15] here and there, to counter the anonymity imposed—even on great human tragedies—by time and death, but finally *Redburn* seems to remain decidedly sceptical of the possibility of, as Short puts it, "a redeemed past."

There is an elegiac tone which underlies, and increasingly overpowers, the narrator's comic treatment of his younger self. This is doubtlessly because of a growing sense of fellow-feeling, since Redburn's narrative, like Wellingborough's quest, is to some extent premised on hopes of a redeemed past. The young protagonist's "filial pilgrimage" (154; ch. 31) intends to repeat in order to recapture or redeem—as Dryden suggests, "he hopes that by following his father's footsteps he will at once complete his own maturation and successfully recapture the past" (64). The pilgrimage, as ritualistic re-enactment, does not merely commemorate—it is also meant to effect rebirth, a passage from boyhood to maturity. The distinctions were perhaps most clearly drawn by Melville's contemporary (unknown to him, of course), Søren Kierkegaard. In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Constantin Constantius, argues that "[r]epetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions; for what is recollected is repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards. Recollection makes us unhappy, but repetition, if it is possible, will make us happy" (116). It seems unlikely that Melville had such a positive sense of repetition, but Kierkegaard's distinction remains useful in untangling intentions from results in *Redburn*. Thus, young Wellingborough is involved in a dual action: he constantly gives himself over to recollection, which leaves him feeling desperate and emotional,[16] but his pilgrimage is meant to be an act of Kierkegaardian repetition, "forwards." His pilgrimage is not merely nostalgic; it is meant to achieve progress. What defeats him, interestingly enough, is almost precisely what defeats Constantin Constantius, who, by way of experiment, repeats a journey to Berlin, only to find "the place changed since his last visit, and

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[15] One is reminded of Ahab's overwriting of—his imposition of meaning onto—the White Whale, and his tracing, in "The Chart," of "additional courses over spaces that before were blank" (*MD* 198).

[16] As Redburn admits, upon leaving New York, "I must not think of those delightful days, before my father became a bankrupt, and died, and we removed from the city; for when I think of those days, something rises up in my throat and almost strangles me" (36; ch. 7).

[he] begins to be persuaded (however illogically [in the context of Kierkegaard's argument for repetition]) that repetition may be impossible after all" (Chamberlain and Rée 111).

On the other hand, the older Redburn, as narrator, seems wholly involved in an act of Kierkegaardian recollection. He is back where he started, except that now he has no dreams to spur him. His narrative may be meant as a kind of pilgrimage, an attempt at redeeming the past and freeing him from stasis—to get himself "put on his legs again" (*R* 9; ch. 1). But there is little in the book to sustain such hope. Consequently, the narrative action of the book seems strictly retrogressive. In the words of Samson, "[i]n writing his Rouseauvian 'Confessions' he tries to accomplish in narrative what he has failed in life: to discover a pattern of growth, of progress in his experience" (125). With the failure of his dreams, Redburn falls back on the old expedient of seeking solace and repose in the past. Kierkegaard has noted that, in spite of the fact that it induces sadness, "[r]ecollection has a great advantage in beginning with loss: it is safe, because it has nothing left to lose" (120). It becomes a strange form of atemporal felicity, as absolute and static as any prophetic, apocalyptic ideal—in a sense there is little difference between yearning for heaven and being nostalgic about Eden.

Redburn's anamnesis, then, is geared primarily to a constituted past, a type of ideal space. But we have reason to doubt the possibility of even such a venture. Like the "repetition" of Redburn's "filial pilgrimage" (154; ch. 31), complete "recollection"—filling up all the "blanks"—ultimately remains impossible. Then there is the question of the validity of the past in "a moving world" (157; ch. 31).[17] And, ultimately, there remains the indeterminacy of the past itself—for there are events in the past that, even from an idealising temporal distance, refuse to become integrated, unified and significant. For the same reason that all interpretations are provisional, no recollection can ever be complete, or even completely accurate.

The sense of claustrophobia evoked by the narrator's vision of multiplying names is also a feature of the young sailor's experience. As Redburn's journey to Liverpool continues, we have a constant sense of his inescapable imprisonment aboard the *Highlander*—his total subjection to an absolute ethic which holds, "*Obey orders, though you break owners*" (29; ch. 6). The fate of his shooting-jacket communicates a similar sense of constriction: "Every day, it grew smaller and smaller" (74; ch. 15). But one of the most telling instances of claustrophobia occurs in

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[17] We are reminded of Montaigne's point, in "Of Repentance," that "the world eternally turns round; all things therein are incessantly moving" (19; bk. 3, ch. 2).

chapter 16, when Redburn has his own vision at the mast-head, a vision that presents a direct contrast to Taji's generous "[v]istas" (*M* 8; ch. 1) of possibility:

> For a few moments I stood awe-stricken and mute. I could not see far out upon the ocean, owing to the darkness of the night; and from my lofty perch, the sea looked like a great, black gulf, hemmed in, all round, by beetling black cliffs. I seemed all alone; treading the midnight clouds; and every second, expected to find myself falling—falling—falling, as I have felt when the nightmare has been on me. (78)

The sense of constriction and hopelessness is immense. Cast into the void, Redburn does not soar—he falls. We should not lose sight of the fact that this is Redburn's "first going aloft" (77)—later, we are told in the words of the title of chapter 24, "He Begins to Hop About in the Rigging Like a Saint Jago's Monkey." But his growing occupational familiarity with such heights ultimately has no direct bearing on the existential horror of his mast-head experience, and certainly does not reverse its effect. Redburn himself hints at the archetypal resonance of his ascent when he professes that "it looks almost like tempting heaven, to brush the very firmament so" (77). But he does not have the Promethean instinct.

Redburn's vision of constriction, the sense of being "hemmed in" by the universe, is extended in a number of minor incidents that turn on the interpretation of books. The first of these follows soon after his mast-head experience, in the comic chapter entitled "The Cook and the Steward," notable in particular for its exposure of Redburn's patronising attitudes regarding blacks.[18] Redburn's justification for such attitudes receives a heavy blow in the only direct encounter described in the chapter, in which the cook—an avid reader of the Bible—approaches Redburn for insight:

> [O]n the day I speak of, it was no wonder he got perplexed, for he was reading a mysterious passage in the Book of Chronicles. Being aware that I knew how to read, he called me as I was passing his premises, and read the passage over, demanding an explanation. I told him it was a mystery that no one could explain; not even a parson. But this did not satisfy him, and I left him poring over it still. (82; ch. 17)

Glibly as Redburn glosses over the scene, it completely undermines his pretensions, both as a white man and an educated man. But it also keeps the broader sense of incomprehensibility and inscrutability before us, in relation to, of all things, the Bible—the sole and absolute sign of God's will on earth. Not much is made of that here, but when, after the failure of all his

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[18] In view of Redburn's initial patronising attitudes regarding sailors in general, Redburn's racism may seem less patent. Still, Redburn's reference to "boys [. . .] reading Robinson Crusoe" (80; ch. 17), just before he launches into a description of Mr Thompson, "our black cook" (81), and Lavender, "a handsome, dandy mulatto" and "sentimental sort of darky" (83), does evoke an implicit context of power relations and, specifically, the assumptions inscribed in Redburn's own upbringing.

touchstones, Redburn falls back on the absolute and prevailing authority of one—the "Holy Guide-Book" (157; ch. 31)—his appeal will have a hollow ring.

This instance of a failed reading is closely followed by another, when Redburn, in the interest of spending time "profitably, in improving my mind" (85; ch. 18), has a go at Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, "from which I expected to reap great profit and sound instruction" (86). A kind of economic bible, Smith's book holds the promise of revelation and understanding—redemption from economic fallenness. Redburn even fashions his approach to its meaning as a quest, intending to repent for his typically proleptic "flying glimpses into it" by now approaching it "methodically," from the first page, and thence to work his way toward the "gist and body of the book, where I fancied lay something like a philosopher's stone, a secret talisman, which would transmute even pitch and tar, to silver and gold" (86). But Redburn simply does not have the patience and stomach for it. The book starts off "[d]ry as crackers and cheese," and quite soon he has "to give it up for lost work" (87). Appropriately, Redburn reverts to a state that both encapsulates his unrealistic dreams, and his lack of growth—he falls asleep.

The chapter features yet another book, though of a very different nature, namely "the *Bonaparte Dream Book*" (90), belonging to one Blunt. Blunt, a "stereotypical romantic" (Samson 98) who "believe[s] in all kinds of witch-work and magic" (*R* 88), subscribes to another system of reading, an occult science to which the Dream Book is yet another bible:

> [T]he magic of it lay in the interpretation of dreams, and their application to the foreseeing of future events; so that all preparatory measures might be taken beforehand; which would be exceedingly convenient, and satisfactory every way, if true. The problems were to be cast by means of figures, in some perplexed and difficult way, which, however, was facilitated by a set of tables in the end of the pamphlet, something like the Logarithm Tables at the end of Bowditch's Navigator. (90)

The Dream Book presents a science of reading complete with its own figural system of signification; ironically, "perplexed and difficult." It is also a system that Redburn clearly does not subscribe to—his subtle qualification, "if true," communicates his ironic distance from Blunt's efforts. But this qualification filters through to other systems, all of which are premised on certain assumptions. What strikes us about the Dream Book is precisely its resemblance to other books in its impenetrability. It is as difficult to read as the Bible and *The Wealth of Nations*, though here this difficulty is specifically employed to render suspect all conclusions Blunt gleans from it:

> Though often perplexed and lost in mazes concerning the cabalistic figures in the book, and the chapter of directions to beginners; for he could with difficulty read at all; yet, in the end, if not interrupted, he somehow managed to arrive at a conclusion satisfactory to him. (91-92)

With all the variables on which Blunt's understanding is contingent, one might be forgiven for not taking him seriously. Indeed, in the next chapter—"A Narrow Escape"—Blunt wakes at night "with a wonderful dream in his head [. . .] and falls to ciphering" (92), without ever getting an inkling of "the great black hull of a strange vessel" (92) bearing down on them. This near-collision of the *Highlander* with a ship that looks like death at once relativises all those efforts—not only Blunt's—to get a handle on life through various acts or systems of naming and reading. Redburn's critique implicitly—though not intentionally—extends to other books; not only their capacity to contain the truth, but also their capacity to communicate it. Whether one acknowledges it, or not, mankind remains "lost in mazes."

The central section of the book, the sojourn in England, and Liverpool in particular, is undoubtedly also its thematic core—the crisis, or Frye's *pathos*. From the start, Redburn's romantic fantasies "of the sea were connected with the land, but with fine old lands, full of mossy cathedrals and churches, and long, narrow, crooked streets without sidewalks, lined with strange houses" (5; ch. 1). In other words, England will be the true test of Redburn's dreams.

A provisional atmosphere is created right off the bat when Redburn admits that he intends to "note down, at random, my own wanderings about town, and impressions of things as they are recalled to me now, after the lapse of so many years" (136; ch. 29). The reference to "impressions" stresses the strictly subjective nature of the account, while "the lapse of so many years" evokes the possibility of a compromised recollection.

Redburn's picturesque expectations of England are directly analogous to his sentimental image of his father (and his guidebook), in that both are hopeful, idealised images of paternity, for Redburn is doubly an orphan, as a fatherless youth and as a post-revolutionary American. Since his ideas about his father inevitably link him with foreign countries, and with Liverpool in particular, the connection between England and father becomes an explicit one, and Redburn's attempts to trace and follow in his father's footsteps (literally) will be a test also of the relation of the American to England. For Melville this matter is even more loaded, because *Redburn* to some extent also represents his coming to terms with the influence on his own work of one of the fathers of American literature, Washington Irving. One of *Redburn*'s central themes, namely the pilgrimage of an American to England, also forms the substance of Irving's *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, and in his book Melville reconfigures the problematic raised in the earlier one. Susan Manning explains how the theme of paternity operates in Irving's book:

> Having rejected the father—as America symbolically did in the colonies' rebellion against King George III, and as Irving himself had in fleeing from a steady career in Law to the unsettled prospects of literature—the son yearns again and again to identify

> with an idealized father/fatherland, a 'good past', only to find himself held at arms' length as often as he seeks the embrace. (viii)

This reading of Geoffrey Crayon's trip to England clearly exposes the debt owed it by *Redburn*. But just as Crayon's "pilgrimage around the literary shrines of Great Britain" (Manning vii) blends nostalgia and isolation with irony, so Melville's tour of many of Irving's narrative sites[19] both acknowledges literary debt and deposes the former by ironic appropriation. The main point of departure is, of course, the fact that while Crayon travels—and crosses the Atlantic—as a gentleman of leisure, Redburn does so as an unwilling member of the working class. Irvingesque gentility, from which the Redburn family has fallen, is becoming ever more inaccessible to the American, whom democracy is mutating into a new breed. It is not mere coincidence that, at the point of failure of his paternal pilgrimage (for the most part comically treated, as Irving would have), Redburn turns his attention to emigrant ships (ch. 33), and begins to spout American millennialist rhetoric. As will become clear, however, even this rhetoric cannot survive the blast of the horrifying experiences that follow, culminating in the dismal re-enactment of emigration in the return voyage.

Redburn's arrival in Liverpool is marked by the portentous sound of "the famous *Bell-Buoy*" (127; ch. 27)—"a sound that seemed to speak of judgment and the resurrection"—coming to him through the impenetrable fog. This sense of expectation stands in direct contrast to his disappointed first glimpse of the long-awaited harbour itself:

> Looking shoreward, I beheld lofty ranges of dingy warehouses, which seemed very deficient in the elements of the marvelous; and bore a most unexpected resemblance to the ware-houses along South-street in New York. There was nothing strange; nothing extraordinary about them. There they stood; a row of calm and collected ware-houses; very good and substantial edifices, doubtless, and admirably adapted to the ends had in view by the builders; but plain, matter-of-fact ware-houses, nevertheless, and that was all that could be said of them.
>
> To be sure, I did not expect that every house in Liverpool must be a Leaning Tower of Pisa, or a Strasbourg Cathedral; but yet, these edifices I must confess, were a sad and bitter disappointment to me. (127)

This first impression—so far removed from Redburn's earlier picturesque vision—sets the tone for much of Redburn's English sojourn. What he encounters are not the neatly constituted images of his fantasies, but the "confused uproar of ballad-singers, bawling women, babies, and drunken sailors" (133; ch. 28), the chaotic reality of life. "And this is England?" he asks incredulously, clearly not yet realising what the similarity of Liverpool's warehouses to those of New York should have communicated: This is everywhere. The reader is once again brought

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[19] For a brief list of these, see Parker's "Historical Note" 327.

under the impression of Redburn's general lack of experience, even with regard to his own country.

However, certain facts are brought home to Redburn at this juncture, such as his identity as "nothing but a poor sailor boy" (133). As a result, he can abandon at least the most excessive and ridiculous of his fantasies, such as being "invite[d] [. . .] to St. James's" (133). But it also precipitates the recognition "that my prospects of seeing the world as a sailor were, after all, but very doubtful; for sailors only go *round* the world, without going *into* it [. . .]. They but touch the perimeter of the circle; hover about the edges of terra-firma" (133-34). This point repeats Redburn's penetrative quester's urge regarding the glass ship, and sets it against the horrific fate of endlessly going in circles. Sailors are doomed to live always upon, or in the vicinity of, the all-relativising sea, and Redburn seems increasingly doomed to a sailor's life, since he cannot afford the passage (the gentleman's trip he always dreamt of taking, a figure also of the maturing process). But it is also clear that he cannot rest with this identity, that he yet maintains that urge to penetrate "*into*" the world, and that he remains hopeful of finding "something wonderful" (8; ch. 1) to match his vision. In short, Redburn limits the defeat of the quest to the world of sailors—the ships, the harbours, the sea—and intends to exit that world, at least temporarily. Beyond the walls of the Prince's Dock there lie the very streets his father the gentleman once walked, and which he intends to enter in the company of the treasured guidebook (a pilgrim's breviary), which documents and preserves his father's steps.

Chapters 30 and 31 trace the fate of one of Redburn's central psychological touchstones, "THE PICTURE OF LIVERPOOL" (142; ch. 30). The testing of the book against the experiential realities of Liverpool is a test—one among many, but also one of the most important—of the possibility of (representational) correspondence, a possibility without which Redburn's world becomes slippery indeed. The failure of the book will mean the failure of paternity, leaving Redburn irrevocably an orphan.

The eclipse of the guidebook is effected with great deliberation in chapter 31, which gives an account of Redburn's attempts to follow his father's trail through Liverpool. Holding it, at first, to be an "infallible clew" (151), Redburn finds that it indicates places that are simply not (no longer) there. Accordingly, his "filial pilgrimage" (154) ends up being only partial—fragmented—and hence, lacking in the constitutive unity it was meant to have. It cannot redeem Redburn's fallenness, because it is itself fallen, i.e., subject to time. Sometimes right and sometimes wrong, it cannot be a stable source of authority, and cannot lead the way out of the labyrinth of experience—once again, Redburn is left to his own devices.

The failure of the guidebook is not a matter for dispute—ultimately Redburn himself is forced to acknowledge that

> [t]he book on which I had so much relied; [. . .] this precious book was next to useless. Yes, the thing that had guided the father, could not guide the son. [. . .]
>
> Here, now, oh, Wellingborough, thought I, learn a lesson, and never forget it. This world, my boy, is a moving world [. . .]. Guide-books, Wellingborough, are the least reliable books in all literature; and nearly all literature, in one sense, is made up of guide-books. Old ones tell us the ways our fathers went, [. . .] [but] to how few is the old guide-book now a clew! Every age makes its own guide-books [. . .]. (157)

No critic has sought to counter this conclusion and, for all their minor differences, most critics are roughly in agreement on what this episode portends. For Sten, the crisis stands central to Redburn's own *bildung*, and the "discovery of the guidebook's limited value impresses on him the need to form an identity that is appropriate to the conditions of his own present" (107), in which he is a sailor. Somewhat similar is Seelye's sense of the book as "[a]n emblem of mutability, [. . .] useless in the ever-renewing world of *now*" (49), and Milton R. Stern's suggestion that the book's failure is the failure of "[t]he language of the past" ("Society" 452). Stern's point also underlies Davis's "process of replacement" (146) and Tassoni's "linguistic maturation" (51), both of which show some relation to Wenke's conclusion that "[t]he loosely Emersonian dictum—'Every age makes its own guide-books'—does not affirm an ahistorical relativism but the need to make new books out of the old. The object, monument, or iconic text must inform the reader's imaginative reconstruction of new forms" (85).

All these examples show up the fact that the guidebook episode critiques and rejects absolutism, stressing historicity, motion and change, i.e., the relativising effect of time. Accordingly, all of these critics also consider Redburn to be the subject of some growth—experience forces him to release his grip on the past and to make amends with the present. For Bruce L. Grenberg, however, this has demonic implications—when he describes the guidebook as "the last bulwark of his [Redburn's] retreating faith" (65), he intends that (inherited) faith to be something without which Redburn's life would become meaningless. And he is quite correct in doing so, because in recognising the failure of his father's guidebook, and guidebooks in general, Redburn nonetheless maintains—but hopelessly and perilously maintains—the absolute authority of "one Holy Guide-Book, [. . .] that will never lead you astray, if you but follow it aright" (157; ch. 31). Metaphysically, Redburn refuses to be an orphan, because that would leave no viable position but Jackson's nihilism. But in the very act of invoking the Bible as a species of guidebook, at this juncture, he undermines and denies its timeless authority, particularly in a temporal world (a temporal world which also in its aspect and operation has no relation to the "Holy Guide-Book" anymore). Furthermore, as Short points out, "[f]ollowing the Bible 'aright'

[. . .] necessitates a proper reading, and when called upon to translate a passage for the semiliterate cook, Redburn has to conclude that 'it was a mystery that no one could explain; not even a parson'" (75).

Chapter 30, in which, in the words of the title, "Redburn Grows Intolerably Flat and Stupid over Some Outlandish Old Guide-Books," at some length establishes the nature of the symbol that will be found inadequate in the next chapter. But here, already, the reader's relation to the guidebook symbol is determined as ironic—as early as the chapter heading, in which Melville already establishes an ironic tone which, significantly, refers to the older narrator (as opposed to the young protagonist). What are we to make of this overt intrusion by Melville and, more importantly, what are the implications for our sense of who the older Redburn is?

The chapter starts off with a description of some of "the odd volumes in my father's library" (141), and re-establishes the role reading—even such "realistic" reading as guidebooks—played in the formation of Redburn's romantic fantasies. Two aspects in particular are closely considered: titles and appearance, or presentation. The titles, wordy and preposterous, parody the attempt at exhaustive description also evident in the titles of travel narratives, and indeed, *Redburn* itself, while posing the question of the efficacy of such titles in giving a comprehensive sense of content. In other words, we are back to the problem of correspondence. An attempt at correspondence leads to the absurd; thus, one book is

> entitled, in part, "*The Great Roads, both direct and cross, throughout England and Wales, from an actual Admeasurement by order of His Majesty's Postmaster-General: This work describes the Cities, Market and Borough and Corporate Towns, and those at which the Assizes are held, and gives the time of the Mails' arrival and departure from each: Describes the Inns in the Metropolis from which the stages go, and the Inns in the country which supply post-horses and carriages: Describes the Noblemen and Gentlemen's Seats situate near the Road, with Maps of the Environs of London, Bath, Brighton, and Margate.*" It is dedicated "*To the Right Honorable the Earls of Chesterfield and Leicester, by their Lordships' Most Obliged, Obedient, and Obsequious Servant, John Cary*, 1798." (142)

A book to rival *Mardi* in its attempt at inclusiveness, its preposterous title serves to call into question the very authority of the book itself. Melville is careful to include the date of the publication, for it brings to mind the question that becomes overt in the very next chapter—can all this information still be correct?

Redburn's physical description of these books also supports the question of correspondence—in a way that recalls his reference to the "arid-looking" cover of the stranger's book (5; ch. 1), and Melville's later "complaint" about *The Red Rover*'s cover, Redburn describes "a time-darkened, mossy old book, in marbleized binding, much resembling verd-

antique" (141), which deals with the monuments, statues and architecture of Rome. The outside matches the inside. But what, then, is one to make of "*A Description of York*" which has on its cover "an intricate coat of arms [. . .], looking like a diagram of the Labyrinth of Crete" (142)? This is an example of catachresis, a failed correspondence which, quite astoundingly, turns out to be most appropriate. The image of the labyrinth, casually introduced here among the description of guidebooks, destabilizes their authority, but it is simultaneously a figure of their lack of authority (authority which they never had). In one sense, all guidebooks are nothing but limited or partial, and therefore failed, attempts at solving labyrinths.

By the time Redburn gets around to "THE PICTURE OF LIVERPOOL" (142), we are not disposed to share his reverence for it. Our ironic distance from the narrator grows as he draws us into the compositional moment, and proceeds to "get it [the book] down from its shrine, and paint it, if I may, from the life" (143). As Tassoni suggests, here "we are not presented with a narrative proceeding independently of its author, but with the presence of the writer, Redburn, himself" (54). This grants us the opportunity to examine the reminiscing consciousness behind the narrative we are reading. One thing that becomes clear is how prone he is to nostalgia: "what a soft, pleasing sadness steals over me, and how I melt into the past and forgotten!" (143). This dissolute melting into the indeterminate "past and forgotten" seems to me to be one of the clearest indicators of Redburn's lack of substantial growth. Years down the line, he has made no progress toward a stable identity of his own. The undermined guidebook remains the most stable figure of his identity, for it includes not only the documentation of his father's movements, but also the juvenile "scrawls in the fly-leaves" (143) made by him and his siblings. In other words, it preserves a double image of Walter Redburn and Wellingborough Redburn in a prelapsarian past. And, significantly, older Redburn's reverence for the book is shown to be intact even before it is shown to have been severely challenged in his youth (in the next chapter). He still trusts the ability of the book to signify, of its "marks" to "delineate" (145). Unfolding the book's map of Liverpool, Redburn can "discover a number of dotted lines" (145), presumably drawn by his father in order to indicate his movements about town, and note that

> [b]y these marks, I perceive that my father forgot not his religion in a foreign land; but attended St. John's Church near the Hay-market, and other places of public worship: I see that he visited the News Room in Duke-street, the Lyceum in Bold-street, and the Theater Royal; and that he called to pay his respects to the eminent Mr. Roscoe, the historian, poet, and banker. (145)

The book is a means of recapturing the past—lost time—but this recapturing has nothing to do with growth, for it does not serve to release Redburn from its hold. The book remains in its shrine. Neither does the book manage to recapture the past in all its complexity, a flaw which is

of course the very basis of its comfort. Redburn's recollection of his *own* past, we become increasingly aware, does not bow so readily to the unifying, constituting urge.

I do not share Tassoni's more optimistic reading of the compositional scene. For him, the removal of narrative distance is related to the redemption of signification, and "the guide-book's description [by Redburn, "from the life"] (re)presents the registration of a language in the company of its designant—in short, a sign/referent immediacy" (54). In other words, for Tassoni this narrative moment counters the arbitrariness of signs, and goes some way toward "healing that rift between language and the referential world" (52). But the narrative simply does not justify such a reading, and Redburn's "shrine" (143) only brings to mind those "idle towers of stone; which, useless to the world in themselves, vainly hope to eternize a name" (162; ch. 32). "Such monuments are cenotaphs indeed" (162), is the telling insight he somehow fails to make applicable to his "shrine." Ultimately, Redburn's continued reverence for and fidelity to the guidebook is a sign of his lack of maturation.

One thing Redburn does realise, however, is that "I am not the traveler my father was" (160; ch. 31), a realisation that to some extent signals his final recognition of his identity as orphan. To be an orphan means to have no sense of lineage, no sense of a developmental growth in which one features as a small, yet indispensable, stage. It means that one exists in a void—a position which is precisely the demonic obverse of that which the Romantic strives to attain. Therefore Redburn, as he trails through the harbour, latches onto the image of emigrant ships, and proceeds to seek a constitutive solace in the fact of being an American. In others words, he now views himself as belonging to a family of orphans, destined to establish a new, glorious lineage of their own. Almost imperceptibly, Redburn slips into millennialist rhetoric, and then abandons himself to it whole-heartedly:

> Settled by the people of all nations, all nations may claim her for their own. You can not spill a drop of American blood without spilling the blood of the whole world. Be he Englishman, Frenchman, German, Dane, or Scot; the European who scoffs at an American, calls his own brother *Raca*, and stands in danger of the judgment. We are not a narrow tribe of men, with a bigoted Hebrew nationality—whose blood has been debased in the attempt to ennoble it, by maintaining an exclusive succession among ourselves. No: our blood is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble currents all pouring into one. We are not a nation, so much as a world; for unless we may claim all the world for our sire, like Melchisedec, we are without father or mother. (169; ch. 33)

This does not sound like the Redburn we have come to know. Thus Samson warns that "[t]he hastiness of his turnabout and the overblown rhetoric he adopts—fathered by similar statements in the American press—[. . .] lead one to suspect that Redburn's idealistic, romantic tendencies

may merely be appearing in a different guise" (112). The excessiveness of the language serves as the surest indicator of Melville's parodic intentions, while simultaneously suggesting something of the desperation Redburn seems to be experiencing. He suddenly seems intent on presenting the orphaned state as acceptable. Americans "may claim all the world for our sire," but there is a strong sense here that Americans might do "without father and mother" altogether. Against the ever accumulating images of paternal "cenotaphs," Redburn now clearly hopes to place the image of brotherhood—hence the echo of the biblical warning (Matt. 5. 22) against calling one's brother Raca, for, as Beaver suggests in his notes to this passage, "*Raca* (from Semitic adjective *req*) means 'empty'" (431). When fathers—authority figures—fail, one turns to the more democratic, equal relationships afforded by brothers.

Of course, things are not quite so easy, and Redburn's hope for the redemptive possibilities of brotherhood is dealt an early blow. Chapter 37, "What Redburn Saw in Launcelott's-Hey," recounts one of the most graphic and haunting experiences Redburn has during his stay in the inferno of Liverpool. Passing through the street, he

> heard a feeble wail, which seemed to come out of the earth. [. . .] It seemed the low, hopeless, endless wail of some one forever lost. At last I advanced to an opening which communicated downward with deep tiers of cellars beneath a crumbling old warehouse; and there, some fifteen feet below the walk, crouching in nameless squalor, with her head bowed over, was the figure of what had been a woman. Her blue arms folded to her livid bosom two shrunken things like children, that leaned toward her, one on each side. At first, I knew not whether they were alive or dead. They made no sign [. . .]. (180)

Redburn has seen numerous horrors in Liverpool and will see more, but here the city's figurative association with hell is most vividly communicated—the "deep tiers of cellars" simultaneously echoing Dante's systemised inferno, and suggesting the structural immensity of the industrial city. Almost literally at the heart of the city there is nothing but a dying woman and her children, sunk in a squalor which is "nameless" in part because no one will voice it, and in part because it quite simply cannot be expressed—there is "no sign" to communicate it adequately.

Redburn's reaction is sympathetic and humane, but it also reminds one a little of his millennialist oration. He immediately establishes a bond between "these ghosts" and the rest of mankind in terms of equality: "Were they not human beings? A woman and two girls? With eyes, ears and lips like any queen?" (181). But when he goes forth to procure help, he finds that people are utterly unsympathetic: either because involved in their own survival, or because they simply do not consider it their responsibility. Ultimately, Redburn filches food from the boarding house, collects some water in his tarpaulin hat, and "descend[s] [. . .] into the vault" (183). And it is here that the full significance of the experience is brought home to the reader:

> While the girls were breaking and eating the bread, I tried to lift the woman's head; but, feeble as she was, she seemed bent upon holding it down. Observing her arms still clasped upon her bosom, and that something seemed hidden under the rags there, a thought crossed my mind, which impelled me forcibly to withdraw her hands for a moment; when I caught a glimpse of a meagre little babe, the lower part of its body thrust into an old bonnet. Its face was dazzlingly white, even in its squalor; but the closed eyes looked like balls of indigo. It must have been dead some hours. (183).

Proceeding from the first allusion to the Eucharist, Melville creates a bitter parody of the iconography of the Madonna. For the first and only time, Redburn manages to penetrate to "something [. . .] hidden," and what he finds is the corpse of an innocent. The face, "dazzlingly white, even in its squalor," brings to mind the suffering Christ, as do the other images which may be tied to his life—the Eucharist, the vault, the mother.

Grenberg also draws a link to the figure of Christ, though proceeding from another symbolic (and parodic) parallel:

> The death and disappearance of the forlorn family form an ironic and grotesque parody of Christ's resurrection and thus define Redburn's absolute loss of faith. For three days Redburn visits the vault, always meeting "the same sight" [*R* 184; ch. 37]. It is only on the third morning that the smell from the vault indicates that its inhabitants have died. But they have not risen. (68)

What emerges from the vault, then, is not Christ—a figure of hope—but the smell of death. "Above all," Grenberg argues, "what Redburn sees in Launcelott's-Hey is death" (67), death without the possibility of redemption. Redburn's Christian act of kindness cannot save the family—it even acquires a deeply ambiguous quality when Redburn realises that his gift of food "would only tend to prolong their suffering, without hope of any permanent relief" (*R* 183). His Christian faith becomes untenable and impractical in a merciless, ambiguous, murky world. Death undermines all hopes of redemption.

Redburn's eye becomes particularly attuned to the suffering around him, although he can do little but pay witness to the cruelty of the world. He "Roves About Hither and Thither" (ch. 41), aimlessly and without guidance, taking in the "[p]overty, poverty, poverty, in almost endless vistas: and want and woe staggered arm in arm along these miserable streets" (201; ch. 41). His eye is no longer trained upon the future, and for the time being, he slips into the mode of the picaresque observer. Accordingly, he also becomes less insistent on the ability of America to offer a redemptive alternative to Liverpool—thus, he has to concede "that, in some things [such as prevailing attitudes toward blacks], we Americans leave to other countries the carrying out of the principle that stands at the head of our Declaration of Independence" (202; ch. 41); and he comes to accept "the humiliating fact, wholly unforeseen by me, that upon the whole, and barring poverty and beggary, Liverpool, away from the docks, was very much such a place as

New York" (202). Even the great American fraternity consists of "the same elbowing, heartless-looking crowd" (202).

Strangely enough, Redburn's moods and attitudes continue to shift—from tragedy to comedy, fellow-feeling to snobbery, despair to hope—and at length he has another attempt at brotherhood; this time with a bankrupt British dandy called Harry Bolton. In chapter 44, "Redburn Introduces Master Harry Bolton to the Favorable Consideration of the Reader," and proceeds to paint a picture of what his shipmates will eventually call "a very equivocal character" (254; ch. 50). Harry, yet another who "was early left an orphan" (217), considers escaping his troubles in Liverpool by emigrating to America. Thus, he and Redburn, like brothers, to some extent resolve to become guides to one another. Harry takes a leading role while they are in England, and Redburn, with regard to the *Highlander*—indeed, now it is he who, like his older brother at the start of the book, dispenses "sage advice" (220)—and, of course, once back in America.

There is both a strong resemblance and contrast between the characters of Redburn and Harry. Both are educated, and once belonged to respected, wealthy families. Both are subject to unrealistic fantasies, and resolve to seek some redemption across the Atlantic. However, Harry displays "a reckless contempt [. . .] for all past conventionalities" (218), which accounts for his taste for America—in direct contrast to Redburn's reverence for the past, and his pilgrimage to England. Accordingly, Redburn is not wholly at ease with his new-found friend, and occasionally becomes subject to "misgivings" (220), particularly with regard to "the rigid morality of my friend, as a teller of the truth" (223). These suspicions reach a new height when, just prior to a sudden trip to London, Harry dons a disguise of "whiskers and mustache" (226; ch. 45). The reasons for this are never clear, and Redburn finds himself whisked along on a journey that grows ever more mysterious and disturbing.

Redburn's narrative attention to detail takes a beating during the long-awaited journey to London. A single paragraph takes us from a public house in Liverpool to Euston Square in London (226; ch. 45) and, once there, the travellers immediately proceed under Harry's injunction: "No time to lose" (227; ch. 46). For Harry, the past is lost time; thus, no repose is possible. He constantly tries, not to redeem the past, but the present, with an eye to the future. In the meantime, all that Redburn can do is to see what he can see, "though, in truth, I missed much" (227).

"A Mysterious Night in London" presents a hermeneutic problem, not only to young Wellingborough, but also to Redburn the narrator. The young protagonist is lead into "some

semi-public place of opulent entertainment" (228). Immediately Redburn senses the equivocal character of the place, with its walls "painted so as to deceive the eye" (228). But even more evocative is his description of the floor, which

> echoed to the tread, as if all the Paris catacombs were underneath. I started with misgivings at that hollow, boding sound, which seemed sighing with a subterraneous despair, through all the magnificent spectacle around me; mocking it, where most it glared. (228)

We are reminded of a subterranean vault back in Liverpool, from which another sound of despair rose, and so Redburn manages to render a point about economic inequalities. But even greater is the sense of utter existential emptiness, of a "magnificent spectacle" covering up nothing but a void, which mocks all attempts to obscure it. Death finally undermines all appearance, renders it hollow and insignificant.

Confused and excited, Redburn is left alone at a table in a state of "delirium" (229), and begins to "indulge in foolish golden visions" (229). Yet he also feels out of place, and highly sensitive to the "impertinent" (229) gaze of one of the waiters. When Harry finally does collect him, it is only to lead him deeper into the club, and to deposit him once more in a private room: "As we entered the room, methought I was slowly sinking in some reluctant, sedgy sea; so thick and elastic the Persian carpeting, mimicking parterres of tulips, and roses, and jonquils, like a bower in Babylon" (230). The sense of opiated lethargy and slow drowning is related directly to the feeling of sensual excess—the club, whatever its nature, presents Redburn with a potpourri of equivocal signs. He dutifully proceeds to describe the room in great detail, but none of it serves to clarify the reason for his presence there—all is a masquerade, signifying nothing. Overlooking it all is the bust "of a bald-headed old man, with a mysteriously-wicked expression, and imposing silence by one thin finger over his lips. His marble mouth seemed tremulous with secrets" (231). Like Harry, it remains mute and inscrutable.

Once again Redburn is left alone, to reflect on the strange, labyrinthine course his visit to London has taken. Alienated, nervous and revolted, he even begins to miss his "old bunk" (233) on board the *Highlander*: "The whole place seemed infected [. . .]. This must be some house whose foundations take hold on the pit" (233). Pitching in and out of a fitful sleep, the entire experience seems nightmarish and unreal, and utterly unaccountable. In fact, Redburn himself begins to become sparing of his information—for one thing, he "will not" (234) share the contents of a letter, which Harry has left in his care, with the reader. Then Harry suddenly returns in a suicidal fit, tears up the letter, makes Redburn promise not to refer to the events of the night again, and in the morning, the two travellers depart for Liverpool.

The trip to London sits like a lacuna of incomprehensibility in Redburn's otherwise fastidious and relatively thorough narrative—and, as such, it also presents a problem to the reader. It shows a suspicion of the representational—which it recasts as strictly theatrical—but at the same time it becomes in itself a sensational figure of non-signification. It can hardly be a coincidence that neither Tassoni nor Davis, both of whom argue for some process of resignification in *Redburn*, make any reference to these chapters at all. Once again, Redburn is caught without the appropriate lexicon, or clue, but there is nobody to assist him in his interpretation. But there is a sense in which he seems not to want to know either, because he has a sense that all that remains to be uncovered is a void. Harry, the reader feels, might justifiably be called *Raca*; Redburn's ideal of brotherhood turns out as empty as everything else.

Chapter 47 sees the *Highlander* "Homeward-Bound," this time counting Harry among its crew, and a group of "about five hundred emigrants" (239) as its cargo. The third stage of Redburn's circular journey, it corresponds, in terms of the quest pattern, to the recognition of the hero. And there is a sense in which Redburn finally seems to be recognised by his comrades as a sailor, for they do not taunt him as they do on the outward voyage—their negative attentions are now reserved for Harry. Neither does Redburn seem so wrapped up in his own misery anymore: as his longing to be back on board the *Highlander* during his darkest hour at "Aladdin's Palace" shows, he has to some extent come to accept it as his home.

Ultimately, however, this final part of the book seems more notable for its reversals than its progressions. Thus, chapter 47 starts off with an immediate image of Redburn almost travelling back in time: "Once more in Liverpool; and wending my way through the same old streets [. . .]. That I had been at all in London seemed impossible" (237). A few chapters on, a "strange odor in the forecastle" (244; ch. 48), at length found to emanate from a dead sailor, Miguel Saveda, returns us once more to the episode in Launcelott's-Hey, and stresses the inescapability of its implications. Another minor reversal occurs when the Irish emigrants, spotting land, for a moment grow excited, thinking they have reached their destination, only to find

> that the land to the north was their own native island, which, after leaving three or four weeks previous in a steamboat for Liverpool, was now close to them again; and that, after newly voyaging so many days from the Mersey, the Highlander was only bringing them in view of the original home whence they started. (259; ch. 51)

Since this brief passage echoes the greater structure of *Redburn*, its tone of defeat is significant for the reader's experience of Redburn's own return to his "original home."

In fact, the "theme of emigration," as Short calls it, is fraught with a sense of non-progression and reversal. According to his reading of *Redburn*, "[t]he work takes place in and attempts to rationalize the period between childhood and maturity, and it constantly calls on a combined retrospective and prospective vision—a past and future—embodied in the theme of emigration, to find meaning in the circumstances it maps" (68). But the homeward journey figures emigration almost exclusively as a process of decimation. They suffer overcrowding, famine, brutal competition,[20] and fatal illness; they are forced, upon nearing New York, to throw overboard some of their meagre possessions—"pallet and pillow," and "old pots and pans, bottles and baskets" (299; ch. 60)—in order to avoid further incarceration under quarantine; and many of them arrive in the promised land having literally become what Americans are only figuratively—orphans. If this is a case of correspondence, it is deeply ironic. Emigration, as a figure of growth, incontrovertibly suggests that development is simply a process whereby you end up worse off than you were. As Grenberg puts it, "[t]he *Highlander* reaches its brave new world, but its passengers are decimated by plague and the survivors are spotted with blood. There is no resurrection in sight" (75-76).

Significantly, the blood by which they are stained is not the blood of the redemptive figure of Christ, but of the nihilist, Jackson, who coughs blood "with a blasphemous cry," loses his grip, and falls "headlong from the yard" (296; ch. 59). The entire episode is a resurrection myth in reverse, for Jackson, we are told, in "issuing so unexpectedly from his dark tomb in the forecastle, [. . .] looked like a man raised from the dead" (295; ch. 59). His fall from the mast underscores the fallenness—the subjection to time and death—of humankind. Superficially, or temporally speaking, the sailors may be right in considering "that *his* death was *their* deliverance" (297; ch. 59), their deliverance from a mocking, ironic presence that to some extent fulfilled a role similar to that of the "everlastingly mocking" imp (*M* 200; ch. 66)—itself a double of the Typeean skull (*T* 172; ch. 24)—in the prow of the Mardian canoe. But their lot as humans remains unchanged. It is more than likely, then, that Melville introduces this phrase here specifically in order to stress the scene's parodic-demonic relation to the crucifixion.

As a result, the emigration itself becomes a parodic re-enactment or repetition of the original act of emigration to America, and, once again, reverses its redemptive logic. In their voyage to the land of equality and brotherhood, the emigrants are actually turned from a group of

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[20] Samson, in his convincing exploration of the role of "Smithian self-interest" (120) and laissez-faire capitalism in *Redburn* as a whole, focuses precisely on this aspect of the calamitous journey.

fairly well-behaved people—brothers in poverty and hope—into a crowd of heartless competitors.

The reversals continue when the *Highlander* finally puts in to New York, and its various occupants disperse. First there is the famed scene in the cabin, where Redburn is calmly and logically swindled out of all his wages by Captain Riga. Officially to blame is his fantastical non-trip to London. In fact, according to Riga's calculations, it is Redburn who owes *him* money (although he will not be required to pay up). Dimock's reading of this is crucial: "Redburn's negative accumulation of capital at once literalizes and reallegorizes a more central mode of negative accumulation in the book—the negative accumulation of time in the person of the infantilized narrator" (87). In short, Redburn has failed to grow, and his narrative has become "the exact opposite of a *Bildungsroman*: where the *Bildungsroman* registers time as accretion, *Redburn* registers it as deficit" (Dimock 85).

This logic is finally played out in the last chapter of the book, "The Last That Was Ever Heard of Harry Bolton," in which Redburn suddenly abandons Harry, leaving him with the most useless sage advice: "'Now, my dear friend,' said I, 'Take my advice, and while I am gone, keep up a stout heart; never despair, and all will be well'"(310). Bearing in mind the experiences of his round-trip, and his frequent insights regarding the general heartlessness of mankind with regard to each other's welfare, this platitude is impossible to credit. Like the abandonment of Harry itself—however temporary it is meant to be—it serves only to suggest that Redburn has learned nothing, and has not grown up. He is as self-involved as ever, to the extent that he can later sympathetically think of Harry "as a friendless, penniless foreigner in New York" (311), without even for a moment considering his own guilt in the matter.

Redburn concludes with this guilt, as the narrator repeats an account of Harry's death on board a whaler, after falling "over the side, and [being] jammed between the ship, and a whale" (312). On the other hand, "I, Wellingborough Redburn, chance to survive, after having passed through far more perilous scenes than any narrated in this, *My First Voyage*—which here I end" (312). But this end of *Redburn* ties us back to the beginning, not simply because Redburn is back on American soil, penniless and friendless, but because after the narrator's brief reference to his further adventures, our most conclusive access to his compositional identity remains that proffered at the end of the first chapter, in relation to the glass ship:

> So much for *La Reine*. We have her yet in the house, but many of her glass spars and ropes are now sadly shattered and broken,—but I will not have her mended; and her figure-head, a gallant warrior in a cocked-hat, lies pitching head-foremost down into a trough of a calamitous sea under the bows—but I will not have him put on his legs again, till I get on my own; for between him and me there is a secret sympathy; and my

> sisters tell me, even yet, that he fell from his perch the very day I left home to go to sea on this *my first voyage*. (9)

The "gallant warrior," Redburn's parodic double, is fallen, like Jackson and Harry. But more than that, the adverb, "pitching," suggests an ongoing action, queerly frozen. Redburn is caught in a transitional moment, a moment of emigration from childhood to maturity which is never completed. And in keeping with the spate of reversals that characterised his homeward journey, Redburn's gaze has completely turned away from the future, and has settled on the past. His recollection—incomplete and non-redemptive—is strictly solipsistic. He never gets back on his feet again (the glass figure-head becomes a leading figure of the fallenness that denies apotheosis). The only progression is that of time, which leaves the rest of us in the lurch, to collect dust, like the glass ship, *La Reine*. Change occurs, not as growth, but deterioration. We are reminded at this stage of the decay of Redburn's shooting-jacket, in which, even by chapter 44—in which Harry is introduced—he remained dressed, a sign, perhaps, rather of tattered pretensions that passing youth (221).

In *Redburn*, death tends to infect life, constantly encroaches upon it. Hence Redburn, no relativist, cannot maintain an attitude of acceptance, and cannot enjoy life. Obsessed by the past, he ultimately remains under the dominion of the symbol that inspired his romantic fantasies in the first place, the glass ship. As Dimock notes,

> [t]rue to its name, *La Reine* is a symbol of dominion. It is also the site at where a politics of time and space begins to emerge. The fossilized vessel, a sort of maritime Grecian urn, is an extreme case of timelessness, and it shows, with proportionate clarity, just what timelessness can mean. Melville's point is not unlike Keats's, for here, too, timeless permanence must rest on a kind of paralysis, a kind of living death. (83)

Given the tone of *Redburn*'s indeterminate and provisional conclusions, it seems difficult to account for Melville's reference to it (in a letter to Richard H. Dana, dated 6 October 1849) as a "little nursery tale" (141). But then we also know that some nursery tales and rhymes, upon a moment's consideration, turn out to be disconcertingly violent and strange. *Redburn* is such a nursery tale, which, while lulling us with a false sense of security, manages to import the most subversive and destabilising questions into our stronghold of repose. Here and there in *Redburn*, Melville lets us in on this deliberate lulling, by having his narrator display a somewhat nervous (and ultimately ironic) concern for his reader's comfort. Thus, he can attempt to provide "some relief to the impression which Jackson's character must have made upon the reader" (112-13; ch. 23), or he can suddenly suspend an account of his misanthropic thoughts—"bitter enough even now, for they have not yet gone quite away"—for being "uncongenial enough to the reader" (10; ch. 2). Such solicitousness I read as a subtle taunt at the reader's complacency; in particular that

reader who, satisfied with Melville's return to what Howard P. Vincent calls "prose normalcy" (2), fails to recognise its fundamental subversiveness. Contrary to Dimock's claims, then, its formative principle is not "the poetics of a newly chastened [. . .] author, one that will allow him to represent and to give meaning to his imagined powerlessness" (77), but rather, a poetics of *feigned* simplicity and solicitousness—or "subjection," to use Dimock's term—which tones down the extravagance of *Mardi* in order to apply his critique on a domestic front. *Redburn* presents Melville's subversion of the Aristotelian "straightforward [. . .] narrative" (*C* 132), and underlines the fact that the exotic, destabilised Polynesian world that informed *Typee*, *Omoo* and *Mardi* was not the sole force behind the relativistic subversion of centralised authority in those books. In *Redburn* the world is recognisable, and yet completely indeterminate, full of irrepressible violence and suffering. Even the "straightforward [. . .] narrative" must succumb, at times, to the inscrutable, what the narrator of *Billy Budd*, in referring to Claggart's unaccountable antagonism toward Budd, calls "the deadly space between" (*BB* 430; ch. 11). That space—the interstice of mystery and irresolution—dominates the narrative structure of the book Melville wrote directly after *Redburn*, namely *White-Jacket*.

CHAPTER 4

"VIBRATING IN THE MID-DEEP": ONTOLOGICAL INBETWEENNESS IN *WHITE-JACKET*

Howard P. Vincent says of *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* that they are "almost twinned" (2). He may merely be referring to their virtually simultaneous birth—both books were completed within the space of a few months in 1849, between April and September[1]—but this sense of *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* being closely related, even thematically, is pervasive among Melville's readers. It certainly also lies behind the critical "tradition" of discussing the two works together, or at least within the space of one chapter. It seems to me, however, that *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* are twinned in the sense that *Typee* and *Omoo* are twinned—the second book tends to proceed from the implications emerging in the first. Hence, in both cases, the second book appears more knowing, and less hopeful; its world—though, superficially speaking, the setting is similar—less stable; its narrative more episodic. If the protagonist is less baffled, he is also more satirical and aggressive—as Paul is with regard to the missions. Accordingly, where *Redburn* is a "little nursery tale," *White-Jacket* "is in some parts rathar man-of-*warish* in style—rathar aggressive I fear" (*C* 141, 140). It becomes so, most famously, in relation to the persistence of what Melville hoped would become an "obsolete barbarism" (*WJ* 282; ch. 68)—to wit, the use of flogging as a means of discipline in the American navy—but there is a general sense of impatience with what White-Jacket at some stage calls "arbitrary governments" (81; ch. 20).[2] This quality makes *White-Jacket* one of Melville's most overt explorations of socio-political power relations. However, one must be careful not to convert Melville into a reformer and lobbyist, as a number of critics have done,[3] for, firstly, it tends to render one insensitive to the effectiveness of his narrative technique, and, secondly, it rather obscures the fact that *White-Jacket* is also a damning critique of (political) idealism. This double or polarised perspective makes for much of the tension in the book, and is one of the central devices by means of which Melville postpones any sense of closure. All narrative kinesis is metamorphosed into a violent

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[1] See Hershel Parker's "Historical Note" to *Redburn*, specifically 318-21.

[2] Melville would revisit such "arbitrary government" with far less satire in *Billy Budd*, where a more distantiated narrator replaces the first-person narrator of *White-Jacket*.

[3] William Ellery Sedgwick, for instance, bluntly states that "*White-Jacket* was written with a practical intention" (72).

inwardness, suggested most effectively by White-Jacket's exhaustive internal, top-to-bottom anatomy of a man-of-war, a supreme symbol of outward, imperial, epic action. The *Neversink* has no battles to fight and no quest to complete; from the moment we are introduced to it, it is already "Homeward-Bound" (6; ch. 2). But this home is never reached—*White-Jacket* leaves the *Neversink* "on the sea—still with the land out of sight—still with the brooding darkness on the face of the deep" (396; ch. 93), and the reader never experiences the release from the confines of the ship. We are homeward-*bound*, locked in a floating prison.

Redburn's defeat of mythos haunts *White-Jacket*, in which a strange blend of circular movement and stasis comes across as the predominant condition of being—with a sharp sense of phrase, Wai-chee Dimock has described this as a state of "being transfixed in navigation" (80). It is a condition all the more distressing for its rootlessness. For this very reason, Melville's use of the name *Neversink* does not strike one simply as an ironic stab at inflated self-confidence—it effectively communicates the remorselessly static nature of its drifting world. Narratively speaking, there is also a sense of circularity and aimlessness as White-Jacket ranges through the ship, indulging in portraits of individual sailors, detailed descriptions of man-of-war life, quotations, polemic, essayistic discussions, poetic musings, and so forth. As Tony Tanner suggests, "[i]t is a rich book written with self-amplifying energy, but deeply uncertain of its direction, apart from the minimal linearity of the voyage being 'homeward bound'" (xxxiii). In other words, Dimock's phrase—"being transfixed in navigation"—would also be an apt description of the narrative itself, which has a decidedly episodic structure. By necessity it has a beginning and an end, but it has no middle, either in the sense of a clearly defined thematic centre, or in Peter Brooks's sense of the "middle—what we read through—[as] a field of force" (47), a kinetic, forward-reaching force aimed at a resolvent end. Once again, one might point out that although the desire for "home" underlies the entire narrative, *White-Jacket* does not reward its reader with a redemptive homecoming.

This sometimes poses a problem for critics, who then seem to fall back on the reasoning that Melville may not have been certain of his intentions. Christopher Sten, most notably, identifies two opposing impulses at work, namely politics and literature, and feels "[t]hat Melville made less than a satisfactory fusion of the two in *White-Jacket*" (115). Accordingly, he then decides that "in *White-Jacket* his [Melville's] effort to bring about a reform of power in the U.S. Navy is far and away his chief object" (115), a point that makes the book sound more like a polemical pamphlet than the "Political Novel" he ultimately argues it to be. The problem is exacerbated by Sten's own admission "that the book was published too late to have any real impact on the naval abuses, particularly the flogging practices, it so vehemently attacked" (116).

Keeping in mind the speed at which *White-Jacket* was written and published, it seems unlikely that Melville would have been unaware of the atmosphere of reform. Dimock certainly assumes this awareness on the part of Melville when she discusses his book as yet another example of his "poetics of authorial subjection" (77). According to her, Melville was strictly aiming for popular appeal: "[T]o please the reader, nothing is more obligatory than a rhetoric of naval reform, more specifically, a critique of flogging. Not much was controversial about such a critique" (99). This almost goes so far as to say that Melville had no particular feelings about flogging at all—to call the issue uncontroversial is one thing, but to call its inclusion "obligatory" is quite another. As a result, Dimock's point seems as narrow and forced as Sten's. Melville's humanism would have called for strong feelings about the issue, and these feelings are given vent in *White-Jacket*. However, I would argue that his focus on naval abuses is ultimately born, not from offended sensibilities, but from the opportunity it provides for exploring the ironies that stem from a rift between political ideals and political praxis. In other words, I find Tanner quite convincing when he suggests that "Melville is happier undermining—or at least problematizing—than univocally advancing a cause" (xvii), regardless of any sense of "obligation."

As I have already intimated, the narrative of *White-Jacket* proceeds by a tension between irreconcilable extremes, of which the tension between democratic theory and governmental praxis is only one example. That *White-Jacket* seems "deeply uncertain of its direction" (Tanner xxxiii), therefore seems to me to be a direct result of its commitment to the representation of the epistemological and ontological labyrinth of confounding dilemmas that underlies the human condition.

The modulation between extremes that we witnessed in the character of Redburn to some extent becomes an overt feature of *White-Jacket*, a text which occurs in precisely that indeterminate space between irreconcilable extremes. The narrator exists in the same space—indeed, he even claims to "love an indefinite, infinite background—a vast, heaving, rolling, mysterious rear" (396; ch. 93). White-Jacket has personality, wit, erudition, and is full of opinions, and yet, it remains difficult to get a comprehensive sense of his character. As Bruce L. Grenberg points out, his "effacement is almost complete: he is never named throughout the book" (77). Redburn's hunting-jacket—a sign of wealth and leisure (an inherited identity) which, in Redburn's incongruous circumstances, becomes comic—here turns into the narrator's white

jacket, an indeterminate sign[4] which, like the white whale, also poses the reader with a hermeneutic problem, because it overtly refuses to mediate meaning.

We are informed in chapter 1 that it is White-Jacket who "manufactur[es]" the "outlandish garment of my own devising" (3) from which he gains his name. Yet it is a labour to which he is forced because of the purser's steward's refusal to supply him with a "pea-jacket" (3). Consequently, White-Jacket's identity is, from the outset, figured as a result of a mediation between internal and external (social) circumstances, and serves to encapsulate the tension between White-Jacket's ideas of individual autonomy—epitomised in his statement that we "[o]urselves are Fate" (321; ch. 75)—and his sense of cosmic and social determinism that runs through the narrative, and is most clearly captured by the unbending law of the Articles of War.

But White-Jacket's identity is figured as an even more general meeting place of diversity when he continues to describe how, "with many odds and ends of patches [. . .] I bedarned and bequilted the inside of my jacket" (4; ch. 1), in order to make it more resistant to inclement weather. However, the image created is one, not of protection, but of assimilation, an image underscored by White-Jacket's humorous claim that, in a rainstorm, he "became a universal absorber" (4). It is an image that may seem expansive at a superficial glance, but the jacket is developed strictly as a figure of constriction. It is "a burden" (4) that closes in around its wearer, since "the repeated soakings and dryings it had undergone [. . .] made it shrink woefully all over" (100; ch. 25). In other words, it shares the fate of Redburn's hunting-jacket.

I would suggest that, if the jacket has to signify anything beyond sheer indeterminacy, it is most likely the sign of a relativism with which White-Jacket can never become completely comfortable. Its openness, its accommodating "Quakerish amplitude about the skirts" (3; ch. 1)—the very skirts that will muffle White-Jacket and cause his fall into the sea in chapter 92—is a source of irritation and danger. Here, too, its indeterminate colour seems to hint at creedless relativism—as Ishmael's anatomy (in "The Whiteness of the Whale") of the "elusive quality" and "the supernaturalism of this hue" (*MD* 189, 192) suggests, white, born of the meeting of the primary colours, is the "colorless, all-color of atheism" (*MD* 195). It is not at all surprising, then, that the narrator's original "mess club" (one of the subdivisions in a frigate) "nourished a prejudice against my white jacket" (61; ch. 15)—as a result of which he is finally compelled to seek refuge with "mess No. 1 [. . .] the '*Forty-two-pounder Club*;' [. . .] fellows of large intellectual and corporeal calibre" (62). Among the more superstitious sailors, White-Jacket

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[4] This is, of course, the reason why, as Samuel Otter points out, the jacket is "[o]ne in a series of Melville's overwritten symbols" (27)—its very blankness makes possible the imposition of readings which it must ultimately defeat.

seems to be strictly a bad omen, as is made clear when he is "taken for an albatross" (7; ch. 2). Later, more pertinently, he is "taken for a ghost" (78; ch. 19) and almost killed. In both cases, it is the whiteness of the jacket that is to blame for the confusion.

In chapter 9, "Of the Pockets that were in the Jacket," we are made privy to the narrator's further efforts to become a locus of convergence by providing his jacket "with a great variety of pockets, pantries, clothes-presses, and cupboards" (36). He intends to carry his entire world with him, only to find that his possessions are destroyed by the all-dissolving water, which even "reduce[s] to an omelet" his "pocket-edition of Shakspeare" (37). But finally the psychological price White-Jacket has to pay for his openness is most effectively suggested by the self-preservative measure of sewing shut all the pockets in order to avoid the attentions of "a parcel of fellows [. . .] bent upon pillaging me" (37). Finally as incapable of trust as he is of reconciling himself to the loss of personal possessions, he recoils from his defencelessness. It is a recoil we might also have anticipated from the "labyrinth metaphor" (Vincent 24) White-Jacket employs in first describing the proliferation of pockets: "[M]y jacket, like an old castle, was full of winding stairs, and mysterious closets, crypts, and cabinets" (36)—from this, White-Jacket himself appears to be something of a labyrinth: "So, in the end, I masoned up my lockers and pantries; and save the two used for mittens, the white jacket ever after was pocketless" (37).

Still, the narrator's problems with his jacket persist. For one thing, it makes him stand out—in chapter 29 he laments "how easy [. . .] [it is] to individualize '*that white jacket*,' and dispatch him on the errand" (120-21). It makes him stand out, even among his friends, and becomes emblematic of what Leon Howard calls his "individual isolation" (138). Neither does he seem able to get rid of it, and a comic attempt on his part to sell it at an auction finally causes him to feel that "my jacket stuck to me like the fatal shirt on Nessus" (203; ch. 47). This sense of fatality is indeed justified, for by this stage White-Jacket has had at least one near-death experience because of the jacket, and the narrative will close with another.

The sense of constriction created by the jacket is echoed by the world of the *Neversink* itself. In a sense the jacket, with its many inaccessible pockets, also becomes a double of the labyrinthine ship, with its "mysterious store-rooms" (124; ch. 30) and "vaults" (128; ch. 31) that remain "completely inaccessible" (127) to *his* exploring gaze. The title of chapter 30, "A Peep through a Port-hole at the Subterranean Parts of a Man-of-war," repeats the by now familiar attempt at a penetrative glance, by virtually returning us to Redburn's attempt to "peep in at the portholes" of the glass ship (*R* 8; ch. 1). White-Jacket shares the penetrative urge, the need to counter "strange emotions of doubt, misgivings, and mystery" (128). But the fact remains that, after more than a year on board the *Neversink*, "there were numberless things in it that, to the

last, remained wrapped in obscurity, or concerning which I could only lose myself in vague speculations" (128). We are reminded of Tommo's conjectural anthropology, but the difference is that White-Jacket can recognise his speculations for what they are. He comes nearer the acceptance of inscrutability than either Tommo, Taji or Redburn ever manages to do. For the same reason he is also the least proactive of all Melville's protagonists, Redburn included.

White-Jacket shares the sense of constriction that galvanises the earlier protagonists. His initial accounts of the organisation of the *Neversink*, particularly in such anatomical chapters as "A Glance at the principal Divisions, into which a Man-of-war's Crew is divided" (ch. 3), and "The Quarter-deck Officers, Warrant Officers, and Berth-deck Underlings of a Man-of-war; where they Live in the Ship; how they Live; their Social Standing on Ship-board; and what sort of Gentlemen they are" (ch. 6), create the immediate atmosphere of constriction which will later be confirmed by an exposition of the Articles of War and its Draconian laws. But White-Jacket does not react overtly against his confines—his rebellion against the system is not absolute, not expressed in wholesale rejection. He recognises the impossibility of escaping, his complete subjection to the intricate system of the *Neversink*—as he points out to himself, "White-Jacket, the landless horizon hoops you in" (295; ch. 70). This detail did not bother the sovereign Taji, but White-Jacket is a somewhat wiser protagonist. His rebellion, for what it is, is pitched at the more humble level of naval reform. He is resigned, if only to some degree, to the rule of expediency in the world. Consequently, *White-Jacket* may well be one of Melville's most claustrophobic books, but it does bear strong traces of an accepting relativism that provide a hopeful, if non-redemptive,[5] undercurrent. The recognition of the limits of oneself and one's world is an important step towards a "lower [. . .] conceit of attainable felicity" (*MD* 416; ch. 94), which obliquely appears in *White-Jacket* as the narrator's non-absolutist ambition, in his labour, to achieve the "highest *attainable* polish" (171; ch. 42, emphasis added).

It should be clear by now that the tropical blankness of White-Jacket allows our sense of him to be constantly shifting. There is a thread of humanism running through him, but beyond that his specific narrative tone at times varies from an easy geniality to principled outrage, from broad, accepting relativism to chauvinistic national pride or Christian idealism, and from democratic

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[5] Bryan C. Short, for instance, has provided the following reading of White-Jacket's yearly meal (see chapter 42): "He keeps the day, when he can, by eating a meal of lamb, peas, and sherry, a ritual which celebrates and tropes the repetitive rather than the redeemed nature of life" (83). White-Jacket considers this one way of "killing time" (173), a signal of his relative (or occasional) freedom from the redemptive, progressive urge.

feelings to social elitism. These are contradictions to which his character remains prone and which, significantly, persist to the very end. They are never laid to rest.

To some extent this state of being irrevocably caught between extremes is figured in a comic episode recounted in chapter 20, "How they Sleep in a Man-of-war." Here White-Jacket, whose hammock is tightly wedged in among those of his comrades, attempts to give himself some room by first lowering and then raising his hammock, though neither turns out to be practical: "So at last I was fain to return to my old level, and moralize upon the folly, in all arbitrary governments, of striving to get either *below* or *above* those whom legislation has placed upon an equality with yourself" (81). This anecdote reiterates the fact of White-Jacket's inbetweenness, while simultaneously suggesting the impracticality of attempting to position oneself at either extreme. Interestingly, however, White-Jacket chooses to read the incident as a metaphor for social determinism "in all arbitrary governments," which expresses a criticism of the power structures of the *Neversink*, but also, more importantly, exposes something of his isolationism—he seems uncomfortable with his own "equality" with those around him.

White-Jacket's impulse to distantiate himself from others—or, as he calls it, "my fastidiousness" (50; ch. 13) in consorting with others—stems from his fears of leaving himself prone to punishment by association. In the process his loyalties are limited to the morally superior "main-top-men" (15; ch. 4), whose representative figure is the heroic Jack Chase. There he finds brotherhood, but it is based on an undeniable sense of superiority with regard to the rest of the ship: "We had rare times in that top. We accounted ourselves the best seamen [. . .], literally looked down upon the landlopers below" (15). White-Jacket, it seems, is always to be found in the best of company. Interestingly, Sten insists that this hierarchical view "is not a fabrication of White-Jacket's allegedly aristocratic frame of mind," because it "is necessarily acknowledged by 'the people' at large and reinforced by the commander's exercise of the power of promotion and demotion" (123). He goes on to suggest that the aristocracy of "White-Jacket and his fellow topmen [. . .] is a natural aristocracy" (124). But the mess that originally banishes White-Jacket belongs to the ranks of "the people," and it seems unlikely that they would acknowledge his right of claim to "natural aristocracy." Furthermore, Sten aligns the authority of the topmen with the very hegemony to which it is supposed to be an alternative, by stressing its "reinforce[ment] by the commodore." Thus, while one understands Sten's impulse to defend White-Jacket against the charge of personal elitism—an impulse that stems from White-Jacket's pervasive humanism—his reading does not manage to extract the character of White-Jacket from the contradictions to which thematically it must remain prone. White-Jacket himself acknowledges his "aloof[ness] from the mass of seamen," only to stress the fact of his "feeling a

common sympathy with them" (174; ch. 42). It is the dilemma of an educated liberal, and it is not an easy one to solve.

Ultimately, White-Jacket's world presents itself as an unsolvable puzzle, and if you begin to consider matters closely, "the whole puzzle becomes a puzzle indeed, which is the precise condition of the greatest puzzle in the world—this man-of-war world itself" (164; ch. 39). Time and again, he is urged, by experience, toward a relativism he never quite accepts. He can recognise that "we are all Fatalists at bottom" (129; ch. 31), only to revert to religious or national pieties. But reality does not admit of external authority, and man is left to his own devices:

> [A]ll events are mixed in a fusion indistinguishable. What we call Fate is even, heartless, and impartial; not a fiend to kindle bigot flames, nor a philanthropist to espouse the cause of Greece. We may fret, fume, and fight; but the thing called Fate everlastingly sustains an armed neutrality.
>
> Yet though all this be so, nevertheless, in our own hearts, we mold the whole world's hereafters; and in our own hearts we fashion our own gods. Each mortal casts his vote for whom he will to rule the worlds; I have a voice that helps to shape eternity; and my volitions stir the orbits of the furthest suns. In two senses, we are precisely what we worship. Ourselves are Fate. (321; ch. 75)

Once again, White-Jacket's expression reveals a deeply conflicted attempt to come to terms with his world. The passage clearly makes short work of the idea of an external authority, i.e., God, which in itself does not sit comfortably with White-Jacket's repeated professions of faith, most notably in the final chapter, "The End." But he cannot rest with the concept of an impersonal and "impartial" cosmos, in which man is cast adrift in a demonic "fusion indistinguishable." Consequently, he essentially reverts to Taji's self-deification, a Romantic belief in the sovereignty and power of the individual. "Fate" ceases to be impersonal and becomes absolutely personal—it becomes "[o]urselves." It is here, too, that we can see the destabilising effect that essaying has on character, for the open, free-ranging pursuit of ideas (which we have in *Mardi*), does not lead to absolute conclusions. Instead, it serves to emphasise the inherent contradictions that persist even within the individual. In one sense, White-Jacket's choice of cut-off point here does suggest a psychological tendency to shy away from brute relativism. But his narrative method exposes this cut-off point as arbitrary and provisional, since his final line inevitably leads to new ideas and new qualifications.

If, in *Omoo*, Melville can suggest the relativising effect of contradictory perspectives,[6] in *White-Jacket* he seems to be suggesting that is precisely man's lot to exist in that relativised space between polar perspectives. As I have suggested, White-Jacket's return to his "old level" (81) is

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[6] See, for instance, 70-71 above.

not merely a matter of a grudging acceptance of his enforced equality, but a figure of his own suspended state between extremes. This indeterminate tension is central to the narrative, and informs our entire experience of reading. Sten's sense that, in *White-Jacket*, Melville "made less than a satisfactory fusion of" politics and literature (115) suggests that he will not credit the possibility that this is the result of Melville's thematic problematisation of this fusion—if by "fusion" we understand, not White-Jacket's "fusion indistinguishable," but an aesthetic and dialectical process of formation that at least leads to a momentary synthesis (to which the "fusion indistinguishable" is a demonic counterpart). On the *Neversink*, literature belongs to the maintop, for on the deck of "the people" (192; ch. 45) it is subject to persecution and destruction, as the fate of the poet Lemsford's "Songs of the Sirens"—accidentally fired from its hiding place, a cannon (191; ch. 45)—goes to show. Narratively speaking, *White-Jacket* also effects a juxtaposition of texts along this same axis; thus we find the grim, rigid Articles of War, with its recurring cautionary phrase, " *Shall suffer death!*" (293; ch. 70), set against the fluid language of Camoens's *The Lusiads*.

Margaret E. Stewart discusses a similar juxtaposition, between "the 'narrative of facts' and the 'romance,'" the "empirical and the visionary" (189). Melville himself, then, hovers between two modal extremes and, in *White-Jacket*, makes specific use of this tension. "[T]wo narrative loci—the mundane and the metaphysical, the social and the supernatural—pull the novel in opposite directions" (Stewart 189). The crux of this tension is the narrator, that essaying consciousness trying to mediate between the facts and the reader, the maintop and the deck, inner confession and outer description, critique of government and national pride, rebellion and acceptance, past and future, politics and metaphysics, reportage and poetry.

For Stewart the modal tension is captured in the last pair, which she considers to be the subject of chapter 11, "The Pursuit of Poetry under Difficulties." Most of the chapter focuses specifically on the difficulties Lemsford experiences in writing poetry—difficulties for the most part born from the vindictiveness of "his shipmates" (41)—but, as Stewart points out, the chapter also introduces another kind of writer (anonymous), and thus evokes another kind of tension that shapes the reader's response to the narrative:

> [T]he narrator affirms his kinship—blatantly through the poet and subtly through the journalist—with both the romantic and the realist approaches to the 'world in a man-of-war.' At the same time, he gives us reason to dissociate ourselves from both and in that dissociation shapes the ambivalence in the novel, as the poet and journalist vie for narrative control. (194)

This is a sound point, which provides a clear answer to Sten's unhappiness about the lack of fusion. It can also be extended to express a tension between individualism and populism, aristocracy and democracy, for these, too, make for "ambivalence" in the narrative. But Stewart

does not finally link this tension to the narrative figuration of White-Jacket's inbetweenness, presumably because she focuses on the idea of Melville's own "identifi[cation] and dissociat[ion]" with the poet and journalist "[t]hrough his narrator" (193). In other words, she sees the ambivalence as an effect of Melville's greater aesthetic struggle, rather than as a thematic effect required by the narrative itself. But in the indeterminate figure of the white jacket, the signifier of our narrator, we may recognise that blank page that challenges the poet and journalist alike, and perhaps hints at their defeat. And when this blankness is translated into ontological terms, and becomes the "sign" of a more universal defeat of all human effort, the modal tensions become but one feature of a narrative that seems to multiply indefinitely, and to extend, instances of the irreconcilable.

One of the central tensions maintained throughout *White-Jacket*, which to some extent corresponds to Stewart's distinction between the poet and the journalist, is the familiar tension between idealism and expediency. The "twinn[ing]" of *White-Jacket* and *Redburn* becomes overt in Melville's treatment of this tension. In fact, *White-Jacket* revisits a number of the incidents in *Redburn* in which the narrator's romantic notions are put to the test, and, as a result, introduces an interesting intertextual tension between two books written within the same year. For example, in chapter 19, "The Jacket aloft," White-Jacket, a man "of a meditative humor," sits at the mast-head "and give[s] loose to reflection" (76). What follows seems virtually a transcription of Redburn's transient sense of unity with "the All":

> And it is a very fine feeling, and one that fuses us into the universe of things, and makes us a part of the All, to think that, wherever we ocean-wanderers rove, we have still the same glorious old stars to keep us company; that they still shine onward and on, forever beautiful and bright, and luring us, by every ray, to die and be glorified with them.
>
> Ay, ay! we sailors sail not in vain. We expatriate ourselves to nationalize with the universe [. . .].
>
> Oh, give me again the rover's life—the joy, the thrill, the whirl! Let me feel thee again, old sea! let me leap into thy saddle once more. I am sick of these terra firma toils and cares; sick of the dust and reek of towns. (76-77)

The difference between this paean to "the All" and Redburn's is a fine one, but it rests on the qualifying presence of annihilation or death. The chapter itself starts with the announcement: "Again I must call attention to my white jacket, which about this time came near being the death of me" (76). This colours our reading of what follows, and is echoed even in the dreamy description of the stars, which "lur[e]" one towards death. In others words, White-Jacket seems to be aware, in a way that Redburn is not, of the fact that complete "fus[ion]" into the All must mean annihilation, and that one should beware, as Melville put it, of "the universal application of a temporary feeling" (*C* 194). The universe is not benevolent; to "nationalize" with it is to

become a "rover," in other words, to renounce both the perks and drawbacks of serving under a specific authority.[7] One becomes an Ishmael, liable to get "sick" of human society, and to seek out the therapeutic dissolution of water. But as *Omoo* makes clear, this cannot last forever, and even Ishmael feels compelled to warn the Pantheist against too ready a dissolution of self into the All. If you are not careful, even "your insignificance is lost in the riot of the stormy universe around" (108; ch. 26). White-Jacket is reminded of this very fact when, as he muses at the mast-head, the yard is suddenly dropped under him by his superstitious shipmates. "[T]hen I came to myself with a rush, and felt something like a choking hand at my throat" (77; ch. 19).[8] It is a confirmation of selfhood at the moment of an annihilating fall, a sharp juxtaposition of two extremes of human experience, namely the sense of isolation and the sense of oneness, between which life occurs. The contrast achieved here is far more stark than in *Redburn*, where the arrest of the all feeling serves mainly to stress its temporariness (to a young protagonist who attempts to establish a source of atemporal authority). This half-fall repeats, in an archetypal, psychological sense, White-Jacket's uncomfortable suspension between democracy and aristocratic individualism.

Another echo of *Redburn* is to be found in White-Jacket's own millennialist ramble at the end of a short series of chapters dealing with the inhumanity of flogging. For Redburn, the paean to American expansionism is an attempt at transferring his allegiance from a failed guide (the father) to a new one (the brother), an attempt which is finally undermined by his experiences during his own homeward voyage. For White-Jacket the rhetoric serves as a final flourish in his invocation of American brotherhood against flogging:

> [W]e Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. [. . .] God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. In our youth is our strength; in our inexperience, our wisdom. At a period when other nations have but lisped, our deep voice is heard afar. Long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in *us*, if we would but give utterance to his promptings. And let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we can not do good to America but we give alms to the world. (151; ch. 36)

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[7] White-Jacket makes a point of informing the reader that when he "speaks of the rover's life, he means not life in a man-of-war, which [. . .] stabs to the heart the soul of all free-and-easy honorable rovers" (77).

[8] Compare Ishmael's account of the feeling when at the mast-head you "slip your hold at all": "[Y]our identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea" (*MD* 159; ch. 35).

This is the language of quest, a rhetorical confirmation of the American hegemony, which fits rather queerly into a narrative that in itself conveys no clear sense of kinesis. For Merlin Bowen this passage communicates "an almost mystical faith in the inevitability of progress" (58), and he suggests that "[w]ith only a slight alteration of tone, the voice here could be mistaken for Emerson's" (59). It would be interesting to know what alteration Bowen has in mind, for it is precisely the tone that leaves us with some difficulties. Is "Melville [being] carried away for the moment by his own natural exuberance" (Bowen 59), or is it only his narrator? Is the passage meant in earnest, or is it meant as a parody of the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny? The greater context of *White-Jacket* makes it difficult to read it straightforwardly—the mere fact that dedicated readers of Melville tend to scoff at this passage suggests that it is felt to be alien to the Melvillean text in general, and *White-Jacket* in particular. As William Spanos puts it, "[g]iven the fictional context that is its occasion—a savage critique of the authoritarian legal code of the American navy and the totalitarian sociopolitical organization of a United States naval vessel insistently referred to as a ship of (the American) state—I am not at all convinced that the issue is that simple" (223). The rhetoric is ironised by its context,[9] and this renders one suspicious of the tone. That one constantly has to beware of the tone in *White-Jacket* is made clear when, for example, in one of those reasoned arguments against flogging, White-Jacket submits the testimony of "[t]he chivalric Virginian, John Randolph of Roanoke, [who] declared, in his place in Congress, that on board of the American man-of-war that carried him out ambassador to Russia he had witnessed more flogging than had taken place on his own plantation of five hundred African slaves in ten years" (141; ch. 34). White-Jacket does get his point across—that there is excessive flogging on board American men-of-war—but in the process he manages also to undermine his expert witness, the "chivalric Virginian." It is the same kind of subtle subversion that Dimock sees at work in the

> astonishing, improbable aphorism at the end of the paragraph: "National selfishness is unbounded Philanthropy." No advocate of Manifest Destiny would put it quite that way,

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[9] Another example of contextual irony stems from White-Jacket's utterly unsubstantiated claim that "[t]he rest of the nations must soon be in our rear," particularly when viewed in the light of chapter 65, "A Man-of-war Race," in which the American frigate engages in a race against two other ships, one English, the other French. When darkness falls, the *Neversink* is "still in the rear" (268), which necessitates the crew's working through the night. By the next morning there is no sign of the other ships, and "whether we beat them, or whether they beat us, no mortal can tell to this hour" (273). That they have won seems unlikely, but the question itself rather begins to seem beside the point. Still, White-Jacket will "take his ship's oath that we Yankees carried the day" (273). It is an empty boast that recalls—and further undermines—his earlier national claims.

> of course, and the deadpan incisiveness at once summarizes and cuts through everything that has gone on before. (103)

Within the context of Dimock's sustained argument for a "poetics of authorial subjection" (77), this "local puncturing effort" (103) is to be explained by Melville's frustration with his own "concession to his reader" (103), which determined "the emergence of this jingoistic voice" in the first place (102). Such a point remains ungracious to Melville as artist, but, nonetheless, I am interested in Dimock's consideration of such narrative "countermovement[s]" to the "official rhetoric" (103). For Dimock, such "countermovement" occurs in "a mingling of the incongruous" (103), an unsettling fusion which also finds expression on a metaphorical level. For Dimock, the metaphor in *White-Jacket* is "finally less an exercise in analogy than an exercise in incongruity, and [. . .] it enacts a spatial violence, yoking together what is usually understood to be separate and discontinuous. Metaphors turn out to be Melville's primary instrument of spatial desegregation" (104).[10] My point is that White-Jacket, the narrator, exists at this "desegregat[ed]" crux, which is the site of the demonic "fusion indistinguishable," that haunts White-Jacket's attempts at reconciliation. His "yoking together" never succeeds; the reader retains a keen awareness of the persistent incongruity—the "strange contradictions" (390; ch. 91) of which White-Jacket's world is full. Dimock interprets this sense of incongruity as a sign of Melville's authorial sovereignty straining against his subjection to his audience, but it seems preferable to consider it the logical narrative result of a narrator who ultimately seems incapable of inscribing a definitive identity onto his own ideological blankness.

For Melville the allegorical parallels between ship and world would have been overt, because the memories he drew on in writing *White-Jacket* all hailed from his year-long service on board the frigate, *The United States*. The correspondence between the name of the ship and the name of the country it served, which, on the one hand, would have put ship-board practices and democratic ideals into sharp relief, would, on the other, also have suggested a way of looking at the ship as a microcosm of the nation, and the world in general. Consequently, *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* contains some of the most devastating satire in all of Melville, and all-in-all the book communicates a persistent recognition of what Ishmael calls "the wolfish world" (*MD* 51; ch. 10). It is, then, as Spanos suggests, "a savage critique of the [. . .] ship of (the American) state" (223), an exploration of undemocratic maintenance of the American hegemony. But the *Neversink* is also a world-ship, and thus presents a more universal figure of the irreconcilable

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[10] For Dimock's full argument, see pages 101-04 in her chapter on *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*.

tension between noble ideals and violent expediency. In the end White-Jacket is brought to a tentative conclusion that the reader cannot easily reject:

> [W]e have seen that a man-of-war is but this old-fashioned world of ours afloat, full of all manner of characters—full of strange contradictions; and though boasting some fine fellows here and there, yet, upon the whole, charged to the combings of her hatchways with the spirit of Belial and all unrighteousness. (390; ch. 91)

The *Neversink*, then, is symbolic of the world itself, and its problems are those of the world at large. Similarly, its dilemma ceases to be simply that of a despotic system of naval governance contradicting the democratic system of governance it is meant to protect. Instead, it becomes the dilemma of all idealism confronted by existence in an expedient, shifting world. The "strange contradictions" to which the world is subjected are the source of much of the satire in *White-Jacket*, but it also remains central to the narrator's own inability to achieve repose.

Melville's juxtaposition of Christian ideals and naval life[11] finds its most satirical expression in chapter 38, "The Chaplain and Chapel in a Man-of-war," which almost immediately follows a number of chapters that have explored the practise of flogging. It is a chapter in which one expects to find some answers concerning the practical role of religion on board ship. Not surprisingly, however, we find a spiritual leader who is utterly divorced from the realities of ship deck life:

> He was a slender, middle-aged man, of an amiable deportment and irreproachable conversation; but I must say, that his sermons were but ill calculated to benefit the crew. He had drank at the mystic fountain of Plato; his head had been turned by the Germans; and this I will say, that White-Jacket himself saw him with Coleridge's Biographia Literaria in his hand. (155)

White-Jacket proceeds with a satirical portrait of "this transcendental divine" (155), who seems incapable of relating Christian teachings to the quotidian. Instead, his sermons focus "upon the psychological phenomena of the soul" and embark on strictly academic pursuits, such as "expos[ing] the follies of Simplicius's Commentary on Aristotle's 'De Cœlo,' by arraying against that clever Pagan author the admired tract of Tertullian—*De Præscriptionibus Hæreticorum*—and conclud[ing] by a Sanskrit invocation" (155-56). The absurdity of such exposition is overt. Thus, Melville simultaneously manages to satirise transcendentalist

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[11] Educational ideals are also defeated by life aboard the man-of-war, as is clear from chapter 83, "A Man-of-war College," in which "*The Professor*" (346) teaches battle strategies to a class of midshipmen in an absurdly inflated diction, replete with quasi-mathematical gibberish, only to have his thesis interrupted by the order, "All hands reef top-sails" (349).

abstractions[12] and theological obscurantism. Even more damaging is the suggestion that "the harmless, non-committal abstrusities of our Chaplain" are ultimately born from cowardice in the face of "the most mighty Commodore and Captain" (156). The chaplain escapes the dilemma posed him by transferring its tensions to the academic realm, exposing "the follies of Simplicius's Commentary," instead of exposing the worldly follies of the *Neversink*. His complicity in absolute temporal authority, in maintaining the status quo—as opposed to doing the work of redemption—is thus established beyond a doubt.

The Chaplain may be the most overt example of the incommensurability of Christianity and naval praxis, but *White-Jacket* provides many other ironic examples, of which the mere title of chapter 69, "Prayers at the Guns," remains a case in point. But since the *Neversink* ultimately also represents the world entire, it is inevitable that such specific satire must modulate into a more universal sense of irony:

> Ah! the best righteousness of our man-of–war world seems but an unrealized ideal, after all; and those maxims which, in the hope of bringing about a Millennium, we busily teach to the heathen, we Christians ourselves disregard. In view of the whole present social frame-work of our world, so ill adapted to the practical adoption of the meekness of Christianity, there seems almost some ground for the thought, that although our blessed Saviour was full of the wisdom of heaven, yet his gospel seems lacking in the practical wisdom of earth—in a due appreciation of the necessities of nations at times demanding bloody massacres and wars; in a proper estimation of the value of rank, title, and money. (324; ch. 76)

Here we encounter an argument similar to that of Plotinus Plinlimmon in *Pierre*, whose pamphlet argues that "though the earthly wisdom of man be heavenly folly to God[13]; so also, conversely, is the heavenly wisdom of God a folly to man" (*P* 212; bk. 14, ch. 3). Heavenly wisdom (Platonic ideal) and earthly, practical wisdom (praxis and expediency) are incommensurate. Earlier, White-Jacket suggests that "[t]o be efficacious, Virtue must come down from aloft, even as our blessed Redeemer came down" (229; ch. 54), a statement born also from his own democratic impulses. The irony is, of course, that in "com[ing] down," virtue almost literally succumbs to fallenness, and here, White-Jacket finally establishes a clear, impassable gulf between Christian teachings and worldly reality.

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[12] John B. Williams feels that "[t]he minister [. . .] is characterized primarily in terms of the class he represents, rather than as an individual or as a Transcendentalist" (129). However, the overt reference to the chaplain as a "transcendental divine" makes it difficult not to see his depiction as at least partly intended to criticise Transcendentalism, a criticism borne out by the rest of the book.

[13] Compare the apostle Paul's rhetorical question: "[H]ath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" (1 Cor. 1. 20).

Still, White-Jacket's main aim here is not to subvert Christianity (although he clearly does); it is to engage in social criticism. What ultimately emerges from the passage is not so much the impracticality of "the wisdom of heaven" as an ironic recognition of the brutal needs of nations, and the values of society—in short, human folly. If the "gospel" cannot appreciate "the necessities of nations at times demanding bloody massacres and wars," neither can White-Jacket, or the reader. What wars may look like has already been vividly conveyed to us by Jack Chase's gruesome descriptions of battle in chapters 74 and 75, in which, as Vincent points out, "Melville shows them [historic battles] as senseless slaughter and brutality, essential folly beneath a specious glory" (156)—an exposure he would repeat in *Israel Potter*. In the exposure of the untenability of idealism, the critical focus for the most part remains on the folly—and consequent brutality—of mankind, and its institutions in particular.

The problems arising from the incommensurability of ideal and praxis are effectively extended in White-Jacket's consideration of national ideology. Much of the actual prose in *White-Jacket* is dedicated specifically to exposing the rift between, on the one hand, the ideals of American democracy, and, on the other, the reality of despotic, inhuman articles of governance that have to be maintained in order to consolidate—by giving expedient, earthly firepower to—those very ideals. It is a dilemma that ultimately leads to self-deconstruction. Perhaps the most devastating instance of this self-deconstruction occurs in White-Jacket's "ill-timed" lapse into the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny in the passage (from chapter 36) already quoted. There the incidental juxtaposition of self-gratified idealism and incremental brutality serves to destabilise the former. But the narrator frequently resorts to a direct comparison of naval praxis and the constitutional ideals of the nation it serves and represents, as will be clear (to take one example among many) from this incredulous question:

> How comes it that, by virtue of a law solemnly ratified by a Congress of freemen, the representatives of freemen, thousands of Americans are subjected to the most despotic usages, and, from the dock-yards of a republic, absolute monarchies are launched, with the "glorious stars and stripes" for an ensign? By what unparalleled anomaly, by what monstrous grafting of tyranny upon freedom did these Articles of War ever come to be as much as heard of in the American Navy? (297; ch. 71)

Here White-Jacket launches an enquiry into "The Genealogy of the Articles of War," that document which essentially recasts, into the language of naval law, the motto Redburn encounters on the *Highlander*: "*Obey orders though you break owners*" (*R* 29; ch. 6). In both cases the demand is for utter and unthinking submission to temporal law, a suppression of selfhood the better to fulfil one's purpose as a cog in the machine, regardless of the greater purpose of the voyage—in the case of the *Highlander*, the owners' profit, and, in the case of the

Neversink, the consolidation and extension of a democratic nation's hegemony. White-Jacket's rejection of such law is a principled one, and one with which many of his comrades would agree. But that rejection is never translated into real terms, because White-Jacket also realises the ultimate hopelessness of resistance, which can only evoke the wrath of the system. In a sense, authority remains unassailable, however "unfair."[14]

Still, the focus on authority in *White-Jacket* does not merely reveal its tyranny and brutality. In fact, authority figures are frequently portrayed as ineffectual (a point which further problematises their absolute power). The Commodore, especially, while never accused of vindictiveness, for the most part comes across as a mere cipher. He is the ultimate authority on board, yet he takes no active part in its management. White-Jacket, for one, expresses "serious doubts, whether, for the most part, he was not dumb" (21; ch. 6). It is a telling choice of words, for dumbness in Melville frequently represents the inscrutable, the enigmatic, non-signifying façade that encourages the hermeneutic endeavour even as it defeats it. Its mysterious silence, which has no real power in the world, may cover something, but it may also cover nothing at all. The Commodore is a figure of far greater power than the nameless captain of the *Julia* (in *Omoo*), but even less of a factor in the daily running of the ship—a point of which the true existential significance becomes clear in White-Jacket's discourse on the incommensurability of God and world, and which provides a destabilising counterpoint to White-Jacket's pious invocation of the "[o]ur Lord High Admiral" (400; ch. 94) at the end of the book.

The Commodore's alienation from effective navigation is a matter of degrees, since even the tyrannical Captain Claret does not seem to have much to do with the progress of the ship. In chapter 27, we are informed that he "was exempted from personal interposition in many of its current events, and thereby, perhaps, was he lulled into security, under the enticing lee of his decanter" (111). The ironic tone undermines the authority of a man who has the monarchical power of life and death over his subjects. This authority becomes hollowed out, a cipher or masquerade, unrelated to any inherent qualities on the part of the man who wields it. Captain Claret, like Captain Riga, is nothing but a drunk. His drunkenness is simply another form of mast-head reverie—this time the height is a social/formal one, which leads to a drifting off from reality (here, into the intoxicating arms of alcohol). It is a lapse that almost has fatal effects

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[14] In *Billy Budd*, Captain Vere's problematic resignation to the comparable rule of the Mutiny Act proceeds from a recognition of the priority of "martial law"—associated with the "King," i.e., centralised earthly authority—over "Nature" (459; ch. 21). Vere's blunt application of that law to the case of Billy Budd confronts the reader with the dilemma that (man-made) laws are ever unequal to the task of effecting what the heart perceives to be justice. They are necessary, yet unfair.

when, in the midst of a storm, Captain Claret "burst[s] from his cabin like a ghost in his night-dress" (106; ch. 26), and orders what White-Jacket in the next chapter defines as "flying away from the gale" (110). It is an action unambiguously cast as an act of cowardice, but simultaneously explained to be "unwise [. . .] in the extreme" (110). Luckily for the ship, the order is countered by another officer, Mad Jack,[15] and the ship is saved. For White-Jacket, this incident provides an opportunity to stress the captain's unsuitability for his position: "Captain Claret was hurried forth from his disguises, and, at a manhood-testing conjuncture, appeared in his true colors" (111). Like Captain Riga, then, Claret is less than he might seem at first. In short, he is a sham.

The undermining of Captain Claret's authority, however, does not reduce his real power over the men in his ship; it only makes it more horrific. His capacity for navigation, for providing direction—his power over unconscious nature, what *Billy Budd*'s narrator refers to as "the intractable elements" (407; ch. 1)—is undercut, but his judicial power over men remains absolute. For the most part, then, he appears not in his role as navigator, but in his role as disciplinarian. He is the brutal face of worldly, governmental power, an arbitrary power which is in essence hypocritical because it will not acknowledge or confess its own inability to lead properly. In this regard, his surname inescapably ironises his status.

Hypocrisy finds its most overt expression in the form of Bland, the master-at-arms, whose office requires of him to ensure adherence to the law. In chapter 44, "A Knave in Office in a Man-of-war," White-Jacket exposes the corruption and villainy of a man who "was a favorite of the Captain's" (183), and is tasked with rooting out the smuggling of grog onto the *Neversink*. At length it becomes clear that he is the brain behind the smuggling, and he is relieved of his office and "turned adrift among the ship's company" (185). His corruption provides another indictment of those in power, an indictment which becomes damning indeed when the captain openly makes himself guilty of favouritism by having Bland "publicly reinstated in his office" (189).

But Melville's interest in Bland extends beyond the mere exposure of individual hypocrisy. On the one hand, the character—like Jackson before him, and Fedallah after him—provides Melville with an opportunity to explore the strange hypnotic power of evil (a seductive power which is linked to the suggestion of demonic, Promethean knowledge). On the other hand, Bland's ostracism also creates an opportunity for Melville to problematise the hierarchical

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[15] In chapter 8, "Selvagee contrasted with Mad-Jack," the latter is identified as a true salt, who "is in his saddle on the sea" (33).

pretensions of another group, namely the "*Forty-two-pounder Club*" (62; ch. 15), to which White-Jacket himself belongs:

> Now it would not have answered for hardly any other mess in the ship to have received this man [. . .]; but our mess [. . .] was composed of so fine a set of fellows; so many captains of tops, and quarter-masters [. . .]; that, with impunity, we could do so many equivocal things, utterly inadmissible for messes of inferior pretension. Besides, though we all abhorred the monster of Sin itself, yet, from our social superiority, highly rarified education in our lofty top, and large and liberal sweep of the aggregate of things, we were in a good degree free from those useless, personal prejudices, and galling hatreds against conspicuous *sinners*—not *Sin*—which so widely prevail among men of warped understandings and unchristian and uncharitable hearts. No; the superstitions and dogmas concerning Sin had not laid their withering maxims upon our hearts. We perceived how that evil was but good disguised, and a knave a saint in his way; how that in other planets, perhaps, what we deem wrong, may there be deemed right; even as some substances, without undergoing any mutations in themselves, utterly change their color, according to the light thrown upon them. We perceived that the anticipated millennium must have begun upon the morning the first worlds were created; and that, taken all in all, our man-of-war world itself was as eligible a round-sterned craft as any to be found in the Milky Way. And we fancied that though some of us, of the gun-deck, were at times condemned to sufferings and slights, and all manner of tribulation and anguish, yet, no doubt, it was only our misapprehension of these things that made us take them for woeful pains instead of the most agreeable pleasures. (185-86; ch. 44)

There may be an abounding sense of relativistic, unprejudiced humanism in this passage, but it is incongruously blended with the kind of pretensions to social and moral superiority that remind us of Taji. As John Wenke puts it, "White-Jacket presents a playful parody of transcendental clichés; at the same time combining Platonism, transcendental idealism, stoical acceptance, cultural relativity, indeterminacy, and providentialism" (87). It is an uncertain attempt at clarifying his position as someone who is inbetween, neither a moral elitist, nor a nihilist. For Wenke "[t]his passage reflects White-Jacket's expansive temperament" (87). But this is to ignore the effect of the parody—signalled by the inflated rhetoric—on the reader, who is left with the sense that White-Jacket does not quite escape his own genial irony, which becomes fairly confused. A political liberal, he remains a social elitist, and thus embodies the double-bind that defeats many political idealists, who find that the very people whom they champion do not share their liberal views and are, in fact, impossible to socialise with. The humanistic club finds itself welcoming a villain whose former complicity in existing power relations has left him unwelcome among the rest of the crew. It is a case of a Christian ideal (of forgiveness) applied to the morally murky world of the *Neversink*. However, it is only by virtue of its "social superiority" that the club can afford—as well as acquire the impulse—to be generous in the first place. This problem is compounded by the growing sense that Bland is finally accepted, not because he is merely a poor sinner, but because "[h]e was a neat and gentlemanly villain [. . .]. There was a fine polish about his whole person, and a pliant, insinuating style in his conversation, that was, socially,

quite irresistible" (187). It becomes difficult to see what the essential difference is between the club's acceptance of Bland, and the captain's indulgent reinstatement of the disgraced master-at-arms. In both cases, it is a matter of hypocrisy and nepotism within an aristocracy, whether "natural" (Sten 124) or arbitrary.

Ultimately, the entire "*Forty-two-pounder Club*" seems to suffer from that "gaping flaw" (*C* 121) Melville ascribed to Emerson in his letter to Duyckinck (3 March 1849, a few months before *White-Jacket*'s composition), namely a form of spiritual vanity. But what Melville made clear in the same letter is that such a flaw does not necessarily detract from one's appeal. The geniality of the club, its social largesse, renders it likeable to the reader. This is also true of White-Jacket, and it is particularly true of the emblematic hero, Jack Chase, the "noble First Captain of the Top" (13; ch. 4). Still, there has been a critical tendency to oversimplify Jack's treatment in *White-Jacket*, something that may well be related to the fact that Melville dedicated *Billy Budd* to the real "Jack Chase." One may be tempted in investing the fictional counterpart with an authority which he was never meant to have, and which is not wholly justified by the narrative itself. To some extent this effect is noticeable, for instance, in Vincent's discussion[16] of "the actual man John J. Chase [around whom there] spreads the aura of sentiment, a compound of personal attraction and of literary and theatrical tradition" (35). It is necessary to recognise that Jack, though he may seem to be a man with a strong sense of self, is also subject to the kind of inherent contradiction that destabilises our sense of White-Jacket—he, too, emerges as something of an equivocal figure. Already in chapter 4, in which the man is introduced to the reader in an absurdly hyperbolic diction that may in itself be cause for caution—Jack, for example, becomes "a whole phalanx, an entire army" (14)—he is finally qualified as "a little bit of a dictator" (15). The darker side of this character flaw is hinted at when White-Jacket is actually forced to remain quiet about his own past aboard a whaler, simply because of Jack's "unmitigated distaste" for "all whalers" (15). Comic or not, Jack's outburst against the ex-whaler Tubbs leaves White-Jacket "shak[ing] all over" (16).

Strictly speaking, the subtle undermining of Jack Chase, like the undermining of everything lofty, hierarchical and idealistic in *White-Jacket*, is incremental in nature. He is "Virtue" brought "down from aloft" (229; ch. 54), whose influence on deck is a severely diminished one. Even in the famous scene in chapter 67, when, in spite of all his efforts to stay out of trouble, we find "White-Jacket arraigned at the Mast," Jack Chase, the only sailor whom we have thus far witnessed speaking to the captain, is uncharacteristically lax in interceding on

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[16] See his chapter, "A Pair of Jacks," esp. 33-46.

White-Jacket's behalf. Brave he may be, but there is no denying the fact that he appeals to the captain only after Colbrook—briefly introduced to us, in chapter 42, as a corporal of the marines, and a dandy—has vouched for White-Jacket. There seems to be no good reason for introducing Colbrook at this juncture, unless it is to effect some qualification of Jack's bravery. Such examples are multiplied throughout, and ultimately seem to justify Grenberg's point that an "image of subjugated, even servile, moral idealism consistently accompanies Jack's appearances through the novel" (83).[17]

However flawed Jack Chase may be, and to whatever degree his sovereignty may be undercut, he remains an admirable character, and infinitely preferable to those who wield a strictly institutional power. Captain Claret is such a figure, and in him we gain a devastating sense of the arbitrariness and brutality of power that is contingent on law. As far as the arbitrariness of that power is concerned, the issue becomes even more pointed in the consideration of its devolution through the ranks. In chapter 52, "Something concerning Midshipmen," the lamentable power of boys (midshipmen) over men (sailors)—as sanctioned by the Articles of War—is shown to result in a vindictiveness that thoroughly undermines the principle of rule (217). But the most devastating satire of the brutality of power, in all of *White-Jacket*, must lie in the portrayal of Cadwallader Cuticle, the ship's surgeon. In chapter 61 we are soon familiarised with his heartlessness. Cuticle, out of whom "the corporeal vitality" seems to have died (248), is described as a lover of "Morbid Anatomy," someone with a strictly academic interest in the physical suffering of others. White-Jacket poignantly describes the plaster bust of a horned woman in Cuticle's room, only to reveal that the good surgeon employs it for a hat rack. White-Jacket considers this "heartlessness" and "marvelous indifference to the sufferings of his patients" to be "of a purely scientific origin" (251). It is an indictment of dehumanising systems that is comically extended in chapter 62, which satirises academic abstraction and parodies medical terminology, but most notably reveals how Cuticle's seniority allows him to manufacture consent among his fellow surgeons. The actual consequences of this inhuman approach to people are finally played out in chapter 63, "The Operation," which presents Cuticle's capacity for butchery, in the name of healing. His patient dies.

Once again, however, the tension between White-Jacket's social conscience, which lies at the root of his humanitarian arguments as well as his satire, on the one hand, and his ontology, on the other, takes something of the sting out of the former. Ultimately, Cuticle may not

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[17] Grenberg subjects the character of Jack Chase to intensive scrutiny, and by virtue of his initials, defines him as a "Christ figure" who ultimately appears "impotent in the affairs of this world" (83)—i.e., an embodiment of the failure of heavenly wisdom.

unambiguously come across as the figure Eric Mottram calls "the apex of neurosis and authority [. . .], a one-eyed grotesque of anti-life" (241). His "heartlessness" and "indifference" may be but a figure of the "Fate [that] is even, heartless, and impartial" (320; ch. 75), or the heartless cosmos we encounter also in *Moby-Dick*. White-Jacket himself evokes this association when, during the operation, he suggests that "the Surgeon of the Fleet and the top-man presented a spectacle which, to a reflecting mind, was better than a church-yard sermon on the mortality of man," because "[h]ere was a sailor, who, four days previous, had stood erect—a pillar of life" (259). This specific reflection has nothing to do with the dehumanising cruelty of Cuticle, or science, or the navy, and everything to do with the amoral "cruelty" of Sadean nature. The effect is to associate the despicable naval system—for which White-Jacket clearly wishes reform—with a cosmos that cannot be reformed, and casts human brutality[18] as an inevitable aspect of cosmic brutality. As happened in the case of White-Jacket's consideration of Christian idealism, cosmic irony supplants the more specific social satire. But this shift is not absolute either, for the powerful presence of Cuticle preserves the satirical tone to the end of the chapter. It is only upon reflection that the point gets muddled, and we find ourselves, once again, in the midst of a narrative and ideological "fusion indistinguishable."

Throughout his anatomical and conflicted narrative, White-Jacket, in keeping with his name, remains subject to a certain indeterminacy or instability. This state I have defined as a state of inbetweenness, representative of the human incapacity for achieving a reconciliation of divergent impulses and ideas.[19] Toward the end of the book, before White-Jacket launches two attempts at closing off his narrative, Melville introduces a lengthy episode which to my mind "captures" his inability to attain a state of repose, to resolve the persistent and "strange contradictions" (390; ch. 91) that inform his efforts to interpret, understand and redeem his world, as well as his own position in it. In "The Last of the Jacket," the title of which, in itself, seems to promise resolution, Melville stages an elaborate climax only to withhold a stable, monumental, apocalyptic meaning.

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[18] That human brutality is not usually "heartless" does not matter, for in an utterly amoral universe, the specifics of psychological motive cease to have any significance. Does it help, for instance, to inquire into the motives of the Marquis de Sade's sexual predators?

[19] It is a state we find neatly expressed in Montaigne, whom Melville purchased in 1848 (Leyda, *Log* 269), and read avidly: "We fluctuate betwixt various inclinations" ("Of the Inconstancy of Our Actions" 3; bk. 2, ch. 1). By 1849 Melville was well enough read in Montaigne to recognise "the great Montaignism of Hamlet" (see Leyda 291).

The episode starts off with White-Jacket being sent aloft, in the middle of the night, with the ship gliding on its way:

> Having reeved the line through all the inferior blocks, I went out with it to the end of the weather-top-gallant-yard-arm, and was in the act of leaning over and passing it through the suspended jewel-block there, when the ship gave a plunge in the sudden swells of the calm sea, and pitching me still further over the yard, threw the heavy skirts of my jacket right over my head, completely muffling me. Somehow I thought it was the sail that had flapped, and, under that impression, threw up my hands to drag it from my head, relying upon the sail itself to support me meanwhile. Just then the ship gave another sudden jerk, and, head foremost, I pitched from the yard. I knew where I was, from the rush of the air by my ears, but all else was a nightmare. A bloody film was before my eyes, through which, ghost-like, passed and repassed my father, mother, and sisters. An unutterable nausea oppressed me; I was conscious of gasping; there seemed no breath in my body. It was over one hundred feet that I fell—down, down, with lungs collapsed as in death. Ten thousand pounds of shot seemed tied to my head, as the irresistible law of gravitation dragged me, head foremost and straight as a die, toward the infallible centre of this terraqueous globe. All I had seen, and read, and heard, and all I had thought and felt in my life, seemed intensified in one fixed idea in my soul. But dense as this idea was, it was made up of atoms. Having fallen from the projecting yard-arm end, I was conscious of a collected satisfaction in feeling, that I should not be dashed on the deck, but would sink into the speechless profound of the sea.
>
> With the bloody, blind film before my eyes, there was a still stranger hum in my head, as if a hornet were there; and I thought to myself, Great God! this is Death! Yet these thoughts were unmixed with alarm. Like frost-work that flashes and shifts its scared hues in the sun, all my braided, blended emotions were in themselves icy cold and calm. (392-93; ch. 92)

White-Jacket's jacket "muffl[es]" him and causes him to lose his grip on the mast. Holding on to himself instead, he is pitched from his world, becoming the helpless subject of an "irresistible law" even more heartless and fatal than the dreaded Articles of War. With White-Jacket we are privy to the recognition that finally ours is a "terraqueous globe," a watery, shifting, indeterminate space that relativises everything that occurs in our "man-of-war world" (164; ch. 39). For those critics, like Newton Arvin (114), who tend to see White-Jacket as an elitist or individualist, this fall is simultaneously a punishment for vanity, and a re-enactment and extension—in physical terms—of White-Jacket's earlier readiness "to come down from the lofty mast-head of an eternal principle" (147; ch. 36). In archetypal terms the direction of its movement may be demonic, but the result is a redemptive immersion in the womb of the sea. Still, such a reading must be measured quite carefully against the dense language of White-Jacket's description:

> So protracted did my fall seem, that I can even now recall the feeling of wondering how much longer it would be, ere all was over and I struck. Time seemed to stand still, and all the worlds seemed poised on their poles, as I fell, soul-becalmed, through the eddying whirl and swirl of the Maelstrom air. [. . .]
>
> As I gushed into the sea, a thunder-boom sounded in my ear; my soul seemed flying from my mouth. The feeling of death flooded over me with the billows. The blow

> from the sea must have turned me, so that I sank almost feet foremost through a soft, seething, foamy lull. Some current seemed hurrying me away; in a trance I yielded, and sank deeper down with a glide. Purple and pathless was the deep calm now around me, flecked by summer lightnings in an azure afar. The horrible nausea was gone; the bloody, blind film turned a pale green; I wondered whether I was yet dead, or still dying. But of a sudden some fashionless form brushed my side—some inert, coiled fish of the sea; the thrill of being alive again tingled in my nerves, and the strong shunning of death shocked me through.
>
> For one instant an agonizing revulsion came over me as I found myself utterly sinking. Next moment the force of my fall was expended; and there I hung, vibrating in the mid-deep. What wild sounds then rang in my ear! One was a soft moaning, as of low waves on a beach; the other wild and heartlessly jubilant, as of the sea in the height of a tempest. Oh soul! thou then heardest life and death: as he who stands upon the Corinthian shore hears both the Ionian and the Ægean waves. The life-and-death poise soon passed; and then I found myself slowly ascending, and caught a dim glimmering of light. (393)

All in all, this entire passage belongs to that category of writing which can only be reduced by an attempt at exegesis—it compresses an entire universe of existence into a page or two. And more than anything, that universe is an irresolvable one.

Even during the fall the imagery anticipates the actual subject of this passage, that "life-and-death poise," the momentary suspension of the narrator at "the mid-deep" of the chaos of water. The sense of "Time [. . .] stand[ing] still," familiar as it may be, perfectly encapsulates the general sense of non-progression in the book, Dimock's sense that we are "transfixed in navigation" (80), and there is an effective narrative prolepsis in the image of "all the worlds [. . .] *poised* on their poles." It creates a sense of precarious balance and rest, but one which is destabilised by the related suggestion that White-Jacket "fell, soul-becalmed"—a strange convergence of motion and stasis, narratively captured in the length of the description of the fall, that almost returns us to Redburn's motionlessly "pitching" figurehead. The same tension is even more strikingly captured in the image of "some inert, coiled fish of the sea," which maintains a tense balance between vagueness ("some") and identity ("fish"), and, more pertinently, captures a sense of a spring-loaded inertia.

Still, it is a fall, and White-Jacket finally "gushe[s] into the sea," where the calm within is echoed by the calm without. Melville draws quite strongly on the archetypal associations of water and sea when White-Jacket describes the formless, "pathless" and "calm" chaos around him. It is an indeterminate space in which teleological ambition loses all its meaning. The fallen White-Jacket finds himself sinking to a point of perfect balance between life and death—this is where his fall is "expended." There are strictly two ways to go from here, namely up or down, and White-Jacket is lucky. We note that he remains a passive player in this crucial drama; "I found myself utterly sinking" is mirrored, or balanced, by "I found myself slowly ascending."

Neither of these actions seems to proceed from White-Jacket himself, and thus, the passage communicates a kind of fatalism, underlining once again the absence of man's control over his own course in an indifferent universe.

White-Jacket's ascent is, understandably, cast in a redemptive light as he rises from "the mid-deep." Still, I would like to argue that the "life-and-death poise" ultimately is not something that White-Jacket escapes in order to return to life. Rather, the entire scene captures the state of inbetweenness that persists throughout the narrative and defines the tension between polar opposites. F. O. Matthiessen, in tracing the author's developing voice, excitedly refers to this scene as "the first extended instance when the two halves of his experience, his outer and inner life, are fused in expression" (390); in others words, Melville achieves the "fusion" that Sten deemed absent from the book. Matthiessen's sensitivity to the poetry of the prose is in keeping with the sense of momentousness exuded by the passage, and the reason for its being considered a pyramidical moment in the narrative of *White-Jacket*, and treated as such by critics. But close consideration also reveals that, for all its aesthetic unity, this pyramidical moment symbolically preserves, rather than solves, the problematically static dialectic of the narrative. It is a moment of precarious synthesis and provisional composition, which reveals the pyramid to be one "whose foundations take hold on the pit" (*R* 233; ch. 46)—in fact, this moment takes place within the wall-less labyrinth of the sea. However, *as* a symbolic crux, the moment effectively communicates the indeterminate position of mankind at "the mid-deep." What is revealed here is that to some extent the crux of the individual's inbetweenness lies in the fact of his being poised *even* between life and death, for this is the very locus of his fallen consciousness. Knowledge of death—the price of (partial) gnosis—means that humans can never belong to life completely, in the sense that animals do; that our existence always already occurs within an interstice.[20] Our fall is not complete or final—we remain suspended at "mid-deep," between Heaven and Hell. It is the unacceptable position which the relativist tries to accept, while the absolutist must either seek for closure by mystic ascension, or a Promethean chase after complete gnosis, downwards, to the great depths at which only the gnostic whale can survive.[21]

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[20] Here we might regard the reference to the sounds of life and death—the life that White-Jacket hears still includes the sound of the water that overwhelmingly dominates the sound of death. Also, the "heartlessly jubilant" sound of death reminds us of the "heartless" Cuticle and White-Jacket's "heartless" Fate (320; ch. 75), and, finally, "the joyous, heartless ever-juvenile eternities" of *Moby-Dick* (414; ch. 93).

[21] As Ahab charges the sperm whale's head in "The Sphynx": "[S]peak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved

All pyramidical moments pass, and one returns to the temporal world, which in *White-Jacket*, as in *Redburn*, is a simultaneously mutating and static world. White-Jacket emerges from the water, leaving us uncertain of the exact import of his fall:

> Quicker and quicker I mounted; till at last I bounded up like a buoy, and my whole head was bathed in the blessed air.
>
> I had fallen in a line with the main-mast; I now found myself nearly abreast of the mizzen-mast, the frigate slowly gliding by like a black world in the water. Her vast hull loomed out of the night, showing hundreds of seamen in the hammock-nettings, some tossing over ropes, others madly flinging overboard the hammocks; but I was too far out from them immediately to reach what they threw. I essayed to swim toward the ship; but instantly I was conscious of a feeling like being pinioned in a feather-bed, and, moving my hands, felt my jacket puffed out above my tight girdle with water. I strove to tear it off; but it was looped together here and there, and the strings were not then to be sundered by hand. I whipped out my knife, that was tucked at my belt, and ripped my jacket straight up and down, as if I were ripping open myself. With a violent struggle I then burst out of it, and was free. Heavily soaked, it slowly sank before my eyes.
>
> Sink! sink! oh shroud! thought I; sink forever! accursed jacket that thou art!
>
> "See that white shark!" cried a horrified voice from the taffrail; "he'll have that man down his hatchway! Quick! The *grains!* the *grains!*"
>
> The next instant that barbed bunch of harpoons pierced through and through the unfortunate jacket, and swiftly sped down with it out of sight. (393-94)

The very first impression one has after the narrator is returned to the surface is of a world that has kept moving—a world that never stands still. It communicates something of the insignificance of the individual in the great scheme of things, a theme which Melville raised in his previous books, particularly in his descriptions of death and burial at sea (see, for instance, *O* 45; ch. 12). The *Neversink* calmly sails past the profound scene of White-Jacket's ocean vision—which occurs at the demonic, polar opposite of Taji's mast-head vision—in a tacit denial of its momentousness.

White-Jacket has "fallen in a line with the main-mast," the mast of his "eternal principle" (147; ch. 36), the mast of his idealistic comrades, and the mast, indeed, that consistently appears in Melville's oeuvre as a figure for the dangerous hierarchical ambitions of idealism. In other words, his fall seems to be firmly linked to his association with that main-mast. Consequently, one is tempted to read something into the fact that he now finds himself "nearly abreast of the mizzen-mast," which seems to communicate a reduction in stature. This would certainly find favour with those who subscribe to "prevailing 'humanistic' reading" (Sten 129), i.e., those, like Arvin or Vincent (225), who consider White-Jacket's experience to mark a significant moment

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amid this world's foundations" (*MD* 311). For Ishmael, too, the whale's realm lies "among the unspeakable foundations" of the world (*MD* 136; ch. 32).

in his redemption from social vanity, a reading that more specifically draws on White-Jacket's escape from his jacket (one of the major factors in his ostracism from the greater part of the crew) and his liberation from the water by the nameless crew of "one of the cutters" (394).

It is White-Jacket's violent escape from the jacket, of course, that serves as the surest sign of his reform. Vincent's reference to "obstetrical imagery" (224) communicates a sense that what occurs here is nothing but a (re)birth. However, the narrative presents a disconcertingly violent obstetrics that explains Grenberg's feeling that "we are not sure whether we are witnessing a suicide or an apotheosis" (91). Vincent is on firmer ground when he draws on the archetypal symbolism of immersion (as a death and a rebirth) in order to call the scene "a thumbnail three-act drama of Fall, Submersion and Salvation" (214). It presents, in other words, Northrop Frye's "complete form of the romance," the "successful quest," replete with *agon*, *pathos* and *anagnorisis* (187). Martin Leonard Pops comes to a similar conclusion: "Finally, of course, he escapes the labyrinth, shucks off the pod of his protective Ego, and purges himself of his innocence, for, in his traumatic Fall, his near death by water and rebirth therein, he is able to rip through his encasement and enter the larger world" (58). But this seems to ignore the fact of the scene's own immersion in the greater labyrinth of a book which shows a marked absence of a teleological narrative mythos. It is specifically the fact that it does not quite close the book, that introduces a number of questions. Consequently Dimock's reading, in terms of which "[t]he final joyous moment of liberation [. . .] recasts the entire narrative as its antecedent—as what must have been in order for the ending to be what it is" (97), needs to be qualified. For though our reading of this climax is certainly informed by what has gone before, the narrative cannot be said to lead up to this event, even retrospectively. Firstly, there are other climactic events that vie for place of priority, such as White-Jacket's arraignment at the mast (ch. 67), or "The great Massacre of the Beards" (ch. 85) which for Tanner emerges as "the climactic event of the voyage" (xx). But more importantly, the account of White-Jacket's fall is followed by two more chapters—both, in their way, an attempt at an ending—and the effect of these chapters is to displace the conclusiveness of an event which ultimately appears as little more than a lengthy and poetically heightened episode in an irredeemably episodic narrative.

Even within the episode itself, there is a resistance to the monumentality of the event. White-Jacket's shedding of the jacket, to some extent also a symbolic suicide (especially since he casts off the only name—already indeterminate—he has, and the reader is given no other "handle to [the] man" [*R* 28; ch. 6]), is directly linked to his recognition of his inbetweenness at "mid-deep." Like Ishmael he emerges from the water. He gains a degree of insight into his position that justifies a symbolism of rebirth, but it also needs to be recognised that, once he

emerges from the water, there is nothing for it but to be pulled back onto the deck of the *Neversink*. He does not, as John Seelye puts it, "bid [. . .] that [man-of-war] world farewell" (59). Not to return would mean annihilation. At the end of his "three-act drama" (Vincent 214), White-Jacket, like Redburn, is essentially back where he started. "Ten minutes after," we are told, "I was safe on board, and, springing aloft, was ordered to reeve anew the stun'-sail-halyards" (394). It is back to business as usual. And whether or not the "prevailing 'humanistic' reading" (Sten 129) is convincing,[22] the specifics of social allegiance are certainly not the most striking feature of the now doubly nameless narrator's situation. He is back to his "old level" (81; ch. 20) in the world of the *Neversink*, which, even when viewed from peril, struck him as "a black world," a threatening presence, "[h]er vast hull loom[ing]."

"Life is a voyage that's homeward-bound!" (400; ch. 94), White-Jacket attempts to proclaim with some optimism at the end of his narrative. However, on the evidence of the homeward voyage just recounted, the reader is left with little cause for rejoicing. Actually, one feels that the entire last chapter, which announces itself as "The End," is nothing but a sudden violent reaction, on the part of the narrator, against the very indeterminacy he claimed to love as he prepared, in the previous chapter, to (narratively speaking) "leave the ship on the sea" (396; ch. 93). It is an alternative ending, in which he feels compelled to redeem his narrative, to the extent of even working out for the reader, conclusively, the allegorical import of his anatomy:

> As a man-of-war that sails through the sea, so this earth that sails through the air. We mortals are all on board a fast-sailing, never-sinking world-frigate, of which God was the shipwright; and she is but one craft in a Milky-Way fleet, of which God is the Lord High Admiral. The port we sail from is forever astern. And though far out of sight of land, for ages and ages we continue to sail with sealed orders, and our last destination remains a secret to ourselves and our officers; yet our final haven was predestinated ere we slipped from the stocks at Creation.
>
> Thus sailing with sealed orders, we ourselves are the repositories of the secret packet, whose mysterious contents we long to learn. There are no mysteries out of ourselves. But let us not give ear to the superstitious, gun-deck gossip about whither we may be gliding, for, as yet, not a soul on board of us knows—not even the Commodore

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[22] A complete contrast to this reading is provided by William B. Dillingham, who suggests that

> White-Jacket remains essentially apart and aloof. After his fall, he returns, significantly, to his position aloft, not to the deck to mix with the common crew. With or without the jacket, he can never be one of them. If there is change in his degree of isolation, it is toward LESS involvement with the common man, not more [. . .]. The more he learns of the world the more he realizes his alienation from it. (qtd. in Sarru 42)

I agree with the sense of changelessness, and even the sense of alienation, but would argue that the former position White-Jacket returns to is the state of inbetweenness, and not the absolute top, to which he never absolutely belonged in the first place.

> himself; assuredly not the Chaplain; even our Professor's scientific surmisings are in vain. On that point, the smallest cabin-boy is as wise as the Captain. And believe not the hypochondriac dwellers below hatches, who will tell you, with a sneer, that our world-frigate is bound to no final harbor whatever; that our voyage will prove an endless circumnavigation of space. Not so. For how can this world-frigate prove our eventual abiding place, when, upon our first embarkation, as infants in arms, her violent rolling—in after life unperceived—makes every soul of us sea-sick? Does this not show, too, that the very air we here inhale is uncongenial, and only becomes endurable at last through gradual habituation, and that some blessed, placid haven, however remote at present, must be in store for us all? (398-99)

This amazing passage, for all its hopes of providing a redemptive hope, retains all the ambiguities that characterise White-Jacket's man-of-war experience. It is followed by a brief point-for-point comparison between frigate and world, and the pious thought that "[o]ur Lord High Admiral will yet interpose" (400) on our behalf, but "The End" is thoroughly dominated by the quoted passage, which imports all of the narrative's dilemmas into an ostensible site of closure. If God is the "shipwright" of our violent, belligerent "world-frigate," what are we to make of Christian values; and if the "final haven" is "predestinated," what role can we possibly play in our own existence? Of course, such dilemmas are impossible to solve, because we sail under inscrutable "sealed orders," and there is nobody—no figure of authority—to appeal to for direction. "Our Lord High Admiral" is as dumb as the Commodore. There remains only speculation, or "gossip." Thus White-Jacket's statement of belief in a higher authority modulates into a statement of complete relativism, according to which "[t]here are no mysteries out of ourselves." It is difficult to explain, then, why one should not pay attention to those Jackson-like "hypochondriac dwellers," especially since White-Jacket himself refuses to take us into the harbour. He sounds a little like a hypochondriac[23] himself when he refers to sea-sickness, and suggests that "the very air we here inhale is uncongenial" to us—like Ishmael, he becomes "over conscious of my lungs" (*MD* 5; ch. 1). But perhaps the most devastating subversion of this statement of "belief" flows from the typographical presence—and the repetition—of the question-mark itself, as its period. It denotes the persistent absence of closure, the fact of White-Jacket's ongoing self-questioning suspension "in the mid-deep" (393; ch. 92) maze between irreconcilables.

White-Jacket's narrator never escapes from the *Neversink*, in spite of the fact that, in literal terms, he is obviously no longer on it at the time of narration. Like Redburn, he is looking back

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[23] Hypochondria is a condition also associated with relativistic Ishmael, who is, at times, subject to "spleen" and "hypos" (*MD* 3; ch. 1)—in "The Whiteness of the Whale" the narrator imagines being warned by the reader: "[T]hou surrenderest to a hypo, Ishmael" (*MD* 194).

on experiences. Unlike Redburn, however, he never takes shape in our eyes, and we never have a sense of the double perspective that makes *Redburn* a text so obviously concerned with time. And yet, *White-Jacket* is very much concerned with time, and to a large extent it takes its cue from the implications of Redburn's narrative. Just as the unstable world of *Omoo* is the result of Tommo's failed efforts to gain a new, uncomplicated life in *Typee*, so the unstable world of *White-Jacket* is the result of Redburn's defeated attempts to (re)gain an absolute authority. White-Jacket can no longer argue, convincingly, for a stable, external source of authority. His world becomes morally murky, and his arguments and musings subject to what Ishmael calls the "endlessness, yea, the intolerableness of all earthly effort" (*MD* 60; ch. 13). Redburn's defeat by time, his inability to redeem it by means of prolepsis, results in a state of stasis that reminds one of the fate of Lot's wife—he is frozen in the act of looking at the past, without any real hope of redeeming it and, indeed, his own fallen state. Change becomes a strictly outward event, that leaves the unknown or indeterminate interior intact—Redburn becomes older, and his glass ship collects dust. And this is precisely what happens in *White-Jacket*, in which the narrator rips himself free of his jacket only to return to the world of the *Neversink*. The difference between the two narratives lies in the fact that in *Redburn* the developmental telos determined by time provides the narrative with a clear romance structure which ultimately descends into parody because it cannot contain the violent, deviant reality of Wellingborough's experiences.[24] In *White-Jacket*, on the other hand, such a defeat is already implicit, dramatised in such moments as the narrator's fall, but ultimately expressed in an anti-romantic form that is anatomical, essayistic and episodic, and modulates between satire, parody, lyricism, comedy and reportage. Above all, it "attempts to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence" (Frye 223). Such form remains indeterminate at best, and consequently, so does the narrator. The result of this is that any developmental strains become submerged in the greater labyrinth of the text. The *Neversink* moves eternally forward and never gets anywhere, and certainly does not attain the resolvent end represented by the "home," an end that would redeem and unify the irresolute "middle." In fact, what I have said at the beginning of this chapter regarding *White-Jacket*'s absence of "middle" begs reconsideration, for from another perspective one might say that *White-Jacket* is all "middle," an interstitial narrative that does not gather its deviant energies, the flux of its own "intractable elements" (*BB* 407; ch. 1), in terms of the proposed (providential) line of development of which the "voyage that's homeward-bound" is emblematic (*WJ* 400; ch.

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[24] See Frye's description of "the quest-romance" as "the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will contain that reality" (193).

94). The sea, on which the entire action of the book takes place, confounds our sense of progression. The sea becomes that indeterminate "middle" ground that the teleological movement from "beginning" to "end" is meant to bring under control and resolve. But in *White-Jacket*, both "beginning" and "end" occur within that space, and are assimilated, shorn of their monumental status. Forward movement does takes place, and may gain a comforting significance in terms of the myth of the homeward voyage, but ultimately it is a movement that leads nowhere. Time passes, but everything stays the same. White-Jacket shows a greater ability than Redburn to accept this state of affairs—the distinction in narrative mythos testifies to that—and therefore his gaze, unlike Redburn's, is not frozen. But this acceptance must always be a provisional one, based on an imperfect "poise," in the midst of the labyrinth, between irreconcilables.

CHAPTER 5

"ALL WORDS ARE ARRANT SKIRMISHERS": DEFEATING NARRATIVE IN *PIERRE*

"Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" howls Ahab, in "The Forge," as he baptises his newly forged harpoon in the blood of the three "heathen" harpooners (*MD* 489; ch. 113). Tom Quirk offers the following translation of the Latin: "I baptize thee not in the name of the Father, but in the name of the Devil" ("Notes" 649). This, Melville intimated in a letter to Hawthorne, "is the book's motto (the secret one)" (*C* 196). In other words, underneath the open proclamation of allegiance in the dedication of *Moby-Dick* to Nathaniel Hawthorne, "in admiration for his genius," there lies another, which aligns the book with the demonic. Hawthorne is let in on the joke, but the reader is not—in some sense, the joke is on him.

Ahab's well-wrought harpoon—simultaneous symbol of his pointed, forged will, and the quill with which the author strives to fix a shifting, vast reality—will end up another piece of twisted metal[1] in the blubber of the White Whale. The universe will not be solved. And in this sense Melville's secret motto differs in intention from Ahab's rebellious, satanic, and Faustian baptism, which is the cry of a vengeful quester. The demonism Melville aligns his book with is the "demonism" of a heartless and to some extent picaresque world, a world beyond categories of good and evil, which in Melville finds expression in a narrative confounding of the teleological pursuit. That Melville understood the motto in these broad terms may also be suggested by its appearance (in a slightly extended form) in a gnomic note—dated around 1849-1851—found at the end of one of his volumes of the works of Shakespeare:

> Ego non baptizo te in nominee Patris et
> Filii et Spiritus Sancti—sed in nomine
> Diaboli.—Madness is undefinable—
> It & right reasons extremes of one. ("Notes in a Shakespeare Volume" 970)

In spite of a fair amount of exegesis, this remains delightfully enigmatic, but if, roughly speaking, "right reasons" is to be aligned with the Trinity, and the "[m]adness [. . .] undefinable" with the Devil, it seems to follow that, in speaking of the Devil, we cannot really speak of a conscious evil anymore.[2] The eclipse of the Father is an eclipse by a faceless meaninglessness,

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[1] As Ahab confirms in "The Quarter-Deck," "the harpoons lie all twisted and wrenched in him" (*MD* 162; ch. 36).

[2] Robert Milder makes a related point when he suggests that "[d]iabolism in both instances [i.e., the use of "Ego non baptizo" in *Moby-Dick* and in the letter to Hawthorne] seems metaphoric and intended not so much to connote evil

that "demonic divine world [that] largely personifies the vast, menacing, stupid powers of nature" (Frye 147). It is a pattern we have seen in all of the books, and it results in the absence of authoritative centres and unified structural principles. In the process, Melville's narrative—if we think here of Peter Brooks's point that "[n]arratives [. . .] arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification" (37)—aligns itself with "the world that desire totally rejects" (Frye 147). The narrative becomes subject to that "demon Principle" (32; bk. 2, ch. 4) we find in *Pierre*, and predetermines the "failure" of his narrative. This is what lies behind R. P. Blackmur's frustration with Melville's craft, the fact that "[h]e added nothing to the novel as a form, and his work nowhere showed conspicuous mastery of the formal devices of fiction which he used" (75). We might suggest—as Northrop Frye doubtlessly would—that Blackmur's frustration is the result of the application of an inappropriate category, i.e., the novel, but we can also appreciate it insofar as we can appreciate Melville's radical errancy and dissolution of form. As William C. Spengemann argues in his introduction to the book, *Pierre* is perhaps "not so much a novel as an anti-novel" (ix). Ultimately I would agree with William Spanos that this is "no accident of inattentiveness, but a deliberate destruction of precisely the form that 'limits, compacts, and therefore controls what can be told and how'" (81).[3] It is central to his critique of the teleological myth of control and self-determination that he leaves his work—and a chosen form—susceptible to the vagaries of chance, to allow its clearly delineated outlines to thaw out, which is what I understand to be the source of Blackmur's point that Melville's "work constantly *said* what it was doing or going to do, and then, as a rule, stopped short" (79). Melville's books posit a hypothetical line of development—a trajectory of desire, to employ Brooks's sense of "the reading of plot as a form of desire" (37)—only to muddle its progress, or to allow its progress to be muddled. And here Spanos's argument, which presumably draws on Ishmael's insistence that "[t]here are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method" (*MD* 361; ch. 82), is crucial:

> Melville's "careless" "method" is a *care*-ful, however (or, rather, because) uncertain, "strategy." It is precisely intended to make a novel that will not proceed according to the calculative and regularizing measure of an author who, out of reach of the freeplay of finitude, coerces the "middle"—the "incidental" (like "accident" and "case," also from *cadere*, to fall)—into the disciplinary space between Beginning and End, but according to the improvisational measure of its finite and decentered occasion. (81)

(black art) as to suggest a principle of opposition to the Father" (261). For an inaugural, thorough and paradigmatic reading of the note, see Charles Olson (52-58), and for the critical eclipse of that reading, see Geoffrey Sanborn's uncovering of Melville's source for the note in a *Quarterly Review* essay by Sir Francis Palgrave (217).

[3] Spanos is quoting from Blackmur's response to *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*.

In other words, Melville comes down from the formal mast-head that places the providential author "out of reach of the freeplay of finitude," and submits instead to "the improvisational measure" of the ship deck. I am not unaware here of Blackmur's valid point that aesthetic forms are historically determined, and his insistence that the artist must "dramatize his theme, his vision, his observation, his 'mere' story, in terms of existing conventions however adverse those conventions may seem to his intentions" (78), but this does not alter the fact that there remains something decidedly Platonic (a term Melville might have used) about such conventions. The Jamesian aesthetics of the novel persist way past his age; they certainly determine Blackmur's judgments on Melville. And why Blackmur must be frustrated with Melville is clear from his point that "[a]n age moves; it is momentum felt. An artist expresses *an arrested version of movement*, expresses it at the level of actuality" (77, emphasis added). Melville, by contrast, allows that movement to determine the course of his narrative—*Pierre*, in fact, is about the destructive insinuation and incursion of movement into the arrested monumental paradise of Saddle Meadows.

If we are to take Melville's letter to Hawthorne ([17?] November 1851) as giving an early, if vague, indication of what he intended to do with *Pierre*—a book he wrote "during the winter of 1851-52" (Howard and Parker 365)[4]—it would seem he was thinking of outdoing *Moby-Dick* in some way: "Lord, when shall we be done growing? As long as we have anything more to do, we have done nothing. So, now, let us add Moby Dick to our blessing, and step from that. Leviathan is not the biggest fish;—I have heard of Krakens" (*C* 213). As a reference to *Pierre* it may not be very direct, but it certainly captures something of the nature of *Pierre*, and the sense in which it does "outdo" *Moby-Dick*. Here there are two related points we can make about Krakens. Firstly, unlike the sperm whale, they are wholly creatures of myth. They are creatures from an impalpable dream world; they belong to the unconscious. This relates to the second point, in terms of which we should see the Kraken as related to the octopus and the squid. Ishmael himself makes that point in "The Squid," suggesting that "[t]here seems some ground to imagine that the great Kraken of Bishop Pontoppidan may ultimately resolve itself into Squid" (*MD* 277). The octopus and squid are actual creatures, but nonetheless associated with the unconscious.[5] Ad de Vries relates the octopus to "the Mystic Centre, and the unfolding of

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[4] Howard and Parker explain that "[t]he book was finished and in type by the middle of April" (378), in other words, a mere five months after his letter to Hawthorne.

[5] So is the whale, of course, which Ad de Vries identifies as "one of the ambivalent symbols" (497). However, the whale, which is also associated with "lust" (497), carries a kinetic charge that the octopus (or squid), with its

creation," but stresses also its status as "monster" (348). Insofar as they are of indeterminate form, their value is primarily demonic. In "The Squid," Ishmael gives us a most thorough sense of the symbolic value of a creature which, from a distance, Daggoo at first mistakes for the White Whale. When the whale-boats converge upon the designated spot, they encounter the following:

> Almost forgetting for the moment all thoughts of Moby Dick, we now gazed at the most wondrous phenomenon which the secret seas have hitherto revealed to mankind. A vast pulpy mass, furlongs in length and breadth, of a glancing cream-color, lay floating on the water, innumerable long arms radiating from its centre, and curling and twisting like a nest of anacondas, as if blindly to clutch at any hapless object within reach. No perceptible face or front did it have; no conceivable token of either sensation or instinct; but undulated there on the billows, an unearthly, formless, chance-like apparition of life.
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> As with a low sucking sound it slowly disappeared again, Starbuck still gazing at the agitated waters where it had sunk, with a wild voice exclaimed—"Almost rather had I seen Moby Dick and fought him, than to have seen thee, thou white ghost!" (*MD* 276)

The squid appears as another creature of the deeps impossible to comprehend. It shares the whiteness of Moby Dick. Like the whale, it has no face; worse than the whale, it does not even have a front, and seems completely formless. As Camille Paglia suggests, "[t]his is the snaky, Medusa-head of nature, swampy and inert" (585). Most horrific, of course, are the tentacles, "curling and twisting like a nest of anacondas." Without reason or purpose—"blindly"—they nonetheless threaten to entangle "any hapless object within reach." In short, the squid becomes a manifestation of the demonic aspect of the sea, and nature in general. There is a reason why Starbuck would rather fight Moby Dick than even see the creature—the latter, formless as it is, does not really leave one with anything palpable to strike at.

These general points suggest why Melville may indeed have been thinking of *Pierre* as a book on Krakens, especially when we consider the images of entanglement that pervade it. It is a sense overtly captured, for instance, in the image of Laocoön,[6] a marble image of which graces the landing of the stairs at the Glendinning manor, and which the narrator points out to us as Pierre approaches his mother in order to sever his ties with Saddle Meadows. But that is only a

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invertebrate, indeterminate body and multi-directional tentacles, lacks. Still, in the end it essentially extends the image of the whale as a symbol of nature. Regarding the latter, Jorge Luis Borges has stressed that

> the symbol of the whale is less apt to suggest that the cosmos is evil than to suggest its vast inhumanity, its beastly or enigmatic stupidity. In some of his stories, Chesterton compares the atheists' universe to a centerless labyrinth. Such is the universe of *Moby-Dick*: a cosmos (a chaos) not only perceptibly malignant as the Gnostics had intuited, but also irrational, like the cosmos in the hexameters of Lucretius. ("*Bartleby*" 245)

[6] The narrator presents Laocoön and his sons as "caught in inextricable snarls of snakes, writh[ing] in eternal torments" (185; bk. 11, ch. 3). According to the Greek myth, the family is dragged into the sea by two sea-serpents (Graves 333).

minor emblem expressing the theme of entanglement—familial, social, philosophical, metaphysical and, above all, psychological—that coils and twists through the narrative. The *Ambiguities* of the subtitle directly refers to this quality in the book. The narrative itself, too, is something like a many-limbed, shapeless monster. Even the language, with all its odd, often ridiculous neologisms (frequently created by means of the suffix, *-ness*), lengthy, involved sentences, and repetitions, is suffocating, "cloying" (Higgins and Parker, "Reading" 227), and serpentine. In this sense it mirrors the theme of entanglement which is ultimately played out in the realm of Pierre's psyche. For that is where Pierre engages the fatal battle with the Kraken he never comes to identify. In this sense, also, he resembles Ahab, for Ahab, we recall, is dragged to his death after getting entangled in the whale-line. But this is where the resemblance ends, for Ahab at least had the momentary thrill of feeling his harpoon strike home. Pierre, on the other hand, has nothing to strike, and nowhere to turn.

Moby-Dick's double allegiance—baptism in the name of the Devil and dedication to genius—is followed by parodic dedications in *Pierre* and *Israel Potter*. This seems to be an effect of the subversion of monuments—or monumentalism—in both books. In *Redburn*, the narrator identified certain monuments as "cenotaphs" (162; ch. 32), and in *Israel Potter*, the emptiness of monuments will again be stressed. In *Pierre*, too, the frozen, constituted monument—the pyramid, the shrine, the text, the "I"—will be exposed as finally empty, and founded on an unstable, provisional surface overlaying a labyrinth. In *Pierre* that labyrinth is the unconscious, the realm of the Kraken; the pyramid is the edenic world of Saddle Meadows (which provides the self with a sense of continuity). The book starts with the pyramid, and proceeds to undermine it. This, I believe, is the true import of Melville's dedication on the first page of *Pierre*:

To
Greylock's Most Excellent Majesty

> In old times authors were proud of the privilege of dedicating their works to Majesty. A right noble custom, which we of Berkshire must revive. For whether we will or no, Majesty is all around us here in Berkshire, sitting as in a grand Congress of Vienna of majestical hill-tops, and eternally challenging our homage.
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> But since the majestic mountain, Greylock—my own more immediate sovereign lord and king—hath now, for innumerable ages, been the one grand dedicatee of the earliest rays of all the Berkshire mornings, I know not how his Imperial Purple Majesty (royal-born: Porphyrogenitus) will receive the dedication of my own poor solitary ray.
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> Nevertheless, forasmuch as I, dwelling with my loyal neighbors, the Maples and the Beeches, in the amphitheater over which his central majesty presides, have received his most bounteous and unstinted fertilizations, it is but meet, that I here devoutly kneel, and render up my gratitude, whether, thereto, The Most Excellent Purple Majesty of Greylock benignantly incline his hoary crown or no. (vii)

Here is a whimsical parody which enacts the transference of democratic America's loyalty from centralised monarchy to the panoptic and eternal "Majesty" of the American landscape. It seems to proceed from a response to the nationalistic call for literature "based on American materials" (Bell 16), an answer to Washington Irving's lament that "[o]ur lofty mountains and stupendous cataracts awaken no poetical associations, and our majestic rivers roll their waters unheeded, because unsung" (qtd. in Bell 17)—in short, to meet the "challeng[e]" with which the landscape confronts the author. *Pierre*, to be sure, will present the most sustained focus on the American landscape—both country and city—in all of Melville's work. But almost immediately, the ironies begin to mount. Man's constitutive urge devolves a centre, and Greylock emerges from the democratic "Congress" as Melville's "own more immediate sovereign lord and king." He becomes a "devout" and fawning subject, a parodic image of the Transcendentalist who converses with the All in the specific (as, say, Thoreau returns to Nature by settling at Walden pond). The tone is difficult—ambiguous—because there is no question about Melville's own feelings of awe when confronted with nature. Yet the sense of mocking is persistent, right up to the excessive praise of "The Most Excellent Purple Majesty."

What informs this mocking tone, I would suggest, is Melville's "oceanic" sense of nature; in other words, his view of nature as inscrutable, heartless (predatory) and formless (shifting). The picturesque composition of the dedication is a lie, because it creates a soothing image of a Rousseauean, benign natural majesty. That picture is undercut in the last qualifying clause—Greylock, as everybody knows, will most certainly not "benignantly incline his hoary crown." As a natural pyramid, the mountain—the hill around which "the slovenly wilderness" arranges itself in Stevens's poem; here, even the sun seems subject to it—looms as a centre of meaning; but finally it maintains only a disconcerting, inhuman silence.[7] This recognition is brought home to the reader in book 25, in Pierre's dream of Enceladus, which the narrator prefaces by a description of the "Mount of Titans" in Saddle Meadows:

> Say what some poets will, Nature is not so much her own ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood.

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[7] This silence is also stressed retrospectively by the Memnon Stone, which Pierre names after the legendary "monument in Egypt" to Memnon, son of Aurora (or Eos), killed "beneath the walls of Troy": "Touched by the breath of Aurora, at every sunrise that statue gave forth a mournful broken sound, as of a harp-string suddenly sundered, being to harshly wound" (*P* 135; bk. 7, ch. 6). According to Robert Graves, Eos is "dawn" (390), and the "first rays of the sun warmed the hollow stone, making the air inside expand and rush through the narrow throat" (320). But Melville's Greylock—like Pierre's Memnon Stone—remains mute in "the earliest rays of all the Berkshire mornings," as it does in the face of his "own poor solitary ray."

> Thus a high-aspiring, but most moody, disappointed bard, chancing once to visit the Meadows and beholding that fine eminence, christened it by the name it ever after bore; completely extinguishing its former title—The Delectable Mountain—one long ago bestowed by an old Baptist farmer, an hereditary admirer of Bunyan and his most marvelous book. [. . .]
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> Now, on a somewhat nearer approach, the precipice did not belie its purple promise from the manorial piazza;—that sweet imposing purple promise, which seemed fully to vindicate the Bunyanish old title originally bestowed;—but showed the profuse aërial foliage of a hanging forest. Nevertheless, coming still more nigh, long and frequent rents among the mass of leaves revealed horrible glimpses of dark-dripping rocks, and mysterious mouths of wolfish caves. [. . .] As he ["the tourist"] would now speed on, the lower ground, which from the manor-house piazza seemed all a grassy level, suddenly merged into a very long and weary acclivity, slowly rising close up to the precipice's base; so that the efflorescent grasses rippled against it, as the efflorescent waves of some great swell or long rolling billow ripple against the water-line of a steep gigantic war-ship on the sea. And, as among the rolling sea-like sands of Egypt, disordered rows of broken Sphinxes lead to the Cheopian pyramid itself; so this long acclivity was thickly strewn with enormous rocky masses, grotesque in shape, and with wonderful features on them, which seemed to express that slumbering intelligence visible in some recumbent beasts—beasts whose intelligence seems struck dumb in them by some sorrowful and inexplicable spell. (342-43; ch. 4)

This passage presents us with a fictional representation of the majestic Mount Greylock of the Berkshires, and proceeds to show how the removal of a safe, constitutional distance destroys the initial assumption of unity and repose. Melville revisited the same setting and a similar "resolution" in his 1856 story, "The Piazza," in which the narrator sets out on an "inland voyage to fairy-land" (4) in quest of "[o]ne spot of radiance, where all else was shade" (4), only to find nothing but a dilapidated cottage inhabited by "a lonely girl" (8), who harbours her own fantasies about the distant house from which the narrator had just set out. However, the gently anticlimactic denouement of that story is here presented in more violent terms—what is uncovered in the approach is a demonic world. The savage, primordial landscape that Tommo and Toby struggle through on their way to Typee (a landscape which also seemed coherent from a distance) is identified and uncovered here in the very picturesque American landscape which the civilising process was meant to have liberated from the wilderness. In fact, the Glendinning family's involvement in this process is exposed in the tracing of Pierre's genealogy in book 1: "All the associations of Saddle-Meadows were full of pride to Pierre. The Glendinning deeds by which their estate had so long been held, bore the cyphers of three Indian kings, the aboriginal and only conveyancers of those noble woods and plains" (6; ch. 2). Presumably, these deeds devolved upon Pierre's heroic and victorious great-grandfather after "an Indian battle had been fought, in the earlier days of the colony" (5). The euphemistic legalities do not obscure the brutal imperialism of a paterfamilias whose own son—a hero in the next step toward national autonomy, the Revolutionary War—is reported to have once "annihilated two Indian savages by

making reciprocal bludgeons of their heads" (29-30; bk. 2, ch. 3). The casual brutality of this act is nicely offset by the narrator's ironic insistence (which simultaneously presents Pierre's unironic belief) that "all this was done by the mildest hearted, and most blue-eyed gentleman in the world, [. . .] a sweet-hearted, charitable Christian; [. . .]—fit image of his God" (30).

The superimposition of the civilising Christian narrative of salvation upon the American wilderness—like the "Bunyanish old title" of "The Delectable Mountain"—is shown to effect no actual change in the essential nature of things (a point raised in a somewhat different form in Plotinus Plinlimmon's pamphlet). In fact, in order to achieve that overlaying of reality, the Christian himself has to resort to savagery. Pierre's slumbering, docile, edenic world is contingent on several initial acts of violence; its purity is always already compromised.[8] But there is another sense in which Pierre's country seat is founded on violence, namely in the sense that its calm atmosphere only provisionally and tentatively overlays a chaotic, primal world. It is, like the mountain, a kind of "recumbent beast," which mutely harbours a "slumbering intelligence" that carries all the associations of pent-up violence. If this is beginning to sound like Jungian psychology we are not off track, for as several generations of critics, from Lewis Mumford to Henry A. Murray to Christopher Sten, have pointed out, *Pierre* is nothing if not a "psychological novel" (Sten 217).[9] But for now I want to stress the fact that "ever-shifting Nature" (9; bk. 1, ch. 3) in *Pierre*, like the sea in Melville's other books, finally relativises all of the action that occurs upon its surface. This is what becomes clear to "the tourist" who approaches the Mount of Titans and, among "rippl[ing]" grasses, suddenly seems to find himself in the sea facing the side of a "steep gigantic war-ship"—a position reminiscent of that of the fallen White-Jacket. Melville destabilises the very ground beneath our feet.

For all the excessive flowery language that dominates *Pierre*, particularly its first part, the narrator, in the process of introducing Pierre's felicitous world, is ever introducing qualifying remarks. Thus, for instance, we are told early on that Pierre's apparently perfect life does indeed have at least "one hiatus," namely the fact that a "sister had been omitted from the text" (7; bk. 1, ch. 2). Such breaches are plentiful, and frequently also seem the result of an essayistic

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[8] Compare the equally compromised "conversion" and "civilisation" of the South Sea islanders in *Omoo* (see chapter 1, 73-74 of this thesis).

[9] See Mumford's *Herman Melville: A Study of His Life and Vision* (1929), in which he suggests that Melville "sought [. . .] to arrive at the same sort of psychological truth that he had achieved, in metaphysics, in *Moby-Dick*" (144); Murray's introduction to the Hendricks House edition of *Pierre* (1949); and Sten's chapter on the book in *The Weaver-God, He Weaves* (1996).

tendency—and I would stress the improvisational nature of the act of essaying—on the part of the narrator, as he himself ponders on the circumstances of his protagonist. The effect of such digressions is to puncture the leading narrative. In book 1, for example, in establishing the unwavering flow of the Glendinning line, the narrator apparently pauses to address what he assumes to be the surprise of foreign readers: "The monarchical world very generally imagines, that in demagoguical America the sacred Past hath no fixed statues erected to it, but all things irreverently seethe and boil in the vulgar caldron of an everlasting, uncrystalizing Present" (8; ch. 3). At first this would seem to be a simple rhetorical prelude to a nationalistic refutation of such a vision of primal chaos. Significantly, however, it takes the narrator a lengthy paragraph to finally get to that refutation. In the course of that paragraph, the narrator suggests that "indeed the democratic element operates as a subtile acid among us; forever producing new things by corroding the old" (9), and finally goes on to relate the American hegemony to a heartless natural process: "[P]olitical institutions, which in other lands seem above all things intensely artificial, with America seem to possess the divine virtue of a natural law; for the most might of nature's laws is this, that out of Death she brings Life" (9). If this is patriotism, it is of the most ambiguous kind. By the time that the narrator gets round to his initial point, namely that some families—like the Glendinnings—show more staying-power than "the vast mass of families," it has lost much of its ability to convince and, indeed, the narrator's tone seems more ironic than before (in this sense the ironic tone is incremental). We have a sense of a world ultimately ruled by "ever-shifting Nature" (9).

Against this world Pierre's consciousness is initially protected by a talismanic "fond ideality," premised on "proud memories" (8). "[W]ith Pierre," we are told, "that talisman touched the whole earthly landscape about him; [. . .] Pierre deemed all that part of the earth a love-token; so that his very horizon was to him as a memorial ring" (8). The idealising glance subjects deviance and arranges the wilderness into a composed and benign landscape. The sense of completion (together with its psychological premise) is very neatly captured in the image of the "memorial ring," which also repeats an earlier image of Pierre's "circumscribed youth" (6; bk. 1, ch. 2). In a sense it is the world of the womb,[10] and accordingly Saddle Meadows is associated most strongly with Pierre's mother, Mrs. Glendinning, "an affluent, and haughty widow" (4; bk. 1, ch. 2). Bryan C. Short argues that "[a]s long as he [Pierre] accepts his mother's constructions, he inhabits the center of a seamless, fetishized world, metonymically timeless like

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[10] The womb imagery emerges on the very first page of *Pierre*, as the protagonist "issu[es] from the *embowered* and high-gabled old home of his fathers" (3; bk. 1, ch. 1, emphasis added).

the Typee valley, yet claiming the synecdochic significance of his lineage" (111). His mother's control over the activities at the manor; her involvement in the affairs of Saddle Meadows, where the family, as John P. McWilliams has shown, "perpetuate[s] feudal land laws [. . .], a debilitating anachronism" (167);[11] and her breeding of familial respect and "sweet docility" (20; bk. 1, ch. 6) in her son, consolidate the rule of Glendinning family. She even keeps him from going to college, lest he "grow vain-glorious in sophomorean wisdom" (19), and develops ideas of his own. Instead, Pierre is raised a gentleman, in accordance with what was once

> a maxim with the father of Pierre, that all gentlemanhood was vain; all claims to it preposterous and absurd, unless the primeval gentleness and golden humanities of religion had been so thoroughly wrought into the complete texture of the character, that he who pronounced himself gentleman, could also rightfully assume the meek, but kingly style of Christian. (6; bk. 1, ch. 2)

Once again the tone seems ironic, especially with regard to the "assum[ption]" of the "*style* of Christian." It puts us in mind of Mrs. Glendinning's "vivid [. . .] aware[ness]" of "how immense was that influence, which, even in the closest ties of the heart, the merest appearances make upon the mind" (15; bk. 1, ch. 5). From the beginning, indeed, from the very first lines of excessive and artificial rhetoric, particularly in Pierre and Lucy's sugary opening exchange, we are made aware of our encounter with Saddle Meadows as an encounter with cultural surfaces (in this sense *Pierre* resembles a novel, i.e., a narrative concerned with social conventions and relations; however, it is not as concerned with realistic presentation of these conventions as it is with parodying them, and their literary representation in particular). And Pierre's mother is the staunch and practical preserver of these surfaces, to the extent that she will even lie to her son.[12] Like Pierre's forebears, she is not beyond a recognition of the role of expedience in the maintenance of the monumental identity—she is nowhere as naïve as her son, even though he may be her intellectual superior.

It is this sheltered upbringing that allows Pierre to grow into the "young idealist" F. O. Matthiessen deems him to be (467). The initial nature of that idealism—in terms of which Pierre later becomes the implicit White Knight in opposition to the "Black Knight" that "confront[s]" and "mock[s]" him (65; bk. 3, ch. 6)—is specifically Christian, and based on a monumentalised

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[11] We are reminded of the luxury of Media and his guests in Odo, contingent on the labour of "poor serfs" (*M* 191; ch. 63), a point brought home when we become privy to the economical plight of the Ulver family.

[12] Pierre later reveals a suppressed memory of his father being "delirious" on his deathbed (70; bk. 4, ch. 2). The extent to which Mrs. Glendinning insists on preserving an uncompromised memory of her husband is clear from the fact that she allows the "devoted family attendants" to "restrain [. . .] her from being present at his side" (70), yet this could hardly have prevented her recognition that even gentlemen can be reduced to ranting. Later, Pierre faces the fact that, "[m]ince the matter how his family would, had not his father died a raver?" (178; bk. 10, ch. 2).

image of Pierre's father which consecrates him, not merely as an exemplary Christian but as God himself:

> There had long stood a shrine in the fresh-foliaged heart of Pierre, up to which he ascended by many tableted steps of remembrance; and around which annually he had hung fresh wreaths of a sweet and holy affection. [. . .] But though thus mantled, and tangled with garlands, this shrine was of marble—a niched pillar, deemed solid and eternal, [. . .] which supported the entire one-pillared temple of his moral life [. . .]. In this shrine, in this niche of this pillar, stood the perfect marble form of his departed father; without blemish, unclouded, snow-white, and serene [. . .]. Not to God had Pierre ever gone in his heart, unless by ascending the steps of that shrine, and so making it the vestibule of his abstractest religion. (68; bk. 4, ch. 1)

As in the case of Redburn, Pierre stakes his identity on a paternal "shrine" that will prove equivocal. But as is also the case with Redburn, his idealistic illusions remain unchallenged[13] during the early part of his life, and he seems set on unproblematic enjoyment of a decidedly unearthly felicity. But this cannot last—the romance demands it and Original Sin demands it, as does Melville's own "lower[ed] [. . .] conceit of attainable felicity" (*MD* 416; ch. 94).

As Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker have pointed out, *Pierre* evolved from the "attempt to convert the gothic romance (in one of its late permutations as sensational fiction primarily for female readers) into a vehicle for his psychological and philosophical speculations (now in this order of importance)" ("Grandeur" 162). There are several critics—Leon Howard and Hershel Parker, for instance ("Note" 368)—who have argued that Melville's choice of form may have been motivated by hopes of writing a best-seller, an argument apparently borne out by Melville's claim in a letter to his publisher, Richard Bentley, that *Pierre* was "very much more calculated for popularity than anything you have yet published of mine—being a regular romance, with a mysterious plot to it, & stirring passions at work, and withall, representing a new & elevated aspect of American life" (*C* 226). Whether Melville's optimism was the result of self-deception (as Harrison Hayford would have it[14]) or the result of a conscious and deliberate deception of his

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[13] This is something of an oversimplification for, as I have already pointed out, the narrator will occasionally reveal certain gaps in Pierre's felicity through which certain destabilising thoughts may enter—the portrait of his father would be a case in point, as would the Memnon Stone/Terror Stone. Still, the full force of such incursions is only felt once the centre of Pierre's moral universe—his father—is brought into disrepute; indeed, it is only then—i.e., retrospectively—that these former "prophetic" sites of deviance are introduced.

[14] Higgins and Parker quote Hayford as saying that Melville probably "deceived himself in thinking he had submerged the profounder elements of his book far enough below the surface to allow the ordinary reader clear sailing through the romance" ("Reading" 233), and go on to qualify this view by suggesting that perhaps the deception pertained only to the earlier "short version of *Pierre*" (233).

publisher (the view, for instance, of Joseph Flibbert[15]), remains a moot point, but I incline towards Higgins and Parker's sensible reminder of Melville's history with his publishers and readers:

> What he offered a publisher was never quite what he labeled it, what he professed to believe about the salability and potential popularity of a book was rarely quite straightforward (and often may well have been self-deceptive), what he offered the great majority of readers was rarely quite what it appeared to be; his writing was, as far as we know, the one area of his life which he defended at such cost to simple truth. ("Reading" 232)

This "cost to simple truth" would have been more than justified by the radicalism of Melville's implications, especially when viewed in the light of his dependence on writing for the maintenance of his family. However, in the end it seems best to account for this state of confusion and indecision by reminding oneself that whatever form Melville adopted for a given work, that narrative always proceeded to fragment and metamorphose the form into something new and unexpected, sometimes in ways offensive or irritating to contemporary tastes. This is what has always made Melville's work so difficult to classify—as Blackmur's exasperation with Melville's failure to work within "existing conventions" (78) attests—presumably not only by his critics, but also by himself. The fact of the matter is that Melville's work remained inherently critical of the unifying, teleological process at work within inherited literary forms, which is why his own taste in literature leaned toward the more heterogeneous and indeterminate character of such forms as the essay or the anatomy. As Bainard Cowan points out, "[f]or Melville and Kierkegaard, security itself is the enemy" (34). It is a false "security" which Pierre, at length, disgustedly associates with the "false, inverted attempts [of novels] at systematizing eternally unsystematizable elements" (141). Melville may not reach the same emotional level of indignation, but he certainly shares the critical intent—*Pierre* itself will not falsely resolve, or avoid, the hopeless density of the "entanglements" into which Pierre's initially familiar situation—that is, familiar to romance—leads him. In effect it succumbs to those entanglements, leaving the reader with a difficult—and in some respects hopeless—hermeneutic responsibility. Melville might well have been pleased with Higgins and Parker's playful but significant insistence, "Young reader or older hand, don't let anyone tell you he understands this book" ("Reading" 211), if he felt that such confusion could exist side by side with appreciation. His subtitle—*The Ambiguities*—quite explicitly suggests that he expected the reader's encounter with the book to be a confounding one. In it, he must have known, he had let the very medium of

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[15] Flibbert argues that "we can hardly credit the sincerity of this statement to Bentley," and goes on to call *Pierre* "truly an example of literary nihilism" (133).

his communication succumb to those ambiguities. He had allowed his text to become demonic, fallen. For as the parodic dedication to Mount Greylock implies, ultimately *Pierre* is dedicated to nature; and, indeed, nature—the indeterminate, kinetic, destructive nature which Greylock's purpleness obscures, that "cunning purpleness" the narrator later ascribes to the Mount of Titans (344; bk. 25, ch. 4)—comes to rule its "measure" (Spanos 81).

We will return to this matter. For now, it seems safe to say that, whatever his particular intentions with *Pierre*, Melville thought of himself as generally writing a romance of some or other kind. He returned to a form he had employed, to varying degrees, in *Typee*, *Mardi*, *Redburn* and *Moby-Dick* (each of these retains, at its core, a version of the romance myth). With *Pierre* Melville settled for a sensational plot not at all alien to his contemporaries. As Frye points out,

> one very common convention of the nineteenth-century novel is the use of two heroines, one dark, and one light. The dark one is as a rule passionate, haughty, plain, foreign or Jewish, and in some way associated with the undesirable or with some kind of forbidden fruit like incest. When the two are involved with the same hero, the plot usually has to get rid of the dark one or make her into a sister if the story is to end happily. Examples include *Ivanhoe*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Woman in White*, *Ligeia*, *Pierre* (a tragedy because the hero chooses the dark girl, who is also his sister), *The Marble Faun*, and countless incidental treatments. (101)

Melville adopts the opposition between the dark girl, Isabel, consistently associated with night and "mystery" (126; bk. 6, ch. 6), and the light girl, Lucy, associated with the day, her very name meaning "light." Isabel appears on the scene as a dark secret, a threat to the edenic, uncomplicated romance of Pierre and Lucy. However, she appears as a sister, and therefore might, after some initial complications, be accommodated (as Frye's scheme suggests) in a felicitous, redemptive and apocalyptic resolution pleasing to one and all. She would then fill the "one hiatus" in the "text" of Pierre's life (7; bk. 1, ch. 2), and render it complete. This does not happen, because Isabel completely destabilises that world, while Pierre pledges himself to a self-sacrificing course of action and never renounces that pledge, even though severely tested. He becomes an absolutist, a modern-day version of the tempted saint. Melville's book clearly does not end happily, and therein lies the first of his deviancies from the expectations that his romance would have called into being. As Laurie Robertson-Lorant puts it, "[m]ost antebellum authors made a kind of covenant with their readers that human destiny ultimately lay in the hands of a benevolent and just God who would punish wickedness and reward goodness" (319). Melville reneges on this agreement by problematising the idea of a providential God and, by logical extension, the ideal of Christian, ethical behaviour.

Here I need to take a moment to point out that, satanic as *Pierre* seems, there are remarkably few signs of actual evil in the book. Some social evils are subjected to scrutiny; Isabel remains unsettlingly difficult to account for; Glen Stanly acts unconscionably. But nowhere do we find the kind of concrete, malignant presence we found in figures like Jackson, Bland, and Fedallah—ultimately all "evil" in the book results directly from Pierre's attempt to do the Christian thing, i.e., to act in accordance with an ideal in a world of expedience. This absence of conscious, active evil seems to be a symptom of Pierre's de-authorised universe, ultimately captured in the famous image of the empty sarcophagus at the centre of the pyramid (285; bk. 21, ch. 1). The monumental pyramid, that triumph of identity and will—individual and social—against the de-individualising flux of nature, itself only houses an all-relativising and existentially taxing void. For the quester like Pierre, the seeker who "will know nothing but Truth" and who "will know what *is*" (65; bk. 3, ch. 6), such a recognition must lead to madness. Pierre's truth here seems to me not quite the same as Melville's truth, for Pierre is after total apprehension, finality. Truth to Melville is not a goal, at least not one the individual should expect to attain; at most it is an incentive. Like the philosopher's stone, which is for ever unattainable, it informs a certain mode of living and perception. Knowledge aims at verifiable, objective and stable facts; truth, like wisdom, is ineffable, and therefore only communicable in emotional, instinctual, and constantly changing terms. It can never be permanent, may only be apprehended in glimpses; like Melville's "*all* feeling" (*C* 194), it can never be absolute, and its apprehension must remain subject to time and change. Truth, in fact, lies at the root of the sceptic's inquiry into existing, contemporary mores and systems, as well as knowledge, because it exposes them as artificial and temporal. But it remains furtive and ambiguous to the last, and if followed "too far"—with the resolve of an absolutist—it not only upsets temporal felicity; it leads to the searcher's annihilation. In many ways, then, it is identical with the idea of God, an immanent principle of existence which, as soon when one attempts to pin it down, to give it a face or a name, succumbs to temporality and becomes a lie. If, on the basis of Melville's oeuvre, and *Pierre* in particular, one were to hazard a guess at Melville's metaphysics,[16] I would suggest that it must have been informed by some idea similar to "the so-called materialism of pre-Socratic thinker Democritus" as defined by George Seidel:

> For him nothing (the void) exists just as much as does something (the atoms); otherwise there would be no motion, since there would be no 'place' (the void) into which the atoms might move. But because the void is other than atoms, which are material, it

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[16] My ideas of Melville's metaphysics, which must remain speculative, are here meant to facilitate the discussion of *Pierre*, and do not presume to be the final word on the matter.

> becomes something immaterial or spiritual, and thereby the cause of motion, that is, God. (2)

Such an idea is not wholly at odds with Spanos's definition of Melville's "God" as "the *deus absconditus*, i.e., the 'principle' of absence" (72). The apparently contradictory sense of the nothingness of God informs also Georges Bataille's definition of God as an overwhelming "solitude": "In the solitude I entered, the norms of this world, if they subsist, do so in order to maintain a dizzying feeling of enormity: this solitude, it is God" ("Mother" 36). Though Void—and therefore, like Melville's Truth, beyond expression—God remains an active principle, not a Providence, but a Prime Mover. In Melville this concept finds overt expression in the account of Pip's horrific abandonment at sea, which "drown[s] the infinite of his soul":

> [A]mong the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (*MD* 414; ch. 93)

This God is impersonal and amoral, and as heartless and indifferent as all nature.[17] Elsewhere Ishmael speaks of "a sort of interregnum in Providence" as the only explanation for the existence of "gross [. . .] injustice" (320; ch. 72). In *Pierre* the sense of God as a void is extended in terms of the sarcophagus image and the image of God's hand as "a Hollow, truly!" (139; bk. 7, ch. 8), as well as the narrator's overt claim that "Silence is the only Voice of our God" (204; bk. 14, ch. 1). This poses man with a problem because, subject to the (divine) inner compulsion to movement, he has no way of knowing what the proper *course* of action might be. The knowledge of his own mortality, however, teaches him to think in terms of closure, and thence, to evolve a theory of development. In other words, his chosen course becomes a matter of some significance. And this is what leads the "enthusiast youth"—the young Pierre, whose questing urge has been awakened by his recognition of the artificiality of his Eden—to set out in search of "the talismanic secret, to reconcile this world with his own soul" (*P* 208; bk. 14, ch. 2). The narrator is quick to point out that "this Talismanic Secret has never yet been found; and in the nature of human things it seems as though it never can be" (208). He also goes on to dismiss those "philosophers [who] [. . .] pretended to have found it":

> Plato, and Spinoza, and Goethe, and many more belong to this guild of self-impostors, with a preposterous rabble of Muggletonian Scots and Yankees, whose vile brogue still

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[17] See also *Pierre*'s narrator's account of an Old Testament Fate: " Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. Eternally inexorable and unconcerned is Fate, a mere heartless trader in men's joys and woes" (105; bk. 5, ch. 5).

> the more bestreaks the stripedness of their Greek or German Neoplatonic originals. That profound Silence, that only Voice of our God, which I before spoke of; from that divine thing without a name, those impostor philosophers pretend somehow to have got an answer; which is as absurd, as though they should say they had got water out of stone; for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence? (208)

This is as comprehensive a rejection of idealism[18] as one is likely to find in literature, and the narrator becomes particularly satirical in his portrayal of his contemporaries, the Transcendentalists.[19] In the process we almost remain insensitive to the subtle rejection of Moses's miraculous feat of getting a rock to yield water (Num. 20. 11), an allusion only secondarily meant to expose the Messianic pretensions of the "impostor philosophers." Ultimately, for the narrator, there simply is no "get[ting] a Voice out of Silence."

The irony, of course, is that it is this very silence—like Moby Dick's blankness—that allows the superimposition of different readings. The result is hierarchical and convergent (i.e., pyramidical) systems erected on the most equivocal, provisional and unstable foundations. As Bataille suggests of the elusiveness of such monumental Being: "Being in fact is found NOWHERE and it was an easy game for sickly malice to discover it to be divine, at the summit of a pyramid formed by the multitude of beings, which has at its base the immensity of the simplest matter" ("Labyrinth" 173).[20] Bataille's artificial pyramid clearly has a social cast to it, and we can see how Pierre's fall from psychological repose is simultaneously a fall from social position, both of which bring him nearer the "base"—"the immensity of the simplest matter." It is this indeterminate "immensity" into which Pierre sinks that keeps on confronting him with a sense of what Spanos calls "an always deferred presence, which is to say, an abysmal absence" (70), which appears in *Billy Budd* as "the deadly space between" (430; ch. 11). Milton R. Stern's keen critical instinct and sense of form tell him that, at Pierre's "double disinheritance" in time and space (which is the discovery of the void),

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[18] The term is used loosely here. Cowan has pointed out that "[t]his is a curious list [of philosophers], since Plato's turn away from the world's dark cave exactly opposes Spinoza and Goethe's enthusiastic embraces of the world. But placing them together in this way serves to emphasize that they all propose a false solution to the tension between world and soul" (38). Whether Melville himself truly recognised the opposition, however, is another matter—after all, Melville once dismissed what he perceived to be Goethe's pantheism (*C* 193).

[19] Spengemann's gloss to this passage identifies the "Muggletonian Scots and Yankees" as "in particular and respectively, Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson" ("Notes" 374), and earlier he relates the adjective to "the followers of Lodowicke Muggleton (1609-1698), an English tailor who thought himself divinely inspired to preach the evils of reason" (365).

[20] For Montaigne, too, *being* does not have circumscribable or "fix[ed]" presence—hence, he says of his "object" that "I do not paint its being, I paint its passage" ("Of Repentance" 19; bk. 3, ch. 2).

> were this classical drama in modern dress, there should be a sudden blankness where Pierre stands, a sudden view of chaos, and then the thunderclap as the forms of existence rush in to fill the vacuum so suddenly created. But Melville does not have these means at his disposal, and therefore must continue an impossibility which makes the novel so agonizing and long. (*Steel* 176)

In *Pierre*, however, there can be no thunderclap. For Stern's projected narrative presents precisely the kind of monumental, convergent text that Melville's book will not become. In fact, there is a sense in which Melville seems almost comfortable with the existential void this book—even more intensively than his earlier fictions—opens up. As William Spanos argues, "[u]nlike Pierre, [. . .] who is brought to an artistic impasse by his discovery of the absent center, the Melville of *Moby-Dick* [. . .] finds this nothing to be liberating" (80).

Pierre's introduction into this authorless world is sudden and brutal, but even his growing desperation does not allow him to abandon the course of action he has decided on. Part of the reason may be that he has burned all his bridges,[21] and has no way of fixing things. But finally it is more a psychological matter than a practical matter. Pierre has become conscious—an act archetypally associated with fallenness—and as D. H. Lawrence once suggested, in his essay on *Typee* and *Omoo*, "one cannot go back" (*Studies* 144). Accordingly the nature of his idealism changes, becoming more demonic and nearer Ahab's Titanism. Summer changes to winter. Where previously he viewed the world through unifying, rose-tinted glasses, he now becomes like those "wilful travellers in Lapland," discussed by Ishmael in "The Whiteness of the Whale," "who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, [and] [. . .] the wretched infidel [who] gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him" (*MD* 195). This is a desperate way of life. But as *Pierre*'s narrator remarks as he relates the evolution of Pierre's decision to make "one grand victim" of himself (179; bk. 10 ch. 2), to turn himself into a Christ, "[t]here is an inevitable keen cruelty in the loftier heroism" (178). The idealist exists in a rarefied atmosphere and, as Melville would later note of Emerson, suffers from "a defect in the region of the heart" (Leyda, *Log* 649).

We must not mistake the nature of and reason for Pierre's "free sacrifice of all earthly felicity" (177; bk. 10, ch. 2). Because he is an idealist he cannot accept that lower "*earthly* felicity"—for him it must be either uncompromised heavenly felicity, or uncompromised self-

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[21] This process is recounted in morbid detail in book 10, "He Crosses the Rubicon."

sacrifice. With the irrevocable loss of the former, he now wholly gives himself over to the practice of the latter.[22] But this, too, will prove difficult to achieve. As the narrator stresses,

> [i]n those hyperborean regions, to which enthusiastic Truth, and Earnestness, and Independence, will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought, all objects are seen in a dubious, uncertain, and refracting light. Viewed through that rarefied atmosphere the most immemorially admitted maxims of men begin to slide and fluctuate, and finally become wholly inverted; the very heavens themselves being not innocent of producing this confounding effect, since it is mostly in the heavens themselves that these wonderful mirages are exhibited.
>
> But the example of many minds forever lost, like undiscoverable Arctic explorers, amid those treacherous regions, warns us entirely away from them; and we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike. (165; bk. 9, ch. 1)

The narrator makes a point of informing us that these thoughts are not Pierre's own (167). Pierre is a recent, demonically optimistic initiate into "those treacherous regions" of thought which will ultimately prove to be his undoing. By contrast, Ishmael's generous, provisional and improvisational intercourse with profundities keeps him sane. He knows his limits, and can therefore resign himself to the necessary incompleteness of any system he proposes. In "Cetology" he impetuously claims that "[t]he classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed" (*MD* 134), only to leave it "[un]perfected": "God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught" (*MD* 145). But sovereign and persistent Pierre will "follow the trail of truth too far," and arrive only at the utter moral indeterminacy of the "Pole." Indeed, for the remainder of the book, Pierre is a little like a frantic, jumping needle, nowhere able to regain a sense of direction. He pushes on—and the book he begins to write is meant to register that "progress"—while it is painfully clear to the reader, as it is to the narrator, that he is merely walking in circles.

The relation between Ishmael's "travellers in Lapland" and *Pierre*'s narrator's "Arctic explorers" is overt, although the latter term more specifically activates ideas of discovery, knowledge and conquest. In *Pierre* Melville ingeniously extended the implications of Ishmael's essay on "Whiteness" in *Moby-Dick*, exploring it in terms of the imagery of marble, amaranth, and snow. Throughout *Pierre*, snow is forever encroaching upon him, figuring the eclipse of the

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[22] As the narrator points out earlier in the book, "Grief, not Joy, is a moralizer" (36; bk. 2, ch. 5). Pierre starts moralising with a vengeance.

mythos of summer by the mythos of winter.[23] Thus, the enigmatic and unofficial portrait of Pierre's father—unofficial because rejected by Mrs. Glendinning and because unauthorized by her husband—is associated with snow, and causes an unwitting Pierre to "throw [. . .] himself open to all those ineffable hints and ambiguities, and undefined half-suggestions, which now and then people the soul's atmosphere, as thickly as in a soft, steady snow-storm, the snow-flakes people the air" (84; bk. 4, ch. 5). Also, the newly-disillusioned Pierre is described as a "traveler in snow" (87; bk. 5, ch. 1), an image linked to the "Arctic explorers," and returned to much later in the book, when the narrator reflects that even "the resolute traveler [. . .] into the Switzerland of his soul" can only progress "by judicious degrees," "lest [. . .] his spirit should sink and perish in the lowermost snows" (284; bk. 21, ch. 1). There is a progression from the initial snow-flakes to the vast and implicitly featureless "immensity" (284) of the landscape, which figures Pierre's own pursuit of an absolute, moral Pole. On the level of plot this movement is mirrored by the movement from the summer in Saddle Meadows—the opening sentence of the book refers to the spell of those "strange summer mornings" (3)—to the harrowing winter in the city, textually speaking closely associated with Pierre's attempts to write his book.

The onset of the snows suggests an encroaching barrenness, to some extent repeated in the imagery of monumentalising marble and, more specifically, the amaranth. This small white flower appears in book 25 as the "aspiring amaranth" and "immortal amaranth" (343; ch. 4), a symbol of "the ever-encroaching appetite for God" (345). This perennial flower becomes the "bane" of Mrs. Glendinning's dairy tenants, because it colonises their pastures, which "grow glittering white, and in warm June still show like banks of snow:—fit token of the sterileness the amaranth begets!" (343). The amaranth, overtly associated with the snow, figures the barrenness of idealism, which here displaces the "aromatic," "unemigrating," "dear farm-house herb," the catnip (344), surely a symbol of earthly felicity. And here it must be made clear that nobody in the book is ever associated with the catnip, unless Charlie Millthorpe (Pierre's ridiculous but ultimately good-hearted old friend) may be considered a candidate for such association. From the beginning, Mrs. Glendinning's "amaranthineness" (5; bk. 1, ch. 2), like Pierre's "marbleized" inner shrine to his father (the nearest in an almost undifferentiated procession of Pierres)—"without blemish, unclouded, snow-white and serene" (68; bk. 4, ch. 1)—and the over-elaborate, sexless cooings of Pierre and Lucy, suggests an Eden quite as barren as the featureless Pole at which Pierre ends up. He simply swings from heaven to hell, bypassing earth altogether. Lucy,

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[23] See Frye, for whom romance is "the mythos of summer" (186) and irony and satire "the mythos of winter" (223). The latter, however, is indeterminate and errant, marked by what Frye calls "the *attempts* to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence" (223, emphasis added).

heavenly creature that she is, follows a similar course. She, too, opts for self-sacrifice (living in Pierre's presence as a cousin) as opposed to settling for expedient solutions (marrying Glen Stanly, Pierre's cousin). By the time we see her again in book 24 (the first time since book 12), she has metamorphosed into a full-blown Christian martyr, "[a]nd as if her body were the only fit material for so holy a shrine, a brilliant, supernatural whiteness now gleamed in her cheek" (328; ch. 4). But though their circumstances have worsened emphatically, Pierre and Lucy are essentially back to their former relation—the "nun-like cousin" (311; bk. 23, ch. 2) being not irreconcilable with the girl who once made Pierre think "marriage [. . .] an impious thing," and to wonder: "*I* to wed this heavenly fleece?" (58; bk. 3; ch. 3).

But what are we to make of Isabel? For one thing, she is undeniably that volatile element which, introduced into Pierre's world, completely disrupts its repose and initiates a chain of events that leads to the tragic (if melodramatic) conclusion. Pierre's very first consciousness of her is mediated by a "sudden shriek [which] seemed to split its way clean through his heart, and leave a yawning gap there" (45; bk. 3, ch. 1). There is a nice correspondence between this sudden gap in Pierre's heart and the "one hiatus" in his life-text (7)—an oblique suggestion that the portentous shriek might well have something to do with Pierre's need for a sister—but the actual effect of the imagery is to introduce a more serious, violent kind of breach into Pierre's existence. Isabel is not here to fill a "hiatus" so much as to open up a gulf, and to introduce all manner of ambiguities into the "sweetly-writ manuscript" of Pierre's life (7). She splits his heart in two, a fit image for her antithetical polarisation of his world. But then we should realise that this effect should not, in itself, be considered in a strictly negative light. For Isabel's appeal, destructive as it turns out to be, is to Pierre's heart: the seat, in Melville, of all humanity, geniality and generosity. Pierre himself initially sees matters in this light, and after his receipt of Isabel's letter, before he has even gone to meet her, he establishes a firm link between her and the heart, which stirs him into action: "The heart! the heart! 'tis God's anointed; let me pursue the heart!" (91; bk. 5, ch. 1). It is this that informs Matthiessen's problematic sense of Pierre as "a young idealist, who, with some distrust of his intellect but none of his heart, followed unswervingly his generous impulses" (467). I find this problematic, because difficult to square with the narrator's apt point regarding the "inevitable keen cruelty in the loftier heroism" (178), a cruelty of which Pierre becomes increasingly guilty as he pursues the sovereign quest for Truth. Pierre himself will realise this, later, when he reflects on Charlie Millthorpe: "'Plus heart, minus head,' muttered Pierre, his eyes fixed on the door. 'Now, by heaven! the god that made Millthorpe was both a better and a greater than the god that made Napoleon or Byron'" (320; bk. 23, ch. 4).

Pierre would clearly, if somewhat ruefully, place himself in the latter category, with the great conqueror and the great poet (and, no matter what our personal feelings on the matter might be, here they are associated with the head, and not the heart). No matter if it was his heart that first responded to Isabel, by now his gnostic quest has increasingly become a matter for the imperial mind.

Isabel represents the introduction of deviant, intense, vital, mysterious yet material life into Pierre's artificial existence. By this I do not mean to resign her to an allegorical fate, because the complexities and ambiguities of Melville's book make that impossible. If Isabel is Life she is also Death—as her darkness and, more pertinently, the secret vial of poison in her bosom would suggest. She is not morally responsible for Pierre's tragic end, and yet she is deeply implicated in Pierre's approach to that end—in terms of the plot, she makes it possible, she causes it. Her entrance into the virtually deathless world of Saddle Meadows—the realm of the perennially youthful Mrs. Glendinning and the virtually immortal (because temporally ubiquitous) Pierre[24]—is simultaneously an introduction of decay and death (certainly traditionally gothic themes). Pierre's relationships with Lucy and his mother dissolve, Mrs. Glendinning dies, Lucy almost dies (as well as her aunt, Mrs. Llanyllyn), and the glorious Glendinning line is eradicated (even though that eradication only becomes formal at the end of the book, when Pierre kills, first his cousin, Glen Stanly, and then himself).

Of course, life and death are linked, and man exists—while he exists—somewhere inbetween. At the outset, Pierre is not much aware of this fact. Saddle Meadows is a false utopia, and Isabel shatters its façade. She destroys, but in the service of life. Pierre learns that his father had a life that cannot be accommodated and contained within the rigid outlines of his official, monumental identity. And it is Isabel who finally dissolves the unchallenged sovereignty of Mrs. Glendinning's supervision of that identity. That supervision, as Mrs. Glendinning's rejection of the portrait of the young Pierre Sr. implies, is simultaneously an act of overseeing (preserving and managing) and overlooking (neglecting or refusing to see). And even Pierre's private interaction with the portrait remains subject to that supervision until Isabel comes and breaks the spell, freeing the disconcerting and destabilising ambiguities inherent in the portrait.

The stolen portrait, "[a]n impromptu portrait of a fine-looking, gay-hearted, youthful gentleman" (72; bk. 4, ch. 3), plays a central role in Pierre's acceptance of Isabel, even as she

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[24] As Ishmael suggests, "immortality is but ubiquity in time" (*MD* 183; ch. 41). The succession of Pierres to some extent achieves such ubiquity. Still, as is suggested by Pierre's reduced stature, in comparison to his grandfather's imposing physique (29; bk. 2, ch. 3), as well as his mother's recognition of the final irreconcilability of docility and heroism (20; bk. 1, ch. 6), there is, to some extent, a reduction in the greatness of the line.

awakens him to its suggestions. Executed by a vital friend, his cousin Ralph, the portrait is a fluid rendering that captures Pierre Sr. (his mind, possibly, on Love) without reductively arresting him. The stolen portrait stands in direct opposition to the monumental grandeur of the commissioned portrait that graces "the great drawing-room" at Saddle Meadows, "occup[ying] the most conspicuous and honorable place on the wall" (72). This latter portrait simply repeats and reifies an image which relies on an unquestioning, respectful distance. It defies time. The former portrait, however, when viewed in conjunction with the other, suggests the passage of time, and thus hints at the greater changeability of identity. In itself, too, it invites closer scrutiny. The ambiguous smile is akin to that of the Mona Lisa which, J. H. Van den Berg argues, exerts an enigmatic pull on the viewer:

> Why does she smile? What makes her smile so eloquent—and so secretive? What is it that she is confiding to us and keeping from us at the same time? No one who looks at the painting can escape these questions.
>
> Her smile seals an inner self. [. . .] Mona Lisa holds that which is known, and she hides it. After this, that which is known will be that which is hidden, that which is unknown. And as time goes on everything will be within her, at once known and unknown. (60)

Pierre's portrait creates just this sense. It is full of meaning and communicates nothing definite. As it "tells" Pierre, "a smile is the chosen vehicle for all ambiguities" (84; bk. 4, ch. 5). Accordingly, it subjects the constituted repose of Saddle Meadows to a kind of dramatic irony, and it is this irony more than anything else that Pierre becomes privy to. He recognises himself—his world—to be the object of irony, and sets out to reverse that, to *be in the know*. But this only exposes him to an even more damning irony, similar to that of Ahab, of not seeing "those Cretan labyrinths, to which thy life's cord is leading thee" (176; bk. 10, ch. 1). Pierre's actions—to him the result of self-reliance and "self-will," of the "untrammeled [. . .] ever-present self" that remains after he becomes "twice-disinherited," left with "no paternity, and no past" (199; bk. 12, ch. 2)—play into the hands of fate. Pierre repeats the mistake that most of Melville's protagonists make, Taji in particular, believing that his actions can be freed from social, historical and psychological determinants, as well as from chance. His rejection of paternity is the direct result of his father's (imagined) actions, and his acceptance of Isabel, to some extent, the acceptance of that father's responsibility on his behalf. As the narrator puts it:

> Sucked within the maelstrom, man must go round. Strike at one end the longest conceivable row of billiard balls in close contact, and the furthermost ball will start forth, while all the rest stand still; and yet that last ball was not struck at all. So, through long previous generations, whether of births or thoughts, Fate strikes the present man. Idly he disowns the blow's effect, because he felt no blow, and indeed, received no blow. But Pierre wasn't arguing Fixed Fate and Free Will, now; Fixed Fate and Free Will were arguing him, and Fixed Fate got the better in the debate. (182; bk. 11, ch. 1)

At the point, then, when Pierre finally seems to assert and distinguish himself, the point of ostensible individuation, his actions are shown to be determined. T. Walter Herbert understands this passage to mean that "Pierre's experience becomes subject to the outcome of a debate whose terms are set by the traditions of thought that had structured his mentality" (*Calvinism* 56). This is true, but we need to recognise that the determining factors go beyond the historical specifics of tradition—in other words, the influence of the super-ego—into the labyrinthine realm of the unconscious. That is what the portrait, like the Mona Lisa, finally hints at: the vast and mysterious inner life of the psyche. And therefore, too, the smile is ultimately ironic. As D. C. Muecke perceptively remarks,

> [t]here is a vast potential for General Irony in the psychoanalyst's discovery of the unconscious processes of the mind. We are told of radical oppositions within the psyche, of self-submissive and self-assertive instincts, of the masculine Persona and the Feminine Anima, of the death-wish, of the Super-ego and the Id. Our conscious life it seems is a façade behind which a very different 'real' life goes on in secret; our hidden fears and desires evade the Censor and emerge disguised in symbolic form to betray us. [. . .]
>
> In our conscious life we have all the 'innocent unawareness' of the typical victim of irony who assumes that things are what they appear. (142)

In an age before Freud and Jung, Melville had no systematic models to work from when exploring the psyche; only his creative instincts and the example of Shakespeare, whom Harold Bloom credits with the invention of psychology anyway.[25] But in *Pierre* he laid particular stress on his protagonist's inability to comprehend and control all the forces at work in his actions, even his "Free Will." The narrator himself occasionally tries to trace these influences to some depth, to "follow the endless, winding way—the flowing river in the cave of man" (107; bk. 5, ch. 7), but even he cannot come to certainties. We see more than Pierre and, indeed, more than readers usually see,[26] yet we see but little. Peeling away one layer of appearance only presents us with another level. As the narrator suggests, "far as any geologist has gone down into the world, it is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies" (285). Beyond, there is only vacancy.

Insofar as it is a psychological novel, the meaning of Pierre's name is of some interest. Stern (in spite of his fear of suggesting something "too obvious") points out that "the French for stone is *pierre*" (*Steel* 179); hence, also, H. Bruce Franklin refers to Pierre as "the stone of the

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[25] In "Freud: A Shakespearean Reading," for instance, Bloom advances the claim that "Freud's vision of human psychology is derived, not altogether unconsciously, from his reading of the plays" (*Canon* 372).

[26] As the narrator says, with some irony: "I am more frank with Pierre than the best men are with themselves. I am all unguarded and magnanimous with Pierre; therefore you see his weakness, and therefore only" (108; bk. 5, ch. 6).

title" (*Wake* 101). Similarly, the name is related also to the name of Peter (whose name means stone), whom Christ announces as the rock upon which the Church will be built.[27] The other character of Melville's to end up with that name is the equivocal Long Ghost of *Omoo* (199; ch. 51), but there the parodic intention is essentially whimsical. Here, on the other hand, it is firmly related to Melville's thorough undermining of all monumental rocks, whether of church, state, or self. Stone, as J. E. Cirlot points out,

> is a symbol of being, of cohesion and harmonious reconciliation with self. The hardness and durability of stone have always impressed men, suggesting to them the antithesis to biological things subject to the laws of change, decay and death, as well as the antithesis to dust, sand and stone splinters, as aspects of disintegration. The stone when whole symbolized unity and strength; when shattered it signified dismemberment, psychic disintegration, infirmity, death and annihilation." (313-14)

In other words, the stone presents a pyramidical symbol of the self as something that escapes the inroads of time. Across generations, one Pierre replaces another, each, in turn, fulfilling a heroic destiny and confirming the sovereignty of the Glendinning line. But even stone is finally not impervious to time, a point made explicitly when the narrator warns Pierre of the "prophetic lesson" of Palmyra, where "the proud stone that should have stood among the clouds, Time left abased beneath the soil" (8; bk. 1, ch. 2). Time finally begins to tell on the Glendinnings. The young Pierre's inherited identity becomes subject to a destabilising force. It is herein that the problematic of the title lies, since it sets the monumental, unified identity—*Pierre*—against the pluralised and destabilising *The Ambiguities*. It is a marriage of opposites that creates tension, and ultimately leads to disintegration. In Pierre's eventual identification with the "armless" figure of Enceladus (346; bk. 25, ch. 4), for example, we have a clear image of the "psychic disintegration" and "dismemberment" to which Cirlot refers. In fact, his Enceladus already exists only as a fragment, a piece of rock "thrown off from the rocky steep" of the Mount of Titans (345).

As suggested before, Isabel enters into the narrative—the nineteenth-century American textual construct, *Pierre*, as well as the life-text of Pierre—as a disruptive influence. From the beginning, her voice is associated with division, her face with mystery. We are told that it was "[o]ne of those faces, which now and then appear to man, and without one word of speech, still reveal glimpses of some fearful gospel" (43; bk. 3, ch. 1); a face, then, that has an effect similar to that of the silent, suggestive portrait. The narrator continues to describe it:

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[27] See Matt. 16. 18: "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

> In natural guise, but lit by supernatural light; palpable to the senses, but inscrutable to the soul; in their perfectest impression on us, ever hovering between Tartarean misery and Paradisaic beauty; such faces, compounded so of hell and heaven, overthrow in us all foregone conclusions, and make us wondering children in the world again. (43)

This indeterminate "hovering" is familiar to us from *White-Jacket*, and should serve as a warning against too easy a classification of Isabel as the diagrammatic opposite of Lucy. Here Isabel, or her face, is identified with both heaven and hell and, indeed, seems to be an almost earthly mixture of the two—that is, if one might stress the implied physicality in such expressions as "natural guise" and "palpable to the senses." This physicality is also stressed later, once Pierre gets to hold her hand, "small and smooth, but strangely hard" from labour (113; bk. 6, ch. 2), suggested by his attentions to her "beautiful ear" and "abundant tresses" (119), and implicit in Isabel's dark, magnetic, sexual and almost chthonic presence. Wyn Kelley also feels that, as opposed to Lucy, "she seems a real bodily presence" (103). Even to Pierre himself, at their first meeting, she only "seemed half unearthly" (118; bk. 6, ch. 4). Isabel, however mysterious, is never ethereal. Furthermore, the irresolute ambiguity of her face resists "conclusions," not to announce the defeat of meaning (the descent into hell), but in order to reinstate "wonder."[28] This is part of the inherent promise of her challenge to the institutional repose of the Glendinning clan.

Isabel's world and identity retains a remarkable fluidity. For her, "the solidest things melt into dreams, and dreams into solidities" (117; bk. 6, ch. 3). Her age is unclear. Her story is discontinuous and inconclusive, and it links her with the forests, decay, sea-travel, and the insane. The imagery we associate with her is, for the most part, natural. We come to realise that she has only a basic grasp of social codes, values and relations, and, most importantly, that she "had been taught no God" (123; bk. 6, ch. 5). Her emotions, unlike Lucy's, crave theatrical, violent expression. She seems least at a loss when expressing herself by means of her guitar, for music does not attempt to circumscribe or grasp; it is completely non-analytical and non-hermeneutic, and hence more suited to the communication of the ineffable. Toward the end of the book, when Pierre takes her and Lucy on a boat trip around the bay, her association with the sea is once more made overt.

Critics have proffered several interpretations of Isabel, most of them not beyond reconciliation. Khalil Husni describes her as "the incarnation of elemental darkness" (478). Franklin suggests that she "seems to represent Nature" (*Wake* 100), and relates her to dissolution

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[28] To Montaigne such "wonder" lies at the root of the "generous mind['s] [. . .] pursuits [. . .] without bound or method"—as he puts it, "its aliment is admiration, the chase, ambiguity" ("Of Experience" 322-23; bk. 3, ch. 13).

(103). Matthiessen sees her as representing "earthly passion" (against Lucy's "ideal love") and stresses that, against tradition, she "is obviously not evil" (481). He also refers directly to her "dark life-giving forces" (484). Quite understandably, also, a number of critics have associated Isabel with the unconscious. Martin Leonard Pops, who relates her to the "Quest" (112), points out that "Dr. [Henry A.] Murray has long since identified Isabel as Pierre's anima, the feminine 'soul-image' in the man" (119). Leslie Fiedler calls her "the swart anima figure" (423) and Robert Milder agrees, adding that she is "an externalization of Pierre's own undeveloped self" (266). In "The Process of Individuation," M.-L. von Franz defines the anima as

> a personification of all feminine psychological tendencies in a man's psyche, such as vague feelings and moods, prophetic hunches, receptiveness to the irrational, capacity for personal love, feeling for nature, and—last but not least—his relation to the unconscious. (186)

The relevance of this for *Pierre* should be clear, especially if we go on to consider Von Franz's explication of one of the possible negative sides of the anima:

> The projection of the anima in such a sudden and passionate form as a love affair can greatly disturb a man's marriage and lead to the so-called "human triangle," with its accompanying difficulties. A bearable solution to such a drama can be found only if the anima is recognized as an inner power. The secret aim of the unconscious in bringing about such an entanglement is to force a man to develop and to bring his *own* being to maturity by integrating more of his unconscious personality and bringing it into his real life. (191)

Within this scheme, then, Isabel appears in order to enforce a crisis that will lead Pierre to maturity. After all, she finally provides Pierre with the opportunity to distinguish himself, and fill up the "one hiatus," which he previously identified as the absence of a sister on whose behalf he could "engage in a mortal quarrel" (7; bk. 1, ch. 2). Even in terms of the pervasive stone imagery, Isabel's appearance as anima figure would be consistent with the achievement of the talismanic "philosophers' stone" as defined by Cirlot: "As for the philosophers' stone in alchemy, it represents the 'conjunction' of opposites, or the integration of the conscious self with the feminine or unconscious side (or in other words, the fixing of volatile elements); it is, then, a symbol of the All" (314). Pierre's "stone," then, might become stable and wholly sovereign at last. But, as always, Melville mistrusts such resolutions (which he may have encountered more directly in terms of Emersonian ideas on self-reliance[29]), and *Pierre* traces the protagonist's ill-

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[29] For Emerson it is clear that "[w]e but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents" ("Self-Reliance" 176). He continues to exhort his contemporaries: "And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, nor cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark" (177). Pierre's resolution not to be ashamed of Isabel and to accept her, and all

fated attempts at self-integration. Even Pierre's marriage to Isabel, which is a sham, seems to be nothing so much as a parody of such a marriage, or "conjunction."

With what seems a prophetic instinct of his own, Melville manages even to oppose the systemised narrative of teleological psychology—i.e., the sense that the unconscious can be harnessed in the attainment of a rounded selfhood. It is here that one's sense of Isabel as related to nature becomes most closely linked with one's sense of her as an anima-figure, for Melville treats the unconscious in much the same way that he treats the sea, and nature in general, and Pierre's fate seems more than a little related to the fate of the mast-head "Pantheist" whose deep reflection upon the water results in an annihilating plunge (*MD* 159; ch. 35). Indeed, in book 8 we are told that the spell Isabel casts over Pierre "seemed one with that Pantheistic master-spell, which eternally locks in mystery and in muteness the universal subject world" (151; ch. 3). Throughout much of the narrative, Pierre hovers over those very "Descartian vortices" to which Ishmael refers (*MD* 159), and in the end, he is swallowed by them. By letting Isabel into his life, he does break the stasis of Saddle Meadows, and eradicates what one might call a first line of appearances, but simultaneously this robs him of those structures within which his life made sense, and had meaning. Isabel, who is a virtual idiot with regard to social codes and conventions, cannot help him to evolve a new ethic—as she pertinently points out, late in the book, she "comprehend[s] nothing" (314; bk. 23, ch. 3)—and Pierre, idealist that he is, cannot live without one. In fact, he justifies the entire course of his actions to himself by an appeal to the Christian ideal of unselfishness, or self-sacrifice, little realising that, in all respects, Isabel has already taken the ground from under that ideal.

In this respect it becomes difficult to accept those readings that associate Isabel with the absolutist amaranth. Merlin Bowen, for instance, suggests that "Lucy, like the lowly dooryard catnip, is an emblem of 'man's earthly household peace,' while Isabel resembles the sterile immortal amaranth of the uplands, symbol of 'man's ever encroaching appetite for God'" (162), and Pops advocates the same alignment (112). Stern recognises that the issue is not quite so clear-cut, for although he associates her with "the domestic habitat of the catnip" (*Steel* 159), he also recognises that at first

> the symbolic value of Lucy the person is to see her as the lure to ideality, or at least as the unearthly nineteenth-century blonde heroine. When one thinks of the warfare between the amaranth (heavenly white flower) and the catnip (green domestic plant) and extends the imagery to Lucy, one would conclude that in the warfare between Lucy and Isabel, Lucy is the amaranth. (151)

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the actions immediately contingent on that resolution, almost seems a direct response to this exhortation. But then Melville does not have Pierre so much advance on "Chaos and the Dark" as being completely swallowed up by it.

Stern goes on to argue that these initial impressions are reversed in the course of the novel, thereby escaping a charge of careless over-simplification that might be levelled at Bowen and Pops. Yet, ultimately, as far as Stern is concerned, "Isabel is as sterile as the amaranth. Her bosom hides the time-shaped death-vial with which she and Pierre find death" (183). But this is simply to ignore the fact that it is Lucy whom Pierre follows into death by committing suicide. It also ignores the untouchable, absolute purity of the self-sacrificing Lucy who comes to live at the Apostles, and the narrator's insistence on her "inflexibility," "sterling heavenliness," "heroicness" and "unearthliness" (327, 328; bk. 24, ch. 4), or, even more pertinently, her statuesque "marble" appearance, with its "supernatural whiteness," so reminiscent of the amaranth (328). What allows these critics to ignore this evidence is doubtlessly related to that moment in which the narrator purports to give us a clear and simple explanation of the dilemma that faces Pierre when, for the first time since he has learned about Isabel, he thinks of Lucy: "Then, for a time, all minor things were whelmed in him; his mother, Isabel, the whole wide world; and one only thing remained to him;—this all-including query—Lucy, or God?" (181; bk. 10, ch. 3). Since the amaranth is later identified with "the ever-encroaching appetite for God" (345; bk. 25, ch. 4), it might seem problematic, in the light of the earlier formulation of Pierre's choice, to associate Lucy with that very flower. But then, in the light of that same formulation, it would also be problematic to associate Isabel with the flower, for she is overtly taken out of the equation when Pierre has to face the choice between Lucy and God. It is a choice, then, between an ideal which to some extent has become untenable (Lucy, who belongs to the undermined world of Saddle Meadows) and an ideal which he has not yet recognised as untenable (God,[30] and Christian ethics). This is the choice *as Pierre sees it*. That Isabel serves as the catalyst in this shift of allegiance suggests nothing but the fact that she is a catalyst, a force that breaks up stasis and introduces the movement that is the only principle of life.

Isabel brings movement to a static world that in most respects seems to represent the goal of all wish-fulfilment, and therefore that movement is unwelcome. The plot and imagery of *Pierre*, then, with the introduction of Isabel into the narrative, modulates into the demonic. As Frye explains,

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[30] Obviously the God referred to here should be distinguished from the Melvillean God I attempted to imagine earlier. Here Pierre opts for an inherited God, a God he thinks he knows and understands (by way of Christianity). The rest of the book traces his growing recognition that he does not, a recognition which seems to inform also his failed attempt to reclaim some stability by writing a narrative.

> [o]pposed to apocalyptic symbolism is the presentation of the world that desire totally rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion; the world as it is before the human imagination begins to work on it and before any image of human desire, such as the city or garden, has been solidly established, the world also of perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly. And just as apocalyptic imagery in poetry is closely associated with a religious heaven, so its dialectic opposite is closely linked with an existential hell, like Dante's *Inferno*, or with the hell that man creates on earth [. . .]. One of the central themes of demonic imagery is parody, the mocking of the exuberant play of art by suggesting its imitation in terms of "real life." (147)

The chaotic and primordial nature imagery in *Pierre* clearly belongs to this category, as do the tortured existential musings scattered throughout most of the book and, most importantly, Pierre's own demonic manuscript. The city-scape we encounter is less related to "the city or garden" (products of imperial desire) than to the oppressive "ruins and catacombs" of Frye's archetypal diagram. With *Pierre* we are back in the realm of the familiar demonic dungeons and labyrinths and "sinister spiral[s]" (Frye 150), of which Dante's subterranean world, Milton's Pandemonium, and the castle at Elsinore are all emblematic. In this sense *Pierre* is overtly about a descent into the labyrinth. The mood is claustrophobic and oppressive, and the wan Pierre is completely assimilated by it. His end lies between four stone walls, fit emblem of his contracted, solipsistic world. But if Melville reverts, in this sense, to the familiar aspects of Frye's archetype, he to some extent diverges from it again, for one of the central images in *Pierre* is that of the empty sarcophagus. There is no monster at the heart of this labyrinth; instead, there is emptiness, a void. What this means, effectively, is that there is nothing to challenge, nothing against which Pierre can really assert his identity, as his forefathers, or Ahab (whether deluded or not) could. Throughout, Pierre struggles with nothing but shades—his is a quest for something that turns out to be nothing.

Melville, whose sense of archetypes was primarily communicated to him by his reading of poetry and fiction, signals his protagonist's descent into this world by a reference to Dante's *Inferno*. After listening to Isabel's tale, and before settling on the decision that will banish him from Saddle Meadows, Pierre's entrance into hell is in part consecrated by a glance into "the open Inferno in his hand," and his apprehension of the inscription over the gates:

> Through me you pass into the city of Woe;
> Through me you pass into eternal pain;
> Through me, among the people lost for aye.
> * * * * * *
> All hope abandon, ye who enter here. (168; bk. 9, ch. 2)

In terms of plot, Pierre's narrative now embarks on a course that completely precludes the possibility of salvation. From here on, his quest for Truth can only be parodic. He is not Dante, taking the grand tour of the consecutive realms of the fallen, the repentant, and the redeemed.

Lucy's Beatrice, who appears toward the end of the book, is helpless to guide him, except by means of preceding him into death (for she is not immortal). Fallenness is an inescapable fact of life, a state of being that cannot be resolved except by its surcease. As the surface of his edenic world has been rent, to show a void underneath, Pierre can do nothing but take the plunge—but in terms of Melville's narrative logic, this act should also dissolve the strictures of the text that constitutes him. In this regard Flibbert is perhaps justified in calling *Pierre* an "example of literary nihilism" (133), because even though it is cast into the form of the romance, Melville apparently ends up removing all boundaries to his text, an act which utterly estranged his reading public, and rendered his book something of a conundrum for generations of critics since the Melville revival.

What I am trying to come round to is the point that Isabel's introduction into *Pierre* might be seen as a release of deviant, unchannelled energy—Spanos's "improvisational measure" (81)—not only into Pierre's life, but into his life-text. Insofar as *Pierre* is something of a *Bildungsroman*, the two are essentially indistinguishable, but Melville maintains this connection to the point of compromising his own text. From the first oblique reference to her, in the form of a "hiatus," Isabel is associated, not only with nature and the unconscious, but with text and narrative; more specifically, with confusing, irresolute, intermittent narrative.[31] Her first communication to Pierre is by means of a letter, and only shortly after he has formally met her for the first time, Isabel launches into an account of her life, an account which is not long in showing signs of indeterminacy. Isabel, uncertain of the actual setting of her earliest memories, confesses that "it is all bewildering to me; and you must not start at me, for I can not but talk wildly upon so wild a theme" (115; bk. 6, ch. 3). In other words, we have to resign ourselves to the fact that Isabel's formulation will be subject, not to aesthetics, but to the demands of the moment. Continually she has to exhort herself to "be shorter" and to "be briefer," but she seems unable to resist "turn[ing] off into the mere offshootings of my story, here and there" (121; bk. 6, ch. 4). Her progress is slowed down by a number of breaks (at least six in the first part of her story, in terms of which she reminds us somewhat of those auto-interruptive narrators in *Typee*, *Omoo* and *Mardi*), which seem to occur either in terms of some internal, musical rhythm, or when she feels she has lost the thread of the tale. For all its melodrama, her tale contains some striking, if irresolute, expressions, as when she explains her first attempts to remember: "[T]ry as I would, little could I recall, but the bewilderingness;—and the stupor, and the torpor, and the

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[31] One thinks of the "organic hesitancy" of Billy Budd's stutter, another instance of a natural innocent's failed attempt to express himself coherently (*BB* 413; ch. 2).

blankness, and the dimness, and the vacant whirlingness of the bewilderingness. Let me be still again" (122). This is almost gibberish, and a good example of the kind of language that irked Melville's contemporary critics. Yet as an expression of the hypnotic chaos of an unnarrativised identity this linguistic circumvention of meaning is nothing short of profound. It is not inappropriate that this first interview ends with Isabel's playing of the guitar, surely the only time in Melville anybody has heard anything from beyond a veil:

> And still the wild girl played on the guitar; and her long dark shower of curls fell over it, and vailed it; and still, out from the vail came the swarming sweetness, and the utter unintelligibleness, but the infinite significancies of the sounds of the guitar. (126; bk. 6, ch. 6)

The appeal of this is strictly emotive; not much is actually communicated, because the "significancies" are "infinite," not brought under control, delimited. But the effect of this on Pierre is profound, and initially takes the form of a renewed sense of wonder which is able, quite remarkably, to persist in the full recognition that there can be no conclusions:

> But the vague revelation was now in him, that the visible world, some of which before had seemed but too common and prosaic to him; and but too intelligible; he now vaguely felt, that all the world, and every misconceivedly common and prosaic thing in it, was steeped a million fathoms in a mysteriousness wholly hopeless of solution. (128; bk. 7, ch. 1)

Isabel's narrative, of which the musical "conclusion" is emblematic, opens possibilities without resolving any of them. For a moment, Pierre seems able to persist in this relativistic, a-normative, anti-teleological wonder, a wonder that finally informs also the more sceptical, Montaignean perspective of Ishmael (whose narrative invests many a "prosaic thing" with "infinite significancies"). But we soon see the young idealist trying to re-establish a degree of control over a recalcitrant mystery that must finally be demonic to him, first by taking a walk and by appealing to the "Mute Massiveness" of the Memnon/Terror Stone for a decisive sign (134; bk. 7, ch. 5), and then by trying to piece together the details of the first part of Isabel's narrative:

> He strove to condense her mysterious haze into some definite and comprehensible shape. He could not but infer that the feeling of bewilderment, which she had so often hinted of during their interview, had caused her continually to go aside from the straight line of her narration; and finally to end it in an abrupt and enigmatical obscurity. But he also felt assured, that this was entirely unintended, and now, doubtless, regretted by herself, so their coming second interview would help to clear up much of this mysteriousness [. . .]. (136; bk. 7, ch. 7)

This is the Pierre who resolves to come up with an ideal solution to the dilemma he is in, little realising that he is acting in a labyrinthine world in which no absolutes can survive. It is not surprising that "the clew-defying mysteriousness of Isabel's narrative, did now for the time, [. . .] put on a repelling aspect to our Pierre" (137). He cannot abide indeterminacy, and essentially

spends the rest of the narrative trying to clear it up. But this only renders all the more strange and miraculous the thoughts that, at the end of book 7, the narrator ascribes to Pierre as he ponders the mystery of Isabel one more time before he sets out to the second interview he hopes will redeem her narrative:

> In her life there was an unraveled plot; and he felt that unraveled it would eternally remain to him. No slightest hope or dream had he, that what was dark and mournful in her would ever be cleared up into some coming atmosphere of light and mirth. Like all youths, Pierre had conned his novel-lessons; had read more novels than most persons of his years; but their false, inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystemizable elements; their audacious, intermeddling impotency, in trying to unravel, and spread out, and classify, the more thin than gossamer threads which make up the complex web of life; these things over Pierre had no power now. Straight through their helpless miserableness he pierced; the one sensational truth in him, transfixed like beetles all the speculative lies in them. He saw that human life doth truly come from that, which all men are agreed to call by the name *God*; and that it partakes of the unravelable inscrutableness of God. By infallible presentiment he saw, that not always doth life's beginning gloom conclude in gladness; that wedding-bells peal not ever in the last scene of life's fifth act; that while the countless tribes of common novels laboriously spin vails of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last; and while the countless tribe of common dramas do but repeat the same; yet the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all that can be humanly known of human life; these never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings; but in imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels (as mutilated stumps), hurry to abrupt intermergings with the eternal tides of time and fate. (141; ch. 8)

Insofar as Pierre may convincingly have these insights, it is clear that he only has them courtesy of Isabel, whom James D. Wallace claims "[w]e can best understand [. . .] as Pierre's Imp of the Perverse" (53). One can see, furthermore, how these insights eventually come to influence and dominate his writing. But the passage remains problematic because it seems more an expression of the narrator's (or Melville's) ideas—and, at this point, a statement of non-intent—than the coherent thoughts of a young man who will continue to act in accordance with the strictest interpretation of Christian ethics. For while it is perfectly understandable that Pierre, in his dark hour, might reject the superficial plots of sentimental novels, it is not so clear why someone who recognises God to be inscrutable, would still persist in acting—to his own detriment—according to the dictates of a religion to which God is supposed to be the providential father. The God referred to here is closer—identical—to the God posited by Ishmael, and the God-void I attempted to define earlier. It certainly is the God that finally emerges from *Pierre*, eclipsing the personal, benevolent Creator who was, for Pierre, represented and impersonated by his own father.

Another source of contradiction stems from the reference here to those serious but apparently non-absolutist and happily temporal works of literature that aim "to illustrate all that can be humanly known of human life," especially when viewed in the light of Pierre's earlier

unbounded, sovereign intention to "know what *is*" (65; bk. 3, ch. 6). There seems to be a general suggestion, then, that the diffusive, relativistic influence of Isabel may be extending to those very feelings and intentions she released in him. Somewhere between the sheer wonder at the opening of book 7 and the more wise and relativistic scepticism toward its end, one feels, lies a tenable approach to life. But while Pierre's points remain important to our experience of the rest of the narrative, providing meta-textual commentary on what Melville is writing, we have to realise that they do not remain central to Pierre's own sense of his actions. In this sense he resembles Taji and Ahab, both of whom can on some level recognise, if only intermittently, the folly or untenability of their quests without ever seriously considering the abandonment of their designs. When reading Plotinus Plinlimmon's pamphlet, for instance, Pierre "seemed to think that he did not fully comprehend the strange writer's conceit in all its bearings. Yet was this conceit apparently one of the plainest in the world" (209-10; bk. 14, ch. 2). The narrator accounts for such uncharacteristic dimness by suggesting that it may result either from Pierre's refusal to understand, or from his utter unfamiliarity with the kind of ideas expressed in the pamphlet (which argues against the practice of idealistic precepts in a world irredeemably subject to expedience). If nothing else, then, Pierre certainly suppresses the lessons learned in his first contact with Isabel, a fact that should be brought home to us in the very last lines of book 7, which reveal that "to him, Isabel wholly soared out of the realms of all mortalness, and for him became transfigured in the highest heaven of uncorrupted Love" (142; ch. 8). The narrator's insistence on Pierre's perspective—"to him" and "for him"—warns us against an unthinking acceptance of his constructions. This ascendant Isabel is clearly a step up from the Isabel who, at their first meeting, only "seemed half unearthly" to Pierre (118; bk. 6, ch. 4). What seems to happen is that Pierre displaces her destabilising influence by effectively casting her into the role of an angel, a position not unworthy of Lucy. To some extent Isabel becomes the prisoner of an idealising image which significantly limits her actual influence and presence in the narrative once the second part of her story is "completed," and Pierre proceeds to set his plans in motion. And yet this is a highly uncertain resolution, for Pierre can never quite overcome his sexual attraction to Isabel. In fact it is at the moment when Pierre, just after having gone the rounds of Saddle Meadows to sever all his ties, overtly enlists Isabel in his noble quest—"we both reach up alike to a glorious ideal!" (192; bk. 12, ch. 1)—that he completely delegitimises and defeats it by succumbing to a passionate embrace: "Then they changed; they coiled together, and entangledly stood mute" (192). In trying to free himself from society, Pierre only becomes more entangled with nature, and caught in the labyrinth of the unconscious. This is the "entanglement" to which Von Franz refers in his account of the anima, the "secret aim" of which is "to force a man to

develop and to bring his *own* being to maturity by integrating more of his unconscious personality and bringing it into his real life" (191). In *Pierre* this process, like all teleological processes in Melville, founders in the overwhelming instability of the inscrutable God's world.

Elizabeth Renker has stressed that "*Pierre* is obsessed with reading and writing" (*Mask* 26), an obsession which also extends to listening and telling. Simply put, *Pierre* is deeply and specifically concerned with narrative, particularly as a means of forestalling chaos. In this regard Michael Davitt Bell is correct when he suggests that in this book

> [t]here is [a] new prominence given to plot—to the formulas of genteel sexual melodrama that Melville apparently set out to exploit or imitate and ended up parodying. More fundamentally, there is the radical shift in implicit attitude toward language. Literary expression, which redeemed Ishmael from Ahab's suicidal compulsion, becomes Pierre's equivalent to Ahab's fiery hunt. (226)

Bell's point is that in writing *Pierre* Melville was actively thinking of narrative as inherently teleological; as only another means of imposing arbitrary signifying structure on a deviant reality; that it, in short, conforms to the archetype of the quest. The critique of novels quoted above overtly supports such an idea, although I would argue that this way of thinking about narrative was not in the least bit new to Melville when he wrote *Pierre*. In fact, it is my contention that from the very beginning of his writing career Melville sensed narrative errancy to present the most effective—and natural—way of resisting and criticising the various optimistic teleological narratives—religious, political and literary—of the day.

After *Mardi*, *Pierre* must certainly be Melville's most errant book and, in a sense, it is even more erratic than the former. It certainly is more claustrophobic, swapping the generously wide canvas of ocean-travel in an exotic and spectacular "world of mind" (*M* 557; ch. 169) for a world of "entanglements"—both "fleshy" (164; bk. 8, ch. 7) and "social" (191; bk. 12, ch. 1)—and the stifling internal labyrinths finally figured also in the sojourn in the city. Taji is swallowed by the infinities he would have subjected and contained; Pierre is caught in a world that contracts around him, even as inwardly there opens up a void. The allegorical approach in *Mardi* allows for the misleading impression of action and movement; the psychological approach in *Pierre* reproduces the hopeless sense of running in circles. As Robertson-Lorant puts it, even "[w]riting about *Pierre* is like tap-dancing in quicksand, or swimming through the kelp-choked Sargasso Sea" (317). In *Pierre*, in short, we join the protagonist in that very same "bootless deep diving" to which Hautia condemned Taji toward the end of *Mardi* (651; ch. 194).

The major distinction between *Mardi* and *Pierre*, however, lies in the latter's greater sense of plot. In *Mardi*, plot is completely eradicated by the bulk of the narrative, its topical digressions and its anatomy. Neither is it all that overt what the plot might actually be until the

narrator encounters Yillah and becomes Taji. Merrell R. Davis, commenting on the genesis of *Mardi*, suggests that in the early stages, "the author as well as the narrator did not know what was to happen to his travelers when they reached the paradisiacal islands to the west" (109). With *Pierre*, as we have seen, this is not quite the case, for Melville seems to have at least started out with a clear model in mind. Higgins and Parker refer to the "unusual complexity of its plottedness" and "the air it initially breathes of being all worked out in advance" ("Grandeur" 163). William Ellery Sedgwick claims that "[t]he plot itself is sound; and if it is understood that Melville's theme is growth, the growth of a personality or psyche, many of the circumstances of the plot will appear to be well chosen" (138). However, that qualifying "many" somewhat undermines Sedgwick's sweeping claim, which is contingent, it seems, on "overlooking the violent turns of the story" (142). Contemporary, less forgiving critics had greater difficulty achieving such oversight. Thus the reviewer for the New York *Herald*, no doubt still under the influence of the narrator's own imagery, called *Pierre* "a labyrinth without a clue" (Howard and Parker 382).

This textual labyrinth must be the responsibility of the narrator who, on the one hand, attempts to present Pierre's case in all its complexity and, on the other, persistently refuses to subject these attempts to aesthetic conventions. This challenge to the reader is further complicated by the tone, which seems to be parodic, ironic and satirical for the most part, but occasionally betrays a secret sympathy with Pierre, at least in terms of the protagonist's later rejection and criticisms of conventional culture. This determines also our ambivalent feelings—ambivalent feelings most contemporary reviewers simply did not share—toward a protagonist whom we consider both the dupe of his own idealism and a youth of admirable resolve in the face of wholesale social rejection and economic destitution.

Pierre's narrator is a first in Melville's oeuvre—an omniscient (if not consistent) third-person narrator. The choice of such a narrator may have been related to Melville's intention to adhere more exclusively to the romance form (and leaving behind the strictures of the confession and travel-narrative). He wanted to be able to explore the complexity of human motivations without being hamstringed by the necessary self-deceptions and misunderstandings a first-person narrator would have to be subject to (a limitation he might have become aware of, even as he overrode it, in having Ishmael delve into Ahab's psyche). *Pierre*'s narrator stands in a relation to Pierre that recalls Ishmael's relation to Ahab; hence Bell stresses that "it is not Pierre but the nameless narrator who functions as the Ishmael of the book" (229). In both books, then, a more relativistic narrator represents the quest of an absolutist, and to some extent subverts it. The difference is that, unlike Ishmael, the narrator of *Pierre* is wholly detached from his

protagonist's trials, which introduces a greater emotional distance, creating space for what Milder calls "the sardonic tone that controls even the earliest books of *Pierre*" (268). Also, as Bowen points out, "Pierre is neither so simple nor so consistent as Ahab" (158), a fact which simultaneously renders him less impressive and more resistant to our admiration and understanding. He is simply more human, and his doubts more pervasive. Finally, also, his object is more abstract and nebulous, and his path to it a matter of pure conjecture. Ahab has a lifetime of whaling experience behind him; at least theoretically, he should be able to beat the White Whale. But Pierre, robbed of all resources and deficient in experience, does not stand a chance.

Ultimately, Melville's choice of narrator is most certainly also related to the tonal options it created for him. It has a tremendous impact on our experience of Pierre's story, for the tone first shows up the ridiculousness of his naïvety, "that passing preposterousness in Pierre" (175; bk. 10, ch. 1), and later maintains a constant sense of the cosmic ironies of his position. Thus the narrator can say of Pierre—devastatingly—that "essentially and relatively everything is misseen by him" (175). Given such comments, one may sometimes be tempted to credit Husni's relation of the narrator to "heartless 'inexorable and unconcerned' fate" (479n). But this would require one to overlook the "improvisational measure" (Spanos 81), so unfate-like, that informs the narrator's digressions, lengthy arguments and aesthetic misdemeanours. John Wenke makes an overt distinction between the narrator and fate when he defines fate in *Pierre* as "[a] construct of a retrospective intelligence, [. . .] the philosophical signifier of narrative containment" (172), and suggests that,

> [i]n the narrator's lexicon, Fate is the power that fixes Pierre, and his story, in place; the dialectical counterpoint to the power of Fate emerges in the narrator's explicit and implicit demonstrations of compositional freedom—his wayward speculations that rupture the progress of Pierre's story" (182).

In this sense, fate resembles the plot; in *Pierre*'s case, the tragic mythos that the narrator ironises and thus defeats, not by altering the "tragic" end, but by robbing it of any cathartic value.[32] Firstly, *Pierre* is a destructive book, but finally it is also what Kelley calls a "self-destructive text" (110). Its "wayward speculations" not only "rupture the progress," i.e., the teleological unravelling, of the narrative; they also fragment the identity of the text as a "gothic romance" or a "psychological novel," thus undermining the monumental status usually given to the "composition" as a completed movement, "an architectural finial" (*BB* 474; ch. 28). And in this regard, the narrator's improvisational and digressive interruptions play an important role in the

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[32] Matthiessen suggests that *Pierre*'s tragedy is "robbed of catharsis," because for him, "Melville's incessant pounding on this strain [that Pierre "is helplessly caught by Fate"] ends by robbing Pierre's struggle of much meaning" (470).

deferral of apocalyptic meaning, and constitute, in the telling words of *Billy Budd*'s narrator, "a literary sin" (415; ch. 4). The first half of *Pierre* is characterised by a number of digressions—on the Peerage system and the Patroons (bk. 1, ch. 3), on beautiful women (bk. 2, ch 2), on Love (bk. 2, ch. 4), on Fate (bk. 4, ch. 2), etc.—and interruptions. Even Isabel's story, itself a rambling, auto-interruptive account, is divided into two sections, and the severely introspective interim taken up in part by a lengthy description of the Memnon Stone. In the second part of the book, however, the narrative seems to consist of little else beyond sudden interpolations and interruptions.

The first and most frequently discussed interruption of Pierre's narrative is the account of Pierre's encounter—in book 14, "The Journey and the Pamphlet"—with the Plotinus Plinlimmon pamphlet, "*EI.*" Pierre reads the pamphlet, which the narrator reproduces in its "entirety," as the coach takes him into exile. The pamphlet advances the general argument that earthly praxis must by necessity be wholly incommensurate with heavenly ideals, and proffers the tentative conclusion that "[a] virtuous expediency, then, seems the highest desirable or attainable earthly excellence for the mass of men, and is the only earthly excellence their Creator intended for them" (214; ch. 3). However, the pamphlet is torn, and Pierre cannot follow the argument to its end. Instead, he is left with the inconclusiveness of the final printed words: "Moreover, if——" (215). This is, as the narrator points out, "a most untidy termination" (215).

The basic import of the pamphlet would seem to align Plinlimmon with Ishmael, or Melville himself. Even the pamphlet's disclaimer, which identifies it as "*not so much the Portal, as part of the temporary Scaffold to the Portal of this new Philosophy*" (210), recalls Ishmael's disclaimer about his "cetological System," which he leaves "standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower" (*MD* 145; ch. 32). Bell, for instance, considers it to be "at once a theological treatise on the disrelation of phenomenal matter and noumenal spirit and a discourse on the inevitable lurking insincerity of romance. It might be regarded, in this sense, as Melville's parodic *Eureka*" (155). And yet Plinlimmon's tone seems cold and heartless in a way that would have been inimical to both Ishmael and Melville. The narrator, too, introduces the pamphlet as "a very blurred one as to ink, and a very sleazy one as to paper" (207; ch. 1), which marks it as somehow equivocal and distasteful (or disreputable) even before we have had a chance to read it. This sense is for the most part extended by Pierre's glimpses of Plinlimmon at the Apostles.[33]

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[33] The Plinlimmon we meet in book 21, for instance, may express "cheerful content," but "there was still something latently visible in him which repelled. That something may best be described as non-Benevolence" (260; ch. 3).

The question, then, as Peter A. Obuchowski has pointed out, is to what degree we can take "Plinlimmon's argument as mirroring Melville's," since the former "is delineated so ambiguously" ("*Pierre*" 490). To be sure, most critics have remained somewhat uncertain of Melville's attitude toward the pamphlet. Howard and Parker have suggested that one "resolv[e]" the issue "by accepting that on an intellectual level Melville might often if not always agree with the ideas attributed to Plinlimmon while altogether dissociating himself from the blandly rational and self-satisfied tone in which Plinlimmon is reported to express them" ("Note" 406).

My specific interest in the inconclusive pamphlet, however, is as an interpolation, an interruption of the forward momentum of the plot in order to introduce "the excellently illustrated re-statement of a problem" (210; bk. 14, ch. 2). More importantly, the narrator literally introduces it as a kind of digression, not essential to the plot of the narrative:

> But as such mere illustrations are almost universally taken for solutions (and perhaps they are the only possible human solutions), therefore it may help to the temporary quiet of some inquiring mind; and so not be wholly without use. At the worst, each person can now skip, or read and rail for himself. (210)

Leaving aside for now the not insignificant point that the narrator's sense of what is temporally attainable does not differ significantly from Plinlimmon's, this passage presents us with a most extraordinary, if muddled and absolutely indefinable, "aesthetics." With an ironic lack of concern for form (or, indeed, the progress of his story), the narrator includes the pamphlet on what seems vaguely utilitarian terms, on the chance that "it may help to the temporary quiet of some inquiring mind." Even more extraordinary is the choice placed before the reader, either to "skip" the passage altogether, or to "read and rail for himself," for this clearly suggests that the narrator does not deem the pamphlet necessary to his story[34]—a suggestion supported by the fact that Pierre never overtly responds to the pamphlet, and in fact fails to comprehend its "central conceit" (209). The narrator renounces all responsibility for deciding on what should be kept in and what left out, thereby completely breaking the reader's trust that the author will not include in the narrative that which is not necessary to it. In fact, the reader wades through the pamphlet fully aware of its narrative status as a postponement (a quality which by necessity also extends to the narrator's own reflections on the pamphlet). From this point on, everything that appears in the narrative is to be viewed with some suspicion.

The arrival of Pierre, Isabel and Delly Ulver in the city, for which they set out in book 13, is postponed until book 16. The interim is filled with an account of the pamphlet, followed by a

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[34] This makes it all the more ironic that the pamphlet has become the central feature of the bulk of the discussions of *Pierre*. But, of course, the interpolation is necessary, insofar as it hampers the teleological development of the plot.

lengthy retrospective consideration of Pierre's relationship with his cousin, Glendinning Stanly, to whom no reference has been made before this. In itself, the filling in of a character to whom we will shortly be introduced is not unusual, but the narrator's approach strikes us as unusual in a number of ways. Most notably, it rather abruptly follows the equally abrupt cessation of the pamphlet, requiring the reader to pick up a new and wholly unexpected line of development. At the very least one would expect such a retrospective to coincide with the actual introduction of the character into the action of the book. Most importantly, however, the length and scope of the introduction is by no means justified by the role Glen Stanly will come to play in the book. We will briefly encounter him when Pierre searches him out in the city, only to be disavowed, and later he will reappear in the background as a suitor to Lucy, and her brother Fred's comrade in the attempts to save her from the strange *ménage à trois* she enters at the Apostles. At the end, Pierre kills him. But never is his carefully developed character exploited in the rest of the narrative. He looms large in book 15, only to become a part of a greater world that is generally inhospitable to Pierre.

There are further interpolations, digressions and sudden deviations. The most recognisable, of course, is the sudden revelation, in book 17, that Pierre is a published author (discussed in greater detail below). Then there is the satirical account of life at the Apostles, the community of "Teleological Theorists, and Social Reformers, and political propagandists of all manner of heterodoxical tenets" (266; bk. 19, ch.1), where Pierre finds a home. Also, there is the introduction, at length, of yet another wholly new character, one even less necessary to the progression of the plot than Glen Stanly (who at least has a central role to play in the denouement).

Book 20, "Charlie Millthorpe," sticks out like a particularly sore thumb. By now we are in the final quarter of the book, and a new character seems the last thing needed. Spengemann accounts for this introduction by considering Charlie "evidently a foil for the hero's emergent literary character" (Introduction viii-ix). This seems a valid point, for Charlie's superficial and unincisive dabblings in philosophy are overtly contrasted with Pierre's dark, existential diving. But ironic contrast still does not explain the necessity for making Pierre and Charlie childhood friends from different levels of society. Once again one has the sense that the narrator is simply indulging a whim, the sheer joy of composition, especially when he delineates the character of Charlie's dead father, a farmer "whose bowed shoulders and homely garb had still been surmounted by a head fit for a Greek philosopher" (275; ch 1); when he embarks on a striking ironic critique of both picturesque and romanticised views of rusticity in his discussion of "*povertiresque*" (276); and when he takes the opportunity to blame Charlie's foolish ambitions

on his education and particularly "that great American bulwark and bore—elocution" (278). In other words, the introduction of Charlie as a "foil" provides the narrator with an opportunity for improvisation. Furthermore, I would suggest that this introduction is not without its own ambiguities, for the picture of Charlie that emerges is not simply ridiculous. He, like Pierre, has something of the quester's urge, a point driven home by the fact that his emigrant forefather was a knight, yet, unlike Pierre, he has tasted labour as well as lack, and has learned at an early age that "life was a fact" (279). This recognition, coupled with his "generous heart" (279), ensures that Charlie's "quest," which is strictly the result of an innocent, if vain, social ambition, can never become as absolute and destructive as Pierre's. We may find him ridiculous in his pretensions, but cannot really disagree with Pierre's insight, quoted earlier, that "the god that made Millthorpe was both a better and a greater than the god that made Napoleon or Byron'" (320; bk. 23, ch. 4).

Melville's narrator, then, introduces digressions and interpolations into the narrative. However, one would not want to say of any of these that they are utterly unnecessary to *Pierre*, for, after all, they are what make *Pierre* the anti-teleological book it is. In other words, they are unnecessary to the romance plot, to the progression from the beginning, through the middle, to the end. In fact, they hamper that movement, and rob it of its impact. But they are not unnecessary to the book Melville was writing. The narrative, we feel, is to some extent at odds with its plot—their concerns differ. The plot exists in service of the progress from complication to resolution; the narrative, insofar as the narrator hopes to import into it the diverse and deviant rhythms of life (which Charlie Millthorpe so wisely recognises as "a fact"), exists in the service of nothing but the demands of the inconclusive moment. Once Isabel is allowed to enter the artificial, constituted world of Saddle Meadows, all rules pertaining to consistency and unity are scratched. In this regard Matthiessen's perceptive comment on character in *Pierre* is pertinent, though it should be extended to the narrative in general; he suggests that Melville "had made the dangerous discovery he was to proclaim in *The Confidence Man*, that to portray a consistent character in fiction is to be untrue to life" (480).

Isabel and the narrator are linked. Insofar as Isabel enters the narrative as a disruptive, errant force, she sometimes seems a manifestation of the narrator's own anti-teleological tendencies. Isabel's erratic and emotional narrative "methodology" in many respects resembles the more knowing approach of the narrator. I have already linked Pierre's critique of novels to the narrator's own agenda, for *his* narrative insists on not "laboriously spin[ning] vails of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last" (141; bk. 7, ch. 8). I have also pointed out the

narrator's tendency to deviate from the course which aesthetics demanded of him. But there are numerous other examples of the narrator's conscious subjection to Spanos's "improvisational measure," as well as the limitations of language and expression.[35] Early in the book, in a description of Lucy's charms, the narrator comments on his own limitations: "Never shall I get down the vile inventory! How, if with paper and pencil I went out into the starry night to inventorize the heavens? Who shall put down the charms of Lucy Tartan upon paper?" (25; bk. 2, ch. 2). Even through the whimsy and irony we glimpse an implicit and proleptic criticism of both "systematizing" novels (141) and Pierre's own literary efforts (and possibly even a self-satirical thrust, on the part of Melville, at his own taste for anatomy). From Pierre's very first apprehension of the mystery of (the face of) Isabel, he shows a hermeneutic urge to unravel, even as the narrator stresses that "he lost himself trying to follow out this tangle" (49; bk. 3, ch. 2). Essentially, this is the story of the rest of the book, in which Pierre constantly loses himself, only to try and regain control by embarking on some monumental action.

The narrator seems more comfortable with the persistent ambiguities and instabilities of his narrative. As he confesses at some point, "[t]his history goes forward and goes backward, *as occasion calls*. Nimble center, circumference elastic you must have" (54; bk. 3, ch. 3, emphasis added). Of course, this is a problem no amount of planning can really eradicate, since any narrative is doomed to the consecutive representation of events, thoughts and actions that actually "occur" simultaneously.[36] But *Pierre*'s narrator consciously favours the demands of the occasion above any ideal, predetermined aesthetic scheme (of which Henry James's aesthetic theories remain a canonical example), an allegiance to some extent borne out also by the absence of any strictly theoretical writings in Melville's oeuvre. Also, as the narrator points out, "[i]n their precise tracings-out and subtile causations, the strongest and fieriest emotions of life defy all analytical insight" (67; bk. 4, ch. 1). By means of a parodic adherence to a theory of correspondence, then, the narrative that presents such emotions must necessarily succumb to its

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[35] Isabel's own suspicion of language is clearly expressed when she suggests that "all words are arrant skirmishers" (333; bk. 25, ch. 1).

[36] What this boils down to is a distinction between what the Russian Formalists have termed *fabula*, "the order of events referred to by the narrative," and *sjužet*, "the order of events presented in the narrative discourse" (Brooks 12). Of course the *fabula* is only hypothetical, and is reconstructed by the reader in the act of reading. If so, Melville tends to persistently destabilise our sense of the *fabula* itself (as Pierre's sense of his father's identity is destabilised). "What happened" remains subject to eternal qualification—Isabel's arrival enforces Pierre's restructuring of monumental "memory," while the narrator's sudden revelation of Pierre's status as published author, for instance, requires an immediate overhaul of the reader's "understanding" of the central character. The *fabula* ceases to operate as the stable "logic" to be revealed in the redemptive act of reading.

own inscrutability. We saw something similar in *Mardi*, in which the sovereign Romantic narrator's creation succumbs to the deviance of a reality he had hoped to contain, and demonically comes to "correspond" to that deviance.

There is, perhaps, a sense in which *Pierre*'s narrator seems to resemble Taji, or to sound somewhat like him, primarily in his occasional statements of an apparent authorial sovereignty. A good example is to be found in book 5, when the narrator momentarily seems to be faced with the difficulty of his task:

> Save me from being bound to Truth, liege lord, as I am now. How shall I steal yet further into Pierre, and show how this heavenly fire was helped to be contained in him, by mere contingent things, and things that he knew not. But I shall follow the endless, winding way,—the flowing river in the cave of man; careless whither I be led, reckless where I land. (107; bk. 5, ch. 7)

There is a trace here of Taji's "reckless," self-annihilating launch into the "endless sea" (654; ch. 195), and yet, what should be abundantly clear is that this passage, in all its particulars, rejects any hope of closure, the very hope that haunts Taji to the end. What seems like an expression of authorial sovereignty is in fact a confession of a lack of control. The uncapitalised "liege lord" to which he appeals is, in all probability, the mute and distant Mount Greylock to which the book has been dedicated. This raises the question of tone, particularly with regard to the narrator's troublesome allegiance to "Truth." What he seems to realise is that his pursuit, into the "cave of man," of a "Truth" he will never uncover—a point driven home by the image of the empty sarcophagus—cannot really have an end. Ultimately the passage seems to present us more with a whimsical lament and a stoic acceptance of the hopeless task of narration which may end up defeating itself (as *Pierre* did). In this decentred world, in which one can only maintain a "[n]imble center," the narration becomes impossible to circumscribe. This is what informs Blackmur's critical judgment of *Pierre*, namely that "the book had no compositional center at all" (83).

The narrator's suspicion and rejection of narrative teleology at length finds another overt expression in book 17, not insignificantly, at the outset of his sudden introduction and consideration of Pierre's own literary career, and the general state of American letters:

> Among the various conflicting modes of writing history, there would seem to be two grand practical distinctions, under which all the rest must subordinately range. By the one mode, all contemporaneous circumstances, facts, and events must be set down contemporaneously; by the other, they are only to be set down as the general stream of the narrative shall dictate; for matters which are kindred in time, may be very irrelative in themselves. I elect neither of these; I am careless of either; both are well enough in their way; I write precisely as I please. (244; ch. 1)

It is an Ishmaelian prerogative the narrator exercises here. That he does so in a book entitled "Young America in Literature" only the more stresses Melville's complicity in that prerogative,

which he announces to his former friends in the "Young America" movement—Evert Duyckinck in particular—even as he sets out to satirise them. Higgins and Parker have argued that this sudden shift in the subject matter might have resulted from Melville's encounter, mid-composition, with the reviews of *Moby-Dick*. According to them,

> the evidence shows that what changed was not Melville's attitude toward his plot but toward his literary career: his unsuccessful efforts to peddle his manuscript on the good terms he had previously enjoyed coincided with his reading some of the most condemnatory reviews of *Moby-Dick*, so that he had good reason to feel that his career might well be brought to an abrupt end. Swiftly reconceiving the plot, Melville used the unfinished manuscript as an outlet for his all-absorbing preoccupation with authorship, not only introducing unplanned-for elements but also condensing or otherwise altering parts already written or projected. ("Grandeur" 165)

But whatever the precise circumstances and reasons informing this shift of focus, or the nature of the shift, it remains justified in terms of the narrator's stated right to improvisation, a tendency noticeable in all of Melville's other books. What Higgins and Parker see as evidence of the fact that Melville had two divergent purposes in the book—that "*Pierre* as we know it is the product of two major, and conflicting, impulses" ("Reading" 235)—suggests nothing beyond the fact that Melville had no aesthetic qualms about introducing any material he felt to be relevant at the time. Merrell Davis's account of Melville's composition of *Mardi* goes some way toward driving this point home, a case in point being Melville's insertion of a satire on contemporary American politics and society, as part of group of satirical chapters in *Mardi* "based on historical events" (Davis 81). If it is true that Melville always wrote exactly as he pleased, then, "Melville's attitude toward his plot" in *Pierre* probably did not change much: his attitude toward the plot was never earnest to begin with.

In "Young America in Literature," the narrator suddenly makes the startling revelation that Pierre "himself possessed the poetic nature" (244; ch 1), and is a published and applauded author. In certain respects the details of Pierre's career as author present a parody of Melville's own literary career. Thus, for instance, Pierre's "magnificent and victorious *début* had been made in that delightful love-sonnet, entitled 'The Tropical Summer'" (245), which reminds us of *Typee*. But the main force of satire is here directed at "the high and mighty Campbell clan of editors" (245) who commended these early efforts. As Hayford, Parker and Tanselle explains—in their "Historical Note" to *Moby-Dick*—in *Pierre* Melville's "satirical method was to reverse or sardonically twist phrases they [the reviewers] had just written about *Moby-Dick* into the praise asinine critics lavished upon the bland, inoffensive, tasteful effusions he had abruptly attributed to his young hero" (696). Melville was particularly effective at this, managing to satirise simultaneously the critics and his protagonist by coining such judgments as this: "He is blameless in morals, and harmless throughout" (246). But his satire extends to the entire literary

racket, as Pierre is approached by publishers and designers, bothered for his autograph—which, Pierre laments, "did not possess that inflexible uniformity, which [. . .] should always mark the hand of illustrious men" (253; ch. 3)—invited to give lectures, solicited by biographers, and even hounded for a portrait by "a literary acquaintance—a joint editor of the 'Captain Kidd Monthly'" (253), a parody of Evert Duyckinck, who had early in 1851 approached Melville (in a letter) for a daguerreotype, and had been refused (*C* 180). The parody of Duyckinck in *Pierre* was a personal slight, but viewed in the light of book 17's overt allusion to the "Young America" movement, as well as Duyckinck's close association with it, there can be no doubt that Melville's criticism was aimed at a wider mark. As David S. Reynolds points out, "*Pierre* makes clear Melville's disillusionment with the Young America group, which had failed to comprehend his efforts to forge a powerful national literature out of raw, violent American materials" (292). Whether it is true that Melville thought in such heroic terms is a matter for speculation, but certainly it seems as though he intended to import America's "raw, violent [. . .] materials" into his literature in the face of all formal prescriptions and expectations, including those of the Young America movement.

Melville may have settled some scores in book 17, but ultimately the chapter slots in with a greater, and more immediate, concern, namely the subversion of the teleological impulse that informs writing in general. The satirical focus on authors in *Pierre* is a pervasive one—more pervasive, for instance, than the focus on contemporary readers and critics—and is linked to the eventual defeat of Pierre's narrative, which becomes the external figure of his quest in the latter half of the book. Installed at the Apostles, the fallen Pierre still persists in his quest, little realising how beaten he is already. Earlier we saw how, "in the Enthusiast to Duty, the heaven-begotten Christ is born" (106; bk. 5, ch. 5). By now, Pierre has had inklings that his sense of duty might have been misplaced. As he announces to Isabel before he has started working on his new book:

> Ah! now I catch glimpses, and seem to half-see, somehow, that the uttermost ideal of moral perfection in man is wide of the mark. The demigods trample on trash, and Virtue and Vice are trash! Isabel, I will write such things—I will gospelize the world anew, and show them deeper secrets than the Apocalypse!—I will write it, I will write it! (273; bk. 14, ch. 2)

Pierre gets a sense—highly qualified—that he may have been mistaken in his ideal. But this is not to say that he undergoes a complete reversal in character. He does not become less of an absolutist; all that happens is that his apocalyptic quester's urge turns demonic, Ahabian. His intention to "gospelize the world anew" clearly stems from the very idea of himself as Christ that informed his self-renouncing project in the first place. He sees himself, like Taji, as a demigod—someone who exists beyond what he deems the petty categories of "Virtue and Vice," and has

the sovereign power and resolution to follow a vision into annihilation, if need be. But clearly Pierre is not beyond these categories, from which he tries to cut himself loose. That Isabel does not even understand the concepts of virtue and vice, and therefore cannot comprehend why he should get so worked up with regard to them, is just another sign of Isabel's natural amorality, as opposed to Pierre's inherent urge to follow out tangles. And here, this apocalyptic urge in Pierre is related overtly to his intention to write. Here, as Bell points out, "[l]iterary expression, which redeemed Ishmael from Ahab's suicidal compulsion, becomes Pierre's equivalent to Ahab's fiery hunt" (226). Pierre intends to hunt and capture the elusive, infernal truth of his life in a third-person narrative which "he seems to have directly plagiarized from his own experiences" (302; bk. 22, ch. 3). Spanos neatly captures the scope of this intent when he says of Pierre (*not* Melville) that

> his fiercely idealistic purpose as a Hegelian or Emersonian "Apostle" is to write a relentlessly inclusive and conclusive metaphysical book from the perspective of an omniscient eye (I), in which all experience, earthly and supernatural, is integrated and incorporated into a cosmic epiphany. (84)

To this end, Pierre subjects himself to a rigorous regime meant to limit any interruptions, by Isabel in particular. But Isabel's destabilising, demonic influence on his world—his psyche—is irreversible. The demonic world we have entered, as Frye explains, is "the world also of perverted or wasted work" (147), which is precisely what Pierre's work becomes. Pierre will flounder in the indeterminate, protracted encounter with the ambiguous, multi-limbed Kraken of his psyche, and his book, which he is unable to finish, becomes an emblem of that fragmenting quest. He does not know, as Isabel does, that "all words are arrant skirmishers" (333; bk. 25, ch. 1), and therefore unlikely to capture and monumentalise a Truth. Neither does he realise that the text he writes is determined by Isabel, more than by anything else. The narrator captures this dilemma when he shows that when, after "his day's work was done," Pierre allows Isabel to sit with him: "[She] played her mystic guitar till Pierre felt chapter after chapter born of its wondrous suggestiveness; but alas! eternally incapable of being translated into words; for where the deepest words end, there music begins with its supersensuous and all-confounding intimations" (282; bk. 21, ch. 1).

In the end Pierre's efforts to grant an all-comprehensive form to his experience in a narrative fails, even when Lucy, that paragon of Apollonian form, is brought back into the narrative to redress the imbalance. The simple fact is that the book never coheres, and exists only in fragments. The only glimpses we catch of it are by means of "random slips" of manuscript that the narrator picks off the floor (303; bk. 22, ch. 3), all the more confounding because in them, Pierre sounds remarkably like the narrator. The only difference is that Pierre cannot step

back from his text, and recognise its essential folly as a mode of apprehending and communicating truth. He does not know, as the narrator does, that

> [i]t is impossible to talk or to write without apparently throwing oneself helplessly open; the Invulnerable Knight wears his visor down. Still, it is pleasant to chat; for it passes the time ere we go to our beds; and speech is further incited, when like strolling improvisatores of Italy, we are paid for our breath. And we are only too thankful when the gapes of the audience dismiss us with the few ducats we earn. (259; bk. 18, ch. 1)

Pierre, the demigod, thinks of himself as that "Invulnerable Knight," little realising that, since the introduction of Isabel into his life-text, in the act of writing he, too, cannot but throw himself "helplessly open." His intentions are still teleological, but without the artificial structures that previously kept his world coherent, and which he has now rejected as compromised and insufficient, these intentions have no chance against "ever-shifting Nature" (9; bk. 1, ch. 3). As the narrator stresses, "Lies only never vary; look for no invariableness in Pierre" (337; bk. 25, ch. 3). His narrative comes to mock him, causing him to wander through the labyrinthine streets—where once he gets lost and falls into a fit (341; bk. 25, ch. 3)—and eventually leads to the dream of the armless, broken Enceladus, leading a fruitless, self-destructive assault upon the Mount of Titans. As the narrator makes clear, there is nothing to be hoped for in approaching this mountain, which from afar seems so majestic and peaceful:

> Stark desolation; ruin, merciless and ceaseless; chills and gloom,—all here lived a hidden life, curtained by that cunning purpleness, which, from the piazza of the manor house, so beautifully invested the mountain once called Delectable, but now styled Titanic. (344; bk. 25, ch. 4)

The "cunning purpleness"—which, as I have argued at the outset of this chapter, so deceptively covers up the deviant and violent "hidden life"—here refers to that "cunning alphabet" which Nature supplies, according to the narrator, and "whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood" (342). It tells us that there is nothing permanent or essential in any expression or name—the mountain, "once *called* Delectable, but now *styled* Titanic" (a shift which mirrors the shift in Pierre's world-view), is not finally explained or captured by either name, and the suggestion seems to be that other names are sure to supplant these ones, in time. It is in this regard that Spengemann's perceptive argument on the fate of words in *Pierre* seems quite pertinent to my own:

> Previously signs of natural facts that are in turn signs of spiritual facts, words in *Pierre* become actions performed by the writer in the continuous present, actions motivated at once by unconscious intentions and unconscious desires, with each verbal act giving rise to others that may realize, defer, frustrate, or entirely negate those initial intentions. Instead of standing for the fixed meanings from which they arose, words now make and continually remake their meanings, accumulating semantic complexity as long as they continue. (xiv-xv)

Spengemann is no doubt alluding to the point made in *Clarel* that, while man may "[m]ake and remake his verbiage," he will not "solve" the "too wild [. . .], too wonderful" world (pt. 4, canto 3, 107-13). But Spengemann now denies man's ultimate control over these "fixed meanings," arguing that in the act of writing the writer is precisely engaged in an act of displacing meaning, and that, the more he writes, the more likely he is to find his language becoming uncanny. Here we come face to face with what Spanos calls the priority of "words to the Word" (80). Language emerges as a fluid medium, partaking of that same mystery that Isabel represents for Pierre. It escapes Pierre's sovereign intentions and, instead, involves him in ever greater ambiguities. This is why Isabel recognises instinctively that "all words are arrant skirmishers" (333; bk. 25, ch. 1). And, as once before, Pierre attempts to escape such indeterminacy by taking action—in this case, by shooting Glen Stanly full of lead, and precipitating his own death.[37] But, as once before, this action—which is, symbolically, already an act of suicide—does not solve anything. Pierre, as the author of "the timely, untimely end," now ironically ends up confounding his own life's text completely by causing "[l]ife's last chapter [to be] well stitched into the middle!" (360; bk. 26, ch. 6).

Death appears in *Pierre* not as a resolution, but as an abrupt cessation. The thread is simply cut. And no matter how deep down the narrator has taken us into the criss-crossed complex of motives and impulses at work in Pierre, Isabel's final cry—on one level no doubt meant as a claim to ownership—is also directed at us: "All's o'er, and ye know him not!" (362; bk. 26, ch. 7). Insofar as that cry is directed at Fred Tartan and Charlie Millthorpe, it exposes the one-sidedness of their respective views of Pierre, the fact that they must, by necessity, overlook the complexity of that identity; but insofar as it is directed at the reader and, indeed, the narrator (whose attitude to Pierre is, to say the least, ambivalent), it expresses the irony of our overlooking virtually nothing: we *know* him even less than Fred or Charlie[38] (who know him

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[37] Billy Budd's killing of Claggart also results from his spontaneous, instinctive recoil from "the paralysis" the master-at-arms's accusation effects in him (450; ch. 19).

[38] It is Charlie, in particular, who regains something of dignity in this final scene, in which he plays Horatio to Pierre's Hamlet. While Isabel may have the last word on Pierre and, like the nature she represents, claim him by "arbor[ing] him in ebon vines," Charlie's is the last truly human voice in the book, as he laments his failure to "rall[y] thee, and banteringly warn [. . .] thee from thy too moody ways" (362). The "one speechless clasp" Pierre's dying hand exerts upon Charlie's is deliberately open to many meanings, but on a certain level, one feels, it must be an absolution of Charlie, who was simply out of his depth, but whom Pierre might recognise in his last moments as presenting the only kind of hope the world may offer.

falsely), if by knowing we mean understanding. The narrative that presents Pierre to us is itself not an act of knowing; instead, it affects the reader more on the level of the "wondrous suggestiveness" (282; bk. 21, ch. 1) emanating from Isabel's guitar, expanding into "infinite significancies" (126; bk. 6, ch. 6) that remind us of Ishmael's "infinite perspectives" (*MD* 308; ch. 69). As the narrator suggests early in the book, "[w]onder interlocks with wonder; and then the confounding feeling comes" (51; bk. 3, ch. 2).

The "confounding feeling" is one that comes to all readers of *Pierre*, and must underlie the widespread contemporary rejection of the book, a rejection of which the echoes are still occasionally discernible even in recent discussions of the seventh novel of the by now canonical author, Herman Melville. *Pierre* deals with the subjection of the mythos of identity—individual (psychological) identity, national identity, narrative identity—to the elemental forces of inscrutable nature. Its resistance to hermeneutics is more profound than that of most other literary texts (none of which, to be sure, ever falls perfectly into scholarly categories), and therefore, if we consider Brooks's suggestion that plot "belongs to the reader's 'competence,' and in his 'performance'—the reading of narrative—it animates the sense-making process" (37), *Pierre*'s challenge to the reader may come to appear a sardonic, mocking one. And, certainly, there does seem to be a darkly ironic tone pervading the book. But in the end there is also much of wonder—or rather, the "interlinked terrors and wonders of God" (*MD* 109; ch. 24)—as Melville manages to raise the mythological Kraken from the depths of the human psyche, and present us with a kind of provisional anatomy of its many tentacles.

CHAPTER 6

"HITHER AND THITHER": THE IMPROVIDENT HISTORICAL OCCASION IN *ISRAEL POTTER*

When or where Melville came across the autobiography of an unfortunate, exiled soldier of the American Revolution, *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter*, ghost-written and first printed by Henry Trumbull in 1824, is not known. However, in 1849, during a journey to Europe which proved to be germinal in many ways, Melville noted in his journal that, on 18 December, he had perused some "old book stores," and "[l]ooked over a lot of ancient maps of London. Bought one (A.D. 1766) for 3 & 6 pence. I want to use it in case I serve up the Revolutionary narrative of the beggar" (*J* 43). According to Walter E. Bezanson, '[t]he entry assures us that by the end of 1849 Melville had read the *Life and Remarkable Adventures*, probably owned a copy, and was thinking of working it up" (174). As it turned out, Melville ended up writing *Moby-Dick* first, followed by *Pierre*, after the commercial and critical failure of which he turned to writing short prose pieces for magazines such as *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, and the new *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature*. But in 1854, he finally turned to his earlier project and by 7 June, as one may glean from his offer of the tale to *Putnam's* for serialisation, had already written up "some sixty and odd pages of MSS" (*C* 265). It was accepted, and ran through nine instalments until March 1855, when it was also published in book form.

As the title page to Trumbull's *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter* (hereafter *Life*) explains, the book concerns the life of one

> WHO WAS A SOLDIER IN THE
> AMERICAN REVOLUTION,
> And took a distinguished part in the Battle of Bunker Hill (in which he received three wounds.) after which he was taken Prisoner by the British, conveyed to England, where for 30 years he obtained a livelihood for himself and family, by crying "*Old Chairs to Mend*" through the Streets of London.— In May last, by the assistance of the American Consul, he succeeded (in the 79th year of his age) in obtaining a passage to his native country, after an absence of 48 years. (287)

The first half of the narrative, on which Melville mainly drew for his biographical "retouch[ing]" (*IP* vii)—and from which, as Bezanson has pointed out, Melville lifted "much of the original language" (184)—is devoted to a brief account of Israel's early life (which shows him to be in possession of a keen Yankee instinct for survival), followed by an account of his adventures during the Revolution. These include his induction into the "minute men," his role in the

monumental battle of Bunker Hill, his later capture by the British at sea, his escape in England, and his subsequent efforts to elude both capture and impressment while making a living (even working in George III's gardens at Kew), nominally operating as a courier (between certain friends of America—John Woodcock, Horne Tooke and James Bridges—in England, and Benjamin Franklin in Paris), and keeping an eye out for an opportunity to return to America. The second half focuses on Israel's strangely unresisting disappearance into the infernal metropolis "where I was doomed to spend more than 40 years of my life" (Trumbull 352), an account that Melville radically shortened in his own version of the story, and to which he devoted only two chapters (24 and 25), "In the City of Dis" and "Forty-Five Years."

There seem to be two important reasons why the autobiography of Israel Potter might have commended itself to Melville for rewriting, the first of which also accounts for his decision to gloss over the London years. Firstly, the tale's relation to the constituting occasion of America's national identity afforded Melville the opportunity to cast a direct and critical glance upon the monumentalising events, and some of their central, or at least representative, figures. The unhappy, yet frequently comic, account of Israel's earlier rambles in itself provided a nice contrast to the respectful awe with which Americans viewed the War of Independence. William Spanos, for instance, refers to "the grim oxymoron of the title name and its occasion (the American Revolution)" (297n). Yet, by extending the actual scope of Israel's involvement and movements, Melville could pull heroic figures like John Paul Jones and Ethan Allen—as well as an important, almost mythical event like the sea-battle between the American-French *Bon Homme Richard* and the British *Serapis*—into the narrative, and both highlight and intensify the ironies only inherent in Trumbull's account, which Bezanson defines as rhetorically modulating between "aggrieved innocence, [. . .] Yankee posturing, [. . .] pathetic apostrophes, [and] [. . .] patriotic pietism" (186). Israel's sojourn in London, then, while important in establishing the irony of the exile and of forgetting a national hero—even if only a common one—did not, for Melville, offer much by way of actual representation.

Secondly, as an account of a life ruled by so many external factors, the *Life* provided a perfect opportunity for constructing a picaresque narrative, presenting a life wholly subject to the vagaries of chance, and hence thwarted in his simple goal, which is to get home, to be able to affirm his identity as an American, and to take part in its destiny. Melville had last made overt and sustained use of the form in *Omoo*, and insofar as *Israel Potter*, beyond specific concerns with national identity, demonstrates Melville's persistent interest in considering man's place in the universe, it is also an episodic narrative of deferred identity, of elusive closure, of the absence of justice, and of the tyranny of chance and nature. In this regard it is perhaps to be

considered prophetic that in Melville's earliest extant reference to the *Life*, his journal entry of 18 December 1849, he also noted the acquisition of "a 3. Vol: ed: of Guzman" (*J* 43), to wit, Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599-1604), one of the paradigmatic picaresque novels and the first, according to Ulrich Wicks, in which the word *pícaro* appeared (7). A final commendation might have been the fact that, by writing a picaresque narrative based on an autobiography, Melville could both avoid responsibility for the course the story would take, and pursue his critique of teleology without resorting, as he put it to Putnam, to "reflective writing"—for Melville promised "that the story shall contain nothing of any sort to shock the fastidious" (*C* 265). His language, we notice, had become shorn of effects. Gone was the bewildering encyclopaedic and linguistic plenitude of books like *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. In *Israel Potter* and *The Confidence-Man* he completely severed the link between the narrator and his subjects (in a way that was not quite so clear in *Pierre*), converting the former into an ironic observer. Melville was getting as close as he would ever get to becoming a novelist.

Contemporary reception of *Israel Potter* was, if not ecstatic, generally favourable, and is perhaps most clearly captured in the *Boston Post* review of 15 March 1855:

> Mr Melville has made an interesting book from the facts at his command—a book, not great, not remarkable for any particular in it, but of a curt, manly, independent tone, dealing with truth honestly, and telling it feelingly. [. . .] We trust its successor will be quite as sensible, but be of a wider scope and a larger subject. (Leyda, *Log* 500)

Melville scholars of the twentieth century for the most part seem to share this view, if not the favourable opinion of Melville's newfound apparent "sensib[ility]." The absence of his verbal and metaphysical pyrotechnics showed up his lack of craft only the more. Thus, to Lewis Mumford (1929), *Israel Potter* showed a Melville in decline, and he located the flaw in the sense that "what it chiefly lacks is centrality" (167). In 1950 Newton Arvin essentially reiterated this judgment when he called the book "hardly more than a heap of sketches," and suggested that "the product is not a narrative with any profound unity or serious inner coherence of its own" (245). This sense of formlessness and incoherence also informed F. O. Matthiessen's belief that

> the structure of both *Israel Potter* and *The Confidence-Man* shows them to have been produced by a man not at all able to write the kind of books he wanted to, but under a miserable compulsion. In the former he started out to portray the tragedy of exile, but when he came to the ex-soldier's destitution in London, his own sense of suffering was so great that he could not bear to dwell on Potter's, and slurred over what was to have been his main subject in a couple of short chapters. (491)

Matthiessen's assumptions seem to be based on an idea of Melville that may well be too limited, for Melville was not predominantly a tragedian. Peter A. Obuchowski locates the root of the problem when he argues that, "[t]o assume, as Matthiessen does, that the theme is 'the tragedy of

exile' makes it impossible to understand Melville's treatment of both character and structure in the book" ("Technique" 461). Once again, Melville would consciously forego the catharsis made possible by the nature of his materials.

The result of such judgments has been that *Israel Potter* has generally been treated as something of a curiosity. Warner Berthoff has called it "an odd item in the Melville canon" (qtd. in Bezanson 230), and most critics have treated it as somehow external to that canon. Even where the judgments are predominantly positive, as in William Ellery Sedgwick's description of the book as "a brilliant historical novel" (180), discussions tend to be brief. A number of book-length studies of Melville's prose works have paid very little or no attention to *Israel Potter*.[1] As Hennig Cohen puts it, '[t]he accumulated criticism and scholarship, with the exception of the NN edition, have been slight" (308).

In spite of the generally lacklustre critical engagement with *Israel Potter*, there are a number of critics who have recognised and described the book as picaresque. Bezanson points out that, in 1926, John Freeman judged the book "'a delightful picaresque story,' [although] he was sensitive to its 'grim texture' and disturbing tone of constraint in the writing" (227). Since then, Freeman's categorisation has found favour intermittently, but in such a manner as to stress once more the lack of critical clarity on what is to be understood by "picaresque." Thus, two works from the early 1970s, in taking *Israel Potter* as picaresque, introduce a somewhat confusing sense of what that means. Pops argues that in Melville's eighth book, we are "reminded of *Omoo*, for it too is witty and picaresque, emphasizes plot and action, eschews religious and sexual symbolism, and almost completely rejects abstract analysis" (159), a point that seems designed exclusively to excuse an unwillingness to consider the book more closely. A somewhat happier formulation is John Seelye's—recognising the "rambling, disjunct structure" of *Israel Potter*, he defines it as "a picaresque novel, a genre in which the linear, narrative element traditionally dominates the structure" (112). Both these critics, however, make the mistake of ascribing a strong sense of plot and progression to the picaresque narrative, which, as I have argued in the introduction, should in fact be considered an anti-teleological form, indeterminate and circular. It is precisely this quality that robs the preponderant external action of any apparent significance, and determines the episodic structure of the picaresque narrative.

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[1] Among those works to make no reference to *Israel Potter* are Thompson's *Melville's Quarrel with God*, Stern's *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville*, Short's *Cast by Means of Figures*, Wenke's *Melville's Muse* and Dimock's *Empire for Liberty*. Critics like Martin Leonard Pops (*The Melville Archetype*) and Bruce L. Grenberg (*Some Other World to Find*), for instance, also find little to say about the book.

Arnold Goldman, presumably also recognising what Freeman called its "grim texture," suggests that "*Israel Potter* is negatively picaresque, its *picaro* an often and progressively deflated figure who is thrust into mischance after mischance" (77). It is difficult to see how this distinguishes it from other picaresque novels, insofar as the basic structure of the picaresque novel is premised on the ironic fragmentation of the *agon* of romance into an inglorious, episodic career of "mischance after mischance." Furthermore, Goldman ignores the fact that Melville's book, like most picaresque narratives, is full of comic incident and that, throughout most of it, its grimness is a matter more of implication than of texture.

Obuchowski is one of the more recent critics to regard *Israel Potter* as a picaresque novel ("Technique" 459-60), and to make that genre a cogent and important part of his analysis of the book. Beyond that, most critics remain content to refer to picaresque qualities in *Israel Potter*. An important example is Cohen's partial acceptance of Freeman's original definition:

> The picaresque is part of the story, and the comment is justified by its roguish protagonist of the low degree, its comic and satiric elements, its vividness to detail enhanced by bravura touches, its episodic nature, and its attention to movement through space and time and a social scale that embraces beggars and kings. Structure and protagonist evolve in a picaresque fashion, in a wandering narrative without a logical story line about a character whose identity is uncertain. (306)

This is a comprehensive and informed critical judgment, which also serves to indicate which points of comparison Melville might have recognised between his own book and a narrative like Alemán's. Still, Cohen's intention is not to identify Melville's book as strictly picaresque for, firstly, he argues for Melville's use of a wide range of genres in it[2] and, more importantly, his reading of *Israel Potter* ultimately posits it as "a plebeian version of the heroic quest" (304), a quest for identity in terms of which "Israel's wanderings" finally do gain some "purpose" (307). This is a contentious point in a discussion which, like Bezanson's "Historical Note," remains a landmark in the critical confrontation with what must be Melville's most neglected book. Therefore, although I appreciate Cohen's sense of the multiplicity of genres (a general Melvillean tendency), and although I also recognise that in certain respects *Israel Potter*, more than *Omoo*, veers from what is generally understood to be picaresque, I retain the latter designation in order to stress the irreverence of its approach, pointlessness of its wanderings, and its avoidance of a redemptive conclusion. It is because of this, too, that I would argue against Christopher Sten's rejection of the term because, while it "has the virtue of capturing something

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[2] The genres that Cohen lists are the "biography, narrative of adventure, patriotic tribute, and epitaph" (301), the "picturesque travel sketch" and "character sketch" (301), the "gothic tale," "historical romance" and "naval history" (303) and, finally, the "tall tale of a slick Yankee," "self-contained parable" and "local color" (303).

of the comic tone and gritty realism of the book, it fails to take into account the important historical dimension of the novel" (261-62). The picaresque tradition is certainly not alien to social criticism,[3] and the effectiveness of *Israel Potter* seems precisely to lie in its subjection of a tale of the Revolution—a tale in which one might expect to find mirrored, on an individual scale, the grand American quest for sovereign national identity—to the demonic, errant world of the picaro, a world which is finally subject only to the heartless, eternal and irredeemable flux of nature.

There is a sense, however, in which the term *picaresque* should be qualified, for if the structure of *Israel Potter*, as well as the world it represents, belongs squarely to the picaresque genre, the protagonist himself somewhat escapes complete identification with the unprincipled picaro. Socially speaking, Israel comes from the lower end of the scale, and is drawn into a life of poverty and precarious survival; his escapades are frequently comic, yet ultimately pathetic; at times, he comes across as something of a simpleton while, at others, he can be shrewd, keeping a vigilant "eye on the main chance" (15; ch. 3); a victim both of society and nature, he is able to hatch (criminal) schemes, and to subsist; he frequently disguises himself, and hence is something of a protean character. In these respects, Israel resembles the picaro. Yet insofar as he is an example of a democratic American, his resemblance to the picaro should be qualified. For the Yankee that we meet in the opening chapters shows himself to be unobstructed by social standing, and is quite able to advance himself financially. He is also a patriot and, in the hands of Melville, distinguishes himself not only at Bunker Hill, but also on several other occasions in the company of the belligerent John Paul Jones. His criminality, also, is more a result of his nationality (the fact of his being at large in a hostile country) than of his inclinations, and it is only rarely (and only under extreme duress) that he actually takes what is not his. The result of all this is that, while in some respects an underdeveloped character, Israel is not wholly without recognisable and consistent traits of personality, and can therefore not be deemed strictly protean. Throughout, he remains a Yankee, and we are meant to recognise him as such, for therein lies Melville's consideration of the Quixotic nature of the American quest for autonomy. Heroic, democratic and resourceful, even Israel Potter is finally swallowed up by history, his Ulyssean wanderings, like his name, fading "out of all memory" (169; ch. 26).

There is a clear link, then, between Melville's treatment of the Yankee picaro's "blue-jean career" (131; ch. 20)—to be contrasted with what *Typee*'s narrator calls "the career of

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[3] Consider, for example *Guzmán*, or Quevedo's *El Buscón*, and see the introduction to this thesis, 26-27.

improvement" (*T* 29; ch. 4)—and his consideration of national identity. To some extent this link is further clarified when we consider Israel also as related to the complex archetype of the Wandering Jew, which Joseph Campbell defines as "despised, unknown, yet with the pearl of great price in his pocket" and associates with, among other figures, "the tatterdemalion beggar, set upon by dogs" and "the masquerading god, Wotan, Viracocha, Edshu" (237). The latter guise seems more appropriate to the elusive, unidentifiable protagonist of *The Confidence-Man*, but Israel convincingly matches the former, right down to being called "a tatterdemalion" (81; ch. 13), and being molested by dogs (81, 20; ch. 3). As the bearer of secrets, too, Israel seems related to the figure. More pointed still is the narrator's own reference, in the penultimate chapter, to Israel as "our Wandering Jew" (165).

The significance of this archetype to the present discussion is made clear in Marie-France Rouart's lucid explication of its development and associative values. She explains that

> [t]he complex myth of the Wandering Jew combines disparate elements: the wandering is in relation to knowledge of heaven or destiny, is assimilated with the movement of human history itself or is linked to a punishment whose origins have been traced to the most ancient cosmic myths. (826)

While Israel's mortality—the fact that he dies at the end of his story—and his general lack of insight into the forces that rule him, would seem to place him beyond the scope of this mysterious, tragic figure of knowledge, both these qualities should be seen in perspective. For one thing, as I have argued in the introduction, the picaresque journey (the demonic opposite of the quest) is, at least symbolically speaking, an eternal one, because non-redemptive. Death intervenes, instead of bringing closure. Time never stands still, and never resolves itself. Thus, what Rouart says of the mythical figure seems wholly applicable to the situation of the picaro in general, and Israel in particular: "Human time is spatialized and dramatized via this foreigner's footsteps in a dynamic, repetitive structure" (826). In a sense one might classify the myth as a heroic version of the myth of the picaro. As for Israel's gnostic simplicity, we will find in chapter 23, "Israel in Egypt," that Israel has indeed been carrying a pearl of wisdom within him, even though that wisdom will confront him with nothing but the hopelessness of redemption.

Rouart argues that "[d]uring the nineteenth century [. . .] the foreigner [. . .] increasingly came to symbolize all marginal life, whether that of an individual or group" (829), and presumably, this sense ultimately lies behind Melville's own use of the term, applied to one who is victim to "a fate, uncommon even to luckless humanity; a fate whose crowning qualities were its remoteness from relief and its depth of obscurity" (160; ch. 24). He may even have had in

mind the figure of Schiller's Armenian in *Der Geisterseher*,[4] in the guise of which, as Rouart points out (quoting Schiller), "the Wandering Jew incarnates the occult force of remorse, escaping all definition: 'He is in no way what he seems. He has worn the mask and costume of all states and all conditions'" (829-30). Once again, these lines seem to have an overt relation to *The Confidence-Man*, but on a less mysterious and haunting level they might very well be applied also to Israel Potter. At any rate, one is tempted to ascribe to Melville a broader sense—if only subconscious—of the Wandering Jew's relation to time and, more pertinently, "the movement of human history itself" and the question of (national) destiny. As James E. Miller points out, "Israel Potter manages to turn up in the vicinity of the most important events of his time, as well as in the presence of many of the most important men" (141). Rouart further underscores this link between protagonist and history when she suggests that "the hero personifies the Romantic feeling of the incompleteness of destiny," and that he may reflect "collective fears concerning the future of nations" (830). It seems to me to be precisely in this sense that Israel Potter, the unfortunate Yankee adventurer, also becomes a representative figure, one who, by dint of his erratic and unromantic career , provides a complex, subversive critique of the monumental founding occasion of the national autonomy, which would go on to bolster and legitimate the ideology of Manifest Destiny in Melville's own day.

According to Cohen, there is documentary evidence that Melville admired Samuel Johnson's denunciation (in *The Rambler*, no. 136) of "the practice of indecent and promiscuous dedication" (qtd. in Cohen 299). However, Melville recognised the uses to which he could put it, and therefore *Israel Potter*, like *Pierre*, opens with a parodic dedication. There seems to be a similarity, too, in the nature of the dedicatee, a mute, majestic Mount Greylock in the former and, in the latter, "His Highness / the / Bunker-Hill Monument" (vii), for they are both pyramidical structures,[5] loci of meaning and, in a sense, bulwarks against anonymity. Both are

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[4] During his 1849 journey to London Melville acquired from Bentley a copy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which apparently included the first part of a translation of Schiller's novel (see Horsford 405). It is not certain when he read the text, though he had certainly done so by the time of his 1856 trip overseas. In a journal entry for 15 December, Melville noted being followed by "an infernal Greek, & confederates" through the streets of Constantinople: "Began to feel nervous; remembered that much of the fearful interest of Schiller's Ghost-seer hangs upon being followed in Venice by an Armenian. The mere mysterious, persistant, silent following" (*J* 64).

[5] Not surprisingly, the rhetoric surrounding the Bunker Hill monument drew on the image of the pyramid. Michael Paul Rogin quotes from Daniel Webster's "oration to celebrate the monument's completion": "It towers above us like 'the mighty pyramid itself,' the senator boasted'" (229). The senator then went on to contrast the slave-built pyramid to the monument, which had a "moral object [. . .] [and] a high end in its erection" (229). In other words,

addressed as exemplary structures within the American landscape: Mount Greylock as the symbol of a constituted natural landscape with a compositional, *picturesque* beauty (a term of appreciation which actually subjects nature even as it appears to praise it), and the Bunker Hill monument as a symbol of the mythological occasion of the attainment of national autonomy—the casting off of the stifling hold of the father. As Spanos puts it, "Melville, like Nietzsche and Foucault, knew too much about monuments, as *Pierre* and especially *Israel Potter* strikingly testify in their profound solicitation of the monumentalizing American Cultural Memory" (155). And that solicitation, as the reviewer for *The National Magazine* (May 1855) recognised with a tone of surprise, was of a less than earnest nature: "A tinge of obscure sarcasm pervades the book, most apparent in its dedication to the Bunker Hill Monument!" (Leyda, *Log* 501). Whether it is the simple (parodic) fact of dedication, or the tone within the dedication itself that is referred to here, is not certain but, either way, this critic, together with the reviewer of the *Albion*, seems to have been the only ones among his contemporaries who recognised that Melville was perhaps not being sincerely patriotic in constructing his "Fourth of July Story."[6]

Melville's subversive intentions—communicated by his "sarcasm"—may have been "obscure," but they emerge from the very beginning. Throughout the dedication, the narrator—who here appears hyperbolically as the "[m]ost devoted and obsequious" editor (viii)—employs an unmistakably ironic tone, and also introduces the central ironic contrast on which the book is premised, namely the discrepancy between the "American Cultural Memory's" monolithic representation of the historical occasion of American Independence—the birth and consecration of a unified national quest—and the actual violence, comedy, confusion and indeterminacy—the picaresque errancy—of that occasion. The opening paragraphs of the dedication already drive something of this point home:

> Biography, in its purer form, confined to the ended lives of the true and brave, may be held the fairest meed of human virtue—one given and received in entire disinterestedness—since neither can the biographer hope for acknowledgement from the subject, nor the subject at all avail himself of the biographical distinction conferred.

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the monument presented a truly American pyramid, a sovereign expression of the American will to freedom. However, as Rogin points out, for Melville the monument maintained the same (ironic) silence as the pyramid it was meant to eclipse (229).

[6] This was the subtitle appended in the first two instalments (July and August 1854) of the serial, although scholars are in disagreement on the source. Cohen suggests that "[i]t could have been Melville himself" (284), while Bezanson feels that "[t]he decision both to supply the Fourth of July reference and later omit it may have been made in the magazine offices, without consulting Melville" (209). Either way, the phrase seems apt insofar as it captures the general spirit in which Melville's tale seems to have been received.

> Israel Potter well merits the present tribute—a private of Bunker Hill, who for his faithful services was years ago promoted to a still deeper privacy under the ground, with a posthumous pension, in default of any during life, annually paid him by the spring in ever-new mosses and sward. (vii)

Superficially speaking, the "editor" may come across as something of an arch-democrat, who seems to feel that a biography of a common, forgotten hero is called for. But it is precisely in drawing this life from a lower social order into the sacred precincts of the Revolutionary occasion, that he comes to destabilise the repose of the monument. Israel Potter seems like unfinished business.

At first, the narrator focuses on the matter of biography which, as he points out, is primarily "confined to [. . .] *ended* lives"; in other words, lives about which there is a sense of completion, and from which there can be no resistance to the design of the biographer. The "disinterestedness" would seem to ensure the objectivity of the biographical account, and becomes an early excuse, on the part of the narrator, for what he is constrained to recount. But this "disinterestedness" acquires quite another sense when viewed in the light of the narrator's later reference to the Bunker Hill monument itself as "the Great Biographer" (viii). For much of the dedication ironically stresses the fact that Israel's "faithful services" never met with any recognition in his lifetime, and that the account of his exploits has very nearly faded into oblivion. The ironies mount when the narrator pretends to give an account of his methodology, an account which Melville scholars have exposed[7] as an inaccurate description of the way Melville himself treated his source:

> I am the more encouraged to lay this performance at the feet of your Highness, because, with a change in the grammatical person, it preserves, almost as in a reprint, Israel Potter's autobiographical story. Shortly after his return in infirm old age to his native land, a little narrative of his adventures, forlornly published on sleazy gray paper, appeared among the peddlers, written, probably, not by himself, but taken down from his lips by another. But like the crutch-marks of the cripple by the Beautiful Gate, this blurred record is now out of print. From a tattered copy, rescued by the merest chance from the rag-pickers, the present account has been drawn, which, with the exception of some expansions, and additions of historic and personal details, and one of two shiftings of scene, may, perhaps, be not unfitly regarded as something in the light of a dilapidated old tombstone retouched. (vii)

The narrator does not really justify his "expansions," "additions" and "shiftings," and it seems unlikely that he would be able to, without both delegitimising his claim for biography, and exposing his subversive project. He proceeds in the reverential and sentimental guise of one who

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[7] See Bezanson (184-205) for an account of how "Melville moved in and out of his sources" (184). However, Melville's "historical liberties" (Leyda, *Log* 501) were already exposed by, of all people, a reviewer for *Putnam's* (1 May 1855), who had a copy of the *Life* before him.

simply aims at the "retouch[ing]" of Israel's "old tombstone." In fact, Melville heightens the pathos throughout, even staging a chance resurrection of Israel's "autobiography" from an anonymous fate.

Insofar as the narrator's admission of creative interference with the original narrative is overt, it somewhat contradicts and undermines the claims he makes when next he turns to that old bugbear of Melville's career, namely narrative authenticity. If *Typee*'s narrator evinced a desire "to speak the unvarnished truth" (Preface xiv) about his experiences, the narrator of *Israel Potter* also undertakes to stay true to his source, the *Life*:

> Well aware that in your Highness' eyes the merit of the story must be in its general fidelity to the main drift of the original narrative, I forbore anywhere to mitigate the hard fortunes of my hero; and particularly towards the end, though sorely tempted, durst not substitute for the allotment of Providence any artistic recompense of poetical justice; so that no one can complain of the gloom of my closing chapters more profoundly than myself. (viii)

This is exquisitely ironic. Although these lines may well have informed Matthiessen's sense of the "miserable compulsion" under which he felt Melville wrote at this stage (491), they seem to be more the result of a combination of a private joke, an apology, and a subversive metaphysics. Firstly, Melville's severe truncation of the end of the *Life* constitutes a major departure from his source, and severely affects the way we experience Israel's life. However, only a few readers—those who had access to the original *Life*—would be aware of the extent of his fictionalising. Secondly, the narrator's apologetic lament regarding the necessary "gloom" of his narrative is certainly a wink in the direction of those critics who fumed over the morbidity of *Pierre*.[8] In fact, the responsibility for that "gloom" is laid squarely at the door of a "Providence" which, by implication, has no sense of "poetical justice." It is a double-pronged critique, for it posits a God that is either conscious and callous—in other words, perverse—or unconscious and impersonal, a mere inchoate—non-"artistic" and unredeeming—force at work in the world, comparable to the "chance" that placed Israel Potter's autobiography in the narrator's hands. In this sense, then, the narrator does stay true to "the main drift" of the narrative, insofar as he preserves the vicissitudes of life not only evident in the *Life*, but in the fate of the narrative itself. The challenge to the reader becomes that of recognising a providential design in that narrative.

With ironies mounting around him, the narrator finally turns to the dedicatee itself, and presents it with his dubious gift:

> Such is the work, and such the man, that I have the honor to present to your Highness. That the name here noted should not have appeared in the volumes of Sparks, may or may not be a matter for astonishment; but Israel Potter seems purposely to have waited

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[8] See, for instance, the *Graham's Magazine* review, October 1852 (Leyda, *Log* 462).

> to make his popular advent under the present exalted patronage, seeing that your Highness, according to the definition above, may, in the loftiest sense, be deemed the Great Biographer: the national commemorator of such of the anonymous privates of July 17, 1775, who may never have received other requital than the solid reward of your granite. (viii)

Under the circumstances (Israel's death in unrelieved poverty) this "solid reward" cannot but appear absurdly abstract. In the end, the untold story of Israel's life is a reproach to the silent Bunker Hill monument, which only "commemorat[es]" the "anonymous privates" by paving over (overlooking) their actual lives, each one of which, like Israel's, must ultimately resist the historical determinism of the term "privates," which coerces errant lives into a uniform and reductive category in the "American Cultural Memory." In a most undemocratic fashion, that memory can accommodate, and save from immediate effacement by time, only the identities of great leaders (for instance, General Putnam at Bunker Hill). The rest must be anonymously accommodated, and thereby subjected to the monumental unity and repose of "granite." Still, as we have seen in *Pierre*, even stone is not exempt from degeneration and decay, and finally must fall prey to the flux of nature. *Israel Potter* is Melville's exploration of the errancy of the occasion (the labyrinth) on which the "solid [. . .] granite" of the pyramidical Bunker Hill monument is founded.

Chapter 1, "The Birthplace of Israel," presents Melville's first major divergence from his source, for there is nothing comparable in the *Life* and, furthermore, it substitutes Melville's own Berkshires for Israel's actual place of birth, Cranston, Rhode-Island. It is a setting he had used extensively both in *Pierre* and in an 1853 short story—in fact, Leon Howard suggests that Melville "had made Israel a native of the Berkshires in order to open the book with a more general description of his own neighborhood than he had used in 'Cock-a-Doodle-Doo!'" (214). This is a fair suggestion, although it rather makes it seem as though Melville sneaked in an otherwise unnecessary piece of prose simply because he felt like writing something more on the Berkshires. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth, since Melville's *Natureingang* is pertinent to his retouching of the Israel Potter story.

At first we seem to be presented with an example of the picturesque, as the narrator places his reader in the position of a leisurely "traveller who [. . .] is content to travel in the good old Asiatic style, neither rushed along by a locomotive, nor dragged by a stage-coach" (3). As Pops has suggested, Melville seems to revert to Washington Irving, "that most picturesque of American writers" (231). Yet this reversion extends beyond the general atmosphere, for the description of the Berkshires seems, to a significant degree, to be a direct response to Irving's own opening to "Rip Van Winkle" (as *Israel Potter* seems to be a response to Irving's

Revolution tale in general[9]). There are some overt similarities between the two openings. Thus, the reference to travelling in the opening line of *Israel Potter* matches the reference to "a voyage" in "Rip Van Winkle" (34); both describe mountainous regions (in the same general area); an image of "columns of smoke rising from the depths of the forest" (4) replaces one of "light smoke curling up from a village" (34); a reference to "the original settlers" (4) matches the reference, in Irving, to "the Dutch colonists" and "the original settlers" (34); and a telling description of dilapidated, "weather-stain[ed]" old houses as "forming part now of the general picturesqueness of the natural scene" replaces Irving's own picturesque description of a landscape that includes houses that are "time-worn and weather-beaten" (34). However, such correspondences only serve to show up what distinguishes Melville's approach from Irving's—in other words, the extent to which his picturesque is only a ruse. For just as, in *Pierre*, the Delectable Mountain, at closer inspection, seems more deserving of the title, Mount of Titans (344; bk. 25, ch. 4), so the picturesque scenery in *Israel Potter* shows some significant signs of a violent, demonic undercurrent. It is here also that we find a convincing rationale for Melville's use of a setting that, according to Howard, he had already exploited in "Cock-A-Doodle-Doo." For the "capacious rolling country" we encounter in the opening paragraphs of that story is violent, primal and dissolutive, suggestively captured by the narrator's comment that "[t]he country looked underdone, its raw juices squirting out all round" (269, 268). In *Israel Potter*, as in *Pierre*, the narrator initially stands back from the scene in order to establish a picturesque repose, to provide what Howard calls "a more general description" (214), but a moment's consideration of the diction reveals that the narrator is in fact constantly undermining the peaceful pretensions of the picturesque glance. Early on, the landscape is already defined as something alien, and the demonic picaresque world is hinted at in the passing remark that "[u]nless by a sudden precipitation of the road you find yourself plunging into some gorge; you pass on, and on, and on" (3). It is a world that is shown to be resistant to cultivation, for the most part covered either in "wood or pasture" (4). The mountain chains are "serpentine," while the Housatonic is described as "wind[ing] on in her watery labyrinth" (5). Finally the narrator runs us through the four seasons, and as his description winds down to winter, presents us with "bleak and sere" mountains, "scowling glen," "grim rocks" and a "menacing scene" (6).

Nowhere, however, does the demonic quality of the landscape become more pointed than in the narrator's establishment of a violent *agon* between man and nature, presented here in

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[9] Two critics, Arnold Goldman (83) and John B. Williams (171), recognise the basic similarity of the ending of *Israel Potter* to that of "Rip Van Winkle." Only Goldman, however, has seen Melville's ending as revising Irving's (83), and neither has argued for any other points of intertextuality.

mythical terms. After an initial identification of the area as resistant to cultivation, and the soil's near "exhaust[ion]," the narrator turns to the Puritan colonists:

> Yet during the first settlement of the country, the region was not unproductive. Here it was that the original settlers came, acting upon the principle well-known to have regulated their choice of site, namely, the high land in preference to the low, as less subject to the unwholesome miasmas generated by breaking into the rich valleys and alluvial bottoms of primeval regions. By degrees, however, they quitted the safety of this sterile elevation, to brave the dangers of the richer though lower fields. So that at the present day, some of those mountain townships present an aspect of singular abandonment. Though they have never known aught but peace and health, they, in one lesser aspect at least, look like countries depopulated by plague and war. (4)

Here we see demonstrated Melville's keen sense of the mythical patterns that "regulated" what Spanos calls "the American errand in the wilderness" (2). The settlers are shown to be idealists, who act strictly from a "principle" that disposes them to seek out high ground. Like the placing of the jar "upon a hill" in Wallace Stevens's poem, it is an act which imparts some form to the "slovenly wilderness," represented here by the "unwholesome miasmas," "alluvial bottoms" and "primeval regions." Yet the wilderness, for all its dangers, and in spite of the fact that it is "lower," is also fertile, and the narrator beautifully captures the submission of idealism to expedience in the image of a gradual migration from the "sterile elevation" to the "richer though lower fields." And the image may well be more complex than that, for though it suggests a kind of "degeneration" in the American character—from principle to common sense—on another level it may well figure the secularisation of Puritan idealism, a conversion of vertical aspiration (for heaven) into horizontal aspiration (for empire).

The narrator's focus remains with the American character from the time of the settlers to the time of the Revolution. He marvels at the feats performed by a sheer act of will, as in the case of the surviving stone walls "of uncommon neatness and strength":

> The number and length of these walls is not more surprising than the size of some of the blocks comprising them. The very Titans seemed to have been at work. That so small an army as the first settlers must needs have been, should have taken such wonderful pains to inclose so ungrateful a soil; that they should have accomplished such herculean undertakings with so slight prospect of reward; this is a consideration which gives us a significant hint of the temper of the men of the Revolutionary era.
>
> Nor could a fitter country be found for the birthplace of the devoted patriot, Israel Potter.
>
> To this day the best stone-wall builders, as the best wood-choppers, come from those solitary mountain towns; a tall, athletic, and hardy race, unerring with the axe as the Indian with the tomahawk; at stone-rolling, patient as Sisyphus, powerful as Samson. (4-5)

There certainly is a sense of awe here, and in a sense we are reminded once again of Tommo who, standing in front of the unaccountable monument of stone "terraces" in the Typee valley, also feels that "[t]heir magnitude [. . .] is less striking than the immense size of the blocks

composing them" (*T* 154; ch. 21). These blocks are related to the massive blocks used to build the pyramids (to which Tommo also refers), and become a sign of man's triumph, by technology or by will, over nature and time. Accordingly, the stature of the intrepid settlers grows to that of Titans. It is an interesting choice of title, for though it is Melvillean shorthand for designating an absolutist character, the comparison of the pious settlers to the heaven-stormers seems incongruous in a way that the association of Ahab or Pierre with these ill-fated demigods does not. A similar sense of incongruity attends the settlers' comparison, for instance, to "an army" (associated with empire-building), or to the fallen sensualist, Samson. In the context of the early settlers's view of Indians as in league with Satan, the comparison to "the Indian with the tomahawk" seems especially impertinent. The most telling comparison, however, lies in the reference to Sisyphus,[10] the supreme figure of non-progressive, repetitive human effort and a fine illustration of the Solomonic principle that "all is vanity" (Eccles. 1. 2). The allusion to that figure here alerts us to the narrator's sense of the Titanic Puritan effort, a sense which determines his view of all human action throughout the rest of the book. Here it is linked to the remark that the settlers were willing to engage "herculean undertakings with [. . .] slight prospect of reward," a remark which, firstly, carries metaphysical implications and, secondly, gains a deeply ironic charge when viewed in the light of the narrator's almost immediate suggestion that not "a fitter country [could] be found for the birthplace of the patriot, Israel Potter." After all, Israel Potter, as both the dedication and the final paragraph of the book tell us, was never rewarded for his own heroic efforts, which include his persistence in the face of the abject.

While there may be a private joke, then, in the narrator's point that "not a fitter country could be found" (since at this juncture biography gives way to fiction), it is more than a case of Melville being disingenuous. Neither is his main purpose here to create an image of Israel Potter as descended from heroic stock, although such a link between the protagonist and the American character remains important. The main purpose of Melville's *Natureingang*, it would seem, is to provide an image of the abiding *agon* between man and the broad natural backdrop that must always defeat his ambitions and principles, and at length efface even his most solid works. For it is this broad backdrop that provides the context for all human action and effort—including the Revolution—and emerges as the determining force in the wayward fortunes of the protagonist.

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[10] Rouart links Sisyphus with the Wandering Jew insofar as both reflect "a mystery of the human being which is erected on the apparent failure of a revealed mystery" (832), by which I take her to mean that both are anti-apocalyptic figures. Their mysteriousness resembles that of the silent "Sphynx" Ahab addresses in *Moby-Dick* (331; ch. 70), and stems from a silence—like the "Silence [which] is the only Voice of our God" (*P* 204; bk. 14, ch. 1)—which both covers (renders sacred) and "reveals" the void.

On this scene, then, Israel Potter—in chapter 2, "The Youthful Adventures of Israel"—makes his appearance as a type of the American. Melville leaves his early youth to the reader's "[i]magination" (7). Instead, he focuses on Israel's engagement with the world, an engagement that retains its association to the Fall in the image of Israel's rebellion against his father. Like so many of Melville's protagonists before him, Israel becomes, at least symbolically, an orphan, and a self-reliant man. This rebellion is directly related to America's rebellion against England and George III when the narrator suggests "that ere, on just principles throwing off the yoke of his king, Israel, on equally excusable grounds, emancipated himself from his sire" (7). Emblematic, too, is Israel's comprehensive entrepreneurial project to gain financial independence by way of a number of occupations—first farming, surveying, hunting, trading with Indians, and later, whaling—which essentially belong to the frontier. As the narrator points out, "[i]n this way was bred that fearless self-reliance and independence which conducted our forefathers to national freedom" (9). Independence and frontier are linked and, by logical extension, so are independence and imperial conquest. Most pointed, perhaps, is Israel's abandoned project (one of the few not to succeed) of "clearing out a farm for himself in the wilderness" (8). For herein lies the link between America's independence and the nation's sovereign and imperial errand in the wilderness—both relate to national individuation, the attainment of an autonomous, free identity.

Such echoes of national progress in Israel's own is nicely offset by the narrator's use of the word "wanderings" (7), which anticipates the drift of Israel's later career, and suggests a certain determining aimlessness even in Israel's early project, his emancipation in order to get married. The resourceful young man seems strangely lax when it comes to effecting the marriage his breach with his father is meant to have made possible. But we are reminded, perhaps not incidentally, of the unrequited love that grants purpose and meaning—and hence, structure—to the life of the knight-errant. At any rate, all Israel's efforts turn out to have been in vain when, after all his "rovings" (10), he returns home, only to find that his "hopes were not destined to be crowned with fruition. The dear, false girl, was another's" (11). It is an experience that sets the pattern for the rest of the narrative, for Israel's picaresque wanderings. But insofar as "[t]he dear, false girl," the object of the Love that initially provides the "excusable grounds" for Israel's "emancipat[ion]" (7), has become associated with the "just principles" excusing the Revolution (7), she would seem to be a figure for the way in which those principles had been betrayed by the time Melville wrote *Israel Potter*, when America's ideals of freedom had long since been eclipsed by the reality of imperialism and conquest.

With the preliminaries over, Israel's career proper commences with the defining occasion of his life—his involvement in the Battle of Bunker Hill. The choice of title for the chapter is interesting, though, for it proleptically counters the sense of momentousness one might have expected from the account of the battle itself. The lumbering title informs us that "Israel Goes to the Wars; and Reaching Bunker Hill in Time to Be of Service There, Soon After Is Forced to Extend His Travels across the Sea into the Enemy's Land," thereby stressing, not the central significance of the battle (as defining, monumental occasion in both Israel's life and the life of the nation), but the unceasing passage of time, the fact that life goes on in spite of everything. This point is also suggested by the devastating, laconic sentence that closes the one lengthy paragraph that describes the Yankee fortification of Bunker Hill, the battle itself, Israel's treatment in the hospital for several wounds, and his eventual assistance, upon returning to his regiment, in "throwing up entrenchments on Prospect Hill": "Bunker Hill was now in possession of the foe, who had in turn fortified it" (14).

The matter-of-fact style of narration—which makes for comparatively effortless reading—also has something remorseless about it. Events come and go, and the reader is carried along in a way that mirrors Israel's own abduction by history. Within the space of two paragraphs, Israel becomes a prisoner-of-war in a battle at sea, and is almost executed (it is by sheer luck that he is spared); three more paragraphs, and he is an escaped fugitive running around in the English countryside. Immediately, also, we notice the appearance of comic incident and burlesque humour. Israel effects his escape from an "ale-house" after ostensibly answering the "still more imperative calls" of nature (15).[11] Caught again, he falls to drinking with his captors and only escapes becoming as inebriated as them because he is made to dance a jig, and proceeds to give them "a touch of certain Yankee steps, as yet undreamed of in their simple philosophy" (16). Suddenly, also, we are introduced to a more duplicitous side of Israel, who, "with much of the gentleness of the dove, is not wholly without the wisdom of the serpent" (16). If the formulation reminds us of the Reverend Falsegrave's "cameo brooch, representing the allegorical union of the serpent and the dove" (*P* 102; bk. 5, ch. 4), which symbolised the spiritual leader's own hypocritical submission to secular expedience, it also foreshadows the character of that archetypal American, Benjamin Franklin, who in *Israel Potter* emerges as a blend of "[t]he diplomatist and the shepherd; [. . .] the apostolic serpent and dove" (46; ch. 8).

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[11] The guard registers a comic complaint against "these Yankees; no better edication than to be gettin' up on nateral necessities at this time o'night. It ain't nateral; it's unnateral" (17; ch. 3).

However, in the overtly picaresque world of *Israel Potter* and, more particularly, in the men that belong to this world, these qualities do not appear so damnable and hypocritical as they do in a spiritual leader like Falsgrave, who cannot quite practise what he preaches. Israel and Franklin do not appeal to God or divine law for guidance—both of them are, as the narrator points out on separate occasions, "keen observers of the main chance" (46).

Israel's relationship with chance becomes overt, for the first time, as the narrator describes the circumstances of his second escape. Israel, as he drinks "from the hand of his foe," we are told, "still keeps his eye on the main chance" (16; ch. 3). It is here that he is closest to the picaro, who cannot appeal to a higher authority, and must try and make his own luck. It is the kind of ethic we will encounter also in Franklin, and one which is central to the idea of the American self-made man. By setting Israel up as a resourceful Yankee, only to trace out his miserable fortunes—which occur in spite of all his efforts—Melville achieves his most telling subversion of the optimistic Yankee belief in the power of the individual to invent and fulfil a glorious destiny. With his "eye on the main chance," Israel is nonetheless busy "cogitating a little plot to himself" (16). In short, he proleptically scripts his life (if only his immediate future) even as he remains conscious, as many of Melville's earlier protagonists never were, or never wanted to be, that the plot remains premised on nothing more stable than his own opportunism. However, as the "plotless[ness]" (Williams 171) of *Israel Potter* goes to show, life has a way of defying *all* plots. Chance, which corresponds roughly to the "Fate" we encounter in such books as *White-Jacket* and *Pierre*, becomes the deciding force in all human affairs.

Melville's most significant "retouch[ing]" (vii) of Trumbull's *Life*, I would argue, is not his creative inclusion of historical material alien to the source text, an inclusion which intensified the national implications of Israel's story. The major departure is his substitution, for Providence, of the rule of chance. The "autobiography" is shot through with references to the "interfere[nce]" of "providence" (289), "the interposition of kind providence" (297), the "favour" of "providence" (354), "the kind interposition of Providence" (366), and "the will of providence" (368), as well as pronouncements of gratitude to (or acceptance of the will of) "the supreme Arbiter of allotments" (364), "the Almighty" (366), "the Supreme Giver of patience and fortitude" (370), and "that Almighty Being" (387-88). This determining force is only nominally replaced—usually in the recounting of adversity—by "fate" (e.g., 338, 368). The doubtlessly unintentional incremental effect of these references is a cosmic irony to which Melville would have been highly alert. In *Israel Potter* he makes the most of that irony by limiting the use of pious expressions to a few choice occasions, and extending the reign of fate, or chance, over the course

of Israel's life. One such occasion, already quoted, is Melville's use, in the dedication, of Trumbull's phrase "the supreme Arbiter of allotments," in excusing the absence of "poetical justice" in his narrative, due to his biographer's fidelity to "the allotment of Providence" (viii). That allotment, in the case of Israel Potter, constitutes precisely that "gross [. . .] injustice," which Ishmael, with a most subversive piety, could ascribe only to "a sort of interregnum in Providence" (*MD* 320; ch. 72). In other words, the "allotment of Providence" deconstructs the very idea of Providence itself (as an active, conscious, "providential" force in human destiny). It becomes subject to those very errant, demonic forces—chance, fate, nature, etc.—it was meant to replace and banish in the first place, by granting a plot to human existence.

Chance and disorder have a firm hand in Israel's adventures in England. Even incidental detail serves to confirm a sense of randomness and confusion. A strangely poignant example is Israel's outsider's view through "the window of a now noiseless public-house [of] [. . .] a table all in disorder, covered with empty flagons, and tobacco-ashes, and long pipes; some of the latter broken" (19; ch. 3), which simultaneously captures both the feeling of emptiness that characterises the morning after (the anti-climax of a spent celebration), and the full force of Israel's unrelieved isolation (pipes are always a domestic source of comfort in Melville). He heads for London with the intention of disappearing among its masses, thus embarking on a kind of expedient "quest" that resembles Typee/Paul and Long Ghost/Peter's "quest" to the "solitary inland village" of Tamai in the picaresque *Omoo* (234; ch. 62). Not surprisingly, this journey is not met with success. Israel is forced to adopt "wretched rags" emblematic of the "long career of destitution before him" (19), to act as a cripple, to take "a roundabout course" to his destination (21), and to negotiate all manner of "unlooked-for obstacles in his path—walls, ditches and streams" (21). But at the end of the day he is simply "[t]aken captive once again on the very brink of reaching his goal" (23; ch. 4). Once again, Israel has "to bethink him how to be extricated from this labyrinth" (23).

Of course, being in a labyrinth does not mean that events will never be disposed in one's favour. Once more Israel succeeds in escaping, and this time is rewarded with a period of relative repose, first as a gardener for Sir John Millet, and then, most extraordinarily, "as a laborer in the King's Gardens at Kew" (29; ch. 5), where Melville even involves his protagonist in "one chance conversation with the monarch" (30). In both cases Melville makes use of the opportunity to stress Israel's constitutional democracy by rendering him incapable of addressing the illustrious English figures by their proper titles (a problem the real Israel Potter seems not to

have shared[12]). But the more striking effect of both episodes is to stress the humanity of figures that represent everything the Revolution meant to reject. Recognising Israel for the Yankee fugitive he is, they nonetheless harbour him and ensure his immediate safety, in which respect they certainly come off better than those characters—like Franklin and the sympathiser, Squire Woodcock—that are meant to be Israel's allies, yet for the most part seem less interested in his welfare than in what Spanos has called his "use value" (209). Such a complication of the diagrammatic polar oppositions of romance also resists any simplistic assignment of values to characters, a most "unlooked-for" quality in "A Fourth of July Story." Incongruous as it may seem, it is only "in the Lion's Den" at Kew Gardens (29; ch. 5), or at Sir Millet's, that Israel gains significant respite from an otherwise mad, remorseless career. Of course, that, too, is brought to an end when the season changes (32; ch. 5). Israel goes back to being a hunted man. And it is at this telling moment that the narrator, lifting a formulation straight from the *Life*, informs us "that in a fit of despair he was about to surrender himself, and submit to his fate, when Providence seasonably interposed in his favor" (32).

What happens next is adequately summarised by the title of chapter 6: "Israel Makes the Acquaintance of Certain Secret Friends of America, One of Them Being the Famous Author of the 'Diversions of Purley.' These Despatch Him on a Sly Errand across the Channel."[13] It is an acquaintance that rescues him from his immediate troubles, and one which would seem, at first, to hold the promise of the complete cessation of his troubles altogether. Of course, since the reader has by now been informed a number of times that Israel's sufferings are to be a protracted affair,[14] a fact which has the additional effect, as Obuchowski has pointed out, of making him "follow the events of Israel's life with detachment" ("Technique" 460), he is doubly alert to the ways in which Israel's allies will fail to effect his redemption. Indeed, that failure seems already inscribed in the circumstances that give rise to this new acquaintance, for Israel is not summoned from hiding out of charity, but because the three "friends to America [. . .] have resolved to employ" him (34). He is sent on an errand to Paris, to meet with "[t]he venerable Dr. Franklin" (38; ch. 7), a mission which, far from freeing him from equivocation and paranoia, only pulls him the more deeply into the underworld (a point driven home when, in chapter 12, he finds

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[12] See the corresponding section (on Millet) in the *Life*, in which "Sir" and "Mr" are used interchangeably (320-28).

[13] Cohen has convincingly demonstrated how the "Contents" of *Israel Potter* may serve as "a synopsis and an outline of its settings and structure" (289).

[14] Most obviously there is the subtitle, which refers to Israel's *Fifty Years of Exile*. But the dedication also stresses "the hard fortunes of [. . .] [the] hero" (viii), and in the text itself, the narrator has referred to "that long career of destitution" and "forty torpid years of pauperism" (19; ch. 3).

himself buried alive in a secret closet at the Squire's abode). Fitted with a pair of boots with "false heels" in which certain secret papers are concealed (36; ch. 6), Israel becomes the very figure of duplicity. In a sense he becomes a parodic double of the Wandering Jew with his concealed "pearl" (Campbell 237) and mysterious knowledge, and he also, if only superficially, recalls White-Jacket's suggestion that "we ourselves are the repositories of the secret packet, whose mysterious contents we long to learn" (398; ch. 94). Israel is sent on an errand that he does not really know the significance of. Yet he goes for two related reasons: firstly, from a sense of patriotic duty, to which Squire Woodcock appeals (34; ch. 6), and, secondly, from a hope of redemption. Of course, the first, in a sense, by granting a sense of purpose, is an important step in attaining the second. It is in this regard that the unfolding of the rest of the narrative is of particular interest. For it is pertinent to Melville's critique of the monumentalised Revolutionary occasion that even Israel's reassimilation into the goal-oriented activities of the Revolution does not counter the erratic nature of his career (nor the episodic structure of the narrative that contains him).

Benjamin Franklin's introduction into the narrative is accompanied by an atmosphere of magic. Arriving at the house where the inveterate inventor and thinker lives, Israel is immediately confronted by an "unlooked-for sort of enchantment" when the gate suddenly swings open by itself (38; ch. 7). The mystery is soon cleared up when he learns that the porter has managed this feat by means of a spring mechanism. By means of this detail the narrator prepares us for Franklin in two important ways. Firstly, as an improvement most likely effected by Franklin himself, the "magical" gate becomes our first introduction to the man's inventiveness and meddlesome character, both of which are clearly in evidence in the next few chapters. Secondly, it also introduces the theme of illusion, for the portrayal of Franklin on some level also manages to reveal the secret and equivocal mechanisms at work behind the monumental, "magical" image of the American hero. Bearing in mind the "magic" at the gate, we can hardly avoid some critical distance on first finding ourselves "in the presence of the venerable Doctor Franklin":

> Wrapped in a rich dressing-gown—a fanciful present from an admiring Marchesa—curiously embroidered with algebraic figures like a conjuror's robe, and with a skull-cap of black satin on his hive of a head, the man of gravity was seated at a huge claw-footed old table, round as the zodiac. (38)

Dressed in costume, Franklin appears here, somewhat parodically, as the legendary American magician, or alchemist—a self-made man both abuzz with ideas and equipped with the knowledge to convert those ideas into successful inventions. This character is also imagistically

linked to the assertion of American identity when the narrator, in presenting a sweeping glance of the room, describes

> wide maps of far countries in the New World, containing vast empty spaces in the middle, with the word D E S E R T diffusely printed there, so as to span five-and-twenty degrees of longitude with only two syllables,—which printed word however bore a vigorous pen-mark, in the Doctor's hand, drawn straight through it, as if in summary repeal of it [. . .]. (38)

Repealing the Eurocentric view of the New World as a desert (biblically speaking, a term comparable to "wilderness"), Franklin, the archetypal American success, asserts the sovereign American identity by recalling (typographically repeating) the successful colonial liberation of the wilderness from the rule of nature, beasts and so-called savages. The "middle" of the "New World," for Franklin, is no longer "empty," or of indeterminate, "diffuse" meaning. Perhaps, however, his "repeal" is not quite as effective as it is meant to be, for it is less an affirmation of a new identity than it is a negation of a former one. In rejecting a term which is offensive to his patriotism, Franklin leaves the middle of the New World completely unscripted, both a space of possibilities and a heart of darkness.[15] His glib repeal of the desert from a room in Paris resembles his own primarily diplomatic role in the Revolution, his management of violence from that very same room.

It is particularly Franklin's appearance as a kind of "conjuror" that puts us on our guard, and our ambiguous sense of him is intensified by such details as his detached "cool[ness]" in a warm chamber that "buzz[es] with flies" (39), and the pertinently made point that, "when Israel stepped within the chamber, [. . .] the sage's back, not his face, was turned to him" (39). Emblematic of the eventual abandonment of Israel by his comrades once his usefulness has expired, this moment also preserves the mythical character for a moment longer, before he turns round and almost immediately turns into what Obuchowski has termed "a stingy, boorish, petty, moralizing old prude" ("Technique" 469). This judgment is limiting, especially in its silence on Franklin's sly humour, but thus qualified, it may serve to characterise the image of Franklin that dominates the remainder of chapter 7, and it finds an echo in the narrator's own eventual admission that his portrayal of Franklin "but served to manifest him in his far lesser lights; thrifty, domestic, dietarian, and, it may be, didactically waggish" (48; ch. 8). Right off the bat, upon first seeing Israel, "the grave man of utility" ("the wise man," "the venerable sage," "the

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[15] In *Heart of Darkness*, of course, Marlow describes the "blank space of delightful mystery" (Conrad 39) on the maps he studies. As the rest of his story goes to show, that blankness obscures undocumented atrocities. It is tempting to speculate whether Franklin's silence on the "middle" he claims from the desert does not in some way suggest a willing blindness to the reality of colonisation (i.e., what it in fact means to draw a line through the desert).

man of gravity," etc.) starts preaching against the vanity of high heels, that is, until he realises that "your high heels, instead of being idle vanities, seem to be full of meaning" (40).

Still, Franklin's main impact in the book is as a proponent of a utilitarian and self-reliant ethic of practical expedience that in many respects reminds us of the ideas expressed in the pamphlet of the equivocal and ambiguous Plinlimmon in *Pierre*. Franklin, too, apparently rejects the efficacy of Christian ideals in a horological world of governments and business. His ethic is most clearly expressed in his mercenary dictum that Israel (and, later, John Paul Jones) encounters in *Poor Richard's Almanac*, namely "God helps them that help themselves" (54; ch. 9). It is a dictum that completely counters the pious reliance on Providence that ostensibly characterises the real Israel Potter's acceptance of his hard fortune, and it is given a particular mythic ring in the narrator's description of Franklin in chapter 8, in which we find him compared to Jacob:[16]

> The first, both in point of time and merit, of American envoys was famous not less for the pastoral simplicity of his manners than for the politic grace of his mind. Viewed from a certain point, there was a touch of primeval orientalness in Benjamin Franklin. Neither is there wanting something like his scriptural parallel. The history of the patriarch Jacob is interesting not less from the unselfish devotion which we are bound to ascribe to him, than from the deep worldly wisdom and polished Italian tact, gleaming under an air of Arcadian unaffectedness. The diplomatist and shepherd are blended; a union not without warrant; the apostolic serpent and dove. A tanned Machiavelli in tents. [. . .]
>
> Franklin all over is of a piece. He dressed his person as his periods; neat, trim, nothing superfluous, nothing deficient. In some of his works his style is only surpassed by the unimprovable sentences of Hobbes of Malmsbury, the paragon of perspicuity. The mental habits of Hobbes and Franklin in several points, especially in one of some moment, assimilated. Indeed, making due allowance for soil and era, history presents few trios more akin, upon the whole, than Jacob, Hobbes, and Franklin; three labyrinth-minded, but plain-spoken Broadbrims, at once politicians; keen observers of the main chance; prudent courtiers; practical magians in linsey woolsey. (46-48)

Here we finally see the full significance of the narrator's reference to "a conjurer's robe" in the opening description of the famous man. Franklin, sage and practical as he is, is also something of an equivocator. His "thrift" remains a persistent characteristic, and is here extended by a complex evocation of a Hobbesian economy of prose—a preparation for Israel's encounter with *Poor Richard's Almanac*. But there is also the suggestion here that this narrative "perspicuity" or "plain-spoken[ness]" somewhat deviously overlays a "labyrinth"; i.e., gives the lie to its complexity, in Franklin's case, by proffering easily digested but ethically ambiguous maxims to

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[16] This comparison is already implicit in the language of chapter 7, as in Franklin's admonishment to Israel to "[b]e a plain man, and stick to plain things" (45). Jacob, too, "was a plain man, dwelling in tents" (Gen. 25. 27). These "tents" are referred to in the quoted definition of Franklin in chapter 8.

the world. And nowhere is this ambiguity of character stressed so effectively as in Franklin's comparison to Jacob, the biblical "patriarch" who bought his elder brother, Esau, out of his birthright, and swindled him out of his blessing; the "plain man, dwelling in tents" who finally "came with subtilty" (Gen. 25. 27; 27. 36). It is in this light, too, that we should read the comic episode that follows in chapter 9, in which Franklin relieves Israel of all the luxuries set out in his room—Otard, Cologne, sugar and, essentially, a French chambermaid—for what may be purely selfish reasons. Israel, of course, is not wholly fooled: "'Every time he comes in he robs me,' soliloquised Israel, dolefully; 'with an air all the time, too, as if he were making me presents'" (53).

At the end of the day, utilitarian practicality and equivocation are perfectly wedded in Franklin, who has gained an almost mystical insight into the workings of the world (society). As the narrator informs us, "[h]aving carefully weighed the world, Franklin could act any part in it" (48; ch. 8). It is a knowledge that grants him a Plinlimmon-like moral detachment from the world around him, and it is that detachment, the narrator suggests, that enables him to operate with such facility in it:

> This philosophical levity of tranquillity, so to speak, is shown in his easy variety of pursuits. Printer, postmaster, almanac maker, essayist, chemist, orator, tinker, statesman, humorist, philosopher, parlor-man, political economist, professor of housewifery, ambassador, projector, maxim-monger, herb-doctor, wit:—Jack of all trades, master of each and mastered by none—the type and genius of his land. Franklin was everything but a poet. (48)

The laconic last sentence captures a deficiency in Franklin, a lack of heart perhaps—that heart which Melville deemed the seat of sympathetic humanity, and which Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, classifying human bodies as "*automata*," considered nothing "but a *spring*" (19)—but certainly an absence of poetic sensibility. He is a tradesman, a complex of personalities; in short, something of a cosmopolitan confidence man, but also the archetypal entrepreneurial American (in which sense Israel, who also adopts a number of roles and occupations in the course of the book, resembles him). His catalogue of trades implicitly fills in that blank left upon his crossing out of the word "Desert" on the map of the New World. In this sense, Franklin—as American type—undermines the idealistic rhetoric of Manifest Destiny belonging to Melville's own age, as he shows the "type and genius of his land" to be defined not by lofty principles but by opportunism and expedience. As John Bryant has pointed out, "unreliable voices can lead us toward truths (as witness Plinlimmon in *Pierre* or Franklin in *Israel Potter*)" (*Repose* 256).

The equivocal voice replaces the voice of idealism. In Franklin's inner sanctum there are no monumental speeches on national destiny. But at first it also seems to displace the "barbaric yawp" that Whitman still hoped to "sound over the roofs of the world" (*Song* [52] line 1323). It

is this sense that leads Michael Paul Rogin to suggest that "Melville Americanized the story of Jacob and Esau in *Israel Potter*. He made John Paul Jones the dispossessed Indian; Ben Franklin was the American Jacob" (42). When Jones, "Another Adventurer[,] Appears upon the Scene" in chapter 10, he is first announced as "a very rude gentleman" by the "pretty chambermaid" (55), and then described as "a rather small, elastic, swarthy man, with an aspect as of a disinherited Indian Chief in European clothes" (56). He is the rustic Esau, dressed in the clothes of his conquerors. In terms of Rogin's argument, this is the colonised Native American Indian, but also the vital, poetic, romantic American father, who is eclipsed by the "calculating, prudential Ben Franklin of the marketplace" (225). The "European clothes" complete the image of subjection. Still, one has to wonder about the efficacy of that subjection, especially when we consider the rest of the narrator's description of this other "Adventurer":

> An unvanquishable enthusiasm, intensified to perfect sobriety, couched in his savage, self-possessed eye. He was elegantly and somewhat extravagantly dressed as a civilian; he carried himself with a rustic, barbaric jauntiness, strangely dashed with a superinduced touch of the Parisian *salon*. His tawny cheek, like a date, spoke of the tropic. A wonderful atmosphere of proud friendlessness and scornful isolation invested him. Yet was there a bit of the poet as well as the outlaw in him, too. A cool solemnity of intrepidity sat on his lip. He looked like one who of purpose sought out harm's way. He looked like one who had never been, and never would be, a subordinate. (56)

Dressed like a dandy, Jones is nonetheless reminiscent, in his "isolation" and "intrepidity," of the Titanic Ahab. The apparent incongruity he presents cuts both ways. Ultimately he seems less a figure of subjection than a reminder of the primal violence that underlies all empires and civilisations. It is a point borne out by the later image of Jones's "deep blue, elaborate, labyrinthine, cabalistic" tattoos covered by "his laced coat-sleeve," at which he "glanc[es] ironically" (62, 63), and made overt in the narrator's comment that

> the heart of the metropolis of modern civilization was secretly trod by this jaunty barbarian in broad-cloth; a sort of prophetical ghost, glimmering in anticipation upon the advent of the tragic scenes of the French Revolution which levelled the exquisite refinement of Paris with the blood-thirsty ferocity of Borneo; showing that broaches and finger-rings, not less than nose-rings and tattooing, are tokens of the primeval savageness which ever slumbers in human kind, civilised or uncivilised. (63)

The reference to the French Revolution here—in a book set during the American Revolution—cannot but imply a comparable "blood-thirsty ferocity" at work in the constitutional American occasion, a matter that receives thorough expression in the account of the monumental battle between the *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Serapis* in chapter 19. But this passage also somewhat complicates the association of Jones with the disinherited Esau. If civilisation is Franklin's undisputed arena, that arena is shown to be ultimately prone to a "primeval savageness" that may at any time wake from its "slumber." The relationship between Franklin and Jones eventually

seems to take on less the shape of a simple master-servant or manipulator-manipulated structure, than that of a tentative compromise. Franklin may have his means of working upon Jones, but one should not lose sight of the fact that, in his dealings with humanity, the hero generally gets things his way. When later he is finally assigned the ship he petitioned Franklin for, we are told that "[h]e sailed without any instructions" (95; ch. 15). Franklin's wisdom consists in his recognition that Jones cannot ultimately be ruled: "'Let him alone;' was the wise man's answer to some statesman who sought to hamper Paul with a letter of instructions" (95).

Almost a third of *Israel Potter* is devoted to Israel's adventurous and action-packet association with John Paul Jones, an association which is wholly invented by Melville, even though his account draws strongly on the facts of Jones's career as he encountered it, according to Bezanson, in "Ronald C. Sands's compiled *Life and Correspondence of John Paul Jones*" (184). But though the two men first meet during Israel's stay at Franklin's lodgings in Paris, this association is only picked up after Israel's return to England and his eventual impressment into the British naval service.

Israel's departure from Paris—where he leaves Franklin "pondering upon the chances of the important enterprise" (65; ch. 12)—once again unceremoniously plunges him into further strange and humorous adventures. After a run-in with a thief while crossing the channel, he returns to Squire Woodcock's house, where he is secreted in "a little closet, or rather cell, built into the massive main wall of the mansion" (67). What follows has been defined by Bezanson as a "Gothic digression" (194), in which Israel is locked up with no apparent means of escape—"buried alive," as he puts it (68; ch. 12)—and lies waiting for the Squire's return, which never comes. The scene underscores the ironic fact of Israel's continual incarceration by his own allies—as he himself points out, "I was a sort of prisoner in Paris, just as I seem to be made one here" (68)—but its effect extends way beyond that specific point. For a brief time the narrative loses most of its humorous undertone as Israel is reduced to "mutely rav[ing] in the darkness" (70). The scene to some extent anticipates the hopeless gloom of Israel's London years, but it may well also serve to shift the reader's attention, for a moment, toward the darker, more demonic implications of Israel's isolation from a community. Finally, however, the episode seems to present what Cohen has called "a resurrection with a parodic twist" (294). Squire Woodcock humorously informs Israel that his "resurrection will be soon at hand" (68), and on the archetypally appropriate "morning of the third day" readies himself for a deliverance that does not come. As Rogin puts it, "Squire Woodcock is playing God to Israel's Christ; instead he dies himself" (228). In this sense, the entire scene presents the hopelessness of Israel's reliance

on Providence, positing God as an absence. In the end, Israel has to find his own way out of the cell, something he manages only by chance, as "[h]is foot [. . .] unconsciously presse[s] some spring laid in the floor" (72).

Of course, in the world of Israel Potter, such redemption brings no respite. As Edgar A. Dryden puts it, "Israel's subsequent actions suggest [. . .] [that] his burial and resurrection have been symbolically meaningless" (144). Life goes on. Bad luck killed the Squire, and good luck sprung the door. And now Israel has to find a way of escaping from a house of mourners, unseen. This makes for one of the most amusing episodes in the book as Israel, by dressing in the Squire's clothes, effects an exit from the house as a ghost, walking out past a line of astonished family members. It is his most audacious con, followed by his most absurd, in which he attempts to be convincing as a scarecrow come to life. The two episodes provide much light relief before Israel's return to a more heroic mode on the sea, but they also illustrate the changefulness of Israel's world, in which certain tactics (here, to get away by playing a ghost) will not necessarily work more than once.

Israel makes his way to the channel in hope of rejoining Franklin, only to find that, by another stroke of bad luck, "the very coach in which he rode brought the news to the authorities that all intercourse between the two nations was indefinitely suspended" (83; ch. 13). As the narrator puts it, "[h]ere was another accumulation of misfortunes" (83). A stranger buys him some drinks, coaxes him into confessing his experience as a sailor, and "in a trice Israel found himself kidnapped into the naval service" (84), to serve on the ship, *Unprincipled*. Anticipating the next chapter, the narrator informs us that once more, "fate [will] snatch" Israel from his new course (84), and point his fortunes elsewhere. He closes chapter 13 with this ironic reflection: "Thus repeatedly and rapidly were the fortunes of our wanderer planted, torn up, transplanted, and dropped again, hither and thither, according as the Supreme Disposer of sailors and soldiers saw fit to appoint" (84). There is a profound incongruity in the association between the "appoint[ment]" of "the Supreme Disposer" and the "hither and thither" of Israel's fortunes, and the fact of the latter reflects badly upon the efficiency of the former. In other words, the narrator persists in throwing out the challenge to the reader to recognise some providential design to Israel's errant life. However, with Israel's renewed association with Jones, that challenge becomes more difficult to meet than ever.

Chapter 14, "In Which Israel Is Sailor under Two Flags, and in Three Ships, and All in One Night," introduces a new level of instability to Israel's wanderings, perhaps justified by the fact that Israel now finds himself "on the endless drifts of the Bunker Hills of the billows" (85).

Hardly having a chance to reconcile himself to this new predicament, Israel manages to have himself transferred to a "revenue cutter" (86), until that, in turn, chances across a strange warship (87), from which they are hailed by a voice Israel recognises. In order to ensure their being taken, Israel engages in a bloody brawl with the three Englishmen on the boat, killing at least two of them with his bare hands. The account is brief but vivid; the narrator, avoiding all moralising, hones in on the violence, the "battle [. . .] in the midst of the chaos of blowing canvas" (88), as a decidedly brutal clash between individuals. After pitching the captain overboard, Israel engages one of the officers:

> Caught in a rent of the sail, the officer slipped and fell near the sharp iron edge of the hatchway. As he fell, he caught Israel by the most terrible part in which mortality can be grappled. Insane with pain, Israel dashed his adversary's skull against the sharp iron. The officer's hold relaxed; but himself stiffened. Israel made for the helmsman, who as yet knew not the issue of the late tussel. He caught him round the loins, bedding his fingers like grisly claws into his flesh, and hugging him to his heart. The man's ghost, caught like a broken cork in a gurgling bottle's neck, gasped with the embrace. Loosening him suddenly, Israel hurled him from him against the bulwarks. (88-89)

This is desperate, instinctive fighting for survival. In the encounter itself there is no sense of patriotism or glory, even though, of course, it was instigated by Israel's sudden declaration of himself as a Yankee (88). This is primal nature in action, and the narrator is careful to avoid all sense or suggestion of strategy or skill in the fight. Israel simply overpowers his adversaries and mangles them. It is an eruption of natural savagery (which, not surprisingly, brings with it a sexual energy alluded to in the course of the passage), that destabilises the values of the society that authorised the violence in the first place. "Unlike Tommo or Taji, Redburn or White-Jacket," as Bell points out, "Israel feels no apparent guilt about his violence. But then, he is fighting for a worthy cause, the liberty of America" (216). The subversive impact of the passage lies in the extent to which that "worthy cause" becomes pushed to the background once the fighting starts. War unleashes the savagery in men—the savagery which, as the figure of Jones suggests, always slumbers under the civilised exterior of society. Therefore it does not come as a surprise when we learn from Israel that "[i]t was Captain Paul's voice that somehow put me up to this deed" (89).

The John Paul Jones whom Israel befriends once he is transferred from the cutter onto the *Ranger* seems, at first, even more like Ahab than before. His isolation, his appreciation for the fact that Israel "had so fiercely waged battle against tyrannical odds" (91), his own hatred of the British and specific vendetta against Whitehaven, and even his rhetoric—"Spring under me, good ship; on you I bound to my vengeance" (91)—inspire an association with the "task[ed]" captain (*MD* 164; ch. 36). However, to make too much of this is to lose sight of the most significant difference between the two figures, namely that Ahab (the austere, demonic idealist)

is *against* nature, while Jones (the dandified savage) is *of* nature. Jones displays a pagan respect for nature that is a far cry from Ahab's Quaker defiance of it.

Nowhere is this aspect of Jones's character brought out more clearly than in chapter 19, "They Sail as Far as the Crag of Ailsa," in which we gain a better sense of the precise nature of his "anomalous cruise" (94). That it is a cruise finally subject to natural expedience immediately becomes clear when, coming in sight of Whitehaven, Jones actually decides to postpone his vengeance because of a shift in the capricious wind (96). That wind, as a figure for both the vagaries of chance and the rule of nature, becomes a recurring feature of the narrative for the duration of Israel and Jones's adventures at sea.[17] As the narrator puts it,

> seeming as much to bear the elemental commission of Nature, as the military warrant of Congress, swarthy Paul darted hither and thither; hovering like a thunder-cloud off the crowded harbors; then, beaten off by an adverse wind, discharging his lightnings on uncompanioned vessels, whose solitude made them a more conspicuous and easier mark, like lonely trees on the heath. (96)

Sailing "hither and thither," Jones takes his "commission" from nature, and certainly not from "the Supreme Disposer of sailors and soldiers" (84; ch. 13). His method, if it might be so called, is to range freely, as opposed to the more scientific and persistent Ahab, "threading a maze of currents and eddies" (*MD* 199; ch. 44). Jones becomes an elemental force himself, randomly destroying whatever chance puts in his way. In a sense he becomes a figure for the random adversity which haunts Israel's life so unfairly, particularly when the latter's "solitude" also makes him "a more conspicuous and easier mark."

There is another sense in which Melville distinguishes Jones from Ahab, dramatised in an "ominously symbolic episode" (Bezanson 197) in which the *Ranger*, chasing after a vessel, is brought into view of the Crag of Ailsa:

> While thus engaged, suddenly a shadow, like that thrown by an eclipse, was seen rapidly gaining along the deck, with a sharp defined line, plain as a seam of the planks. It involved all before it. It was the domineering shadow of the Juan Fernandez-like Crag of Ailsa. The Ranger was in the deep water which makes all round and close up to this great summit of the submarine Grampians.
>
> The crag, more than a mile in circuit, is over a thousand feet high, eight miles from the Ayrshire shore. There stands the cone, lonely as a foundling, proud as Cheops. But, like the battered brains surmounting the Giant of Gath, its haughty summit is crowned by a desolate castle, in and out of whose arches the aerial mists eddy like purposeless phantoms, thronging the soul of some ruinous genius, who, even in overthrow, harbors none but lofty conceptions.

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[17] This wind can be "fair," and blow "with a strange, bestirring power" (94; ch. 15), or it can foil the *Ranger*'s attacks, as at Lochryan, where Jones "abandon[s] the project" because "the wind turned against him" (96), or again in his first attempt at engaging the *Drake*, when "once more the winds interposed" (99; ch. 16).

> As the Ranger shot nigher under the crag, its height and bulk dwarfed both pursuer and pursued into nut-shells. The main-truck of the Ranger was nine hundred feet below the foundations of the ruin on the crag's top.
>
> While the ship was yet under the shadow, and each seaman's face shared in the general eclipse, a sudden change came over Paul. He issued no more sultanical orders. He did not look so elate as before. At length he gave the order to discontinue the chase. Turning about, they sailed southward. (97)

Howard has spoken of the "Wordsworthian wonder" of this description (238), a point that seems unnecessarily careless of the pervading sense of hellish oppressiveness. John Paul Jones's "sultanical" resolve falters under the forbidding shadow of the pyramidical crag, which stands as a warning to absolutism. As a monumental site, a site of individuation from the "deep water," the crag achieves a certain domination of its immediate surroundings, "involv[ing] all before it." However, this domination is ultimately less one of actuality than of mood; in other words, it does not dominate, it oppresses. This proud structure is haunted, its idealistic, exclusive and sterile loftiness having resulted in a schizophrenic state in which "lofty conceptions" vie with "purposeless phantoms." One thinks of Taji and Pierre, whose absolute vision results in schizophrenic madness. In its gothic effect the haunted castle is also linked to Israel's nightmarish experience in the cell, and underscores the suggestion, raised by that episode, that Israel's world is finally a Godless one. The unfathered, sovereign I AM WHO AM (Kearney 183) has succumbed to dissolution. And in such a world, the Bunker Hill monument—the monumental national identity in which is inscribed a Manifest Destiny—has no claims on "lofty conceptions."

The ongoing account of John Paul Jones's exploits—some of them comically presented—at length brings the narrator to the following telling reflection:

> The career of this stubborn adventurer signally illustrates the idea, that since all human affairs are subject to organic disorder; since they are created in, and sustained by, a sort of half-disciplined chaos; hence, he who in great things seeks success, must never wait for smooth water; which never was, and never will be; but with what straggling method he can, dash with all his derangements at his object, leaving the rest to Fortune. (114)

Jones's method is finally defined as a "straggling method," and we are reminded of Ishmael's own subscription to "a careful disorderliness [as] [. . .] the true method" in his own narrative (*MD* 361; ch. 82). Here, too, the narrator suggests that it is the only tenable approach to the "organic disorder" to which "human affairs are subject." This counts among the most overt challenges in the book to the idea of Providence. Melville's sense of Fate or Fortune cannot be aligned with a doctrine of Predetermination, since "human affairs" are the outcome of a indeterminate compromise between nature, chance and character (i.e., those personal "derangements" with which the individual undertakes his projects). This virtually returns us to

Ishmael's conceit in "The Mat-Maker," where he considers individual destiny to be the result of a combination of "chance, free will, and necessity" (*MD* 215). For in one sense at least, nature provides an unswerving "ultimate course" (*MD* 215)—a necessity—in the form of man's inexorable progression toward death. Beyond this, however, there is nothing inherent in life that constitutes a plot. This challenge to Providence also poses a challenge to all compositional metaphysics or aesthetics, for its "organic[ism]" is a far cry from the organicism of the Romantic imagination, that unifying, vital force that assimilates reality into a comprehensive vision. Man's control over nature is partial and hopelessly provisional, and the resultant "half-disciplined chaos" thoroughly precludes the possibility of attaining the constituted—composed—serenity of "smooth water."

In "The Expedition That Sailed from Groix," we find Jones in command of a different ship, the *Bon Homme Richard*, formerly the *Duras*. According to the narrator, who offers to reveal "the secret history" (wholly fictional) of the "change of titles" (115), the new name is the result of a discussion between Jones and Israel, and chosen in honour of Franklin's maxim (from *Poor Richard's Almanac*), "God helps them that help themselves" (115). The ship, the "sad old hulk [which] became afterwards immortal" (115), is of central importance to the mythology of the Revolution for its victory (albeit ambiguous) in what the narrator refers to as "the first signal collision on the sea between the Englishman and the American" (120; ch. 19). It is this battle, too, that converts Jones into a hero, and is therefore of some interest to Melville's subversive revision of the monumental American occasion. Even before the battle starts, much of the glory is taken out of it by the narrator's suggestion that Jones's great moment somehow arose from his charming of the "fickle power" of fortune: "In a word, luck—that's the word—shortly threw in Paul's way the great action of his life: the most extraordinary of all naval engagements; the unparalleled death-lock with the Serapis" (119; ch. 18). It is this luck, too, which, as Obuchowski points out, when seen in conjunction with Israel's bad luck, "reveal[s] the arbitrary, ofttimes maddening, incomprehensible workings of accident in human striving" ("Technique" 467).

Chapter 19, "They Fight the Serapis," lifts the veil on the chaotic, aimless brutality of a historic battle—Whitman's "oldfashioned frigate-fight" (*Song* [35] line 890)[18]—in a sense repeating, on a broader canvass, the viciousness of Israel's decimation of the cutter's crew. The

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[18] Joseph Flibbert has suggested that "[t]o Whitman, the event is one of the most stirring confirmations of the fortitude and idealism of the common man" (139). He has also raised the rather astonishing possibility that Whitman based his own account on the one in *Israel Potter*! (see 138 and 139n).

battle becomes representative of the essential character of the Revolution, something the narrator stresses from the start:

> There would seem to be something singularly indicatory in this engagement. It may involve at once a type, a parallel, and a prophecy. Sharing the same blood with England, and yet her proved foe in two wars; not wholly inclined at bottom to forget an old grudge: intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilised in externals but a savage at heart, America is, or may yet be, the Paul Jones of nations. (120)

Anticipating the image of antagonistic "Siamese Twins" (125), the narrator characterises the battle as an instance of fratricide, which lends some force to John P. McWilliams's suggestion that "Melville conceived of the battle [. . .] not only as a revision of Revolutionary history, but as a prophecy of civil war" (187). But the main effect of the comparison between America and her wayward son, Jones, is to explode the lofty Revolutionary pretensions to ideality.[19] At the constituting moment of what came to be known as America's Manifest Destiny we find brute ambition, an amoral, predatory will to power, a complete denial of the glorifying, meaningful, redemptive *agon* of romance:[20]

> Never was there a fight so snarled. The intricacy of those incidents which defy the narrator's extrication, is not ill figured in that bewildering intertanglement of all the yards and anchors of the two ships, which confounded them for the time in one chaos of devastation. (120)

As Paul Giles has pointed out, this dissolution of distinct national identity in the midst of the battle provides a parallel to the confusion of Israel's "personal identity" by his "calamities" in general and, together with that confusion, "undermine[s] the very notion of a sovereign state" (239). As a result, victory becomes something of a moot point: Jones, finally forcing the English captain into surrender by his brute tenacity, has to abandon his own sinking ship for the mangled *Serapis*. The victory is so "nominal" that for some time there remains some confusion among the different crews as to "whether the Serapis had struck to the Richard, or the Richard to the Serapis" (130, 129). The narrator, who has provided a detailed account of the confusion and general progression of the battle, closes it with a devastating final reflection on the heroic events: "In view of this battle one may well ask—What separates the enlightened man from the savage? Is civilisation a thing distinct, or is it an advanced stage of barbarism?" (130). That the closure is

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[19] The narrator has already alluded to a somewhat uncomfortable relationship between America and her hero when he explains that "[m]uch subtle casuistry has been expended upon the point, whether Paul Jones was a knave or a hero" (95-96; ch. 15). Keeping this uncertainty in mind, the narrator's extended focus on Jones as an exemplary figure is of itself a telling matter.

[20] In this sense, at least, what Cohen calls "[t]he extensive naval sequence involving Paul Jones" should not be deemed "*romanticized* history" (302, emphasis added).

presented in the form of a question is also of significance, for Melville is not so much rewriting (reconstituting) history as unsettling it, reopening a "closed case" for re-evaluation of its unresolved ethical complexities.

The narrative approach to the battle is also of crucial interest, for it explicitly symbolises the act of zooming in on a temporally distant (and therefore finalised) occurrence. In the initial setting up of the scene, the narrator maintains a comfortable distance which allows for the description of the two ships as "grand duellists," and their battle as reminiscent of "the Miltonic contests of arch-angels" (122). As Cohen has pointed out, something about the treatment recalls the artificiality of the stage:

> To maximize its visual qualities and their significance Melville employs three angles of vision: the viewpoint of the spectators of Flamborough Head who are effectively an audience within a theater; that of the seamen involved in the conflict and thus the actors; and that of the moon rising above the scene, remote and orderly, a "Mephistopheles prompter of the stage." (302)

This is a perceptive point, which suggests something about the constituting (staged) effect of the historicised view, but it ignores the important progression of perspectives which makes this such a striking moment in the book. After setting the scene, the narrator first introduces the perspective of the fantastical "Man-in-the-Moon" casting an "ambigu[ous]" light over the proceedings (123). Rising from the sea, this figure seems a rare instance of personification of nature (reminiscent of Ahab's), in its demonic form, as a "malignant," though "complacent" Mephistopheles (123). As "prompter" it is clearly without a script, even as it informs the violent encounter itself. At any rate, this is not violence for the sake of history (the destiny of nations), but violence for its own sake, having no external point of reference.

From this "contextualising" perspective the narrator shifts to another kind of detached point of view, namely that of the human "spectator[s]": "From the high cliffs of the shore, and especially from the great promontory of Flamborough Head, the scene was witnessed by crowds of the islanders. Any rustic might be pardoned his curiosity in view of the spectacle presented" (124). This perspective, in terms of which the battle—which involves a number of ships—appears a mere spectacle, resembles the historical gaze insofar as it considers events occurring "in the indistinct distance" (124). From this perspective, too, the actual horror of the battle is veiled; all the crowd sees are "isolated mist[s]" of smoke upon the sea (124). Yet as the narrator begins to home in on the specific subject of his chapter, an unsettling violence begins to seep into his account:

> As yet this lurid cloud was neither stationary nor slowly adrift, like the first mentioned one; but, instinct with chaotic vitality, shifted hither and thither, foaming with fire, like a valiant water-spout careering off the coast of Malabar.

> To get some idea of the events enacting in that cloud, it will be necessary to enter it; to go and possess it, as a ghost may rush into a body, or the devils into swine, which running down the steep place perished in the sea; just as the Richard is yet to do. (124)

The final sentence is a particularly strange one. Notable and comprehensible is the narrator's removal of agents in the events—which enact, instead of being enacted—and his insistence on the "necess[ity]" of entering the cloud in order to "possess" those events (on removing the comfortable "indistinct distance" provided not only by theatrical space, but by historical time). But in terms of a pun the narrator (and his audience) is suddenly converted into a ghost or devil, who actually informs a self-destructive impulse. It is difficult to account for this conceit, unless the narrator is suggesting that the distant cloud will, by his penetration of it, become possessed by the legion mad souls of men. It is one of those lines that remind us of the irreducible strangeness of Melville; his persistent ability to catch his reader off guard.

At any rate, the narrator pulls the reader into that cloud, in order to dispel some of the more misty-eyed conceptions of war, as Melville had done by means of Jack Chase's accounts of battle in *White-Jacket*. By means of a detailed account of the remorseless carnage of a "[m]utual obliteration" (129), he creates an abiding image of the undirected, blind, unprincipled violence at the centre of a historical, monumentalised battle.

As the last major episode of Jones and Israel's association, the battle between the *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Serapis* underscores the elemental violence defining that association (inaugurated by Israel's own brutal victory over the cutter). As the narrator announces at the outset of chapter 20, "The Shuttle," [f]or a time back, across the otherwise blue-jean career of Israel, Paul Jones flits and re-flits like a crimson thread. One more brief intermingling of it, and to the plain old homespun we return" (131). To some extent, of course, that "old homespun" refers to the *Life*, from which the narrator has made a significant and lengthy departure, but for a while yet the return to the details of that text is only very fragmentary and intermittent. Primarily, then, the "old homespun" refers to the less momentous and more comic mode of the traditional picaresque narrative.

It is particularly ironic that this return to solitary wanderings should intervene just as Israel, now on board the *Ariel* with John Paul Jones, has finally embarked for America. The inclusion of this detail serves to remind the reader, both of Israel's abiding project (that which drives him throughout the book), and of the fickle fortunes to which that project must remain liable. During an otherwise uneventful but literal brush with an English ship, Israel, a little too intrepid in boarding it, finds himself on board the hostile vessel without anybody on either side

realising what has happened. As the English ship flees into the night, leaving the *Ariel* behind, John Paul Jones completely disappears from the narrative. Even Israel's close friendship with a national hero, and his own vigorous participation in some of his most famous exploits, cannot ensure a happy ending to his life's story. Jones, like Franklin, and the United States, seems to forget all about Israel.

What follows is a comic episode in which Israel spends the entire night unsuccessfully trying to insinuate himself into one of the messes on board. Seelye deems it "[a]n episode which typifies Israel's plight" (113): "Like White-Jacket, Israel becomes a pariah, a stranger in a strange land, and his search for a billet becomes a parable in which the English ship is a microcosm of society and he a misfit engaged in a search for charity" (114). Beyond a search for charity, however, it is also a search for an identity, for the messes are clearly designated (as in *White-Jacket*), and Israel's object is to be assimilated by one of them. It is this overt and active search that informs Cohen's sense of it as "an absurd quest for place and identity, a parody of a quest that depends for its humor on its absurdity, though this heavier element is awash in the waters of a comic folk hero" (303). Of course, insofar as Seelye is correct in considering this a typifying episode—i.e., emblematic of the overall narrative—*Israel Potter* might itself be considered to be a parody of a quest, which is precisely how one may define the anti-teleological picaresque form. This is why Cohen's ultimate sense of *Israel Potter* as "a plebeian version of the heroic quest" (304) is problematic,[21] for it posits a (humble, non-"heroic") telos which simply never becomes evident.

Israel finds no place, not even among the "exiled" "*waisters*" (135). The episode concludes with a farce of indirection. Once Israel is discovered in the morning, there simply is no accounting for his unsettling presence. As the officer of the deck puts it, unconsciously pronouncing Israel's fate, "he's out of all reason; out of all men's knowledge and memories!" (137). In fact, the officer is so perplexed by his presence that at length he orders him taken "out of sight" (139). Sten provides a compelling reading of the scene, suggesting that it

> offers some oblique comment on the problems Melville thought his readers would face when encountering a realistic character like Israel Potter in a novel of the American Revolutionary War. Here Melville's remarks center, ostensibly, on the absurdity of Potter's presence on a British letter-of-marque, but by implication they comment also on the absurdity of his presence in a novel treating America's legendary past. (274).

Sten's point centres, for the most part, on the matter of genre expectations (in terms of which a historical novel should deal with famous personages). However, it might usefully be extended to the matter of Israel's subversive eruption—from anonymity, "out of all men's knowledge and

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[21] Cohen may be responding to the narrator's reference to Israel as a "plebeian Lear or Œdipus" (161; ch. 25).

memories"—onto the historical stage, in which all the parts have already been assigned. His presence is not only absurd, it is also deeply problematic. It exposes the artificiality of structures—genre, social, and historical—as well as their provisional nature. It threatens the monumental repose represented by the "architectural finial" (*BB* 474; ch. 28) of the Bunker Hill memorial (which commemorates but does not remember) by recalling the grim, cheap, inglorious, plebeian detail of the historical occasion.

Having come to light, however, Israel becomes a conundrum for the system. The officer may hope to relieve "his own perplexity" (139) by ignoring him, but this does not solve the problem: "'Come along, then, my ghost,' said the master-at-arms. And, collaring the phantom, he led it hither and thither, not knowing exactly what to do with it" (139). At length the captain, chancing across this apparently pointless spectacle, it forced to repeat the officer's inquiry: "Come here, master-at-arms. To what end do you lead that man about?" (140). The master-at-arms's hopeless reply is deeply descriptive of the symbolic "endlessness" of the picaro's wanderings, and the horrific fate of the Wandering Jew: "To no end in the world, sir. I keep leading him about because he has no final destination" (140).

The ship finally arrives in Falmouth, whither Melville sends it in order to create an opportunity for a digression on Ethan Allen, the hero of Ticonderoga. Once again the effect of this, as Obuchowski has suggested, is "to dwarf Israel by contrast, keeping him from figuring significantly in the story of his own life" ("Technique" 466). Allen is described as

> frank; bluff; companionable as a Pagan; convivial; a Roman; hearty as a harvest. His spirit was essentially western; and herein is his peculiar Americanism; for the western spirit is, or will yet be (for no other is, or can be) the true American one. (149; ch. 22).

This is a fairly positive estimation, if rendered somewhat uncertain by the structural indeterminacy of the sentence. However, it is most distinctly qualified by the portrayal of Allen in chapter 21. The Allen we encounter there is boorish and most theatrical, a composite image of the blustering woodsman and the cosmopolitan trickster, belonging to the kind of West Melville would expose in *The Confidence-Man*. Unlike Israel, he has that talismanic self-mythologising capacity, which ultimately keeps him from major harm, and, we are told, ensures his eventual return home (151; ch. 22). He becomes larger than life and, appropriately, Melville's representation of him employs elements of that truly Western narrative form, the tall tale.[22]

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[22] The language is of a decidedly hyperbolic turn, and Allen manages such amazing feats as using his teeth to wrench a sword from a soldier's grasp (147; ch. 21), the same teeth which, according to legend, he once employed to "twist [. . .] off the nail that went through the mortise of his handcuffs" (150; ch. 22).

By the end of chapter 22, Israel is forced to flee Falmouth, and the narrative returns to his particular experience. The narrator presents this return as the completion of a circle, which deposits Israel right back in his disenfranchised state. His associations with heroes and statesmen has amounted to nothing:

> Once more in beggar's garb, the fugitive sped towards London, prompted by the same instinct which impels the hunted fox to the wilderness; for solitudes befriend the endangered wild beast, but crowds are the security, because the true desert of persecuted man. Among the throngs of the capital, Israel for more than forty years was yet to disappear, as one entering at dusk into a thick wood. No did ever the German forest, nor Tasso's enchanted one, contain in its depths more things of horror than eventually were revealed in the secret clefts, gulfs, caves and dens of London.
>
> But here we anticipate a page. (153)

The salvation from persecution promised by London is here shown to be of a decidedly demonic nature, for the city is nothing but a labyrinth of "secret clefts, gulfs, caves and dens," in which one may escape one's pursuers only because of a final dissolution of identity in the mass. In many ways, the city qualifies as the "end" of Israel's tale, since its image draws in and captures such thematic concerns as his anonymity, his poverty and his lack of community. But the reason why the narrator considers this passage an anticipation is that there is one more episode to interpose between Israel and his hopeless "goal," an episode that will reveal, in Israel, something akin to the secret pearl of wisdom carried by the Wandering Jew.

Chapter 23, "Israel in Egypt," provides an account of Israel's sojourn of "thirteen weeks" (155) in a brickyard just outside London. Cohen has defined it as "a transitional (an allegorical) pause" (290) which, I would suggest, allows for some distillation of the implications of the narrative, without creating the mistaken impression of monumental, redemptive apotheosis or insight—after all, Israel stands on the brink of forty-five more years of profound squalor.

There is a decided element of social criticism in the description of the business, which "suppl[ies] the London Market," and to which Israel's "rags" provide "the best letters-of-introduction" (154). Our attention is drawn to the "surly overseers, or task-masters" with their "pompous airs," and the miserable wage of "six shillings a week" (154). Israel's exploited labour at "one of the mills"—reminiscent of Blake's industrial "dark Satanic Mills" (*Milton*, Preface line 8)—becomes an image of slavery, captured also by the biblical reference in the chapter title. But with both Israel's persecution and military service at an end, the antagonism between England and America fades into the background, to be replaced by a more general encroachment

of inhuman industrialism.[23] Israel's pastoral past has receded into obscurity. What remains is an overt sense of the pervasive dehumanising effect of the business upon its employees:

> Twenty of these melancholy old mills were in operation. Twenty heart-broken old horses, rigged out deplorably in cast-off old cart harness, incessantly tugged at twenty great shaggy beams; while from twenty half-burst barrels, twenty wads of mud, with a lava-like course, gouged out into twenty old troughs, to be slapped by twenty tattered men, into the twenty-times-twenty battered old trays. (155)

However, if this is the mathematics of industry, it is also the mathematics of nature. Accordingly, the social perspective soon acquires a more symbolic impact as a reflection of the human condition (remember Sisyphus), at first suggested by references to the "rude, primitive, Eastern aspect" of the mills and the vivid, loaded evocation of the "Dismal Swamp" of mud into which Israel descends. His insight is ultimately not social, but ontological and metaphysical:

> Ere entering this pit for the first, Israel had been struck by the dismally devil-may-care gestures of the moulders. But hardly had he himself been a moulder three days, when his previous sedateness of concern at his unfortunate lot, began to conform to the reckless sort of half jolly despair expressed by the others. The truth indeed was, that this continual, violent, helter-skelter slapping of the dough into the moulds, begat a corresponding disposition in the moulder; who, by heedlessly slapping that sad dough, as stuff of little worth, was thereby taught, in his meditations, to slap, with similar heedlessness, his own sadder fortunes, as of still less vital consideration. To these muddy philosophers, men and bricks were equally of clay. What signifies who we be—dukes or ditchers? thought the moulders; all is vanity and clay. So slap, slap, slap; care-free and negligent; with bitter unconcern, these dismal desperadoes flapped down the dough. If this recklessness were vicious of them, be it so; but their vice was like that weed which but grows on barren ground; enrich the soil, and it disappears. (155)

The final line once more intrudes something of the social perspective, but, for the most part, this passage represents Israel's initiation into the Solomonic wisdom of Ecclesiastes, Hamlet's recognition that "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (5.1.209-10), and Ishmael's knowledge "that everybody [. . .] is one way or the other served in much the same way" (*MD* 6; ch. 1). In other words, the focus is on the equality of men as mortal beings, as opposed to their inequality as social beings. The "continual, violent, helter-skelter slapping of the dough" brings home to Israel something of the emblematic significance of his own wanderings, and metamorphoses his own "sedateness" into a "reckless sort of half jolly despair" which bears some relation to Ishmael's "free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy" (*MD* 226; ch. 49). A relation to Ishmaelian thought also emerges, for instance, in the narrator's description of the brick kilns, just after he has developed a conceit in which he compares men to bricks:

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[23] The inhumanity is strikingly captured by the narrator's laconic description of the absence of shelter: "No shelter, though it hailed. The sheds were for the bricks" (156).

> When, at last, the fires would be extinguished, the bricks being duly baked, Israel often took a peep into the low vaulted ways at the base, where the flaming faggots had crackled. The bricks immediately lining the vaults would be all burnt to useless scrolls, black as charcoal, and twisted into shapes the most grotesque; the next tier would be a little less withered, but hardly fit for service; and gradually, as you went higher and higher along the successive layers of the kiln, you came to the midmost ones, sound, square, and perfect bricks, bringing the highest prices; from these the contents of the kiln gradually deteriorated in the opposite direction, upward. But the topmost layers, though inferior to the best, by no means presented the distorted look of the furnace-bricks. The furnace-bricks were haggard, with the immediate blistering of the fire—the midmost ones were ruddy with a genial and tempered glow—the summit ones were pale with the languor of too exclusive an exemption from the burden of the blaze. (156)

Once again, the social commentary persists, and, once more, the import of the passage extends beyond that commentary. Miller has suggested that the fires may "represent [. . .] evil or misfortune—or both" (150), but Cohen's reading seems more appropriate. He sees the fires as "the vital fires of life that may, depending on the distance, severely scorch, sustain through its warmth, or prove inadequate" (303). In this we may recognise the lineaments of Ishmael's counter-teleological wisdom, gained "by many prolonged, repeated experiences," which holds that "man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity" (*MD* 416; ch. 94). The "genial and tempered glow" can only come from that suspension at "the mid-deep" White-Jacket could not quite get used to (*WJ* 393; ch. 92)—to soar too high or dive too deep is to condemn oneself to spiritual anaemia or deformity.

Yet the kiln serves the narrator's purposes in still another way, for, as a pyramidical structure, it provides the opportunity to reflect on the temporality of man's "ambitious edifices," one of the most persistent thematic concerns of *Israel Potter*:

> These kilns were a sort of temporary temples constructed in the yard, each brick being set against its neighbor almost with the care taken by the mason. But as soon as the fire was extinguished, down came the kiln in a tumbled ruin, carted off the London, once more to be set up in ambitious edifices, to a true brick-yard philosopher, little less transient than the kilns. (156-57)

Transience becomes the single indisputable fact of human existence, and the defeat of all ambitious human effort. In the end even Israel's recognition that his labour only serves to "extend the walls of the Thebes of the oppressor" (157), fails to be of consequence. With an echo of Ishmael's own question, "Who ain't a slave?" (*MD* 6, ch. 1),[24] and another echo of Ecclesiastes, Israel repeats the horrific brick-yard wisdom, which goes so far as to deny completely the significance of nationality: "'What signifies who we be, or where we are, or what

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[24] Giles has also recognised that "Israel's plaintive 'who ain't a nobody?' echoes Ishmael's famous 'who ain't a slave?' three years earlier" (241).

we do?' Slap-dash! 'Kings as clowns are codgers—who ain't a nobody?' Splash! 'All is vanity and clay.'"

Chapter 23 distils the stoic wisdom of *Israel Potter*, but Melville is at pains to counter any sense of that wisdom as being something that redeems Israel. Instead, it becomes the obscure, dark pearl that this Wandering Jew carries with him into the infernal London of chapters 24 and 25. At first maintaining the mythical overtones emerging in his account of the brick-yard, the narrator now follows his protagonist—for the time being actually dressed in "a tolerable suit of clothes" (158)—"In[to] the City of Dis.":

> It was late on a Monday morning, in November—a Blue Monday—a Fifth of November—Guy Fawkes' Day!—very blue, foggy, doleful and gunpowdery, indeed, as shortly will be seen,—that Israel found himself wedged in among the greatest every-day crowd which grimy London presents to the curious stranger. That hereditary crowd—gulf-stream of humanity—which, for continuous centuries, has never ceased pouring, like an endless shoal of herring, over London Bridge. (158)

Drawn from the November 9 entry in Melville's 1849 journal, chapter 24 creates a sustained and oppressive image of London as the sulphuric Hell of Dante. But Israel's arrival in wintry London is not so much posited as an isolated, personal descent into that hell, as an assimilation into a "hereditary crowd—gulf-stream of humanity," in other words, into the nameless mortal ranks of mankind.[25] History is converted into a remorseless "pouring" of "an endless shoal of herring," an image which simultaneously liquefies and depersonalises, and yet maintains a sense of mechanical procession. At length the stream across the bridge even parodically pre-empts the redemptive tale of Noah's ark: "On they passed; two-and-two, along the packed footpaths of the bridge; long-drawn, methodic, as funerals" (160). To enter into the industrialised ark of London is to sink into the flood. Israel, unlike Ishmael, is not able to escape the "damp, drizzly November in [his] [. . .] soul" (*MD* 1; ch. 1) by leaving the city for the sea, that "asylum for the generous distressed" (*IP* 10; ch. 2). As a result, although we are told that "never, till dead, had [he] done with his wondering" (159; ch. 24), Israel's outlook on life takes a decided blow: "Israel's heart was prophetically heavy; foreknowing, that being of this race, felicity could never be his lot" (160).

In chapter 25 the narrator condenses the "Forty-Five Years" of squalor that defines Israel Potter's sojourn in London, which takes up half of the narrative in Melville's source, the *Life*.

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[25] Sir Thomas Browne has spoken of the inevitable effacement of all identity by time, and here we find that recognition presented in its most horrifying aspect. See, for instance, his anti-monumental, though Christian, *Urn Burial*, which, according to Lawrance Thompson, "made a strong appeal to Melville" (74).

This significant exclusion, when seen together with the equally significant narrative interpolations, serves as the clearest indicator of Melville's general intentions in *Israel Potter*. The main theme, the American Revolution, having receded into the background, there is little need for a renewed fidelity to the original material, beyond retaining its devastating outlines. The basic evocation of the unrelieved drudgery is, thematically speaking, adequate for suggesting the eternal picaresque postponement of redemption, and ensures its being considered in relation to the Revolution itself. However, the narrator pretends to forego a detailed account from a strange double sensitivity to the absence of "poetic justice" he mentioned in his dedication (viii), and the patience of the audience:

> But these experiences, both from their intensity and his solitude, were necessarily squalid. Best not enlarge upon them. For just as extreme suffering, without hope, is intolerable to the victim, so, to others, is its depiction, without some corresponding delusive mitigation. The gloomiest and truthfulest dramatist seldom chooses for his theme the calamities, however extraordinary, of inferior and private persons; least of all, the pauper's; admonished by the fact, that to the craped palace of the king lying in state, thousands of starers shall throng; but few feel enticed to the shanty, where, like a pealed knuckle-bone, grins the unupholstered corpse of the beggar. (161; ch. 25)

This is disingenuous, and certainly does not merit Matthiessen's sympathetic dismay, his sense that Melville's "own sense of suffering was so great that he could not bear to dwell on Potter's, and slurred over what was to have been his main subject" (491). Rather, having covered his main subject, Melville now availed himself of the opportunity to criticise his readers gently. We are reminded of Melville's lament to Duyckinck, in 1849: "What madness & anguish it is, that an author can never—under no conceivable circumstances—be at all frank with his readers" (*C* 149). We are also reminded of the deluding "upholsterers" against which *Pierre*'s narrator rebels (25; bk. 2, ch. 2), and the public call for the "mitigation" of Melville's own perceived gloom. The ultimate irony, perhaps, lies in the fact that, by summarising Israel's miseries, Melville to some extent intensifies them, and chapter 25, shorn of narrative flesh, begins to appear somewhat like "a pealed knuckle-bone."

Israel Potter closes with the deeply ironic chapter, "Requiescat in Pace." In 1826 the protagonist, with his son, crosses the Atlantic as "[a]n octogenarian" (166; ch. 25), returning to the country he had helped toward independence. Chapter 26 opens, abruptly and curtly, with Israel's homecoming:

> It happened that the ship, gaining her port, was moored to the dock on a Fourth-of-July; and half-an-hour after landing, hustled by the riotous crowd near Faneuil Hall, the old man narrowly escaped being run over by a patriotic triumphal car in the procession, flying a broidered banner, inscribed with gilt letters:—
>
> "BUNKER-HILL.

1775.
GLORY TO THE HEROES THAT FOUGHT!" (167)

Perhaps nowhere else has the impersonality of the monumental, commemorative event—here, the attainment of national independence—been brought home with such simple, ironic force. As in the case of the Bunker Hill monument, still the "incipient monument" at Israel's arrival (167), triumphal commemoration is exposed essentially an act of overseeing (i.e., overlooking and forgetting) the inglorious and multiform reality underlying the commemorated event. The anonymous generality—"the heroes that fought"—overrides and displaces the pauper, Israel. It is a point finally driven home when we learn that Israel "was repulsed, after a pension, by certain caprices of law" (169).

Israel's homecoming, then, does not carry the redemptive charge one might have expected. The major sense one gathers, instead, is that of exhaustion. Seeking "repose" on a hill, Israel "[f]or a long time [. . .] sat mute, gazing blankly about him" (167). This sense also ultimately defines Melville's rewriting of "Rip Van Winkle." Irving's story is recalled by the description of Israel's return to his native "country of the Housatonic": "But the exile's presence in these old mountain townships proved less a return than a resurrection. At first, none knew him, nor could recall having heard of him" (168). However, while Irving finally stages a definite and emphatic scene of recognition for Rip,[26] there is no such moment in *Israel Potter*. As John B. Williams remarks, "[u]nlike [. . .] Rip Van Winkle, no one recognizes him or takes him in" (171). Goldman, more closely considering the relation of Melville's ending to Irving's tale, points out that

> Though more deserving than Rip (who at best slept away the Revolution, but as likely slyly skulked off), Israel is afforded no place in the America to which he at length returns—no role as a licensed chronicler of 'old times' before the war, no solace, no pension. Not only has his democratic perseverance brought him no peace abroad, it has offered no recompense at home. (83)

Time has left Israel behind, and the present cannot accommodate him. Unrecognised to the end, Israel is as "out of all reason; out of all men's knowledge and memories!" as he was on the English ship (137;ch. 20). He is still "[b]lindly ranging to and fro" (169), except that it is no longer funny.

Searching for the site of his former home, he passes into "an ancient natural wood," where he comes across a "strange, mouldy pile,"

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[26] "All stood amazed, until an old woman, tottering out from among the crowd, put her hand to her brow, and peering under it in his face for a moment, exclaimed, 'Sure enough! it is Rip Van Winkle—it is himself! Welcome home again, old neighbor—Why, where have you been these twenty long years?'" (Irving 46)

> a half-cord of stout hemlock [. . .], in a foregoing generation chopped and stacked up on the spot, against sledging-time; but, as sometimes happens in such cases, by subsequent oversight, abandoned to oblivious decay. Type now, as it stood there, of for ever arrested intentions, and a long life still rotting in early mishap. (168)

Israel at length recognises this as his own handiwork, and the narrator makes very clear the significance of the cord, a victim, too, of "oversight." It is a "[t]ype [. . .] of forever arrested intentions." But it also returns us to the intrepid young Israel at the beginning of the book, whose intentions, even then, were thwarted. It also recalls those abandoned mountain dwellings that belonged to a "foregoing generation" which time and nature have supplanted. In other words, Israel is not simply the victim of national, historical neglect, but of time's own corrosive effect. When finally he does locate "the half-buried hearth" of his old home—another eclipsed monument—in a field someone is busy ploughing, "the wanderer" recognises his existence as a mere cycle: "The ends meet. Plough away, friend" (169). This most non-monumental insight completes the book. As the narrator puts it:

> Best followed now is this life, by hurrying, like itself, to a close.
> Few things remain.
> He was repulsed in his efforts, after a pension, by certain caprices of law. His scars proved his only medals. He dictated a little book, the record of his fortunes. But long ago it faded out of print—himself out of being—his name out of memory. He dies the same day that the oldest oak on his native hills was blown down. (169).

Israel passes out of life like an old oak blown down by the capricious wind which played such a significant part in his own life. He also passes out of life a victim, wronged by the "caprices of [a] law" which, it seems, has no superior claim to equity. It is a beautiful ending, a blend of pathos—thoroughly unsentimental—and an acute sense of irony. Cohen has wondered "[w]hether Melville intends it [the title, "Requiescat in Pace"] as a testimony to a serene acceptance or as irony, or in some degree and from different viewpoints both" (290). If society's pretensions to lofty principles—and for Melville, in particular, the new Democracy's pretensions—render it a fit object for irony, then the inexorable, unceasing "progression" of life can only be met, honestly, with a kind of stoic acceptance, to which I would add Ishmaelian geniality and wonder. It is in the blend of these apparently irreconcilable attitudes—of which Socrates to some extent presents a type—that we might best locate Melville's narrative voice.

In *Israel Potter*, Melville turns his subversive attentions to the monumental American identity, specifically its authorisation in terms of a Providence, at the moment of its constitution. Against the idea of Providential God, he posits the vagary, violent rule of nature and chance; against the teleological, resolvent plot, the aimless "hither and thither" of Israel Potter's picaresque career. He had used that phrase before, in the title to chapter 41 of *Redburn* ("He Roves About Hither and Thither"), to indicate the temporary suspension of Redburn's

redemptive urge after his disillusioning encounter with the squalor of Liverpool. One thinks also of the ontological labyrinth evoked in Babbalanja's description of himself as one who, "blinded, goaded, headlong, rush[es]! this way and that; nor knowing whither; one forest wide around" (*M* 621; ch. 185). Here Melville employs the phrase at least four times, at critical junctures, in the course of *Israel Potter*. Indeed, his first use of it, applied to a general characterisation of Israel's life, subversively alerts the reader to the irreconcilable tension between Israel's "fortunes" and the idea of a providential cosmic Author: "Thus repeatedly and rapidly were the fortunes of our wanderer planted, torn up, transplanted, and dropped again, hither and thither, according as the Supreme Disposer of sailors and soldiers saw fit to appoint" (84; ch. 13). This is deeply ironic—almost sarcastic—and radically calls into question the actuality or efficacy of such "appoint[ment]."

Melville also uses the expression with regard to the violent, erratic force of John Paul Jones (96; ch. 15), to which Israel's career—against all biographical and historical verity—becomes wedded for much of the book. He employs it again in the description of the monumental battle between the *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Serapis* (124; ch. 19), represented here as a chaotic fraternal blood-bath, as opposed to a tactically executed (plotted) engagement between two nations. Finally, the phrase also emerges in the ontologically telling episode on board the *Ariel*, when the master-at-arms, charged with Israel's keeping, "collar[s] the phantom, [. . .] [and leads] it hither and thither, not knowing exactly what to do with it" (139; ch. 20).

Such moments reveal Melville's sense of man's existence as an unscripted one, a succession of chance occurrences that mankind generally attempts to gather into an evolutionary, resolvent narrative. Melville also understood the value of monuments in terms of this need for resolution and closure, insofar as a monument constitutes an expression of immutable (national) identity against the dissolving flow of time and flux of nature. It is what he would call in *Billy Budd* "an architectural finial" (474; ch. 28), a completed, homogenised composition. But such an expression, Melville clearly indicated in *Israel Potter*, becomes false, because it must by necessity overlook and suppress the heterogeneous plenitude and inexorable movement of existence. By tracing the remarkable picaresque career of Israel Potter—"hither and thither"—Melville found the means of engaging in a critique of the fatally confident, optimistic American identity, while continuing to resist those insincere narratives of closure that rely on the predetermined dispensations and "unravelings" of the providential author.

CHAPTER 7

"DISCOVERING THE HEART OF MAN": APOCRYPHAL READING VS. APOCALYPTIC READING IN *THE CONFIDENCE-MAN*

Between May 1855 and October 1856[1] Melville worked on the final prose project to be published in his life-time, a narrative set on a Mississippi steamboat travelling downstream from St. Louis toward New Orleans (*CM* 1; ch. 1). It is a narrative characterised by a contraction of space and time, as all of the action takes place on board the boat itself, and essentially within the space of one day—"the first of April" (1), to wit, April Fools' Day. It is a closed space. With one or two exceptions,[2] we are not even offered so much as a glimpse over the side, and the landscape we are moving through remains undefined. Even the great river itself remains little beyond a vague presence.

There is an implicit landscape, however, one that is external but not insignificant to the self-involved life unfolding on board the *Fidèle*. Our most striking encounter (lyrically speaking) with the landscape as such—the great natural backdrop against which the actual movement of the *Fidèle* may be confirmed—occurs in the first paragraph of chapter 16:

> The sky slides into blue, the bluffs into bloom; the rapid Mississippi expands; runs sparkling and gurgling, all over in eddies; one magnified wake of a seventy-four. The sun comes out, a golden huzzar, from his tent, flashing his helm on the world. All things, warmed in the landscape, leap. Speeds the dædal boat as a dream. (77)

This paragraph presents a textual pocket of vitality and action that presents a strong contrast to the eclipse of the physical by the verbal in the rest of the narrative. Epic action contracts into the labyrinthine world of "the dædal boat." Indeed, from this description the focus immediately shifts to a "withdrawn" and "unparticipating man, visited, but not warmed, by the sun—a plant whose hour seems over, while buds are blowing and seeds are astir" (77). But this should not blind us to the fact that the "unparticipating man"—whose withdrawal suggests a kind of

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[1] See "Historical Note" (277) to the NN edition of *The Confidence-Man*, by Watson Branch, Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, with Alma MacDougall.

[2] Most notably, Pitch's introspective gaze at the "villainous bank" of the "swampy and squalid domain" of Cairo (129; ch. 23), consequent upon the confidence man's latest avatar (the PIO man) leaving him in order to disembark. Upon the approach to Cairo, the PIO man also directs our gaze shoreward in order to point out "a grotesquely-shaped bluff," called "the Devil's Joke" (128; ch. 22).

dormancy—does not finally escape the vigorous, ongoing processes of nature. He, too, is "a plant" and, more importantly, his world, for all its apparent stasis, is continually "[s]peed[ing]" along with the currents of the river.

The river on which the *Fidèle* winds its way has a decidedly symbolic function as a consistently implied backdrop. As symbol the river merges both linear form and fluid formlessness. J. E. Cirlot has defined the river as

> [a]n ambivalent symbol since it corresponds to the creative power of both nature and time. On the one hand it signifies fertility and the progressive irrigation of the soil; and on the other it stands for the irreversible passage of time and, in consequence, for a sense of loss and oblivion. (274)

The sense of "creative power" is amply communicated in the passage quoted above, in which the Mississippi's flow is related to the rising of the sun and the "slid[ing]" of "the bluffs into bloom" (an image which simultaneously suggests the natural process of blooming and the movement of the ship in relation to a constantly shifting landscape[3]). This progressive "creative power," along with the linearity of the river itself, may create an impression of an advance toward a goal, an advance implied also in the idea of the journey undertaken by what the narrator calls "that multiform pilgrim species, man" (9; ch. 2). However, that very power of evolutionary creation is implicitly linked to a counter-movement of devolution and decay, to the ongoing cycles of nature. The river's linearity becomes associated with the passing of time, in other words, time as a non-redemptive "passage" from a lost past to a future of "oblivion." By implication the sea itself enters this symbolic field as the "oblivion" toward which the river flows.

This sense of the river is of great importance to the progress of the *Fidèle* from morning to night, in that it both informs and relativises the human activities on board. However, it is the human element that comes under the spotlight in the course of the narrative. This much is stressed by Melville's apparent suppression of the natural imagery in *The Confidence-Man*. Among the manuscript fragments extant there is a passage, "The River," which may have formed part of the book during its early stages,[4] and essentially extends the image of natural energy evoked in the first paragraph of chapter 16. In the excluded passage, the Mississippi is

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[3] One wonders if the "bluffs" shifting into "bloom" might not also allude to the bluffing confidence man coming into his own. The serpentine associations of "slid[ing]," which here become suppressed by the absence of corroborative imagery, have already been employed in chapter 5, in which "the man with the weed" approaches a prospective dupe by "slowly sliding along the rail" toward him (25).

[4] For prevailing scholarly assumptions about the fate of the passage, see the "Historical Note" (308-9). See also the relevant discussion in a further appendix, "Manuscript Fragments," by Harrison Hayford and Alma MacDougall (490-95).

personified as "the father of a great multitude of waters" ("Manuscript" 497). It winds through a chthonic world where "[w]ood and wave wed, man is remote. The Unsung Time, the Golden Age of the billow" (497). At length the river begins to enact a very human drama of identity:

> By his Fall,[5] though he rise not again, the unhumbled river ennobles himself now deepens now proudly expands, now first forms his character & begins that career whose majestic amenity if not overborne by feirce onsets of torrents shall end only with ocean. (497)

However, those torrents are not long in coming. "[A]t St: Louis," the place from which Melville's narrative starts out, "the course of this dream is run" (497-99). With the flow of the Missouri into the Mississippi, "[t]he calmness is gone" and "the before moderate current is rapid & vexed" (499). Repose is eclipsed by primal violence:

> Under the benign name Mississippi it is in truth the Missouri that now rolls to the Gulf, the Missouri that with the Timon snows from his solitudes freezes the warmth of the genial zones, the Missouri that by open assault or artful sap sweeps away forest & feild grave-yard & town, the Missouri that not a tributary but an invader enters the sea, long disdaining to yeild his white wave to the blue. (499)

According to Hayford and MacDougall the "purpose" of this rejected passage "would be to set the natural precivilized scene and time before narrowing both down" (490), in other words, to provide something akin to the *Natureingang* of *Israel Potter*, which projects the vast, chthonic backdrop against which the unfortunate Revolutionary's life—as well as the birth of his nation—is played out. "The River" goes some way toward establishing Melville's own sense of the symbolic charge of the river as explicated by Cirlot. But it is also clear that by means of personification Melville meant to extend the sense of the river as an image of time-bound life for the purposes of allegory, as a reflection of the life on board ship. Melville clearly decided against such a course. As Elizabeth S. Foster speculates, "[p]erhaps Melville discarded it because its imagery suggests other ideas than those which he wished to attach to the Mississippi in *The Confidence-Man*" (qtd. in Hayford and MacDougall, "Manuscript" 403). I would suggest that he wanted to suppress the vital kinesis evoked by the passage (but still evident in the paragraph from chapter 16) in favour of a more sterile and static environment, to shift the focus from nature to society, "the dædal boat," to subsume the heroic *agon* into the contained and comparatively petty squabbles of social interaction. In other words, he wanted to avoid conflating the image of nature and man, as it would invest the latter with a grandeur (an Ahabian defiance mirrored in the "long disdain" of the Missouri) that would be contrary to the deeply limited stage of action

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[5] The manuscript shows that Melville first had "the Fall" (497). The crossing out of the article and substitution of "his" serves to stress the personification, thereby underscoring the river's allegorical representation of the life of the human being.

available to the passengers of the *Fidèle*. More important still, Melville wanted to stress the strange immunity granted to mankind by virtue of the "dream" (an illusion without context) in which they are inexorably rushed toward oblivion. In the rejected passage "the course of the dream is run" at St. Louis. But in *The Confidence-Man* the pyramidical illusion of society as closing man off from the reality of the torrential sea-bound journey remains intact: onward "[s]peeds the dædal boat as a dream."

The dream represented by the *Fidèle*, the ship of faith, is that of a polarised moral universe within which human activities can gain some significance. On a literal level its course is clearly plotted, from St. Louis to New Orleans (a destination which, like the longed-for port in *White-Jacket*, simply never appears). But in keeping with the narrator's image of "the dædal boat," this polarised structure becomes labyrinthine. If the "species, man" may be defined as a "pilgrim species"—i.e., a species constitutionally seeing itself in terms of the structure of redemption—it is also undeniably "multiform," an image of irreconcilability and deviance. This quality also pervades the narrator's lengthy catalogue of types—quoted here only in part—on board the ship:

> As among Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, or those oriental ones crossing the Red Sea towards Mecca in the festival month, there was no lack of variety. Natives of all sorts, and foreigners; men of business and men of pleasure; parlor men and backwoodsmen; farm-hunters and fame-hunters; heiress-hunters, gold-hunters, buffalo-hunters, bee-hunters, happiness-hunters, truth-hunters, and still keener hunters after all these hunters. [. . .] In short, a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man.
>
> As pine, beech, birch, ash, hackmatack, hemlock, spruce, bass-wood, maple, interweave their foliage in the natural wood, so these varieties of mortals blended their varieties of visage and garb. A Tartar-like picturesqueness; a sort of pagan abandonment and assurance. Here reigned the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide. (9; ch. 2)

The fact that this passage closes a chapter which started out with a contradictory symposium of voices, "Showing that many men have many minds," should be ample corroboration of the ironic tone at work here. But there is enough imagery in the passage to resist the narrator's ostensible attempt to create a Whitmanesque individual-national image of effectively "contain[ed] multitudes" (*Song* [51] line 1316), itself a species of that "normative thought-form of unity-in-diversity" Robert M. Greenberg recognises in American literature of the age (8). But in ostensibly attempting to create an image of the "all-fusing spirit of the West"—the violent site of conquest and redemptive assimilation of the wilderness into the sovereign national realm—the narrator subversively composes it into a grotesque "Tartar-like picturesqueness." The full force of the subversiveness of this "pagan" tableau becomes overt when one considers Jonathan A.

Cook's exploration of the pervasive teleological influence of "millennial perfectionism [. . .] in virtually all spheres of antebellum life" (5). Here the Christian master-narrative, implicit in the allusion to the pilgrimage,[6] is pulled awry by its failed assimilation of a deviant, heterogeneous multitude. The "blend" turns demonic, providing the real rationale for the narrator's shift to natural, organic imagery in the last paragraph. And once again, the clearest indicator of the regression of Romantic "organicism" into demonic, or natural, organicism, is to be found in the image of the river.

It is at this point that the figurative values emerging from Melville's excluded passage, "The River," may yet serve to highlight the ironic presentation of the Mississippi as the "type" of the West, as an autonomous entity or force that manages to "unit[e] the streams of the most distant and opposite zones [. . .] in one cosmopolitan and confident tide." For in that passage the very identity of the Mississippi is displaced by the virulent Missouri, the "benign name" designating its authoritative paternity becoming a mere cipher. Here, too, an intrusive adverb like "helter-skelter" does not allow the image to settle, resisting the flow of the sentence towards the concluding and all-encompassing "cosmopolitan and confident tide." It is in fact the schismatic undercurrents at work in this tide—and the resultant lack of confidence—that *The Confidence-Man* sets out to expose.

So much for the river. In the internal catalogue of specialised hunters we may also see the fragmentation of the *agon*, which gives the lie to the imperial "reign" of the "spirit of the West." On board the *Fidèle* there is no communal "oath [. . .] of violence and revenge" (*MD* 179; ch. 41), not even the illusion of a shared vision.[7] The great hunter has been fragmented into numerous agents of expedience, and with him has gone his monumental project, and his visionary gaze. Left now are only rogues who, for the most part, hunt among themselves. The "truth-hunter" and the "heiress-hunter" have become comparable figures, and both of them are potential victims of those "still keener hunters after all these hunters," to wit, swindlers and confidence men. It is towards this "piebald parliament," and the interaction among some of its constituents, that the narrator's focus is directed.

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[6] However, it is significant that the narrator refers to Chaucer's pilgrims—as opposed to, say, the pilgrim of Bunyan—for it recalls the ironic interplay between the tales (or voices) in that work, a technique that is central to *The Confidence-Man*.

[7] Of course, even Ahab's oath cannot really achieve the subjection of all wills to his own. It exerts a temporary power to which even Ishmael succumbs, in answer to "[a] wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling [. . .] in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (179; ch 41). But that "seemed" is crucial, for it suggests its irrevocable passing.

As a work that deals with the dreamy "dædal boat" of culture, it is fit that *The Confidence-Man* should engage overtly some of the most enduring cultural archetypes in its representation, insofar as they serve, broadly, to establish a moral grid within which the diversity of human responses to life may be assigned value. In *The Confidence-Man* that engagement occurs primarily in relation to three cultural metaphors (all of them surprisingly "medieval"), namely that of the pilgrimage, the Ship of Fools, and the "*theatrum mundi*, the theater of the world" (Chai 89). The internal relation of these three metaphors may, superficially, be represented as follows: the pilgrimage and the Ship of Fools represent oppositional modes of living that are played out in a world of appearances.

The pilgrimage, an operative metaphor in *The Confidence-Man*, a metaphor comparable to that of the quest, posits an image of man's life as a redemptive process. The redemption takes the form of a "pilgrim's progress" from a state of fallenness in what Bunyan calls "the wilderness of the world" (11; pt. 1) to an original "celestial realm" (Cirlot 255), i.e., Bunyan's Celestial City on the hill. Indeed, the title page to Bunyan's book announces it as "The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That which is to come: Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream" (1; pt. 1). The *Fidèle*—the ship of faith—is also presented "as a dream" which shuts out the natural world around it (77; ch. 16). However, as Bunyan's dream shows, such shutting out results in an internalised gaze which only serves to reveal the labyrinth within, precipitating a journey through the unconscious (a journey in which Pierre founders). As Cirlot explains, the idea of the pilgrim "is cognate with that of the labyrinth: to go on a pilgrimage is to come to understand the nature of the labyrinth, and to move towards the mastery of it as a means to the 'Centre'" (255). This also returns us to the image of the "dædal boat," and the symbolic value communicated by the ship itself, one which is comparable to the significance of the pilgrimage. According to Cirlot, "sailing or navigating" suggests "living in order to transcend—or what Nietzsche from his pessimistic angle called 'living in order to disappear'" (294). Translated into secular terms, this apocalyptic pattern might also be expressed in terms of the image of "the ship of state" (Matterson, Introduction xxvii), in terms of which "the favorite steamer Fidèle" (3; ch. 1) might be considered as representative of the optimistic American national dream (and its most monumental expression in the millennial rhetoric of Manifest Destiny).

As I have already indicated, Melville's texts resist such a developmental mythos, and in *The Confidence-Man* the implicit presence of the river relativises all life on board the steamer, though in a way which is different from the relativising presence of the sea in Melville's other books. In a sense, the very "linearity" of the river makes redemptive "navigation" an impossibility (and hence, the captain, as character, of no narrative interest). But the denial of

teleological progress finds its most overt expression in *The Confidence-Man* in a cultural image that in itself consists of an inversion of the symbolic values of the ship, namely the Ship of Fools.

Newton Arvin saw in *The Confidence-Man* the lineaments of a "modern *Ship of Fools*" (247), and not without reason. The metaphor itself is clearly suggested by the fact the *Fidèle*'s journey, like Melville's narrative, starts "[a]t sunrise on a first of April" (3; ch. 1), in other words, April Fools' Day. Several commentators—most recently, Cook (10)—have argued for Melville's conscious use of the idea in *The Confidence-Man*. As John Bryant notes, "Melville had used the ship-microcosm image in earlier works, but the ship of fools concept may derive from Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* which, according to Edward H. Rosenberry, Melville may have read in translation or heard of through Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*" ("*Confidence-Man*" 327). In chapter 3 of *The Confidence-Man* we encounter what is usually considered to be a "direct allusion" (Wicks 127) when a misanthropic and uncharitable cripple, after some rather harsh usage by "a tall, muscular, martial-looking" Methodist minister (14), goes on to berate the gathered crowd: "'You fools!' cried he with the wooden leg, writhing himself loose and inflamedly turning upon the throng; 'you fools, under this captain of fools, in this ship of fools!'" (15).

The image of the Ship of Fools is useful insofar as it assists us in clarifying the nature of the "dædal boat" we enter as we enter Melville's text. According to Cirlot the figure

> expresses the idea of 'sailing' as an end in itself, as opposed to the true sense of 'sailing,' which is transition, evolution, and salvation, or a safe arrival at the haven. Hence, illustrations of *stultifera navis* usually showed a naked woman, a wine-glass and other allusions to terrestrial desires. The Ship of Fools is, then, a parallel symbol to that of the Accursed Hunter. (295)

This ship, then, represents the defeat of the redemptive progress by an immersion into the fallen, labyrinthine, "terrestrial" moment. The informing image of "*stultifera navis*" recalls Wai-chee Dimock's definition of the state of being in *White-Jacket* as "transfixed in navigation" (80). The moral chart in terms of which the dialectic of progress might be registered is absent. The *Fidèle* indeed returns us to the *Neversink*, although now the rigid guidelines for action provided by the "arbitrary discipline" (*WJ* 227; ch. 54) of the Articles of War have also disappeared. The Ship of Fools moves, but, teleologically speaking, it moves nowhere. Herein lies its relation to the symbol of "the Accursed Hunter" (a kind of version of the Wandering Jew), which turns on the "falling away from the centre [. . .] towards the endlessly turning periphery of the wheel of phenomena" (154). It also returns us to the catalogue of expedient hunters at the end of chapter 2, and contextualises the pervasive picaresque qualities in *The Confidence-Man* as a whole.

There have been many attempts at assigning the peculiar qualities of Melville's narrative to a specific genre, although finally, to be sure, there is little disagreement among such critics as to the general quality of the book. Q. D. Leavis, for one, has convincingly defined it as a version of "the novel of philosophical speculation, a neo-Classical art form with which Melville was evidently familiar and found congenial [. . .] and which type of novel Melville's chapter-titles deliberately recall. [. . .] It superseded the romance of spiritual pilgrimage or quest" (214). Herein one may recognise, of course, my own sense of the picaresque genre as one which opposes the telos of romance. Indeed, both John Seelye and Ulrich Wicks consider it a picaresque narrative (117-30; 127-34). Alexander Blackburn calls it "a picaresque novel in a nonautobiographical form" and explains how "[s]ome of its characteristics relate it to the central picaresque tradition and demonstrate its continuance of picaresque myth" (176). Hennig Cohen has identified "picaresque qualities" in the book (Branch, et al. 345). Cook (15), again, expresses a prevalent perspective when he concludes that *The Confidence-Man* should be considered as satire, and Edward Strickland has called it "satirical anatomy" (40). Leon F. Seltzer—writing from the perspective of Camus's "absurd"—defines it as "an absurd creation" and an "anti-novel" (22). Finally, Christopher Sten has opted for an essentially anti-generic category, the "experimental novel" (285). All of these perspectives reveal something about the way in which Melville's deviant text subverts what one might call the privileged telos of its nineteenth-century American occasion: as "philosophical speculation," it resists epistemological certainty; as picaresque, it parodies and subverts progress (substituting a rogue for a hero); as satire, it undermines the authority of prevalent and emergent systems (Christianity, Transcendentalism, civilisation, *laissez-faire* capitalism, etc.); and as "anti-" or "experimental," it challenges authoritative and enshrined assumptions about literary structure.[8] Ultimately, all of these critics seek to provide a rationale for the defeat of narrative progression in the book, its prevalently circular structure, as first defined, with some humour, by the contemporary critic for *Mrs Stephen's New Monthly* (June 1857): "The book ends where it begins. You might, without sensible inconvenience, read it backwards" (Branch, et al. 322).

Insofar as all these critics share a sense of the general quality of *The Confidence-Man*, it seems counter-productive to set them at cross-purposes by becoming too fastidious about genre. We will do well to remember Northrop Frye's crucial point that "[t]he forms of prose fiction are mixed" and that "'[p]ure' examples [. . .] are never found" (305). Among Melville scholars

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[8] Sten perhaps lays too much stress on Melville's book as a "sui generis work," for it threatens to obscure his recognition of the "tradition of experimental fiction" to which it belongs (285). Melville's engagement with the canon here, as always, is a profoundly productive one.

Daniel G. Hoffman provides a kind of precedent when he resigns himself to a general sense of genre: "[T]here seems general opinion that it is fiction, and a novel—whether satirical, allegorical, symbolist, or tractarian" (127). Of course, Frye might take issue with even this definition. In a sense, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* does seem like a "novel" in the sense that Frye means it, i.e., a prose fiction that "deals with personality, with characters wearing their *personae* or social masks" (305). But then it foregoes the novel's interest in the ironic tension between inner character and outer mask in favour of the ironic contrasts created by a multiplicity of masks (types or attitudes). In this sense Melville's book emerges more as a species of anatomy.[9] However, the confidence man's search for confidence parodically recalls the heroic quest in the romance, and therefore *The Confidence-Man* may finally belong to the "hybrid" class of "romance-anatomy" to which Frye also consigned *Moby-Dick* (313).

All things considered—and so as to forestall the charge of critical abstention—I will provisionally retain the term "picaresque." Cook's most striking objection to it, namely that the book's "plot is more static and schematic [. . .] than picaresque fiction typically demonstrates" (17), disappears when one keeps in mind that the confidence man's movement through the narrative does constitute an ironic search, and that, as I have already indicated, the implicit non-redemptive movement of the ship replaces the sense of stasis with a more complex sense of "being transfixed in navigation" (Dimock 80). Insofar as *The Confidence-Man* seems to provide a parodic version of the quest-romance (and its search for ideal) by portraying the activities of a protean rogue in a demonic world,[10] a world in which the diagrammatical oppositions of the world of romance have become clouded, it is convincing as a picaresque fiction.

This brings us to the third of the informing metaphors at work in *The Confidence-Man*, namely that of the theatre. In chapter 23 of *White-Jacket*, the planks of the ship deck, for a brief space of time, metamorphose into the boards of the stage,[11] a comic episode that also draws our attention to the fact of role-playing, especially pertinent in the light of the meticulous social stratification of the world of the *Neversink*. It provides an oblique comment on the arbitrariness

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[9] This also accounts for the uncertainty of a contemporary reviewer (*The Literary Gazette*, April 1857) regarding the genre of the book: "A novel it is not, unless a novel means forty-five conversations held on board a steamer, conducted by personages who might pass for the errata of creation" (Leyda, *Log* 571).

[10] As a "frontier" space, the *Fidèle* provides a liminal setting for an unusual admixture of social types, and hence comfortably lends itself to the figuration of what Wicks considers the "social instability" that traditionally provides the impetus to the rise of picaresque narratives (125).

[11] As White-Jacket puts it, "if ever there was a continual theatre in the world, playing by night and by day, and without intervals between the acts, a man-of-war is that theatre, and her planks are the *boards* indeed" (*WJ* 91; ch. 23). Insofar as the ship is a microcosm, such a point clearly converts all the world into a stage.

of authority, in other words, on naval rank as an assigned role and not an internal prerogative, an extension of character. In *The Confidence-Man* Melville returns to the theatrical possibilities of the ship deck, this time overtly. Leon Chai defines the world of the book as characterised by the metaphor (from the Middle Ages and Renaissance) of "*theatrum mundi*, the theater of the world" (89). Indeed, there are numerous overt allusions to the theatre scattered throughout the narrative, following the appearance of an announcement resembling "a theatre-bill" (3; ch. 1), ironically giving "what purported to be a careful description" of the "mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the east" (3). The tension between "careful description" and confounding mystery is a persistent theme in Melville's work, and one which, in *The Confidence-Man*, is most clearly registered in the defeat of "truth" by the attempt to define and circumscribe it by means of dialogue and story-telling. But as the reference to "a theatre-bill" makes clear, here that tension is to be recast into the equivocal realm of the theatre, a world where nobody is who they seem, and participation (for audience and actor) necessarily requires a suspension of disbelief, a surrender to the illusion. As the confidence man, in his final guise as Frank Goodman, the cosmopolitan, puts it, "[l]ife is a pic-nic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool. To come in plain clothes, with a long face, as a wiseacre, only makes one a discomfort to himself, and a blot upon the scene" (133; ch. 24).

Cirlot defines the theatre as "[a]n image of the world of phenomena" (340), in others words, the world of temporal illusions that obscures and overlays the noumenal realm. This is pure Platonism (which, after all, informs the Aristotelian poetics of *mimesis*). It is the world of forms which it is the ultimate aim of the hero to subject or transcend—which is why Nietzsche called such an aim "living in order to disappear" (qtd. in Cirlot 294). It is the natural, phenomenal world in general, but primarily it becomes the human world, the distracting, prevaricating world of society which both the mystic philosopher and devout religious ascetic shun. The distance between *what is*—we remember that Pierre, the quester, resolves to "know what *is*" (*P* 65; bk. 3, ch. 6)—and *what seems* grows ever wider, a removal by degrees. Hence Emerson's point, in the introduction to "Nature," that "[t]he foregoing generations" interpose between us and "God and nature" (35), as, of course, symbolic nature interposed between them and God. In terms of praxis, then, this idealism—to which Spanos has referred as "secularized Puritanism" (62)—stands in direct opposition to the social idealism of what Cook calls the "perfectionist ideology" of "[p]ostmillennialism," which "envisioned an incremental movement toward perfection *within history*" (5, emphasis added). As versions of idealism, however, both ultimately conceive of some kind of neutralisation of nature's demonic power. For the

postmillennialists, it occurs in terms of cultivation and conquest; for Emerson, in terms of the unifying power of "the Universal Being," or "God," as well as, of course, the "transparent eyeball" of the sovereign and transcendent "I" ("Nature" 39; ch. 1).

In *The Confidence-Man* we are presented with the world as a "dream" that, for its inhabitants, is taken for reality. From the point of view of the reader, the world they move in is recognisable, yet still hypothetical. As the twentieth–century theatre director, Peter Brook, puts it, "[i]n everyday life, 'if' is an evasion, in the theatre 'if' is the truth" (157). It is the world of hypothesis and fiction. We are allowed to test propositions. However, as Bruce L. Grenberg has pointed out, in *The Confidence-Man* this provisional world becomes the world we live in: "The world of the *Fidèle*, in short, is the world of Plinlimmon's 'Ei' carried to its logical extreme. In *The Confidence-Man*, humanity lives in a conditional world whose motto is 'If—'" (181). The reader then, is pulled into a cyclical argument from which, as we will see, the narrator refuses to lead him.

From the light going up with sunrise at the beginning of the book, to the light being put out at the end, *The Confidence-Man* presents the theatrical performance anticipated in the subtitle, *His Masquerade*. Providing virtually no information on the inner thoughts and feelings of characters, but, conversely, paying much attention to the outward appearance of the figures that enter the narrative, the narrator operates more like a stage director than a traditional omniscient narrator. Also, as I have already mentioned, there is a certain inwardness of focus, an exclusion of the outer landscape, that captures something of the suppression of contextual "reality" inside a modern theatre. Another relation to the theatre (in a broader sense) may be found in Cook's point that *The Confidence-Man* "exhibits the Aristotelian 'unities' of time, place, and theme" (20), although, as Seltzer has made clear, "*all* the unities of classical tragedy are toyed with and mercilessly perverted by Melville, so that the possibility of finding any hint of an ordered universe through the novel's form becomes itself a joke" (18). In chapter 6, the cynical cripple implicitly relates all action to equivocation—by rendering it theatrical—when he maintains that"[t]o do is to act; so all doers are actors" (31). However, the most overt evocation of the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* is found in a reference to its paradigmatic expression in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (itself a play of masquerades). In chapter 41, Frank Goodman—the "cosmopolitan" (132; ch. 24), and final manifestation of the confidence man—momentarily storms offstage, exasperated at the heartless immunity of his "hypothetical friend" (202; ch. 39), Egbert, to his appeals to charity. Left by himself, Egbert (uncertain of the veracity of Goodman's exasperation) is suddenly reminded of Jaques's "familiar lines":

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players,

> Who [They] have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts. (*CM* 224; ch. 41 [*As You Like It* 2.7.139-42])

The relevance of these lines has become quite apparent by this stage of the book, since they mark the abrupt end of a hypothetical conversation between "Frank" (played by Frank Goodman) and "Charlie Noble" (played by Egbert) that essentially repeats an earlier conversation between Frank and Noble. What further complicates matters is that even that conversation, as far as we know, was merely a ruse, a meeting between two confidence men trying to dupe one another. The reader is transported to a world of appearances from which there seems to be no exit, the kind of world, envisioned in *Pierre*, that merely consists of "surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies" (285; bk. 21, ch. 1). Here, however, there is no Pierre to peel back these layers for us, in hopeless search of a central essence or principle of being. It is left entirely up to the reader to pick his way among the phenomena in search of a narrative centre—the plot, or at least the unifying agent promised in the title's reference to the "masquerade" of a "confidence man." That centre, however, is nowhere to be found, and we are left with a narrative that radically refuses to accommodate the apocalyptic, resolvent aims of hermeneutics.

Contrary to the claims of Jonathan Cook's *Satirical Apocalypse*—and in spite of all allusions to the Apocalypse of St. John—*The Confidence-Man* is not apocalyptic but anti-apocalyptic, resistant to both closure and clarification (in other words, revelation as a resolution). This general quality holds true also of the confidence man who, in spite of being the "protagonist," remains the most elusive character in the book. This is the inevitable result of his occupational proteanism, of course, which problematises character analysis. But the narrator does give us a rare psychological glimpse in the opening paragraph of chapter 8, in which the "man in gray" is momentarily represented in isolation (a rare instance):

> Society his stimulus, loneliness was his lethargy. Loneliness, like a sea-breeze, blowing off from a thousand leagues of blankness, he did not find, as veteran solitaires do, if anything, too bracing. In short, left to himself, with none to charm forth his latent lymphatic, he insensibly resumes his original air, a quiescent one, blended of sad humility and demureness. (43)

The overriding sense here is one of arrestation and stasis, an absence of any internal activity. The confidence man, who can display personality only in relation (generally, in opposition) to somebody else, lapses into a puppet-like state when left by himself. Above all, he seems empty,

a suggestion amply communicated by the "blankness"[12] carried within the apparent affliction of "loneliness." Essentially inhuman, he seems at this point to be at the furthest possible remove from the principled quester, the autonomous man who acts in terms of an internal compulsion. And yet, in the very first line to follow the quoted paragraph, the narrator confusingly conflates the prevailing suggestion of psychological "blankness" with image of the quester: "Ere long, he goes laggingly into the ladies' saloon, as in spiritless quest of somebody" (43). Another instance of non-progressive motion, this formulation captures the simultaneous and irreconcilable fact of the confidence man's existential vacancy (his meaningless progression through a series of cons), and his search for the (Christian) ideals of confidence and charity, a version, as Milton R. Stern recognised, of "the quest for the Holy Grail" (*Steel* 10). In his astute and thorough discussion of *The Confidence-Man*, John Bryant refers to Frank Goodman's "naïve yet cagey search for faith and [. . .] his fatuous but sincere millennialism" (*Repose* 122). As Goodman himself says, in a statement both ironic and profoundly hopeful, "one roams not over the gallant globe in vain" (132; ch. 24).

Insofar as the confidence man's quest is a hopeless one, we tend to be reminded of *Don Quixote*, a novel Melville likely had in mind while he wrote his own.[13] It is with regard to Cervantes's novel that we need to reappraise the classification of *The Confidence–Man* as a picaresque narrative, for Melville's narrative essentially deviates from that form to the same extent that *Don Quixote* does. Insofar as the confidence man is an equivocator and a swindler, he is a picaro; but insofar as he is an "earnest" quester after the lofty ideal of "confidence," he is truly quixotic. The link between these figures is drawn by Edwin Honig when he defines both "Don Quixote and Melville's Confidence Man" as examples of "a zealous reformer-impostor" (78), someone who "take[s] a given ideal or absolutist ethic as entirely practicable" (171). Tom Quirk, who has examined in some depth the influence of *Don Quixote* on Melville's last book, also recognises a connection between the confidence man and Cervantes's deluded knight:

> However removed this character may be from a swindler, Melville could nevertheless imagine a champion of charity and confidence who, however sinister his real purpose,

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[12] Bell also argues that "the nature of this 'original air' has already been hinted at in the image" of the sea-breeze (242).

[13] As Jay Leyda notes in *The Melville Log*, leaving Albany on 18 September 1855, at the end of what must have been a break from the writing of *The Confidence-Man*, Melville bought a copy of *Don Quixote*,

> *in which he subsequently reads (on the cars?) & marks this passage in Vol. II, p 216*:
> ". . . a knight-errant without a mistress is like a tree without leaves, a building without cement, a shadow without a body that causes it."
> *M's* [*marginal*] *comment*: X or as Confucius said 'a dog without a master,' or to drop both Cervantes & Confucius parables—a god-like mind without a God. (508).

> might be taken for a quixotic simpleton in a corrupt age so terribly out of joint. For Melville made his cosmopolitan quixotic in both the conventional and an imitative sense. (*Knave* 95-96)

Ultimately, the "protagonist" of *The Confidence-Man* inhabits a curious space somewhere between the picaro and the deluded Don, at once a rogue (a demonic double of the romantic hero) and a true romantic hero (displaced into a demonic picaresque world, which he mistakes for a "gallant globe"). This position is not, however, as Bryant has suggested, one of "fusion" (*Repose* 112). Instead, it maintains the tension between antitheses that marks the entire narrative—which Michael Davitt Bell has described as a "labyrinth of contrasted views" (234)—and continually taxes the reader to place himself in a position of judgment, essentially dooming him to White-Jacket's inbetweenness.

Although a morally vacant picaro, the confidence man's search for the ideal of confidence is an "earnest" one, and he presents a clear example (albeit ironic) of the dilemma that faces the idealist: reaching for the ideal tends to eradicate it. The Don himself frequently has a related experience when his deluded actions as a knight result in the sudden imposition of reality (as in the battles with the windmills and the wine-skins)—then he forestalls disillusionment by essentially re-romanticising his world when he lays the blame for his temporary delusion at the door of the "learned enchanter" (Cervantes 65; pt. 1, ch. 7).[14] In *The Confidence-Man*, in a sense, Don and enchanter merge. Simultaneously, he both searches for confidence and produces it by means of a kind of "enchantment." The hypnotic qualities of the confidence man are clearly expressed in the narrative—finally a victim of Frank Goodman's "power of holding another creature by the button of the eye," the barber, William Cream, remembers him as "the man-charmer" (234, 237; ch. 43), while Pitch, after being left to himself by the PIO man, is "[l]ike one beginning to rouse himself from a dose of chloroform treacherously given" (129; ch. 23)—indeed, the very nature of his game is to enchant in order to dupe. At other times, however, our sense of the trickster is displaced by a recognition of the dogged persistence of an idealist in the face of a disillusioned and bitter world. At such times, as a millennial pilgrim propagating geniality and trusting fellowship, as a believer in a "goodness

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[14] The Don frequently resorts to the fiction of the "enchanter." As Spanos puts it, commenting on the function of this figure in the Don's maintenance of his romantic vision,

> [w]hen the differential force of the recalcitrant real world manifests itself so powerfully that it can no longer be accommodated to and contained by the don's visionary problematic, he is compelled to appeal to the "enchanter." This is the ultimate outside principle of presence—the transcendental signified, as it were—that is the final guarantee of the legitimacy—but also the illegitimacy—of all logocentric and totalizing ontologies, the principle which is normally held in invisible reserve, but which is brought into play in crisis situations. (314n)

that is not greenness, either" (24; ch. 5), the confidence man almost seems a bona fide quester. The ultimate irony, of course, is that by breaking the very confidence he so carefully calls into being, the confidence man is eradicating the ideal even as he "quests" for it.

The confidence man, it must be made clear, is never actually introduced, and, as Tom Quirk has pointed out, "the question of [. . .] [his] identity, a question so fundamental to an understanding of the novel, is not easily answered" (*Knave* 49). Chapter 1 simply opens with the "advent" of an indeterminate "man in cream-colors"—"a stranger" and, as the chapter title suggests, "[a] mute" (3)—who may or may not be the awaited protagonist, but who

> chance[s] to come to a placard nigh the captain's office, offering a reward for the capture of a mysterious impostor, supposed to have recently arrived from the East; quite an original genius in his vocation, as would appear, though wherein his originality consisted was not clearly given; but what purported to be a careful description of his person followed. (3)

If this announcement seems somewhat ambiguous—prone to qualification—so, ultimately, does the tableau the reader is asked to imagine. The narrator's placing of the "stranger" in the vicinity of a placard presumably describing the confidence man encourages the reader to associate the two figures. However, the opportunity this presents the gathered crowd for a direct comparison of the apparition with the "careful description" of the "impostor," might either imply that this man is someone else completely, or that the undefined "original genius" of the confidence man must consist in a preternatural talent for disguise.

There is very little to assist us in deductions. The stranger arrives on board with "neither trunk, valise, carpet-bag, nor parcel" (3), in other words, he has no past, nothing to assist us in providing him with a defining context. Neither does the little we are told about his appearance help much. The fact that "[h]is cheek was fair, his skin downy, his hair flaxen, his hat a white fur one, with a long fleecy nap" (3) may invest him with what the narrator eventually calls "lamb-like" associations (6), but it also returns us to the ambiguities of Ishmael's essay on "whiteness" (*MD* 189; ch. 42). For all we know it may just be the primary "all-color" (*MD* 195) from which the confidence man's subsequent disguises are drawn, finding its final and most colourful expression in the "parti-hued [. . .] aspect" of Frank Goodman, the cosmopolitan. Not surprisingly, therefore, Seelye bluntly insists that "[t]he Christly mute is a blank, an outline to be filled in by a number of tricksters to follow" (120). However, his muteness, which recalls so many other mutes in Melville's fiction, also makes him "a threshold to Mystery" (Seelye 120).

Uncertainties persist as the chapter unfolds. The stranger "plant[s] himself just beside the placard" and, "producing a small slate and tracing some words upon it," provides a kind of scriptural anti-chorus to the watchfulness urged by the placard. Otherwise mute, he runs through

the cumulative Pauline definition of "Charity": "Charity thinketh no evil," "Charity suffereth long, and is kind" (4), "Charity endureth all things," "Charity believeth all things" and "Charity never faileth" (5). We are told that "[t]he word charity, as originally traced, remained throughout uneffaced, not unlike the left-hand numeral of a printed date, otherwise left for convenience in blank" (5). Already making full use of the associative values of the words established in the few preceding paragraphs—an associative complex that will grow beyond all unravelling in the course of the book—the narrator confounds the reader's ability to cast decisive judgement on the character of the mute. The blankness of the slate is related to the blankness of the stranger as defined by Seelye, susceptible to a filling in—here, an exhortation to the crowd gathered about the placard to put a kind interpretation upon him. The reference to convenience also hints—obliquely—at a certain expedience lurking in the idealistic professions. Further, by means of a linguistic echo, the "originally traced" characters remind us of the "original genius" of the confidence man, who, after all, makes his living by preying on the charitable (believing) instincts in people. More than anything, the mute now appears to be preparing the ground for a confidence trick. In fact, the consistency of the term "Charity" within a sequence of definitions seems proleptically to mirror the consistent advocacy of "confidence" by a procession of confidence men (presumably, one confidence man in various guises). At the same time it provides a consistent rejection of the very idea of the confidence man as evoked by the placard.

The slate may contradict the placard, but it is in turn contradicted by the barber's "gaudy sort of illuminated pasteboard sign," which bears the laconic inscription, "NO TRUST" (5). It is clearly a sentiment with which the crowd feels some sympathy, while the mute's thoughts are uncharitably met with "stares and jeers," and even related to "lunacy," the barber's does not "provoke any corresponding derision or surprise, much less indignation; and still less, to all appearances, did it gain for the inscriber the repute of being a simpleton" (5). For the time being suppressing the internal disagreements among the members in the crowd, communicated in the next chapter, the narrator here seems to place a satirical focus on the unchristian behaviour of an ostensibly Christian crowd. But this, in turn, makes us wonder about the mute. Once more he begins to look more like the original disciple of charity, namely Christ himself. In the greater context of the book, we recognise some important differences between him and the other avatars of the confidence man. For one thing, he is mute, and, in terms of his communications, incapable of any subtlety, whereas they are all fluent speakers, capable of winning people round by subtle casuistry. This leads to a second observation, namely that the mute alone, of all the appellants to charity and confidence in the book, gains absolutely nothing for his pains. Even Frank Goodman, simultaneously the most genial and least successful of the avatars, at length scores a notable (if

financially trifling) victory over the barber himself, by apparently diddling him out of the price of a shave.

All this leaves us in a hermeneutic quagmire. Recasting White-Jacket's inbetweenness, and Pierre's ethical dilemma, *The Confidence-Man* presents, as Seelye notes (in considering the encounters or dialogues between Goodman and Mark Winsome, as well as Goodman and Pitch), a tableau of "counterpointed alternatives, [. . .] a static arrangement of antitheses, a ring from which there is no escape" (130). For all its dialogue, the overall structure, in other words, is antithetical and not dialectical. An almost diagrammatic example of this occurs in chapter 29, when Goodman's anecdote about Phalaris—that "he once caused a poor fellow to be beheaded on a horse-block, for no other cause than having a horse-laugh"—is simultaneously punctuated by himself and his "boon companion," Charlie Noble:

> "Funny Phalaris!"
> "Cruel Phalaris!"
> As after fire-crackers, there was a pause, both looking downward on the table as if mutually struck by the contrast of exclamations, and pondering upon its significance, if any. So, at least, it seemed [. . .]. (164)

Here, as everywhere, the significance, in other words, the synthetic conclusion—the pyramidical moment—that is meant to be the result of dialectic is qualified out of existence. All that remains are the two static antithetical exclamations, about which, it seems, there is nothing more to be said. Within the narrative such a irresolvable contradiction results in what Jonathan Culler, following Paul de Man, has called "unreadability" (80). According to Culler, "[s]uch unreadability does not result simply from a central ambiguity or choice but from the way in which the system of values in the text both urges choice and prevents that choice from being made" (81).[15] This basic pattern clearly underlies the structure of *The Confidence-Man*, a work

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[15] Elizabeth Renker has shown how the term "unreadability" gains a literal dimension in *The Confidence-Man*. She refers, for instance, to the discussion between Mark Winsome and Frank Goodman in chapter 36. In this chapter their talk is marked by a lack of resolution, this time carried to the height of abstraction. Goodman cannot help but recognise that they have strayed into "a labyrinth," though, of course, he retains good hope of finding his way back out of it (194; ch. 36). Melville fashions the entire comic scene as an occasion of non-communication, of which Winsome's effort to define the recently departed Noble is most emblematic:

> "I conjecture him to be what, among the ancient Egyptians, was called a ——" using some unknown word.
> "A ——! And what is that?"
> "A —— is what Proclus, in a little note to his third book on the theology of Plato, defines as —— ——" coming out with a sentence of Greek. (193)

For Elizabeth Renker, what this passage *does* communicate, to the reader, at any rate, is the book's tendency toward "unreadability." She argues that, in this instance, "*The Confidence-Man* takes unreadability from the level of a confusing cast and bewildering plot to the verge of literal unreadability—by which I mean a hypothetical novel that

in which the appeal for Christian charity and confidence comes from the very source that undermines such charity and confidence.

From the very first chapter, the narrative evolves a complex of irresolvable antitheses—discrepancies—that in turn begets an intricate network of interrelated and reciprocal ironies. What Elizabeth Foster has called "the charm—and also the bane—of this novel [. . .] [i.e.,] its irony delicate and intricate as a spider's web" (qtd. in Branch, et al. 337), becomes simultaneously most apparent and unravelable at such moments as when Goodman registers the "ironic complaint" (Cook 8) that "irony is so unjust; never could abide irony; something Satanic about irony" (136; ch. 24). This from a man whose very occupation by necessity calls into being the seminal incongruity that lies at the root of dramatic irony.

The reciprocal antithetical tensions set up in chapter 1 permeate and expand throughout the rest of the book. The disappearance of the mute into a "slumber" (6; ch. 1)—and, ultimately, from the narrative—merely precipitates the fragmentation of what seemed a universal conspiracy against him, a fragmentation figured by the chorus—less polyphonic than cacophonic—that opens chapter 2, "Showing that many men have many minds":

> "Odd fish!"
> "Poor fellow!"
> "Who can he be?"
> "Caspar Hauser."
> "Bless my soul!"
> "Uncommon countenance."
> "Green prophet from Utah."
> "Humbug!"
> "Singular innocence."
> "Means something."
> "Spirit-rapper."
> "Moon-calf."
> "Piteous."
> "Trying to enlist interest."
> "Beware of him."
> "Fast asleep here, and, doubtless, pick-pockets on board."
> "Kind of daylight Endymion."
> "Escaped convict, worn out with dodging."
> "Jacob dreaming at Luz."

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would not even contain legible words" ("Unreadability" 120). There is good reason to shun such a novel even in its hypothetical state, but Renker's point, particularly when considered in conjunction with her identification of the use of tautology in Melville's book (120), serves to underscore what I will call a rhetoric of equivocation, which radically amplifies the interstice between signifier and signified, text and meaning. Bell calls such rhetoric "almost terminally phenomenal" (231), and goes on to describe the narrative as a "labyrinth of contrasted views" (234).

> Such the epitaphic comments, conflictingly spoken or thought, of a miscellaneous company, who, assembled on the overlooking, cross-wise balcony at the forward end of the upper deck near by, had not witnessed preceding occurrences. (7-8)

This catalogue of contradictory voices returns us to Media's argument against the efficacy of trying a case on the basis of consensus among a democratic jury of "twelve men good and true" (*M* 184; ch. 60). Of course, Media's point is meant to justify his own judicial sovereignty, and is itself the subject of a critical gaze. Melville, a constitutional democrat, certainly has nothing against the exchange of opinions, and once noted of the Declaration of Independence that it "makes a difference" (*C* 122). What provoked him, rather, was the blind optimism that defined the pervasive national chauvinism (parodied, for instance, in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*), the expectation, implicit in any perfectionist scheme, that a steadily accumulating consensus would propel the nation toward its millennial Manifest Destiny. Chapter 2, which ends with the ironic image of the "one cosmopolitan and confident tide" (9), thus tellingly opens with a cacophony of diverse opinions that for the most part cannot even be defined as an argument. No logic determines its unfolding. A collective—the "company"—remains "miscellaneous," internally divided and conflicted. Toward the end of the chapter this fact finally manifests itself in the most physical of terms when

> the crowd, as is usual, began in all parts to break up from a concourse into various clusters or squads, which in some cases disintegrated again into quartettes, trios, and couples, or even solitaires; involuntarily submitting to that natural law which ordains dissolution equally to the mass, as in time to the member. (9)

The only "logic" persisting in this world is one that counters and overrules the human evolutionary will, namely the almost catagenetic logic of the "disintegration" and "dissolution" ordained by "natural law" (the same law that carries the "dædal boat" downstream).

The inharmonious chorus of commentary on the mute also prefigures the marked defeat of critical agreement on the precise character of the "man in cream colors," whose muteness is only the most overt sign of his hermeneutic recalcitrance. Is he, or is he not, the confidence man? Like one of the disembodied voices quoted above, the reader can only assume that he "[m]eans something." But what? For some, like Hoffman (131), Grenberg (181), William Ellery Sedgwick (188), Leslie Fiedler (460), Edgar A. Dryden (159), H. Bruce Franklin (*Wake* 155), John P. McWilliams (192), and John Wenke (199), he is, or most likely is, the first avatar of a confidence man whom some—like Sedgwick, McWilliams, and Grenberg—seem to consider a mere man, while others deem the Devil. Accordingly, for those who yet recognise some resemblance to Christ, this resemblance must stem either from the fact that he is an impostor, i.e., "a mock-Christ" (Hoffman 131), or from the fact that he is meant to reveal Christ, "the saviour," as being also "the destroyer" (Franklin 155), the possibility that "*Christ is the Devil*!"

(Fiedler 461). For others, like Chai and Bell, the mute is strictly "Christ-like" (91, 210). Chai sees him as a redemptive figure rejected by an expedient world, and hence, one who stands in "diametrical opposition to the Cosmopolitan, the principal disguise of the Confidence-Man" (92). James E. Miller argues that "the mute is Christ bringing the essence of the Christian ethical message to the world" (177). Overtly or implicitly, these critics seem to agree with Leavis's argument that "[t]he first [avatar] is Black Guinea the negro cripple" (212), who enters the narrative in chapter 3. According to Quirk, Foster also rejects the mute as an avatar, and assumes Black Guinea to be the first (*Knave* 50). Such a distinction sets up an antithetical relation between the two figures. As Miller puts it, "[a]s the first figure to appear is Christ, the second is the Devil" (177). The relation of Black Guinea to the Christ-like mute, then, is one of eclipse, in terms of which the latter emerges as "a symbol," as Bryant (in identifying this view) puts it, "of ineffectual or recumbent Christianity" ("*Confidence-Man*" 331).

This unresolved critical debate on what is surely a crucial point—in fact, a hermeneutical starting-point—is symptomatic of a narrative postponement of meaning. In the end all critics are forced even to assume the qualifying words—seems, may, etc.—that characterise the narrative under discussion. In other words, the irresolvable ambiguity is a feature of the narrative itself. If we cannot finally decide whether the mute is Christ, or anti-Christ (Devil), or both (or something completely different), it seems, this very uncertainty must remain the indeterminate and provisional centre to the hermeneutic endeavour of criticism.

The complex of voices at the opening of chapter 2 serves also as the hyperbolic introduction of another pervasive narrative technique, namely that of opening a chapter with a remark, or even a brief piece of dialogue, before identifying the actual speaker(s). This postponement of attribution—Bryant's "*unidentified dialogue*" (237)[16]—has an important effect on the reader's initial sense of command of the text. It necessitates an interpretive guess which the reader is, for the most part, simply not in a position to make. In the case of the crowd in chapter 2, of course, any kind of attribution is hopeless. The voices (the "many minds" of the chapter title) fade into obscurity, eclipsed by chapter 3, "In which a variety of characters appear." And here, of course, another set of voices appear, this time to comment on Black Guinea.

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[16] Bryant includes this technique among "[n]ine patterns of behavior (both ritualized and aesthetic)" related to the confidence man in the first part of the book (*Repose* 237).

The opening of chapter 2 presents an extreme case, since the characters behind the voices are never introduced at all. A more representative moment, for example, occurs in chapter 19, which opens thus:

> "Mexico? Molina del Rey? Resaca de la Palma?
> "Resaca de la *Tombs*!"
> Leaving his reputation to take care of itself, since, as is not seldom the case, he knew nothing of its being in debate, the herb-doctor, wandering towards the forward part of the boat, had there espied a singular character in a grimy old regimental coat, a countenance at once grim and wizened, interwoven paralyzed legs, stiff as icicles, suspended between rude crutches, while the whole rigid body, like a ship's long barometer on gimbals, swung to and fro, mechanically faithful to the motion of the boat. (93)

This passage presents an exemplary instance of the narrative postponement of identity, of direct statement undermined by the ostensibly descriptive multiplication of phrases and clauses. Even by the end of this paragraph it remains an open question as to what the import of the opening exchange might be, and even who precisely might have been saying what.[17] Two voices linger in a void. At length, something resembling a proper context accrues to them, but the narrator takes his time. Only the initiated will immediately recognise "Molina del Rey" and "Resaca de la Palma" as battles,[18] and even they might have problems gauging the import of the substitution of the word "Tombs" in the reply. In fact it takes a significant time for the point to be cleared up: at length we learn that the "soldier of fortune['s]" (93) paralysis is the result not of any historic battle but of a quirk of social inequality, whereby he, as an innocent witness to a murder, was subpoenaed and, while waiting to testify, "imprisoned" at the Tombs—"[t]he Hall of Justice in New York City, used as a prison" (Matterson, "Notes" 315)—where "the wet and damp struck into my bones" (96). First and foremost a grim criticism of social inequality (the moneyed perpetrator first gets out on bail and is finally acquitted), the tale ultimately provides another example of the heartlessness of nature and fate. It is not without reason that the "soldier," when first introduced, is represented as "swing[ing] to and fro, mechanically faithful to the motion of

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[17] My own point proceeds from Bryant's comment on the first two lines quoted: "Not until the middle of the chapter do we fully understand that the bitter response of the second speaker (soldier of fortune) to the first (herb doctor) refers to his crippling incarceration in New York City's prison and not to any heroic wound received during the Mexican War" (237).

[18] According to Stephen Matterson, both were "[b]attles in the Mexican War, fought respectively on 8 September 1847 and 9 May 1846" ("Notes" 315), roughly ten years previous to the writing and publication of *The Confidence-Man*.

the boat," a motion that hints at the waters below its keel.[19] On board the *Fidèle*, where faith (confidence) has become a rare commodity, such "faithful[ness]" stands out. As in the case of "that natural law which ordains dissolution" (9; ch. 2), we are here presented with an inescapable fact. In spite of itself, the ostensibly closed world *Fidèle* remains "mechanically" true to nature, and its motion remains a faint natural pulse that passes through the narrative in order to remind us of the provisional foundations of the entire intricate world that unfolds on deck.

I have already referred to the multiplication of phrases and clauses in the passage quoted above. Such circumlocution, too, is characteristic of a narrative that is defined, not only by an antithetical structure, but also by what by now we may call a rhetoric of equivocation[20] that, to appropriate Wenke's formulation, "invite[s] the reader into an interpretive labyrinth" (200). The narrator consistently subjects our reading to strategies that complicate our grasp of the text. These strategies range from the basic to the complex. Thus, for instance, there is the widespread and apparently unsystematic use of the term "stranger," first used of the mute, who "was, in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger" (3; ch. 1). As the narrative proceeds we frequently encounter this term, not only in relation to the different avatars, but also in relation to his victims and companions. The word ceases to have a clear designative value as we begin to realise that we are moving in a world entirely made up of strangers—strangers who, as Bryan C. Short puts it, "have no authorizing memories" (142). A similar diffusion of the signified occurs in the narrator's ironic disquisition on "goodness" at the start of chapter 7 (35-37). This passage also reveals a more pervasive and complex strategy, as evidenced in the involved, labyrinthine sentences ostensibly constructed by the narrator in order to "contain," or represent, as fully as possible, the range of social and linguistic traces implicit at the moment/site of signification. Another example occurs in chapter 5, when the narrator reflects on the apparent contradiction presented by the solitary display of heart in "the man with the weed" (the confidence man), after the taciturnity of his response to the charity of the merchant, Mr. Roberts, at the end of the previous chapter:

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[19] We are reminded also of the "rock[ing]" of "the sailor's cradle" (*O* 319; ch. 82) and the "[m]aternal craft" (*M* 24; ch. 7). In both cases the ship is linked to an illusion of security. In *Mardi*, such illusion particularly asserts its influence over Jarl, when he and Taji gain the decks of the *Parki*. The latter points out that "perhaps, finding himself once more in a double-decked craft, which rocked him as of yore, he was lulled into a deceitful security" (110; ch. 34).

[20] This is to be distinguished from Bryant's "rhetoric of deceit" (254), for I am not here interested in the possibility of Melville's duping of his reader, so much as his radical postponement of hermeneutic "certitude" (which makes it impossible, it seems to me, to know whether or not we have been deceived).

> But the truth, perhaps, is, that those who are least touched with that vice [pride], besides being not unsusceptible to goodness, are sometimes the ones whom a ruling sense of propriety makes appear cold, if not thankless, under a favor. For, at such a time, to be full of warm, earnest words, and heart-felt protestations, is to create a scene; and well-bred people dislike few things more than that; which would seem to look as if the world did not relish earnestness; but, not so; because the world, being earnest itself, likes an earnest scene, and an earnest man, very well, but only in their place—the stage. (24; ch. 5)

The first thing to note about this is that it is unnecessary, for, if we are indeed looking at a confidence man, we cannot hope to make any deductions about his character while he is still "in character." The starting-point for the narrator's reflections, then, is a complete fiction. However, what strikes one even more forcefully is the way in which the narrator's attempt to explain "the truth" succumbs to confusion and virtual meaninglessness. From the beginning, qualifying words and phrases—e.g., "perhaps"; "would seem to look as if"—undermine the ability of the passage to communicate something unequivocal about human nature, or "the world." The double negative—"not unsusceptible"—presents another way of introducing a qualifying distance between the statement and its reader. "Litotes," Short has also argued, "creates the throttled and somnambulistic effects which dog Melville's style throughout" (145). But far and away the most subversive effect is created by the profusion of commas, which impede the progression of the sentence and the advent of its meaning. In the first part of the first sentence quoted—"But the truth, perhaps, is, that [. . .]"—the commas virtually serve to break it down into its constituent parts. Such "breakdown" takes another form toward the end of the quoted passage, when the narrator's point on the world's attitude to "earnestness" begins to show decided strain and ultimately breaks down at the dash, which here clearly appears in its role, as once defined by Coleridge, as an "expression of the indefinite or fragmentary" ("Notebook" 422). The "truth" that the narrator purported to explicate has, confoundingly, landed us back in the theatre, "the stage." And neither is the process by which this happened at all transparent to the reader. The only logic, ironic and untenable, to emerge from the passage is that the confidence man did not resort to theatricals in duping the merchant.

This passage gives rise to another issue that becomes a recurring theme through the rest of the book, and indeed elicits several direct remarks from the narrator, namely that of the instability of character. After pursuing his discussion of gratitude and earnestness a little further, the narrator at length arrives at what seems to have been his point all along:

> What started this was, to account, if necessary, for the changed air of the man with the weed, who, throwing off in private the cold garb of decorum, and so giving warmly loose to his genuine heart, seemed almost transformed into another being. This subdued air of softness, too, was toned with melancholy, melancholy unreserved; a thing which, however at variance with propriety, still the more attested his earnestness; for one

> knows not how it is, but sometimes it happens that, where earnestness is, there, also, is melancholy. (25)

This suddenly positive use of "earnestness" is deliberately fatal to the narrator's evocation of the man with the weed's "heart." It immediately recalls the theatrical "earnest words, and heart-felt protestations" of the previous passage. We begin to have doubts about this "genuine heart." We also grow more confused about what it is we are to understand by the word "earnestness." We are left with a contradiction and, as I have pointed out with regard to the word "stranger," the capacity of the signifier—like that of all other surfaces in the book—to signify is radically called into question. Of course this relates also to the matter of "the changed air of the man with the weed," and we are made increasingly wary of any statements as to character. Even our own assumptions on the subject matter proceed on highly unstable ground.

One of the reasons, of course, why the narrative becomes so confusing is that there is a profound absence of defining action, both external and internal (physical and psychological). This is what underlies Newton Arvin's point that the characters tend to disappear from the reader's mind as soon as they leave the narrative (250). Short, too, suggests that "characters in the novel appear all the same" (142). Dialogue, especially if it remains equivocal and ultimately ineffectual, cannot compete with action in successfully delineating a character, which is why Ahab was the first to emerge as the protagonist of *Moby-Dick*. In *The Confidence-Man* a case in point is provided by the "kind of invalid Titan in homespun" who arrives on board with his daughter (85; ch. 17), and, after a stubborn exchange with the herb-doctor, almost fells him with "a sudden side-blow" (88). This action has ensured him a long and prosperous critical life—in spite of his comparatively brief appearance, he has commanded the attention of most critics since his publication.

The Titan's decisive action is certainly the most overt among a measly few. As Bell has pointed out, "[l]ike everything else on the *Fidèle*, violence has been sublimated into artificial gesture and language" (235). In a sense this sublimation is analogous to the suppression of nature as a physical fact in favour of ideologically biased conversations that evoke nature, in other words, *re*present it. This is in keeping with the narrative immersion in the "dream" of the "dædal boat," *Fidèle*. In fact, what will be the most sustained conversation on this theme—the ongoing discussion between the "ursine[21] [. . .] Missouri bachelor," Pitch (106; ch. 21), and two

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[21] Apart from his overt scepticism, Pitch's "ursine [. . .] aspect" (106) also superficially links him to those "scoundrelly bears" who, according to the agent for the Black Rapids Coal Company (the confidence man), devalued the company stock by "destroy[ing] [. . .] confidence" (48; ch. 9).

consecutive manifestations of the confidence man, i.e., the herb-doctor and the PIO man—is initiated immediately after the brief glimpse of the natural setting that opens chapter 16, when the "sick man," the "plant whose hour seems over," is drawn into conversation by "a stranger in a snuff-colored surtout" (77). It soon emerges that this "stranger" is an herb-doctor, one who rejects chemically-based medicinal science in favour of the curative and providential qualities of nature as captured in his representative image of "God's natural air" (79). As Leavis puts it, he "propagands the Romantics' belief in Nature as a cure-all" (212). His fraudulent panacean "Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator" (79) is simultaneously emblematic of a Rousseauean belief in the goodness of nature and a Romantic logic of inclusion, containment and unification.

The herb-doctor's sense of nature is simplistic (as simplistic, of course, as the ostensibly uncomplicated choice between confidence and utter cynicism). To him, "nature, divine nature," cannot be "aught but health": "Trust me, nature is health; for health is good, and nature cannot work ill. As little can she work error. Get nature, and you get well" (81). Of course, this is a specious argument, and in linking nature with "divine nature," or God, the herb-doctor ultimately does not so much vindicate nature as undermine the authority and goodness of God. The question implicitly raised, of course, is this: if God and nature are good, how do we account for "error," or evil? A more complex and inhuman evasion of this question is later proffered by the Emersonian Mark Winsome, in his conversation with Frank Goodman, but the herb-doctor's assumptions are not directly challenged until the appearance, in chapter 21, of "A hard case," namely Pitch.

Pitch's very entrance into the narrative is marked by a spirited rejection of the herb-doctor's claims: "Yarbs, yarbs; natur, natur; you foolish old file, you! He diddled you with that hocus-pocus, did he? Yarbs and natur will cure your incurable cough, you think" (106). Almost immediately he points out the problematic that the herb-doctor's sales pitch suppresses, or overlooks: "Because a thing is nat'ral, as you call it, you think it must be good. But who gave you that cough? Was it, or was it not, nature?" (106). These questions are directed to an old miser, the herb-doctor's latest dupe, but the doctor himself soon reappears to take up the challenge in a sustained feat of evasion.[22] Meanwhile, in a complete expression of dependence, the miser begins to lean on the herb-doctor's arm, forcing the latter, at given points in the conversation, to request him to "[s]tand up a little" (108). As Quirk has perceptively pointed out, "[n]ot only do these intrusions nullify the herb doctor's defense of unqualified confidence in man

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[22] The herb-doctor never actually answers Pitch's points regarding specific injuries inflicted by nature. At such moments, he tends simply to lament the sceptic's lack of confidence.

and nature, but they also expose the herb doctor as a hypocrite and the miser as a pathetic dupe whose weakness is moral as well as physical" (*Knave* 35). Against such weakness and hypocrisy we have the imposing figure of Pitch, and his ultimately balanced and informed[23] view of nature as expressed "as in apostrophe: 'Look you, nature! I don't deny but your clover is sweet, and your dandelions don't roar; but whose hailstones smashed my windows?" (109). Still, Pitch's antithetical positioning of himself in relation to the herb-doctor's Rousseauean view of nature forces him into such extremities as advocating the replacement of human labour by machines (108). In the course of the conversation, especially as continued with the PIO man, it becomes increasingly clear that this argument is more emotional than ideological, the result of several disappointments with undisciplined boys. Still, Melville doubtlessly introduces this radical point of view in order to preserve a sense of ambivalence in the reader, to forestall any overt identification with the bellicose, yet strangely humane, "Spartan" (106). A similar logic would seem to inform Charlie Noble's later association of Pitch with the Indian-hater, Colonel John Moredock (139; ch. 25).

However, as the only character in the book to provide an apparent moral pole to the confidence man that is at least partially acceptable, identification has proved tempting. For all his scepticism, Pitch is finally duped by the PIO man into putting down an advance on another boy, the result, we are told, of the betrayal of "[p]hilosophy, knowledge, experience" by "his too indulgent, too artless and companionable nature" (130; ch. 23). In Pitch, it seems, the heart still wins out over the head, and the "loft[iness]" of which the cosmopolitan at length accuses him (134; ch. 24), is clearly not absolute. He may proclaim that "my name is Pitch; I stick to what I say" (126; ch. 22), but finally he is deeply prone to "a little softening" (126). According to McWilliams, Pitch "is surely the most sympathetic character aboard the *Fidèle* precisely because he has 'confidence in distrust' without having totally lost his humanities" (192). And as Wenke has pointed out, in relation to Pitch the "narrator alters his rules of revelation. He now seems to provide qualified access to a character's inner life" (210). That inner life, to be sure, is also liable to doubt and indeterminacy—it holds no answers—and, as the reader has learned in chapter 5, the evocation of the heart may itself be an equivocal business. And yet, it is precisely in relation to the matter of Pitch's heart that the reader feels most inclined to suspend distrust and risk being duped.

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[23] As the herb-doctor himself notes, judging by his "complexion," Pitch "live[s] an out-of-door life" (109). Such a recognition is implicitly damaging to his own argument, since, presumably, it places Pitch in a position of authority vis-à-vis the nature of nature.

One thing we soon recognise about Pitch is that he essentially advocates a non-teleological view of life. It is especially with regard to the concept of growth and maturation that he harbours severe doubts about man's capacities. For Pitch, as his conversation with the PIO man reveals, "St. Augustine on Original Sin is my text book" (125; ch. 22). The relevance, for Melville's critique of millennial national optimism, of Pitch's subscription to St. Augustine becomes clear when one considers Chai's point regarding the latter's

> involve[ment] in the Pelagian controversy from which were to issue the majority of his pronouncements on the doctrine of Original Sin. His opponents, Pelagius and later Julian of Eclanum, had maintained a belief in the perfectibility of man, the possibility of attaining a state of absolute grace. (94)

However, Chai goes on to align Pitch and St. Augustine with the essentially religious asceticism of the Indian-hater (Colonel John Moredock) who forms the subject of a discussion between Frank Goodman and yet another "Mississippi operator," Charlie Noble (196; ch. 36). This Indian-hater, as Chai correctly argues, aims for "the overcoming of nature" in the form of the Indian (95), and should therefore be linked to the Puritan "errand into the wilderness" (96). Earlier in the book Melville evokes this very errand—though alluding strictly to its genocidal hegemony—by having the confidence man walk the deck as an agent suing for "contributions to a Widow and Orphan Asylum recently founded among the Seminoles" (28; ch. 6). The image of the orphan as liberated American, an image that found its ironic expression, for instance, in *Redburn* and *Pierre*, is here completely eclipsed by the image of the orphan as disempowered victim. In the Indian-hater, the "captain in the vanguard of civilisation" and the "[p]athfinder" who precedes "[t]he tide of emigration" (145; ch. 26), we finally meet the agent of that disempowerment. For Chai to align not only Pitch, but also Melville, with what he ultimately perceives to be a quest for "a spiritualization of the soul" (97), seems to me seriously to misread the efficacy of the Indian-hater's overcoming of nature as presented by Melville. For one thing, there is the matter of the subtle subversion of the civilised-uncivilised dichotomy evoked by Judge Hall[24] in chapter 26, "Containing the metaphysics of Indian-hating, according to one

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[24] Charlie Noble proposes to present Goodman with a "word for word" rendering of Judge Hall's account of the Indian-hater. Melville's source for this account has been identified by scholars (see Branch, et al. 284) as a chapter in James Hall's *Sketches of History, Life, and Manners, in the West* (1835). Hall's topic in chapter 6 of that book is announced as follows: "Indian hating.—Some account of the sources of this animosity.—Brief Account of Col. Moredock" (Hayford and MacDougall, "Indian-Hating" 502). Hall emerges as a sympathetic chronicler, both in his own account and in Melville's. Melville, for instance, retains such expressions as Hall's reference to "[t]he great tide of emigration" (503). But Melville also adds some phrases to his own account that are certainly more subversive than Judge Hall would have intended.

evidently not so prepossessed as Rousseau in favor of savages." In this account, as Sten has suggested, "there are a few hints—aside from the plain murderousness of his [the Indian-hater's] philosophy and the ironic suggestion that it constitutes a form of 'metaphysics'—that should lead us to doubt that this is Melville's own position on the question of Indian-white relations" (294). Sten mentions a few, but there are more, some of which have specific bearing on the matter of the Indian-hater's representative *agon* with nature. One notes, for instance, that the self-reliance evidenced in the "self-willed" backwoodsman's errand is proleptically aligned with a kind of natural savagery: "As with the 'possum, instincts prevail with the backwoodsman over precepts" (145). Bloodlust, not idealism, it seems, drives this "captain in the vanguard of civilisation." However, possibly inspired by Hall's reference, in explaining this particular animosity, to "[t]he history of the borders of England and Scotland" (Hayford and MacDougall, "Indian-Hating" 504), Melville sneaks a most subversive comparative reference into the narrative. In an effort to underline the bloodthirstiness of the Indian, Hall/Noble suggests that the frontier histories, "though of wild woods, are almost as full of things unangelic as the Newgate Calendar or the Annals of Europe" (146). A similar point is made in relation to the reputation of the fictitious Indian chief, "Mocmohoc, [. . .] deemed a savage almost as perfidious as Cæsar Borgia" (147-48). As Bell suggests, commenting on these subtle but unmistakable stabs at civilisation, "a propensity to villainy can scarcely serve to distinguish between Indian and white" (236). A bloodthirsty man in the vanguard of a bloodthirsty society, the Indian-hater ceases to be a moral standard. "Like the American character anticipated in John Paul Jones," writes McWilliams, "Moredock is civilized in externals, but a savage at heart" (193). The distinction between savage and civilised collapses in a way that recalls the unsettling alignment of the heartless Cadwallader Cuticle with heartless nature in *White-Jacket*. The pyramid of society threatens to collapse into the labyrinth. This regression seems to be what is finally communicated in the strange boyhood anecdote Charlie Noble appends to his initial reference to the exemplary Indian-hater of Hall's account, Colonel John Moredock. On his own "westward [. . .] journey through the wilderness with my father," Noble stopped at a cabin, where a man warned them that the famous colonel himself "was at that moment sleeping on wolf-skins in the corn-loft above" (141; ch. 25). With boyish curiosity, however, Noble attempts to sneak a peek:

> I slipped back into the cabin, and stepping a round or two up the ladder, pushed my head through the trap, and peered about. Not much light in the loft; but off, in the further corner, I saw what I took to be the wolf-skins, and on them a bundle of something, like a drift of leaves; and at one end, what seemed a moss-ball; and over it, deer-antlers branched; and close by, a small squirrel sprang out from a maple-bowl of nuts, brushed the moss-ball with his tail, through a hole, and vanished, squeaking. That bit of woodland scene was all I saw. No Colonel Moredock there, unless that moss-ball was his curly head, seen in the back view. (141)

The main point of this non-sighting, of course, is its indeterminacy, its inability to confirm the existence of such a monumental identity, which Goodman simply cannot credit (157; ch. 28). After all, nothing else in *The Confidence-Man* is ever invested with the (already dubious) authority of a first-hand account. Ultimately we cannot even know whether Noble's anecdote itself is fabricated in service of his scheme to dupe Goodman. But there is another suggestion that emerges from the description of the "woodland scene" up in the "loft" that is meant to be the monastic retreat of this pilgrim, a scene which is disturbed by the sudden human presence of the young Noble. While the "loft"—which activates the image of idealistic loftiness pervasive throughout Melville's work—may itself figure Moredock's absolutist isolation, it is clear that the wilderness has followed him into this retreat. Moredock himself, human no longer, has been reclaimed by nature, his monumental and conquering identity regressing to the insubstantiality of "a drift of leaves," his very head succumbing to the stupid decay figured by the "moss-ball."[25]

These points ultimately seem to me to forestall a prevalent reading—related to Chai's—that considers the Indian-hater to be presented, in the words of John Schroeder, as "the world's only remedy against the confidence-man" (qtd. in Sten 294). It is not really a question, here, of whether Melville means to portray Indians as victims, or as bloodthirsty savages or allegorical devils.[26] The point is that Moredock fails to provide a viable moral opposition. Like Ahab or Taji, his very absolutism leads to his dissolution. The frontier ceases to be the site of heroic moral reclamation and becomes, instead, the space in which the heroic identity regresses, first into grotesqueness (one thinks here of the roster of cripples and rogues populating Melville's Western boat), and then into faceless dissolution.

Eventually, in spite of certain parallels, Pitch and Moredock are not related. Both are resilient backwoodsmen, to be sure, but Pitch's grudge against mankind does not reveal the demonising logic of Moredock's Indian-hating. If Moredock hates Indians and loves white

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[25] From Bryant's argument we learn that the reverse is also true. "Young Noble," Bryant suggests, "only speculates that the moss-ball is Moredock's head. And it is our propensity for metaphor and transcendence, our passion for analogy, myth, and other puns, that predisposes us to create a human shape out of the indirections Noble provides" (252). Bryant's point, in other words, describes not the catagenetic influence of nature, but the constituting—shaping—effect of the human mind. Charlie Noble (like the reader) imposes or evolves form where there is none.

[26] In their "Historical Note" to *The Confidence-Man*, Branch, et al. provide a brief summary of the critical debate regarding "the Indian-hating episode" (340). According to them, Shroeder, Hershel Parker and Merlin Bowen have all suggested that the Indians are, in the words of Bowen, allegorically represented as "devils or manifestations of some malign force inherent in nature and in man" (Branch, et al. 341). On the other hand, Roy Harvey Pearce and Elizabeth Foster, from different perspectives, have seen Moredock as a figure under indictment (Branch, et al. 341).

America, Pitch wages a more complex and philosophical battle between the contradictory dictates of his heart and head with regard to mankind in general. It is a contradiction that mirrors the simultaneous admiration and antagonism evident in his apostrophe to nature. Like White-Jacket, Pitch finds himself in a dilemma to which there seems no resolution. Indeed, his duping, occurring at the exact centre of the book—as well as between two successful parryings of the confidence man, in the guises of the herb-doctor and the cosmopolitan—seems to provide the ambiguous fulcrum on which the book is balanced. Does he, at this point, confirm his humanity, or descend to the foolish level of the other dupes? Herein lies what Seelye has called Pitch's "pivotal function" (127). And this is perhaps what most disposes the reader toward him, for his struggle between antithetical poles—genial confidence or sceptical distrust—represents the reader's own problem of allegiance in the book.

It is telling that Pitch leaves the stage as the confidence man's final avatar, who is to dominate the rest of the book, arrives on the scene. In chapter 23, "In which the powerful effect of natural scenery is evinced in the case of the Missourian, who, in view of the region round-about Cairo, has a return of his chilly fit," Pitch, reflecting on "that swampy and squalid domain" (129), is roused from the hypnotic dream that has clouded his judgment. He realises that he has "unwittingly been betrayed into being an unphilosophical dupe. To what vicissitudes of light and shade is man subject! He ponders the mystery of human subjectivity in general" (129). In spite of the reference to a "chilly fit," this is Pitch at his most Ishmaelian, reverting not to wholesale misanthropy, but, instead, experiencing a sense of grim wonder at the "vicissitudes of light and shade." What is evoked here is a sceptical Ishmaelian wonder, a sense of the inscrutable. Not surprisingly, this is the chapter that refers to Pitch's heart, "his artless and companionable nature" (130).

All this changes in chapter 24, "A philanthropist undertakes to convert a misanthrope, but does not get beyond confuting him." Frank Goodman, "[a] cosmopolitan, a catholic man" (132) approaches Pitch and, as the title makes clear, mystery regresses into static antithesis. Appropriately, too, we are returned to the slippery and confounding significance of appearances. Pitch calls Goodman a "Toucan fowl," and the narrator examines this insult by providing an equivocal, literally faceless, description of Goodman's appearance:

> This ungentle mention of the toucan was not improbably suggested by the parti-hued, and rather plumagy aspect of the stranger, no bigot it would seem, but a liberalist, in dress, and whose wardrobe, almost anywhere than on the liberal Mississippi, used to all sorts of fantastic informalities, might, even to observers less critical than the bachelor, have looked, if anything, a little out of the common; but not more so perhaps, than, considering the bear and raccoon costume, the bachelor's own appearance. (131)

The confounding apparition exerts its influence even over the sentence structure, which displays a "liberalist" inclusiveness that threatens to eradicate its ability to say anything. More even than the narrator's subsequent anatomy of the "[g]rotesque" amalgamation of garments and colours (131), this sentence establishes Goodman as a demonic prism through which reality becomes refracted into its meaningless and unrelated constituents. Goodman, however, considers himself to be a "fusing" principle of unification, "catholic" and all-inclusive, and accordingly feels that "one roams not over the gallant globe in vain" (132). Faced with the recalcitrant Pitch, however, he registers what is perhaps a sign of frustration when he notes that "we talk and keep talking, and still stand where we did" (135). The conversation is getting him nowhere, and he clearly does not have the genial Ishmael's capacity for tolerating indeterminacy. For Goodman there is no mystery (no Montaignean doubt) in the world—there is only misanthropic distrust or philanthropic confidence.

In the end, Pitch proves Goodman's only worthy opponent. Goodman goes on to outwit Charlie Noble and William Cream, the barber, and in the end he effects a most sinister eclipse of the devout old man in "the gentlemen's cabin" (240; ch. 45). Mark Winsome and his disciple, Egbert, may prove to be recalcitrant, but their incorruptibility becomes a sign of an idealistic inhumanity as heartless as Goodman's (and, indeed, far less genial). Notably, they do not see through Goodman. Pitch, on the other hand, recognises him to be a "Diogenes masquerading as a cosmopolitan" (138; ch. 24), the "genial misanthrope," the "new kind of monster" later discussed by Goodman and Noble (176; ch. 30). In his ambiguous role as swindler-quester, Goodman functions precisely as that which he claims to abhor, namely "a man-hooter" (138; ch. 24). His ironic quest for confidence allows man no other roles but those generally circumscribed by the satirist, either a stingy misanthrope or a foolish dupe.

This is not to deny Goodman's effectiveness in exposing the folly of man, or to argue away the reader's growing admiration for his capacity for well-placed ironic remarks and gestures, such as his interruption of Hall/Noble's account of Indian-hating in order to "refill my calumet" (151). Condemnation of Goodman himself has to proceed strictly from the moral grounds the narrative renders so slippery (although a solid case against him might perhaps be made from the perspective of fashion). But we can hardly overlook his function in showing up the dubious moral pretensions of others. As Bryant has suggested, "[a]s improbable as the genial misanthrope [Goodman] may seem as the moral center for Melville's last novel, he is nevertheless the central ironic point upon which all questions of morality are focused" (*Repose* 128). Of course, this is true only insofar as prismatic Goodman's "ironic point" fragments the very question it attempts to bring into focus. I cannot agree with Bryant's suggestion that "[b]y

making his genial misanthrope the *beau idéal* of his con man cosmopolite, Melville fuses the mutually exclusive sensibilities of idealism and skepticism, and in subjecting readers to this fusion, he promotes a resolvent synthesis" (*Repose* 112). Firstly, few reader's have ever attested to a sense of "resolvent synthesis" in *The Confidence-Man*, and with good reason. Melville's "comic" thought, as Seltzer puts it, "does not attempt to resolve the contradictions of life, but merely to dramatize these discrepancies" (18). The book's sustained antithetical structure, evident also in the double "character" of Goodman, subjects the reader to the indefinite postponement of resolution. Bryant himself has pointed out that Melville "give[s] equal voice to both the promise and the threat of the cosmopolitan in a way that effectively mirrors the reader's own ontological dilemmas" (128). Scepticism, I would suggest, enters the text as the only tenable position that the reader has recourse to (short of simply closing the book). In this, Pitch, himself flawed and plagued with contradictions, may well provide the point of entry.

Bryant recognises and stresses the influence of the paradigmatic sceptic, Montaigne, on Melville, especially in terms of his inconclusive method of "essaying." According to Montaigne, as Bryant points out, "[t]he mind is a process, not a storage bin" (*Repose* 73). As Montaigne himself puts it in "Of Repentance": "Could my soul once take footing, I would not essay but resolve" (19; bk. 3, ch. 2). Montaigne also knows that, as far as both world and consciousness are concerned, "all things therein are incessantly moving" (19). This anti-monumental philosophy finds its expression in terms of the identity, as defined in "Of Experience," of the "generous mind," which cannot

> stop in itself; it will still tend further, and beyond its power; it has sallies beyond its effects; if it do not advance and press forward, and retire, and rush and wheel about, 'tis but half alive; its pursuits are without bound or method; its aliment is admiration, the chase, ambiguity, which Apollo sufficiently declared in always speaking to us in a double, obscure, and oblique sense; not feeding, but amusing and puzzling us. 'Tis an irregular and perpetual motion, without model and without aim; its inventions heat, pursue, and inter-produce one another. (323; bk. 3, ch. 13)

Montaigne's "advance," or "chase," linked here to "ambiguity" and "admiration"—J. M. Cohen translates it as "wonder" (348)—should not be associated with teleological motion, but rather with a kind of "*questioning*," to borrow a useful distinction from Bryant (*Repose* 19).[27] The "generous mind" is alive to the world, which he attempts to meet more with "admiration" than ambition. Resigned to "an irregular and perpetual motion [. . .] without aim," his identity is not

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[27] Bryant specifically associates this activity with Ishmael, whom he calls "the resolvent questioner" (19). Bryant's definition clearly captures the activity of dialectic, whereby the inquiring and associative Ishmael arrives at provisional syntheses, as, for instance, in the case of his "essayed" and "unfinished" "Cetology" (*MD* 134, 145; ch. 32).

agonistic. And because he does not, as Taji does, pretend to contain the heterogeneous plenitude of the world, or, like Ahab, strive to dominate the irreducible and indomitable, he shows a flexible resilience. The Montaignean sceptic—epitomised by Ishmael—accepts that all points are provisional; that, in fact, "[e]ven constancy itself is no other but a slower and more languishing motion" ("Of Repentance" 19). Consciousness, like nature, is in constant flux. What he recognises, as Camille R. La Bossière puts it, "is the living dubeity that is the world and ourselves" (343).

These ideas are of central importance to one's understanding of Melville's narrative subversion of the formal and the monumental. They most certainly also enter into the irresolvable world of *The Confidence-Man*. But in this world there is no Ishmael, no pervading consciousness to range and gather and renounce, nobody, in short, to "essay" (there is, however, the narrator and his three interpolated essays, discussed below). This is what makes Bryant's formulation seem problematic, for Montaigne's explicitly stated incapacity to "resolve" directly contradicts Bryant's sense of "a resolvent synthesis." What is so radical about *The Confidence-Man* is precisely its confounding refusal to resolve, even for a moment, the structure of antitheses.

This brings us back to Goodman, the "genial misanthrope," and Bryant's view of him as the authoritative if unstable site of "resolvent synthesis." Bryant's argument is impressive and sustained, but in the end it makes too much of Goodman's ability to "fuse [. . .] variant perspectives" (250). Goodman is likeable, sociable, apparently accommodating and comic, and as a "genial misanthropist" he may remind us of the Ishmael who can be genial, but also suffers from the anti-social "hypos" (*MD* 3; ch. 1). He may win the reader's admiration for his ability to rupture the pretensions of others. Sometimes, as in the conversations with the transcendentalists, Mark Winsome and Egbert, his perspective appears positively humane. However, none of this alters the fact that his perspective is a static one. Hoffman provides a neat definition of Goodman's "metaphysics": "For the unfathomable complexity of human nature he substitutes his false synthesis of simplicity" (137). This definition perfectly captures Goodman's superficial denial of the flux of consciousness. Goodman, finally, is against the mind as flux or process. He is a champion for confidence, or nothing. The antithetical structure this calls into being is never resolved. Charlie Noble flees the scene when Goodman exposes his lack of confidence. Goodman, in turn, storms offstage when a recalcitrant Egbert refuses to have confidence and, to crown it all, manifests "an inconsistency that amazes and shocks me" (222; ch. 41). In the subsequent comic interview with the barber we notice that Goodman's ideal is intact, and his quest continues unabated. In its interest, we now learn, he will invoke Don Quixote's

"metaphysical principle of last resort" (Spanos 65), in other words, resort to enchantment in order to override a recalcitrant world. Crucially, in Goodman's encounter with the barber, the stark antithesis between the former's ideal of confidence and the latter's sign, "NO TRUST," is never resolved by means of a conversational dialectic. Nobody is convinced, in the traditional sense of the word. Instead of process, we have eclipse, enchantment or, to use Hoffman's term, "substitution." When Goodman leaves, the "fascination" (237; ch. 43) evaporates and the barber is "*restored* to his self-possession and senses" (237, emphasis added). He also restores his sign and tears up the agreement. In short, everything is as it was before, and Goodman has effected no change whatsoever.

Goodman's sovereign absolutism is carried into the final chapter, which he enters in search of a Bible in order to "resolve [. . .] a disturbing doubt" (242; ch. 45). The doubt stems from the apparent inconsistencies, evoked by the barber, in what Goodman agrees to be "the True Book" (236; ch. 43), the unifying and monumental grand narrative that authorises the confidence man's quest for confidence. In that scene, Goodman upbraids the barber for a recounted display of distrust, and demands an explanation. The barber obliges:

> "Because, I recalled what the son of Sirach says in the True Book: 'An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips;' and so I did what the son of Sirach advises in such cases: 'I believed not his many words.'"
>
> "What, barber, do you say that such cynical sort of things are in the True Book, by which, of course, you mean the Bible?"
>
> "Yes, and plenty more to the same effect. Read the Book of Proverbs."
>
> "That's strange, now, barber; for I never happen to have met with those passages you cite. Before I go to bed this night, I'll inspect the Bible I saw on the cabin-table, to-day. But mind, you mustn't quote the True Book that way to people coming in here; it would be impliedly a violation of the contract. But you don't know how glad I feel that you have for one while signed off all that sort of thing." (236; ch. 43)

All this is deeply ironical but, as is so often the case in Melville, the irony does not belong exclusively, or even predominantly, to the speaker. The internal deviance of the grand narrative—the telos—of Christianity is exposed, its pretensions to what Stephen Prickett calls "a pattern of hidden meaning" exploded (xv).[28] The subversion, however, is Melville's, and not

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[28] The idea of "the True Book" is also undermined, proleptically, in the meeting between the merchant, Mr. Roberts, and the third avatar to diddle him successfully, the "president and transfer-agent" for "the Black Rapids Coal Company" (47; ch. 9). There, Mr. Roberts admits that he cannot know whether the confidence man's transfer-book "be the true book" (56; ch. 10). In this matter his act can only be based on a confidence (faith) which, needless to say, the confidence man "admire[s]" (57). In a sense, we do too, although we clearly cannot accept the thrice-diddled merchant as a practical model. The fact—or extreme likelihood—remains that "the true book" is false.

Frank Goodman's. The aim of Goodman's contract, it is clear, is to "supervise" such deviance by what quite blatantly emerges as a form of censorship.

In chapter 45, "The Cosmopolitan increases in seriousness," the confidence man enters into the nefarious "gentleman's cabin" (240). He has defeated Noble, escaped and rejected Winsome/Egbert,[29] and enchanted William Cream, but the last encounter has introduced doubts, which he now seeks to allay. The cabin, as so many critics have argued, carries an overtly allegorical charge. In its middle there "burn[s] a solar lamp [. . .] whose shade of round glass was all round fancifully variegated, in transparency, with the image of the horned altar, from which flames rose, alternate with the figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo" (240). This is the embattled lamp of faith that burns low at the centre of the *Fidèle*, still succeeding in holding off the encroaching darkness, subsisting in the face of exhaustion and the intentions of "perverse" men who want to extinguish it—both those "who wanted to sleep, not see" (240), and those who, conversely, rely on the darkness for their own schemes. It is this very lamp that Goodman will snuff out at the end of the book, even as he talks of putting one's trust in "Providence" (251). Its fate is foreordained, as is clear from the darkened space around it: "Here and there, true to their place, but not their function, swung other lamps, barren planets, which had either gone out from exhaustion, or had been extinguished by such occupants of berths as the light annoyed, or who wanted to sleep, not see" (240). For Leavis the allegory "is straightforward—the extinguished lamps are dead religions" (225). Yet, under "the commands of the captain" we have never seen, the Christian "solar lamp" persists, attended by "a clean, comely, old man," reading the Bible and "[k]eeping his lone vigils" (241).

Enemy to faith that he ultimately is, Goodman does not arrive as an antagonist to the lamp. In fact, he needs it to clear up his own doubts regarding "the True Book" on which he so strongly relies. He takes a seat by the old man who, sensing Goodman's eager consideration of the Bible, addresses him. Goodman refers to the Bible as "the very best of good news" (241), a remark which elicits a sourceless response from the shadowed berths: "Too good to be true"

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[29] The highly abstract "mystic" (189; ch. 36), Mark Winsome, is the only other character in *The Confidence-Man* to display the power of enchantment. Even Goodman is not wholly proof against him, and at length raises the objection that "you someway bewitch me with your tempting discourse, so that I keep straying from my point unawares" (193; ch. 36). In the end his only recourse is flight, and angry protestation. Still, the reader cannot help but sympathise when Goodman proclaims (to Egbert), that "I have had my fill of the philosophy of Mark Winsome put into action. [. . .] Pray, leave me, and with you take the last dregs of your inhuman philosophy" (223; ch. 41). Winsome and Egbert are widely accepted as either satirical portraits of Emerson and Thoreau or, conversely, a satirical double portrait of Emersonian thought, in theory and in praxis. For general discussions of these critical views, see Branch, et al. (285-89) and Bryant ("Confidence-Man" 330).

(241). This voice—which here simultaneously denounces Scripture and evokes the falsity of the good man, Goodman (also too good to be true), and continues to provide what Spanos calls "antichoric" interjections (66)—adds an agnostic perspective to the ironic idealism of Goodman and what turns out to be the fallible confidence of the old man. Leavis suggests that this voice may be "Melville himself" (225), but one should guard against introducing an authoritative voice into a scene structured entirely around an absence of authority. A faceless voice from the dark is not something to put one's confidence in; soon, indeed, a second voice is added, the more to confuse our sense of allegiance, should we still have any.

In this first part of the chapter, the doubting Goodman seems somehow reliant on the old man. His helplessness reveals his reliance on a unified text. His cosmopolitanism is a sham, for at this crucial juncture it shows nothing of the unprejudiced and "liberalize[d]" relativism which Melville, in an 1859 lecture, considered "the proper fruit of rightly undertaken travel" ("Traveling" 422, 423). It is here that Bryant's argument, which holds that Goodman encapsulates "the mediating moral stance of the genial misanthrope" (242), buckles. Bryant himself is forced to concede that, "[i]n all respects, Goodman seems out of character" in this scene (242). He shows none of the resilience he is supposed to. It is only once the old man explains to him that "the 'Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach'" (242; ch. 45) belongs neither to the Old or New Testaments, but is "apocryphal" and hence "of uncertain credit," that Goodman's good humour is fully restored (243). As Goodman finally proclaims:

> I cannot tell you how thankful I am for your reminding me about the apocrypha here. For the moment, its being such escaped me. Fact is, when all is bound up together, it's sometimes confusing. The uncanonical part should be bound distinct. And, now that I think of it, how well did those learned doctors who rejected for us this whole book of Sirach. I never read anything so calculated to destroy man's confidence in man. (243)

As with the barber, whom Goodman's contract bars from "quot[ing] the True Book *that way* to people" (236; ch. 43, emphasis added), Goodman here shows himself to be in favour of a manufactured narrative unity, the suppression of "confusi[on]" in terms of an ideologically informed "distinct[ion]" between the canonical and the "uncanonical" or apocryphal. Naming, it seems, is not enough. Goodman advocates wholesale—physical—differentiation, essentially intending to put what he perceives to be the antithetical voice of the Apocrypha out of play altogether. To do so makes possible the revelation of the Bible's meaning. What Goodman fails to see is that, in his neat and simplistic establishment of antithetical texts in order to hierarchise and reject, he essentially tricks himself. Identifying the "book of Sirach"—i.e., Ecclesiasticus—as apocryphal effectively allays "a disturbing doubt" (242), yet he forgets (overlooks) the fact that the barber had also referred him to the canonical "Book of Proverbs" (236; ch. 43). The "True Book," which, after all, includes also such "deviant" works as Ecclesiastes and the Book

of Job, cannot so easily be rid of the internal and worrisome inconsistencies that problematise its origins in the unifying I AM of a *super*natural God (a problem that underlies the imperial exegetical practice that, as hermeneutics, strives to subject textual ambiguity to a unifying reading or interpretation[30]).

Spanos has identified in this passage a recognition on Melville's part of the relation of his own narratives to the nineteenth-century canon:

> Surely, given his acute awareness of the fate of his novels, Melville is referring here not only to the seminal, recollective, exegetical strategies of the American Puritan biblical exegetes [. . .], but simultaneously—and more immediately—to that of the secular "learned doctors" past and future—presiding over the American literary scene, the academic critics (the "college men") who, in the name of the Emersonian testament (one central target of this "satanic" or, rather, "diabolic" anti-Book) read *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* as eccentric deviations and excluded them from the canon of American literary history. Surely, too, Melville is proleptically anticipating the fate of the heretical "novel" from which the above passage is taken. (68)

Spanos shows Melville's book to be an anti-canonical gesture that undermines the unifying logic at work in canonisation itself. But there is an even more pertinent reason for calling Melville's book "heretical." For in suggesting the recalcitrant forces persisting, in spite of exegesis, in the monumental "Book of Books" (Prickett xiv), Melville essentially relates it to the radically deviant (non-imperial) *The Confidence-Man*. If *The Confidence-Man* is to be rejected for its lack of centre and unity, the implication goes, how is one to accept "the True Book" it undermines? By creating a text that resists the hermeneutical endeavour at so many different levels, Melville makes the reader painfully aware of the act of reading, its nature as an essentially imperial, hegemonic activity (relying on the suppression or exclusion of recalcitrant details that do not "fit" the "reading"). In *The Confidence-Man* such imperial reading is made impossible. This "unreadability" forces us to re-examine our reading practice in relation to all books.

In the end even the going out of the lamp is an ambiguous occurrence. H. Bruce Franklin suggests that "the extinguishing of the solar lamp, the natural conclusion to the Confidence Man's teachings, signalizes an ominous sequel, perhaps an apocalyptic sequel" (*Wake* 186). Indeed, several critics—notably Cook (73-80)—have recognised and explored what Dryden calls the "apocalyptic overtones of the final chapter" (184). What is not often made clear, however, is that the "lamp, solar lamp that it is, begins to burn dimly" before Goodman physically tampers

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[30] One thinks here of Schleiermacher's reappraisal of hermeneutics as a "rigorous practice [that] proceeds on the assumption that *mis*understanding arises *naturally*, and that understanding must be intended and sought at each point" (qtd. in Linge xiii, emphasis added). As my emphases suggest, Schleiermacher's hermeneutics overtly emerges as an agonistic activity in which nature once more becomes the fragmenting foe.

genuineness has been thoroughly undermined in the course of the book. We simply cannot judge Goodman at this moment. He is finally as indeterminate and "unreadable" as the mute whose advent opened the narrative.

The one thing that does remain consistent in Frank Goodman, however, is his advocacy of the ideal of confidence. Insofar as he is a quester, he enters the darkness with his ideal intact, even though the religion that authorises this ideal has been allegorically extinguished. Outdoing even Don Quixote in remaining quixotic to the end, Goodman "exits" *The Confidence-Man* having displayed no willingness to compromise. Montaignean ideas of flux and indeterminacy may enter Melville's book, but they certainly do not enter it via the philosophy of Frank Goodman, whose inclusive, idealistic, cosmopolitan supervision of the "multiform pilgrim species, man" (9; ch. 2) urges the overlooking of destabilising (apocryphal) opinions and texts.

It is in this "light," perhaps, that one might also read Goodman's emblematic extinguishing of the lamp. Goodman refers to the fading of the lamp just as he and the old man are about to return to the subject of the Bible, temporarily interrupted by the arrival of the peddler. He has successfully defeated his doubts by identifying the apocryphal nature of the barber's scriptural quotation, and now, remembering "that passage from Scripture which says, 'Jehovah shall be thy confidence,'" he intends to read "a chapter" (250). The irony is that this passage comes from Proverbs (3. 26), the very book to which the barber had also referred him, and which Goodman has chosen to ignore in setting his mind at rest. One cannot help but wonder whether a dim stirring in his memory now also threatens to reopen the issue of scriptural inconsistency, and whether his sudden focus on the fading light (as an encumbrance to reading), is not the result of a self-preservative reflex. Putting out the light also brings an end to reading; it closes off the process and, in a sense, objectifies the text. However, this superficial act of closure, both of Goodman's reading and Melville's book, is deliberately countermanded by the narrator's appending of the famous and perversely inconclusive line, "Something further may follow of this Masquerade" (251). As in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, we are caught in a cycle of events from which there is no redemption, in a text that is simply discontinued with the announcement that "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (Ellis 399). As Wenke says of Melville's final line, "[t]hough reaching a postpunctuation blank, one does not quite exit the theater. [. . .] With the prospect of a sequel, Melville suspends teleological definition" (216).

As I have stated earlier, the narrative logic of *The Confidence-Man* is essentially anti-apocalyptic. Forms constantly emerge from the indeterminate background, only to fade back into obscurity. This holds true even of characters like Pitch. Nobody evolves a fixed, monumental identity into which the radical contradictions of the book may be assimilated and resolved. The

most overt communication of this quality, of course, is the final line of the book, "Something further may follow of this Masquerade" (251). It is a line that promises nothing definite, but takes everything, undermining even the tentative monumentality of the last chapter as—if nothing else—the *last* chapter. As Cook puts it, "the extinction of the solar lamp is no doubt meant to symbolize the completion of a fictive Apocalypse.[31] Nevertheless, the last sentence of the novel [. . .] suggests the continued existence of the world" (80). The "waning light [does] expire" (250), but we also know, as Ecclesiastes teaches, that "the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose" (1. 5). The events we have witnessed will be repeated again—with different accents, to be sure, and different individuals, but without significant (i.e., progressive) alteration—for, as the narrator puts it, "[t]he grand points of human nature are the same to-day as they were a thousand years ago. The only variability in them is in expression, not in feature" (71; ch. 14). Neither are we—as humans, ontologically speaking, not heroes, but picaros—proffered any hope of an external interposition into our lot (apart from death, which does not so much interpose as interrupt and which, as Short has pointed out, "has no fictive force in *The Confidence-Man*" [141]). La Bossière, in a striking reformulation of Psalm 42. 7, describes the resultant sense of the effaced tableau with which the reader is confronted at the end: "Darkness calls unto darkness, unknowing unto unknowing, deep unto deep, *bêtise* unto *bêtise*" (354).

The question of hermeneutics and its agonistic relation to the flux of nature (and consciousness) are brought to the fore in the three chapters—chapters 14, 33 and 44—in which the narrator directly addresses the reader on the poetics of fiction. R. P. Blackmur, exasperated with Melville's "vagary" narrative rule in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* (81), pointed out among other things that "[i]f an author is to use digressions, which are confusing but legitimate by tradition, he ought to follow Fielding and put them in inter-chapters" (82). Authorial intrusions, as it were, should be "bound distinct" (243; ch. 45), to minimise confusion and the better to identify an authoritative hierarchy of voices in the text. Ironically enough, Melville does just that in *The Confidence-Man*, which, in spite of its "unreadability," frequently seems to be technically the most controlled of all his fictions. As with the apparent adherence to the Aristotelian unities (implicitly under discussion in these chapters), Melville seems at pains here to avoid any

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[31] The significance of "Apocalypse" as both "end" and "revelation" is of particular importance in *The Confidence-Man*, which recognises the complicity of endings in effecting the revelation of meaning. The Revelation of St. John (the Apocalypse), for all its ironic complexity, provides a suitable ending to the grand narrative of the Bible in anticipating the final judgment of God at the end of history. Within the canonical codex it literally *completes* the Christian romance and therefore makes it possible to interpret the meaning of the narrative in terms of that ending.

spectacular rejection of accepted literary formalities. Though, as we will see, he reintroduces an aesthetics overtly raised in *Mardi* and *Pierre*, Melville's narrator does not announce his right to "write precisely as I please" (*P* 244; bk. 17, ch. 1). He capitulates in this respect, the better to demonstrate how flux will unimpededly course through maintained formal structures like water through the ribs of a sunken ship.

Like the interpolated "parables" (Leavis 218), the narrator's interruptions serve to hamper the nominal "progress" of the narrative. However, the intrusive effect of the latter is far more severe, and may be likened to the effect of an intermission in the modern theatre—they ostensibly suspend the "dream," restoring the objective context of "reality." We are able to discuss what we are seeing, to engage in the activity of criticism. In chapters 14, 33 and 44, I will argue, we are invited to engage in precisely this activity. Together, they function to elicit the reader's role as essayist. Wenke is right on the mark when he draws a link between these three chapters and "the three digressive chapters [75, 97 and 119] of *Mardi*, [because they] exist not within the past time of reported action but within the compositional present. Such moments qualify, and indeed displace, the closed world of the confidence game" (208). In *Mardi*, such puncturing of the narrative time-frame serves to give the reader a glimpse of the narrative consciousness at work, the imperial but fallen, fragmented and haunted "mind" that is Taji's. In *The Confidence-Man*, this glimpse of the narrative consciousness is so structured as to elicit a response—it puts the reader in a dialogic relation vis-à-vis the narrator.

Melville's experience of more than a decade as a publishing author tended to indicate that readers for the most part did not like being challenged too intensively. This, more than anything, would seem to be the reason for his use of tautology in the titles of the relevant chapters. As Renker has suggested in reference to these titles, "[t]autology is a use of language with no 'inside' or space of meaning. Instead, it offers itself *as* language, twice" (121). Dimock makes the same point when she says that "[s]omething seems to be said in the course of tautology, but nothing is, for what is offered here is, quite literally, words, and nothing but words" (212). In short, the tautological structure figures the intricate weave of an infinitely traced language finally overlaying an epistemological and ontological void. But finally these titles do not simply communicate a defeating nothingness, with an invitation to readers to skip the chapters altogether. They couple an invitation (or challenge) to the reader with the sardonic recognition that readers generally do not pick up books in order to be challenged. The reader who takes up that challenge encounters more antitheses, to be sure, but he also finds, insofar as it is possible, the concerns of *The Confidence-Man* brought into a clearer relief.

Chapter 14, "Worth the consideration of those to whom it may prove worth considering," opens with an inversion of chronological narrative sequence that reminds us of the narrator of *Pierre*'s admission that "[t]his history goes forward and goes backward, as occasion calls. Nimble center, circumference elastic you must have" (54; bk. 3, ch. 3). There, the narrator means to account for the structure of his narrative itself; here, however, the inversion is ascribed to the need, on the part of the narrator, for clearing up a matter that may have caused the reader some concern:

> As the last chapter was begun with a reminder looking forwards, so the present must consist of one glancing backwards.
>
> To some, it may raise a degree of surprise that one so full of confidence, as the merchant has throughout shown himself, up to the moment of his late sudden impulsiveness, should, in that instance, have betrayed such a depth of discontent. He may be thought inconsistent, and so he is. But for this, is the author to be blamed? (69)

The problematic flows from Mr. Roberts's sudden display of pessimism in the company of John Truman, the transfer-agent, some time after their business has been concluded. The latter, of course, expresses some surprise at the sudden change of mood. The chapter concludes with the merchant leaving "with the air of one, mortified at having been tempted by his own honest goodness, accidentally stimulated into making mad disclosures—to himself as to another—of the queer, unaccountable caprices of his natural heart" (68; ch. 13). The last phrase is crucial, for it anticipates the contrary but related betrayal, in Pitch, of "his too indulgent, too artless and companionable nature" (130; ch. 23). The merchant, it seems, has a heart, and that heart, as in all of Melville, is not the site of abstract ideals and ideas, but the register of man's humanity. It is his "redemptive" weak spot, because its "unaccountable caprices" resist the formation of a monolithic identity, the reduction of the mysterious, uncontainable self in terms of the Aristotelian criterion for "consistent" character (*Poetics* 69).

In chapter 14 the narrator, though still retaining a rhetoric of equivocation, directly addresses this Aristotelian guideline, proceeds to point out its own internal contradiction, and apparently substitutes his own aesthetics:

> True, it may be urged that there is nothing a writer of fiction should more carefully see to, as there is nothing a sensible reader will more carefully look for, than that, in the depiction of any character, its consistency should be preserved. But this, though at first blush, seeming reasonable enough, may, upon a closer view, prove not so much so. For how does it couple with another requirement—equally insisted upon, perhaps—that, while to all fiction is allowed some play of invention, yet, fiction based on fact should never be contradictory to it; and is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent character is a *rara avis*? Which being so, the distaste of readers to the contrary sort in books, can hardly arise from any sense of their untrueness. It may rather be from perplexity as to understanding them. But if the acutest sage be often at his wits' ends to understand living character, shall those who are not sages expect to run and read character in those mere phantoms which flit along a page, like shadows along a wall? (69)

It is tempting to identify in the narrator's insubstantial fictional "phantoms which flit along a page [. . .] like shadows" an echo of a passage in *Don Quixote* to which Melville appended an uncertainly dated comment (see footnote 13). In that passage, "a knight-errant without a mistress" is compared to, among other things, "a shadow without a body that causes it" (see Leyda, *Log* 508). In a sense, the aimless journey of the "Ship of Fools" leaves most of the characters to appear insubstantial, like shades.

Of course, the argument provides problems, with its repeated references to an apparently objective reality which the narrative goes some way toward undermining. But Melville, we must remember, did not consider life an illusion. It is particularly his recognition of the immediacy of the senses (almost completely displaced in *The Confidence-Man*) that informed his rejection of abstract philosophy, so wonderfully illustrated in his insistence that for Goethe to say, to "a fellow with a raging toothache," that "you must *live in the all*," is "nonsense" (*C* 193).[32] It is the natural, physical fact of living that defeats man's teleological yearnings and imperial pretensions. In Melville's earlier books, men almost exclusively live in a tactile world that is by turns beautiful and brutal. In *Pierre* we have Charlie Millthorpe who, for all his foolish pretensions, had a "generous heart" and knew that "[l]ife was a fact" (279; bk. 20, ch. 1). So does Pitch, who rejects the herb-doctor's facile Rousseaueanism on the basis of such cold, hard facts as "hailstones smash[ing] [. . .] windows" (109; ch. 21). Pitch also recognises that physical suffering stems from nature: "Nature made me blind and would have kept me so. My oculist counterplotted her" (109). Melville himself had weak and chronically overtaxed eyes. Early on during the writing of *The Confidence-Man*, he suffered a severe bout of sciatica attacks (Robertson-Lorant 370). One thinks of the older Montaigne, who suffered from gallstones, and recognised the euphemising distance words introduce between the fact and the concept: "The very names by which they call diseases, sweeten and mollify the sharpness of them" ("Of Physiognomy" 291; bk. 3; ch. 12).

Cook has suggested (to return to the quoted passage) that "[t]he 'acutest sage' here is no doubt Montaigne" (203), and I find this a happy thought. If the wisdom of any "sage" permeates this chapter, it belongs to Montaigne. However, Montaigne, inventor of his own form, never had to justify his work against a dominant Aristotelian aesthetics. Melville's narrator knows that, in allowing inconsistency and flux to enter into his "fiction," he will sin against the expectations of

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[32] One assumes that Melville drew his image from *Much Ado about Nothing*. In his entry for 23 February 1849 in the *Melville Log*, Leyda lists a number of marginal comments made by Melville in his seven-volume copy of Shakespeare's works. Leyda notes that Melville "triple-scores" Leonato's lines from 5.1: ". . . there never was yet philosopher,/ That could endure the toothache patiently" (Leyda 289).

readers. What makes his point so subversive, of course, is that he finally exposes the very inconsistencies at work in these "expectations," based on Aristotle's own call for both "life-like" and "consistent" characters (*Poetics* 69). The point here is to expose the teleological rationale at work in the fictional form, and herein lies the narrator's eventual shift from the fiction to science:

> That fiction, where every character can, by reason of its consistency, be comprehended at a glance, either exhibits but sections of character, making them appear for wholes, or else is very untrue to reality; while, on the other hand, that author who draws a character, even though to common view incongruous in its parts, as the flying-squirrel, and, at different periods, as much at variance with itself as the caterpillar is with the butterfly into which it changes, may yet, in so doing, be not false but faithful to facts.[33]
>
> If reason be judge, no writer has produced such inconsistent characters as nature herself has. It must call for no small sagacity in a reader unerringly to discriminate in a novel between the inconsistencies of conception and those of life. As elsewhere, experience is the only guide here; but as no one man's experience can be coextensive with *what is*, it may be unwise in every case to rest upon it. When the duck-billed beaver of Australia was first brought stuffed to England, the naturalists, appealing to their classifications, maintained that there was, in reality, no such creature; the bill in the specimen must needs be, in some way, artificially stuck on. (69-70)

As the narrator's argument progresses, what emerges most persistently is an appeal to the reader's experience, Montaigne's most important source of provisional "knowledge." Both the weakness and wisdom of experience lies in the fact that it cannot show us "wholes." As in the case of the incredulous "naturalists," experience will often be belied, because "experience can[not] be coextensive with *what is*." *Pierre*'s ill-fated protagonist also, in his role as quester, "will know what *is*" (65; bk. 3, ch. 6). Such knowledge, however, lies beyond experience, which remains bound to the inconsistencies and flux of a terrestrial world. None of this means, however, that we should reject our experience out of hand (which would imply either a return to "fixed principles" or a descent into complete nihilism). What is called for, instead, is a vital and sceptical "discriminat[ion]," an approach to one's own experience which recognises both its value and its fallibility. Such an engagement of experience calls for an acceptance of flux. The problem with the "naturalists" is that, while their subject is an always shifting one, they insist on fixing the experiences of a given occasion into inflexible "classifications."

These points made, the narrator returns to the matter of fiction, and its attempt similarly to reduce the vital indeterminacy and inconsistency of man to a "readable" character. Fiction, it is shown, is analogous to science in that they may both be defined as specious narratives (fictions) of containment. Significantly, in criticising these "psychological novelists," the narrator's terminology returns us to Melville's own tangled psychological novel, *Pierre*. There,

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[33] We are reminded of the hint to the natural backdrop of the Mississippi communicated by the soldier of fortune's swaying between crutches, "mechanically faithful to the motion of the boat" (93; ch. 19).

as Cook points out (203), the narrator had similarly attacked the "complacen[t] clear[ing] [. . .] up" of mystery and complexity in "common novels" (141; ch. 8). He had rejected "their false, inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystemizable elements; their audacious, intermeddling impotency, in trying to unravel, and spread out, and classify, the more thin than gossamer threads which make up the complex web of life" (141). He had called on the "unravelable inscrutableness of God" (141). Here the narrator echoes that argument in some detail:

> They challenge astonishment at the tangled web of some character, and then raise admiration still greater at their satisfactory unraveling of it; in this way throwing open, sometimes to the understanding even of school misses, the last complications of that spirit which is affirmed by its Creator to be fearfully and wonderfully made.
>
> At least, something like this is claimed for certain psychological novelists; nor will the claim be here disputed. Yet, as touching this point, it may prove suggestive, that all those sallies of ingenuity, having for their end the revelation of human nature on fixed principles, have, by the best judges, been excluded with contempt from the ranks of the sciences—palmistry, physiognomy, phrenology, psychology. (71)

The narrator here pitches the "objective" science, which he has already criticised for its inability to accommodate deviant reality into its established categories, against the dubious, "apocryphal" sciences. The fact that the former has already been debunked does not mean that the latter are now redeemed. Instead, what happens is that inconsistencies are exposed where they may do most damage; the notion of "fixed principles" is relativised, meaning that *any* claims based on them become subject to scepticism. We begin to see that the antithetical tension between distrust and confidence that defines *The Confidence-Man* in itself represents one of these inconsistencies that will never admit of clearing up.

The argument, upon reflection, is clear. But in order for it to be consistent, it has to indicate its own subjection to inconsistency. This is indeed what happens as we further consider the narrator's critique of simplifying novels. As he points out,

> after poring over the best novels professing to portray human nature, the studious youth will still run risk of being too often at fault upon actually entering the world; whereas, had he been furnished with a true delineation, it ought to fare with him something as with a stranger entering, map in hand, Boston town; the streets may be very crooked, he may often pause; but, thanks to his true map, he does not hopelessly lose his way. Nor, to this comparison, can it be an adequate objection, that the twistings of the town are always the same, and those of human nature subject to variation. The grand points of human nature are the same to-day they were a thousand years ago. The only variability in them is in expression, not in feature. (71)

Remembering Melville's treatment of guidebooks in *Redburn* (a narrative which critics, in this regard, seem to have forgotten) the first part of this passage comes as no surprise. The novel that pretends to trace out and resolve the complex web of the psyche is duping its reader. The "studious youth" cannot rely on the superficial principles it establishes. At the same time,

however, the narrator is suggesting that a "true map" of sorts is possible, as long as it shows the "twistings of the town." In *Redburn* it is made clear that towns change. Here, however, it is not the change that is focused on, but the fact that the town itself (as metaphor for the psyche) is consistently labyrinthine. This shift in perspective places the reader in the position from which the narrator had previously argued, namely that both towns and "human nature [are] subject to variation." What is demonstrated here, beyond the points that the narrator is making, is that any point invariably calls into being its antithesis, and that it is up to the reader himself to engage in the act of essaying the mysterious interstice that opens up between these irreconcilable opposites.

Moving toward his conclusion, the narrator again evokes the doomed but persistent efforts of man to bring his world and reality under control:

> But as, in spite of seeming discouragement, some mathematicians are yet in hopes of hitting upon an exact method in determining the longitude, the more earnest psychologists may, in the face of previous failures, still cherish expectations with regard to some mode of infallibly discovering the heart of man. (71)

Completing a circle, this returns us to the root of the problematic, that which gave rise to his digression in the first place, namely "the heart," the seat of humanity and, in its sympathy to the flux of nature, the mystery of that humanity. The digression has played out the motion of its own tautological title, leaving the reader right back where he started, simultaneously none the wiser, and yet, perhaps (if, in the words of the title, it "prove[d] worth considering"), awakened to the active role he is to take in the narrative.

The inconsistency of the narrator, as it emerges from chapter 14, is eventually called into play on a greater scale. Chapter 33, "Which may pass for whatever it may prove to be worth," once again anticipates the reader's displeasure. Drawing on the reader's position (where the narrator last left him) as a stickler for reality, the narrator now challenges an imagined objection against the recently introduced colourful cosmopolitan as being too fanciful:

> Strange, that in a work of amusement, this severe fidelity to real life should be exacted by any one, who, by taking up such a work, sufficiently shows that he is not unwilling to drop real life, and turn, for a time, to something different. Yes, it is, indeed, strange that any one should clamor for the thing he is weary of; that any one, who, for any cause, finds real life dull, should yet demand of him who is to divert his attention from it, that he should be true to that dullness. (182)

This, as Quirk has pointed out, constitutes "a defense of the 'fancy'" (*Knave* 109) or, to make use of Cook's own deployment of Aristotelian terms, a temporary privileging of "creative originality (*poesis*)" over "a direct imitation of life (*mimesis*)" (199). In other words, the narrator now pulls into focus yet another inconsistency in Aristotelian aesthetics even as he calls into being a point that presents the antithesis to his former (internally antithetical) argument. In fact,

he had started that chapter by countering, by calling upon mimetic criteria, the belief that "all fiction is allowed some play of invention" (69). Here, he turns to defend that very perspective, for

> as, in real life, the proprieties will not allow people to act out themselves with that unreserve permitted to the stage; so, in books of fiction, they look not only for more entertainment, but, at bottom, even for more reality, than real life itself can show. [. . .] It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie. (182-83)

Here, fiction becomes the stage on which the author can exercise his fancy to the entertainment of the reader. But, again, this point turns equivocal, for what is suggested here is that "real life"—here referring to a socially defined life—is a matter of "proprieties" that, like the "classifications" of scientists, aims at subjecting the vital flux of life. Fiction here becomes a site of liberation from "real life," but this apparently simple point by now requires a confounding double vision from the reader. Insofar as the concept of "real life" as established in chapter 14 still stands, the reference here is to fiction as an escape from inconsistency, as a breather from the vicissitudes of existence—in short, an escape into a world governed by a resolvent telos. On the other hand, insofar as "real life" has now come to refer to life as a social phenomenon (itself governed by hegemonic "proprieties"), fiction emerges as a liberation from reserve, an uncovering of "more reality," and a return to the possibilities of existence. By now, I would suggest, Melville had come to recognise his fiction as constituted in terms of this very tension—reliant on the very forms its own energies tended to overwhelm.

Once again the chapter inscribes a circle. It begins by implicitly but directly contradicting the argument of chapter 14, but in the end, in accounting for Goodman's "unreal[ity]," he refers us to his previous argument. Readers who

> may think they perceive something inharmonious between the boisterous hilarity of the cosmopolitan with the bristling cynic, and his restrained good-nature with the boon-companion, are now referred to that chapter where some similar apparent inconsistency in another character is, on general principles, modestly endeavored to be apologized for. (183).

This is a joke. Staggeringly, the narrator refers us back to a chapter which contradicts the very chapter that appeals to it. But that is precisely the point. In *The Confidence-Man*, to proffer yet another adaptation of Psalm 42. 7, antithesis calls unto antithesis. Author calls unto reader, and reader unto author.

Chapter 44, "In which the last three words of the last chapter are made the text of discourse, which will be sure of receiving more or less attention from those readers who do not skip it," grows, as it announces, from the barber's definition of Goodman, "in after days," as "QUITE AN

ORIGINAL" (237; ch. 43). Now the narrator implicitly returns to the earlier point, made in chapter 33, that Goodman may perhaps seem unreal, and therefore too original. The narrator now calls into question the artist's capacity to call into being a truly original character.

At first the point is limited to the matter of genius. The narrator humbly draws a distinction between the handful of characters that are "original in the sense that Hamlet is, or Don Quixote, or Milton's Satan," and those that are merely "novel, or singular, or striking, or captivating, or all four at once" (238). This is a fair enough distinction, but one which once again breaks down in the course of the argument. Characters are picked up, "[f]or the most part, in town" (238), and are therefore generally recognisable (and will therefore not help us to escape). A truly original character, on the other hand, is revolutionary, "as in real history is a new law-giver, a revolutionizing philosopher, or the founder of a new religion" (239). However, even an original character cannot escape its context, and in it, "there is discernible something prevailingly local, or of the age; which circumstance, of itself, would seem to invalidate the claim, judged by the principles here suggested" (239). The narrator, in other words, is constantly drawn into the evolution of principles that cannot be sustained. The mystery of originality escapes definition and completely defies methodology. Reasserting the value of experience and recalling a word used in *Israel Potter* to account for John Paul Jones's rise to herodom, the narrator here suggests that "[t]o produce such characters, an author, beside other things, must have seen much, and seen through much: to produce but one original character, he must have had much *luck*" (239, emphasis added). In a final ironic reversal, the narrator now reconfirms that there can be no absolute originality, because it is "as true in literature as in zoology, that all life is from the egg" (239). Looping round once more, the narrator deposits us back in chapter 14, where he had rejected the "naturalists" and their closed systems.

If there is one idea that remains constant (though not consistent) throughout these chapters, it is that the problematic of inconsistency that characterises the entire book stems, in the final instance, from the insuppressible influence of nature upon form. The idea is there in chapter 14's overt references to nature; its diversity underlies the appeal to "more reality" in chapter 33; and it re-emerges in chapter 44 in the assertion that "all life is from the egg." Throughout, it is this presence—the presence which the "dream" of the *Fidèle* appears to exclude, but cannot—that defeats the construction of any lasting "principles" by anyone, most of all by the narrator himself. It is left up to the reader to essay these irreconcilable antitheses, to engage an ongoing process which, if it does not succumb to either facile confidence or misanthropic despair along the way, presents the vital interaction of man with his unknowable universe.

H. Bruce Franklin has argued that "[i]n *The Confidence-Man*, the narrator knows who and what he is; the game is for the readers to penetrate his inscrutable disguises" ("Outsider" 5). I agree, as long as we recognise the narrator's self-knowledge as a Socratic self-knowledge which finally recognises nothing but its own lack of knowledge (as a fixed, inclusive command of unswerving "facts"). For Montaigne, too, self-knowledge was a matter of endless exploration. What this means is that "the game" we enter is ultimately not controlled by the author, because he is himself part of it. The author functions not as a godlike—Providential—unifying principle, "an Invisible Hand" (Dimock 206), wearing a "disguise" that we, like Ahab, should strive to "strike through" (*MD* 164; ch. 36) or, conversely, hope to unravel. What he does is to present us, in the form of an equivocating rhetoric, with the irresolvable inconsistencies and contradictions in the human condition—in himself, his society, and his craft—and to invite us to join him in trying to essay our existence. As Bryant puts it,

> [i]nevitably, Melville's willful creation and deconstruction of norms pushes us beyond authority and certitude into a Mardian world of perpetual questioning. As Melville puts it in chapter 14, fiction is like a "true delineation" of old Boston; it should show us the "twistings of the town." Similarly, fiction succeeds only in the degree that it makes the reader twist. We play these twistings "to the life" (181). By removing himself from the narrative, by silencing the Ishmaelian voice and thus making our doubt the central action of the novel, Melville has his participant readers taste the full ripeness of "manhood's pondering repose of If." (*Repose* 243)

Dimock argues that "*The Confidence-Man* rejects nothing, questions nothing, and displays its abundance in segregated harmony" (206), but finally there is no "harmony" between the antitheses with which the narrative confronts us. If the narrative itself "questions nothing," its structure, as I have attempted to demonstrate, somehow manoeuvres the reader into a position of essayist, or questioner, as Bryant also suggests. The only course of action open to the reader is a non-redemptive escape into mystery, to become the Ishmaelian narrator of a tactile but finally inscrutable universe.

At some stage of its composition, it seems, *The Confidence-Man* was to be "Dedicated to the victims of Auto da Fe." The isolated phrase survives on a manuscript fragment otherwise listing several of the surviving "Titles for chapters" (Hayford and MacDougall, "Manuscript" 470). Leavis argues that its eventual exclusion from the published novel "suggest[s] that the novel had far transcended the implications of such a dedication, even if he had meant it to be taken widely as referring to the victims of all religious orthodoxies or even all sufferers of intransigence" (209). I would suggest, however, that Melville primarily wanted to remove the apparently authoritative platform from which the reader might proceed to read the book; in other words, to remove all guidance. Melville's later dedications, in particular, provide strong clues as

to how his books might be read. Thus, the scholarly reclamation of that suppressed dedication (although ultimately Melville's actual intentions with the phrase remain a matter of conjecture) seems to give us a useful handle to the text Melville never intended us to have. The themes suggested by such a dedication, I would argue, remain important to *The Confidence-Man*, and are most clearly captured in Goodman's (failed) imperial reading of the Bible, his censorious exclusion and suppression of the apocryphal in the interest of a unified, meaningful, apocalyptic narrative. Melville's book, dedicated to the deviants of canonical history, aligns itself with the ostensibly excluded but always destabilising margin, the heterogeneous and "multiform" (9; ch. 2) in contrast to the sovereign (nominally "democratic") "cosmopolitan and confident tide" (9). It also aligns itself with the living flux of nature unsuccessfully excluded by the facile "dream" of the *Fidèle*, and with a provisional, "Montaignean" or "apocryphal" reading that rejects the possibility of an "apocalyptic," revelatory reading, once and for all meant to establish a monumental and unassailable meaning, "coextensive with *what is*" (70; ch. 14). The impish peddler who interrupts Goodman and the old man's reestablishment of canonical authority is himself associated with the flaming "victim of *auto-da-fe*" (244; ch. 45). Melville's text is never at a loss for producing doubts and yet more doubts. In the end, the persevering reader is led into a darkness that is the archetypal realm of all doubt, but also, we come to realise in our reading, the indeterminate, interstitial realm of all mystery, a mystery, in turn, that leads us back into wonder. Inexplicably, the incessant babbling of rogues and fools pulls us back to the silence of the mute, and into the "Silence" which the narrator of *Pierre* defined as "the only Voice of our God" (204; bk. 14, ch. 1).

CONCLUSION

THE PYRAMID, AND THE "INTERREGNUM IN PROVIDENCE"

The publication of *The Confidence-Man* on 1 April 1857 saw the formal end of Melville's decade-long career as a professional author. On the day, Melville himself, in the company of "a grave dark guide," was busy exploring Padua in the rain, visiting such sights as Agostino Fasolata's sculpture of the Fall of Lucifer, and Giotto's fresco of "The Virtues & Vices" (*J* 117), which "illustrates allegorically the Vices on the one side, the Virtues on the other" (Horsford 501). He had been away from home for almost six months, and slowly making his way back to England from the Holy Land. He had seen Hawthorne in Southport, a meeting which occasioned the latter's reflection on Melville's persistent "wandering to-and-fro over these deserts" (*J* 628). He had also finally seen the pyramids, "from distance purple like mountains," but upon approach, overwhelming:

> It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah. Terrible mixture of the cunning and awful. Moses learned in all the lore of the Egyptians. The idea of Jehovah born here. [. . .] As long as earth endures some vestige will remain of the pyramids. Nought but earthquake or geological revolution can obliterate them. Only people who made their mark, both in their masonry & their religion (through Moses). (*J* 75-76)

In the monument—of which the pyramid provides the supreme and paradigmatic instance—we may well find the logic of all architecture in its purest form: shorn of any overt and distracting appeal to utility, the monument offers itself strictly as a bolster against anonymity, the establishment of identity against flux. The monument is an act of individuation, a mark. It proposes, in all senses, to be what Melville in *Billy Budd* calls "an architectural finial" (474; ch. 28). Charles Olson argues that "[t]he *Journal* [1856-57] comes to a climax before the Pyramids" (96), and he is right. It documents Melville's confrontation with an image that had asserted itself in his imagination for years. Olson also understands why:

> Whether it is the appropriation of space involved or the implied defiance of time or the enceladic assault on the heavens, MASONRY is especially associated with MYTH in man. The tale of the Great Tower is as ultimate a legend as the Flood, Eden, Adam.
>
> Whatever the explanation of the great pyramid at Cholula or the source of Plato's description of the watchtowers of Atlantis, they, like the Pyramids, partake of this need to persist in monument as well as in myth. (96)

What so horrified and overwhelmed Melville at the pyramids were the sheer dimensions of this will and ambition. In the pyramids there is captured such scope—spatial and temporal—that they seem to defy natural eclipse altogether. In it, man almost achieves immortality, which is why

Melville recognises it as the birthplace of Jehovah, the terrible God later domesticated into Providence. Both time and space are conquered—redeemed—in the pyramids. But monuments, Melville also understood, only appear to simplify. They present a monolithic front which overlays the labyrinth without resolving it. Hence Melville's late poem, "The Great Pyramid," from *Timoleon* (1891):

> Slant from your inmost lead the caves
> And labyrinths rumored. These who braves
> And penetrates (old palmers said)
> Comes out afar on deserts dead
> And, dying, raves.
>
> Craftsmen, in dateless quarries dim,
> Stones formless into form did trim,
> Usurped on Nature's self with Art,
> And bade this dumb I AM to start,
> Imposing him. (*Poems* lines 26-35)

In these lines we find the crux of Melville's thoughts on monuments, teleological metaphysics, nature and art. In a rewriting of Genesis, his "craftsmen," from a chthonic, uncreate, "dateless" flux raise the sovereign, ideational "I AM"—God. The creative act itself is the "I AM," which sublimates nature into form, and "imposes" identity. Something is established, undeniably, but the conquest is not without its deep irony. That Being is "dumb." The labyrinth reappears on the inside, its centre the vacant eternity of "deserts dead" that "old palmers"—both pilgrims and tricksters—rumour.

The internal labyrinth also appears in *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, Melville's last work, apparently developed from a prose heading to a poem initially destined for the 1888 volume, *John Marr and Other Sailors with Some Sea-Pieces* (see Sealts, "Innocence" 410). Among other things, the story recalls the exclusive exegetical practice parodied in *The Confidence-Man*, this time in relation to Britain's "grand naval story" (414; ch. 3). Billy Budd, nature's innocent, is incorporated into this canonical history—by means of an "authorized weekly publication" of the navy (475; ch. 29)—as a mutinous criminal. The counter-canonical, apocryphal perspective, captured in terms of the poem, "Billy in the Darbies," closes this narrative in which Melville once more calls into play the confounding antithetical structure that characterises many of his earlier works.

The work concerns the dilemma which faces Captain Vere when the essentially amoral, innocent and fatherless Billy Budd, falsely accused by the urbane and misanthropic master-at-arms, Claggart, strikes out in passion and kills him. In terms of the "Mutiny Act," Budd's punishment is hanging; in terms of the "natural law" with which he is earlier associated, Budd's

"frank manifestation" of anger, void of all "viciousness" (412; ch. 2), is not deserving of retribution. This latter "law" clearly has no standing on board the *Bellipotent*, yet it exerts some influence over every single character who considers Budd's case. The case is difficult precisely because everybody recognises or assumes that his act was devoid of all malice, while Claggart's accusation (from the perspective of Budd's judges) *may* not have been.

At the centre of this dilemma Melville places Vere, both a practical man and an intellectual, a reader of "history, biography, and unconventional writers like Montaigne, who, free from cant and convention, honestly and in a spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities" (420-21; ch. 7). When the time comes, however, Vere fails in his role as an ethical and legal essayist, and settles instead for the blunt application of canonical law. He, too, recognises Budd's moral innocence, and demonstrates an almost paternal sympathy for the sailor. However, he further recognises that "[w]ith mankind, [. . .] forms, measured forms, are everything" (473; ch. 27), that they provide the only buttress against chaos, figured in *Billy Budd* in terms of the "irrational combustion" of mutiny (414; ch. 3). Billy Budd hangs. One thinks of God, consigning an innocent Son to the cross.

What makes *Billy Budd* such a difficult narrative to read is that there are essentially no judgments on the characters and their actions inscribed in the narrative itself. Confused himself, and limited in his access to the inner life of Budd, Claggart and Vere, the narrator cannot provide any definitive guidance in what Melville has so ironically subtitled *An Inside Narrative*. Once again, literary criticism itself bears out this point in its variety of contradictory interpretations, particularly with regard to Vere's decision. Was it, as F. O. Matthiessen (509-10) and Milton R. Stern (*Steel* 220) have suggested, an excusable and understandable—even just—practical and temporal decision, or does it stem from institutionally determined cowardice, immorality or stupidity, as Kingsley Widmer (Sealts, "Innocence" 423) and Lawrance Thompson (370, 386) have argued? This is only one of the more important points of contention among scholars. However, I will not presently engage this discussion, which, as Bruce L. Grenberg has suggested, seeks "to 'solve' a text that by its very nature does not allow solution" (194). Instead, what I will briefly consider is how this indecisiveness is not only determined by the narrator's limited knowledge, but by the unauthorised "aesthetics" that "governs" his narrative itself.

Early on in the narrative we are informed that Budd suffers from a stutter, a "vocal defect" resulting from the "provocation of strong heart-feeling" (413; ch. 2). The narrator goes on to describe this problem as "an organic hesitancy" (413), which completes the round of images that link it to nature, and simultaneously adumbrates a counter-Romantic aesthetics by positing an organic flaw that ruptures the Romantic "organicist" aesthetics of completion. As the

narrator goes on to say, "[t]he avowal of such an imperfection in the Handsome Sailor should be evidence not alone that he is not presented as a conventional hero, but also that the story in which he is the main figure is no romance" (413).

The stutter, or "organic hesitancy," figured as a postponement of clarification and revelation, somewhat incongruously becomes also a figure for the all too wordy narrative itself. The narrator finds, as he proceeds, that his tale necessitates all kinds of digressions and additions that work against the progression of the narrative itself:

> In this matter of writing, resolve as one may to keep to the main road, some bypaths have an enticement not readily to be withstood. I am going to err into such a bypath. If the reader will keep me company I shall be glad. At the least, we can promise ourselves that pleasure which is wickedly said to be in sinning, for a literary sin the divergence will be. (415-61; ch. 3)

Here we have a clear expression of the link Melville recognised between the idea of the pious, resolvent quest/pilgrimage for God (the straight-and-narrow) and the idea of the narrative itself as a progression toward a resolution. To stray is, in both instances, to sin, to give in to the dissolute temptations to which the transcendent soul becomes prone through the weakness of the flesh. As the narrator commits "literary sin," his becomes an "errant art," to employ William Spanos's useful coinage (one which the Aristotelian critic would no doubt deem an oxymoron).

In the course of the narrative the speaker reiterates and extends this problematic. Confronted with Claggart, we are told, in terms that remind us of Ishmael: "His portrait I essay, but shall never hit it" (422; ch. 8). In certain matters the narrator's authority is deliberately undermined—see, for instance, his equivocal source for the impressment of convicts (423-24; ch. 8). In the matter of Claggart's antagonism toward Budd he denies any satisfactory origin or logical, accountable causation:

> Now to invent something touching the more private career of Claggart, something involving Billy Budd, of which something the latter should be wholly ignorant, some romantic incident implying that Claggart's knowledge of the young bluejacket began at some period anterior to catching sight of him on board the seventy-four—all this, not so difficult to do, might avail in a way more or less interesting to account for whatever enigma may appear to lurk in the case. But in fact there was nothing of the sort. And yet the cause necessarily to be assumed as the sole one assignable is in its very realism much charged with that prime element of Radcliffian romance, the mysterious, as any that the ingenuity of the author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* could devise. For what can more partake of the mysterious than an antipathy spontaneous and profound such as is evoked in certain exceptional mortals by the mere aspect of some other mortal, however harmless he may be, if not called forth by this very harmlessness itself? (429-30; ch. 11)

There is a layered irony here that returns us to "the unvarnished truth" promised in the preface to the significantly embellished (romanticised) *Typee* (xiv). However, the important thing is that, since the narrator is ostensibly committed to "realism," he is in no position to indulge in

resolvent "invention." Far from making the story understandable, however, such "realism"—having no recourse to the logic of fiction—only serves to usher in the "enigmatic." Reader and narrator alike are left with an "irritating juxtaposition of dissimilar personalities" (430) that defies reconciliation. What opens up is an interstitial mystery, wherein no knowledge suffices. The narrator calls it "the deadly space between" (430). He requires the reader to "cross" this space, but, since "this is best done by indirection," the reader is simply lead into a labyrinth (430). This much is made overt in the narrator's anecdote about the confusion of "an honest scholar, my senior," regarding yet another mysterious character, "X—" (430). As this scholar explains,

> "Yes, X— is a nut not to be cracked by the tap of a lady's fan. You are aware that I am the adherent of no organized religion, much less of any philosophy built into a system. Well, for all that, I think that to try and get into X—, enter his labyrinth and get out again, without a clue derived from some source other than what is known as 'knowledge of the world'—that were hardly possible, at least for me." (430)

The antagonism that lies between Claggart and Budd presents such a labyrinth that admits of no solution without an externally provided clue. But this providential "clue" is precisely what the narrator, in the interest of "realism," has refused to "invent." Budd seems simply to call forth his antithesis in Claggart. Vere—hovering over that "deadly space between"—must decide. And so does the reader, who is informed, at length, that "everyone must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford" (453; ch. 21).

Toward the end of *Billy Budd* the narrator returns once more to the poetics of fiction, hoping to account for what he himself recognises to be a flawed narrative:

> The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial. (474; ch. 28)

"Truth" does not appear here as a site of resolution—it is ragged and unfinished. The narrator evokes an old opposition between truth and fiction to establish his own sense of truth as that which is related to the unresolved flux of life, Millthorpe's "fact." The truth here is not, I would argue, a transcendental truth only imperfectly apprehended in a fallen world. Instead, it is the ever-indeterminate truth—a truth that is a process and not an end—of a world that is irrevocably aligned to nature. It is the "truth" that the always essaying Montaigne claims "never [to] contradict," even though "I may peradventure contradict myself" ("Of Repentance" 19; bk. 2, ch. 2)[1]—the truth, then, of mankind's irredeemable connection to the flux of the world.

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[1] The distinction between Montaigne's point and apparently similar ones raised by Emerson and Whitman seems to me to lie in the fact that the latter, in the words of Whitman, claim to "contain multitudes" (*Song of Myself* [51] line

Against this "truth" the narrator sets the closed narrative, the "pure fiction" that traces a progression, in Aristotelian terms, from a beginning, through a middle, to an end, which comprehensively resolves the problematic evolved in the text (but always in terms of the end, inscribed already in the beginning). As the adjective suggests, this "fiction" is the result of an exclusive practice—purified of deviance in the way that Frank Goodman hoped to purify the "True Book" by excluding the Apocrypha. In fact, we are to recognise in the narrator's reference to "pure fiction" a comprehensive snub at all teleological narratives—"romantic" and "pure," to stay with the terminology established within *Billy Budd*—that inscribe a redemptive progress into the term of man's life. All such narratives are "pure fiction," fairy-tales set against the "truth" of man's irredeemable but mysterious existence.

Vere, when first faced with Claggart's accusation, has a sense "of strong suspicion clogged by strange dubieties" (448; ch. 18). It is this "clogg[ing]" that foreshadows his eventual inability to respond innovatively to the case of Claggart's murder. He retreats into the bastion of "measured forms"—from which, we must not forget, he himself tends to seek refuge in solitude—in order to circumvent the paralysis induced by the case's essential "unreadability," just as Budd, in his instinctive recoil from "the paralysis" caused in him by Claggart's accusation (450; ch. 19), strikes a fatal blow. Simply put, Vere is out of his depth. And yet, it is important to recognise that the reader also is. One may find fault with Vere's procedures, but one cannot finally proffer a wholly satisfactory solution to the case (after all, Budd, for all his naïvety, has killed Claggart with his bare hands). Vere's unexplained deathbed cry, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd" (475; ch. 28), acknowledges the ineffectuality of his resolution. He dies in the "deadly space between," struck by a bullet from the French "*Athée* (the *Atheist*)" (474).

In *Billy Budd*, the unfinished—interrupted—prose work Melville left at his death in 1891, the themes from his earliest works persist. More than thirty years had passed since his last active engagement with prose, yet his mind was as unresolved as ever. His last statement in and on fiction reaffirms the ironies of man's *agon* with nature, and Melville's own trust—a wavering, uncertain trust, but a trust nonetheless—in the dictates of the heart. Appropriately, he left not a finished, polished narrative, "an architectural finial" (474), but something nearer the "unfinished" architecture of Ishmael's "cetological System" (*MD* 145; ch. 32). In the same context, Ishmael speaks of "leav[ing] the copestone to posterity" (145), and it is meet that *Billy*

1316). It is a sovereign and, finally, monumental claim that remains quite foreign to Montaigne, who never speaks of containment, but of flux, or "passage" (Of Repentance" 19; bk. 3, ch. 2).

Budd should leave to a posterity of readers the task of facing its irresolute structure and wrestling with its meaning.

Finally, of course, unfinished *Billy Budd* does not differ all that much from its "finished" predecessors, all of which seem to be composed specifically in order to postpone and defeat superficial closure. The teleological drive toward that closure I have considered broadly in terms of the quest structure, both because that seemed to me to present the clearest archetypal expression of the teleological drive, particularly as narrative, and because Melville seems to have consciously employed that basic structure in a number of his works, most notably in *Moby-Dick*, and to have engaged it, critically, in all of his fiction. There also is an incontrovertible tradition in Melville studies, reaching its zenith around the 1970s in the work of such critics as Martin Leonard Pops, Milton R. Stern, John Seelye, that focuses on the quest as a significant feature of Melville's fiction. The reason I deemed the resuscitation of such a venerable theme justified is that there seemed ample room yet for the relation of this structure to Melville's wide-ranging questioning and subversion of what one might call the privileged narratives—national, metaphysical, religious, and aesthetic—of his day. He diffuses and disintegrates the quest by a variety of incisive and damaging, frequently alienating, strategies, such as fragmentation, postponement, the splicing of genres, satire, irony and parody. What all this is in service of is the defeat of the providential design, whether by an author or by a rational, personal God, the reassertion of difference, deviance, irresolution, flux, and finally also, it is important to keep in mind, play and wonder.

This is, I assume, why Bryant rejects the idea of Melville as a "philosopher" (*Repose* 19). Melville does not attempt a systematic philosophy of life—in fact he overtly rejects the "systematizing [of] eternally unsystematizable elements" (*P* 141; bk. 7, ch. 8), the authorial containment and suppression of the deviant energies of life. And yet, his work, like that of Montaigne, has a decidedly philosophical effect. Wenke, who classifies Melville's work as "philosophical fiction," indulges a critical joke when he makes Melville a reader of influential twentieth-century philosophers:

> *The Confidence-Man* seems most responsive to Melville's studious consumption of Heidegger, Gadamer, Bakhtin, and Derrida, especially in its preoccupation with hermeneutics, dialogic play, and logocentric displacement. In terms both indebted to Sartre's depiction of existential angst and the floating signifiers of post-structuralist *difference*, Melville critically assails the once privileged concept of the subject: the Confidence Man's repetition of theatrical display empowers his predatory hegemonics. (193)

It is a joke that exposes and gently mocks the twentieth- and twenty-first-century critic's inescapably mediated reading of Melville. But at the same time, as Wenke's own work shows, the relation between these thinkers and nineteenth-century Melville is not wholly fanciful. After all, they inherited a tradition of thought to which Melville has made an important, if initially undervalued, contribution. Certain important philosophical thinkers, most notably Camus, have acknowledged the direct influence of Melville on their work.

In 1931 Adorno expressed the conviction that "[w]hoever chooses philosophical work as a vocation today, must from the beginning renounce the illusion with which philosophical systems formerly began: that it is possible to grasp the totality of the real through the power of thought" (qtd. in Dews 226). As Ishmael's provisional and incomplete "Cetology" indicates, Melville had long before come to a similar insight. In "The Prairie," too, Ishmael recognises that one cannot "[r]ead" the "brow" of the whale (*MD* 347; ch. 79). The whale has no face to make possible knowledge and comprehension. In *Moby-Dick*, in a parody of scientific hermeneutics, the whale is anatomised, broken down and sub-categorised, but its totality remains beyond reach. Comprehension fails, is cast into an abysmal interstice. To return to the face,

> gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other distinct feature in living nature. For you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none, proper; nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles; dumbly lowering with the doom of boats, and ships, and men. (346; ch. 79)

Always questioning Ishmael knows when he is beat. He evolves theories and ideas and abandons them, but there is forever that which remains beyond hermeneutics, irreducible. It is this unknowable, interstitial mystery—an "interregnum in Providence" (*MD* 320; ch. 72)—Ishmael knows, that lies at the heart of all life. Those who seek to reduce it, must fail, and go under. But for Ishmael, the realisation that he cannot finally comprehend does not defeat him. Instead, it informs his wonder, his Montaignean "admiration" ("Of Experience" 323; bk. 3, ch. 13). For him, as for Melville, it is the invocation to creation—creation not as monument building, but as consciousness and engagement. Standing before the mysterious non-face of the whale, Ishmael apprehends at least one thing: "This aspect is sublime" (*MD* 346; ch. 79).

Melville was a literary artist, and not a philosopher. Literature suited his imaginative play, his whimsical and ironic humour, his undeniable facility for language—its traces and cadences—and his troubled wonder. Ultimately Melville's subversive engagement with literary forms stems from a desire to open possibilities for expression. In rejecting and undermining Providence, he was clearing away what he perceived to be an illusion of control, harboured in the dual image—dual but related, especially in terms of Romanticism—of the providential God and the

providential author, both directing their worlds in terms of a master plan toward final and meaningful closure. As such, Melville's engagement with literary aesthetics, metaphysics, philosophy and politics must all be related to what Spanos calls "his antihegemonic project" (277). His texts consciously resist the unifying (falsifying) force of apocalyptic narrative in favour of a raw, energetic narrative that captures the passage of a consciousness engaging the ironies, contradictions and indeterminacies of human existence. Those pyramidical forms that mankind establishes as redoubts against such instability, he exposes as incapable of subjecting and solving the labyrinth. This is what keeps critics coming back to Melville, who remains a particularly recalcitrant presence in the canon. In this thesis, I have essayed to explore some of the reasons for that recalcitrance, while engaging also the rich tradition of criticism on Melville—to join what Watson Branch, Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford have called "criticism as ongoing conversation" (342). Thankfully, it is a conversation with no end.

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