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The subversive genius: Melville's theory of characterization

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Case Western Reserve University, 1990

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The Subversive Genius: Melville's Theory of Characterization

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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The Subversive Genius: Melville's Theory of Characterization

Abstract

by

Joyce Kessler

This dissertation explores the significance of Melville's conception of the original character, described in chapters 14 and 44 of The Confidence-Man. It examines his use of this characterological type for the central characters of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Moby-Dick, The Confidence-Man and Billy-Budd. Most of the critical literature focusing on Melville's characters discusses their emblematic values and functions as symbolic referents within socio-cultural or literary contexts. My claim is that Melville's art of characterization in these four works is not derived solely from novelistic traditions of characterization, but is derived chiefly from his conception of the original character, who has the power to redefine both the action and the characters of his narrative.
My first chapter discusses the idea of an original character, presented in The Confidence-Man. This character's presence causes a revision of the story that has been predicated up to the point of his appearance; he redefines both the plot and the identities of the other characters. To the extent that he revises the story so thoroughly, he is the story. My second chapter considers the character of Bartleby as the original of that tale, as his preferences and his very presence redefine the world of the law office and illuminate the lawyer/narrator's profound inability to act on the impulse of human sympathy. My third chapter traces the effect of the character of Ahab on the plot and other characters of Moby-Dick, focusing in particular on his transforming effect on the character of Ishmael. In my fourth chapter I claim that the constantly metamorphosing figures who are (or may be) the title figure of The Confidence-Man represent Melville's most extreme stage of experimentation with his theory of character. These figures demonstrate of the power of an original to revise repeatedly his fictional world. My fifth chapter takes Billy Budd to be the original character in Melville's last work and also locates Billy
as the source figure for the characters of John Claggart and Captain Vere. Taking Melville at his often-given word that art should express the truth only indirectly, I also claim that the theory of character he employs in these four works provides him with a characterological strategy for portraying the truth without betraying it.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Rara Avis

In chapter 14 of *The Confidence-Man*, Melville justifies the inconsistent natures of his fictional characters by noting: "is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent character is rara avis?"\(^1\) This simple observation of the parallels between art and life belies Melville's sophisticated approach to the art of characterization. Chapter 14 and chapter 44 of this novel, taken together, contain Melville's expression of a specific, well-developed theory of character, one he employed to produce the main figures in some of his middle-to-late works. The theory is centered entirely around Melville's conception of the "original character," which he describes in chapter 44. Melville uses the original character as a figure with a subversive force who, entering into a previously posited or established narrative, overthrows it. This character reveals the underside of the given narrative structure into which he comes, bringing into view the bi-polar dynamic of the values on which the initially predicated story is based. The character also motivates and activates a radical change in both the story and its other characters. He determines the story, and, to that extent, he is the story.

*Melville's art of characterization in "Bartleby,*
the Scrivener," Moby-Dick, The Confidence-Man and Billy-Budd stands as a cohesive demonstration of this characterology. My purpose in this dissertation is to explore Melville's characterology in the works named, and to elucidate the way in which his creation of the original character functions as a vehicle through which to utter "the sane madness of vital truth," for him, art's most essential opportunity.²

Even critical discussions of Melville's protagonist figure in The Confidence-Man do not generally consider him in relation to Melville's own theory of character as it is carefully developed in this novel. Richard Chase interprets the central character of the novel as "a portmanteau figure combining attributes of native heroes (Brother Jonathan, Uncle Sam, the Yankee) with those of the heroes of world-historical myths (Christ, Orpheus, Prometheus)." Daniel G. Hoffman compares The Confidence-Man's main figure to characters in the works of Mark Twain, finding them to be responses to cultural contexts, "omens and witchcraft...the bracing tensions of native character and humor." In Hoffman's opinion, the two authors diverge only in their conceptions of the implications of such a figure. Twain's is founded on "optimistic folk tradition," and Melville's on the pessimistic.³
Tom Quirk's evaluation of chapter 44 of the novel and of Melville's notion of an original character is more focused, if more literal: "...in chapter 44, Melville indicates where such original characters, and characters in general, are to be found." Quirk reads this passage without acknowledging that Melville makes a sharp distinction between those characters to be "picked up in town" at the "man show," and those whom he perceives to be the given elements at the beginning of a creative act of fiction. His claim, therefore, is that the central character of this novel is based on a real confidence man, who was arrested in New York City in July of 1849, and whose exploits were widely known. He does find the figure's purpose in "his capacity to reveal the inner natures of those with whom he came in contact," but he does not see in him a characterological type that Melville had used before and would use again to similar purposes of characterization.4

There is at least a sense among some scholars of Melville, if not an articulated consensus, that he intended certain characters, like the confidence man and Ahab, to dominate the lives and identities of the others. Both Quirk and Leon Howard have referred to Coleridge's essay on Hamlet when discussing the possible inspiration for Ahab: "...the effect arises from the
subordination of all to one, either as the prominent person, or the principal object" (Quirk, 102-3). In related comments, Warner Berthoff contrasts Ahab and Pierre. While he finds in the character of Pierre an "unfolding inward nature, capable of passional action and change," he reads Ahab's construction as "static," "contrived" and "mechanical." Both Berthoff and Howard, to the former's regret and the latter's satisfaction, see Ahab as a character who takes over the plot and other characters of Moby-Dick (Howard, 166; Berthoff, 109). Thus, the peculiarly dominating power of Melville's central characters has been observed previously, but never has it been substantially related to Melville's own theory of characterization as I will do here.

Nor was the possibility that Melville had a characterological theory broached in the long-established and on-going discourse about the compositional genesis of Melville's master work. Leon Howard, Charles Olson, George R. Stewart, James Barbour and Harrison Hayford all have contributed to the currently existing theory about the composition of Moby-Dick, which reconstructs an evolution of the novel in three stages between February of 1850 and the autumn of 1851. All agree that the character of Ahab is a
later, second- or third-stage, addition to the narrative. Leon Howard and Harrison Hayford, in particular, have traced in these reconstructed genetic stages of the text reasons for the existence of and for the relations among certain of the novel's characters. Neither one, however, has established a connection between what can be demonstrated about Melville's experience in writing the book and what can be inferred therefrom about his theory or art of characterization in general. For that matter, neither one assumes that Melville, at the time he composed Moby-Dick, had a theory of character which grounded his characterological creations. This failure to examine the novel in the light of Melville's theory of character causes certain limitations in their discussions of Moby-Dick's characters, and I will elaborate on these limitations in chapter 3 of this dissertation, in which I consider Ahab as Melville's original character in that work.

Before examining Melville's theory of characterization and its use in his later works, I would like to consider some of his general comments on the art of fiction, made in a review of Hawthorne's Mosses from an Old Manse. These comments, though not made on the specific topic fictional character, are nevertheless relevant to Melville's characterology. In his
discussion of Hawthorne's tales, he speculates about "the conjectural parts of the mind that produced them."
His insight is that Hawthorne's work is distinguished by the communication of "a blackness, ten times black," and he claims "it is that blackness...that so fixes and fascinates me." He compares Hawthorne to Shakespeare on the basis of their shared concern with this blackness:

This blackness it is that furnishes the infinite obscure of his back-ground, -- that back-ground, against which Shakespeare plays his grandest conceits.... Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. ("Mosses," 1159-60)

What is true-above-all, what is "terrifically true," the "vital truth," is, in Melville's mind, to be found within the blackness that he sees and appreciates so thoroughly in the work of Shakespeare and, particularly, in the work of his compatriot, Nathaniel Hawthorne. The specific contents of this dark quality he so prizes in art Melville does not delineate, but he does claim that, besides representing the vital truth about human existence, it is the necessary outcome of a consciousness about the role of original sin in human life:

Certainly it is, however, that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly
free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance. ("Mosses," 1159)

The power of blackness derived from an inescapable sense of original sin is for Melville the most meaningful component of life, and, correspondingly, of a work of fiction. It is in such blackness that "the Truth" (the word Melville invariably capitalizes) can be framed. Melville's use of the words "darkness," "blackness," "shade," "gloom," suggest that, for him, the essence of human experience, its "truth," is above all mysterious, is, if not unknowable, at least eminently difficult to penetrate, much less to represent. Another conceit he uses in arguing this idea is that of truth as "a scared white doe in the woodlands;...only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself,...even though it be covertly, and by snatches" ("Mosses," 1160). What is dark, what is hidden, contains not only the prize, but suggests the difficulty in attaining it; for Melville, truth and mystery are necessarily bound together.

Melville takes as given that truth must be hidden in art. What is boldly or obviously stated can only be taken as a gloss; there must always be some concomitant underside to the obvious proposition, something "spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight...like the dark half
of the physical sphere" (Moses, 1158). And that hidden treasure must be revealed indirectly, so as not to downplay the importance of the mystery itself. In his own art, then, Melville's problem, at least, is obvious -- how to reveal the truth without betraying it. In his poem, "Art," he captures his dilemma:

What unlike things must meet and mate:
A flame to melt -- a wind to freeze;

This problem Melville approached through his conception of the original character.

Melville provides the formula and rationale for this type of character in chapter 44 of The Confidence-Man. His description of the figure is a fairly straightforward enumeration of its distinguishing characteristics and background. He begins by making it clear that the character who is original in the sense he intends is not merely, "novel, or singular, or striking, or captivating, or all four at once" (1097). That is, the sense in which words such as novel, new, variant, unique, exceptional, unconventional, etc. are synonymous with the word original is not relevant to Melville's definition. For him, these "novel" characters are lesser creations which may be "picked up ... in town," like pipe tobacco or lumber, products merely of observation and reproduction, rather than of vision and inspiration. The implication is that the writer "comes
by" such characters more than he actually conceives and fashions them, that they are in some sense "out there" in the "man-show" of the real world, and that the writer has only to duplicate them in order to populate his fictional world. What distinguishes the character who is "original in the sense of Hamlet, or Don Quixote, or Milton's Satan" from those which are merely life forms reproduced is his power to engender, to shape, to confer unity. Original characters engender their entire fictional worlds: Don Quixote in his dream of a chivalric reality; Satan in his jealous obsession; and Hamlet in his vengeful conviction. They do not stand as mirror images of actual men, but, Melville claims, were also engendered, as is all life, "from the egg." They are the products, not particularly of wisdom or craft, but primarily of inspiration, of "much luck." They are that which is given, the archetypal forms from which their worlds must evolve (The Confidence-Man, 1097-8).

Within the general assertion that the original character originates a given story and its people, Melville provides various distinguishing features of this figure. About him, "there is discernible something prevalingly local, or of the age" (The Confidence-Man, 1098). Coexistent with and in apparent opposition to this quality is a lack of general background information
about the character (a lack notable among Bartleby, Ahab, the confidence man and Billy Budd). The character is not to be too firmly grounded in history, nor is too much of his presence to be understood by his identity as it is shown to evolve through time. His lack of a verifiable past situates the character squarely in the present-time of the story, providing the "something prevailing local" about him, at the same time that it cuts him off from the story's or his own past, and makes him seem to stand outside of time. Another comment Melville makes in his review of Hawthorne's Mosses invites speculation on this notion of a character whose background is not specific:

Would that all excellent books were foundlings, without father or mother, that so it might be, we could glorify them, without including their ostensible authors...this I feel, that the names of all fine authors are fictitious ones...simply standing, as they do, for the mystical, ever-eluding Spirit of all Beauty, which ubiquitously possesses men of genius. ("Mosses," 1154)

It seems that, for Melville, "excellent" books encapsulate a spirit outside of the flow of time, an eternal ideal of beauty. They do not merely represent that ideal, any more than do their authors when they write them, but they are a materialization of it, a manifestation of it. Melville's creation of "foundling" characters -- notably Billy Budd, but also the characters of Bartleby, Ahab and the confidence man --
implies that they are manifestations from outside time, too. They seem placed within their stories by an unknown source. Their backgrounds lack anything beyond the sketchiest details given to explain the way in which they come to inhabit their stories. They stand outside of the narrative flow, and yet exert over it a transforming force. While the original character's lack of a past makes him more immediately significant, in the sense that his presence can only be interpreted in the present, such an absence of information also encourages freer speculation about his significance. The original character is perceived by the reader and by the other characters as very much a part of his day and surroundings, as the embodiment of them. At the same time, he is also understood to transcend those circumstances, creating them as much as they, him, and embodying something more permanent in relation to his time and place. He is to fiction what "in real history is a new law-giver, a revolutionizing philosopher, or the founder of a new religion" (The Confidence-Man, 1097). Melville notes in his review of Hawthorne that "great geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the times; and possess a correspondent coloring" ("Mosses," 1161). In a letter he wrote to Hawthorne, praising The House of Seven Gables, Melville expresses
admiration in particular for the character of Clifford as having this dual capacity to represent the story's society, and yet also to embody its transcendent truths:

Clifford is full of an awful truth throughout. He is conceived in the finest, truest spirit. He is no caricature. He is Clifford. Melville's original corresponds to the genius of real history as a figure among other figures in his story and at the same time, the figure of the story, a fusion of being and symbol.

Because he symbolizes, because he has an emblematic function, the original character is a kind of "motivated sign," to borrow a term from Barbara Johnson's treatment of Billy-Budd. He tends to look like whatever it is he is supposed to be by those he encounters in the story. The significance he eventually comes to have in the narrative is in part because of and in part despite the seemingly intrinsic relationship between his looks and his essence. Thus Melville gives us the pale, mechanical Bartleby, a human form which nonetheless suggest a duplicating machine more than it does a conventional personality; the mutilated Ahab, branded by circumstances he allows to scar him; the vari-colored surfaces of the confidence man, whose multiple forms imply the embodiment of nothing; and Billy Budd, the blushing, blond symbol of all innocence. Typically,
these characterological surfaces are taken by the other characters as an invitation to speculate on the relationship between the surface of the original character and his depth. And typically, his ultimate significance to the story as they determine it undergoes a change from or revision of the meaning his presence seems at first to imply. Bartleby comes to signify the tragedy of human disconnection because he arouses a connecting sympathy in his employer, one which the lawyer, known for his "safe" emotional detachment, is incapable of acknowledging. Ahab destroys by necessity his own constructed unity of world-without-whale, leaving Ishmael to realize that all his deconstructions, doubts and disbelief will not dematerialize Moby-Dick. The lack of confidence expressed instinctively by the confidence man's gulls is one they must eventually transfer from him to themselves. And Billy's broken innocence is nevertheless finally reconstituted to a new purity. These changes in the significance of the original character are parallel to the changes he brings to the initial story -- the story or dramatic situation which Melville first posits and then allows his original character to rewrite.

In chapter 44 of The Confidence-Man, Melville offers another conceit to clarify what he means by the
original character, that of the "revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it --
everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it" 
(The Confidence-Man, 1098). With this image of a long, 
moving ray of illumination which searches out and makes 
visible (thereby "creating") what is otherwise in 
darkness, Melville captures the original character's 
effect upon the narrative in which he appears. In any 
organized fictional world, in any unity of place, time 
and dramatic situation between people that is proposed, 
the original character shines the light of revelation on 
that which has been left out of the proposal. The 
identities of the other characters come to be defined in 
terms of him, or in terms of what hidden elements he 
reveals about their identities.

Bartleby's effect on his employer is an example of 
the way in which the original character confers his 
identity on other characters. Before Bartleby enters 
the story, the lawyer sings a confident aria of himself 
and the successful professional world he has managed to 
create. He has avoided the general emotional upheaval 
associated with criminal law (or with any kind of trial, 
in any sense of the word), and has secured his contracts 
with the services of a staff which, if it is not 
perfect, is as close to perfection as the situation, as
he understands it, will allow. Bartleby's entrance into the law office shines a beacon onto something which the lawyer leaves dark in his account of himself -- an almost total emotional detachment, the substance and effects of which the new scrivener symbolizes. It is this sort of revelation of character which is included in the "everything" which Melville claims is "lit up" by the original character.

Melville's other characters do indeed "start up" to the original character, in addition to taking their identities from or finding them revealed by him. That is, this character jolts the others into unanticipated action, into responses and behavior which, without his presence, would have been hard to predict, and for which, without the example of the original character, motivations are hard to provide. By casting a light on the qualities of the others which are dormant or somehow essential but hidden, and thereby bringing them into the visible patterning of the fiction in question, he necessitates relevant action among them. It is in this way that he creates or generates the plot out of the dramatic situation into which he is placed.

Again, we might consider Bartleby as he comes into the narrator's law office and causes the general collapse of the working harmony which the lawyer has
orchestrated there. His refusal to perform any of his functions, or to participate in any of the business interactions of the others, amounts to a backlight for the display, not so much of Bartleby's passivity, but of the extreme passivity of the lawyer. The lawyer has not presented this passivity and the emotional detachment on which it is based in the description of himself and his business with which he sets the scene of his story about Bartleby. But the acts which the new scrivener inspires in his employer are revealed by Bartleby to be, like his own actions, essentially non-acts. The lawyer orders him to perform tasks, often before witnesses, that he knows Bartleby will prefer not to do. He moves himself and the entire law office when Bartleby will not respond to his order to vacate the original premises. The lawyer's behavior effects nothing in the matter of dealing with a recalcitrant employee; it is merely a flurry of inconsequential activity motivated and illumined by the character of Bartleby. But the plot of this tale consists of the devolution of these non-events: Bartleby prefers not to work, the lawyer prefers not to deal directly with him for a time, then later ends by dealing with him indirectly (by not dealing with him!), and Bartleby finally prefers not to live. Before Bartleby, the law office is a harmony unto
itself; after Bartleby, all is a discord of no, not, non- and un-. In this sense of his turning their positive world into a negative one, Bartleby causes the other characters in this story to start up to him, commanding their behaviors and revealing their previously hidden essential natures.

Thus, the original character has a total effect on the narrative into which he is brought. Melville gives him to us as a unity, not of defining acts or of an identifying past or of a conglomerate of attributes which are physical or psychological or allegorical, but of a total, organic combination of these things which has been visited on the writer's conception. He cannot be understood as the sort of aesthetic construction which evolved out of the conventions of novelistic characterization available to Melville in his time. He does not represent an idea or system of thought, nor is he created to mirror a physical or emotional reality, because he "cannot be born in the author's imagination -- it being true in literature as well as in zoology, that all life is from the egg" (The Confidence-Man, 1098). For Melville, he simply exists, as he has from the beginning, as an original.

The original character, Melville stipulates, is a galvanizer of events; the events of the plot are
seemingly necessitated by his presence. He also functions in the story as a catalyst to the natures of the other characters, causing them to act in ways unexpected and to reveal aspects of themselves unsuspected. The way in which Melville uses the original character to redefine characters and redirect their story has a specific purpose -- to reveal the flip-side, to bring into sight the things left out in the dark at the moment the story comes into being and the original unities of character and action are predicated. This is to say that, in the works which involve the use of an original character, Melville begins with a study sketch or gloss of a fictional world which, in its renderings of character and dramatic situation, is somehow false, misleading or incomplete. Into this first created world he eventually brings the figure for the purpose of painting in the more complex and significant areas of light and shade, thus providing a more detailed and accurate account of the meaning of the story. It might be said that he provides the reader with an untrue proposition in order to enhance the effect when the presence of his original character, be it Bartleby, Ahab, the confidence man or Billy Budd, suggests a proposition which seems truer. Melville reminds us that "As for original characters in fiction,
a grateful reader will, on meeting with one, keep the anniversary of that day" (The Confidence-Man, 1097).

The lynchpin of Melville's characterology, then, is this concept of an original character who generates plot and character by lighting up the shadowed areas lying outside of the narrative organization into which he comes. He is more elemental, more a given than any other narrative element. He is there among those elements before they come together into any pattern, and is seemingly the impetus for whatever organization they finally combine to form. In light of such a concept, certain phrases Melville uses in his review of Hawthorne seem to reverberate with added meaning. One of these is "Original Sin." Recalling material from the review once again, we see the importance of the role of original sin in Melville's total conception of the world ("no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow, like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance"). He admires Hawthorne's fictional generations for their derivation from just that balancing element which destabilizes the "normal" and thereby makes a totality out of a partial representation of life. And any world he himself might wish to create on paper will also reflect that bipartite conception, the dark part of which, as he says, carries more weight in the uneven
balance. In Melville's fictional worlds, this balance is struck by a characterological element. As an element, it is not simply represented by a "dark" character who by his evil words or actions shades in the flat areas of light, giving them depth and dimension. It is an element whose characterological manifestation reveals the darkened content within and among the other characters. The dynamic between the original character and the others in any of the fictions to be discussed here is one that facilitates a vision of the hidden truths within and among men, revealed "covertly, and by snatches."

Another notion in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" that furthers our understanding of Melville's characterology is found in the words, "any good man, in his own proper character" ("Mosses," 1160). These phrases, especially the adjectives, imply that human beings are complex entities which nonetheless put forward public faces or personae that express an actual inner goodness. The personae are organized around what is "proper," what will properly reflect the good in men, and therefore exclude whatever elements contradict that unity. Such elements, though presumably there and acknowledged, are not considered an appropriate part of the "character," the polished, one-dimensional self, that a man shows to
the world. It is fair to say then, that Melville conceives of human beings as complex systems including good and bad elements, which naturally emphasize the former and hide the latter. In light of such a conception of humanity, the notion of fictional character will necessarily include, in fact turn upon, a hidden compositional element. A character is for Melville more than what can be seen from his "proper" persona; he is the sum of both the persona and that which has been excluded from it. The original character functions to bring whatever has been excluded into the light.

Melville's art of characterization is based on a theory of character in which one character motivates and defines all of the others. The theory also proposes that plot is generated by character. Such a theory distinguishes Melville's characterology from traditions of characterization that had evolved in the novel. These involved the creation of characters as discrete entities who represented systems of moral or epistemological certainties, and who were conceived to represent their times. Melville's original characters are formulated within somewhat conventional means; they have aspects of both allegory and physical/psychological verity. But their dynamic within their stories is
entirely different from the characterological dynamic of figures such as Richardson's Pamela or Defoe's Moll Flanders. These latter characters are emblematic of the division or struggle between good and evil, Pamela the pure representative of the side of good, Moll the sinner who knows the difference between the two, and who, even if she doesn't always behave as a representative of good, always indicates in her narrative a consciousness of the necessity to do so. Melville's original character appears at first to represent a simple element; Billy Budd is the emblem of democratic heroism to all who first encounter him on the Bellipotent. What later ensues among him, John Claggart and Captain Vere both utterly dismantles and then reformulates Billy's emblematic value. Billy undergoes certain transformations, and with him, the other two main figures in the novel do likewise. By the narrative's end, the characterological symbol of innocence has done murder, the corresponding symbol of evil has become a victim, and the dreamy, distant figure of authority has been forced to come down hard into a flawed and brutal action which misrepresents the will (but not the understanding) of all of the novel's characters. The much simpler characters of Pamela are designed as key support structures in a moral edifice; it is no part of
this novel's project to knock loose so much as a stone of that edifice. Thus, the character of Pamela is constructed with an allegorical component, to represent absolute goodness, the fundamental principle around which she coheres. Her seducer, Mr. B., is corruption and corrupter, a figure whose core we understand to be the negative to her positive within the moral framework which supports both their individual identities and their interactions. This framework of absolute values regarding good and evil insists that their union result not in a reconciliation of the characteristics of both figures, as it does in Billy-Budd, but in the triumph of goodness over corruption, the complete and dramatic change of Mr. B.'s character so that it exhibits a positive match for Pamela's, rather than a negative challenge.

Traditional novelistic characters such as Pamela and Moll Flanders are conventionally formulated as a conglomerate of their pasts, their physical attributes and their representational roles in the thematic concerns of their novels. They are centered and unified on the basis of these principles, and thus have a perceivable essence that may be presumed by the reader in the way that a phoneme may be perceived and presumed by a speaker as a meaningful sound unit comprised of its
distinctive features. These centered essences are clearly separate from one another, and rarely do their interactions disturb that clarity.

Melville's original characters do not simply represent actual human beings or the values of human beings. Rather, they represent a dynamic formulation of human characteristics and values which is based on the fundamental principle of transformation. If the original character can be said to represent any single thing, he can be said to be the agent of the principle of transformation. Thus, Melville's original character is something like the artist within the story, insofar as it is his function to rewrite the story, to shape it, to determine it. But he is not separate from this function. Henry James' comment on character in "The Art of Fiction," though not specifically responding to Melville's characterology, helps us to understand it:

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is not of character?

The original character as Melville conceives it is as elemental an aspect of any fictional world as sin is elemental in the world of men. It is a transformational component which arises from the principle of transformation, facilitating and determining narrative evolution. The character also provides the means by
which the element of "blackness" Melville so values in Hawthorne and Shakespeare becomes an essential operative in his own fiction.

In the chapters to follow, I will examine the original characters in four works of Melville: "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Moby-Dick, The Confidence-Man, and Billy-Budd. These narratives chose themselves; the texts reveal the characterological concept quite clearly. Melville's other works, both early and late, do not illustrate his characterological theory so definitely. He does not seem, in fact, always to have been working deliberately within this theory of character. In some of Melville's works, there are characters who are similar in construction and presentation to the original characters to be discussed here. For example, the figure of Jack Chase, in White-Jacket, bears a resemblance to Billy Budd. They share a frankness, an accessible quality, along with good looks indicating good moral quality:

He was a Briton, and a true-blue; tall and well-knit, with a clear open eye, a fine broad brow, ...No man ever had a better heart or a bolder. He was loved by the seamen and admired by the officers. 11

Jack Chase, like Billy, is regarded by all as a natural representative of the best that can be found in all of them. He is universally acknowledged as a leader, as
well-trained and skillful in his duties on board, and as a champion in the cause of "Right." Like Billy he, too, has a single, small flaw:

   Indeed, there was only one thing wanting about him; and that was, a finger of his left hand, which finger he had lost at the great battle of Navarino. (White-Jacket, 360)

This small flaw in his corporeal unity roughly corresponds to Billy's stutter (as well as to Ahab's lost leg). But these similarities in distinctive characterological features do not amount to a correlation which would put Jack Chase into the category of original character. Chase is a presence in his narrative, but only one among many. His heroic quality is not challenged or redefined, as is Billy's; it is merely stated, sketched in and left to become part of the rest of the picture of the world of the Neversink. He does not determine or come to constitute the narrative of the time encompassed and presented, he does not effect a change in all of the crew and officers, he does not symbolize any thematic idea that is the novel's intrinsic basis of inquiry.

   Likewise the character Yillah, in Mardi, although she resembles Billy Budd in form, does not have the substance of a Melvillean original. She is a golden-haired, blue-eyed captive who symbolizes beauty
and innocence as much as does Billy. Her ornamental symbology of rosebuds -- the "rose-colored pearl on her bosom," the blossom into which she is transformed, the "rosy mist" from which she emerges in restored human form -- surrounds Billy as well, lying in his name and in the rose-colored light that illumines him when he is executed. The mystery of her past and her ignorance of it are also like Billy's, as is her ultimate identity as the object of a necessary sacrifice. Like Ahab, she is compelled to a vision in the water which contains her fate. But unlike Billy and Ahab, she does not command the actions of all around her. Even the narrator's endless search for her once she has disappeared is presented as having various bases, the profoundest of which -- "Now, I am my own soul's emperor; and my first act is abdication!" -- is conceived without considering her (Mardi, 1316). Nor does she reveal or rewrite any of the other characters; she is simply one of them.

Pierre's Isabel has much in common with Yillah, and like Yillah, cannot be considered an original. She leads Pierre, but she does not reveal him. When he renounces Lucy and follows Isabel, Pierre is acting on impulses and bases that the text clearly provides, even before it provides the figure of Isabel. When he and Lucy are first presented together in the novel, she asks
him,

"swear to me, dear Pierre, that thou wilt never keep a secret from me...swear!"

and he answers,

"Something seizes me. Thy inexplicable tears, falling, falling on my heart, have now, turned it to a stone. I feel icy cold and hard; I will not swear!"13

And although he recovers his pleasant former manner and his kind regard for Lucy and her every request by the end of the chapter, the subsequent two chapters display Pierre, alone, contending his mysterious fascination with grief. Though he is unfamiliar with it -- "thou, Grief! art still a ghost-story to me" -- he suspects that it is the inevitable flip-side of his happiness with Lucy:

...what an ill-matched pendant, thou, to that other countenance of sweet Lucy, which also hangs, and first did hang within my heart! Is grief a pendant then to pleasantness? Is grief a self-willed guest that will come in? (Pierre, 51)

Because Pierre conceives Isabel as a mournful, disembodied face before she actually appears in the novel, she is more like Pallas Athena to his Zeus than like an original character to Melville. She is an author's conception, to be sure, but is an inspiration once removed. Nested within these layers (Melville conceives Pierre, who conceives Isabel), her power as an original is reduced. Everything she effects in the plot, Pierre has already in some way expected or
foreseen. Everything she reveals has been prefigured by Pierre's early imaginings. She has more in common with the dark lady who opposes the fair lady in the conventions of romance literature than with the figures of Bartleby, Ahab, the confidence man or Billy Budd. Beginning with the first of these four figures, then, we can approach an understanding of the role of the original character in Melville's art of characterization.
Chapter One - Endnotes


9Herman Melville, "To Nathaniel Hawthorne" Pittsfield, Mass., April 16, 1851, reprinted in *The Letters of Herman Melville*, eds. Merrill R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1960) 124.


A Fraternal Melancholy

In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Melville creates an original character in the title figure. Bartleby can be considered an original because he fulfills the characterological conditions and exhibits the distinctive characterological features posited by Melville in chapter 44 of The Confidence Man and discussed in the introductory chapter of this essay. The general lack of information about Bartleby's past lends the "something prevailingly local" to this figure which Melville claims is a mark of the original character. The fact that his physical appearance is very much a correlative of his spiritual hopelessness makes him the kind of motivated sign which is another such mark. In addition, he functions like "a revolving Drummond light," (The Confidence Man, 1098) shedding his identity on the other characters and making visible, out of the darkness, things about themselves and their world previously unknown or only partially known to them. "Everything starts up" to him (1098); he, albeit indirectly, necessitates all of the story's action. Bartleby notably has the galvanizing function which Melville attributes to the original. He exists as a catalyst for the behavior of the other characters and, in his passive way, causes them to become engaged in a
series of acts which constitute the events of the story. Finally, he springs "from the egg" (1098) of the author's conception, a characterological unity which derives not so much from his acts or his essential identity as from the totality with which he has been conceived by his creator in relation to the other characters of the narrative.

Bartleby, as Melville's original character in this tale, is the story. The unity which the lawyer predicates at the story's beginning -- of his eminent safety, of his conviction that "the easiest way of life is the best," of his managerial resourcefulness -- is up-ended by what Bartleby reveals. He reveals, simply by being what he is, all of the things about the narrator's character and life choices which have been excluded from that predicated unity. Bartleby is an original character whose life and death symbolize the tale's thematic core -- the inevitability of human isolation.

The lawyer delineates this unified construction of himself and his life in some detail at the story's outset. His central concept of himself is summed up by the word "safe," and his practical philosophy centers on the preference for ease in all of life's aspects. His acquaintances (notably John Jacob Astor) give him
character references which emphasize his safety, prudence and method. He says proudly that he has designed his life very consciously to exclude struggle, confrontation or any type of upheaval. He not only arranges his professional endeavors around the principle of calm, preferring to service bonds and mortgages rather than to address a jury, but he also suppresses on principle any excitation which may be caused by a stray stimulus he cannot control. Thus, he refuses to express his bitterness over the fact that his job as Master of Chancery had been taken from him by a change in governmental policy. His refusal is based on the belief that "indignation at wrongs and outrages" is "dangerous" ("Bartleby," 636).

In this way, he constructs for himself a world in which ill feelings -- confusion, disappointment, frustration, despair -- have no place. Competence, predictability and cheerful coping with adversity (and this latter is rarely seen in such extreme terms) reign in the lawyer's world. His management of his two scriveners, Turkey and Nippers, is a good illustration of his refusal to become overwhelmed in the face of a problem. There is a tolerant, almost indulgent quality in his account of his difficulties with them, and these difficulties he presents in a light which makes a comic
but basically successful compromise out of what might otherwise seem a faltering of business efficiency.

The lawyer tells us that though these two employees are a certain amount of trouble for him, he never needs to contend with difficulty from both of them at the same time because of the complementary arrangement of the periods during which their respective temperaments make them difficult. Turkey is the essence of efficiency until noon and after lunch, capitulates to the drink-induced irascibility and flightiness which compromise his afternoon production in the office. Nipper's "fits" of distracted bad humor come on him in the morning and are relieved, presumably, by the same agent that causes Turkey's daily demise -- lunch. This hour and activity form the point at which they cross into each other's former temperament. The lawyer gamely insists on seeing them, from a functional perspective, as two parts of a working whole, giving him, both morning and afternoon, one efficient worker. But they do not complement one another, each contributing his part to a single, jointly-completed service; rather, they exchange work ability for inability. When one is able, the other is not, and in the course of any given day, both are both. Thus, in his management of them, the lawyer manages also to ignore the fact that, for
every work day, he has the productivity of one worker for the price of two.

Yet, within the boundaries of the lawyer's construction of his professional dealings, his actual relations with Turkey and Nippers are presented as a functional success. The lawyer is the boss, the scriveners are his employees and complete adequately the work for which he employs them. The lawyer not only sets up this hierarchy, but he also sees (and gives) his working relationship with them as one which reflects his ideal of calm productivity. For the lawyer, the pair provides throughout the work day a ratification of his own mild temperament and business efficiency, equaling as they do in the "off" states of their bad moods, one perfect employee. Their imperfections -- Turkey's slovenly dressing, Nippers' "diseased ambition" -- the lawyer ignores or accommodates insofar as he can, and he is mostly successful. His conviction that protest is dangerous and wrong is the ballast that stabilizes his office. And until Bartleby enters it as a new scrivener, all seems firmly grounded within the lawyer's world.

But with the entrance of the story's title character, the lawyer's ballast proves to be made of cork. Melville conceives the character of Bartleby in
such a way that his main figure can generate an entire peopled world by simply being. Into the world of the lawyer's office, containing people in a hierarchy of relations which the lawyer has rationalized and is comfortable with, Bartleby steps, and within a few days, he recasts the people, and their relations are seen to have little to do with the sort of hierarchy (placing the boss at the top) conventionally found in a business office. They stand revealed, instead, in an irregular hierarchy which (placing the boss at the bottom) becomes an indication of the new boundaries which Bartleby sets for the lawyer's previous concepts of sympathy and identity. Bartleby's presence in the tale has "an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things" (The Confidence-Man, 1098).

Bartleby's genetic effect on the lawyer and the other scriveners is based simply on the fact of his existence. All of the constituent parts of his character are not so important in defining him as they are in catalyzing the nature of the other characters. His lack of a past is the first such constituent to contribute to his power. In accordance with his provision that, about the original character, "there is discernible something prevailingly local, or of the
age," Melville provides little information of Bartleby's past. Unlike Moll Flanders, the conditions of whose childhood provide the motivation for the somewhat desperate concern for financial security and social standing that characterizes her adult life, no specific fact is given, during the course of the plot's unfolding, that would delimit Bartleby's character, or facilitate a rationale for his (non-) acts. All that is known of him, to us or to the other characters who meet him in the course of the tale, is that he was rumored to have worked in the government's Dead Letter Office. The symbolic significance of this almost-fact of Bartleby's history is elaborated as an afterthought by the tale's narrator, the lawyer, at the very end of the narrative. But as a determiner of character, as a meaningful unit with which we are to understand a part of the scrivener's overall shape, it carries no weight, neither for the other characters, nor for the reader, during the course of the actual story. Throughout the lawyer's account, Bartleby appears solely in his immediate context; the facts of his personal history and their meaning in terms of his behavior in the lawyer's office are not presented. It is in this sense of having no applicable past that he can be seen as prevailingly local.
Melville chooses to leave for the story's end the most telling background information about Bartleby, no doubt in order to milk the most melancholy out of Bartleby's death. This renders the living character more as a mirror, a smooth surface, uninterrupted by the textures of the past, reflecting those things standing near it. Bartleby is hired as a scrivener, one of three in the lawyer's office. In the lawyer's understanding, the official one for his employees as well as for himself, all of the men in his office are there to perform their duties. Bartleby's function as scrivener is the same as that of Turkey and Nippers; likewise, their function is the same as his. It is this conventional logic of equivalence -- that, as functionaries, the scriveners are all the same, or are interchangeable -- that permits Bartleby to mirror a more complex world than that which the lawyer posits for his office. As all of the scriveners take their essential meaning from their essential duty to the lawyer, so the new scrivener takes his essential meaning to the others from his being hired in their exact capacity. They expect him to be exactly the way they are. In a reciprocal manner, his behavior in the capacity of scrivener has implications for the way in which their behavior is to be understood, if not by the
lawyer, then by the readers of the tale. We begin to see the other characters in terms of the way Bartleby is. Melville builds the narrator's world, then, with both refractive and reflective capabilities. That is to say that the lawyer's account of his law office can be seen as a product which has passed through the medium of his understanding and desires, as broken colors of a light ray have passed through a prism. At the beginning of that account, the reflective medium is missing. Melville uses Bartleby, the original character, to fill in the office landscape with the images that he alone can reflect into it, those lying behind the lawyer's field of vision, like the dark side of the moon.

As is typical of the original character, at first the figure of Bartleby appears to invite literal interpretation, to fit easily into the lawyer's scheme of work and world. He copies night and day, "as if long famishing for something to copy" ("Bartleby," 642). The only way in which Melville suggests his reflective qualities is in his exaggerated productivity, which heightens the metaphoric pun, bringing together the production of a copied document and that of reflected image. Despite the fact that his new scrivener does not perform his work with the "cheerful industriousness" which (in the lawyer's mind) should accompany it, the
lawyer's delight in Bartleby is only somewhat qualified. So he is taken completely by surprise the first time Bartleby expresses what comes to be understood by all as his essential preference. He is utterly unprepared to find that his employee prefers not to do his bidding. Having created in his mind an office that is such a safe harbor, he can hardly believe his eyes when he sees whitecaps in the water. The shock causes him to retreat from the situation; he decides to "reserve it for ... future leisure," a decision ostensibly prompted by his secure understanding of documents and copyists ("Bartleby," 644). The lawyer resolves the next occasion of Bartleby's preference/refusal in much the same way, deciding that he is too busy for a direct approach to his employee, and reserving action for "future leisure." At this point, when Bartleby prefers not to participate in the necessary proofreading of documents, the lawyer does appeal to the scrivener's general sense of both the business and the social contract:

These are your own copies we are about to examine. It is labor saving to you, ... It is common usage. Every copyist is bound to help examine his copy. ... You are decided, then, not to comply with my request -- a request made according to common usage and common sense? ("Bartleby," 645)

Such clear-cut guidelines as "common usage" and "common sense" for human relations are the foundation of the
lawyer's secure view of his position in the world. Bartleby's behavior cracks this foundation, jarring loose his employer's construction. As the lawyer begins, in response, to look more closely at Bartleby's behavior, observing the peculiarity of his habits, we begin to look more closely at the meaning of the lawyer's assumptions about common usage and common sense.

These assumptions also begin to seem fairly arbitrary, based as they are on preferences, for Bartleby reveals the lawyer to be, like himself, very much "more a man of preferences than assumptions" ("Bartleby," 659). His very appeal to Bartleby, cited above, is in fact a peculiar response, even to such a peculiar situation. As an appeal, it is framed as a recitation of a set of shared assumptions. This may at first seem a reasonable approach on the lawyer's part, but Bartleby's act (his refusal to act, which, in this case, amounts to an act) most obviously has nothing to do with such assumptions. The lawyer chooses to ignore the implications of Bartleby's choice of the word "prefer," at the same time exercising a preference himself. In other words, when Bartleby meets the lawyer's command with a preference, the lawyer does not restate his command on the assumption that it will be
obeyed. He "prefers," instead, to make the assumptions themselves into an argument, converting them from the status of a given to that of mere strategy for discussion.

But this method of dealing with difficulties among his office staff does not strike us as out of character in the lawyer. He does not approach Bartleby in a manner that is any different from the manner he uses with his other scriveners; it is simply that his employee relations are newly revealed by the presence of Bartleby. His daily management of Turkey and Nippers illustrate this point. Despite the fact that the lawyer sees the alternation of their "off" moods as "fortunate," the pair of workers do in fact bring into the office each day the very passionate nervousness of disposition which the lawyer abhors and has rigidly excluded from his life. Much of the actual nature of these two employees is a trial to him. In addition to Nippers' indigestion and resultant behavior, the lawyer is vaguely repulsed by his tendency to hustle business for himself outside of the law office, yet he doesn't forbid Nippers' activities on what clearly could be grounds of conflict of interest -- he simply looks the other way. Turkey, besides his drunken afternoon frenzies, also dresses in a manner which the lawyer
considers a reproach to him. His response is not to outline a code of dress appropriate for a law office, though he plainly conceives one; instead, he offers Turkey one of his own coats. All of this is to say that the lawyer prefers to deal with his scriveners by accommodating their failures into a functioning norm of his own design, rather than by asserting his power over them, a power quite naturally based on the fact that he employs them. 4

His attempts to deal with Turkey are, in particular, quite extensively accommodating, when we view them through the mirror of Bartleby's stubborn passivity. The lawyer counters the copyist's deplorable afternoon behavior by offering him each afternoon off, presumably to spare himself Turkey's "blots" and blunders. But Turkey recognizes, and explicitly points out, that the offer is not so much based on concerns of utility, but on a "fellow-feeling" which he can and will exploit to his advantage. Thus, Turkey often takes the helm in their encounters, easily slipping into the lawyer's role as boss because the lawyer proffers it. The lawyer hints that the afternoon duties are too strenuous for his copyist and tells him, out of "kindness," to rest in the afternoons. Turkey observes, with a "submission" the irony of which neither
acknowledges, that the afternoon is when the lawyer needs him most. Since the lawyer understands that Turkey will not go, he "chooses" to let him stay. The quality of this response raises the question of who is in charge in the law office. On each occasion that demands his firm control and decisive action, the lawyer prefers not to take either. Turkey, the lawyer's opposite in this way, will flourish a ruler and charge aggressively ahead, taking control where he has no assurance that it is appropriate -- he is unafraid of the unsafe. But the lawyer, whatever his fears may be, fears direct action more. Though he has no access to this fact about himself, Bartleby's own version of the refusal to act illuminates this quality in the lawyer for us.

The lawyer that Bartleby brings to light is not the same character the narrator has been sketching in his claims about himself. His passivity, revealed by its flesh-and-blood embodiment in Bartleby, is an aspect of his character of which he is aware, but which he understands somewhat differently. While he would probably prefer to term it peaceableness, mildness or calm (and his references to his snug business and himself as a safe man notwithstanding), his interactions with his employees as they have been discussed are
nothing if not passive. Once Bartleby's presence has remade the character of the lawyer in this way, the substance of their interaction becomes a passivity contest in which the choices (the quasi-acts and non-acts) of both devolve through a course of negative possibilities until the final negative point has been reached. Their alienation from one another, despite the lawyer's feeling of a fraternal melancholy is inevitable.

The eventual estrangement between this tale's two main figures is motivated by the ironic tension between their fundamental similarity and their ultimate inability to connect to one another. Bartleby, filling the role of scrivener though he may be, is less like Turkey and Nippers and more like the lawyer in his actual behavior and what it indicates about his temperament. For instance, the lawyer's general passivity is not so obvious in his dealings with Turkey; it can pass (as the lawyer makes it do) as the desire to make peace. Putting the lawyer's construction on the situation, we can see his and Turkey's relationship as successfully complementary, if not from the standpoint of business efficiency, then at least from that of the lawyer's desire for emotional serenity and the controlled mechanical functioning of his office.
necessitated by it. But the combination of the
temperaments of the lawyer and Bartleby emphasizes the
destructive power of their shared passivity. The trait
cancels out the importance of any reasonable expectation
the lawyer may have of his new employee, or of any
sympathy he may feel for Bartleby's increasingly
desperate situation.

The contrast between the characters of Turkey and
Bartleby clarifies the negative nature of the similarity
between the lawyer and Bartleby. In terms of behavior
and manner, the first pair couldn't appear to be more
opposite, setting high color against pallor, manic
restlessness against sedateness, etc. Their responses
to their employer seem to contrast, too. Turkey
confronts his boss with his opinions and expresses
without hesitation his will to do the opposite of what
is suggested to him by the lawyer. Bartleby's responses
to the requests and commands of his employer can in no
way be seen as outwardly contentious. There is,
however, the undeniable fact that neither one will do
what he is requested to do if he has a will to do
otherwise. Turkey refuses to leave the office after
lunch, and Bartleby (and here the contrast between them
is most acute) prefers not to proofread his copies.
They share a characterological attribute of resistance
or rebelliousness, but differ crucially in the manner of
its expression. Turkey's flat rejection of the lawyer's
authority is the more obviously aggressive of the two.
Bartleby's opposite, passive response -- his insistence
on perceiving a choice in every command given him -- is
no less an actual rejection of the lawyer's will, but is
simply a passive one.

"Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a
passive resistance," observes the lawyer after his first
two contretemps with Bartleby's passivity ("Bartleby,"
646). And, indeed, each time the scrivener chooses not
to obey him, the lawyer's first reaction is a baffled
excitement approaching rage. This agitation he quickly
checks, however, and moves always to the next stage of
his response -- an attempt to "reason" the situation
out, either with Bartleby directly or at least in his
own mind. The resolution he then achieves usually takes
the form of some deferment of final resolution. He does
not, for example, fire bartleby for refusing to
proofread his own copies; he simply "resolves" not to do
anything immediately. It is the same decision he takes
when he realizes that Bartleby is actually living in the
office and considers ousting him from the premises. He
doesn't do it; he doesn't do anything. When Bartleby is
finally evicted, it is not by the lawyer at all, but by
the landlord of the offices the lawyer fled, empowered by the lawyer's failure to act on Bartleby's presence there himself. These failures of action on the lawyer's part are not best described by the word "earnest." It may be that passive resistance would provoke an earnest person to aggravation, and perhaps at his very bottom layer the lawyer has an earnest impulse. But the rapidity with which he covers his aggravation with contemplation and procrastination bespeaks at best an extreme discomfort with earnestness, or with any clear sense of purpose. His observation is really only hypothetical; it doesn't describe his own state in relation to Bartleby at all. In fact, seem from this viewpoint, probably the only character in the story more passive than Bartleby is the lawyer himself.

The lawyer's immediate problem, Bartleby's brand of insubordination, could easily be remedied by any earnest employer (such as the lawyer claims to be). And yet on each occasion, the lawyer's cleanest anger gives way promptly to a muddy alternation of sympathy and the perverse desire to provoke the scrivener further. Their interactions seem devoted to proving who is finally the more passive of the two. The lawyer gives in to his perversity on more than one occasion, purposely creating situations in which he foretells -- and fears --
Bartleby's inevitable preference "not to." He repeatedly submits himself and Bartleby to whatever it is about their interaction that torments him, and the only possible reason for him to do so is that he must here at least be in earnest. There is something in Bartleby's choosing to refuse, perhaps in his seeing choice as a mode of refusal, that stimulates something new in the lawyer, something beyond the mild discomfort he feels with the peppery, direct refusals of Turkey. What is both seductive and terrifying about Bartleby to the lawyer is much more disturbing than the violent temper tantrums of the other scriveners. His very mildness, so obviously the echo of the lawyer's own demeanor, is in fact a substantial rebellion. The mild manner by which the lawyer rigidly contains his own anger and diverts his own actions is, in Bartleby, the actual means for the expression of the "dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages" the lawyer so wishes to avoid. His other scriveners, with their flaring tempers, would be incapable of implying to the lawyer the significance of passivity. In this special manner of Bartleby's is the paradox that drives the lawyer both towards and away from him. It seduces his innate perversity and, at the same time, moves him to sympathy, then to pity, and finally to fear. Thus, all of the
things which the lawyer wished to exclude from his existence, Bartleby places firmly within it.

The emotional dynamics which Bartleby introduces into the lawyer's life are elements of being which facilitate human connection and interdependence. Besides the fact that the scrivener and his employer are two similarly constructed souls, passive and emotionally monotone, the sympathy which Bartleby arouses in the lawyer is the foundation of much of societal contract. Yet these essentially encouraging aspects of their relationship are the very things which cause it to devolve into a bleak and complete alienation. This irony is developed subtly. The lawyer's sympathy is tricked out of him at first, when he uses it in order to avoid acting on Bartleby's initial refusals. He summons purposely what will turn out to be his particular demon, assuming that a sympathetic, charitable attitude towards his scrivener will be an eventual reward for his conscience. But during the emergence of this sympathy, he continues to provoke Bartleby into non-action, seemingly to explore the nature and extent of his employee's passivity. After he discovers that Bartleby is actually living in the law offices, his sympathy threatens to become empathy, and his feelings about the scrivener take him by the throat. As he retreats from
this change in the quality of his view of Bartleby, as he permits his feelings to degenerate into fear, he assumes that the hopelessness of Bartleby's situation is what pains him so much. He feels that Bartleby cannot be helped, that his suffering soul cannot be reached. The feeling of hopelessness creates a roadblock on the lawyer's path to church; he feels disillusioned about any message of salvation that could ignore a soul in such obvious need. Or perhaps at least part of his reluctance to go to church is an intuitive appreciation of his own inability to tolerate empathy, pity, or any truly demanding appeal to fellow-feeling. When he becomes aware of the scope of Bartleby's pitiful aloneness, he also on some level perceives the scope of his own pitiful incapacity to bear suffering -- his own or his scrivener's. This empty-hearted perplexity, in combination with his squeamishness in response to the surprise expressed by his colleagues about Bartleby's behavior, causes him to translate pity finally into pure fear, and to see Bartleby, quite rightly, as an "intolerable incubus."

The lawyer fails in fellow-felling, and passively permits Bartleby to be removed to the Tombs to die. Once Bartleby is no longer a part of his world, he finds the courage to speculate on the scrivener's
significance. He correlates the dead letters to Bartleby's dead hopes with appropriate melancholy, and even notes the irony of timing in them as messages of hope that never reached the hopeless. But the one step further that his comparison suggests, the lawyer prefers not to go, although we must, recognizing that, though it failed, Bartleby's suffering soul was a message that was meant to intercept the lawyer's empty one. If he can conclude from the unfortunate results of giving Turkey his coat that Turkey "was a man whom prosperity harmed," we can also propose that the lawyer was a man whom adversity might have helped ("Bartleby," 640). The lawyer, however, quietly side-steps adversity in the form of Bartleby. He will not see the image of himself that Bartleby reflects, and, to the story's end, remains unconnected to the chain of fellow-feeling binding the world of men.

And yet as he lingers over the fine ironies of Bartleby's rumored prior post, we sense at least some sincere emotion motivating the lawyer to a partial understanding of the scriveners' meaning. He comes very close to the crux of the situation: "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?" ("Bartleby," 672). And although he pores morbidly over the rumor's implications, pushing them to the comfortable distance
of melodrama ("Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring -- the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave"), his last pronouncement on his experience at least achieves some linkage of human beings: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" Bartleby and humanity are together; their common bond is their common suffering. The lawyer leaves himself nicely out of this formula and does not acknowledge the disconnection, but to us he stands as the last, most lonely figure in this tale of human isolation.

Thus Melville deploys the original character in the form of Bartleby to remake the lawyer's world on the principle of inevitable disunity among men. Human sympathy and its expected fruits wither to a futile "fraternal melancholy," which drives the tale's two main figures totally apart. The theme of disunity is carried out on the characterological level of the story by revising the significance of the individual, discrete entity of character. With the exception of Bartleby, each of the characters in this narrative is given shape and unity not so much by his self-concept as he accounts it, or by the indications of his past and present actions, as by those previously hidden or unrealized aspects of his character which are revealed by the original character. To a certain extent, comparisons of
one character to another facilitate understanding of a
given figure, as in the case of Turkey and the lawyer,
or of Turkey and Bartleby. But even in such instances,
the striking fact is that, in this tale, we gain insight
about the nature of these characters entirely from
seeing them in terms of one another (and especially in
terms of the power of the original character). The
concept of a fictional world of unified characters, each
with a clear set of entity-boundaries, slips into an
idea of a planet system, with characters revolving
around their dominating central planet -- the original
character -- whose existence motivates theirs.

The original character, then, is original not just
in that he orchestrates a fictional world simply by
being, but also in the sense that he redefines the
notion of character in fiction. But there is yet more
originality in Melville's conception. To the extent
that discrete characterological entities in fiction
imply the possibility of a unified concept of self in
the actual world, Melville's original character subverts
more than just the other characters in his fictional
world. Bartleby and the satellite lawyer stand in a
relationship to one another which challenges the extreme
importance of the self in romantic philosophy. The
democratic ideal of brotherhood, founded on the
assumption of the power of human sympathy, and so much a
part of romantic political inspiration, is subtly mocked
by these characters, two figures whose interactions
pervert natural human sympathy to the cause (and effect)
of alienation.

2The character of Bartleby has often been interpreted as one based on the concept of the romantic double. C. F. Keppler, The Literature of the Second Self (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1972) sees him as a demonstration of the second self as savior. Similarly, Mordecai Marcus, "Melville's Bartleby as Psychological Double," The Dimensions of the Short Story, eds. James B. Miller, Jr. and Bernice Slote (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, Inc., 1965) 539–45, finds him to be a living reproach to the lawyer about all of his life's preferences. Robert Rogers, The Double in Literature (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970) 60–70, traces in the story the decomposition of Melville's self into two of his own doppelgangers, the lawyer representing the smug writer of popular sea-travel adventures and Bartleby, the disappointed writer-idealists, gradually withdrawing from all readership and society, and preferring to die rather than to live with the fact of a rejected masterpiece. All of these readings of the character of Bartleby assume his function as adjunct to the lawyer's, and see the lawyer as the main character. In a more recent scheme of the story's characterology, Michael Murphy, in "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Simple Reading," (Arizona Quarterly, 41, No. 2 [Summer, 1985] 143-51) claims that all of the characters are projections of aspects of the lawyer's personality. My claim is that Bartleby is not adjunct but central; the other characters are not projections of his character, but they are newly revealed, rewritten, by his character. His presence among them necessitates the story that the lawyer narrates, and without him, that story and its characters could never have been conceived.


4But this tale clearly challenges such commonplace values of the business world as the natural power of employer over employee. While most scholars, such as Ronald Mason, apprehend the story's criticism of the assumptions beneath the 1850's capitalist culture depicted, and of the emotional "mediocrity" encouraged in that context, most also see the lawyer as a two-dimensional representative of Wall Street. This leaves Bartleby alone to drive a wedge of individualist
rebellion under the blank wall of that culture. Certainly before Bartleby's appearance, the lawyer's professes such values, and may consciously desire to act on them. But Melville brings Bartleby into the law office in order to dramatize the point that the lawyer has much more in common with his scrivener than he has with John Jacob Astor. Ronald Mason, The Spirit Above the Dust, (London: John Lehmann, Ltd., 1951) 190-92.
The Whale Does Not Diminish

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville's original character is Ahab. The captain of the *Pequod* becomes the defining force for all the other characters in the novel as they seek answers along their various lines of experience and inquiry. What is initially narrated by Ishmael as his story about his search for "the ungraspable phantom of life" is quickly appropriated by Ahab and Ahab's search for the white whale. Ahab's story carries the book's essential thematic burden, the idea that any given construction of experience cannot adequately capture or explain it. Motivated by his obsession with Moby-Dick and his resulting need to pursue and kill him, Ahab's story unfolds through the course of the whaling voyage narrated to become the story of every member of the ship's crew. His fixation on the destruction of the white whale eventually ensnares the rest of his men in a similar concentration of purpose, even if they do not share in his reasoning or in his inspired madness on the subject of Moby-Dick. Regardless of the diverse ways in which the crew members resist Ahab's compulsion to destroy the whale -- by reasoning with him, or by analyzing his behavior, or by degenerating into helplessness -- they are with him at the end of his chase, sharing in his fate. Each of these forms of
resistance, be it Starbuck's response of moral outrage, or Stubb's more practical sense of mere puzzlement, or Pip's insane terror, is a necessary construction for these characters once Ahab has overtaken their original motives for sailing and has irrevocably shaped their experience. But the constructions in themselves fall far short of actually helping the characters to account for what happens to them at Ahab's hands. Each response accounts only for the experience of one character; they are limited, almost solipsistic interpretations of what is actually an eminently communal series of events. It is Ahab and his obsession that pulls them together in a common aim, the beacon-figure of their captain who lights up the sympathy within them that answers to his obsession. Like the lawyer-narrator of "Bartleby," they leave this sympathetic core of their response to Ahab out of their reckoning with him. But their lives are affected by Ahab in ways similar to Bartleby's effect on the lawyer's life. To describe Ahab's illuminating and defining effect on the other characters in the novel is to describe him as this novel's original character.

The nature of Ahab's character, of course, has been given much consideration in the literature about his much-discussed novel. Warner Berthoff contends: "The characterization of Ahab can succeed because Moby-Dick
as a whole does not depend on it." He sees the figure as lacking realism in contrast to the figures of Stubb and Queequeg. For Berthoff, Ahab represents not a "real" man, but an abstraction -- "the vast and changeless phenomenon of...nature."¹ Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. also sees Ahab's role in the novel as secondary to Ishmael's.² Walter Reed conceives Ahab and Ishmael as a single, composite heroic figure, signifying the end of Melville's belief in the possibility of an American hero in literature.³ And Leon Howard claims that the development of Ahab's character overtook the novel Melville initially had been writing, that "the officers and crew are completely under Ahab's control," and that all of the characters whom Melville had developed up to the point of his developing Ahab were abandoned to that later effort.⁴

I have already referred, in my introduction, to the usefulness of Howard's notion that Ahab's character caused Melville to rewrite the novel. Harrison Hayford's "Unnecessary Duplicates: A Key to the Writing of Moby-Dick" contributes an especially provocative argument to the discussion about that notion; namely, that Melville left "vestigal" characters such as Bulkington and Peleg in the completed text, although they had evolved in the composing process into Queequeg
and Ahab. Hayford sees them as "false starts," as characters for whom Melville had a specific purpose (Bulkington, in part, as Ishmael's companion and Peleg as the Pequod's captain), but whose usefulness diminished as the characters of Ahab and Queequeg were developed. The reasoning on which Hayford bases his reconstruction of Melville's composing process is sound, but some of his conclusions about the finished work underestimate Melville's practice of art.

The concept of the false start is, of course, essential to Melville's theory of the original character. I have been tracing the narrative outline necessitated by that theory, an outline which entails an initial predication of plot and characters, and which is rewritten or "taken over" by the introduction of the original. In the case of the four works I am examining, this narrative outline is deliberate, and the false start characterizing it is possibly its most defining element. Melville's theory of character may have been derived from a composing experience in which a latterly-conceived character obviated some of the other characters. But I am claiming that the characterology of the completed work is not merely an adaptation to a tardy inspiration, but a conscious conversion of that experience from the level of composition to the level of
art. As will be seen from my discussion of *Billy-Budd* in chapter 5, the existence of various stages of the manuscript makes it easier to establish Melville's transformation of process to product in his last novel. Hayford perhaps takes too literally the phrase from *Moby-Dick* which suggests that mankind is "a mob of unnecessary duplicates" (Hayford, 128). While they may have originated in false composing starts, the characters of Bulkington and Peleg, insofar as they have qualities and characterological purposes in common with Queequeg and Ahab, are in the finished text quite necessary duplicates. Melville often uses such duplicate characters (converted from his composing experience) to engage both an idea such as heroism, alienation, or obsession with power, and a critique of that idea simultaneously.

Thus, these representative critical evaluations of Ahab's importance lie along a continuum, from Berthoff's peculiar dismissal of the figure's role in the narrative to Howard's insight that it in fact dominates the narrative. None of these readings of Ahab, however, deal with him as the motivating figure for all of the novel's events and other characters.

The novel's various other characters are like satellites orbiting around Ahab. The sense each one
makes, the meaning of the experience of each, derives from his path in relation to Ahab, and from the magnetic net into which Ahab gathers each of them. Each character seems to have an understanding of himself and of what is happening to him in the narrative which partakes of his individual history and his own personal understanding of the world. But this understanding is incomplete when put alongside the dynamic and defining relationship that each and all of the other characters come to have with Ahab.

Most important is the fact that Ishmael proceeds through Ahab in his thinking from conventional conceptions of reality which he has deliberately dismantled, to a renewed mental shape of it which is based on the primacy of the symbolic. Ishmael's experience in the narrative and his satellite role in relation to Ahab are the same as the roles and experiences of the others, but Ishmael is also the voice of the narrative. He traces everyone's path as he goes along his own, describes Ahab's magnetism even while feeling the pull of it. At first, and especially before he actually encounters Ahab on the ship, he tries to forecast or interpret him, to characterize his meaning for the others and for the voyage. But about a third of the way through the novel, he capitulates to his
captain's mesmerizing power, and from this hypnotized distance, his narration becomes a recitation of Ahab as he happens, as an evolving event like the chase of the white whale. He begins by talking about Ahab, giving us the original character whose presence determines every other reality within the novel.

The figure of Ahab contains all of the distinctive features of original characters as Melville formulates them in chapter 44 of The Confidence-Man. Like Bartleby, Billy-Budd and the confidence man, little of Ahab's past is known for certain. He has about him "something prevailingly local;" that is, something immediately engaging, if not riveting, to the members of his crew, which makes him appear to them as the living representative of their collective situation in space and time, the symbolic figure of their moment.⁶ No one can substantiate Ahab's personal history, and his shadowy past simply serves to intensify the light thrown off by his electrifying present. As the book's most visible main figure, he acts as a "revolving Drummond light," newly illuminating the nature of other figures and aspects of the narrative which have been somehow misrepresented or left in darkness (The Confidence-Man, 1098). He is a galvanizer of event; he causes the other characters to "start up" to him, and the motion of the
plot depends entirely on his motivation (*The Confidence-Man*, 1098). He is a complete characterological conception, seeming to have come "from the egg" (*The Confidence-Man*, 1098). His being and significance are so emeshed as to seem not an authorial invention, but a given element within the confines of the novel’s world. Finally, like Bartleby, he is a figure with obvious symbolic significance; his appearance invites or even demands that it be interpreted in terms of his acts and his nature. All of these aspects of Ahab’s character combine to empower him. He becomes the engendering figure; in terms of Melville’s theory of the original character as the novel-bearing seed, he is the source of all that happens in *Moby-Dick*, and of all that can finally be understood by virtue of it.

*Ishmael*, the other, less visible main figure, is the interpreter of all the understanding *Moby-Dick* offers, and the narrator of all that happens in it. He is the sailor/narrator, like Bartleby’s lawyer/narrator, and his narration of his experience on the *Pequod* undergoes a reorientation at Ahab’s hands similar to the one which the lawyer’s undergoes because of Bartleby. He begins, like the lawyer, by interpreting himself and his world, and then meditates on and attempts to
interpret Ahab. There, like the lawyer, he meets a being who challenges all of his conceptions and preconceptions. Instead of stalling out, his interpretive motion becomes a narrative one, and he humbly reduces his goal from that of accounting to that of simply telling. As the novel reaches its conclusion, Ishmael bows to the absolute power of experience as represented by Ahab, realizing that being and understanding cannot be separated.

Ishmael, like the lawyer in "Bartleby," is the novel's predicing character. He opens the novel with an account of himself and of the world as he knows it before he goes on his whaling voyage. Both characters have this function in common; they sketch in the basic (albeit temporary) outline of the narrative world in question. Bartleby's employer, however, acknowledges no doubts to be resolved or questions to be answered in the future as he explains the world-before-Bartleby. Ishmael's attitude has a significantly different quality, because he is conscious of doubt and question above all. He is explicitly aware that he is following a line of inquiry. He "takes to the ship" as a response to his own vaguely defined but clearly acknowledged doubts, in the firm expectation that his experiences there will provide resolution of them. He begins his
narration with a reasoned presentation of his need to go to sea, thereby laying the foundation for the structure of questions that he presumes are relevant to his experience.

Ishmael's cornerstone presumption is that he can call into question by dismantling down to the most basic constructional element, any living and/or thinking system he may find himself in. This is apparent from his first utterance: "Call me Ishmael." The imperative form of the sentence contains its own destructive contradiction; that the command to use a certain name can be interpreted as a disclaimer of the validity of any name, insofar as a name denoting any entity can be said to have any meaningful connection with it. It is as if the narrator had said, "Suppose I am Ishmael. Believe for the sake of the following that a person named Ishmael..." The following, "Loomings," is apparently an exposition which tells us much about the basic Ishmael, as he is understood by the disembodied voice who congenially suggests a name for an identity. But the congeniality undercuts the seriousness with which we can take the suggestion, and implies that not only the name, but the identity itself may be arbitrarily designed.

Ishmael's first words are built on a foundation of
irony. And the remainder of what he says in "Loomings" rests in part on a like foundation. It is not the expression of a secure belief, offered in ironic terms. It is the sincere expression of the idea that no belief is secure. The irony derives from Ishmael's instinct, or habit of mind, that all things contain their opposites, that everything said can be changed or taken back, that any identity posited can be questioned. The Ishmael given to us in "Loomings" is posited on the principle of metamorphosis, of mutation, of transformation. His personal ideal of balance is found in the lowest common denominator -- "when I go to sea, I go as a simple sailor" (Moby-Dick, 798) -- because he is convinced that the most elemental forms of being are the most authentic, and the ones from which change can spring. For this reason, he wishes to place himself into a situation in which he is of the lowest rank, in the least control:

Well, then however the old sea-captains may order me about -- however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way -- either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round... (Moby-Dick, 798)

He is comfortable in this bottom position because he believes it to be the only actual human position that is not an illusion. The lowest ranking member of a ship's
crew are essential, irreducible elements who can be commanded by the higher officers to form and reform into various shifting patterns according to the immediate needs of the voyage. It is the organic principle of arbitrary formation and transformation inherent in the station of "simple sailor" that appeals to Ishmael.

The transformational quality that is the appeal of the sailor's rank must also account for Ishmael's attraction to the sea itself. He develops the notion of such an attraction as a fact which is universally true among men. Any man with leisure will inevitably find his way to the nearest body of water:

Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries...Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries -- stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water, if water there be in all that region. (Moby-Dick, 795-6)

Water aids in reverie, is its counterpart -- "Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever" (Moby-Dick, 796). The reason for this affinity between water and meditation, though unstated, is implied by Ishmael's preference for the lowest common denominator. For him, water is a fundamental life-element, universally desired and needed in the aesthetic and philosophical realms, as well as in the physical. Settings without water lack essential appeal:
But here is an artist. He desires to paint you the dreamiest, shadiest, quietest, most enchanting bit of romantic landscape... What is the chief element he employs?...all were vain, unless the shepherd's eye were fixed upon the magic stream before him. Go visit the Prairies in June... -- what is the one charm wanting? -- Water -- there is not a drop of water there! Were Niagara but a cataract of sand, would you travel your thousand miles to see it? (Moby-Dick, 796-7)

What is more significant, without water, the essential meaning of life experience cannot be divined:

And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. (Moby-Dick, 797)

Ishmael believes that water is the most important element of life because it contains, in its suspension, all of life's basic properties. All of the material for world-making is there, in its most disorganized form, held in the matrix of the liquid, phantom-like in its ability to take any shape, a multitude of shapes.

Thus Ishmael establishes definitely the universal fact of water's attraction; he implies rather than argues directly its fascination for him in particular. At this point in the novel, Ishmael seeks an unconstructed reality in which to refresh and refurbish himself. He feels stale and repressed in the occupation of "country schoolmaster," and likely, if he does not find a way of "driving off the spleen, and regulating
the circulation," to find himself "deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off" (Moby-Dick, 795, 798). The sea, which to Ishmael contains all but assembles nothing, and the diverse tasks of the common sailor will afford him the opportunity he needs to relax the particular hold he has had over the world, and perhaps to reformulate it.

The ocean attracts Ishmael because it represents to him pre-organized form, the refreshing potential as opposed to the stale actual. And yet in this first chapter his comments suggest a readiness (one he seems out of touch with) to find form within the medium of water. His reference to Narcissus and his speculation about the "grand hooded phantom" whale imply at least a path within Ishmael that opposes his main direction at the novel's start. The character of Ahab, once encountered, acts as a searchlight, revealing this counter-path of the narrator's, and where it leads. Ahab's obsession with the whale organizes what is yet to be formulated about the ocean for Ishmael. Ishmael looks into the water and sees an ungraspable phantom essence; Ahab sees a demon whale with whose being, agent or principal, he is fully engaged as the only reality. Despite his initial conception that going on a sea voyage will loosen the previous hold his life has had on
him, Ishmael begins to conceive Ahab's object sympathetically, and to see the purpose of the voyage as real. Once Ahab illuminates Ishmael's hidden desire for form, for an answer or an explanation, he subsumes Ishmael's original vision of the journey's potential.

What is notable at the novel's outset is that Ishmael seems unaware of this contradictory tension in his situation as he articulates it. He implies that ordered reality is inherently destructive, that too long a time of "lording it as a country schoolmaster making the tallest boys stand in awe of you" is the assumption of a falsely superior position which inevitably leads to "growing grim about the mouth...and bringing up the rear of every funeral," to say nothing of knocking strangers' hats off (Moby-Dick, 795 & 798). His comments on his emotional situation prior to going to sea suggest that he feels contained and driven by the rigidity of the order which, as a schoolmaster, he must represent. It is as if he sees his duty over his charges as existing on a value-continuum which, moving along it in time, naturally becomes more negative. Thus it is that he portrays the act of knocking people's hats off not as a spontaneous reaction to the stresses of a life lacking in spontaneity, but as one which is "methodical" and "deliberate," as would be required of much of a
schoolmaster's behavior. This notion of a too-ordered or structured life and its necessary link to the destructive is posited against the renewal which Ishmael believes is possible through the temporary dissolution of structure in life. Ishmael longs to release himself from the oppressive hierarchy of his world by taking a refreshing dip into the relatively unstructured universe of the ocean. Yet at the same time he professes attraction to the ocean's organized expression — "the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself" (Moby-Dick, 799-800).

But the tension set up in "Loomings" is only a seeming contradiction. In fact, the novel's core equation — impulse to order = destruction — is formulated in this chapter, with its corollary reverse — impulse to dismantle = construction. These two values are set up through Ishmael's longings as opposing directives, but they actually intersect and form a woven pattern. Thus, the title's pun not only foreshadows the novel's plot and its symbolic focus, but also refers to another image which is later elaborated (in chapter 47), that of the "loom of Time." In the later development of this image, Ishmael conceives the warp threads of the sword-mat he is weaving with Queequeg as "necessity," and the woof strands which he threads through the warp
as "free will." In the first hint of the loom image, in the book's first chapter, the interlocked grid is composed of the apparent opposites of construction/destruction, deliberation/spontaneity, wholeness/fragments, order/formlessness. This interwoven after-image of the title therefore hints at the extent to which these two ideas, rather than diverging into mutual exclusivity, might form a pattern in which both are embraced.

At this, the novel's outset, however, the notion of interlocking co-existence of opposites is a phantom floating under the surface of the title's pun, and what is actually predicated is a set of contradictions. Ishmael does not wish to reconcile these; he wishes to negotiate passage from one side to the other, to discover the opportunities for change that may lie between. Quite self-consciously, he has directed his life toward a change which he believes is both necessary and possible. His plan is to go from the hierarchical land life to the unstructured life of the sea, to allow himself time to gaze into the water at the phantom of life and to contemplate it simply as a phantom. He will orchestrate a kind of death for himself -- "With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship" (Moby-Dick, 795).
And out of this risk of death he will regain some sort of balance, re-enter a June in his soul. The opportunity for contemplation of life without the necessity to conceive and execute acts within it is what Ishmael consciously seeks from his whaling voyage.

In the chapters that precede Ishmael's boarding the Pequod, more is revealed of who Ishmael is and what he wants. And the emphasis in these chapters is always on the seductiveness for him of formlessness, insubstantiality, absence of structure, the unknown. His contemplation of the painting in the Spouter-Inn, for example, focuses on its lack of focus:

Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched. But by dint of much and earnest contemplation...you at last came to the conclusion that such an idea, however wild, might not be altogether unwarranted...Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant. (Moby-Dick, 805)

The inpenetrable pulls Ishmael most; this quality is for him the painting's first and most enduring magic. His experience of the work centers on it as unknowable. Even his final apprehension of it is, in his term, a "theory" of what he sees, rather than an interpretation of the meaning of a purely visual experience.

His meditation on the black-bordered marble
commemorative tablets set into the walls of the
Whalemen's Chapel reveals the same preoccupation with
formlessness. What they signify to him is their empty
horror, the fact that they mark a physical spot in which
lies nothing physical, and he sympathizes with the
mourners of these dead particularly because they have
not buried actual bodies. But it is natural for Ishmael
to reverse that sympathetic melancholy by transcending
the importance of the body:

But somehow I grew merry again....Methinks we
have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death.
Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is
my true substance.... Methinks my body is but the less
of my better being. In fact take my body who will, take
it I say, it is not me. (Moby-Dick, 833)

The very organization and definition of the living
organism, Ishmael regards as arbitrary.

But Ishmael's fascination with the unstructured is
given a far more serious challenge than those suggested
by paintings or marble tablets once Ahab appears in the
narrative. With the appearance of the revolving
Drummond light of Ahab's character, we begin to see
Ishmael's predications about who he is and what he wants
differently. Ahab's presence gives us a newly-lighted
display of a transforming Ishmael, a man who is moving
from a preferred uncertainty about what is, to a
certainty of being which is both unanticipated and
undeniable.
Ahab first appears in chapter 28. This and the following three chapters form a cluster of plot events that establish his dramatic significance. It is here that the dynamic presence of the Pequod's captain is for the first time experienced, both by Ishmael, with "foreboding shivers," and by Stubb, in whom it produces a species of nightmare (Moby-Dick, 924). Ishmael acknowledges his helplessness before the figure of Ahab immediately upon seeing him: "Reality outran apprehension; Captain Ahab stood upon his quarter-deck" (Moby-Dick, 924). This helplessness he tries to resist in his own way, distracting himself from Ahab's power over both him and Stubb by plunging into the detailed cetological analysis of chapter 32. And this method resistance, of running back to the safety of the hierarchical forms from which he sought escape, is indicative of the instability of Ishmael's personal guiding principle, as well as of the tentative nature of his grasp on it. His courage is challenged and confounded by every ironic twist in his path, every opposite that trips him, despite the fact that he has set out deliberately to find just those ironies and oppositions. In the world of contrasts that Ishmael conceives and even professes to desire, he still finds himself unprepared for the man who matches his, "Who
ain't a slave?" with "Who's over me?" (Moby-Dick, 798, 967). Once he encounters Ahab, and the flip-side of his desire for formlessness has been illuminated by that encounter, Ishmael relinquishes his innermost sense of direction, such as he has been claiming it. He abandons his search for the end of form, and follows his form-giver captain without even realizing that he has changed directions within himself. The beacon of Ahab's character searches out the mirroring form-giver image of himself hidden within Ishmael. His disclaimer notwithstanding -- "I am the architect, not the builder" -- Ishmael feels a clear need in the beginning of his exposure to Ahab to somehow construct him, if only in the most hesitant draft:

But Ahab, my Captain, still moves before me in all his Nantucket grimness and in this episode touching Emperors and Kings, I must not conceal that I have only to do with a poor old whale-hunter like him; and, therefore, all outward majestical trappings and housing are denied me. Oh, Ahab! what shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air! (Moby-Dick, 935, 949)

While he is reluctant to commit it to any specific material medium, he yet feels the need to "construct" or somehow to construe the experience of Ahab. And this is not Ishmael's need alone. Stubb, for instance, is moved by his own contact with his captain to dream an explication of the intuitive pity he feels for him.
Here, in the "Queen Mab" chapter, is a drama of experience and its dream-interpretation that demonstrates Ahab's ability to reveal aspects of the other characters previously unknown to them, and thus to have power over them.

In the prior chapter, Stubb's impulse to pray for Ahab comes unbidden in the midst of his feeling of anger at their harsh exchange, and the contradiction of feeling sympathy while feeling anger provokes his dream. In it, the sympathy that has so surprised him expands to identity, and he becomes like Ahab, both in having lost his leg, and in his obsessive response to that event. Even as he continues to kick at the pyramid (in the way that Ahab continues to rage at the whale), he has a dream-awareness which Ahab lacks. The fact that Stubb kicks his own leg off (instead of its being devoured in the way that Ahab's was) shows that he will only go so far in losing his identity to that of another, however great his empathy. He understands, even dreaming, that the loss of his leg is his own fault, and only circumstantially due to Ahab's kick. He also comprehends that this loss and his response to it could forever trap him in a bitter and futile quest for redress, that the price he must pay to gain justice from a higher power is an endless stubbing of toes.
Awake, Stubb knows Ahab to be an ivory-legged, moody old man who happens to be the captain of the ship on which he is employed. But asleep, he dreams him as a power of evil, mysterious and omnipotent as the pyramid that symbolizes him (much in the same way that Moby-Dick symbolizes evil for Ahab). The merman in Stubb's dream speaks to him with his own considerable (if literal-minded) common sense, advising him not to butt his head against brick walls and turn reality into riddles. In the merman's words, the answer to the sphinx's riddle reverberates, and Stubb, who knows himself pretty well in the main, rolls over in his hammock and comes back to himself in waking consciousness.

In the course of the dream, Stubb's contradictory reactions to his near-fight with Ahab split him into two parts, one which is like Ahab, wanting to take his vengeance on an inscrutable and malicious power in whose presence he came to harm, and one which is more like his waking self, whose sanity is founded on the utmost respect for the identity boundaries of those around him. Unless he is being confused and influenced by the likes of a character such as Ahab, Stubb is a man who calls a spade a spade, and therein lies the power of his integrity. The brief period in which that power is
threatened comes to him only in an altered state of consciousness, but the dream provides a demonstration of the nature of Ahab's greater, gravitational power over all of the other characters, even those who, like Stubb, would seem less vulnerable to it. Ahab can pull a sympathy out of the other characters which they did not know existed. The centripetal force of their captain pulls all of the crew members into his center of being, no matter what their resources for resistance might be. He illuminates that thing within them which is like him, and, using that common thread, weaves their identities into his.

Ishmael, far more vulnerable a character in relation to Ahab's power, continues to try to account for it. His characterization of Ahab's soul as a hibernating bear, sucking "the sullen paws of its gloom" is such an attempt to put his captain together in his mind (Moby-Dick, 955). But at the same time, he cannot resist letting his mind leak (or flow!) right out of his ears, taking his construction with it, as in the next chapter, "The Masthead," in which he casts himself as an "absent-minded youth" who is:

... lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie... 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, (his) spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space, like Wycliff's sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over. (Moby-Dick, 961-2)

This propensity in Ishmael to efface his own identity through metaphysical speculation, in combination with his hidden need to determine some metaphysical certainty, is what so predisposes him to Ahab's command, and, after the chapters containing the events in which Ahab absorbs the will and intentions of the rest of the crew (chapters 36-40), Ishmael succumbs to his captain by a similar process of speculation.

That process is galvanized by Ahab. Ishmael turns his meditation from Ahab-as-object to Ahab's object -- the white whale. When he contemplates the matter, the aspect of Moby-Dick which is most striking to Ishmael is the significance of his seeming ubiquity:

One of the wild suggestings referred to, as at last coming to be linked with the white whale in the minds of the superstitiously inclined, was the unearthly conceit that Moby-Dick was ubiquitous. (Moby-Dick, 986)

"Why not ubiquitous?" muses Ishmael. There may be some basis in empirical fact for these rumors. After all, what would prevent a whale from using an undersea passage, the existence of which man had inferred but not demonstrated? But, as Ishmael notes, what a man cannot
prove, a whale will not consider a problem; thus, "the Nor'West Passage, so long a problem to man, was never a problem to the whale" (Moby-Dick, 987). A whale, in full command of the mysterious connections between one point and another in the vast oceans, can appear at any of these points easily, seemingly simultaneously. Because he can and does make use of those connections, he may as well be ubiquitous. A man cannot make use of them, though they are obviously there, and this limits him, confines him at least to place, if not time as well. A whale can compress the ocean, can demonstrate comprehensive understanding of it by seeming to inhabit its many parts at once. But a man's lack of such deeper understanding compresses him, cuts him off from the unified sense of oceanic entirety that the whale instinctively enjoys. Thus, a man's comprehension of an entity such as the system of oceans is necessarily fragmented; he has little access to an awareness of the parts' connections. And this reality of fragmented understanding is what draws Ishmael to his captain.

He begins Chapter 41 confiding his "wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling" toward Ahab, and, in the ensuing narrative, tries to penetrate the reasons for this by exploring the natures of both his captain and his captain's prey (Moby-Dick, 983). This contemplation
unites him with Ahab, and commits him to the true purpose of the Pequod's voyage. Once Ahab has lit the sympathy for this purpose within him, he seems to feel the need to understand what the whale means to Ahab. And in the following chapter on the whale's whiteness, he expresses his own, related reasons for dreading Moby-Dick. Ahab hates the whale because he perceives in it a malicious will to oppose and dominate a single human being. Ishmael, on the other hand (and quite typically), sees Moby-Dick as an emblem of dissembling chaos, of nothing masquerading as substance, of a concept of evil derived from its seemingly perverse, opposing indifference to any man's hope for any construction of absolute knowledge or understanding. These two differently shaded understandings of the whale's evil import suggest a sum to Ishmael. It is Ahab who suggests that Moby-Dick is significant beyond the threat he poses as a reputed danger in the whale fishery. And it is this notion of the whale as a symbol that has such immense appeal for Ishmael, who, though he has not known it, has been seeking a containing form for his metaphysical meanderings.

The total nature of the threat posed by Moby-Dick is thus apprehended by a discovery method which involves accretive meditation based on generous speculation, and
which leaves the whale in one piece, a created, if still mysterious, totality. The connection between himself and Ahab, however, Ishmael is at pains to specify, and this difficulty causes him to revert, once more, to analytic methods. In order to know his captain and to attempt to account for his own sympathy with him, Ishmael fragments Ahab. Having established through reports of Moby-Dick that he characteristically rends the whalmen's preconceptions about his species and splits their sense of comic well-being, Ishmael imagines the origins of obsession in Ahab's mind as a splitting process in response to and not unlike the splitting he underwent in his former encounter with the whale. He supposes that the loss of a leg was at first solely experienced by Ahab as a corporeal wound. During Ahab's convalescence, Ishmael conjectures, the damage developed a metaphoric dimension as well, and that both dimensions then existed in tandem, their final mingling intensifying pain into madness: "Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock, ... his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another" (Moby-Dick, 989). Here, aspects of the total figure of Ahab -- his immediate history, his wounded body and spirit -- are split off from the unified sum of character and placed next to one another as if each were an entity in itself
and each capable of acting on and interacting with the others. Ishmael continues to fantasize Ahab as a man divided. Madness and sanity are his two distinct parts, the latter masquerading as the entire man. Not unlike the hidden link between Babo and Benito Cereno, madness is hidden well within sanity, yet the former rules utterly, so that the seeming totality of reason disguises the schizoid dynamic between the "living instrument" of Ahab's sane intellect and the "special lunacy" of his driving motive (Moby-Dick, 990).

Ahab's fragmented nature is a magnet to Ishmael, who knows it, and knows that the same goes for the Pequod's crew. But this undeniable "drag" toward their captain Ishmael does not presume or attempt to fathom completely. And here, at the end of chapter 41, he creates an image of the unconscious -- "the subterranean miner" -- that, in subtly recalling the whale's ubiquity, makes whales and men distinct, and shows the nature of men's bond. Unlike whales, men do not have access to the fluid medium of the oceans' depths but instead, as earth-bound creatures, are limited to "the ever-shifting, muffled sound" of the miners within them, pushing blindly through the dark, unyielding mass surrounding them (Moby-Dick, 992). In the face of material which hinders rather than conducts, which must
be fought through without real hope of connection, Ishmael demurs. He knows that any knowledge of the miner's true location is impossible because he is constantly changing direction and cannot entirely be heard through the dense layers of earth. If Ishmael is thus as cut off from his innermost promptings toward a sympathetic bond with Ahab as Ahab is cut off from the community of sane men, he cannot judge his captain too unforgivingly. If a man cannot be sure about what he knows about himself and how, can he be sure about knowing others? He can only acknowledge what he sees for himself on the surface of consciousness -- that he and the rest of the crew are helpless as "a skiff in tow of a seventy-four," and must give themselves up to being drawn by Ahab to their collective fate. Every ray of the revolving light of Ahab's character illuminates the sympathy which previously lay unmined in the dark inner earth within each of the others, and they helplessly mirror his obsession with Moby-Dick back to him.

At this point in the novel, Ahab causes all of the other characters, including Ishmael, to become committed to what most of them regard as an inappropriate course of action, based on an untenable system of ideas and beliefs. Ishmael, in particular, finds in his captain
an agent for and galvanizer of the very act he shipped out to escape -- the deliberate and methodical destruction of an arbitrarily chosen object. Finding his most feared instinct embodied in the man he serves has the ultimate power of fascination for Ishmael. Before him, as if it were a play in which he could safely act out a minor and inconsequential role, is the drama of Ahab's immense conceptual project. Because it is initiated and maintained by Ahab, it is one from which Ishmael need no longer hide because he can explore it without taking ultimate responsibility. All he need do is narrate Ahab's frantic struggles to manage the symbolic import of the whale hunt. Yet despite his fear of certainty made irrevocable by action, Ishmael knows that his sympathy for Ahab comes from the need of men to form inter-dependent unions for experience and understanding. He also realizes that Ahab must reject such a notion because it means that no one man can master meaning, can know the significance of events and thereby control them by himself alone.

Such an idea of dependence on the human community, however, terrifies Ahab, and he always turns his terror into rage. Such a rage and an urge to control are at the bottom of his response to the opposite reactions of Starbuck and Stubb to his broken boat:
Ye two are the opposite poles of one thing; Starbuck is Stubb reversed and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind; and Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors! (Moby-Dick, 1385)

Ahab must remove himself from the fluidity of these changing opposites; he insists on his construction of a unified, integrated self, and on the literal, objectified reality of his view of the world. What all of the other characters feel (as best articulated by Ishmael), will not allow him any peace -- that men need other men to know the complexities of themselves and the world. He banishes Starbuck and Stubb from the site of the broken boat because their reactions to it are not what he considers appropriate in the reality context as he sees it. He will not have a response which differs from his own because he will admit no distinction between his idea of reality and anyone else's. The minds of all of the crew members must mirror his mind alone.

Ishmael sympathetically mirrors, but reserves for himself the position in front of the mirror as well. Because he must both produce and contemplate the image, he can pay particular attention to it as an image. And out of this double-edged experience, necessitated by Ahab, he begins to see the symbolic value of the image,
and to derive a new world-scheme based on the unifying power of the symbol. The whale, his whiteness, the broken boat, all are processed by Ishmael. He passes them through Ahab's construct of the whale as if it were a prism, and sorts through their refracted meanings. Each of these colorings of the experience on the Pequod exists to be perceived in its own right, but also exists in the containment of pure light which the symbol can provide.

Once Ishmael begins to follow Ahab's obsessional course, which demands that he assemble things instead of dismantling them, Pip takes over the dismantling function, so that the balancing irony of Ishmael's total vision may be maintained. Thus, the chapter on the doubloon, with its many "rendering"s of "one text" establishes the power of a symbol to generate and yet contain meanings, while it cautions, through Pip, against any too-tidy interpretive effort:

Here's the ship's navel, this doubloon here, and they are all on fire to unscrew it. But, unscrew your navel, and what's the consequence? Then again, if it stays here, that is ugly, too, for when aught's nailed to the mast it's a sign that things grow desperate. (Moby-Dick, 1258)

It is Pip, his sanity dismantled and set on its wandering course by Ahab's monomania, who intuits the core of Queequeg's near-death, and suggests the coffin
as another symbol to Ishmael. His ranting -- "Queequeg dies game! I say; game, game, game!" -- cuts to the heart of Queequeg's experience. Realizing it is indeed all a game, the harpooneer decides to quit playing; he gets up, gets well, and pronounces himself "fit for a fight" (Moby-Dick, 1306-7). His coffin, no longer a checkmated king, can become the ace of spades in a new game, and accordingly metamorphoses into Ishmael's life-buoy. And Ishmael understands at the novel's end that this death-to-life transition of the coffin's meaning is part of his new understanding of the world. Ishmael's refurbished cosmology is being buoyed up, in the same way that he himself is, by a construction which both symbolizes the death of his old one and restates the general fluidity of symbols.

The coffin also symbolizes the death of Ahab's constructed reality. The Pequod's captain insists on making literal the symbolic. The pasteboard mask speech, for instance, demonstrates the extent of Ahab's need for every symbol to yield up some single, essential reality:

... in the living act, the undoubted deed, -- there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If a man will strike, strike through the mask! (Moby-Dick, 967)

Which is to say that a man may strike through the mask
of any visible object and find there the validation of his symbolic conceptualization of it, that being uniform in the spirits and minds of all men, and in the essential content of all visible objects and of all acts. This conceptual behemoth, the unity of experience, perception and meaning, becomes a burden which eventually crushes Ahab. But Ishmael follows his captain's command to descend a "little lower layer," and finds that this unity, once conceived, can be reconceived on the regenerate principle of the symbol-as-symbol. Though this principle eludes Ahab, and he is therefore destroyed, it is captures by Ishmael, who has "escaped alone to tell" (Moby-Dick, 1408).

By contemplation of Ahab's tormented, harsh image, he discovers this new, symbolic means for he construction of the world, one which grants the integrity of experience while permitting its apprehension. Ahab, Melville's original character, causes Ishmael to assemble within himself the means for grasping the phantom of life without necessitating any act upon or embodiment of it which would betray the phantom essence, an essence which is still, for Ishmael, the key to it all. Ahab's drama is the play within the play of Ishmael's search for a reinvented world-view.
Its acting out proves to be an experience so commanding and comprehensive in its implication that it must stand by itself, without reduction to any one particular explanation or interpretation. From within that interior play, Ahab illuminates the missing elements of Ishmael's dismantled world, revealing to this novel's common sailor/narrator an integrated vision of experience powered not by the total nature of a given event, but by the symbols through which its essence may be grasped.
1Warner Berthoff, "Characterization in Moby-Dick," The Example of Melville (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962) 108-110. Hereafter cited in the text. Berthoff's insight that Ahab represents an abstract quality is noted (see 2) below and, in the broadest sense of the word, I too, agree with him. It is the content of the abstraction which I see differently. Ahab, as an original character, represents not the "vast and changeless phenomenon of physical nature," but the vastly potent phenomenon of change, of transformative potential.

2Paul Brodkorb, Jr., Ishmael’s White World: A Phenomenological Reading of Moby-Dick (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1965). Brodkorb's contention that a phenomenological reading of the novel puts Ishmael at its center as author entrusts that character's subjectivity with too much authority. While it is clear from the first chapter that Ishmael wants to have an account of his experience (as well as the time Ahab appears that Ishmael's construction of himself is unmade and remade by Ahab's presence as a fact and factor outside ("Reality outran apprehension; Captain Ahab stood upon his quarter-deck") of Ishmael's on-going conception. Brodkorb himself implies that the figure of Ahab is a power beyond Ishmael's conceiving, when he describes his "mind-soul" as a "ray of living light" that needs an object to color for its existence (65). This metaphor for Ahab casts Ishmael as object, and Ahab as the power of subjectivity through which that object comes to light. For Brodkorb, too, Ahab represents an abstract quality rather than a "real" personality, and it is very much to the abstract revealing properties of light that Melville attributes the transforming and ordaining power of the original character.

3Walter Reed, Meditations on the Hero (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) 5.


6Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man. His Masquerade, The Library of America Series, (New York:


Integrity, of experience and of being, is very much at issue in the book's last three chapters. All of the characters, including Ishmael, have been subsumed into Ahab's identity by their participation in his quest. They are so much a part of Ahab's unity of purpose that they no longer have separate voices; the last plea for exemption from the chase comes from Starbuck in chapter 132, that immediately preceding the beginning of the chase sequence. Thus, in chapter 134, we find the following "voiceless" comment on their fused identity:

They were one man, not thirty...all the individualities of the crew, this man's valor, that man's fear, guilt and oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to. (1389)

Even Ishmael's narration has been incorporated into and becomes lost within the overwhelming effort of the act -- the chase itself. Ishmael's identity, as distinct from the others on the Pequod, does not break the surface until the ship sinks beneath it.
Ought Mr. Melville to write such books? ... We do not hesitate to return and emphatic "No!".

Fitz-James O'Brien's review of The Confidence-Man in Putnam's Monthly strikes the note of outrage with which Melville's public reacted when it appeared in 1857. It is the novel on which Melville's nineteenth-century reputation foundered. Most readers reviled it because it mocks all possibility of certainty. In exchanges of money and goods among people, a sensitive issue for Americans, it narrates a chaotic shell-game. Worse, the novel depicts a time, place and dramatic situation in which it is impossible to ascertain the true identity, the basic and recognizable essence, of those characters within it who ask for truth, faith, and charity. A tension is created around the world "confidence," the faith within the human community that constitutes the basis of mutual understanding and trust. This tension is so exacerbated by all of the confidence tricks performed by its title figure that all confidence, including that most basic confidence necessary to the identity of the self, collapses. The reader feels tricked. What promises to be a plot, or at the very least an episodic novel of journey with a conventional beginning and ending, delivers only a repetitive series of masquerades in
which something may or presumably may not follow, and fails to specify that something. In addition to the confusion on the level of narrative structure, the reader experiences a bewildering characterology in this novel. The supposedly central figure is presented in at least eight forms, all of which may or, again, may not be this figure in various disguises. No wonder Melville's critics admonished him.

Another reason that The Confidence-Man seems to have repulsed most of its readers is due to the fact that, though it appeared within a national literary tradition which has always been engaged with various forms of idealism (Calvinism, Transcendentalism, etc.), it is a novel that features disillusionment and dramatizes the destruction of ideals (of religious faith, of friendship, of the value of a free press, etc.). It is an experimental project, centered on an experimental main character (and presented to a public that had no taste for literary experiments). There is an on-going inquiry on the thematic level into the nature of confidence. In a further elaboration of Ishmael's irony -- that all things contain their opposites -- Melville portrays the concept of faith as vulnerable because of its inherent contradictions. The basic plot scheme is a repeating scenario in which one
person is asked by another to act on the basis of faith or of confidence in human goodness and trustworthiness. Once the possibility of acting on the concept is raised in the mind of any of the characters, each feels it necessary to be secure in the concept, and thus they engage in rational consideration of what proves to be an irrational object -- the character of the confidence man himself. This figure is the galvanizer of all of these considerations and actions on the part of the other characters; he is Melville's most extreme experiment with the figure of the original character. Despite its initial critical and popular failure, the novel has always claimed a share of the attention of Melville scholars. This comment on its value must at least in part be assigned to the fact that it contains Melville's most explicit presentation of his theory of fictional character.

I have described Melville's original character up to this point both within the theoretical framework set forth in chapters 14 and 44 of The Confidence-Man, and as the figure is manifested as Bartleby and Ahab. The original is a character who appears within a narrative that has some previously given and conventional structure based on philosophical and social assumptions, and that is peopled by characters who see themselves as
part of those conventions and assumptions. By appearing within that context, the original character in some way challenges the initially predicated structure of the narrative, thereby transforming it and the other characters within it. Thus it is that Bartleby's presence enables us to see the passivity and emotional detachment that the lawyer has been hiding in the murky corners of his office, and reveals it to be the foundational element of what occurs there, instead of a small, unacknowledged part of the overall structure. In a similar manner, the figure of Ahab invokes in his crew the spirit of a sympathy which will enable them to destroy on command, despite the various warring understandings and fears with which they may view the chase of Moby-Dick.

The Confidence-Man gives us an explicit discussion of the original as a characterological concept, a discussion not found in "Bartleby" or Moby-Dick. Perhaps what is implicit in the characterology of the two prior works is elaborated here because the more obviously experimental use to which Melville puts his original character requires justification. Melville seems to set up this experiment in order to explore a question about his theory of character: Can the concept
of the original character in include a recursive factor? On the level of character in this novel, Melville explores the idea of an original character with a self-regenerating function, who, in each new manifestation, is ceaselessly transformed, and ceaselessly transforms his narrative world.

The varied and mysterious appearances of the novel’s title character have been interpreted by most readers and scholars as the results of deliberate disguise on the part of the character himself. In Melville’s Confidence Man, From Knave to Knight, Thomas Quirk provides a summary of the critical consensus on this matter. He cites a group of critics who have worked with the novel, and who agree in general that the confidence man is one character masquerading in eight disguises. They concede that there is no evidence to permit this conclusion, “other than the fact that these characters appear successively, never together, and that they all seem to function as confidence men.”

Quirk then goes on to discuss various kinds of “evidence” that other scholars have missed, which “prove” that the eight distinct characters are actually one figure in an ever-changing disguise. The problem with this approach is that it turns the process of reading a literary character into a detective game, unfortunately placing
the reader in the position of another of the novel's characters who must trace the title figure's identity through a confusing array of clues. It fails to make the distinction between people in the world and characters in a novel -- the "man-show" of people "in town," who might provide the pattern for novelistic characters, versus the mind-show of a created world, complete with created characters who come to life by virtue of the dynamic energy their novel-world generates. 4

In chapter 14, Melville acknowledges the difficulty of interpreting fictional characters (much less of "detecting" them and, one presumes, charging and convicting them of being!):

But if the acutest sage be often at his wit's 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? (The Confidence-Man, 913)

Having established this difficulty in the interpretation of fictional characters, Melville takes full advantage of its implications in order to test the powers of his original character. In chapter 44, Melville cautions that there can be only one original character to a novel: "Two would conflict to chaos" (The Confidence-Man, 1098). This is because, unlike the "consistent" character whose verity Melville questions
in chapter 14, and who is based on mimetic principles, the original character is consistent with nothing that precedes it, either in fiction or in reality. The figure necessarily engenders its own, alternate reality by virtue of its very being; it imitates nothing prior to it. Thus, the worlds engendered by more than one original within a novelistic space would cancel one another out.

But Melville seems to have proposed his cautionary rule about characterization in order to contradict it in the characterology of this novel. Much like the initial predications of the lawyer/narrator of "Bartleby" and of Ishmael, what is stated as a general rule of characterologic art is turned by the original character into an ineffectual claim. The actual question being posed is this: If there can be an alternate reality embodied by a character that becomes a conquering and engendering reality in his fictional universe, could not that reality also be usurped or superceded by another, equally powerful one, and so on?

The ceaseless succession of alternate (yet related) realities is what Melville gives us in The Confidence-Man. Our experience of these metamorphosing characters begins with the deaf mute in cream colors, moves on to Black Guinea, the Negro cripple, and then to
the man with the weed, the representative from the Black Rapids Coal Company, the elderly Quaker distributing pamphlets, the herb-doctor, the dog-like man from the Philosophical Intelligence Office, and, finally, to Frank Goodman, the cosmopolitan (or, possibly, one final incarnation is the little urchin selling money belts in the last chapter). By the time that we arrive at the novel's last sentence ("Something further may follow of this Masquerade"), we have long since despaired of finding a stable character who is the confidence man. We cannot even locate stability in the empirical reality portrayed, much less in the moral inquiry being pursued, among all of the constant attacks on trust which the novel depicts. Our predicament is much like that of the snowy-headed old man in the final chapter, whose faith in normal empirical realities is so compromised by his discussion with the confidence-man that he has no difficulty in seeing a common stool as equivalent to a life-preserver. Our grasp of what constitutes a characterological category has been similarly compromised, and since we can no longer take literally event the most minor aspect of this novel, we realize that the title of the book must refer to a redefined concept of the word "masquerade." We would anticipate "His Masquerade" to consist of a disguise or series of
disguises, underneath which we would find a character with a single, consistent identity. Instead, we find a figure with a constantly changing identity who can only be recognized as the same figure because of the repetitiveness of his behavior (the things with which he is always concerned and his general intentions with regards to the other characters).

Ignoring this special meaning with which Melville has enhanced the word "masquerade," of course, leaves us in the false position of assuming that a single, coherent identity lies behind the various disguises of the confidence man. Thomas Quirk and others would say it is the only position from which to read the title figure of this novel -- the position, that is, of any one of the book's other characters -- and I have mentioned the problem of ignoring the division between the characters, who live within a text, and the readers, who must finally remain outside of it.

The basis of a reader's interpretation of fictional character will have, to a greater or lesser extent, much in common with the feelings and attitudes that the characters themselves have about one another. But reading and apprehending characters in a novel require knowledge and understanding that go beyond the information to be found in the context of a given,
single narrative. In part, a reader always approaches a story from outside of the narration of events, taking into consideration the general traditions of characterization as well as an awareness of the given characterology of a specific novel. If we grant this structuralist content of a reader's approach to character in any work of fiction, we must surely recognize that its importance is heightened in the context of Melville's fiction, for which he has elaborated an explicit theory of character. We might, then, say that it is generally desirable, but particularly so in the case of Melville's work, for a reader to interpret character from the reader's special standpoint, and not from that of a character. The reader of Melville must above all attend to the purpose, or role, of a given character. In addition, a reader of any one of the works treated here must have special expectations about the interactions of all of the characters within any one of the four narratives under discussion, and, most important, about the significance of the main figure or protagonist in any of them. In view of the unique problems relating to the interpretations of the central figure of The Confidence-Man, it is especially important for readers to think explicitly about the characterological scheme
and dynamics of this novel. Readers must ask how it is that as many as eight different figures can be resolved into one central character. They must seek the generalization that captures the characterological dynamic manifested in this constantly transforming central character.

The troubling and seemingly infinite metamorphoses of Melville's original character in this novel can be approached by applying, and extending Roland Barthes' generalization about all fictional characters. Barthes proposes that character is constituted by the proper name and the textual predication about the figure bearing that name. In applying this concept about the formulation of character to the protagonist of The Confidence-Man, we see that the proper name and the corresponding identity by which the character is known changes at least eight times in the course of the story. From this it may be gathered that Melville's original as the confidence man may transform his identity -- as Black Guinea, as John Ringman, as Frank Goodman, etc. -- potentially continually, which is the reason that we may expect something further to follow from the overall characterological masquerade. By providing this on-going metamorphosis of the proper-name/identity aspect of the character which never really alters the
predication about him that has been established in the
text, Melville gives us a (potentially infinite) series
of regenerating identities in one figure. This figure
demonstrates the transformative principle that for
Melville is the essence of the art of characterization.
Insofar as the confidence man continues to signify the
"point of convergence" of all of the accumulating
information about the theme of confidence as it is being
developed throughout the novel, he can freely manifest
new character identities with each successive
appearance.

Applying Barthes' generalization about character to
Melville's original character in The Confidence-Man
obviates the necessity to prove that he is actually the
same "person" in a new disguise (a thing that cannot be
proved anyway), because it is clear that this figure
with proliferating identities is the embodiment of the
transforming power of fiction. Melville's original
thoroughly represents and enacts this novel's
proposition -- that if confidence is immaterial (in the
sense that it is shown here to be ephemeral,
transitory), then it can be both created and destroyed
in a repetitive cycle.

The first state of being in which the title figure
appears reveals the vulnerable nature of the human
capacity for trust as this novel illuminates it. In the first chapter, the mute in cream colors boards the Fidele and immediately creates a dramatic situation featuring the distrust he galvanizes among the other passengers. As a response to this first manifestation of the title character, the scene's other characters (the ship's passengers) distrust him on sight, partly, it is suggested, due to the fact that many of them have been reading and speculating on a notice posted near the captain's office that a thief or confidence man is at large in their area. Instead of depicting a simple drama of distrust, however, the chapter sets forth a tableau to illustrate in advance the general contention of the following chapter — "that many men have many minds" (The Confidence-Man, 846). The more the mute proclaims the virtues of charity, the less charitably his on-lookers view his parade of signs. Pushing and hitting him, they react ever more negatively to his display of maxims on the nature of trust. His insistence that "Charity thinketh no evil" and "Charity believeth all things" inspires them to suspect the presence of evil and to question all things. The instability of their communal tendency to disbelief is further illustrated by a lightning-flash change in their response to a similar message about the same subject
which the ship's barber displays. Just as "Charity never faileth" causes them to fail in charity, "No trust", the barber's business motto, inspires their immediate confidence. All of which is to say that the ship's passengers are in a state of flux as regards confidence in humanity. This state is the one which is most likely to facilitate the confidence man's success in winning their money or their minds because, as a later confidence man(ifestation) points out, "Distrust is a stage to confidence" (The Confidence-Man, 928).

The mute in cream colors is the original character of the first two chapters; his appearance among the other characters engenders a mood of suspicion and hostility. That mood was, before the mute's appearance, a mere item in the varied range of human attitudes and responses that made up the collective mind of the passengers. But the mute pulls their distrust out of the background and into his illuminating presence, where it is then featured as the predominant emotional element of the dramatic situation at that point. The character is in himself an event. His pathetic appearance and obvious helplessness, all of which would seem to arouse sympathy, stand in dynamic contrast to the way in which he arouses hostility in the passengers. This hostility takes shape as a consensus with his arrival and brief
presence; once he has receded into sleep and background, the hostility also recedes, or seems to disperse as the crowd disperses.

Melville points out what is both natural and ominous in their dispersal. He accounts for their disbanding, not by boredom with their communal subject, but by their "involuntarily submitting to that natural law which ordains dissolution equally to the mass, as in time to the member" (The Confidence-Man, 847). Their consensus about the mute, strong and integrated as it may be, is governed at bottom by the unrecognized law of dissolution, as natural and inevitable a force operating on human opinion as gravity is on physical bodies.

This concept -- that men's opinions or ideological constructions will fall apart -- is carried into chapter 3, where the second original character, Black Guinea, makes his single appearance. Here the law of dissolution is presented in the form of an image -- the Canada thistle -- used unconsciously by the Methodist minister as he seeks to address the crowd's hostility, which has once again taken shape and is now directed at (and engendered by) the crippled beggar. He charges that those who cannot have confidence in Black Guinea's identity are Canada thistles, their confidence in other human beings as easily scattered as thistles in wind,
and as fruitless. The wooden-legged cynic, who is
spokesman for the crowd's distrust, and who is therefore
the most attacked by the charge, follows the metaphor
through for its full value of insult:

look you, I have been called a Canada thistle.
Very good. And a seedy one: still better. And the
seedy Canada thistle has been pretty well shaken among
ye: best of all. Dare say some seed has been shaken
out; and won't it spring though? And when it does
spring, do you cut down the young thistles, and won't
they spring the more? It's encouraging and coaxing 'em.
Now, when with my thistles your farms shall be well
stocked, why then -- you may abandon 'em! (The
Confidence-Man, 855)

Doubt seeds doubt, and finally any coherence -- of
truth, of faith, of identity -- is sown with it, and
therefore fit only for abandonment. The ruin of the
image corresponds to the effects of the law of
dissolution mentioned in the foregoing chapter. Even
the charitable Methodist minister is under its rule, for
what is it to "put as charitable a construction as one
can" upon any character, but to say that one is free to
impose any sort of interpretation that one is inclined
toward upon another person, as if no actual, intrinsic
form of identity existed? Thus, the growth of
confidence that any sort of truth about a person's
identity can be obtained and believed is at this point
choked off by proliferating doubt.

In the space of the third chapter, Black Guinea
suddenly appears and then mysteriously disappears, leaving the confidence of the other passengers riddled with conflicting suspicions. As the reinvented identity of the confidence man, he is set down among them but does not take root in their confidence, or in the narrative structure. We do not read about Black Guinea again, but the confidence man, in all of his many incarnations, can be thought of as the Canada thistle in this novel's characterology. His presence galvanizes the other characters into narrative action, and seeds their emotions and responses to him. But each time any of the other characters reaches the point at which he expects the original character's "true" identity to flower, he finds it long scattered, sown among the other mysterious figures on board the Fidele. Even more damaging to all of their attempts, collective or individual, to pin down the identity of the figure is his tendency to scatter their identities to the wind as well. He is the embodiment of doubt, and, entering them, effortlessly destroys their self-confidence by illuminating the self-doubt within which it is rooted.

The fourth chapter introduces the third original character of this work of fiction. It demonstrates, in the exchange between John Ringman and his gull, the good merchant, Roberts, the way in which the illusory and
unstable quality of the confidence man's identity reveals a related instability in the identities of his dupes. Ironically titled "Renewal of an Old Acquaintance," it presents not the reunion of two former friends, but the emergence of a new aspect of the identity of Mr. Roberts which was previously unknown to him. John Ringman (yet another renewed identity) challenges Mr. Roberts' memory and diplomacy by insisting that they have met before. He outlines the time and place of their meeting, the means by which they were introduced, and even recounts details of the time they spent together in the company of Mr. Roberts' family. It is very convincing, but Mr. Roberts himself cannot seem to recall any of it. John Ringman suggests that Roberts' memory is "faithless," and against the charge, Roberts placates Ringman: "Well, to tell the truth, in some things my memory ain't of the very best" (The Confidence-Man, 859). Mr. Roberts has encountered a man, Mr. Ringman, who claims to have confidence in his acquaintance, and although he himself does not share that confidence, Mr. Roberts feels that it is his responsibility to support it.

The duty of establishing and supporting confidence has been passed from the confidence man to his dupe in short and skillful order. This transfer of duty is
effected by the confidence man's first and most basic method -- the creation of doubt. In order to prove that he knows Mr. Roberts, Ringman refers the merchant to his own business card:

"Pray, now, if you use the advertisement of business cards, ... just look at it, and see whether you are not the man I take you for."

"Why," a bit chafed, perhaps, "I hope I know myself."

"And yet self-knowledge is thought by some not so easy. Who knows, my dear sir, but for a time you may have taken yourself for somebody else? Stranger things have happened." (The Confidence-Man, 859)

The assertion itself, despite the frivolous manner and context in which it is presented, does not seem to Mr. Roberts to be a joke. He takes it seriously enough to allow a considerable confusion to begin in his mind, and is thus turned into an easy mark for Ringman. The latter takes some of Roberts' money in this chapter, and in luring him further with the possibility of a good business transaction aboard, takes his confidence as well. By the end of chapter 13, he has become a newly-defined character. His confidence has been passed down through the chapters by the changing identities of the confidence man until it reaches the representative of the Black Rapids Coal company, who, it seems, pushes him to give up still more. Roberts offers what he didn't know he had to give -- a cynicism startling even to him:
Truth will not be comforted. ... mere dreams and ideals, they explode in your hand, leaving naught but the scorching behind! (The Confidence-Man, 911)

The outlines of this character have been altered in chapter 13. It is still Mr. Roberts, his proper name maintaining his identity, but the predication about him has, in this scene with the most recent incarnation of the confidence man been radically changed. He has not been reinvented, but merely revealed, and what the original character from Black Rapids Coal has brought to light is a potential for "black" disillusionment that was always one "of the queer, unaccountable caprices of his (Roberts') natural heart" (The Confidence-Man, 912).

John Ringman (proper name/identity) and the representative from Black Rapids Coal (pronom/identity) together illuminate the predicate material which we have come to associate with Mr. Roberts. His original composition as a competent business man and a religious, confident, optimistic, and friendly sort has changed in the light of the presence of these two original characters. We now see a revised characterological terrain, one which has been revealed to be dominated by "all the stony strata of hard considerations" (The Confidence-Man, 911).

Melville continually demonstrates the power of the original character in this novel to transform both
himself and others. There are continual reinventions of the proper name/identity aspect of the confidence man character and, as a result, on-going revelations which redefine the predicate material of the characters being conned. For the reader, it is as if each manifestation of the confidence man reveals the "hidden sun" in another of the novel's characters, "at once enlightening and mystifying" (The Confidence-Man, 1025). Once the original character, in whatever his current form, has revealed the hidden sun of another character, that enlightenment has indeed resulted in mystification. The "good" merchant, Mr. Roberts, is an example of this paradox; he is at once a good man and cynic, diplomatic and embittered, charitable and disillusioned. The theme of all things containing their opposites is newly articulated in these characters, whose predicate categories are revealed by the original character to yoke together a clashing discord of attributes and sensibilities.

The behaviors and even the states of being of those characters who are discovered in the light ray shed by the original are constantly in radical transformation. When the Fidele's barber encounters Frank Goodman, the "cosmopolitan" version of the confidence man, his ideas about trust and the manner in which he displays them are
up-ended. Throughout his discussion with the cosmopolitan, the barber has been staunchly resistant to the former's gentle but persistent argument that he should simply trust men and offer his clientele credit in his shop to confirm that trust. They are at a seeming impasse in their dispute when, by a "sort of magical" form of persuasion on the cosmopolitan's part, the barber evinces full acquiescence to the proposal that he trust mankind by signing an agreement to that effect. While Melville dramatizes most of their exchange in meticulous detail, the time during which the con-man acts as a "man-charmer" is presented in a few compressed phrases. What the cosmopolitan could not accomplish by means of friendly discussion, he could accomplish by other, more mysterious means. This scene in the novel is a potent demonstration of the confidence man's ultimate authority as the chapter's, and in fact, the book's, original character. It is as if Melville, having reached a deadlock between his two characters, surrendered primary authority to the original one, who resolves the situation powerfully by his own mysterious power to make the other characters "start up" to him (The Confidence-Man, 1092, 1096).

Yet another mystifying transformation of character occurs during the chapters-long, "friendly" discussion
between Frank Goodman and Charlie Noble, the man who begins as a "boon companion" to the cosmopolitan. Their friendship evolves, over the course of their various discussions in the space of five or so chapters, as an abruptly-formed but well-knit affinity. When Charlie first appears (in a scene including only one other human figure -- the cosmopolitan), he appears in a spill of light from an overhead lamp:

   a zoned lamp swung overhead ... sending its light vertically down, like the sun at noon. Beneath the lamp stood the speaker, affording to any one disposed to it no unfavorable chance for scrutiny. (The Confidence-Man, 989)

Melville sets this figure in an actual ray of light at the outset, its symbolic implications facilitating whatever revelations about the nature of his character the cosmopolitan has in store. This revelation comes, in chapters 31 and 32, as a species of characterologic miracle (or at least as an ironic version of Ovid's theory of character in relation to Melville's own!). The cosmopolitan requests a loan of Charlie Noble, and Charlie ignobly refuses. The titles of these two chapters ("A Metamorphosis More Surprising Than Any in Ovid" and "Showing that the Age of Magic and Magicians Is Not Yet Over") focus directly on the transformative potential of Melville's fictional characters, as does the first paragraph of the latter chapter:
While speaking or rather hissing those words, the boon companion underwent much such a change as one reads of in fairy-books. Out of old materials sprang a new creature. Cadmus glided into the snake. (The Confidence-Man, 1035)

For Melville, the characters of fiction ably carry the burden of invention. They move the fiction forward (or in any direction), and their dynamic constitutions necessitate and constitute the story. But Melville's original character has the ultimate responsibility as Prime Mover. It is his existence which ordains the transformations of the other characters. His presence provides the corresponding light by which their hidden suns become visible, and the operations of these discernible.

Melville writes The Confidence-Man as an exploration of the relations among the people of his fiction. It is a test of his own theory of those relations and of the original as the characterological mechanism devised to illuminate them. The novel is a complex and difficult working-out of this project, and chapters 36 and 37 offer a model of its dynamic of revelation. Here the cosmopolitan meets Mark Winsome, the mystic, and his "practical disciple," Egbert. The mystic elaborates his original warning to the cosmopolitan against feeling too secure in his understanding of Charlie Noble's character:
What are you? What am I? Nobody knows who anybody is. The data which life furnishes, towards forming a true estimate of any being, are as insufficient to that end as in geometry one side given would be to determine the triangle. (The Confidence-Man, 1047)

Geometry, as a method of inferring relationships, provides the key needed for tracing the line between Melville's original character and his other characters. The analogy between Melville's theory of character and the geometry of triangles is buried in the events of these two chapters, the second of which begins with the addition of the character of Egbert, Mark Winsome's practical disciple, to the scene in which Frank Goodman and the mystic discuss the philosophy of the latter. Mark Winsome charges Egbert with the duty of explaining his (Winsome's) perplexing and self-contradictory philosophy:

You, Egbert by simply setting forth your practice, can do more to enlighten one as to my theory, than I myself can by mere speech. Indeed, it is by you that I myself best understand myself. For to every philosophy are certain rear parts, very important parts, and these, like the rear of one's head, are best seen by reflection. Now, as in a glass, you Egbert, in your life, reflect to me the more important part of my system. He, who approves you, approves the philosophy of Mark Winsome. (The Confidence-Man, 1052)

Thus a triangular relationship is suggested among the three men, wherein something of the true nature of Mark Winsome's philosophy is implied by the actual life of his disciple, Egbert, and in which Frank Goodman makes
the inference connecting the two. This is to say that
the meaning of Mark Winsome's philosophy can only be
grapsed as an inference between what he articulates and
the way in which Egbert's life indirectly demonstrates
it. Thus, the doubles or character-pairs, who appear
periodically throughout the novel, such as Winsome and
Egbert, function as two sides of a triangle of relations
which includes the reader, or, in the case of the above
two characters, it includes Frank Goodman, as inferrer
of character. In a similar manner, the significance of
the other characters can be inferred by the novel's
readers only when we are given the "second side" of the
triangle -- the original character. The original
illuminates the darkened angles and lines of the others,
bringing the shapes of character and character relations
to light, filling in the missing information, revising
the total form of the characters and of the fiction
itself. And the little vignette stories -- those of the
unfortunate man, of China Aster, of Charlemont, and of
the Indian-hater, Colonel Moredock -- work in a related
way. As stories (pivoting on the natures of their
individual characters), they provide the second side
from which a grasp of the abstract themes about life
which are under discussion when they are introduced may
be inferred by the reader.
Melville's original character exists in a kind of sym-tri-osis with the other characters and the readers of the texts that have been discussed so far. The significance of such a trinity of relations becomes central to our considerations of his last novel, *Billy-Budd*. 


2 I use the term "recursive" in the sense that it is used in transformational-generative grammar, or in arithmetic theory. So used, it indicates a property of self-regeneration, the product of which is distinct from copying or other forms of iteration. Recursiveness is understood to be "a single, underlying property" of the various "iterative processes" found in the grammar of a language or in the four sub-systems of arithmetic. These processes produce new forms (utterances, sums) by re-running through the rules of the system, demonstrating its capability of infinite generation. A discussion of recursiveness in the grammar of natural languages is found in Transformational Grammar and the Teacher of English: Theory and Practice, 2nd ed., Owen Thomas and Eugene R. Kintgen (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974), 65 & 144.

3 Thomas Quirk, Melville's Confidence Man. From Knave to Knight (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 50.


5 Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller, (New York: Hill and Wang, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc. 1974) 190-191. Barthes claims that "Character is an adjective, an attribute, a predicate", and that the sum of a character is the "point of convergence" of the "sèmes" -- the thematic meaning-units -- of the text. In his analysis, however, character is not delimited entirely by this point of convergence, but also by the "Proper Name": "The proper name enables the person to exist outside the sèmes, whose sum nevertheless constitutes it entirely. As soon as a Name exists ... the sèmes become predicates,...and the Name becomes a subject: we can say that what is proper to narrative is not action but the character as Proper Name: the semic raw material ... completes what is proper to being, fills the name with adjectives."
one shipmaster at least cheerfully surrenders to the King the flower of his flock ¹

In Meditations on the Hero, Walter Reed expresses the opinion that Melville creates a "composite hero" out of Ahab and Ishmael in Moby-Dick. Actually, he interprets this union of two characters as a fragmentation of the heroic figure, and as a signal of the end of Melville's belief in the heroic character and in the possibility of heroism.² For Reed, Moby-Dick bespeaks the disintegration of its author's faith in a characterological form which expresses a human ideal, a moral principle. He also offers a reading of The Confidence-Man as a novel without a hero because it lacks a central figure which embodies a fixed moral position. He then concludes from assessing the principal figures of these two novels that Melville could no longer envision a hero for American literature. But the existence of Billy-Budd, Melville's final novel, proves that conclusion wrong. It argues, instead, that Melville refused to relinquish the concept of heroism. The original character of Billy Budd, along with the originals of the other works discussed here, are Melville's revised heroes. They represent a new vision of heroism which proceeds out of his critique of the traditional heroic figure.
This last narrative is entirely about heroes, is fixated on the heroic figure. In creating Billy Budd as his original character in this story, Melville created a means by which to address the problems he faced writing within the conflicting contexts of his own doubting sensibilities, and the ideal-dominated literary values of his time. He could indeed envision and even rejoice in heroism; that much the novel plainly states. But Melville placed complicated qualifications on the moral ideal embodied, and these he expressed in Billy-Budd, not though a single character, but by synthesizing a configuration of three characters, two of whom revolve around the germinal one. Though they are presented as and remain to the end independent and discrete figures, Billy Budd, John Claggart and Captain Edward Vere also function as points in a triad of a newly-conceived heroism.

It is easy to perceive Billy's status as original character in this text. Melville's general description of the original in chapter 44 of The Confidence-Man could serve well as a particular description of the handsome sailor. The "something prevailingly local" about a truly original character Billy eminently has. His immediate past -- the account of his impressment into service on the Bellipotent -- is given in some
detail. But his personal history is a matter of mystery, even to Billy himself. This lack of a delimiting familial background intensifies the emblematic quality he suggests to those who come into contact with him. He is, to use Barbara Johnson's term for him, a "motivated sign."\(^3\) Those he meets, knowing nothing contradictory from his past, must take him for what he appears to be, and his appearance and being are equivalent. He is and means innocence entire. This seamlessness of Billy's is the result of yet another of Melville's stipulations about the original character -- that he is, like all of life, "from the egg." He is not invented, but merely is, the given element according to which the ensuing narrative unfolds. He engenders that narrative, shedding his light on all of the other characters, newly revealing them to the extent that they seem newly invented, and galvanizing them into the actions which become the story itself, and which he essentially calls forth.

In addition to the fact that Billy has all of the characteristics of the original as Melville has elsewhere presented them, compelling evidence exists in the original manuscript of the novel that the figure of Billy germinated both the story and the characters of Bill-Budd. There are actually two generations of
Melville's characterological method for this novel, two
levels at which he cast a figure and then allowed him to
reveal and command the rest of the narrative and its
people. On the level of his experience in composing
Billy-Budd, this process seems to have "happened" to
him. Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts have
contributed greatly to our knowledge of Melville's
composition process in their reconstruction of the
genetic text of the novel from the semi-final draft in
which the manuscript was found. Their description of
the manuscript's evolution and their inferences as to
the sources or causes for its particular course of
development create a picture of an author who started
with a character in a situation and allowed that to
germinate other characters, who then seeded other
situations and events according to the dynamics set up
by the original character (Billy-Budd, 2-3).

As this introduction to the reading and genetic
texts of Billy-Budd presents it, the manuscript evolved
to the form in which it was found in three main stages,
each focused around a character. Melville apparently
began with what is now the last page of the novel, the
poem, "Billy in the Darbies." The Billy in that poem,
however, is an older man than the novel's hero, holds a
different kind of position on board his ship, and
though, like Billy, condemned to die, is in fact guilty of the crime Billy is falsely accused of -- plotting mutiny. Both prose and ballad forms of this original figure and dramatic situation existed, out of which Melville developed a young, innocent hero for the narrative to come. At this second stage, Claggart was also introduced and developed, as well as the event in which Billy kills Claggart. In the third stage of composition, Vere was evolved, the story's action culminated, and the sequels written. In a kind of upward composition spiral, Melville would place a character in the narrative in order to expand the plot, and that character would necessitate the narrative development. The manuscript gives evidence that Melville tried at each successive stage to put what he had drafted into fair-copy form, and that each new character interrupted that effort, as if each had a life and necessity of its own that Melville felt he had to accommodate. All of this information about his experiences in conceiving and drafting *Billy-Budd* supports one of my essay's basic arguments about Melville's theory of fictional character -- that the characters hold the narrative key. The stories of the works under discussion have no authority without the presence of the original character. Plot and characters
initially posited in them capitulate to radical revision once his presence is in place in the narrative. For Melville, the transformative power of fiction resides within the realm of character, particularly the original character.

Since the manuscript was found in draft form, Melville's evolution of the characters can be discussed with relative accuracy and certainty. But since the draft was semi-final, discussion of the published text will always proceed with less authority. It is fair to assume, however, that Melville perceived a technical strategy in the way in which his characters dominated his drafting process. Converting the energy of his crafting experience into a similar reading experience for his audience, he opens his novel not with the handsome sailor, but with two prototypes of him, which he then coalesces into his original character, Billy Budd.

The African handsome sailor and the "dandified Billy-be-Dam" are introduced in the novel's opening pages as an indirect illustration of the qualities (heroic and otherwise) to be found in Billy Budd. Both types are heroic insofar as they represent the standard of their peers. The African is an acknowledged symbol of his retinue; his fellow sailors openly hold him in
regard as being the best of them all and somehow making
them all better by being so. The Billy-be-Dam is also
acknowledged by his mates as symbolic, but not of their
best selves. He is reminiscent of "young Alexander
curbing the fiery Bucephalus," a hero of ancient times,
but not of his own (Billy-Budd, 44). The other sailors
around him feel his legendary beauty, strength and
expertise diminish them, and in seeing themselves as
"less gifted," they do not pay him the "honest homage"
that they gladly pay to the African handsome sailor, the
unaffected, naturally regal representative of common
humanity.

These two examples of the superior mariner, while
sharing physical beauty, strength and an inspiring
manner, are set up as opposites. Melville paints the
African sailor first, with luminosity, and then, to
better focus his brightness, shades in the
"Billy-be-Dam" as contrast. But when he begins to
introduce Billy Budd, this contrast fades, and we see
that our anticipation -- that Billy's character is to be
more like that of the African sailor -- was premature.
The sentence in which Billy is first mentioned begins
with the phrase, "Such a cynosure," a confusing referent
because we assume that it connects to the first handsome
sailor described, even though it follows directly the
passage about the second one. The grammar of that phrase does not, in fact, facilitate a choice; either or both of the previously mentioned sailors are indicated as referents. And that is just as Melville's intended it, because Billy Budd actually has the attributes of both types. He is both the beautiful representative of the common mariners and the visual echo of Hercules. He possesses the "barbaric good humor" of the African sailor, but is reputed also to be, like the Billy-be-Dam, a "mighty boxer." He contains within him qualities which are potentially in conflict. But the notion of potential is the essence of Billy's character and central to his role as the novel's galvanizing figure.

As Captain Graveling of the Rights of Man tells Lieutenant Ratcliffe, the Bellipotent officer who decides to impress Billy, the young sailor can inspire both love and hatred in his fellows. Though it is mostly the case of the former, the latter case can occur and, in fact, at the story's beginning, already has. In the brief and immediate history that Captain Graveling gives the Lieutenant of Billy, we see that he can be both "peacemaker" and drubber, someone who can inspire harmony and yet who can also put destruction to the work of maintaining harmony. In both of these aspects he
seems to act unconsciously. His natural virtue smooths out the rivalries and disputes among the other sailors and brings them together in their affection for him. And in the rare instance that his presence arouses envy and aggression, he unleashes his combative powers almost without deliberation, letting his arm "fly" as if it had powers of its own to enforce the innate harmony and purity that go out naturally from Billy's center. His acts, his manner and his essential being are all unified, undifferentiated as petals in the bud of a rose.

In him, consciousness and unconsciousness are seamless, which is why his sally on leaving his merchant ship home ("And good-bye to you too, old Rights-of-Man") was made totally without understanding of its satirical implications, and why the narrator says of him that, "To deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his nature" (Billy-Budd, 49). The implications of his speech are obvious to those around him, as, indeed, are the possible consequences of his acts. But speech and variant meaning, acts and variant consequences, are not obvious to him. The efflorescence of the potential into the actual, from the unconscious and instinctive into the conscious and deliberate is what is foreign to his nature. The inability to
separate essence from its particular manifestation in any given form is the reason for Billy's stutter. His inner harmony can be expressed effortlessly in simply song, and he does sing, "like the illiterate nightingale" (Billy-Budd, 52). But the powers of analysis required for any utterance more complicated than routine exchange or simple expression of feeling give Billy -- literally -- pause.

Billy's lack of definite knowledge about his origins is another dimension suggesting that he is a character whose potential is all. In fact, Melville's curious way of saying that he is an orphan ("his entire family was practically invested in himself") actually stressed this phenomenon (Billy-Budd, 50). Billy's past is contained within him alone, it does not connect back to a family history. His parents do not exist to his knowledge; they may be living, but he does not know it or know them. His origins -- a specific pair of parents -- are enfolded into him and are part of the story he gives only sketchily and only when asked. In an inverted form of biology, they exist within him in his past as he existed within them in their future. Thus Billy's lack of knowledge about his origins blocks access -- that of the other characters or of the readers -- to his character by conventional means. Those who
seek to know him are obliged to pursue a psycho-mythological course, to observe him closely when he is at hand, and to reflect on the emblematic values he suggests simply by being.

Melville compromises the values which Billy suggest as soon as he evokes them: "he is not presented as a conventional hero" (Billy-Budd, 53). In a less direct way of qualifying Billy's heroic potential, he elaborates the character's prelapsarian quality by referring to him as Adam, and his environment as a kind of Eden-before-the-serpent. This facilitates the understanding of his perfect harmony and also foreshadows the inevitable discord to come. But these qualifications of Billy's heroism do not imply that he is a figure divided from within, as is Ahab. The figure divided against itself, so often the hero of the American novel, is a figure more definitely articulated than is Billy. To be sure, division is all around him -- in the wartime and revolutionary context of his story, in the opposing character-types that Melville uses as heroic antecedents for his introduction, even in the antithetical natures of the other two characters of the first chapter, Captain Graveling and Lieutenant Ratcliffe. But Billy is a unity of innocence unto himself, even if, as the Dansker understands, his is an
amoral and naive kind of innocence, one not made to negotiate "the deadly space between" itself and its opposite.

The strength of Billy's coherence as a character does not derive from his simplicity. Billy is not so much simple as he is underdeveloped. In order to force Billy and his story into bloom, Melville needs Claggart, a truly simple, more elemental character than is Billy. So by a process similar to the one in which he pared down his original, guilty Billy into the innocent handsome sailor, he cuts into his first character's side for the material out of which to make Claggart, the articulated form of whatever potential for destruction and evil may lie dormant in Billy.

The character of Billy Budd originates the character of John Claggart, master-at-arms. The simplicity falsely suggested by the former realizes itself in the character of the latter. He is a character composed of one element -- "natural depravity." His simplicity is based on simple acceptance of the concept of the "mystery of iniquity," the idea that wickedness, or sin, exists in observable fact but beyond human understanding. The phrase itself Melville takes from Thessalonians 2:7:
For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.  

In this chapter, Paul argues that while the second coming is certain, up until that time, all manner of wicked men, especially those whose sin consists of exalting themselves above God, will be permitted to exist and to act without hindrance from the deity. Paul emphasizes that God is in control of both sin and the recognition of sin by others: the wicked will be revealed only at the time of the second coming, and until then God will "send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." Such deliberation on God's part takes the necessity for the understanding of sin out of human hands. Though the narrator notes with delicate irony that modern readers will not be content to relinquish their powers of comprehension so easily, the borrowed phrase perfectly captures Claggart's mysterious essence -- wickedness personified.

The presumed anxiety of readers to penetrate the mystery at Claggart's base is not matched by the narrator of this tale. He accepts the elemental evil in the character simply and totally, admitting, "his portrait I shall essay, but shall never hit it" (Billy-Budd, 64). This admission is significant, coming
from a narrator who shows such mastery of the natures of the other characters. With Billy and with Vere, as with Captain Graveling, Lieutenant Ratcliffe, the Dansker, the ship's surgeon, etc., he lays open their cores with easy strokes and elaborates their most essential aspects with all confidence. But, in throwing up his hands with the master-at-arms, he leaves Claggart's mysterious center in one piece and encourages in his readers the same easy acceptance, so that his plot can move forward, shaped by the implications of Billy's character and fueled by the inevitable evil which Claggart embodies.

Nor do the story's other characters feel the need to understand the reason for Claggart's depravity; they readily recognize his nature for what it is, and what it means to them. Excepting Squeak, Claggart's loyal aide in the project of troubling Billy, and one or two other henchmen, the crew uniformly hate the master-at-arms. There is no specific reason for this, even though there is no shortage of gossip about his sordid past -- that he had traded a jail term for service in the Navy, that since he never talked about his life ashore, something bad must have characterized it. The fact that none of the gossip can be substantiated does not trouble them. They hate Claggart on faith. The Dansker's response to
him is similarly intuitive. When Billy comes to him for advice about minor unexpected troubles he has been encountering in his mess, the elder seaman doesn't puzzle about the source of the problem: "...that's because he's down upon you, Baby Budd" (Billy-Budd, 71). Jemmy Legs' sweet voice and pleasant words for Billy do not fool the Dansker; as far as he concerned, they mean their opposites. Like the rest of the crew, he sees Claggart's elemental depravity and understands that trouble must come from it. Captain Vere, of course, also instinctively reacts to Claggart with "vaguely repellent distaste," despite all decorum of manner and speech on the part of the subservient officer (Billy-Budd, 91). Whatever their experience with or apprehension of wickedness, crude in the case of the sailors, sophisticated in the case of the Dansker and the captain, Claggart's false cover deludes no one. Except for Billy, they are unlike those whom Paul warned; they do not believe the lie. They know without a doubt that the master-at-arms is "the direct reverse of a saint," and that his innate depravity will surely lead him to "act out" and evil part "for which the Creator alone is responsible" (Billy-Budd, 78).

The other characters have no difficulty in disregarding Claggart's false outer layer and
determining his "truth," but Billy takes him at face value. He resists the Dansker's reading of the situation between them, citing his own pleasant experience with Claggart and reports from his mates that the officer always speaks well of him. His resistance to the truth of this relationship is like the resistance to it that Claggart instinctively experiences when he watches Billy at his tasks on deck. "Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows ... as if (he) could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban" (Billy-Budd, 88). Claggart, too, is tugged away from his central impression of Billy by a contradictory impulse. But this impulse is not the only thing they share. Billy is the seed of Claggart's character; his being illumines and thereby revises that character as one with more in common with his originator than it would at first appear.

The two are of outstanding physical qualities. Billy's healthy beauty is compared to the work of a Greek sculptor; Claggart's "face was a notable one, the features all except the chin cleanly cut as those on a Greek medallion." Claggart's pallor suggests "something defective or abnormal in the constitution and blood," a hint of moral flaw which corresponds to that suggested by Billy's stutter (Billy-Buddy, 64). They are both,
also, what Barbara Johnson calls "motivated signs," their appearances symbolically indicating their essential natures. Likewise common to both characters is the lack of concrete information about their pasts. Both have mysterious, skeletal histories, fleshed out only by the gossip and speculation of others. Finally, their fatalism matches. Billy is, "without knowing it, practically a fatalist" (Billy-Budd, 49). Claggart is more conscious of his fate in relation to Billy, as he demonstrates when, as noted above suppresses the strange feelings of longing Billy invokes in him. Their awareness, instinctive or more elaborated, of their fate in relation to one another is echoed by the other characters like the Dansker, who foresees but does not proclaim their future, and Vere, who intuits the true moral significance of their immediate past ("It is the divine judgment on Ananias!") (Billy-Budd, 100)

Even their polar-opposite natures -- "innocence and infamy" -- are merely opposite abstract relations at either end of the moral spectrum. When their attributes are seen as complementary, it becomes even more clear that the character of Billy necessitates the character of Claggart. Claggart helplessly hates Billy with an attraction engendered by his envy of Billy's innocence. He and Billy are fused by this attraction; Claggart's
monomania is driven in essence by the blindness of Billy's purity. Billy's very freedom from conscious purpose or design as regards Claggart facilitates Claggart's conscious designing of the means by which he will purposefully bring Billy to his end. Where Billy's innate goodness blocks the needed cautions and advice of the Dansker and the other sailors, Claggart's innate evil causes him to trump up reasons to hate Billy, involving his lackeys like Squeak in schemes to frame evidence which he doesn't even need to feed his irrational hatred of Billy. He is outwardly covert, but his inner depravity is open to all; Billy is overt, open-handed on the outside, but inside is a tightly-closed bud, even to himself.

Claggart is a part of Billy, by virtue of his characterological origins, which is why, despite the Dansker's view that "Something decisive must come of it," nothing actually decisive can or does. The opposite, in fact, happens -- emblematic chaos. In her article, "Melville's Fist: The Execution of Billy Budd," Barbara Johnson has attempted to frame this collision of the plot with the allegorical values of the characters. She positions an opposition between good and evil, illustrating the way in which the two characters switch places as allegorical referents:
This crucifix of received values -- "innocence and infamy, spiritual depravity and fair repute" -- can be understood spatially as a cross (Billy-Budd, 8). The symbolic reverberations of such an image lead, in the context of religion, to the concept of paradox, which cannot be understood by processes of reasoning, but only accepted by processes of faith. Johnson accepts the concept, and for her purposes -- exploring the story as a drama of paradox -- it is useful. But in the context of the present discussion, such tidy arrangements as theology affords when chaos threatens will mislead. Close reading of the characters of Billy and Claggart, ostensible opposites, has revealed many previously unsuspected similarities and only complementary oppositions. By the time they clash and change places of allegorical significance, our confidence in their symbolic values has been seriously compromised. It is not simply that, when Billy strikes and kills Claggart, good and evil have exchanged the places they originally held. It is more that the act of murder in such
circumstances between these particular characters constitutes the final bond between them, one which binds them absolutely. Their allegorical significances, as noted by the Dansker and the narrator, tended toward this outcome as much as did the quite labile situation between them in the plot. We do not, as Johnson's chiasmus depicts, have finally an innocent Claggart and an evil Billy. We have a wicked man who, having accused a good man of the crime of mutiny, has become the accidental victim of a murder perpetrated without deliberation by the accused, who is wholly innocent of the original charge. In moral terms, we have soup. In it, the two characters float in readiness for a new vision which will confer on them heroic distinction. But they are only ready.

At this point in the narrative (and in Melville's original composing process), Billy's nature and unfolding drama have germinated a third necessary character. Melville's decision to introduce Captain Edward Vere in chapter 6, positioning Claggart, conceived and composed before Vere, in chapter 7, seems at first a curious one. This is because although we get certain information about the character and background of the Bellipotent's captain from the narrator at this point, our understanding of him does not deepen until he
begins to respond to the specific event of plot generated by Billy and Claggart. That is to say, our opportunity to "go deeper" into Vere does not present itself until that point in the story which corresponds to the point in his composing at which Melville conceived the need for the captain's character. But there is, in fact, a very substantial reason for Vere to be introduced at the juncture at which Melville places him. It is less notable that he is presented before Claggart than it is significant that he is presented after Billy. Captain Vere is sketched following the depiction of Billy for the very good reason that this order of presentation emphasizes the fact that the character of Billy has necessitated the character of Vere.

The character of Vere seems to emerge from that of Billy, and one indication of this fact is that they are preceded in their appearances by what can be termed heroic prefigures. Billy's prefigures have been discussed above; the presences of the African handsome sailor and the Billy-be-Dam encourage us to begin thinking of attributes and qualities which we will soon discover in the story's first hero. Likewise, Captain Vere's prefigure -- Admiral Nelson, in a large part the subject of chapter 4 -- suggests the qualities of
leadership which are pertinent to our understanding of the captain himself. Nelson's heroic value is plainly defined by Melville: "those exaltations of sentiment that a nature like Nelson, the opportunity being given, vitalizes into acts" (Billy-Budd, 58). We are being prepared in this discussion of Nelson and his possible motives at Trafalgar to consider a man who embodies his beliefs by dramatizing them in his acts. For someone in the role of national defender,

Personal prudence ... surely is no special virtue ... while excessive love of glory, impassioning a less burning impulse, the honest sense of duty, is the first. (Billy-Budd, 58)

Melville's narrator claims that any second-guessing after the fact of the hero's motives for his heroic act misses the point of heroism. Heroes are heroic by nature, a statement no more tautological than is, "Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature" (Billy-Budd, 75). We are somewhat prepared at this point in our reading to entertain such a notion; the smooth continuity between Billy's outer manner and inner purity has given us an understanding of wholeness of being with which to approach the discussion of Admiral Nelson, and which we can also carry into our contemplation of both Vere and Claggart. But before we begin to do that, it is a good idea, having noted that two strongly connected characters have prefigures, to
explore the relations among the prefigures themselves. Billy's prefigures were seen to present contrasting examples of the representative hero, or natural leader, and non-representative hero, whose presence casts a shadow of "lesser being" over his peers. And Billy was discovered to have aspects of both qualities in his heroic capacity, drawing most sailors to him in his natural leadership, but alienating a significant few by his very innocence, and their "cynic disdain ... of innocence" (Billy-Budd, 78). The issue as Melville frames it exists between the notion of the organic evolution of a natural leader, permitted by those he leads and fused to them as an enobling representative, and that of a leader who is perceived by his followers to set himself as their example or to have been set as such, who has somehow been imposed and is therefore seen as in some way intrusively dominant. These issues are, of course, central to the revolutionary context of the story. In chapter 3's discussion of the revolutionary episodes before the battle at Trafalgar, there is a subtle but powerful degradation of Nelson's heroic significance to his men. The fact is that the mutineers see their service under him there as "a plenary absolution" for their involvement in prior insurrections. They have not served out of total
subjugation of self-concern to total loyalty to the Crown, inspired by its embodiment, their Admiral. Rather, they have exploited the opportunity afforded them by their nation's momentary vulnerability to reinstate their compromised loyalty under cover of an heroic emblem which is thereby likewise compromised. The stain of compromise spreads easily from the Billy-Be-Dam to Billy Budd, and from Admiral Nelson to Captain Vere.

Thus we have Captain Vere, a figure engendered by Billy, who, like Billy, is a model to his ship's crew, albeit a compromised leader. Melville stresses the qualifications about leadership he has been developing in the prior three chapters:

In their general bearing and conduct the commissioned officers of a warship naturally take their tone from the commander, that is if he have that ascendancy of character that ought to be his. (Billy-Budd, 60)

He then introduces the captain, very conspicuously failing to claim that happy union of excellence and loyalty between Vere and his men. Such qualities of natural leadership as he does display are countered by his occasional appearance of detachment from the crew and even from his position as commanding officer. Although the narrator allows Vere's achievements in service, he makes but brief mention of them, while he
dwells for a chapter and a half on the captain's
tendencies to disassociate himself from the context of
his rank ("Ashore, ... scarce anyone would have taken
him for a sailor") and to "betray a certain dreaminess
of mood" (Billy-Budd, 60-1). His distance in manner,
his habit of holding himself outside of the identity his
role confers upon him, and outside of the community of
his crew and fellow officers is obvious to and remarked
upon by all. Likewise, his extremely intellectual bent,
favoring books which "philosophize upon realities," and
resultant firm convictions, separate him from the
majority of the more typical men of his rank. Actually,
there is among them some criticism of him, as their
finding him "lacking in the companionable quality"
attests. So does their observation that "there is a
queer streak of the pedantic running through him ... like the King's yarn in a coil of navy rope"
(Billy-Budd, 63). The truest measure of his distance
from his naval context -- both from the role of captain
and from any meaningful engagement with the sailors or
other officers -- is in Melville's last image of chapter
7. Vere's is a mind fortified by rigorous training,
which synthesizes past and present with a "directness,
sometimes far-reaching like that of a migratory fowl
that in its flight never heeds when it crosses a
frontier" (Billy-Budd, 63). In these flights, so natural to him and so strange to those around him, he quite leaves the others behind.

While Billy and his captain share the prominent characteristic of leadership, many of their characterological attributes are opposed, and like those opposite attributes shared by Billy and Claggart, they are located at the extreme ends of the attributive categories which they involve. For example, Vere's auspicious reputation as an intellectual, "a dry and bookish gentleman," is in direct contrast to the carefree example of illiteracy Billy provides. And while Vere's philosophical cast of mind informs his style of leadership, Billy's lack of conscious philosophy likewise stamps his influence on his mates. Vere is isolated from his crew for the most part; Billy, even when antagonistically engaged with someone like Red Whiskers, is nevertheless eminently that -- engaged. Vere is passionate in his attachment to discipline, to order imposed from the top down, from the outside in. His cherished opinions about history and politics shore up his confidence in the exacting standards of discipline for which he is known. Billy, near-fatalist that he is, seems to inspire the men to good behavior almost despite themselves, as Captain Graveling's story
about him demonstrates. He is a bottom-top, inside-out version of Vere in leadership; their styles in this matter can be seen as complementary, as together equalling the ideal of leadership in a world of fallen ideals. Even the contrasting natures of their familial histories contribute to defining this complementary relation between them. The plenitude of Vere's family is diametrically opposed to Billy's lack of family. While Billy doesn't even seem to know the name of his adoptive parents, Vere's name has many representatives in the world, at least one of whom shares his given name as well and creates the necessity for his distinguishing nickname, "Starry" Vere. But most notably in addition, Vere's family, the narrator implies, is in part responsible for the level of naval rank into which he has ascended: "Though allied to the higher nobility, his advancement had not been altogether owing to influences connected with that circumstance" (Billy-Budd, 60). On the other side, Billy's "punctiliousness in duty" is thorough and well-known. His natural talent is enough that, at the time of Claggart's accusation, Vere had been considering promoting him to captain of the mizzentop. Again, in this matter of rank and its acquisition, Vere represents an externally imposed standard to the extent that his
level of rank has been due to his alliance with the "higher nobility," and Billy embodies more an organic totality of standard and being. The essential point about their relations, both similar and opposing, is that, taken together, they circumscribe an heroic dimension, within which the characteristics of each of them interact in a critical dialogue on the aspects and possibilities of heroism. The dynamism of this dialogue provides the regenerative energy for Melville's revision of the heroic figure. Their interactions and given attributes at this point in the story constitute a criticism of the heroic ideal, but the resultant tension also generates the power needed for the renewed statement of heroism made at the story's end.

The energy gets an extra boost from the relations which exist between Captain Vere and John Claggart. Vere seems to share more with this character than he does with Billy, but perhaps that isn't strange, viewed in the context of their necessity in the characterology of this novel. Both are known to be intelligent men and both present the appearance of intelligence to the community at large, Vere by his retiring and contemplative demeanor, and Claggart by the mere look of his features: "His brow was of the sort phrenologically associated with more than average intellect."
(Billy-Budd, 64). In the matter of their appearance to others, it is notable that the narrator refers to them both with similar phrasing of an identical concept; they give the impression on board ship of being highly important but disguised standard-bearers for their culture. They seem not to be sailors, but, in Vere's case, a "highly honorable discreet envoy on his way to an important post," and in Claggart's, "a man of high quality, social and moral, who for reasons of his own was keeping incog" (Billy-Budd 60, 64). Both men are noted as natural leaders, being considered, apart from the relative reactions of disappointment or distaste they arouse in their peers, to be of "superior capacity," to exhibit "austere patriotism," and to demonstrate general soundness of habits.

Like Claggart, with his schemes to employ Squeak and other underlings in fomenting difficulties for Billy, Vere does not hesitate to handle Claggart's report on Billy with the same designing approach. He manipulates; or rather, he takes over the manipulation of Billy where Claggart leaves off, including Claggart in his manipulations, as well. Finally, and most significant, Vere shares with Claggart the instinctive apprehension of any discontinuous phenomenon, as well as the instinct to exploit it. He has a full measure of
distrust for disunity in any form, as his initial impressions of Claggart show, and a complete distaste for what is false, likewise central to his response to Claggart. But despite the aversion he feels to a false witness like his master-at-arms, he is not too fastidious to create a false situation in the hopes of revealing him. It is this faculty in Vere which allows him to appreciate, Claggart does, "the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd" -- his aversion to the false or discontinuous. But although disunity is the enemy for Vere, his means of fighting it involve taking its weapons for his own use against it -- resulting, of course, in the backfire of his plan to unmask Claggart as a liar and Billy as unjustly accused.

Vere's willingness to exploit disunity is the link among him, Claggart and Billy, and makes possible the regeneration of Billy's heroism. This willingness of Vere's proceeds from his horror of disunity, the same horror which causes Billy to stutter at the fatal moment and to strike blindly from within himself in an ill-fated attempt to reconstitute what he sees as broken in that moment. Between Billy and Vere, their most profound need to rout out what is false results in the chaotic state of affairs reached in the narrative in chapter 19. Between Vere and Claggart, the willingness
to engage in base manipulation of circumstances and people provides the means needed to reconstitute Billy's heroism through sacrifice.

The drumhead court is called according to normal procedure in such matters. But the substance of their proceedings is somewhat amiss. The three officers called upon to judge the situation at hand begin to suspect that they are merely there to rubber-stamp Vere's prejudgement. His testimony as witness of Billy's act and his advice as counsel to the court contribute to their impression. Their uneasiness about the matter is furthered by their observation that Vere could with all martial propriety have kept Billy imprisoned until such time as he could deliver him to their Admiral, thus placing the burden of the decision to execute on the proper shoulders. In fact, Vere has not given up his original strategy of manipulating the situation, despite disastrous first results, and the men of the court feel this keenly. The speciousness of Vere's logic as court counsel is unsettling; his warning to the three men to rule out "the feminine in man," as he characterizes the quality of their natural sympathies toward Billy, smacks of brute but purposeful misrepresentation of the real issues of the case. Similar is his handling of the execution itself. He
brings music and marital discipline together in a false comparison as "measured forms" which magically restore order, betraying the innate and essential harmony of music (like Billy's inner harmony) by such a false analogy to the externally imposed and powerfully enforced harmony achieved by discipline. To this end he perverts music throughout the execution, using whistles and drums to calm and control the crew's response to it.

This ugliness in Vere's method of reconstituting the situation aboard the Bellipotent creates the final, necessary bond between him and Billy. Billy's benediction -- "God bless Captain Vere!" -- and the crew's collective repetition of it sanctify Vere's rude efforts. In his willing participation, Billy cleanses the impurities of Vere's actions and restores the seamless quality of his innocence prevailing before Claggart's accusation was made. His participation is total, unmarred even by the natural resistance of his body to the agony of death. It facilitates the regeneration of a new entirety. This new whole is fragile, as the narrator's first and second "sequels" attest, but the third sequel is a vivid qualification of that fragility, demonstrating the tenacious side of this entirety. Vere's deathbed repetition of Billy's name is not spoken in remorse, but more as an acceptance of
reality appropriate to last rites. Though the drumhead court officers regret their participation in Billy's sacrifice, Vere dies with the achievement of its sanctifying power on his lips. The second sequel, in its total reversal of all values originally posited in the story's "reality" (and more truly what Barbara Johnson's diagram represents) is so patent and faithless a disunity that it merely strengthens the power of the regenerated hero present in the third sequel. Billy, the hero in the darbies, is an omnipotent figure bespeaking the strength of unity. He is both talking of his coming execution and experiencing it, both conscious and beyond consciousness, existing both in time and out of it. He symbolizes a powerful union of both his and Vere's strengths, strengths consolidated by meeting the test of weakness which he, Vere and Claggart have between them dramatized in a characterological trinity.

The story of Billy Budd is one Melville crafted seemingly around the principle of anarchy. The mutinous and revolutionary context of the setting suggests the climate in which allegorical anarchy happens. His summary of the insurrections of the period -- "Reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances ... had been ignited into irrational combustion" -- might summarize the tension between Billy
and Claggart with a few minor changes, thus:
(Unreasonable) discontent growing out of (fantastical) grievances ... had been ignited into (inevitable) combustion (Billy-Budd, 54). But is is also a story which celebrates the ability of new forms to arise out of old, broken ones, and without fear of anarchy as such, restores the joy in wholeness that is the first impulse of heroism. Billy Budd, Melville's original character in many senses here, is the character who, binding the figures of Claggart and Vere to him, effloresces into the new, heroic triumvirate which is the principle expression of this joy.

Melville's original character is the facilitator of narrative wholeness, of the vision entire, of a fiction containing "the sane madness of vital truth." The figure as an aesthetic construction arises out of Melville's need to portray the truth in its vital form. Entering an on-going narrative, the original serves this portrayal by revealing what has been left out of that narrative, and by providing the opportunity for a newly-constructed vision of it and its thematic
concerns. This new vision -- of the limits of human sympathy, or of the myriad relations between metaphysics and experience, or of the fragile natures of identity and self-identity, or of the phoenix-like quality of heroism -- may be constructed because of the presence of the original. He illuminates the narrative world, enabling the reader (and sometimes the other characters) to see its hidden dimensions and to reconstruct it in a fully-integrated pattern that represents its basic truths.

Though the original is the facilitator of this whole vision, he does not explain it. Neither Bartleby, nor Ahab, nor the confidence man, nor Billy Budd explicitly insists on the construct of his dramatic situation that emerges from the work of fiction in which he plays the pivotal role. Bartleby says nothing about his isolation, the confidence man lies about his identity, Billy is unaware of his potential for either a destructive or an heroic act, and even Ahab is, ultimately, shown to be obsessed with Moby-Dick rather than to be possessed of his significance. The original character puts the truth on display, but does not put it under glass; his presence reveals aspects of the other characters and their relationships, but leaves the significance of these to be inferred. The "Drummond
light" of his characterological nature searches out the mystery of being, with its "hidden suns" and its "blackness, ten times black," making it visible without providing any solution to that mystery which would betray or reify it.

As a galvanizing force in his narrative, the original is the story's true authority. Events may begin without him, and characters may identify themselves and each other before he arrives, but he rewrites their stories and recasts their identities once he has entered their world. Indeed, the process of the world of the others becoming his world is the essential substance of any narrative featuring the original character. He redefines their concerns, redirects their inquiries, sets them in motion and gives them the opportunity to interpret all of these changes and directives.

The Confidence-Man, with its unpleasant characterological con-game, investigates to the fullest extent the nature of confidence in self and in others. Despite the fact that it has never been among Melville's most valued works, it also offers the reader a theoretical means for considering the nature of fictional character in general and the characters of Melville's fiction in particular. Bartleby, Ahab, the
confidence man and Billy Budd all play a similar, dominant part of their respective stories; they also share the common role as manifestations of the original character as subversive genius in Melville's art of characterization.


4The Holy Bible, Thessalonians 2:7.
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