MONSTROUS COMPOUNDS:
GENRE AND VALUE IN HERMAN MELVILLE


DISSERTATION


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By

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ABSTRACT

My title comes from a review of Herman Melville's 1848 book <u>Mardi</u>, a review that described the book as a "monstrous compound."  In a sense, my dissertation is primarily dedicated to unpacking this comment.  Melville's major works – <u>Mardi</u>, <u>Moby-Dick</u>, <u>Pierre</u>, and <u>The Confidence-Man</u> – are indeed monstrous compounds.  They are "compounds" because they are written in a mixed-genre form, combining different fictional genres in one text.  And they are "monstrous" because they encode Melville's philosophy of tragic nihilism, his belief in the absolute falsity of all moral beliefs, and in the tragic unavoidability of such false beliefs.  My dissertation demonstrates the way in which Melville's mixed-genre texts relate form to content, and shows Melville's complex and ambivalent relationship both to the popular fiction of the antebellum period and to his own audience.

The root of all was Melville's philosophical position, which I herein term tragic nihilism: a belief that the universe offers no ground of moral meaning, combined with a belief that humans were prisoners of their own subjective moral beliefs, regardless of how weakly those beliefs were founded.  At the same time, Melville was not merely a writer who thought deeply about philosophical issues; he was also a writer in the sphere of popular nineteenth-century fiction.  Fiction circulated widely in Melville's day; it was

generally agreed by commentators that everyone was reading novels.  This popular

fiction, in the antebellum environment, was influenced by certain moral requirements,

and there were certain patterns that required certain morally meaningful conventions in

the texts – poetic justice, reliable moral commentary, and so forth – forming a *moral

structure*.  Melville was broadly familiar with this popular literature, and used its

conventions in all of his works, from the bestseller <u>Typee</u> to the scorned <u>Moby-Dick</u> and

<u>Pierre</u>.  However, as Melville grew, he was stymied by the moral structure of the

conventions of antebellum popular fiction, because it was contradicted by his own tragic

nihilism.  Melville's relationship with his readers, as a result of this, was a complex and

ambiguous one, combining the desire to communicate with the desire to punish.

Melville's ambivalent relationship with his readers manifested itself, in the

sequence of mature works begun with <u>Moby-Dick</u>, through the use of a *mixed-genre*

form.  His mixed-genre works combined distinct popular fictional genres in a way that

emphasized moral conflicts between them.  This formal strategy allowed Melville to

work out a relationship to antebellum popular fiction that was creative and original.  The

moral conflicts he created in his mixed-genre texts gave expression to his philosophical

position, allowing each moral position represented by each genre to critique the other and

show its falsity, and by extension demonstrate the larger falsity of *all* positive moral

beliefs and positions.  This allowed him to work out his relationship to his readers, to

communicate by using the mixed-genre form to illustrate his position, while also

attacking the readers by challenging their expectations and their comprehension.

The first chapter, "'A Romance, A Tragedy, and a Natural History': Genre and

Value in <u>Moby-Dick</u>," freshly places <u>Moby-Dick</u> in the context of different kinds of

adventure stories circulating in the antebellum period. Ishmael's part of the narrative is best described as a frontiersman adventure, derived from the tradition of James Fenimore Cooper; Ahab's part of the narrative is positioned as an illustrious criminal adventure, making Ahab a recognizable antihero. I concern myself in this chapter with the hero problem – the question of whether the text's values center on Ahab or Ishmael. If we understand that Melville plays the characters against each other by placing the two genres in conflict, then we can solve this problem, seeing that Melville demonstrates the falsity of *all* claims to value.

The second chapter, "The Punishment of Virtue: Genre and Value in <u>Pierre</u>," looks at the text as a combination of genres along systematic lines. The first half of the text relies on the resources of domestic fiction, facing Pierre with a moral decision and anticipating the rewards of virtue. The second half of the text relies on the resources of city-mysteries fiction, representing the punishment of vice. By a parabolic form that combines the two genres, the text systematically reverses key moral formulae of antebellum fiction, representing a punishment of virtue.

The third chapter, "For His Final Trick: Genre and Value in <u>The Confidence-Man</u>," considers the combination of Southwestern humor and metaphysical fiction in Melville's last work of fiction to be published in his lifetime. I argue that Melville's combination of genre is both formally and philosophically more profound than in any other work, and the text formally demonstrates that moral beliefs are not merely false, but incoherent as well. The text combines genres to present characters whose identities slip back and forth repeatedly, and actions that can be interpreted in radically incompatible

ways.  Melville thus dramatizes the difficulty of reading in a world where humans are

constantly subject to their own illusions.

My fourth chapter, "'But Lever There Is None': Genre and Value in <u>Mardi</u>,"

looks backward to a text written before any of the ones dealt with previously.  In this

chapter I deal with the question of <u>Mardi</u>'s aesthetic failure, arguing that it is an

unsuccessful attempt to do what Melville would go on to do successfully in <u>Moby-Dick</u>,

<u>Pierre</u>, and <u>The Confidence-Man</u>, and only by understanding it thus can one adequately

understand the nature of Melville's failed achievement.

This dissertation makes a number of genuinely original contributions both to the

study of Melville's work and to the study of nineteenth-century American literature

generally.  Although critics have explored Melville's interest in philosophy since the

beginning of the academic study in Melville, and a new generation of critics has been

interested in the popular literature of the nineteenth century, both in and of itself *and* in

relation to the work of the canonical writers, no one has put these two areas of concern

together.  Interest in antebellum popular fiction is on the wax, and this dissertation

contributes to that discussion by paying careful attention to that fiction's moral structure,

and how that moral structure manifests itself differently in different genres.  The picture

it paints of Herman Melville manages to resolve many contradictions, including those

between Melville the high-minded philosopher and Melville the bestselling writer, and

between the Melville who desperately seeks readers and the Melville who seems

concerned with baffling and frustrating his readers.

*For Martha-Lynn*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I.      **THE ISOLATO AND THE COSMOPOLITAN**

Once on board the Pequod, Ishmael describes the men of the crew as "*Isolatoes . . . not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each Isolato living on a separate continent of his own*" [italics Melville's] (121).  The first academic critics to deal with Herman Melville painted the picture of just such an isolato: Melville as a writer who lived on a separate literary continent, devoted only to the great and timeless ideas and issuing his profound books to the world in a spirit of indifference at best, or perhaps contempt.  This image looms over such pioneering early studies as those of F. O. Matthiessen and Richard Chase, among many others[1].  This Isolato-Melville is the canonical author par excellence: innovator of literary form and master of language.  This Melville is fascinated with philosophy and determined to rise to the level of "ontological heroics" (Correspondence 196), ultimately rejecting thoroughly any optimistic or consolatory faith and becoming a thorough nihilist.

Critics have depicted the Isolato-Melville as separate from the world of nineteenth-century American readers and writers.  His literary company is Shakespeare, Milton, and other luminaries of the Western Canon.  This Melville is certainly not put

in the company of most other nineteenth-century American popular authors, authors of a period in American history when literacy skyrocketed, reading of fiction exploded, and the most popular writers were not Nathaniel Hawthorne or even James Fenimore Cooper but female sentimentalists like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner, while bookstalls overflowed with fast-paced adventure stories with titles like The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main (1847) and Black Ralph; Or, the Helmsman of Hurlgate (1844). To the extent that the Isolato-Melville notices this world at all, he is a derisive parodist of popular literature.[2] Because the Isolato-Melville is so far from the antebellum world, critics have seen him as hostile to his readers, and indifferent as to whether or not they would appreciate what he was doing. So there is a critical tradition of a Melville who punishes his readers by giving them books they would not understand – indeed, books he designed to arouse readerly incomprehension[3]: a Melville who, as Ann Douglas puts it, "punishes his readers in advance for their inevitable failure of comprehension" (304).

Since the mid-1980s, however, a picture of a very different Melville has emerged. This is the Melville who, far from rising above and beyond his own immediate context, is positively drenched in it. This Melville appears in the work of later critics, especially David S Reynolds, Sheila Post-Lauria, and Carol Colatrella, as well as those who have drawn on them.[4] This Melville watched the market carefully, and was as fully aware of trends in popular antebellum fiction as any poor miserable dog of a sub-sub librarian. Let us call this Melville the Cosmopolitan-Melville.

The Cosmopolitan-Melville's concerns are different from the Isolato-Melville's. Whereas the latter dwelt on problems of God and human nature, the Cosmopolitan-

Melville concerned himself with the immediate problems of his culture. Reynolds, for instance, deals with Melville's careful observation of the reform idea in nineteenth-century America and its internal contradictions: the idea of moral purity supported by a devilish and sensationalistic rhetoric. Post-Lauria depicts a Melville who carefully employed different kinds of regional fiction to broadly represent different American 'types.' Carol Colatrella, drawing heavily on Melville's use of popular culture and the rhetoric of imprisonment, argues for Melville's deep concern with issues of law, education, and social justice. Rather than philosophical issues, the Cosmopolitan-Melville is deeply involved with the very specific and local problems of antebellum America, and relies on the language of antebellum popular literature.

My dissertation reconciles the Isolato and the Cosmopolitan, and shows that one is crucially dependent on the other. The Melville I will argue for herein wrote about abstruse philosophical ideas, but used the materials of nineteenth-century popular fiction to do so. Melville combined distinct popular genres within single texts, using the oppositions between the genres to emphasize moral conflict, contradiction, and paradox. This formal strategy gives expression to Melville's nihilistic philosophical position as filtered through his use of popular fictional genre. The Isolato and the Cosmopolitan write Melville's books together, through the use of a *mixed-genre structure*.


II.     **"YOUNG AMERICA IN LITERATURE": MORALITY AND THE**
         **ANTEBELLUM FICTIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

As numerous scholars have shown, discourse about fiction in the early United States was chiefly characterized by hostility on the part of cultural leaders: ministers,

politicians, and intellectuals.  Citing the broad sweep of figures who opposed the reading

of fiction, Cathy Davidson points out:

> Timothy Dwight took time out from presiding over Yale, Jonathan
>
> Edwards from fomenting a religious revival, Benjamin Rush from
>
> attending to his medical and philosophical investigations, Noah Webster
>
> from writing dictionaries, and Thomas Jefferson and John Adams from
>
> presiding over a nation – and all to condemn the novel.  (40-41)

These figures phrased their resistance to fiction differently, but all condemnations are

easy to class under one rubric: *immorality*.  "Between the Bible and novels," Dwight

warned, "there is a gulph fixed, which few novel readers are willing to pass" (qtd. in

Cowie 51).  The Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register, in 1801, extended this

rhetoric, describing novels as one great engine in the hands of the fiends of darkness"

(Cowie 51).  Such rhetoric, which accompanied the birth of the nation and the birth of the

genre in the nation[5], persisted at the time Melville was writing: American writers and

critics still condemned fiction in the 1840s and 1850s, Melville's active fiction-writing

period.  For example, in 1843 the Ladies' Repository claimed that "nothing can be more

killing to devotion than the perusal of a book of fiction" (32).  Even works of fiction

themselves echoed this note, as in The Wide Wide World's admonition to "read no

novels" (586).  The majority of commentators, however, realized that fiction was a *fait

accompli*.  The Home Journal struck a defeatist note in 1855 on this subject, saying:

> it is futile to attempt to prevent the young, and many not young, from the
>
> perusal of works of fiction. . . . Indeed, I question the utility, while I
>
> cannot but mark the utter inefficiency, of the wholesale and indiscriminate

proscription of fictitious literature by many well-meaning persons. They

meet a natural demand in our intellectual natures which must be gratified.

They address the imagination, the most powerful and influential faculty of

the mind; and, instead of denouncing everything in this class of literature,

we should seek rather to select and provide pure and wholesome aliment

in this form for the mental appetite of the young. (qtd. in Baym, 1984, 30)

The Christian Examiner struck a similar note of resignation in 1859: "novel-reading may

be misused, but argument for or against it is quite worn-out and superfluous. The great

supply which the last year furnished only proved the demand. In Mr. Carlyle's phrase,

the 'all devouring fact' itself has eaten up and quite ended the old palaver of fine

objections to it" (113).

Such defeatism in critics of the 1840s and 1850s was wise, for the antifiction

discourse did not prevent fiction from becoming extremely popular, as literary historians

have painstakingly demonstrated. At the beginning of the national era, books of fiction

were among the most popular reading. Fiction was so popular at the turn of the century

that books of sketches and travel were advertised as novels (Davidson 40). As literacy

and leisure increased, the popularity of fiction increased as well. From 1820 to 1850, the

number of works of fiction published in the United States increased tenfold, and the

monetary stakes of the book trade exploded as well. Major bestsellers of the 1850s like

The Wide, Wide World were able to number their sales in the hundreds of thousands.[6]

The moral critique of fiction did not prevent literally millions of Americans from reading

fiction.

But to say that the moral critique of fiction did not prevent fiction from becoming popular is not to say the moral critique had no effect. Indeed, it had the effect of creating an atmosphere in which critics, readers, and authors considered fiction to have a moral function: that it would encourage good behavior, and discourage bad. Authors of fiction expected to be judged on moral criteria, and composed their work with that expectation in mind. Such moral writing began with the inception of American fiction, with the use of standard tags like "Founded in Truth" to designate that a work of fiction was not, after all, really fiction[7]. Authors of fiction in the mid-nineteenth century continued to attempt to live up to the assumption that they write works that would have a positive effect on their readers. Hawthorne even referred to this assumption in the preface to The House of Seven Gables: "Many writers lay very great stress upon some definite moral purpose, at which they profess to aim their works. Not to be deficient in this particular, the author has provided himself with a moral" (ii). This assumption is also clear in book reviews, which often substituted moral judgment for any actual description of the works. As Baym points out, "[t]alk about morality is so characteristic of and so widely prevalent in novel reviewing in the 1840s and 1850s as to indicate that it was taken as part of the reviewer's job" (1984, 173). A typical judgment would be found in the May 1848 issue of Graham's: "in criticizing a novel, it becomes important to examine the tendency of the work. We utterly repudiate the idea that a reviewer has nothing to do with the morality of a book. . . . There can be no medium. A fiction which does not do good does harm" (qtd. in Baym, 1984, 173). Clearly, readers believed fiction ought to have a moral function.

Fiction fulfilled its moral function in a number of different ways, such as manipulation of plot, direct commentary by authors or characters, and obvious

6

conventions that indicated a character's moral level.  First and foremost, fictional plots

followed a moral structure: they expressed morality by bringing good characters to good

ends consonant with their virtues, and bad characters to bad ends consonant with their

vices.  This was a feature of plot that both authors and critics discussed publicly.

Graham's praised Edith Kinnaird as one of the "better" sorts of fiction because the

heroine's "sufferings spring from her errors, and are redeemed by her repentance" (298).

The virtuous but poor suitor is rewarded with the hand of his beloved in Caroline Lee

Hentz's Linda; Or, the Young Pilot of the Belle Creole (1850), whereas the wealthier but

greedy cousin ends up disappointed and alone.  Similarly, in The Quaker City (1845), the

seducer Lorrimer dies in an orgy of blood at the hands of his victim's brother, and Dora

Livingstone, who plots with her lover to murder her husband, is killed by her husband.

Poetic justice required not merely that good characters be rewarded and evil characters be

punished, but that they be rewarded and punished *appropriately*.  Thus, in the examples

cited above, Dora Livingstone's attempt to murder her spouse rebounds at her, causing

her to be killed by her own spouse. Those who cheat in love will have their love taken

away, often by their intended victims: in Louise Moulton Chandler's Juno Clifford

(1855), the title character seeks the love of her adopted son and uses fraud to keep him

away from his true love; as a result, the two young lovers are united and Juno is left

alone.  When Natty Bumppo, in The Deerslayer (1841), keeps his word of honor to

submit to punishments by returning to the Native Americans who have captured him and

are intending to torture him, Captain Warley rescues him from his punishment.  This

moral structure, a plot rewarding the good and punishing the bad, pervaded antebellum

popular fiction and supported fiction's moral function, its general policy of encouraging

goodness and discouraging evil.

Less subtly, antebellum authors provided direct commentary in the bodies of their

works, making points about morality in general or the moral behavior of their characters.

A common place for this commentary was in prefaces: George Lippard made his moral

purpose clear in his preface to The Quaker City, where he announced that he had founded

his book on the idea that "*the seduction of a poor and innocent girl, is a deed altogether*

*as criminal as deliberate murder*" (2).  Direct commentary could occur within the

narrative as well, often guiding readers towards the correct evaluations of characters and

their actions.  E. D. E. N. Southworth, in The Hidden Hand (1859), writes:

> THE unregenerate human heart is, perhaps, the most inconsistent thing in
>
> all nature; and in nothing is it more capricious than in the manifestations
>
> of its passions; and in no passion is it so fantastic as in that which it
>
> miscalls love, but which is really often only appetite.
>
> From the earliest days of manhood Craven Le Noir had been the
>
> votary of vice, which he called pleasure. Before reaching the age of
>
> twenty-five he had run the full course of dissipation, and found himself
>
> ruined in health, degraded in character and disgusted with life.
>
> Yet in all this experience his heart had not been once agitated with
>
> a single emotion that deserved the name of passion. It was colder than the
>
> coldest.
>
> He had not loved Clara, though, for the sake of her money, he had
>
> courted her so assiduously. Indeed, for the doctor's orphan girl he had

from the first conceived a strong antipathy. His evil spirit had shrunk from

her pure soul with the loathing a fiend might feel for an angel. He had

found it repugnant and difficult, almost to the extent of impossibility, for

him to pursue the courtship to which he was only reconciled by a sense

of duty to his pocket.   (349)

Such commentary is distinct from narration of characters' thoughts and feelings; it is not

Le Noir who judges his spirit to be "evil" or his heart to be "colder than the coldest," but

Southworth herself, and she encourages her readers to share her conclusions.  Similarly,

Simms passes judgment on the titular villain of Guy Rivers (1841):

The intellect of Guy Rivers had been gigantic – the mistake – a mistake

quite too common to society – consisted in an education limited entirely to

the mind, and entirely neglectful of the morale of the boy.  He was taught,

like thousands of others; and the standards set up for his moral

government, for his passions, for his emotions, were all false from the

first.  The capacities of his mind were good as well as great – but they had

been restrained, while the passions had all been brought into active, and at

length ungovernable exercise.  How was it possible that reason, thus

taught to be subordinate, could hold the strife long, when passion – fierce

passion – the passion of the querulous infant, and the peevish boy, only to

be bribed to its duty by the toy and the sugarplum – is its uncompromising

antagonist? (442)

Sometimes a mouthpiece character would provide this commentary: John and Alice

Humphries in The Wide, Wide World or Natty in Cooper's Deerslayer books, for

example. In <u>The Last of the Mohicans</u> (1826), Natty speaks for the author when he says "The holy Bible is not more true, and that is the truest thing in nature" (23). Authors used the moral structure to indicate which characters to trust. Natty's commentary is believable in part because he comes to a happy ending; Alice Humphries's advice to put one's trust in God and not in good works is true because she dies in a happy and blessed state.

Finally, well-recognized conventions indicated the moral levels of different characters. Readers were familiar with these conventions, and authors used them to convey moral judgments and instruct readers how to evaluate characters. If a male hero must choose between a blonde and a brunette, he will (and should) choose the blonde. Simply dressed women will have better character than richly dressed women; similarly, female characters named Isabel will almost always be "belles": frivolous (though not vicious) flirts. Blind and otherwise disabled characters will have a depth of moral insight, although characters who are grotesquely disfigured will not: for example, Emily in <u>The Lamplighter</u> (1854) is sympathetic because she is blind, whereas the dwarfish, hunchbacked Gold-Bug in <u>The Quaker City</u> is a fiend. These conventions were used widely by popular antebellum writers in service of a moral function.

Thus far, I have painted a specific picture of the antebellum literary situation: one in which fiction, responding to moral criticism, adopted a moral function. This does not mean that all antebellum fictions were morally identical. Individual fictional texts differed from each other, not just in details of plot, character, and style, but in the details of the moral function they imagined for themselves. <u>Uncle Tom's Cabin</u> (1852) and Caroline Lee Hentz's <u>The Planter's Northern Bride</u> (1854) articulate very different

positions on the question of slavery: the former book represents slavery as a moral outrage, the latter as a gentle and familial institution. But such debates do not contradict the argument that fiction performed a moral function; disagreements between texts on moral questions confirm that function. Uncle Tom's Cabin and The Planter's Northern Bride differ on the details of slavery: how slavery functions, what the actual capacities of African-Americans are, and so forth. Both presume agreement on the same fundamental moral principles and pitch their debate according to those principles. Uncle Tom's Cabin attacks slavery because it is cruel; The Planter's Northern Bride defends slavery because it is kind. Debates between texts demonstrate the moral function of fiction.

However, there is also a body of antebellum fictions that appear to be grossly immoral by antebellum standards. David S. Reynolds, in Beneath the American Renaissance, uses the term "Subversive" to designate texts that include both sensationalistic stories of urban crime such as Lippard's The Quaker City, George Thompson's City Crimes (1849), or Ned Buntline's The Mysteries and Miseries of New York (1848) and extremely violent stories of adventure on high seas or untamed land, such as Buntline's pirate stories. These texts all shared a delight in violence, a fascination with criminal characters and antiheroes, and, in many cases, a lurid approach to sex. The existence of such texts challenges my characterization of antebellum fiction as a body of work that followed a strictly moral function.

There are two reasons, however, that such grisly tales do not contract the argument that antebellum readers and critics assumed that fiction had a moral function. First, exceptions do not mean that a rule does not exist, merely that the rule's power of enforcement is not unlimited. The existence of crime does not disprove the existence of

the law.  Second, much of the body of work that Reynolds points to constitutes a class of examples of the rule.  The revelation of gruesome violence and unbridled eroticism does not automatically put a text out of bounds.  What is important in these cases is that authors maintained the *moral structure*.  Criminals and villains committed misdeeds in these texts, but were punished; women who gave into seduction suffered for it.  Authors could justify their scenes of sex and violence by fitting them into the moral structure of their works (the end of George Thompson's <u>City Crimes</u> portrays a criminal being slowly tortured to death, but he is a criminal after all, guilty of many vicious murders).  Antihero characters might reform at the end, preferably after revelations that nullify their misdeeds (J. H. Ingraham's Lafitte turns pirate after murdering his brother over a love rivalry; when he finds out that his brother is in fact still alive, he is free to reenter his land-bound life), or the antihero character might die unrepentant, as Simms's Guy Rivers does.  It is likely that many readers used these texts for immersion in sordidness or for identification with evil, but the rhetoric and techniques of these authors still showed respect for the rules of fictional morality.

Both obvious exemplars and apparent exceptions, therefore, serve to prove our point: fiction in antebellum America was expected by its audience to live up to certain moral demands, and, as a whole, fiction did so by imposing a moral structure on its content.  By doing so, antebellum fiction supported a galaxy of assumptions of antebellum morality: the belief in a benevolent God, the virtue of republicanism, and Christian laws that regulated social and individual behavior, laws that could be understood unambiguously and were believed to be objective and universal.

## III. "I AM DUMB WITH DOUBT; YET, 'TIS NOT DOUBT, BUT WORSE: I DOUBT MY DOUBT": MELVILLE AND PHILOSOPHY

For Melville, the problem with writing in the moral world of antebellum fiction was that, by the time he wrote <u>Moby-Dick</u>, he could not believe in God or moral laws. Rather, Melville had become what I term a *tragic nihilist*. He was a nihilist because he believed the universe was devoid of any guiding reason or absolute principles of morality of truth. However, Melville held that humans believed in such principles because of the delusive nature of our perception. This delusion created a disjuncture between the truth about the world and the way humans see the world, and this disjuncture was tragic. Melville's position of tragic nihilism informed all of his work in the 1850s.

Melville's philosophical interests are evident in his work, which he used as a forum for exploring philosophical issues: questions about the reliability of one's ideas, the source of one's knowledge, the constitution and nature of ultimate reality, and the nature of good and evil. His reading and correspondence reveal this interest: he owned or checked out of the library (according to Sealts in <u>Melville's Reading</u>) books by Aristotle, Edmund Burke, Goethe, Machiavelli, Montaigne, and Schopenhauer. In addition, his works make reference to Locke, Kant, Plato, and Spinoza. His letters chat about God and Being. Moreover, his contemporary readers noticed the philosophical bent of his writing. The London <u>Atlas</u>, in a review of <u>Mardi</u>, compared Melville to a "romancing philosopher" and described the book as "seasoned throughout with German metaphysics of the most transcendental school" (qtd. in Higgins and Parker, 1995, 194). "He has something to say on every subject," opined <u>Bentley's Miscellany</u> on the same book, "from the Berkeleyan theory to the immortality of whales" (qtd. in Higgins and Parker,

1995, 200), and the <u>Albion</u> said it had an "infinite fund" of "philosophy" (qtd. in Higgins and Parker, 1995, 215). Evert Duyckinck in the <u>Literary World</u> called <u>Moby-Dick</u> a "philosophical" account of the whale (qtd. in Higgins and Parker, 1995, 375). So clearly Melville was writing a kind of philosophical fiction.

Two crucial intellectual currents shaped Melville's tragic nihilist position: first, his Calvinist upbringing; second, the influence of Kantian philosophy. Calvinism prepared him to reject optimistic beliefs about the world or the human place in it. Although the intellectual force of Calvinism in American culture during Melville's formative years (the 1820s and 1830s) had lessened,[8] it was still a potent force in Melville's personal life. Melville's mother, Maria Gansevoort Melville, who loomed especially large in Melville's life after his father's death, was brought up in the older American stock, and insisted that Herman be baptized in the Calvinistic Dutch Reformed Church.[9] One need not describe Melville as a believing Calvinist to appreciate the religion's impact on him. Calvinism gave Melville an emotional coloration that led him to reject optimism and respect "blackness." He describes this emotional belief in "Hawthorne and His Mosses":

> Whether Hawthorne has simply availed himself of this mystical blackness
> as a means to the wondrous effects he makes it to produce in his lights and
> shades; or whether there really lurks in him, perhaps unknown to himself,
> a touch of Puritanic gloom,--this, I cannot altogether tell. Certain 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

14

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. (243)

T. Walter Herbert has thoroughly described the influence of Calvinism on Melville's

adult mind. Herbert argues that the importance of Calvinism in his early life, and the

debates between Calvinist and liberal theology that were proceeding in America in the

antebellum period, piqued Melville's interest in theological problems, particularly the

problems of whether God was good or human suffering was merited, an interest that

reached fruition in Moby-Dick.

But if the way to tragic nihilism was prepared by Calvin, it was Kant who took

Melville by the hand and led him down that grim road. Melville's introduction to Kant

was informal, and in large part indirect.[10] His reading of Emerson and the other

Transcendentalists would have exposed him to Kantian ideas. Melville attended a lecture

of Emerson's in 1849, which he was "very agreeably disappointed" to find "quite

intelligible" (121); although there is no record of his acquiring any books by Emerson

until 1859, Merton M. Sealts, Jr., argues persuasively he could very well have read such

important essays as "Self-Reliance" and "Experience" in the late 1840s, possibly in the

private library of his friend Evert Duyckinck, who owned all of Emerson's major works.

Melville might have learned about German philosophy from other sources than Emerson:

White-Jacket makes reference to a ship's chaplain who "prance[s]" on "Coleridge's

'*High German Horse*'" (167); Melville had himself acquired Coleridge's Biographia

Literaria, and read German writers very thoroughly in 1849 and 1850 (Sealts 50).

Especially crucial for Melville's exposure to German philosophy was his acquaintance

with George Adler, a German philologist.  In 1849 Melville traveled to Europe to find a

European publisher for <u>White-Jacket</u>, and, during the lengthy voyage, was in close

association with Adler.  The two spent "hours" discussing such German philosophers as

Kant and Schlegel (Robertson-Lorant 218).  Even without his reading of Emerson and his

travels with Adler, moreover, the influence of Kant on romantic literature and

philosophical thought was pervasive throughout the nineteenth century.  By the time

Melville began writing <u>Moby-Dick</u>, therefore, Melville would have had a fairly broad

familiarity with Kant's more important innovations in philosophy.

It is the Kantian solution to the problem of the *synthetic a priori* that crucially

influenced Melville toward a deep belief that ascriptions of meaning to the universe are

purely imaginary.  In his <u>Critique of Pure Reason</u>, Kant argues that the existence of

certain fundamental constituents of perception – time, space, causality – cannot be known

deductively or inductively and are therefore built into human perceptual faculties.  For

example, the existence of time is entirely beyond the scope of investigation, since the

concept of time is built into the faculties we would use for investigation, and belongs to

the domain of the subjective.  This conception arrived in American transcendentalism via

its popularizers, chiefly Coleridge, who John J. McAleer argues was Emerson's main

source for Kant (163).

Melville's combination of Calvinist pessimism and German subjectivism

produced a position that was fundamentally nihilistic.  A deeply disenchanted idealist

who regarded ideal truth as the only truth, for him empirical or pragmatic truth would not

do.  Since Melville rejected the belief in God or any other ideal truth, he regarded life as

meaningless.  Sealts characterizes Melville's work as a long dialogue with Plato, either

directly or in large part through the idealistic tradition that follows from Plato. According to Sealts, Melville first displayed his enchantment with Plato in Mardi; numerous other critics have demonstrated the influence of Transcendentalism there as well.[11] Melville's important subsequent works – starting with <u>Moby-Dick</u> – all indicate a serious engagement with idealism, but a deeply critical one, profoundly disenchanted with notions of objective truth. This engagement remained hostile for the rest of his career (Sealts 278-336). In the absence of any ideal truth, Melville regarded no moral statement as true or as anything other than an expression of emotion. Pierre comes to this awful realization too late, in a discussion with Isabel. Isabel asks, "Tell me first what is Virtue:—begin!" Pierre replies:

> "If on that point the gods are dumb, shall a pigmy speak? Ask the air!"
>
> > "Then Virtue is nothing."
> >
> > "Not that!"
> >
> > "Then Vice?"
> >
> > "Look: a nothing is the substance, it casts one shadow one way,
> >
> > and another the other way; and these two shadows cast from one nothing;
> >
> > these, seems to me, are Virtue and Vice." (274)

Pierre denies that virtue is "nothing"; rather, it is the shadow of a "nothing." A shadow, however, is pure appearance, lacking substance. If virtue is a shadow of a nothing, then it is the appearance of nothing: an insubstantial illusion. This belief – that all assertions of value or meaning were illusory – was Melville's nihilism.

I call Melville's nihilism "tragic" because he believed that humans were almost completely incapable of accepting the nihilistic truth and were compelled to live in

illusion.  Melville's position – that belief in meaning or absolute value is illusory, strictly

a matter of feeling – reflects his interpretation of Kantian subjectivism.  Melville's

interest in philosophy, and his exposure to the basic ideas circulating in German

philosophy, I argue, led him to the position that fundamental ideas – good and evil,

meaningfulness and meaninglessness, the existence of God – were part of the perceptual

apparatus that provided synthetic *a priori* knowledge.  Edgar Dryden has shown that

Melville's literary project starts with nihilism, and turns then to all the deceptions of the

human mind:

> Meville's theory of fiction is based on a vision of life as an empty
>
> masquerade.  The human and natural worlds are lies.  The mind of man
>
> and the material of nature are "nothing but surface stratified on surface"
>
> (P, XXI, 335) and both are hollow at the core.  To penetrate beneath these
>
> surfaces, however, is no easy task.  As with Conrad's darkness, direct
>
> confrontation with Melville's whiteness brings madness and death. . .
>
> indirection is necessary not only because the actual world is a "world of
>
> lies" but because of the destructive nature of Truth itself.  As with
>
> Conrad's darkness, Melville's Truth is a positive threat to sanity and life.
>
> To face it directly, in one's "own proper character," is to be driven mad.
>
> (21-26)

This inability of humans to face the nihilistic truth was faced by Melville himself:

Hawthorne's comment that Melville "can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his

unbelief" (Leyda 529) is an acute diagnosis of his participation in this universal malady.

In a letter to Hawthorne, he gives a *précis* of this view, joking that a man with a

toothache would be advised by Goethe to "live in the All," and describes such views as "nonsense" and "flummery" (193)  In a postscript, however, he adds:

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

Melville distinguishes between a "temporary feeling or opinion" – in this case, pantheistic optimism – that feels true at the time, and the "universal application" of it, which "plays mischief" with the truth, since optimism is not true, or even false, but only a temporary mood.  This disjuncture between our subjective beliefs, on the one hand, and the objective conditions that obtain in the world, on the other hand, is the source of tragedy for Melville.

Despite Melville's belief that humans are generally incapable of facing the truth of nihilism, he occasionally allows his characters temporary insights into the grim truth, while emphasizing the fleetingness of their insight.  After Pierre states that good and evil are both delusive appearances, empty at the core, Isabel asks, "Then why torment thyself so, dearest Pierre?"  Pierre replies, "It is the law" (274).  What law is that?  It cannot be a moral law of the metaphysical kind, one eternally true and built into the fabric of being, because such moral laws cannot exist, since their constituents, "virtue" and "vice," are nothing.  The law must be a psychological, rather than a metaphysical, one: a law of human nature.  Pierre, in this moment, *realizes* that virtue and vice are the shadows of

19

nothing, but he is not free to cease tormenting himself even with this knowledge. Ahab, perhaps the ultimate metaphysical questor in Melville's corpus, suspects the truth. In the midst of the famous monologue in "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab articulates his own philosophy, a raging inverted Platonism:

> 'Hark ye yet again, -- the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event -- 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 man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. (164)

Ahab's position is not nihilism: he believes in a profound ultimate reality, though an evil one.[12] But then Ahab confesses his doubt: "Sometimes I think there's naught beyond" (164). Such a confession is completely damning to Ahab's position; if there is nought beyond, there is nothing and nobody to take revenge on. But this possibility does not move Ahab one iota from his course of action predicated on his false belief, because Ahab is compelled to seek such truth; as he confesses to Starbuck, he is not free, but is driven by some "cozzening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor" (545) that commands him onward. Ishmael, too, has similar visions, both brief and sustained. One brief one is his comment on the whale's tail: "Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven. So in dreams, have I seen majestic Satan thrusting forth his tormented colossal claw from the flame Baltic of Hell. But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if

20

in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the archangels" (378). A more profound vision of the basic meaninglessness at the core of being appears in the much-celebrated chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale." Ishmael begins by announcing he will present a view alternative to Ahab's demonic one. He proceeds to turn over and over in his mind the kindly and pleasant associations of the color white, in Native American lore, the Christian tradition, classical mythology, and so forth. He then turns to those associations of whiteness that are frightening or depressing: polar bears, white sharks, albinism, corpses. After reviewing this apparent contradiction, Ishmael states that "not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness" (195) He then suggests that whiteness "by its indefiniteness . . . shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation"; going further, he suggests that "as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows -- a colorless, all- color of atheism from which we shrink?" (195) Whiteness is therefore not, for Ishmael, a symbol of demonism or of Ahab's hated God. Rather, if whiteness is the absence of color (as Melville states), then it is essentially nothing. To the extent that whiteness is a symbol of metaphysical truth, as Ishmael implies, then whiteness signifies not an unpleasant but meaningful truth, like Ahab's belief in the malevolence of providence, but the even grimmer truth of nihilism. However, Ishmael does not sustain this vision for the rest of Moby-Dick; like Ahab's, his vision is temporary, and he is compelled to journey on.

## IV. "IT IS, MOSTLY, INSINUATED TO THOSE WHO MAY BEST UNDERSTAND IT": MELVILLE AND HIS READERS

Given Melville's nihilism, it is inevitable that he should have difficulties presenting those beliefs in fictional form, since a positive moralism was essential to the moral function of fiction. Hentz's <u>Linda</u>, with its happy ending for the honest but poor suitor, proceeds from an assumption that honesty is *good* in some objective sense. Similarly, the thunderous proclamations against wealthy seducers in Lippard and Thompson's city-mysteries fictions take as axiomatic that seduction is genuinely wrong. In rewarding and punishing virtue and vice, authors stood in for the deity or other transcendent moral authority that rewarded and punished. According to Melville's tragic nihilism, however, there is nothing truly good about honesty or bad about seduction; both only *appear* right or wrong because of human subjectivity. Certainly no God or moral authority was "out there" to validate these feelings of goodness and badness. Thus, Melville's beliefs were incompatible with the basic moral assumptions of antebellum fiction as a whole.

The dilemma was that Melville relied on antebellum fiction and its motifs. His emotional need for readers was strong, and thus he used the resources of popular antebellum fiction to communicate with them. At the same time, those resources worked against his central vision as an author. Since Melville conceived of his readers as trained to read that popular fiction, Melville conceived of the truth-telling author as antagonistic to his readers: in order to communicate the truth to them, he had to attack all their presuppositions and reading habits. This meant that Melville's stance towards his readers was antagonistic; that antagonism, for Melville, was essential to the writing enterprise.

22

Melville criticism since the 1980s has established Melville's great familiarity with popular fiction and his literary debt to it. As Reynolds points out, Melville peppers his own work with references to popular fiction. The cook Baltimore in Omoo owns a book called <u>A History of the Most Atrocious and Bloody Piracies</u>.[13] In the long series of epigraphs that begins <u>Moby-Dick</u>, Melville includes two popular adventure stories, <u>Miriam Coffin</u> (1834) and <u>Wharton the Whale-Killer</u> (1848). Indeed, in <u>White-Jacket</u>, Melville has his nameless narrator utter a preference for the noncanonical and everyday in literature, saying:

> My book experiences on board of the frigate proved an example of a fact which every book-lover must have experienced before me, namely, that though public libraries have an imposing air, and doubtless contain invaluable volumes, yet, somehow, the books that prove most agreeable, grateful, and companionable, are those we pick up by chance here and there; those which seem put into our hands by Providence; those which pretend to little, but abound in much. (169)

Melville was far from the literary hermit, locked in his writing chamber with Dante on one side and Shakespeare at the other, that those who read <u>Pierre</u> as a semi-self-portrait might infer; rather, he was a writer very intimately aware of the popular literature of his day, and he constructed his texts using the conventions of that literature. For example, as Post-Lauria demonstrates, <u>Typee</u>, which Melville described, in a letter to his publisher, as "calculated for popular reading or for none at all" (Correspondence 56), carefully deployed both sentimental and sensational elements then popular in American magazine fiction (Post-Lauria 27-39). Such "calculations for popularity" were a constant of

Melville's career, as he described <u>Pierre</u> as "a regular romance" (226) and <u>Israel Potter</u> as "nothing weighty. It is adventure. As for its interest, I shall try to sustain that as well as I can" (Leyda 489). Melville was a writer who, by his own admission at least, was interested in the popular literary market, and his own work reflected that interest. Melville's constant use of popular motifs indicates a real attempt to reach readers. <u>Typee</u>'s calculations for popularity included the elements of cannibalism that were in vogue in literature about Polynesia, and the general mixture of romanticization and horror in its attitude towards the non-Western culture was also typical of travel literature (Post-Lauria 12-13). The thick realistic descriptions in <u>Omoo</u> are standard fare in popular nautical reminiscences (Post-Lauria 52-54), as is the adolescent narrator in <u>Redburn</u> (Post-Lauria 84). As Reynolds has pointed out, the rhetoric of reformist movements appears throughout Melville's work. Moreover, even Melville's more obviously philosophical works use antebellum popular motifs. They use popular settings, particularly the adventurous high seas (as in <u>Moby-Dick</u> and <u>Mardi</u>), as well as the seamy underside of urban life (in <u>Pierre</u>). Many of the characters in these works bear striking resemblances to popular character types: the ranting antihero (Ahab) or the blonde and brunette girls (Lucy and Isabel in <u>Pierre</u>). Whaling was a popular subject, found both in <u>Moby-Dick</u> as well as the popular texts like <u>Wharton the Whale-Killer</u> cited in the "Extracts." All of these elements are integral to Melville's plots and themes.

Melville's use of popular motifs stems in part from his desire for a large readership of consumers to buy his books, given his constant financial difficulties[14]. But Melville did not merely want a market of readers; he wanted an *audience* of readers: readers who would know what he was up to and appreciate him. Both Melville's books

and his personal testimony show how important readers were to Melville, and what profound faith he put in the reader-writer relationship.  Melville presents a relationship of this kind in the Bardianna-Babbalanja relationship in Mardi.  Babbalanja identifies the words of the ancient Mardian sage Bardianna as the voice of his own self:

> May you not possibly mistake, my lord? for I do not so much quote Bardianna, as Bardianna quoted me, though he flourished before me; and no vanity, but honesty to say  so. The catalogue of true thoughts is but small; they are ubiquitous; no man's property; and unspoken, or bruited, are the same. When we hear them, why seem they so natural, receiving our spontaneous approval? why do we think we have heard them before? Because they but reiterate ourselves; they were in us, before we were born. The truest poets are but mouth-pieces; and some men are duplicates of each other; I see myself in Bardianna.  (397)

In a world made of words, to share thoughts and words is pragmatically to be the same person; this is a fantasy of total connection to the point of dissolving mutual identities into a new collective one.  Literary language is the medium for this joining.  Melville's own feelings for Hawthorne are similar: in one important letter, Melville exults that Hawthorne has not only read Moby-Dick, but that he has "understood the pervading thought that impelled the book" (Correspondence 212-213).  From there, Melville goes on to a fantasy of total merging with this reader: he speaks of the "infinite fraternity of feeling" that they share, and shares a fantasy of being physically merged with Hawthorne: "By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips – lo, they are yours and not mine. I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the

Supper, and that we are the pieces" (212).  He even imagines them as being connected by a fantastic endless letter, reiterating the fantasy of identity:

> P.S. I can't stop yet. If the world was entirely made up of Magians, I'll tell
> you what I should do. I should have a paper-mill established at one end of
> the house, and so have an endless riband of foolscap rolling in upon my
> desk; and upon that endless riband I should write a thousand – a million –
> billion thoughts, all under the form of a letter to you. The divine magnet is
> on you, and my magnet responds. Which is the biggest? A foolish question
> – they are *One*.  (213)

Melville's fantasy here becomes specifically textual: he and Hawthorne will become one through the medium of writing and reading.  This letter presents an intensely stated instance of Melville's deep and powerful need for readers.

However, Melville's devotion to tragic nihilism worked against this need. Melville, as he sees himself, wishes to bring truth to his readers.  However, he also saw his readers through the lens of the antebellum popular fiction they read.  This lens shaped Melville's *conception* of his readers, as distinct from Melville's historical readers, and that conception is what informed Melville's literary career.  Since Melville saw this fiction as based on lies, he saw his truth as one that was difficult and painful for his readers.  By telling the truth, therefore, Melville was putting himself in the position of his readers' antagonist, one who wishes to inflict necessary pain on them, and one who readers will want to reject.  His self-testimony as an author makes this clear.  To Hawthorne, Melville complained that his distinctive message would never reach a wide audience or be profitable to his career:

26

> Try to get a living by the Truth – and go to the Soup Societies. . . . Dollars
>
> damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding
>
> the door ajar. . . . What I feel  most moved to write, that is banned, — it
>
> will not pay.  Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot.  So the product
>
> is a final hash, and all my books are botches.  (Correspondence 191)

Instead, we see Melville expressing a fondness for unpopular works of genius: "So far as I am individually concerned, and independent of my pocket," he wrote to Lemuel Shaw, "it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to 'fail'" (Correspondence 139).  Melville self-mockingly described his epic philosophical poem Clarel as "eminently adapted for unpopularity" (Correspondence 483).  About the works that embodied his ideas and ambitions, Melville ruminated that their audience would reject them.

Melville made similar pronouncements in his work, presenting texts that embody truth as repelling or rejecting readers.  Only in the early work Mardi can Babbalanja read and understand the deep truths of Bardianna's opus, "A Happy Life."  Later truth-seekers are not so fortunate.  In Moby-Dick, a "mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" (480) adorns the tattooed body of Queequeg, but nobody can read it.  The solution to all of Pierre's problems is (supposedly) found in the pamphlet on "Chronometricals and Horologicals" by Plotinus Plinlimmon, but the second half of the pamphlet is missing. And The Confidence-Man presents a series of unreadable but important texts, from the placard in the first chapter to the Apocryphal scriptures of the last.[15] The writer who wishes to bring truth is *necessarily* hostile to readers who expect something else, because that writer will frustrate readers.

27

Melville's hostility to his readers manifested itself in two obvious ways. First, he implicitly rejected his readers by his resentful comments about his most popular books, implying that they were trifling and that the readers who enjoyed them were equally trifling. He came to dislike his own popularity to the extent that it was founded on his earliest works Typee and Omoo. "What 'reputation' H. M. has is horrible," he confided to Hawthorne. "To go down to posterity is bad enough, any way; but to go down as a 'man who lived among the cannibals'!" (193) In the 1860s, in directing the publication of his first volume of poems, he pleaded to his brother Allan, "For God's sake don't have *By the author of 'Typee' 'Piddledee' &c* on the title-page" (343). Similarly, he wrote to his publisher John Murray, "[u]nless you should deem it very desirable do not put me down on the title page as 'the author of Typee & Omoo'. I wish to separate 'Mardi' as much as possible from those books" (114-115). He confessed to a dislike for others of his books, characterizing them as trash written for the popular taste alone. Redburn in particular attracted his distaste, and he described it in his journal as "a thing, which I, the author, know to be trash, & wrote it to buy some tobacco with" (139); it and White-Jacket he characterized in a letter to Lemuel Shaw as "two *jobs*, which I have done for money – being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood" (138). Melville came to dismiss these works because they were not challenging and frustrating enough, and therefore were trivial.

Second, many critics have argued that Melville's other works explicitly reject, attack, and insult readers. As Kenneth Dauber has shown, the very opening gesture of Moby-Dick ("Call me Ishmael") is a challenge and a threat of rejection to the reader of the text (192-194). Furthermore, as Stephen Railton, describing Moby-Dick as nourished

by a "reservoir of hostility and resentment" towards its audience (176), argues, the text as a whole is characterized by innumerable other gestures of defiance, arrogantly addressing the readers as ignorant landsmen and challenging all the reader's preconceived notions – of religion, of truth, and of common decency – in an unapologetic fashion. In <u>Pierre</u>, critics have found an even more ready locus for interpreting Melville as hostile to his readers. William Charvat, among others, has pointed out the use of the Pierre-as-writer plot to this end:

> Melville here seems to take perverse satisfaction in abusing, satirizing, and insulting the reading public and its representatives – editors and publishers. He excoriates the kind of novels that they make popular. He accuses them of "unforgiveable affronts and insults" to great authors like Dante in the past; of missing the "deeper meanings" of Shakespeare; of judging literature as they do morals; of praising an author's worst books, or liking his best ones for the wrong reasons. The publishers who serve them are thievish illiterates. In short, "Though the world worship Mediocrity and Common Place, yet hath it fire and sword for all contemporary Grandeur." But bad as the present is (it is a "bantering, barren and prosaic heartless age," which will not tolerate the serious), the future will be worse, for it will see "the mass of humanity reduced to one level of dotage." (252)

But, I argue, this hostility was hardly separable from Melville's literary ambitions as a philosophical writer. A writer who wants to tell the truth must challenge and attack his readers, because the truth is the meaninglessness of life and the delusiveness of belief,

and that is a challenge and an attack to humanity. Melville's use of popular fictional motifs escalated this challenge, because that fiction presumed the exact opposite of tragic nihilism, and its readers presumed similarly. To reach them, the writer must frustrate their expectations. The problem[16], as he formulated it, was this: how does one say something (the truth of tragic nihilism) in a language (antebellum popular fiction) designed for saying the complete opposite?

## V. "THE GREAT ART OF TELLING THE TRUTH": MELVILLE AND MIXED-GENRE FORM

Melville solved this problem by turning the language of popular fiction against itself, and mixed-genre form was the way he did it. In his works from the 1850-1857 period, the ones in which he tackled the philosophical concerns of tragic nihilism head-on, Melville combined different genres within single texts. Doing so allowed Melville to dramatize his philosophical position, while still employing the language of nineteenth-century popular fiction. Because this was a strategy for communicating his position, it served as a means of approach to Melville's readers, but it also served as a means of attack on readers, frustrating and challenging them. Melville saw the writer's role as bearer of bad news, and used genre mixture to bear that bad news.

In my discussion of Melville's use of mixed-genre form, I adopt the vocabulary developed in Alastair Fowler's Kinds of Literature to describe combinations of genre[17]. Fowler describes three basic processes of combining genres: first, inclusion, in which a text of one generic type is embedded entirely within another, with the embedded genre subordinate; second, satire, in which parody (a distinct genre) adopts the form of another

30

genre being parodied; third, hybridization, in which two different genres are combined

closely without subordinating one to the other.  Hybridization, in which genres mix

without subordination, is the form of genre combination Melville uses in <u>Mardi</u>, <u>Moby-</u>

<u>Dick</u>, <u>Pierre</u>, and <u>The Confidence-Man</u>.

Hybridization itself can take two different forms, according to Fowler.  First,

hybridization can divide the work between two genres.  Michael Draton's 61 begins as an

eight-line dramatic epigram, and then switches to a sonnet sestet (Fowler 185).  Second,

hybridization can introduce the style and subject matter of one genre into the form of

another, such as introducing epigrammatic style and matter into sonnet form, as in the

anonymous author of <u>Choice, Chance, and Change</u> (184). In <u>Mardi</u>, <u>Moby-Dick</u>, and

<u>Pierre</u>, Melville uses the first kind of hybridization.  He divides the structure into single-

genre sections.  Thus, <u>Mardi</u> consists of sea adventure in some sections and allegory in

others, <u>Moby-Dick</u> alternates between cluster of chapters in the frontiersman genre and

clusters of chapters in the illustrious criminal genre, and <u>Pierre</u> begins as a domestic

fiction and ends as a city-mysteries fiction.  <u>The Confidence-Man</u> uses the second form

of hybridization, combining southwestern humor and metaphysical fiction in a literary

fusion, so that no section is identifiable as one or the other.  However, all four of these

major texts are hybrids of multiple genres, not ultimately classifiable under any single

generic aegis, and in no case does one genre successfully predominate.

Both nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers noted that certain of Melville's

works combined genres; applying Fowler allows us to look at that long-noted

combination in a systematic way.  <u>Mardi</u>'s mixed character was obvious to many critics:

the <u>London Examiner</u> called it a "heap . . . flung together with little order or connexion"

31

(qtd. in Higgins and Parker, 1995, 197); the <u>New York Evening Mirror</u> found its mix of genres suitable for several distinct audiences: "the scholar," "the man of erudition," "the divine," "the philosopher," "the poet," "the little child," and the "genius" (207); the <u>London Morning Chronicle</u> found it to be a "wonderful and unreadable compound" (229); a French critic, writing in the <u>New York Literary World</u>, described it as a "bizarre work, commencing as a novel, turning into a fairy tale, and availing itself of allegory to reach the satirical after passing through the elegy, the drama, and the burlesque novel" (244). <u>Moby-Dick</u> also received notice for its combination of elements. The London Athenaeum described it as an "ill-compounded mixture" (356); the London Spectator called it a "singular medley" (359); Evert A. Duyckinck, in the <u>Literary World</u>, cleverly said that the "difficulty in the estimate of this, in common with one or two other of Mr. Melville's books, occurs from the double character under which they present themselves. . . . There are evidently two if not three books in Moby Dick rolled into one" (384); the <u>New York Commercial Advertiser</u> described it as a "salmagundi" (388). I will show that this mixture of forms was a consciously chosen strategy.

I argue that mixed-genre structure was Melville's strategy for dramatizing his philosophical position in the antebellum marketplace of readers. On the one hand, Melville used this structure as a way to communicate with his readers, giving them the tools they would need to understand his work. The genres that Melville used were recognizable ones that had a popular audience. Moreover, he emphasizes the moral function of each genre. His genre mixtures show the incompatibility of the presumed moral functions of each. This arrangement points to the tragic nihilism that Melville espoused, and the ultimate falsity of the moral presumptions of antebellum fiction.

32

But at the same time, Melville's use of a mixed-genre structure expresses a stance towards readers that we must describe as oppositional, even hostile. This hostility manifested itself on two levels: at the level of form, and at the level of content. By using a complicated mixed-genre structure that frustrated normal expectations and required readers to work hard to understand, Melville made the author an obstacle to understanding rather than an aid. His discussions of writing show a fascination with writers who are difficult and require careful interpretation. In his tribute to Cooper, he wrote that Cooper "was a great, robust-souled man, all whose merits are not even yet fully appreciated" (Leyda 440). Despite his controversial political opinions, Cooper was one of the most well-known and highly respected writers in America at the time of his death, and to say that his merits were not yet appreciated could not mean that not enough people had read him; rather, it meant to say that, though he has been read, he has not been understood, for his merits are not on the surface. Melville claims two credits for himself with this statement: first, for himself as being a penetrating reader (not all have appreciated Cooper's merits, but I have, since in order to know their neglect I must know they exist); second, more indirectly, for himself as a penetrating writer (perhaps all of my merits are not yet fully appreciated either). Melville's own works figure forth such double texts as Melville claimed Cooper wrote and Melville claimed to be able to read and write.

Melville frequently recurs to Shakespeare as a key example of the kind of writer he intends to be, a writer whose work requires careful interpretation. In his most famous comments on Shakespeare, in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville argues for a Shakespeare whose real meanings are carefully hidden. The popular Shakespeare is "a

33

mere man of Richard-the-Third humps, and Macbeth daggers," admired only by "mistaken souls." The popular Shakespeare is admired for "the least part of [his] genius," and admired with "blind, unbridled admiration," with "mere mob renown." The other Shakespeare, the erudite one, is less popular writer than seer, valuable for "those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings- forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality." Shakespeare does not, however, tell those "Truths" outright; instead, he tells them "covertly, and by snatches," and he "craftily says, or sometimes insinuates" them "[t]hrough the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago." Melville's description of Hawthorne in that essay matches his description of Shakespeare, asserting that very few readers really understand Hawthorne, commenting that "[h]ere and there, in some quiet arm- chair in the noisy town, or some deep nook among the noiseless mountains, [Hawthorne] may be appreciated for something of what he is" (244-249). Melville envisioned and adopted a stance towards readers that consisted of concealing meaning from them and forcing them to interpret carefully, a stance of opposition to readers' expectations.

For the cunning reader who deciphered the puzzle, moreover, there was a nasty surprise in store: the bleak meaninglessness of life, as revealed by Melville's structural innovations. The truth, for Melville, was an unpleasant business. Moby-Dick begins with a sermon about Jonah fleeing his vocation to sound "unwelcome truths in the ears of a wicked Nineveh," to "preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood" (36); Ishmael echoes this notion of truth as both profound and horrifying, describing "clear Truth as a thing for salamander giants only to encounter" (282). Ahab declares that "[t]ruth has no confines" (126), and even the erstwhile Bulkington embodies the secret that "in landlessness alone

34

resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God" (86).  In <u>Pierre</u>, "the thousand

sweet illusions of Life" contrast with "Life's Truth" (88), and Melville's hero, after

"Truth rolls a black billow through [his] soul" and "bears [him] nothing but wrecks" (41),

becomes a prophetic author animated by "the burning desire to deliver what he thought to

be new, or at least miserably neglected Truth to the world" (221).  In <u>The Confidence-</u>

<u>Man</u>, a heavy blanket of irony smothers most similar pronouncements, but Pitch gets a

chance to suggest that "truth is like a thrashing-machine; tender sensibilities must keep

out of the way" (200).  To reveal truth, Melville believed, was to be a Cassandra.  By

telling the truth, the author attacks readers.  The notion of a writer hostile to his readers

was central to Melville's concept of himself as an author.

But we must note that the two parts of Melville's stance towards his readers – the

desire to communicate and the desire to attack – are inseparable.  His hostile relationship

to his readers was by no means superfluous; it was an inevitable concomitant of what he

wanted to communicate, and how he chose to communicate it.  The difficulty of the form

was necessary to overcome readers' expectations of how popular genres worked, and the

difficulty of the content was inherent in the content.  To oppose and attack readers, for

Melville, was to communicate with them.


VI.     **". . . AUTHOR, RECONSIDERED": THE ARC OF MELVILLE'S**

        **CAREER**

My first chapter takes as its starting point what has been termed the "hero

problem" in Moby-Dick.  As Higgins and Parker (1992) point out in their useful

introduction to the G. K. Hall collection <u>Critical Essays on Herman Melville's Moby-</u>

<u>Dick</u>, for the first generation of academic Melville scholars (those writing between the 1920s and the 1950s), Ahab was so obviously the central figure that Henry A. Murray was able, in 1951, to write an important study of the book without even mentioning the name "Ishmael." Since then, the pendulum has swung considerably far in the other direction. Ishmael has been the focus of phenomenological approaches like that of Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. and of political approaches like Robert K. Martin's. Yet critics still understand the appeal of Ahab, and so as recent a study as Suzanne Stein's (2000) can make the claim that Ahab represents Melville's position better than Ishmael does. I argue in this chapter that both sides are right and both sides are wrong, because the text of <u>Moby-Dick</u> represents two competing narratives, each a recognizable type in the antebellum setting, and each achieving a highly qualified victory over the other, revealing, in the process, Melville's profound ambivalence about heroism, rightness, and wrongness.

Ahab represents the genre of illustrious criminal adventure, widely circulated in Melville's America. The hero-villain of this genre takes up magnificent and almost supernatural arms against a profoundly corrupt world, often for purposes of revenge. Ahab's readers have had little trouble identifying his "high-culture" and classical antecedents: Milton's Lucifer, Goethe's Faust, and Shakespeare's Lear. But it is only recently, largely through the work of David S. Reynolds, that we have come to see Faustian figures in the warp and woof of popular American literature. Ahab's antecedents are such hero-villains as the pirates of J. H. Ingraham's <u>Laffitte</u> (1834) or Ned Buntline's <u>The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main</u> (1847), the bandit masterminds of William Gilmore Simms's <u>Guy Rivers</u> (1841) or <u>Richard Hurdis</u> (1838), or the

36

brilliant criminal-hero of <u>Eugene Aram</u> (1832). Ahab takes his villainous appeal – his rhetorical and personal power – from this genre. Ishmael is an adventurer-hero of a different type, drawn from the frontiersman adventure genre. This genre presents wilderness adventurers, figures liminal between civilization and savagery, who explore. Their explorations brought back facts from the wild world to readers, and examples of this genre – the works of Cooper, Marryat, or Dana – were informative as well as exciting.

Melville renders these popular narratives self-consciously metaphysical. Their adventures become philosophical. In essence, he puts the two narratives in competition with one another, with Ahab's and Ishmael's obtaining temporary victories over the other, and ending equivocally. Melville "metaphysicalizes" Ishmael's world of manageable wilderness into a vision of the universe as essentially rational; Ahab's world of evil becomes the anguished revolt against a malevolent, semi-Calvinist cosmic order. Each narrative highlights the incompleteness of the other: Ishmael shows up Ahab's lack of humanity, while Ahab shows up Ishmael's lack of depth. Melville thus reveals the world's metaphysical order to be not friendly to human projects and values, and not actively hostile, but genuinely blank.

As with <u>Moby-Dick</u>, readers of <u>Pierre</u> have struggled with a somewhat similar "hero" problem – is Pierre the hero of the text, or a fool at best? – but more have come down on the latter side, arguing that Pierre fails to solve his problem and ignores the good advice that Melville gives him through Plotinus Pinlimmon. Readers have also been more prepared to deal with <u>Pierre</u> against the backdrop of nineteenth-century fiction than with <u>Moby-Dick</u>; the generic shifts in going from sea to land, from struggles against

37

nature to struggles within society, and from the hyper-masculine world of the previous

works to the looming female presences of <u>Pierre</u> were all obvious examples of Melville's

changing literary plans.  The earliest Melville critics thus quickly divined that Pierre had

some sort of relationship to "sentimental" or "domestic" fiction.  However, this first

academic criticism of <u>Pierre</u>, coming in the wake of modernism, saw <u>Pierre</u>'s relationship

with its nineteenth-century generic antecedents as one founded on contempt and

superiority on Melville's part.  William Braswell, for example, could only frame

Melville's relationship with domestic fiction in terms of parody.

We are now, however, better equipped to reevaluate <u>Pierre</u>'s relationship with

domestic fiction, because less apt to make condescending generalizations about this

popular genre.  In domestic fiction, characters struggled for moral maturity and personal

regeneration, through self-sacrifice coupled with independence.  Rather than blindly

support a simple-minded version of domestic ideology, domestic texts were quick to

identify families as sources of trouble and sites of competition, and to urge their heroes

and heroines to build happier, better homes.  Virtue was, in these texts, rewarded, and if

we look only at the first half of <u>Pierre</u> in this light, we can see it not as parody but as an

attempt to work on serious moral issues using this genre's conventions.

It is the second half of the text that complicates Pierre's relationship with the

genre of domestic fiction and that moves it beyond either simple parody or simple

imitation, by shifting the text into the genre of sensational "city-mysteries" fiction, of the

kind often deployed by George Lippard, Ned Buntline, or George Thompson.  These

texts dealt with the seedy underworld of urban crime and the glittering realm of upper-

class corruption, and dwelt on sordid sins of sex and violence.  Yet the texts also made

efforts to fit themselves into the moral matrix of antebellum culture, emphasizing the evil of the crimes they depicted, and dwelling in depth – almost sadistically – on the punishment of malefactors.  We may say, then, that if domestic fiction represents the rewards of virtue, city-mysteries fiction represents the punishment of vice.  The parabolic structure of <u>Pierre</u> allows Melville to put these conventions at the service of his own philosophy, in which, as Pierre says, "Virtue and vice are trash!": human evaluations of morality are inevitable but meaningless.  Pierre's pseudo-marriage to Isabel is the good deed of the first half of the text, but turns itself into the crime of the second half, and he is punished for it.  This double-genre structure thus emphasizes the impossibility of morality in a universe without grounding for such a concept.

Doubleness is also the theme of my third chapter, for even the most casual reader of Melville's final book-length work will notice that two kinds of action dominate The Confidence-Man: the discussion of philosophical questions about ethics and human nature; and, the swindling of people, usually out of money.  What critics have not noticed is that both of these actions, and their modes of presentation, derive from nineteenth-century popular fiction.  I argue that these two actions derive from specific nineteenth-century fictional genres, that the text combines these actions in a seamless way, and that Melville gives these actions and their combination a philosophical significance, dramatizing the truth of tragic nihilism.  The dialectic between the two genres becomes a debate between optimism and pessimism, with both sides losing.

The swindling action in <u>The Confidence-Man</u> fits into the southwestern humor tale or sketch.  This popular fictional genre was published in newspapers by such authors as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, John S. Robb, or Johnson Jones Hooper.  This type of

fiction used Southwestern settings and exaggerated regional types, and its plots often involved the playing of pranks and swindles, sometimes for money, but sometimes for other purposes or for fun. Many of these tales seem to be about as amoral as fiction could possibly be, providing an exception to the generally moralistic culture of antebellum fiction, and at times espouse the amoral moral of Hooper's con-man-antihero: "It is good to be shifty in a new country" (257). The Southwestern setting, with its outlandish modes of dress and imagery that calls on animals, provides the appropriate backdrop. Melville calls on many of the devices of this genre. Criticism to date has missed the fact that The Confidence-Man's lamented plotlessness is such a device. The Southwestern humor sketch was not a book-length form, and thus book-length collections relied on repetition for unity, rather than a developing plot. The Confidence-Man shares this repetitive structure.

But many features of the narrative also fit into what Stephen Eigner calls the "metaphysical novel." Eigner identifies this genre with Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Melville, Hawthorne, and Dickens. Post-Lauria has identified Richard Burleigh Kimball's St. Leger: Or, the Threads of Life (1850) and Sylvester Judd's Margaret: A Tale of the Real and the Ideal (1845) as antebellum American examples of this genre. Metaphysical fictions are self-conscious rejections of nineteenth-century realism as represented by Richardson, Scott, or Thackeray[18]. Rather, the genre espouses an idealistic philosophy, not an empiricist or materialist one. Because the wisdom that such books offer is esoteric, the structure of the text is also esoteric, using the techniques of allegory, and static, undeveloping characters. Melville calls on all these devices in the course of The Confidence-Man, and many of the incidents point towards the kind of metaphysical topoi

40

covered by that genre. One recurring über-plot in the metaphysical fiction is the plot of initiation, or introduction of one person by another to higher mysteries, whether the mysteries of Rosicrucianism or Unitarianism, and most of the incidents in Melville's text can be read as scenes of initiation in this sense.

The Confidence-Man's combination of genres is a more profound combination than in previous texts, and for a more profound philosophical reason. The two different genres are not arranged side by side, but are actually fused, so that no section can be considered an example of one or the other genre. By doing so, Melville allows his characters and actions to slip back and forth between identities. These shifting characterizations are Melville's representations of our own unstable perceptions. Our moral ideas, thus, are not merely false but are in fact incoherent. Melville's challenge to his readers here is profounder than ever, because he now brings tragic nihilism to bear on the very notion of reading, producing a text that argues the near-impossibility of its own interpretation.

My final chapter, on Mardi, looks backwards from 1857 to 1849. Melville's successful projects in his three major books of the 1850s help clarify what Melville did unsuccessfully in his third book. My argument is that Mardi is an incomplete move towards the mature method of Moby-Dick, one that has the posture of that book, but not the substance. Because Melville was still feeling his way towards Moby-Dick when he was writing Mardi, I focus on Melville's process of composition as well as the text itself.

Mardi begins in a familiar mode, that of frontiersman adventure at sea, in which Melville had worked extensively before. The first thirty-eight chapters reflect the prerogatives of this genre. They present a seaman narrator in the aquatic wilderness,

41

struggling for survival in both the constricted authority of a ship and the dangerous

wilderness of the ocean.  Along the way, Melville informs the reader about the flora,

fauna, and meteorology of the "watery world."  The limitations of this genre constricted

Melville's need to express himself and think about deeper questions, occasioning a genre

switch – to allegory.  This genre focused on journeys across heavily representational

landscapes towards goals standing for moral or religious solutions.  Melville creates the

allegorical characters of Media, Babbalanja, Mohi, and Yoomy, and shepherds them

towards the benevolent land of Serenia, along the way using the allegorical genre to

comment on social, religious, and moral issues.  Even this wider scope could not prevent

Melville from shifting genres again.  Melville then moved to the genre of metaphysical

fiction.  The incidents dealing with Yillah follow the protocols of metaphysical fiction;

though they appear early in <u>Mardi</u>, Melville added them last.  These sections represent

the apex of Melville's transformation as an author at the time of their writing, for in them

Melville allowed himself to rise dramatically above his readers.  Yet, for all these

dramatic shifts in genre, Melville's lack of a coherent philosophical position at this stage

in his career prevented the genres from forming a coherent whole.  <u>Mardi</u>, thus, is an

artistic failure, but an incredibly important and instructive one for the young Melville,

since it introduced him to the possibilities of genre mixture and allowed him to begin

forming a conception of himself as a philosophical author.

It is by looking backwards to <u>Mardi</u> from the vantage point of the 1850s that we

see the true shape of Melville's literary project.  Melville developed his stance towards

his readers as his philosophical position developed.  By the time his tragic nihilist

position came to full flower, he had come to see his readers through the moralism of

antebellum fiction.  He thus saw his readers in terms of both a set of conventions for communicating, and as something to be attacked and overcome.  The literary strategy he developed was one that both communicated his ideas and attacked his readers' preconceptions: a mixed-genre structure, bringing different kinds of antebellum fiction into collision within the confines of a single text.

NOTES

[1] See Matthiessen's <u>American Renaissance</u> and Chase's <u>The American Novel and Its Tradition</u>, esp. 89-115.

[2] See, for example, William Braswell (1934) for a discussion of Melville as a writer of parody.

[3] Other critics who have described Melville as hostile to readers include William Charvat and Stephen Railton.

[4] See also Anne Dalke and Wyn Kelly. Dalke discusses the use of sensationalistic and sentimental motifs in <u>Pierre</u>; Kelly relies on Reynolds's discussion of <u>Pierre</u> to explore the representation of cities.

[5] Further discussion appears in G. Harrison Orians's "Censure of Fiction in American Romances and Magazines, 1789-1810."

[6] See James Hart, <u>The Popular Book</u> 89-90 and Cowie 412-413 for a discussion of the popularity of fiction in the antebellum period. See also Charvat 29-30 for the development of the fiction writer as a career, and Baym, <u>Woman's Fiction</u> for a special emphasis on successful female writers of the 1840s and 1850s.

[7] Good discussions of fiction's moral self-justification in the revolutionary and early national periods occurs in Cowie 4-7 and Davidson 40.

[8] Ann Douglas's discussion of the decline of Calvinist theology in <u>The Feminization of American Culture</u> 121-164 is the gold standard in this area.

[9] See Robertson-Lorant and Parker (2002) for discussion of Melville's biography.

[10] It is possible – though by no means certain – that Melville never did read Kant at all; according to Sealts, no book by Kant appears in any record of books Melville owned or borrowed.

[11] See Williams, <u>White Fire</u> 95-104 for a discussion of the influence of Transcendentalism on <u>Mardi</u>.

[12] By way of contrast, Lawrance Thompson argues that Ahab's position in Melville's, and that Melville takes the position of a rebel against an evil God who rules the universe and torments people for His pleasure. Although this is closer to Melville's actual position than any ascription of optimism or Christian orthodoxy to Melville, Thompson's argument does not take into account the way that <u>Moby-Dick</u> critiques Ahab's position (see my Chapter 1), and, more generally, the way Melville at the level of structure attacks *all* belief systems, including pessimistic ones. Other critics who identify Melville's position with Ahab's include Henry A. Murray, William Braswell, Lewis Mumford, Merlin Bowen, Thomas Woodson, and, most recently, Suzanne Stein.

[13] This does not seem to have been a real book; rather, it seems to be based on such titles at <u>The Lives of the Felons</u> (1846) or <u>Pirates' Own Book</u> (1837).

[14] See Charvat 131-145.

[15] See Elizabeth Renker's discussion of unreadability in <u>The Confidence-Man</u> also, as she shows that this resistance to surface readability infiltrates the very characters of the text (dashes and letters), as an extension of Melville's own struggle with the physical act of writing.

[16] Nina Baym, in "Melville's Quarrel With Fiction," makes a similar argument. Baym asserts that Melville's difficulty with fiction was its in ability to tell the truth, but for her the difficulty is primarily *epistemological*: the truth refuses to be told *in language*. My argument is that Melville's problem with fiction and truth was *metaphysical*: the truth was of such a nature that it could not be told.

[17] Although Fowler primarily deals with poetic genres, it is possible to apply his account of generic combination to fiction as well.

[18] Eigner uses the term "metaphysical *novel*" [emphasis mine] but adds the qualification that such texts constitute a subgenre of the broader category of the *romance*, as distinguished from the *novel*. Eigner has identified a real and specific subgenre, but his placement of it in the larger novel/romance schema is problematic. As Nina Baym has shown, the terms "novel" and "romance" were used fairly interchangeably by many critics in the antebellum period, and where some writers and critics attempted to make a distinction, their distinctions were *ad hoc* and not shared by others. Moreover, the terms 'novel' and 'romance,' even given the consistent definitions offered to them (see Richard Chase, for example), are so broad that their usefulness declines, since they tend to be defined in terms of large tendencies, and tend to subsume any number of more concretely identifiable subgenres that can be defined in terms of plot, setting, and character. Hence, I have found the novel/romance distinction not very useful, and I will use the terms *fiction* or *text* except in direct quotations. (G. R. Thompson and Eric Carl Link have challenged Baym on this point, but without engaging the findings she culls from the primary source data.)

CHAPTER 2

"A ROMANCE, A TRAGEDY, AND A NATURAL HISTORY": GENRE, VALUE,

AND READER IN MOBY-DICK

By the time Melville completed and published <u>Moby-Dick</u> in 1851, his sense of

himself as an author was complex and ambivalent.  On the one hand, he longed for

readers, and used popular motifs in his work in order to appeal to them.  Moreover, his

correspondence with Hawthorne around this time reveal that he longed with an almost

erotic intensity for sensitive, comprehending readers.  On the other hand, he had already

begun to manifest signs of impatience and dissatisfaction with his status as a popular

writer.  Of his two previous works, <u>Redburn</u> and <u>White-Jacket</u>, he complained that they

were "two *jobs*, which I have done for money" (138).  To Hawthorne, he presented

himself as a writer struggling against the popular audience: "[t]ry to get a living by the

Truth – and go to the Soup Societies" (191).  This ambivalence structures <u>Moby-Dick</u>, a

text that uses the resources of antebellum popular fiction to make a strike for

independence against the literary marketplace, aggressively challenging readers with a

dangerous task.  Melville accomplished this strike by use of a mixed-genre structure,

combining the illustrious criminal adventure genre and the frontiersman adventure genre.

# I.    "TOKEN IS YET GIVEN THAT A HIDDEN HERO IS THERE": THE HERO PROBLEM

Much discussion of <u>Moby-Dick</u> has revolved around the 'hero problem.'  Some critics have seen Ahab as its hero, the spokesman for Melville's authentic views and the center of the narrative's attention.  Other critics have endorsed Ishmael as hero.  Debate over the hero problem is fundamental to debate over <u>Moby-Dick</u>'s meaning: if we can determine who speaks for Melville, we can determine Melville's central beliefs and the meaning of <u>Moby-Dick</u>.  Still a third group of critics argues that there is no one solution to the hero problem: that <u>Moby-Dick</u> is a story without a hero, and its meaning is meaninglessness itself.  My argument is that this third group of critics is correct, and that we can best understand why these critics are correct by reading <u>Moby-Dick</u> in terms of its combination of popular genres.

Critics who see Ahab as the hero of <u>Moby-Dick</u> include Lawrance Thompson, who identifies Ahab's defiance of God with Melville and argues that this defiance was the overwhelming project of Melville as a writer, Henry A. Murray, who assimilates Ahab and Melville as "Ahab-Melville," and numerous others, particularly earlier critics.[1] The Ahabist view is that <u>Moby-Dick</u> is the story of a tragic hero brought low, and that Melville believed in a malevolent fate that brooded sadistically over the world.  In such readings, Ishmael serves, if he figures at all, primarily as a formal narrative device[2].

The Ishmaelite readings presume Ishmael to be the hero and the text to endorse an easy-going, exploratory approach to the world, essentially optimistic without being dogmatic.  For the Ishmaelites, Ahab is a villain, a dangerous false path, and the text contrasts Ishmael's humaneness and openness and Ahab's inflexibility and isolation.  For

example, Robert K. Martin argues that Melville opposes Ahab's "male aggression, patriarchy, linear progress, militarism, and capitalism" to "the marriage of Queequeg and Ishmael [which] is a vision of a triumphant miscegenation that can overcomethe racial and sexual structures of American society" (94). Joyce Adler argues that Ishmael's escape is Melville's way of imagining a world free from war and conflict. Clearly, the problems of hero and value are inextricably linked, and vitally important for the interpretation of Moby-Dick.

There is a third solution to the hero problem: to argue that Moby-Dick is a story without a hero. Few critics have urged this course; its major exponents have been Richard Brodhead, in Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel, and John Seelye, in The Ironic Diagram.[3] Brodhead argues that the form of the text balances two separate worldviews, one common-sense and naturalistic, associated with Ishmael, and one mystical and symbolic, associated with Ahab, and that the text holds both in tension without resolving them. Seelye argues strenuously that the opposition of Ahab and Ishmael points directly to the text's nihilistic implications, with the quest itself (as opposed to Ahab and Ishmael's conceptions of the quest) being the meaning of the text, even if its is a quest for nothing (5). If reading Ahab or Ishmael as the hero of Moby-Dick means choosing between pessimism and optimism, choosing neither means exposing both pessimism and optimism as false in a world with no essential character.

I argue that this third approach to the hero problem is correct. Melville believed that the notion of a "hero" was ultimately incoherent; without stable good or evil in the universe, it was impossible to speak of one character being better than another, except purely subjectively. My contribution to this resolution of the hero problem is to show

48

that Melville's formal method puts Ahab and Ishmael into unresolvable conflict by mixing specific, identifiable popular genres.  These popular genres are crucial for his attempt to illustrate his philosophical position of tragic nihilism, because it is by means of those genres that he communicates his position to his audience.  At the same time, his dissatisfaction with the moral presumptions of those genres helped create his ambivalence and hostility to that audience.

## II.    "SPITE OF A MILLION VILLAINS": AHAB AS POPULAR HERO

Discussion of antecedents to <u>Moby-Dick</u> has traditionally focused on canonical antecedents such as King Lear and Milton's Satan;[4] I argue, however, that the antebellum popular-fiction antecedents are at least as important, for three reasons.  Melville had used popular materials in previous books, and had used those materials extensively;[5] therefore we can assume continuity of method.  Second, Melville was a determined anti-elitist in his literary politics.  The "Extracts" to <u>Moby-Dick</u> conflate the Bible, Shakespeare, and <u>Paradise Lost</u> with <u>Miriam Coffin</u> and <u>Wharton the Whale Killer</u>.  He articulates this anti-elitist stance in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," where he makes the case that his contemporary Hawthorne will bear comparison with Shakespeare and paints present-day America as a literary golden age about to be born: "This, too, I mean, that if Shakespeare has not been equalled, he is sure to be surpassed, and surpassed by an American born now or yet to be born" (246).  Third, as I shall demonstrate, there were many obvious and clear antecedents in popular fiction for Melville's characters, plots, and themes in <u>Moby-Dick</u>.

Ahab's part of the narrative is an adaptation of the popular nineteenth-century

genre of the illustrious criminal adventure.  It is an adaptation that I describe as

*metaphysicalization*.  Without changing the basic equipment of the genre, Melville takes

the features of the genre and invests them with profound philosophical significance.  In

this way, Melville is able to project an entire worldview – moral and theological – using

the generic materials of popular fiction.  This metaphysicalization was fundamental to

Melville's project in <u>Moby-Dick</u>.  By making the philosophical ideas he attached to each

genre explicit, he was able to make the conflict and contradiction between them explicit

as well.  Rendering this conflict between philosophical ideas was Melville's method of

argument for tragic nihilism.  In his first book written from a fully tragic nihilist position,

metaphysicalization allowed him to use the popular genres to express his philosophical

ideas in a clear and obvious way.

Investing the motifs of popular fiction with philosophical significance, in Ahab's

case, meant making material crime into spiritual crime, and crime is central to the genres

Melville adapts to create Ahab.  As David S. Reynolds has painstakingly detailed, there

was an enormous body of adventure fiction circulating in Melville's time, much of it

dealing with criminals, pirates, and other extreme antinomian types.  I have taken the

term "illustrious criminal" from the nineteenth-century British critic, David Masson, who

first used the term in his <u>British Novelists and their Styles</u> (1870)

> But another kind of Novel [from the "Fashionable Novel"], also perhaps
>
> the result of the same centralization of literary attention on the metropolis,
>
> has been (5) THE ILLUSTRIOUS CRIMINAL NOVEL [capitals
>
> Masson's], of which the most celebrated specimens have been Sir Bulwer

Lytton's Paul Clifford, and Mr. Ainsworth's Jack Sheppard.  I need hardly

say that this kind of novel, though dealing with roguery and criminal

adventure, is by no means the same as that exemplified by Fielding in his

"Jonathan Wild," or as the Spanish picaresque novels, or even as Defoe's

illustrations of outlaw life in his day.  (227-228)

Many such illustrious criminal adventures circulated in Melville's day, both by British

authors such as Bulwer-Lytton and Ainsworth and by American writers such as William

Gilmore Simms and Ned Buntline.  Whereas these popular narratives pitted a criminal

hero against an unjust society, Melville, metaphysicalizing the genre, pits a philosophical

criminal hero against an unjust universe ruled by an evil God.

Illustrious criminals were indeed criminals.  Their actions centered around

performing violent and illegal actions.  In most cases, those crimes involved campaigns

of theft.  Pirates, who plied their criminal trade at sea, were among the most common

illustrious criminals, as in Buntline's pirate king Solonois from The Black Avenger of the

Spanish Main (1847), the Ocean Queen from Buntline's The Queen of the Sea (1852), or

J. H. Ingraham's Lafitte from Lafitte: The Pirate of the Gulf (1834).  Some illustrious

criminals, however, pursued their crimes on land: the criminal conspirators of Simms's

Richard Hurdis (1838), the outlaw leader of the same writer's Guy Rivers (1841),

Bulwer-Lytton's Paul Clifford,[6] who is an urban robber on the Fagin model, or the bandit

heroine of the anonymous The Female Land Pirate (1847).  Bulwer-Lytton's Eugene

Aram (1832) is a more psychologically subtle example, presenting a man who conspired

to commit a murder in the past and must commit another one to hide his crime in the

present.  Usually, though, the body count was a bit higher than a mere two: Solonois, for

example, destroys an entire village on the Spanish coast.  Regardless of the number of notches in their cutlasses, however, all illustrious criminals engaged in violent crime.

But they were also illustrious criminals, attractive and interesting figures, never mere villains but ambiguous heroes.  The attractions of illustrious criminals were twofold: first, they were impressive and astonishing characters; second, they were rebels against cruel and oppressive power structures.  Authors gave illustrious criminals aristocratic origins and tremendous abilities.  The aristocratic origin was a standard piece of equipment, the idea often being that, like Tarzan, a man of high birth will shine regardless of where in the world he finds himself.  Ingraham's Lafitte is descended from a highborn Frenchman, for example, and Paul Clifford is the illegitimate son of a judge. Whether or not the hero has an identifiable origin among the ranked and noble, however, the hero will still have abilities enough to make him a natural aristocrat.  Simms lavishes praises on his bandit Guy Rivers for his intelligence and ability, describing his intellect as "gigantic" (442), with "[e]ndowments that might have done the country honor" (441). Simms even compares him to a fallen angel:

> Fortunate for mankind, if, under the decree of a saving and blessing
>
> Providence, there be no dark void on earth – when one bright star falls
>
> from its sphere, if there is another soon lighted to fill its place, and to
>
> shine more purely than that which has been lost.  May we not believe this
>
> – nay, we must, and exult, on behalf of humanity – that, in the eternal
>
> progress of change, the nature which is its aliment no less than its element,
>
> restores not less than its destiny removes.  Yet, the knowledge that we lose
>
> not, does not materially lessen the pang when we behold the mighty

fall – when we see the great mind, which, as a star, we have almost

worshipped, shooting with headlong precipitance through the immense

void from its place of eminence, and defrauding the eye of all the glorious

presence and golden promise which had become associated with its

survey.  (441-442)

Similarly, Solonois is merely an orphan raised in the estate of the king of Spain, but he

longs "to fit himself for a far different station in life than that to which cruel and

untutored fate seemed to have doomed him" (10) and acquires spectacular fencing

abilities.  Bulwer-Lytton's Eugene Aram has "a broad high majestic forehead" on a "face

that a physiognomist would have loved to look upon," as a "man, certainly the most

eminent in his day for various and profound learning, and a genius wholly self-taught"

(24).  Ingraham's Lafitte also has great abilities:

Here their leader, whose form the count had seen like the genius that

directed the battle, whenever the fight raged hottest, whose voice of

command and encouragement was heard above the din of the conflict, and

whose arm carried death wherever it fell. Many of his men had fallen

around him, yet he remained cool and undaunted; and collecting his

followers about him, he slowly retreated down the terrace to the entrance

of the cave.  (100)

Ahab shares in the impressive qualities of these characters.  He manages to hold

our attention in the same way that other fictional illustrious criminals do.  He shares their

great abilities, connected to his aristocratic bearing.  Before we even meet Ahab, we are

informed of his impressiveness as a human being: "he's a grand, ungodly, god-like man,

Captain Ahab; doesn't speak much; but, when he does speak, then you may well listen. Mark ye, be forewarned; Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier stranger foes than whales" (79). Melville further mythologizes Ahab by naming him after a king, nicknaming his mates and harpoonists after knights and squires, and comparing him to Perseus, the son of Zeus, on his first appearance (123). The chief means by which he pursues the whale – his charts – would appear supernatural to an untutored observer, Melville explains, but Ahab knows "the sets of all tides and currents" (199) which helps him seek out the whale. The illustriousness of the illustrious criminal is Ahab's illustriousness.

Not only were illustrious criminals such dashing figures, they were also rebels against cruel and oppressive powers. Solonois, for example, fights against the king and the nation of Spain, using "Death to the Spaniards" as his slogan. He is motivated by the fact that the king sends agents to kidnap Solonois's wife and newborn child, and tricks Solonois into believing they are murdered. Sometimes, these quests for vengeance are against society in general. Guy Rivers, on his deathbed, condemns social inequality, saying "He [Christ] died not for me. I have gained nothing by his death. Men are as bad as ever, and wrong – the wrong which deprived me of my right in society – has been as active and prevailing a principle of human action as before he died. It is in his name now that they do the wrong, and in his name, since his death, they have contrived to find a sanction for all manner of crime" (445). This vengeance had a dimension of solemnity about it, heightening the defense of these characters' revolt against an evil authority. Solonois vows an oath with a bloody dagger:

"Blood for blood; – ay, for each drop of *her* precious blood, rivers shall

flow in revenge!  Death to the Spaniards!  Oh, my Medora, thou shalt be

avenged!"

Then, turning to his men, and pointing to the flag above them, he

cried, "Haul down that death-flag and go nail it to my ship's mast-head;

ay, *nail* it there, for never shall it cease to wave while I live.  Now ye *shall*

be pirates; ay, ye may drink blood and eat flesh if ye will, for your

chieftan lives only for revenge!"  (17)

Similarly, Amanda Bannoris, who becomes a criminal out of rage at her seducer, takes a

bloody oath to "*cling to every thing wicked, abjure every thing holy, deny God and the

Bible*" (qtd. in Reynolds, 193).

Similarly, Ahab is no criminal for mere profit; like illustrious criminals, he is

motivated by rebellion.  Ahab seeks *revenge*: revenge on the white whale that is a symbol

of the unjust authority of the sadist God.  There is evidence that horrible things have

happened to him: he apparently "lay like dead" for three days off Cape Horn after a

vague "thing" (92) that happened to him, besides his losing his leg to Moby-Dick and his

curious scar.  Ishmael finds this quest at least temporarily convincing, as do many of the

other men on the ship, for the whale Moby-Dick at least is a terrible creature with near-

supernatural abilities to wreak destruction.[7]  And like the blood rituals of Solonois and

Bannoris, Ahab solemnizes his vengeance by means of diabolical ceremony, baptizing

the blades meant for the "white fiend" (489) in the name of the devil.  Thus, Melville

presents Ahab according to the recognized conventions of the illustrious criminal

adventure; Ahab is a rebel, seeking revenge against evil authority.

Because their rebellions against conventional society made them outcasts,

illustrious criminals often sympathized with fellow outcasts, social outsiders of various

kinds. Guy Rivers sacrifices an important strategic advantage in order to spare the life of

the half-witted boy Chub, saying, "No – let him live, Munro. Let him live. Such as he

should be spared. Is he not alone – without fellowship – scorned – an outcast – without

sympathy – like myself. Let him live, let him live!" (411) Guy Rivers explicitly

identifies Chub's outcast status as his own. Similarly, Solonois feels pity for his servant,

the black hangman Lobo. Such characterizations highlighted the central moral concept of

the illustrious criminal adventure genre, by building sympathy for the illustrious

criminal's rebellion, and by highlighting the world of evil responsible for making rebels

and outcasts.

Himself a victim of God's cruelty, Ahab also has sympathy for his fellow victims.

Ahab's special mercy is for Pip, who has lost his reason at the sight of "God's foot upon

the treadle of the loom" (414). Ahab takes pity on Pip precisely because he sees Pip as

evidence of the plight his own special vision has revealed. Pip is, for Ahab, an orphaned

and "abandoned" child of the "frozen heavens," the "the omniscient gods oblivious of

suffering man" (522). Just as Ahab has been rendered an outcast by the cruel God that

rules the universe, so has Pip, and so Ahab's pity for Pip is pity for a fellow-sufferer.

Melville's metaphysicalization of the genre makes the situation of the illustrious

criminal symbolize the human situation generally. This requires Melville to presume a

position about the world, and to endorse a program of action. Since the illustrious

criminal adventure presents a world dominated by evil authorities and endorses rebellion,

that means that a metaphysicalized illustrious criminal adventure will present a world

56

dominated by a ruling principle of evil, and endorses a metaphysical rebellion in which

the hero defies that principle actively and violently. Ahab's narrative thus pits Ahab in

rebellion against a cruel and sadistic God, represented by the white whale that Ahab

seeks to destroy. God is malevolent to humanity, delighting in human suffering, and He

is quite powerful, but not omnipotent, in Ahab's reading; it is possible to resist God.

Such resistance is spiritual, not physical: God can destroy the body, but He apparently

cannot prevent a human from defying Him spiritually, since Ahab dies, but dies defiant.

Ahab's resistance to God is not explicable in ordinary moral terms. In religious

terms, it is totally perverse. Utilitarian calculation will not favor it, since Ahab's actions

in the text result in a net total of greater suffering. Sheer self-interest can hardly be said

to favor it, since Ahab's quest not only kills him but, along the way, deprives him of all

sources of happiness but one. So the metaphysicalized illustrious criminal adventure that

Melville here deploys, in justifying Ahab, relies on a relatively exotic ethical formula. It

is through the concept of "right worship" that Melville provides the ethical justification

for Ahab's quest: one must respond to the ruling principle of the world in a way that

follows the logic of that principle, whatever that principle might be. Right worship is

related to the concept of religious worship but not identical to it. Right worship encloses

the concept of "worship" in that it is a response to fundamental metaphysical reality,

whether to a God or to some other basic principle. It is "right" worship because the

response must be appropriate.

Ahab proclaims and defines his right worship in the midst of the corpusants' light:

Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once

did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour

57

I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy

right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind;

and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed.  No fearless fool

now fronts thee.  (507)

If God, Ahab argues, were a gentle God of love, the appropriate response would be a

loving and gentle one: "Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee"

(507).  However, God comes in the form of violence and hate, as "mere supernal power,"

and Ahab withholds his love, which he signifies as "remain[ing] indifferent," though of

course Ahab is not indifferent.  Ahab figures his responses as symmetrical but opposed –

symmetrical, because he must worship, opposed, because his worship must be right

worship.  Thus, he images God as "light . . . [that] leapest out of darkness," and himself

as "darkness leaping out of light."  His attitude is both an assault on and a tribute to God:

"I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would fain be welded with thee; defyingly I worship

thee!" (508).  Ahab's violence is ethically justified because the violence of God is a

fundamental principle of the universe from which the rightness of Ahab's action is

derived: Ahab's violence against God *matches* God's violence against Ahab[8].  Ahab

demonstrates throughout the text his attitude of right worship, his metaphysicalization of

his illustrious criminal genre.


III.    "THEY . . . EXPLORED THIS WATERY WORLD": ISHMAEL AS

        POPULAR HERO

        The generic antecedents of those parts of the text dealing with Ishmael[9] are quite

different.  Ishmael's part of the narrative is not an outgrowth of or a subplot of Ahab's

illustrious criminal adventure. Rather, it is a part of the narrative that follows a different

set of rules and is derived from a different popular fictional subgenre with a different set

of literary and moral conventions. The genre in question is frontiersman adventure, a

term I borrow from Martin Green[10]. This genre includes most of the works of James

Fenimore Cooper, as well as the adventure fictions of such Cooper-influenced writers as

William Gilmore Simms and Robert Montgomery Bird, and the nonfictional accounts of

adventure on the western or marine frontier, most notably Francis Parkman's The Oregon

Trail (1849) and Two Years Before the Mast (1840) by Melville's friend Richard Henry

Dana[11].

> Green defines frontiersman adventure thus:

>> The frontiersman is a hero who moved between civilization and savagery,
>> in touch with but ahead of his countrymen as they advance their
>> civilization across a continent or across an ocean, across prairies, deserts,
>> archipelagoes, ice-floes. He is their proud precursor, but he is also in
>> flight from them and their civilization; he seeks the consolations of nature
>> and/or solitude and/or an alien tribal culture. Often he has one true friend
>> who belongs to another race, as Natty Bumppo has Chingachgook. (97)

Green also describes the initiation plot as a key element of the frontiersman adventure.

Additionally, I argue that besides centering on a liminal figure who prefers the wilderness

but is ultimately an agent of civilization and an initiation plot, nineteenth-century

American frontiersman adventures, both fictional and nonfictional, also emphasized a

basic moral value in nature and emphasis on fact. Just as he does with the illustrious

criminal adventure, Melville metaphysicalizes the frontiersman adventure genre. He uses

the Ishmael sections of the text to assert an optimistic position, contrasting with Ahab's pessimism.

Unlike illustrious criminal adventure, frontiersman adventures carried an optimistic moral value: they emphasized the goodness of nature and the world. Natty, for example, is known for his romantic connections to the natural world. In <u>The Deerslayer</u> (1841), he finds himself lost in the contemplation of a natural scene, delighting in "the reign of nature, in a word, that gave so much pure delight to one of his habits and turn of mind" and feeling "a portion of that soothing of the spirit which is a common attendant of a scene so thoroughly pervaded by the holy calm of nature" (29). Cooper also demonstrated this in <u>The Sea-Lions</u> (1849), whose love-story plot relies on a skeptical protagonist being convinced of the truth of revealed religion by the sight of an exploding volcano, and thus earning the hand of his beloved. Melville had earlier, in his more literal frontiersman adventure <u>Typee</u>, described himself as "experience[ing] a pang of regret" that an "enchanting" natural amphitheater should be hidden away and "seldom meet the eyes of devoted lovers of nature" (24). The basic morality of the frontiersman adventure, in sanctioning adventure, endorsed the wilderness that the frontiersman pressed into, looking upon the seas and forests and finding them good.

Ishmael's exploration of the wilderness is made possible by his own liminality, his own halfwayness between civilization and wilderness. On the one hand, Ishmael is no landlubber. Like many frontiersman adventurers, Ishmael is not entirely at home in civilization; he is an explorer, an adventurer, and free of civilized vices and weaknesses. Although Ishmael has some interest in the strangeness and oddness he expect to encounter, he is not in awe of the whale or the sea; colloquially, he informs us that he has

an "itch for things remote" (16). Indeed, he seeks out horrors in order to "be social" with them. Ishmael very quickly adjusts to Queequeg's foreign ways and takes a humorous stance about cannibalism or Queequeg's sitting on another sailor. Indeed, he admires Queequeg for his lack of "civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits" (51).

At the same time, Ishmael is only half a wilderness creature, and he still acknowledges the rights of civilization. Ishmael has no desire to have authority himself, as an officer, although he implies that he could serve as one, for he is "something of a salt" (5). However, he has no objection to submitting to authority, for "[w]ho aint a slave?" (6) Indeed, Ishmael notes, partly ruefully, that complete self-direction is not to be his, on account of his own genre placement:

> I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces. (7)

But Ishmael does not protest; instead, he marks this as an opportunity for making an observation about the vagaries of fate, rather than of protest. Ishmael is not going to jump into the sea and swim. Nor is he going to find an island of his own, as Robinson Crusoe did. Rather, he is going on a ship, with, as he notes several times, a captain and a system of authority already in place. He is going to the frontier, not the wilderness: to a place on the borders between civilization and savagery. As a frontiersman, he is an emissary of that civilization in the unexplored world.

One prominent feature of frontiersman adventure is its intense emphasis on fact. Because exploration of the wilderness is good, knowledge about it is therefore also good,

61

and is therefore presented in these texts in abundance. Sometimes, that knowledge is knowledge about a particular craft or aspect of wilderness survival. In <u>Two Years Before the Mast</u>, Dana begins on the very first page with a description of the typical uniform of a jack tar, and goes on to detail the roles of the various mates, the functions of various kinds of winds, and the use of nautical terminology. Marryat's <u>Masterman Ready</u> (1841) provides a thorough explanation of desert island survival, including how to deal with turtles and what to do during rainy season. In other cases, the valuable knowledge is knowledge of the wilderness world generally. In <u>The Yemassee</u> (1835), Simms details Native American customs and cultural practices, such as noting that "it is something of a popular error to suppose the Indian that taciturn character which he is sometimes represented. He is a great speech maker, and when business claims him not, actually and exceeding fond of a jest; which, by the way, is not often the purest in its nature" (62). Simms's correction of a misconception is a manifestation of the generic concern with providing factual information.

It is not surprising that the standard of factual accuracy should be important in judging a nonfictional work; fictional works, however, came under the same scrutiny. One reviewer of <u>The Pioneers</u> emphasized that, in regard to the wilderness setting and Native American characters, "[i]n Europe the scenes of this tale may be viewed as the wild creations of fancy, and the actors as the phantoms of an ingenious imagination; but the American, who has ample evidence of their truth, will recur to them with deep interest and pride, unmingled with a tinge of incredulity" (qtd. in Dekker and McWilliams 70) Simms, in his preface to <u>The Yemassee</u>, asserted that his representations of "the red man" were "true to the Indian as our ancestors knew him at

early periods, and as our people, in certain situations, may know him still" (xxviii). A reviewer of The Last of the Mohicans stated of Cooper's landscapes that "they prove that the author has studied for himself in the great school of nature" (qtd. in Dekker and McWilliams 107). Bird, in his preface to Nick of the Woods, slyly criticizes other writers who do not depict Indians as they *really* are. Critics were not fastidious about the distinction between fictional and nonfictional frontiersman works, lumping them together. Charles Briggs, in a doggerel poem about sea-writers, classed the fiction writer Marryat and the nonfiction writer Dana together as the writers he liked, and criticized others (including Cooper), because they "appear[ed] to have gone to sea without asking leave of their mothers," suggesting that these writers had "gathered their ideas from some naval spectacle at the 'Bowery';/And in fact I have serious doubts whether either of them ever saw blue water,/Or ever had the felicity of saluting the 'gunner's daughter'" (qtd. in Post-Lauria 50), suggesting that they had acquired their knowledge secondhand, rather than from experience, and that their information and descriptions were therefore untrustworthy and nonfactual. Whether fictional or nonfictional, frontiersman adventures strove for presenting accurate information about the frontier world.

The frontiersman source that Melville used to create Ishmael emphasized facts and reliability. Like other frontiersman adventure heroes, Ishmael presents the reader with a great deal of factual information. While in Nantucket, we learn from Ishmael about the whaling community and its relation to the trade. Once the voyage is underway, Ishmael's role in the plot begins to recede in favor of Ahab, but Ishmael remains as a voice to inform us about whales and whaling. The factual thickness with which Ishmael describes the whale earned Melville what little praise he received for Moby-Dick.[12]   And

the discussion of the whale is a vital part of the design of the narrative. Ishmael's mood about the whale is not skeptical, but confident. The task of anatomizing the whale is a challenge, but not an insurmountable one.

> But it is a ponderous task; no ordinary letter-sorter in the Post- office is equal to it. To grope down into the bottom of the sea after them; to have one's hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing. What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this Leviathan! The awful tauntings in Job might well appall me. 'Will he (the Leviathan) make a covenant with thee? Behold the hope of him is vain!' But I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans; I have had to do with whales with these visible hands; I am in earnest; and I will try. There are some preliminaries to settle. (136)

Ishmael's method reveals the confidence he has in these revelations of fact. The chapters are to a great extent divided up around the whale's anatomy, such as heads, tails, and ambergris. In each of these chapters, the facts that Ishmael delivers about the whale are quite specific: the eye of the sperm whale lacks lashes (330); the lower lip of the right whale is twenty feet in length and five feet in depth (334); the whale's tail has three distinct strata (375); the Turks use ambergris for cooking (408). Similarly, the chapters on the whaling arts are thoroughly and factually detailed, as in the historical lesson Ishmael provides about property law in whaling or the discussions of ropes. Moreover, Ishmael offers these facts in a spirit of earnestness: indeed, he is quite concerned about demonstrating the accuracy of his information. He promises to "ere long paint to you as well as one can without canvas, something like the true form of the whale as he actually

appears to the eye of the whaleman" (260).  He cites the source of information, stating he

"shall be content to produce the desired impression by separate citations of items,

practically or reliably known to me as a whaleman" (203). And he takes pride in the

reliability of his knowledge, working out carefully the route Jonah's whale would have

taken, and criticizing those who spread misinformation, critiquing the "curious imaginary

portraits" of the whale that have been disseminated by those who, for example, have used

stranded whales as their models, rather than live ones.  Throughout all the cetology

chapters, Ishmael emphasizes the accuracy and informativeness of his rhetoric,

connecting his narrative to the frontiersman adventure genre.[13]

Ishmael does not merely duplicate the conventions of this genre; rather, he

*metaphysicalizes* those conventions, just as Ahab metaphysicalizes the conventions of the

illustrious criminal adventure.  Ismael's tale of sea-exploration becomes, in Melville's

hands, a voyage of cosmic, philosophical life-exploration, freewheelingly covering Locke

and Kant in the same paragraph as transporting whale-heads, and the dignity of whaling

with the nature of kingship.  Melville gives us explicit permission to see sea-voyaging in

this way, as when he asks Bulkington if he understands that "all deep, earnest thinking is

but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea" (107).

Ishmael, then, is a philosophical frontiersman, crossing the frontier from

knowledge into mystery, and his optimistic attitude stems from an a priori belief in the

goodness of what he will find there.  Ishmael's philosophical wilderness is a dangerous

place, to be sure.  But it is not, ultimately, evil in the way that Ahab's is.  On the contrary,

there are no insurmountable "horrors" in the wilderness that he cannot "be social" with.

Ishmael's desire to go to sea is a normal, occasional urge, felt by "almost every robust

healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him" (13). What you get to experience at sea is

a firsthand experience of invigorating nature: "I always go to sea as a sailor, because of

the wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecastle deck. . . . for the most part the

Commodore on the quarter-deck gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on

the forecastle" (15). The wilderness, for Ishmael, and therefore the universe, given that

he is the protagonist of a metaphysicalized frontiersman adventure, is not a fearful place,

but an exciting opportunity for exploration, discovery, and adventure.

At the same time, there is another Ishmael side by side with the frontiersman

Ishmael, one whose explorations have led him into a very different kind of territory. In

Chapter 45, the frontiersman Ishmael describes the history of whale sightings, with

commentary on brit. But three chapters previously, a less hearty Ishmael was confronting

the monstrous whiteness of the whale. One Ishmael is confident and hearty when facing

the inhabitants of the watery frontier, the other Ishmael recoils in horror. The close

proximities of these two chapters and the radically contrasting registers of their voices

demonstrate the complexity and self-awareness of Melville's approach: one Ishmael

embodies the metaphysicalized frontiersman adventure, a version of optimism, and

another Ishmael steps beyond to tell the truth of tragic nihilism.


IV.     "THIS STRANGE MIXED AFFAIR WE CALL LIFE": MOBY-DICK AS
         MIXED-GENRE TEXT

Ishmael, as I have said, plays a double role in Moby-Dick. For most of the

narrative, he plays the role of the frontiersman adventurer, exploring the watery

wilderness and making careful observations of the whaling trade. At other times,

however, he steps out of this role and speaks for the author. In his observations on the tail, Ishmael carefully catalogs the "peculiar" motions (376) of various types that the tail, by its structure, is capable of. But he concludes the chapter with a gesture that surrenders the very point of such cataloging: "Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will" (379). Ishmael's voice here is in a quite different register, one which transcends the two genres Melville juxtaposes. He combines the genres in order to express a truth that is deeper than the optimism of the frontiersman adventure or the pessimism of the illustrious criminal adventure. Both genres express temporary moods about the world; the real truth, for Melville, is that neither are true in a meaningless universe. This tragic nihilist position of Melville takes form in Moby-Dick through a mixed-genre structure, in which both Ahab and Ishmael critique each other and show the failure of either genre to present the truth[14].

Although Melville uses the resources of the illustrious criminal adventure to invest Ahab with glamour, he also emphasizes Ahab's real destructiveness and cruelty. The other characters in the text (including Ahab himself) note repeatedly that his war against God's evil is itself evil in many ways. As we have seen, the authors of illustrious criminal adventures sought to mollify their characters' rampages and murder and pillage by making them tragic figures with justified grievances. Starbuck unquestionably asserts Ahab's evil: "aye, he would be a democrat to all above; look, how he lords it over all below!" (169); Ahab is "dark" (170); a "Terrible old man!" (235) who "would fain kill all his crew" (514). Moreover, Ishmael is tempted by Ahab's vision, proclaiming that "Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (179), but he decisively rejects it later. According to R. W. B. Lewis, Ishmael faces off with his momentary infatuation with

Ahab in the "Try-Works" chapter, facing in the fire Ahab's inflexible awareness of evil that verges on becoming a love of evil itself. In this chapter, Ishmael observes that "Like a plethoric burning martyr, or a self-consuming misanthrope, once ignited, the whale supplies his own fuel and burns by his own body" (422). The "self-consuming misanthrope" in the text is Ahab, and Ishmael symbolically predicts – indeed, wishes for – Ahab's death: "Would that he consumed his own smoke!" (422) Ishmael also repudiates his own infatuation with Ahab with a statement in the same symbolic system: "Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me" (425). Ishmael does not merely survive Ahab's doom; he rejects the metaphysicalized illustrious criminal's drive for revenge as an "unnatural hallucination" (424). Even Ahab himself doubts the validity of his mission, describing himself as a "forty years' fool" for pursuing the white whale, describing his life on the quest as a "desolation of solitude" that has made him neither "richer nor better" (543-544). Even if God is as evil as Ahab asserts, Ahab's rebellion seems no better.

Moreover, Melville gives reason to doubt that Ahab's pessimistic position is the right one. Starbuck describes Ahab's quest as an imputation of evil where there is only the "instinct" of a "dumb brute" (163-164). Ishmael states directly that other interpretations are possible, saying "What the White Whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid" (188). As Janet Reno argues, Ahab characteristically tries to impose meanings on things too fluid for meaning (79-80). Joyce Adler argues that Ahab's most obvious characteristic is his "rigidity," his state of being "incapable of growth in his vision of, and in his relation to, life" (67-78).[15] The text offers other interpretations, which even Ahab finds himself momentarily assenting

to: "Ahab did, in the end, a little respond to the playful allurings of that girlish [spring] air. More than once did he put forth the faint blossom of a look, which, in any other man, would have soon flowered out in a smile" (125); this is hardly the defiant right worship Ahab trumpets elsewhere. And even when these emotional falterings fail to turn him off the chase, he is incapable of explaining his devotion to the hunt except in terms of crude determinism:

> What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozzening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? (545)

If Ahab is moved not by free will but by some "nameless" force, his quest has no moral meaning. Ahab's value system does not rule the day; other value systems, associated with Ishmael, contrast with Ahab's in a way that shows Ahab's destructiveness. As Carolyn Porter puts it, "he [Ishmael] has usually been regarded by modern readers as genial, tolerant, open-minded – in short, as a comic and sane counterweight to the mad Ahab" (94). Ahab's pessimism, besides producing cruelty, is not necessarily intellectually sustainable.

We see this critique most pointedly in Ahab's dealing with the whale. For Ahab, the whale means one thing and one thing only: the evil God. But much of the text simply ignores this meaning of the whale. Over a third of the text consists of Ishmael's details about the whale: the physiology of the animal, the varieties, the methods of hunting it. If,

as Ahab claims, the whale is only a "pasteboard mask," then this detailing of the filigrees and waxworking of the mask are at best irrelevant to the narrative. If Moby-Dick is truly a metaphysical illustrious criminal adventure, pitting a criminal hero against a universe of evil, then it is one full of doubts and digressions and freighted down by a blind alley more than a hundred pages long. Rather, it would seem that Ahab's picture is not the correct picture.

Given that the text critiques Ahab at a number of points, and systematically, it is possible that Melville did in fact write Ishmael as the hero of a metaphysical frontiersman adventure story, albeit one with a great deal of attention given to a very colorful villain. But Moby-Dick does not rest here either. In the first place, Ishmael gets lost too completely. For the final quarter or so of the text, Ishmael does not appear; the last use of the very word "Ishmael" is in Chapter 102, over thirty chapters before the end. Rather, the book, at least on a surface level, seems to belong quite thoroughly to Ahab. Reacting against more Ishmael-centered readings, Thomas Woodson has memorably protested, "In the popular mind Moby-Dick has always been Ahab's book" (351). Despite the ubiquity of the opening line "Call me Ishmael," popular culture has always treated it as Ahab's book. Indeed, it is difficult to explain anything about the book without recurring to Ahab almost immediately. Melville's purposes in writing Moby-Dick, whatever they were, either centered on Ahab to an extraordinary degree, or else Melville grossly miscalculated what he was doing. And from a formal point of view, it is inevitable that Ahab would gain a kind of prominence over Ishmael. Ishmael's part of the narrative, being largely dominated by fact, does not have a plot. Ishmael does not visibly develop

or change, and therefore this part of the narrative lacks the propulsion that Ahab's part of the narrative does. [16]

In addition, the text calls into question the very premises of Ishmael's metaphysicalized frontiersman adventure. If Ahab's focus on the evil in the world fails to deal with Ishmael's catalog of facts, Ishmael's catalog fails to deal with Ahab's profound metaphysical inquiry. Ishmael's broad survey and collection of facts is not only different from the truth that Ahab defiantly seeks, but it is also lesser and more trivial. Ishmael himself occasionally throws up his hands at the deeper mysteries he faces:

> If then, Sir William Jones, who read in thirty languages, could not read the simplest peasant's face, in its profounder and more subtle meanings, how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read if it you can. (347)

Here Ishmael declares his inability to get to the philosophical bottom of things, an inability Ahab does not suffer from. In the next chapter, however, Ishmael finds a way to discover that "[i]n the full-grown creature the skull will measure at least twenty feet in length" (348). He may have gotten these dimensions off of his arm, for he informs us in the previous chapter that he had the skeleton dimensions of the whale tattooed on his right arm, as "There was no other secure way of preserving such valuable statistics" (451). This is in marked contrast to the tattooing on Queequeg, which forms a "mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" (480). Queequeg's tattooing is important, but incomprehensible; Ishmael's tattooing is understandable, but genuinely trivial. Ahab sees the significance, too, of Queequeg's tattooing: a "devilish tantalization of the gods," confirming his own deepest beliefs. But there is no evidence that Ahab notices Ishmael's

71

tattooing (or that Ahab notices Ishmael at all).  Melville allows the example of Ahab to

criticize the shallowness of Ishmael's optimism: the frontiersman who insists he "would

still be social with" a "horror" is brought to silence by Ahab's real awareness of horror.

The two genres present in Moby-Dick critique each other powerfully.

Melville's use of a mixed-genre structure is a direct consequence of his

philosophical position and his attempt to communicate it.  He presents, in Moby-Dick, a

world devoid of value, but rich – indeed, tragically rich – in beliefs in value.  There are

thus two levels to his position.  One is metaphysical: on this level, there is only the

essentially formless raw material of the universe.  But the other level is psychological.

On this level, where the imaginations of value reside, value, though not real, might as

well be real, because of the absolutely persuasive emotional subjective truth of those

values.  The tragedy, in fact, resides here: the distance between what one feels and what

is true is the central tragedy of life.

Melville demonstrates throughout Moby-Dick the way our fleeting emotions

produce convincing worldviews and philosophical beliefs that are nevertheless entirely

subjective.  He frequently uses the word 'mood' in this context: Ishmael finds Elijah's

prophecies either foreboding or amusing – that is, Ishmael is prepared to believe in

mysticism or skepticism – according to his "mood" (122).  Pantheism not only becomes

true but active, dissolving the self into the "deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading

mankind and nature" if one is in an "enchanted mood" (159).  Ishmael's grammar, when

he states "Therefore, in his other moods, symbolize whatever grand or gracious thing he

will by whiteness, no man can deny that in its profoundest idealized significance it calls

up a peculiar apparition to the soul," reveals his subjectivity: whiteness does not

72

symbolize, but a "man" symbolizes things by whiteness, depending on "his . . . moods" (192). The universe is a joke, but only if one is in a specific "wayward mood" (226). The whale's own meaning is directly dependent on such moods: "But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the archangels" (378). Moods and fleeting emotions are temporary, but they produce assertions of philosophical meaning, sometimes comprehensive ones. The mixed-genre structure of Moby-Dick proceeds on that understanding of our beliefs. In contrasting two opposed genres, Melville contrasts two philosophical beliefs and finds them both wanting. Ishmael, as a metaphysicalized frontiersman adventure, embodies optimism. On the other hand, Ahab's metaphysicalized illustrious criminal adventure embodies pessimism. Melville found particular fictional genres that would represent these beliefs persuasively and compellingly. His deployment of them against each other communicates that these beliefs are persuasive, but if each of them is equally persuasive and both cannot be true, persuasiveness is no test of truth: "what plays the mischief with the truth," Melville wrote to Hawthorne, "is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion" (194).

The truth that these temporary feelings play mischief with is the truth of nihilism. Both characters have it in their grasp, but both characters let it slip away. Ahab has this moment of speculation:

> All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event --
> 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 man will strike, strike through the mask! How can

the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me,
the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. *Sometimes I think there's
naught beyond.* (164) [emphasis mine].

If there is nothing beyond the unreasoning mask, then the mask is all, and if the mask is

unreasoning, it is meaningless. Ahab's whole sense of the universe's hostility requires

that some "reasoning thing" is out there; without that, his whole mission falls apart. But

Ahab's temporary sense of "naught beyond" does not last; he follows up by saying "But

'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me." Whatever temporary sense Ahab may have had,

he does not – cannot – discard the idea of a "he" out there, mocking and tormenting him

as the King of Spain tormented Solonois, Black Avenger of the Spanish Main. Ahab's

mood is pessimistic, expressed by Melville's metaphysicalization of the illustrious

criminal adventure genre, and thus he requires a tyrant to revolt against. Similarly,

Ishmael always allows his momentary nihilistic vision to slip away. His revelation that

"it is all in all what mood you are in" is followed, just one paragraph later, by a very

typically Ishmaelian comparison between the whale's tail and the elephant's trunk, and

one which warns that one should not use that "chance comparison" as license to "place

those two opposite organs on an equality" (378). Again, Ishmael never abandons his own

mission of frontier exploration. These hints of the nihilistic truth never register for the

characters, but they register for the text.


## V.     "THUS, I GIVE UP THE SPEAR!": A STRIKE FOR INDEPENDENCE

Moby-Dick presents this nihilistic philosophical message to its readers. Melville

has a particular position, embodied by the text in a particular form. His use of the codes

of the frontiersman adventure genre and the illustrious criminal adventure genres constitutes a use of specific conventions that communicated specific information to the reader. Melville metaphysicalizes these genres, retaining their basic moral direction. These were popular genres, circulating widely in nineteenth-century America. The text's resources are all directed towards communicating Melville's philosophical ideas to the reader.

But this communication is hardly plain; rather, Melville envisions a remarkable reader. Melville's philosophical message opposed the foundations of antebellum fiction's moral function; if there is no morality, then there can be no moral function to fiction, or to anything. A reader who could accept the prospect of a universe without God or moral order would be a reader with a strong philosophical stomach. When Melville attempted to deliver much the same message in <u>Pierre</u> a year later, he was told by the <u>Literary World</u> that "ordinary novel readers will never unkennel this loathsome suggestion" (qtd. in Higgins and Parker, 1995, 430-431). Moreover, his mixed-genre structure is complex and demanding. As Matt Laufer points out, Melville makes demands on the reader to move beyond mere spectatorship to critical engagement. The mixed-genre structure of <u>Moby-Dick</u>, I argue, requires that critical engagement, since its form reflects an intellectual arrangement whose meaning does not announce itself. Concurrently with Melville's attempt to communicate with the reader, he also makes an aggressive strike against the reader, emphasizing the difficulty of the text and its message while beckoning them to the challenge of that difficulty.

Critics have noted the hostility and aggression in Melville's relationship with his reader in <u>Moby-Dick</u> before. Railton argues that Melville's switch, around Chapter 55,

from a storytelling mode to an expository mode, is a deliberate "demotion" of the reader, a "perversely exacting" demand on the reader and a refusal to "scratch the novel reader's itch for a story" (170). Ann Douglas also argues that Moby-Dick represents a challenge to the reader, one intended to challenge readers to rethink their approach to the text, moving the reader from the

> passivity of the 'sub-sub,' the Irvingesque persona who opens Moby Dick with his erudite but uncollated series of definitions, the consumer of literature who is always more a reader than a writer, toward the philosophy of Ishmael, who is pre-eminently engaged with experience, and finally to the passion of Ahab, whose imagination encompasses and creates the enormities of adventure. The reader is urged to deal with the ambiguities of Ahab's moral status precisely because to deal with ambiguity is, in Melville's mind, to deal with danger. Melville asks the reader metaphorically to risk his life to explore the necessities of the imagination; he invites the reader to help him write the book – if he dares. (308)

What these critics have not done, however, is dealt with how Melville works that aggression out through particular popular genres of the day. Ahab is not Douglas's absolute ambiguity but a recognizable generic type. Moreover, the cetology chapters were not a frustrating demand but very much a conventional feature of the kind of frontiersman adventure that Ishmael's section of the book emulates. In fact, they were the parts of the book that reviewers tended to enjoy the most, and books that contained such features were popular. Rather, Melville works out his challenge to the reader by

using popular genres and *combining* them in a challenging way to deliver a challenging message.

Melville incessantly dramatizes his challenge to his readers throughout the text, not merely in the text's challenging mixed-genre structure, but also in its figuration of land and sea. As Railton points out, Moby-Dick figures the reader as a landsman throughout, and the sea as the domain of truth (172-174). The "you" addressed is always ignorant of the sea: "I am all anxiety to convince ye, ye landsmen, of the injustice hereby done to us hunters of whales" (108). Moreover, in contrast to the land, one has the sea, and Melville constantly reiterates just how profoundly different the land and sea are. The landsman must be educated in these marvels and wonders because the sea is so foreign to his or her own experience, but this education becomes progressively more dangerous. The sea is different zoologically; the animals of the sea do not parallel in any way the animals of the land; in fact, the closest parallel that Melville can imagine is between the dog, which Melville admires for its "sagacious kindness," and the shark, which Melville always presents hatefully (273). Indeed, natural law in one place is not natural law in the other: "Wherein differ the sea and the land, that a miracle upon one is not a miracle upon the other?" (273). Exposure to the secrets of the sea will have the tendency to so profoundly change one that one almost becomes extraterrestrial: "For years he [the whaler] knows not the land; so that when he comes to it at last, it smells like another world, more strangely than the moon would to an Earthsman" (64). The reader is even warned explicitly, not to "push off from" the "verdant land" of ordinary experience into the "appalling ocean" of "the half known life" that lies in seaborne speculation (274). Truth in Moby-Dick is like the sea: perilous territory.

If the sea is truth, it follows that the character who knows most would be the character who has the most experience of the sea: Pip, whose insanity is further warning to the reader.  It is neither Ishmael nor Ahab but Pip who, alone among the characters, has the most direct and unmediated experience of the ocean depths.  When Pip jumps from the ship the second time, and Stubb turns his back, Pip is deprived of any sight of land by the "shoreless ocean."  His deprivation of any sight of land is a direct contact with the truth-sea, and his soul is

> carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the
> unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the
> miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the
> joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-
> omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the
> colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke
> it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is
> heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last
> to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal
> or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.  (414)

Melville he emphasizes what Pip has seen metaphorically by his contact with the sea, and the sea's absolute foreignness from what passes for wisdom on the land.  Although Pip is associated with Ahab (and in those moments he approaches lucidity), he is in fact a much more accurate embodiment of Melville's philosophical beliefs than either Ahab or Ishmael.

For this reason, Pip models the reading process of <u>Moby-Dick</u> if one takes that reading to its logical extreme, making for a further warning of the dangers of true reading. Critics have always examined the doubloon scene as a scene of reading. In this scene, a series of characters look at the doubloon that Ahab has nailed to the mainmast, and each one interprets it. Each interpretation follows from the individual character's predisposition, the individual character's mood; thus, Ahab sees his own titanic power and struggle, Starbuck sees the Christian trinity and the journey of the soul towards salvation, Flask sees monetary value that can be exchanged for tobacco, and so forth. Pip, however, produces a meta-interpretation: first "'I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" and then "And I, you, and he; and we, ye, and they, are all bats; and I'm a crow, especially when I stand a'top of this pine tree here. Caw! caw! caw! caw! caw! caw! Ain't I a crow? And where's the scare-crow? There he stands; two bones stuck into a pair of old trowsers, and two more poked into the sleeves of an old jacket" (434). Pip's interpretation has two parts. First, he notes that others (including himself) have looked upon and interpreted the doubloon; Melville here figures the reader who will see the different genres that the text is composed of, just as the different readers of the doubloon have all interpreted it as a different genre, without making the mistake of classifying it as one or the other. The second part of Pip's statement is nonsense. This is the second part of the ultimate reading Melville imagines, because mixed-genre structure, as I have argued, points toward a particular philosophical conclusion, one which reveals a universe devoid of motive. If the right worship – the appropriate response – to a malevolent universe is counter-malevolence, the right worship of a meaningless universe would be a meaningless response; truly, "man's insanity is heaven's sense" and "celestial

79

thought" is "absurd," for God is "indifferent." Pip is the only fully successful reader in the text, and Pip is insane. Only our false moods, whether pessimistic or optimistic, produce human meaning, but our false moods keep us from the truth. This is the challenge of reading <u>Moby-Dick</u>.

Thus, Melville constructs a text, in <u>Moby-Dick</u>, which offers insanity as the best possible reading. Melville was not merely attempting to communicate ideas to his readers; he knew that these ideas were dangerous and offensive to most readers, and moreover, he was firmly convinced that the literary marketplace, as it stood in 1851, had no place for such ideas. His attempt to deal with them anyway is the mark of his daring, aggressive, hostile challenge to the reader. Brodhead has described Melville as "laureate of aggression": as an artist who was obsessed with aggression and whose texts reflect that obsession, and whose whole approach to writing was founded on aggression, arguing that "Melville . . . envisions the novelist as an affronter, a self asserted over against collectivities and collective understandings" (182-183)[17]. Melville wanted more than merely to communicate his philosophical position using the appropriate form. He could have used any materials for that. Melville, however, wanted to assert his own independence from the central premises of the literary marketplace, even as he used the resources of that marketplace. To that end, he constructed a text that deliberately affronted those premises head-on. <u>Moby-Dick</u> is thus a breakthrough text for Melville as a writer, because it solidified not only his literary approach but his sense of literary mission.

Even so, <u>Moby-Dick</u> offers tremendous challenges and dangers to its prospective readers, but in a spirit of invitation. If Melville warns his readers of the dangers of the

sea of truth, he also celebrates its excitement, for it is the excitement of freedom. "all

deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence

of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the

treacherous, slavish shore" (107). The dangers themselves of such speculation are

welcome as dangers, because only in this way can reader and writer escape from that

which confines them: "better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously

dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven

crawl to land!" (107). If Moby-Dick is a strike at the reader and the reader's

assumptions, it is also an invitation to the reader to put hands on that same harpoon and

strike.

NOTES

[1] Other critics who identify Melville's position with Ahab's include William Braswell, Lewis Mumford, Merlin Bowen, Thomas Woodson, and, more recently, Suzanne Stein.
[2] As Parker and Higgins (1992) note, "even the most elaborate analysis of *Moby-Dick* could be written in the 1920s with no more than a passing mention of Ishmael" (25).
[3] See also Marcia Reddick, William K. Spofford, and Edward J. Rose.
[4] Discussions of the influence of such sources are extensive. Nathalia Wright's Melville's Use of the Bible has a self-explanatory title and is immensely thorough on its subject. Charles Olson and Matthiessen deal with the influence of Shakespeare. Henry F. Pommer extensively catalogs the influence of Milton. Mary K. Bercaw, in Melville's Sources, assembles a discussion of many of the other influences, including Homer, Dante, and Cervantes.
[5] See Reynolds, Post-Lauria, and Colatrella for extensive discussions of popular sources for Melville's pre-Moby-Dick writings.
[6] The ambiguous fame of Bulwer-Lytton's Paul Clifford is that it begins with the sentence "It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the house-tops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness" (1), which inspired the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction contest, wherein contestants compete to write the worst possible opening sentence for a novel.

[7] Ahab can be, and has been, described as owing a debt to the Byronic hero or the Gothic villain (see Kris Lackey's discussion of Gothicism in Melville). The illustrious criminal as a character type is certainly genealogically related to these earlier character types, but I argue that the illustrious criminal is a distinct type, and that Ahab is better described in that category. Linda Bayer-Berenbaum describes the Gothic as a mode relying on extremes, particularly extremes of good and evil. "There are the villains – the interfering, brutal fathers, the officials of the Inquisition, the sadistic monks and abbots, or the ugly, monstrous foreigners" (23). The gothic villain lacks the kind of interiority that illustrious criminal possesses, and the gothic villain's rebellious urges are *entirely* transgressive – there is no attempt to dress the gothic villain's motivations up in the moral dressing that illustrious criminals, particularly in their American incarnations, possessed. The Byronic hero, on the other hand, was too little associated with the world of physical action in comparison with the illustrious criminal.

[8] Herbert puts this in Calvinist terms (147).

[9] Roughly, Ishmael dominates chapters 1-27 and chapters 55-105, as well as the epilogue, with Ahab dominating the remainder of the text.

[10] Green also includes a chapter on another type of adventure tale, "The Avenger," which in some ways resembles what I have termed the illustrious criminal genre. However, his avenger is strictly a European type, starting with Dumas and Sue, and bears only a few resemblances to the American version of the illustrious criminal. Interestingly, Green does briefly consider the possibility of subsuming Ahab and Moby-Dick under the avenger label, but then rejects this notion:

> No doubt the American book with an Avenger hero most famous with literary readers is Melville's Moby Dick (1851), in which Captain Ahab seeks revenge on the universe at large and focuses his anger on a giant white whale, forcing the crew of his whaling ship to pursue it against all common sense and reason – and comes to his death by so doing.
>
> The political reference in this is less clear. Though the ship and the crew represent democratic society, Ahab seems to belong to another world of meaning. Melville's sympathies were more metaphysical than political; they were above all literary. This means that his book is more impressive as a work of Romantic art but less authentic as an adventure. Only the very last chapters, describing the battle between the whale and the ship, have the quality of real adventure, though it seems likely that Melville intended the whole work to have that character. It is difficult to believe even in the sea as long as Ahab has center stage. (140)

Green resists the possibility that metaphysicalization is an operation that can be performed on such a genre; as I argue, that possibility is crucial for understanding Melville's use of the genre.

[11] Green assimilates the nonfictional adventures, like Dana's and Parkman's, with the fictional adventures of Cooper and Marryat. Similarly, Reynolds groups such texts together under his heading of "Moral Adventure" (184-188). Although there are differences between fictional and nonfictional frontiersman adventures, the features that Melville adapts in Moby-Dick are common to both varieties of the genre.

[12] Certainly reviewers of the time thought of these sections as seriously providing information, rather than being playful or ironic.  Duyckinck described it as "a thorough exhaustive account admirably given of the great Sperm Whale. . . . given in the most delightful manner" (qtd. in Higgins and Parker, 1995, 384).  George Ripley wrote that "Mr. Melville gives us not only the romance of his history, but a great mass of instruction on the character and habits of his whole race, with complete details of the wily stratagems of their pursuers" (383).  The Southern Quarterly Review reported that in "all those portions of this volume which relate directly to the whale, his appearance in the oceans which he inhabits; his habits, powers and peculiarities; his pursuit and capture; the interest of the reader will be kept alive. . . . We should judge, from what is before us, that Mr. Melville has as much personal knowledge of the whale as any man living, and is better able, than any man living, to display this knowledge in print" (412).  So nineteenth-century readers thought of these sections as very seriously presenting truthful information in an interesting way.

[13] Sheila Post-Lauria, in her invaluable Correspondent Colorings: Melville in the Marketplace, reads the cetology sections of Moby-Dick differently, while working from the same general premise of Melville's links to popular fiction.  According to Post-Lauria, Moby-Dick is part of the genre of the "metaphysical novel."  The metaphysical novel mixes realistic presentation with high-flown speculation in an attempt to broaden the reader's perspective to include idealism.  Post-Lauria argues that Moby-Dick represents Melville's innovation of this genre: "Unlike other metaphysical writers – particularly, Kimball, Judd, and Mayo, who thematized the superiority of the ideal to the real – Melville combines in Moby-Dick both realistic and impressionistic methods of depicting reality to convey their complementariness" (112).  Metaphysical novels were not the only genre to mix fact and fiction; frontiersman adventures, as I have shown, did the same.  Moreover, Moby-Dick is closer in its surface plot and content to adventure fiction than to the examples of metaphysical novels that Post-Lauria cites, and Melville had extensive experience with the frontiersman mode.  I argue that it is more reasonable to consider Moby-Dick in the context of other frontiersman adventures.

[14] It is not clear whether this was Melville's intention from the beginning of writing Moby-Dick or not.  Many critics, including Leon Parker and Harrison Hayford, have produced convincing evidence that Melville's intentions changed over the course of writing.  The bulk of the evidence such critics cite suggests that Melville began with the intention of focusing the narrative entirely around Ishmael, and deciding in the process that Ahab would be an important character.

       Even if this account is true – and such accounts must necessarily be speculative – then Melville's mixed-genre structure still serves his philosophical intentions.  The expanding role of Ahab could then have begun as an expression of Melville's doubts about Ishmael's relatively sunny disposition about sea-travel, and an attempt to balance a perspective that seemed to Melville to be limited, though convincing.  The use of Ahab could then have been Melville's *discovery* of how mixed-genre structure could communicate his philosophical position.  What *is* certain is that the final text, which Melville felt satisfied with, does indeed use its mixed-genre structure in this way, unlike the less focused Mardi.

[15] See also Post-Lauria 112-122.

[16] It is perhaps significant that, in popular-culture invocations of <u>Moby-Dick</u>, it is invoked as Ahab's book.  On one episode of <u>The Simpsons</u>, Lisa responds to her father Homer's plan to kill a bear with "You can't take vengeance on an animal, dad.  That's the point of <u>Moby-Dick</u>."  Homer replies with, "Lisa, the point of <u>Moby-Dick</u> is 'be yourself.'"  (Both readings are plausible, I suppose.)  On *The X-Files*, Dana Scully and her navy father use the nicknames "Ahab" and "Starbuck," not "Ishmael" and "Queequeg."  When TNT adapted *Moby-Dick*, they chose celebrated actor Patrick Stewart for Ahab but relatively low-profile Henry Thomas for Ishmael.  The only exceptions that come to mind are reworkings of the first line, as in the "Call me Ishmael – you've known me long enough" in Alan Moore's comic book series <u>The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen</u> or (again) on <u>The Simpsons</u>, where Sea-Captain says on the phone "I can't talk right now.  Call me, Ishmael."

[17] Leverenz, in <u>Manhood and the American Renaissance</u>, argues that <u>Moby-Dick</u> reflects Melville's own contradictory drives of masochism and aggression, stemming from both Melville's sophisticated reading of the function of masculinity in the nineteenth-century economy and from Melville's deep-seated rage and self-loathing stemming from resentment for his mother, whom Melville perceived as hating both him and his dead father.  Such a combination of the need to lash out and the need to be noticed mirrors Melville's gestures towards popular fiction in <u>Moby-Dick</u> and in later works.

CHAPTER 3


THE PUNISHMENT OF VIRTUE: GENRE, VALUE, AND READER IN PIERRE


More explicitly than any of Melville's previous works, Pierre is a book about

writing. The main character is an author, writing a book about an "author-hero" (302).

Critics have often noted the obsession with written material and literary works in Pierre.

The narrative is full of important texts, especially the novel Pierre is writing and the

pamphlet written by Plotinus Plinlimmon. Moreover, many of these texts are dangerous.

Pierre retreats in fear from his editions of Dante and Hamlet; his own novel is deemed by

his publishers to be too "blasphemous" to print, and its composition inflicts physical

torture on Pierre. The most dangerous, however, is the insulting letter Pierre receives

from Glen and Fred, not because of what it says, but because Pierre loads the letter into

his pistol and shoots its authors with it; in the world of Pierre, you can literally kill people

with texts.

But if Melville figures written texts as dangerous in Pierre, he also represents

them as repositories of truth. "Be naught concealed in this book of sacred truth" (107),

announces the narrator as he begins to unfold Pierre's complex motivations. Shakespeare

and Dante inspire his fear because Hamlet is "too true" (168). Pierre conceives of his

own novel about Vivia as communicating "what he thought to be new, or at least miserably neglected Truth to the world" (283). If written texts are dangerous, it is in large part because of the truth they contain, and Melville's implication is that <u>Pierre</u> is a book containing truth, and dangerous to its readers as a result.

Melville expresses <u>Pierre</u>'s danger in two ways. The central dangerous truth is tragic nihilism, holding that meaning and value are nothing but illusions in an essentially meaningless world. Such a truth was dangerous because it challenged the reader's own illusions, and confronted him or her with terror and despair. The terror and despair that accompany such meaninglessness make any solution to moral problems impossible. This secret moral to <u>Pierre</u> has often been mistaken by critics for an endorsement of pragmatism and compromise, as <u>Pierre</u>'s philosopher Plotinus Plinlimmon recommends. According to many critics, Melville critiques Pierre's actions by Plinlimmon's standards. But a reading of <u>Pierre</u> that deals with its mixed-genre structure will show that there is no critique of Pierre, for a critique implies a stable position on which to stand, and Melville holds that all such positions are false.

The second danger of <u>Pierre</u> is formal: the way that Melville expresses his tragic nihilism is challenging and perilous to readers. Melville uses a mixed-genre structure that combines domestic and city-mysteries fiction. Both of these genres, like antebellum fiction generally, performed a moral function. The particular moral structures of these genres were their ways of fulfilling that function. Melville's profound rejection of moral truth did not prevent him from using the materials of popular genres that presumed such truth, but he used those generic conventions in an unorthodox way. Melville's combination of them entangles their moral structures, thus short-circuiting their moral

86

function. By this structure, Melville offered a challenge to the reader.  Moreover, Melville articulates that challenge in <u>Pierre</u> in a different register, indicating the greater sense of hostility he had acquired since writing <u>Moby-Dick</u>.  In <u>Moby-Dick</u>, Melville had seen the danger and challenge as one that the reader and writer could share.  In <u>Pierre</u>, Melville sees the author as posing the challenge for the reader: the two are enemies, not by choice, but by the nature of the truth that the author must present.

## I. "THE SUN-LIKE GLORIES OF GOD-LIKE TRUTH AND VIRTUE": <u>PIERRE</u> AS DOMESTIC FICTION

Melville begins this challenge by his use of domestic fiction.  This tremendously popular genre dealt with family life in social settings of the present day, focusing on characters who faced moral challenges and overcame them altruistically.  Domestic fiction organized itself around the rewards of virtue, showing the benefits of moral behavior.  Critics have often described Melville as a derisive parodist of domestic fiction[1], but his use of its conventions is not parodic; rather, Melville takes domestic fiction seriously, and presents its failure as the general failure of all moral beliefs.

Domestic fiction was the most popular American genre of the 1850s.  Though critics disagree about what to call this genre, they agree about what the texts in question are[2].  The most well-known examples of domestic fiction are Susan Warner's <u>The Wide Wide World</u> (1850) and Maria Cummins's <u>The Lamplighter</u> (1854); other examples include the work of E. D. E. N. Southworth, Maria McIntosh, and Caroline Lee Hentz. The protagonists of domestic fiction are generally young and often face parental obstacles on their way to true love.  The first half of <u>Pierre</u>, with its young, idealistic protagonist,

struggling to do the right thing and do his duty to his long-lost sister despite the resistance of his rich and snobbish mother, makes for an excellent example of the genre.

Most important for Melville was the basic moral structure of the domestic novel, which was organized around the rewards of virtue. Among antebellum readers, authors, and critics, fiction served a moral function[3], encouraging good behavior and character among its readers. The characters in fiction existed primarily to set examples for readers. Characters who acted morally, and experienced good consequences as a result, were the kinds of characters authors were supposed to display, and characters who behaved immorally were supposed to suffer as a result. The <u>Christian Examiner</u> in an 1845article on novelist Fredrika Bremer praised her immensely for her moral characters – her "good husbands" and "good wives" (174) – and notes approvingly the happiness, the "happy domestic life," she brings to them (175). Similarly <u>The North American</u> wrote that Sedgwick "never separates the tie that unites virtue and happiness, vice and misery, which succeed each other as invariably as thunder follows lightning or as spring comes after winter" (qtd. in Baym, 1984, 169). Domestic fiction emphasized the former point, the connection between virtue and happiness, focusing on moral exemplars[4] who maintained their virtue through their tribulations and received happiness at the end. This happiness almost always took the form of a good marriage. By staying true to the religious values he has taught her, Ellen is poised to marry John Humpries at the end of <u>The Wide Wide World</u>. Similarly, despite the temptations of easy money from an unreliable love interest, Louise in McIntosh's <u>Woman an Enigma</u> (1843) remains self-sufficient and wins her lover on terms of mutual self-respect. Domestic fiction followed a structure in which good behavior won good consequences.

In domestic fiction, the emotion of *sympathy* is the specific fuel of the good-behavior-good-consequences engine that powers the genre. Glenn Hendler argues that sympathy, in the sense of affective identification with another, structures experience in the domestic genre (114). Thus, in a domestic text such as The Lamplighter, the author continually presents her protagonist's happiness as produced solely by the happiness of others (Hendler 118). Thus, domestic fictions require their characters to identify sympathetically with another and to act in self-sacrificing ways. Although such action seems to be a dissolution of self, Hendler argues that domestic fictions "set up their characters' quests for sympathy as searches for identity" (123); the genre rewards self-sacrifice in non-self-sacrificing ways.

Melville calls on these conventions seriously; it is important that we see that Melville's use of domestic fiction in Pierre is not derisive or merely parodistic. The relationship of Pierre to the domestic novel has been the discursive center of discussions about the text's relationship to popular genres, and most critics who have dealt with the text's relationship to domestic fiction have classified Pierre as an attack on or parody of the domestic novel. However, if one examines the relationship between Pierre and the conventions of domestic fiction, we see that Melville's use of these conventions is serious, sincere, probing. The logical steps of the Pierre-as-parody readings are that first, the domestic novel represented a set of falsifications about moral and social matters, and second, Melville in Pierre mockingly unmasks these falsifications. For example, many critics argue that Pierre, by his decision, is attacking the domestic novel's religion of the family. Paul Rogin argues that Pierre, in leaving Saddle Meadows, is leaving "the ideal of American domesticity . . . in ruins" (161), and that his revolt against his mother is an

attack on the convention that "sentimental novels emphasized the loving bond between mother and son" (162). According to Gillian Brown, Pierre, in seeking independence, is engaging in "antisentimentalism" (152), and his attempt to reformulate his family with Isabel is an attack on the authority of the mother. Carol Colatrella cites <u>Pierre</u> as a "satire of sentimental domestic fictions" (200) and one in which "Melville tinkers with sentimental plot devices for bringing all into a harmonious relation, questioning what family has ever done for Pierre" (193). The premise of such readings is that domestic fiction idealized and prettified biological families, and Melville, by having Pierre revolt against his family, is revolting against the literary genre.

However, Pierre's decision represents the fulfillment of that genre's moral imperatives. Domestic fictions frequently presented biological families as morally flawed and, in some cases, worthy of rejection. Abusive family authority figures were a staple of domestic fiction. Aunt Fortune in <u>The Wide, Wide World</u> is the most obvious example of a guardian who needlessly makes her ward unhappy. Despite Aunt Fortune's cruelty and coldness, there is never any suggestion that Ellen should force her way out of the household. But in many cases, families in domestic novels proved so unsatisfactory that they had to be forcefully reconstituted, and mother-led families, like Mary Glendinning's, were no exception. Mrs. Armstrong in E. D. E. N. Southworth's <u>The Mother-In-Law</u> (1850) and the title character of Louise Moulton's <u>Juno Clifford</u> (1856) are two examples of mothers who so mismanage their families that the only solution is to reject their authority. In <u>The Mother-In-Law</u>, Mrs. Armstrong, out of pride, more or less kidnaps her daughter away from her husband and essentially holds her prisoner for months, using falsified letters to make her daughter think her husband wants to leave her;

90

this makes it necessary for Louise to totally abandon her authority[5]. Juno Clifford falls in love with her adopted son, and abuses her maternal power to keep the young woman who is in love with him away from him, and the male protagonist rejects Juno Clifford's authority by leaving home. Pierre's renunciation of his mother and his family in the name of principle is thus a move that has ample precedents in the body of fiction that Melville here emulates.

Pierre's decision not only to abandon his mother's family but to create a new family with Isabel is a reconstitution of the family that follows the conventions of domestic fiction. Pierre bases his decision partly on biological loyalty (he has a presumed blood relationship to Isabel) but also on *sympathy*. As Hendler puts it, "carrying the 'experiment' of sympathy into the family itself can lead to unexpected consequences. Instead of proposing that one should love one's family, it asserts, in effect, that one's family will be whatever one loves" (125). The family thus became not a static set of biological relations, but a potentially far-extending network based on individual and often self-sacrificing acts of identification with another. Pierre's experience with Isabel is just such an act of self-sacrificing identification. Melville devotes two chapters to her retelling of her life story in first person, in heavily emotional and subjective language, not merely to transmit facts, but so we as readers – along with Pierre – may identify with her and experience her pain as our own. Pierre does not merely contemplate or feel sorry for Isabel's story; he responds sympathetically to her – it brings "all his soft enthusiast tears into the sympathetic but still unshedding eyes of Pierre" (152). His pretended marriage to her is thus not an act of total insanity but an attempt, as Pierre is conscious of, to include Isabel in the family system she has been shut

out of.  If he cannot publicly be her brother, he will be her husband.  Pierre's self-sacrificing act is thus a critique of the genuinely anti-domestic Glendinning family, which is based not on sympathy but on power and manipulation.

Beyond the familial themes, critics also charge that Pierre, by his revolt against his mother, is attacking the general social and economic falsifications that domestic fiction as a genre carries out.  Edgar Dryden argues that Melville in Pierre mocks the "domestic sentimental novel" and engages in a "sneering condemnation of a counterfeit world," a world based on appearances.  Similarly, David S. Reynolds claims that Pierre's mother, Reverend Falsgrave, and the whole social system of Saddle Meadows that shuts Isabel out represents "the antiseptic world of domestic novels, in which ugly social realities are minimized (160).  Ann Douglas and Anne Dalke have both added economics to this equation, claiming that the domestic novel endorsed a kind of middle-class quietism that mystified the labor that supports that class.  Generally, the presumption is that domestic fictions were responsible for a whole system of illusions about class and society: "Domestic fiction presented both sibling and marriage relationships as passionless; women as sources of worldy authority; economics as unimportant; morality as a simple choice of right over wrong" (Dalke 200).  Critics have regarded Saddle Meadows as a false paradise that domestic fictionists lived in, and one that Melville mercilessly lampoons.

But Pierre's decision is not only a critique of his biological family; his decision also critiques the self-centered anti-domestic *world* of Saddle Meadows.  Domestic novels, because of their moral structure, were just as often sites for identification with marginalized groups, and arenas in which productive work was valorized.  Jane

92

Tompkins's famous reading of <u>Uncle Tom's Cabin</u> makes the case that the domestic novel's representations of sympathy were easily turned towards marginalized groups such as slaves.  Moreover, engagement with the world of work was not at all foreign to domestic fiction.  Although, as Douglas argues rather convincingly, <u>The Wide, Wide World</u> displays anxieties about production, it is not entirely typical in this respect.  More typical would be the examples of Louise de la Valière and Isabel Duncan, the heroines of Maria McIntosh's two fictions <u>Woman an Enigma</u> and <u>Two Lives; or To Seem and To Be</u> (1846), who make their livings by needlework and music lessons; in McIntosh's longest work, <u>The Lofty and the Lowly; or, Good in All and None All-Good</u> (1853), the turning point for the female character Alice Montrose comes when she supports her ailing mother by going to work and becoming financially astute; similarly, her hotheaded Southern cousin must come to terms with his debts and learn to manage finances.  E. D. E. N. Southworth's <u>Vivia</u> (1857) deals with the struggles of a widow to manage a farm.  In all these cases, engagement with the real world of labor is the source of moral and personal regeneration for the protagonists.  Thus, the first half of <u>Pierre</u> represents a fairly serious engagement with the conventions and moral structure of the domestic novel, because it presents a young protagonist who sacrifices his own interests in the name of sympathy, rejecting the authority of an unfeeling family and society in the process.

It might be instructive to imagine how the plot might have unfolded if Melville had continued in the domestic-fiction mode throughout the entire narrative.  Here is a conceivable outcome: Pierre pretends to marry Isabel and goes to the city.  They live chastely there.  Pierre becomes self-sufficient for the first time in his life – perhaps as a writer, perhaps in some other useful profession.  Isabel might also find useful work,

possibly giving the music lessons that Pierre regards as impossible for her.  Instead of

leading to mere "mental confusions" (354), the trip to the art gallery featured in Book 26

might reveal that there was no blood relation between them and so their marriage might

be happily consummated.  Lucy's disappointment would be real enough, but thrown on

her own resources, she too might rally, like Susan in <u>The Mother-In-Law</u>, who gives up

the hand of Louis (whom she has adored since childhood) because she knows he really

loves Louise, and learn to make her own giving up of Pierre a creditable act of self-

sacrifice.  The death of Pierre's mother would be unfortunate indeed, but perhaps a

deathbed act of reconciliation on her part might redeem her, or she might remain a villain

of the piece.  What are the elements that differentiate this projected pseudo-Pierre from

the genuine article?  They are the incestuous sexual connection between Pierre and

Isabel, Lucy's decision to go and live with the couple in the city, the murders, the restless

skepticism and pessimism of Pierre's writing career, and, most importantly, Pierre's

tragic end.  All of these are elements that fit into the genre of the sensational urban

fiction, city-mysteries, that the text shifts to exactly halfway through, in Book XIII.


III.   **"DOWNRIGHT VICE IS DOWNRIGHT WOE": <u>PIERRE</u> AS CITY-**
       **MYSTERIES FICTION**

The second half of the text, so out of character with the first half, has a very

different set of literary materials.  The setting moves from country to city.  Violence,

which played no role in the first half, becomes a standard mode of action for Pierre: in the

coach, he jumps out and "violently" reins back the horses (233); he attacks Glen in a

"savage impulse," comparing himself to a "fighting gladiator" (239), and Pierre ends by

committing murder and then dying in a complicated murder-suicide. Sexual

misbehaviour in the form of incest, cohabitation, and prostitution enter the picture. David

S. Reynolds characterizes this generic shift: "[t]he first half of the novel portrays the

Conventional world of pastoralism, domesticity, the angelic exemplar, hopeful religion,

military heroism, and innocence. The second half of the novel plunges us into the

Subversive world of dark city mysteries, shattered homes, illicit love, social and

philosophical radicalism, and bloody crime" (159).

     The generic shift at the end of the first half of <u>Pierre</u> is more than just a shift in

materials, but in the moral structure as well. Pierre's morality turns into immorality in

the second half, and the deed that manifested the morality of his decision becomes the

source of all his misery. It is Pierre's incestuous relationship that is the cause, occasion,

and symbol of this shift.[6] Yet it was Pierre's decision to mock-marry Isabel – not so

much the innocent cause of incest as the first stage in the act as a whole – that was his

self-sacrificing and noble decision in the first half of the text.

     Melville switches from the rewards of virtue to the punishment of vice, which is

the basic moral function of the city-mysteries fiction written by George Lippard, Ned

Buntline, George Thompson, and others. Commentary about city-mysteries works

emphasized this moral function. Ned Buntline, one of the more well-known practitioners

of this school, started a newspaper that was praised in the pages of the October 1848

<u>Godey's Lady's Book</u>: "The effort of Ned Buntline is a philanthropic one; he makes a

dead stand against vice and immorality, and deadly are his blows" (252) His <u>Mysteries</u>

<u>and Miseries of New York</u> (1848) according to the September 1848 <u>Godey's</u>, pointed out

"with great force that 'the way of the transgressor is hard'" (179). A review of an earlier

edition, in the March 1848 issue, suggested obliquely that Buntline had set out with an evangelical purpose: "If there is anything half so dreadful in New York as this book represents, why then, they need the divine as well as the physician" (191). Moral purpose became part of the criteria for reviewing such tales; George Lippard's Memoirs of a Preacher was criticized in the July 1849 issue of Godey's because "it lacks – what Mr. Lippard's books seldom lack – a distinct and ever-prevalent moral" (79)). Indeed, Lippard asserted his morals prevalently in his work. His preface to Quaker City (1845) claims that the whole text exists to defend a moral principle, stating that Lippard "determined to write a book, founded upon" the idea "*That the seduction of a poor and innocent girl, is a deed altogether as criminal as deliberate murder*" (2). And Lippard emphasizes that his book illustrates how such crimes merit punishment of the worst sort: "If the murderer deserves death by the gallows, then the assassin of chastity and maidenhood is worthy of death by the hands of any man, and in any place" (2). The work itself is full of direct and moralistic commentary as well. No writer ever praised female virginity or bemoaned the evils of the seducer like Lippard. Thompson one-ups all condemners of seduction in Venus in Boston (1848) with his trope that if all the sinners in hell met and appointed one to combine in his being all the worst sins that had been committed since the beginning of time, "*that fiend* could not cast a blacker shadow upon human nature than doth the seducer of female innocence" (8). We see, thus, that "the punishment of vice" is a good description of the moral function of city-mysteries fiction, just as "the rewards of virtue" is a good description of the moral function of domestic fiction.

A number of specific tropes support this moral structure. City-mysteries fictions, in order to punish vice, used both the city and the mysteries: the dark and brooding cities and the mysteries of moral judgment. They isolated their characters in ghastly urban interiors and punished them in ways that were grimly appropriate. Pierre employs both of these tropes.

The city-mysteries tradition uses representations of urban space to symbolize evil and pain, and finally punishment. Ned Buntline's The G'Hals of New York (1850) dwells obsessively on the room of two young women driven to prostitution by hopeless poverty, contrasting the apparent luxury of the furnishings with the annihilated souls and moral squalor of the inhabitants. Cities in such texts were something like infinite Chinese puzzle boxes, concealing any number of rooms and buildings of pure evil. The Quaker City, of course, has its Monk-Hall, itself concealing any number of secret chambers. In George Thompson's Venus in Boston an underground room is used by wealthy politicians for seductions and rapes. But such chambers often turn on their dwellers and participate in the function of the punishment of vice: the villains in The Quaker City and Venus in Boston die in the secret chambers of their urban interiors.

Pierre's death, his punishment for the crime of incest, is similarly a poetically just demise. Provoked to near-madness and a murderous rage by the rejection of his novel and the insults of Glen and Fred, Pierre finally meets his end in the presence of Isabel, and his death underlines their incestuous connection. His death comes from a sexualized zone on Isabel's body: "He touched her heart. – 'Dead! – Girl! Wife or sister, saint or fiend!' – seizing Isabel in his grasp – 'in thy breasts, life for infants lodgeth not, but death-milk for thee and me! – The drug!' and tearing her bosom loose, he seized the

secret vial nesting there" (360).  The invocation of the bosom also creates, along with the device of storing the poison there, a direct, physical link between Pierre's vice (incest) and his punishment (death).  The text's final image reinforces that link: "and [Isabel's] whole form sloped sideways, and she fell upon Pierre's heart, and her long hair ran over him, and arbored him in ebon vines" (362) – in which Pierre's "heart," or the site of his misused romantic life, is devoured by Isabel's body, which is prostrate and therefore sexually available.  At every point in his death, the text underlines the specific nature of his crime, thus pronouncing moral judgment on Pierre in the specific and recognizable terms of the city-mysteries genre.  The hero is a villain; the virtue is vice; the reward is punishment.

IV.    "LIFE'S LAST CHAPTER WELL STITCHED INTO THE MIDDLE":
       PIERRE AS MIXED-GENRE TEXT

       As we can see, there are two different and distinct genres at work in Pierre, each making a moral claim that contradicts the other.  The first, domestic-fiction half of the text sets up Pierre as a hero and anticipates a reward; the second, city-mysteries half proclaims Pierre a villain and pronounces punishment.  Melville creates this contradiction through a structure that demonstrates the final falsity of all moral claims.  Pierre is thus, like Moby-Dick, a mixed-genre text.  By combining these genres, Melville illustrates his position of tragic nihilism in dramatic form, both relying on the language of the popular literary market and undercutting its foundations.

       Melville dramatizes his philosophy in the case of Pierre by joining the two genres in a *parabolic* structure,[7] by which I mean that the text is a domestic fiction in the first

98

half, and a city-mysteries fiction in the second half. This particular means of mixing genres was not Melville's only means; in <u>Moby-Dick</u>, he combined the two genres in parallel. But in <u>Pierre</u>, the linkage of the two genres in a single storyline rather than parallel ones allows Melville to undercut one moral claim in favor of another, diametrically opposed claim, pulling the rug out from under the first half. Melville conjoins the genres like a Moebius strip: with one crucial twist in the middle, turning the hero of the first half into the villain of the second half. As long as we can be secure that the happily wedded heroes and heroines of the domestic novel are truly good, and the wretched villains of city-mysteries fictions are truly evil, those genres retain their moral stability, but if they are punishing the good, they sever the crucial link between morality and its consequences. The final interpretation that the reader must apply is that good looks very much like evil, and evil like good, depending purely on subjective perspective. If the same deed on Pierre's part – his crucial decision to enter the false marriage with Isabel – can look good or evil, depending on how one "holds" the text, then neither good nor evil are particularly meaningful. In short, by representing the punishment of virtue[8], <u>Pierre</u> makes distinctions of virtue and vice meaningless.

Other critics have noted this parabolic structure,[9] and have interpreted it as a question-answer form: according to these readings, Pierre makes a mistake in the first half of the text, and learns in the second half – too late – just what was wrong with what he did. In this way, such accounts argue, Melville was taking the domestic fiction genre to task for its extreme sentimentalization of experience, and showing the consequences of that mistake in the second half, by demonstrating the flaws in the particular morality of domestic fiction. For example, Reynolds argues that the shift from the first half to the

second half is from hypocrisy, "America's neurotic obsession with puritanical virtue" (161), to the obsession with evil that hypocrisy represses and produces. Similarly, Richard H. Brodhead sees the two parts of the narrative as exemplifying the conflict between romance (the first half) and realism (the second half). In both these cases, the second half of the text is seen as a corrective to the first, demonstrating the deep problems with the illusions of the first half of the text and, by extension, the idealistic illusions of Pierre himself. Such readings emphasize the "fictiveness" of the first half – the fictiveness of Pierre's desire to do good – and the "trueness" of the second half, specifically in favor of the second half.

Such interpretations argue that Melville had a particular moral claim behind his work, distinct from tragic nihilism: that moral compromise is morally necessary. The argument is that Melville was primarily concerned with critiquing his hero's actions as too idealistic – not idealistic in the sense of Platonic or Hegelian or religious idealism, but idealistic in the sense of "starry-eyed" or "bleeding-hearted."[10] F. O. Matthiessen established this line of argument when he argued that Pierre is a tragedy of idealism (467). Similarly, H. Bruce Franklin argues that "it is precisely because Pierre believes 'that man is a noble, god-like being' that he is destroyed" (110). Higgins and Parker make the case that Pierre's "infinite magnanimities" (Melville 177) are "inextricably linked with appalling self-delusion" (249). In connection, critics often argue that Plotinus Plinlimmon, with his doctrine of "horological" compromise, reflects Melville's authentic and more relaxed beliefs; Higgins and Parker argue that Pierre's problem is that he "refuses to recognize the applicability of the strange pamphlet . . . to his own situation" (254). Floyd Watkins argues that "Plinlimmon defines Pierre's tragic error" (95) and that

Pierre argues against Pierre's attempt to help Isabel. [11]  These readings figure the central

conflict in Pierre as between falsehood and truth, with the falsehood coming from

domestic fiction, and the contradicting truth residing in the second half of the text.

The text of Pierre, however, understood by way of the thickness of generic signals

that it includes, contradicts these 'Plinlimmonistic' readings.  The contrast is not between

an avoidable fiction and a preferable truth, but between two fictions in a situation where

fictions are unavoidable. What is fictional is not any particular set of moral beliefs, but

moral beliefs generally, and yet they are fictions, Melville warns, that cannot be

abandoned.  Thus, Pierre cannot apply Plinlimmonism constructively because

Plinlimmonism is an attempt to transcend the human condition.  Melville anticipates –

and warns against – Plinlimmonistic readings, by attacking both Plinlimmon himself and

the philosophy that Plinlimmon advocates.

First, Melville places Pinlimmon's philosophy in disrepute by the way he

represents Pinlimmon himself and his philosophy.  The pamphlet explaining

Pinlimmonism is "mean" and "sleazy" (206).  Moreover, Pinlimmon himself is an

unattractive figure when he first arrives on the scene; Melville describes him as "non-

benevolent" (290) and as possessing a face that mocks and leers at Pierre (293).  He is

shown to be a hypocrite (291).  Perhaps most significantly, his facial expression is

"neither divine nor human" (291).  And it is the equally unattractive Reverend Falsgrave

who voices the closest thing to Pinlimmon's doctrines earlier in the text.  Moreover,

Plinlimmon's statement of his doctrine is itself logically suspect.  Brian Higgins shows

that the logic of Plinlimmon is frequently suspect, based on the use of *non sequitur*.[12]

The text thus presents a *prima facie* case against Plinlimmon.

Moreover, Melville rejects the Plinlimmonistic reading of Pierre's situation.

Plinlimmon teaches that one should do one's everyday, locally defined "horological"

duty. But horological duty is the one thing that Pierre cannot do, given his situation.

Plinlimmon gives a precise description of the kinds of things that one can do in order to

be properly horological – good enough for this world:

> Nevertheless, if a man gives with a certain self-considerate generosity to
>
> the poor; abstains from doing downright ill to any man; does his
>
> convenient best in a general way to do good to his whole race; takes
>
> watchful loving care of his wife and children, relatives, and friends; is
>
> perfectly tolerant to all other men's opinions, whatever they may be; is an
>
> honest dealer, an honest citizen, and all that; and more especially if he
>
> believe that there is a God for infidels, as well as for believers, and acts
>
> upon that belief; then, though such a man falls infinitely short of the
>
> chronometrical standard, though all his actions are entirely horologic;—
>
> yet such a man need never lastingly despond (214)

These are the things that Pierre simply cannot do. He can do "his convenient best in a

general way to do good to his whole race," but Isabel is not his whole race, and his

convenient best in a general way will not do. To take "watchful loving care of his

relatives" is the source of his dilemma: he cannot take anything like "watchful loving

care" of all his relatives without falling short of even the modest horological standard.

The conflict between his mother and Isabel precludes any compromise: to care for one of

them, he must care totally, and must abandon the other entirely. If he remains loyal to his

mother, then he must abandon Isabel utterly; if he wants to do any part of his duty to

Isabel, he must abandon his mother utterly (as he does). Even at the end, Pierre demonstrates that he knows his conscience would have been mutilated had he done other than what he ends up doing: "Had I been heartless now, disowned, and spurningly portioned off the girl at Saddle Meadows, then had I been happy through a long life on earth, and perchance through a long eternity in heaven!" (359). Plinlimmon offers no solution to Pierre.

Plinlimmonism is not a possibility; rather, it is a false escape, impossible for anyone. The escape from devotion to absolute moral ideals that Plinlimmon represents might be desirable for Pierre, if it were possible, but it is not. Melville emphasizes that Plinlimmon is something out of nature, inhuman. Plotinus Plinlimmon is "*miraculously* [emphasis mine] self-possessed" and a miracle is something out of nature. His face is "mystic[ally]" mild, and the look of it "conveyed to most philosophical observers a notion of something not before included in their scheme of the Universe" (302). Because Plinlimmon is not really human, he is not subject to the tragic compulsion to believe. It is for this reason that Pierre, bothered by Plinlimmon's pamphlet being torn and seeking out the remainder of it, is mistaken. What else would be in the pamphlet? Plotinus Plinlimmon has *completed* his argument; what he has not explained is *how* to abandon the chronometrical drive. That part of the pamphlet can never be found. Melville's position is that seeing the falsity of all moral judgments and categories in no way lets us out of our most powerful feelings of moral responsibility, and this is Pierre's insoluble dilemma.

IV.     **"'TIS SPEECHLESS SWEET TO MURDER THEE!": PIERRE AND THE ATTACK ON THE READER**

103

All the foregoing is a demonstration of Melville's clear concern with putting his

philosophical ideas into precise narrative form, using popular fictional genres. What

these procedures indicate is a concern with *communication*. Melville selected the two

popular genres he used because of their efficacy in communicating moral information

directly. His use of parabolic form also indicates careful planning and clarity. At the

same time, though, Melville's relationship with his presumed readers is a curiously mixed

one. At the same time that Melville communicates, he also challenges and attacks. In

Moby-Dick, this challenge took the form of a daring to adventure, to leave the land of

intellectual safety and enter the sea of despair. But in Pierre, Melville sees the challenge

as more daunting, and proposes that the author who would tell the truth is necessarily at

war with his readers.

Other critics have described Pierre as a text that attacks its readers, and have

described that in terms of Melville's difficulty with the literary marketplace. The general

account of Pierre's attitude towards its readership has been to describe it as a

manifestation of Melville's anger. According to Ann Douglas, "Revenge, not

conversion, is his aim; Melville punishes his readers in advance for their inevitable

failure of comprehension" (304); the text is Melville's revenge on a reading audience that

rejected his work in favor of sentimental lies. Similarly, Stephen Railton argues that

Pierre enacts Melville's disillusionment with his readers in advance, rejecting them

before they have a chance to reject him (158-159). What these critics have assumed is

that Pierre did not have to be a punishing text, that its attack on its readers was a matter of

incidental pique on Melville's part. But what I argue is that, without this aspect of

punishment, Pierre could not have been Pierre. The ways in which the text attacks and

104

punishes readers are not in any way separable from Melville's other purposes in the text; they are especially not separable from his philosophical purpose. Rather, the text's attack on its readers is, in Melville's attitude, necessary to his reach for readers. Melville demonstrates this attitude throughout <u>Pierre</u> in the way that text presents the idea of "truth." The word "truth," in <u>Pierre</u>, is invariably a dangerous and hostile commodity. Metaphors for truth tend to the violent and destructive: truth is a "poison" (53), a fire that "consumes all, and only consumes" (220), and a "hammer" (273). The encounter with truth is a violent and unpleasant event. The face of Pierre's visions, which summons "Truth" to him, "unmans" Pierre (49), and then assaults him with the force of an ocean gale: "Truth rolls a black billow through thy soul! Ah, miserable thou, to whom Truth, in her first tides, bears nothing but wrecks!" (65). Truth is like an invading horde against whom there is no defense: "Sudden onsets of new truth will assail him, and overturn him as the Tartars did China; for there is no China Wall that man can build in his soul, which shall permanently stay the irruptions of those barbarous hordes which Truth ever nourishes in the loins of her frozen, yet teeming North" (167). Truth is almost always gloomy and miserable. Awareness of the "deeper truths" will come from the "profoundest gloom" (169). Those who are "earnest and youthful piercers into truth" will always find their soul poisoned (169). One who follows "the trail of truth too far" will enter a barren wasteland of life, and the "march of the mind, – meaning the inroads of Truth into Error"(165) has little to do with the advancement of human happiness:

> almost every thinking man must have been some time or other struck with
> the idea, that, in certain respects, a tremendous mistake may be lurking
> here, since all the world does never gregariously advance to Truth, but

only here and there some of its individuals do; and by advancing, leave the

rest behind; cutting themselves forever adrift from their sympathy, and

making themselves always liable to be regarded with distrust, dislike, and

often, downright—though, ofttimes, concealed—fear and hate. What

wonder, then, that those advanced minds, which in spite of advance,

happen still to remain, for the time, ill-regulated, should now and then be

goaded into turning round in acts of wanton aggression upon sentiments

and opinions now forever left in their rear. Certain it is, that in their earlier

stages of advance, especially in youthful minds, as yet untranquilized by

long habituation to the world as it inevitably and eternally is; this

aggressiveness is almost invariably manifested, and is invariably afterward

deplored by themselves.  (166)

At the end, Pierre writes that the pursuit of truth has left Vivia with a "pallid cheek"

(303), and proclaims himself the "fool of Truth" (358) just before his death.  This attitude

towards truth is the logical conclusion of Melville's tragic nihilism: the truth about life is

that it is utterly empty and meaningless, and human values are irrational, though we

cannot help but believe them.  It is very difficult for humans to believe the truth of this

position, and painful.  If the truth, then, is painful, and Melville as an author is

determined to tell the truth, then Melville *must* (by the logic of his position) inflict pain

on his readers.  A parent punishing a child harms the child while also communicating a

lesson; the pain in this case is not separable from the communication.  Melville sees his

authorial vocation the same way: to attack his readers in order to communicate with

them.

Second, the heightening of Melville's attack on the reader in <u>Pierre</u> resulted from

Melville's growing sense of his *readers'* resistance to *him*.  His confidence in <u>Moby-Dick</u>

that there would be readers who would follow him into the "howling infinite" had been

severely shaken by the book's poor financial showing and its lukewarm reviews.  As

William Charvat has painstakingly shown, Melville's income as a writer declined

considerably after 1851 (193).  The critical response to <u>Moby-Dick</u> was tepid at best.

Many reviewers praised the "playful learning" (qtd. in Higgins and Parker, 39) or the

"exciting descriptions" (56).  However, no reviewers were interested in Melville's

deepest philosophical probings.  Many reviews rejected the elements of the text that made

those probings possible: the <u>Literary World</u>, for example, claimed that the "intense

Captain Ahab is too long drawn out" (59).  Melville's response was to see the

marketplace as more profoundly hostile than before[13].

As a result, Melville acquired a sense of the author as putting demands on the

reader so intense that the reader *must* recoil before them; such a hostile relationship, for

Melville, was the price of the demands that telling the truth placed on the reader.  <u>Pierre</u>

dramatizes, within its own confines, the demands it places on its readers.  A signal

moment that compresses the entire reading process is found in the image of the tomb:

> The old mummy lies buried in cloth on cloth; it takes time to unwrap this
>
> Egyptian king.  Yet now, forsooth, because Pierre began to see through the
>
> first superficiality of the world, he fondly weens he has come to the
>
> unlayered substance. But, far as any geologist has yet gone down into the
>
> world, it is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface. To
>
> its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies. By vast

pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the

central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and

no body is there!—appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man! (284-

285)

Reading Pierre is represented here as presenting a twofold problem for the seeker, writer,

or reader – the search is incredibly difficult, and what is found at the conclusion is

unpleasant (you seek a "king" and find a "vacan[cy]").  Melville set out to impose this

mordant and dreadful challenge on his readers.  The reader must first "mine into" the text

by "horrible gropings."  These gropings are the difficulties that readers must face in

negotiating Pierre's parabolic form, which frustrates readerly expectations and requires

the reader to burrow beneath the "first superficiality" to solve the structural problems of

the text.

In addition, Melville attacks the reader by means of the text's content; once one

enters the pyramid and finds the sarcophagus, one finds only emptiness rather than

treasure.  The central philosophical idea of Pierre – tragic nihilism – is directly contrary

to the ideas found in antebellum American fiction as a whole.  Whereas antebellum

fiction was supposed to serve a moral function, urging good behavior and character from

its readers, the tragic nihilism of Pierre rejected God and moral truth, and presented all

moral distinctions between good and evil as essentially meaningless.  In a dreamlike

scene, Pierre faces this for a moment:

". . . Thou, Pierre, speakest of Virtue and Vice; life-secluded Isabel knows

neither the one nor the other, but by hearsay.  What are they, in their real

selves, Pierre? Tell me first what is Virtue:—begin!"

"If on that point the gods are dumb, shall a pigmy speak? Ask the air!"

"Then Virtue is nothing."

"Not that!"

"Then Vice?"

"Look: a nothing is the substance, it casts one shadow one way, and another the other way; and these two shadows cast from one nothing; these, seems to me, are Virtue and Vice."

"Then why torment thyself so, dearest Pierre?"

"It is the law."

"What?"

"That a nothing should torment a nothing; for I am a nothing. It is all a dream – we dream that we dreamed we dream." (274)

Pierre utters the truth of tragic nihilism here, that human distinctions of "virtue and vice" are insubstantial appearance only. But if "the law" is a mad one – that "a nothing should torment a nothing" – it is an unbreakable law nonetheless. Pierre's decision to act on hate, to be as "evil" as possible, is not only preferable to the other option – to feel only "stagnant scorn" (357) – it is the only conceivable option for Pierre:

From these random slips, it would seem, that Pierre is quite conscious of much that is so anomalously hard and bitter in his lot, of much that is so black and terrific in his soul. Yet that knowing his fatal condition does not one whit enable him to change or better his condition. Conclusive proof that he has no power over his condition. For in tremendous extremities

human souls are like drowning men; well enough they know they are in

peril; well enough they know the causes of that peril;—nevertheless, the

sea is the sea, and these drowning men do drown.  (303)

Pierre, and <u>Pierre</u>, argue that there is no genuine difference between good or evil, which

is in direct contradiction to the moral code maintained by most critics and authors.

Melville felt impelled to defy the organizing principle of the literary marketplace: that

fiction served a moral function.

      <u>Pierre</u> is the product of Melville's complex relation to the literary marketplace and

the readers whom he saw as shaped by that marketplace.  On the one hand, Melville

sought to communicate a truth to his readers.  The parabolic form of <u>Pierre</u>, combining

domestic fiction and city-mysteries fiction while opposing their moral structures, was that

means of communication.  At the same time, Melville had come to believe that any

author who tells the truth will be at war with readers who are not prepared for that truth,

and <u>Pierre</u>, in both its form and content, reflects that sense of warfare, in which Melville

aimed the text-loaded pistol and fired.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, William Braswell's "The Early Love Scenes in Melville's <u>Pierre</u>" and "The Satirical Temper of Melville's <u>Pierre</u>." Braswell argues that the language of <u>Pierre</u>, with its overextended metaphors, is too deliberately overdone to be regarded as anything but parody. However, Melville's language had been replete with extended metaphors since the beginning of his career, and <u>Pierre</u> is not a marked exception.

[2] The "domestic novel" is sometimes referred to as "the sentimental novel" or, by Nina Baym, as "woman's fiction" or, by Reynolds, as the "Conventional." The "city-mysteries fiction" is sometimes referred to as the "sensational novel," or (by Reynolds) as the "Subversive."

I have chosen the terminology chiefly to avoid any confusion. The term "domestic novel" is most generally used. The term "sentimental novel" runs a close second, but this term is also used to refer to the seduction novels popular in the previous century, such as <u>The Coquette</u> or <u>Charlotte Temple</u>. These two genres varied considerably in their conventions, and so I prefer "domestic novel" to avoid confusion. "Woman's fiction" is unnecessarily narrow, and Reynolds's term "Conventional" is only used by Reynolds, and is not based on a particularly deep reading of the texts.

Although one does not find the term "city-mysteries" in nineteenth-century book reviews or other critical discourse, it very neatly describes the formula by which authors of these texts produced their titles, starting with French writer Eugene Sue's <u>The Mysteries of Paris</u>. Michael Denning describes the phenomenon that followed:

> In the decade that followed, the 'mysteries' proliferated: G. W. M. Reynolds wrote *The Mysteries of London* (1845-1848); F. Thiele, *Die Geneimnisse von Berlin* (1845); and Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1848). In the United States, the genre accommodated smaller cities and mill towns, in novels that were often published locally: one could read Osgood Bradbury's *Mysteries of Lowell* (1844), Frank Hazelton's *The Mysteries of Troy* (1847), Harry Spofford's *The Mysteries of Worcester* (1846), and *The Mysteries and Miseries of San Francisco. By a Californian* (1853)" (Denning 85).

<u>Pierre</u> paves the way for this mode even in the domestic sections, with Isabel's intonations of "Mystery! Mystery!" (150) Lippard's <u>The Quaker City</u> includes the nickname of its city (Philadelphia) in its title, rather as if Buntline's New York book was called <u>The Big Apple</u>. "Sensational novel," which is sometimes used, is too close to the term "sensation novel," which is used to designate such mid-nineteenth-century mystery novels as Wilkie Collins's <u>The Moonstone</u> (See John Sutherland, "Wilkie Collins and the Origins of the Sensation Novel"). "Subversive," again, is tied too closely to Reynolds's particular vocabulary for me to make use of it.

[3] See my Introduction.

[4] See Reynolds 342-345.

[5] Conveniently, Mrs. Armstrong turns out (in the last chapter) to have murdered her first husband.

[6] While some critics, such as Ann Douglas, interpret the text as saying that Pierre and Isabel do not have a sexual relationship, most critics, myself included, have read the text as saying that Pierre and Isabel do indeed consummate their relationship.

[7] I am indebted to Christopher Sten, <u>The Weaver-God, He Weaves: Melville and the Poetics of the Novel</u> for the term "parabolic" (236).

[8] The Marquis De Sade anticipated this title in his <u>Justine, or Misfortunes of Virtue</u> and in his <u>Juliette, or Vice Amply Rewarded</u>. However, the attitudes of the two writers are quite different, chiefly because Melville is a *tragic* nihilist; he does not believe that people can do without moral beliefs. The death of God excites De Sade because it means that anything goes; it depresses Melville, because it means that nothing goes.

[9] Interestingly, Melville's nineteenth-century readers also saw that <u>Pierre</u> had this two-part structure, but they tended to favor the first half and dislike the second half. The New York <u>Albion</u> considered the first half "wrought up cleverly enough" and a "fine dramatic starting point," but complained that Melville had chosen a true "Frenchified mode" of resolving his plot (qtd. in Higgins and Parker, 1995, 428); more impressionistically, the <u>New York Evening Mirror</u> said that the book "reminds one of a summer day that opens sweetly, glittering with dew-drops, redolent of rose-odors, and melodious with the singing of birds; but early clouded with *artificial smoke*, and ending in a terrific display of melo-dramatic lightnings and earthquakes" (433). Reversing the judgment of contemporary critics, Melville's contemporaries liked the first half but felt that the second half ruined the book.

[10] Perhaps the word "sentimental" is appropriate here, but I have not used it in order to avoid confusion.

[11] Other critics who consider <u>Pierre</u> a critique of its hero's idealism include Rowland Sherrill and G. Giovanni. Critics who argue that Plotinus Plinlimmon speaks for Melville include, as Higgins has cataloged, William Braswell, Newton Arvin, James E. Miller. Jr., and William Van O'Connor.

[12] See also Peter A. Obuchowski and Lawrance Thompson.

[13] See Higgins and Parker (Bryant 211-239). Higgins and Parker argue that Melville decided at a stage of composition that Pierre was an author as a response to the hostile and indifferent reviews to <u>Moby-Dick</u>.

CHAPTER 4


FOR HIS FINAL TRICK:

GENRE AND VALUE IN MELVILLE'S THE CONFIDENCE-MAN


In the final chapter of The Confidence-Man, the Cosmopolitan meets an elderly

man in the gentlemen's cabin of the *Fidèle*.  The topic of their discussion quickly turns to

textual interpretation – Biblical interpretation, in fact.  The Cosmopolitan has found

troubling the barber's suggestion that he will find certain verses in the Bible, "Believe not

his many words – an enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips."   To the Cosmopolitan, a

"truster in man" and a "philanthropist," these verses are "gall and wormwood" (242).

The old man explains that these verses are part of the Apocrypha, and therefore not

strictly Biblical.  However, the Cosmopolitan states that "[f]act is, when all is bound up

together, it's sometimes confusing" (243).  Regardless of the old man's explanation, the

fact that the *Bible* is confusing points to a deeper unrest in the text.  This unrest is both

philosophical and formal: it is the unrest of a universe devoid of meaning, populated by

beings compelled to seek and imagine they have found meaning, and it is the unrest of

the structure of <u>The Confidence-Man</u>, a text in which different genres of fiction are

"bound up together," and the result is indeed "confusing." In <u>The Confidence-Man</u>,

Melville combines Southwestern humor and metaphysical fiction not merely to

demonstrate the truth of tragic nihilism, but to carry that nihilism into the realm of

reading itself. In his final non-posthumous work of fiction, Melville uses form to

demonstrate the incoherence of all moral belief and the impossibility of interpretation in a

world of illusion.


## I. ". . . WHILE NOT DISAPPROVING THE MORAL": THE MORAL DESIGN OF <u>THE CONFIDENCE-MAN</u>

Again and again in <u>The Confidence-Man</u>, characters ask a single question: can

you have confidence? The Black Guinea asks that question in the third chapter: "Oh, oh,

good ge'mmen, have you no confidence in dis poor ole darkie?" (16). In the eighth

chapter, a stranger asks it: "By the way, madam, may I ask if you have confidence?" (44).

Pitch asks it of the agent of the Philosophical Intelligence Office: "do you think now,

candidly, that – I say candidly – candidly – could I have some small, limited – some faint,

conditional degree of confidence in that boy?" (127). The wording varies, but the

question remains the same. The Cosmopolitan asks it of Egbert/Frank Noble: "You will

do me the favor, won't you?" (202). Similarly, the Methodist minister asks it of the man

with the wooden leg: "Have you no charity, friend?" (14). All the important incidents of

the book revolve around the asking and answering of the question. One might describe

the whole text as a vast asking of that very question: "Can you have confidence?" The

centrality of the question of confidence to <u>The Confidence-Man</u> is integral to its plot and thematic design.

When the question occurs, it has a local meaning that proceeds to blossom into another, broader meaning, pointing up Melville's philosophical intentions. In the most limited and immediate terms of the narrative, confidence means trust in a particular person's capacity to deliver on a particular promise. Sometimes, as in the case of the Black Guinea, the promise is merely an implied promise to be of good character, an authentic rather than a spurious cripple; more commonly, the promise is to provide some service in exchange for financial remuneration, as in the Herb-Doctor's wares or the boys provided by the Philosophical Intelligence Office. However, Melville links this local *moral* question of what one should or should not do explicitly to a *philosophical* question of the ultimate foundations for morality. When a character raises the question of confidence in another character, conversation proceeds to the question of confidence in life itself. The agent from the Philosophical Intelligence Office requests confidence in his boys, but he and Pitch end up conversing about confidence in human nature. Similarly, the man in gray is seeking support for, and confidence in, his philanthropic scheme, but his discussion with the gentleman with the gold-sleeve buttons touches on how much confidence one should have in human reason. Melville transforms the question of whether one should have confidence into the question of whether one should have optimism about the world, whether one should believe, or not, that there is some fundamental principle in existence that favors human beings and human values. The characters make the meaning of the question explicit: "To distrust the creature," the old man in the final chapter offers, "is a kind of distrusting of the creator" (244).

115

The question, then, of whether one has confidence is a philosophical question, and the characters offer a number of distinct answers. The puzzle of the text is to determine which answer Melville authorizes. Melville does not offer these answers in a simple fashion. The opposite of having confidence, in the terms of The Confidence-Man, is not simply *lacking* confidence. Rather, the opposite of having confidence is, ironically, having a different *kind* of confidence. Pitch has a kind of confidence: it is confidence that nature is evil. He has "confidence in distrust" (108) in one of the text's most revealing and startling phrases. Another man who has confidence in distrust is Indian killer John Moredock, who is convinced not just of the evil of particular Indians but of the very "Indian nature" (147). The contrast, thus, is between two forms of confidence: one belief that there is a "ruling principle of love" and another belief that there is a similarly ruling principle of hate. The text asks the question of confidence, overtly offers two possible answers, and invites one to determine the correct solution.

Melville works out the drama of confidence by deploying three recurrent character types. The first type is the confidence-man. Examples of him include the Cosmopolitan, the Herb-Doctor, the man with the tasseled traveling-cap, and the man with the gray coat. The confidence-man's public role, which may or may not be sincere, is to be optimistic: he is the man who *has* confidence, and wants to *gain* your confidence. The second type is the dupe. Examples of him include Mr. Roberts, or the college student who invests. The dupe hovers on the edge of confidence, ready to have it bestowed by the confidence-man. The cynic is the third character type. Examples of him include Pitch, John Moredock, and the barber, as well as such minor characters as the dusk giant or the man with the wooden leg. He is not merely the type that lacks

116

confidence, but the type that *resists* confidence.  The debate between the confidence-man, who insists that his confidence is both genuine and wise, and the cynic, who argues that such confidence is either foolish or fraudulent, forms the action of the narrative.

The interpretive puzzle of whether Melville sides with the confidence-man or with the cynic has profoundly influenced the history of studies of The Confidence-Man. The earliest critics of The Confidence-Man reached a near-consensus about its thematics. They concluded that Melville was against confidence, and the text was an advertisement for confidence in distrust, with the cynic as the hero.  Elizabeth Foster, in her influential introduction to the book, established what Hershel Parker describes as the "standard line of interpretation": Melville's work is a bitter attack on the confidence-man, who represents all optimisms, both the specifically nineteenth-century varieties and all other kinds.  The title figure is an evil figure who preys on all he encounters[1].  A subsequent generation of critics problematized the standard line; some even went so far as to argue the exact opposite.  Tom Quirk, Ernest Tuveson, Leon F. Seltzer, and Richard Boyd Hauck all argue that the confidence-man is a regenerative figure, whose optimism is valuable and whose confidence is a precious gift or a necessity of life[2].  This critical problem is parallel to the problem of Moby-Dick, where one school of critics argues for Ahab as the hero, and another argues for Ishmael.

As I do with Moby-Dick, what I argue here is that neither side is right, and that the two answers the text offers are both wrong.  Tragic nihilism is Melville's leitmotif, in The Confidence-Man no less than in Moby-Dick and Pierre.  If we understand the parameters of Melville's tragic nihilism, we can predict what kind of answer to the question of confidence Melville will give.  Obviously, it is not to have confidence, to be

optimistic about the universe.  Nor is it to have confidence in distrust.  Rather, it is the chilling truth that there is nothing to have confidence *in*, no ruling principle of any sort.  However, as Melville also believed, and as the text also reflects, neither position of confidence is genuinely escapable.  According to Melville's philosophical beliefs, influenced by Kantian German philosophy, our beliefs are not necessarily rational, but we hold them anyway.  This is, in essence, the same position that had motivated the form of Melville's <u>Moby-Dick</u> and <u>Pierre</u>.  As in those texts, Melville's method for expressing this position relies on a careful balancing of different popular genres.

II.  **"IN NEW COUNTRIES, WHERE THE WOLVES ARE KILLED OFF, THE FOXES INCREASE": THE CONFIDENCE-MAN AS SOUTHWESTERN HUMOR**

One of the two genres central to Melville's dialectic in <u>The Confidence-Man</u> is Southwestern humor, a genre set in the frontier states of Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana.  The usual form of Southwestern humor was short newspaper sketches; popular authors sometimes collected shorter sketches in book form.  The genre first emerged in the mid-1830s and stayed popular up to the Civil War[3].  Southwestern humor, as a genre, gave expression to the moral paradoxes and contradictions of the faultlines of American culture.  At the same time, Southwestern humor contained those paradoxes so as to control them and to give the victory to conventional literary morality.  The conventional materials of Southwestern humor were chaotic and freakish events on the outskirts of civilization.  The characters were crude, uneducated, and frequently criminal, and their adventures brought them into contact with

wild bears and the business ends of firearms.  However, authors controlled the chaos.

Cohen and Dillingham cite the importance of the conventional frame of Southwestern

humor in achieving this control:

> Most [Southwestern humor] sketches. . . . employ a framework.  In such
>
> stories, the author takes the superior vantage point of a cultured gentleman
>
> observing and describing the doings of rougher folk.  The typical sketch
>
> opens and closes with the author's own words, reasoned and dignified. . . .
>
> the authors place themselves in positions above and apart.  The Southwest
>
> humorist wanted to laugh at the earthy life around him and to enjoy it, but
>
> he did not want to be identified with it.  Like the romantics, he recognized
>
> the existence of the more humble aspects of life; but he had no desire to
>
> cast his lot with the yokels.  The framework was thus an effective method
>
> of setting off the narrator, who liked to consider himself a gentleman of
>
> self-control, taste, and reason, from the oddities he presented in his story.
>
> (xxx)

As Cohen and Dillingham show, Southwestern humor emphasizes the moral dangers and

chaos of the frontiers of American civilization.  Within the frame, all was danger and

dishonesty, where the set of moral rules that apply are best summed up by Johnson Jones

Hooper's infamous con-man character, Simon Suggs, whose "ethical system lies snugly

in his favourite aphorism – 'IT IS GOOD TO BE SHIFTY IN A NEW COUNTRY' –

which means that it is right and proper that one should live as merrily and comfortably as

possible at the expense of others" (257).  Southwestern humor displayed the newness,

and roughness, of the country, as well as the shiftiness of its inhabitants.

119

The frontier setting emphasized the moral thematics of the genre.  This setting

was represented first as distant, and second as wild: wild because it embodied moral

chaos and danger, and distant so as to keep it safe and disable the danger for the

cultivated reader.  It was an uncertain world, without firm guarantees of law and order or

property.  Politics was entirely dominated by graft and fraud.  Joseph Glover Baldwin, in

"The Bar of the South-West" (1853), ironically brags about how much crime there is in

the region:

> And such a criminal docket!  What country could boast more largely of its
>
> crimes?  What more splendid rôle of felonies!  What more terrific
>
> murders!  What more gorgeous bank robberies!  What more magnificent
>
> operations in the land offices!  Such McGregor-like levies of black mail,
>
> individual and corporate!  Such superb forays on the treasuries, State and
>
> National!  Such expert transfers of balances to undiscovered bournes!
>
> Such august defalcations!  Such flourishes of rhetoric on ledgers
>
> auspicious of gold which had departed for ever from the vault!  And in
>
> INDIAN affairs! – the very mention is suggestive of the poetry of theft –
>
> the romance of a wild and weird larceny!  What sublime conceptions of
>
> super-Spartan roguery!  Swindling Indians by the nation!  (*Spirit of*
>
> *Falstaff, rap!*)  Stealing their land by the township!  (*Dick Turpin and*
>
> *Jonathan Wild! tip the table!*)  Conducting the nation to the Mississippi
>
> river, stripping them to the flap, and bidding them God speed as they went
>
> howling into the Western wilderness to the friendly agency of some
>
> sheltering Suggs duly empowered to receive their coming annuities and

back rations!  What's Hounslow heath to this?  Who Carvajal?  Who

Count Boulbon?

And all these merely forerunners, ushering in the Millennium of an

accredited, official Repudiation; and IT but vaguely suggestive of what

men could do when opportunity and capacity met – as shortly afterwards

they did – under the Upas-shade of a perjury-breathing bankrupt law!

(309-310)

Though this sequence starts with conventional crime, murder and robbery quickly give

way to the abuses of power of those in authority in business and government.  The tales

represent this chaos and corruption in their narratives; on a steamboat, in the tale "Simon

Fights 'The Tiger' an Gets Whipped" (1845), Simon Suggs is mistaken for a rich hog

drover named General Witherspoon.  When he meets the real Withserpoon's nephew, he

fiercely interrogates the nephew, saying, "All very well, Mr. Jeemes Peyton, but as this

little world of ourn is tolloble d——d full of rascally impostors . . . it stands a man in hand

to be a leetle perticler.  So jist answer me a strait forrard question or two" (279).  The

narrator glosses this action by saying, "Simon was determined to place his own identity

as General Withserspoon above suspicion, by seeming to suspect something wrong about

Mr. James Peyton."  Suggs's *bona fides* established, he uses his new identity to borrow a

great deal of money and run up a huge bar tab on credit.  Such chicanery would not be

plausible in a less morally chaotic environment, and, indeed, in such an environment

dishonesty may be a necessary survival trait.

One common convention for expressing the moral chaos of the Southwest and its

untamed disposition was the liberal use of animal imagery.  Hunting and fishing are

121

dominant activities. Many southwestern humor tales dealt with "scrapes" involving bears and other animals, such as "Fun with a 'Bar'" (1847) and "Smoking a Grizzly" (1851) by John S. Robb; in both stories, bears just show up in the same place as people without their presence being a cause of wonderment. Moreover, there was a kind of slippage between the human and animal worlds. In "Fun with a 'Bar,'" the narrator initially mistakes a bear for one of the other characters. In "Sut Lovingood's Daddy, Acting Horse" (1867) by George Washington Harris, a character on a whim decides to hitch a plow to his back and act as the family horse, to the extent of wearing a bridle and loping around on all fours. In Phillip B. January's "That Big Dog Fight at Myers's" (1845), a man gets down on all fours and participates in a dogfight. Such tropes were a result of taking a setting already heavily populated by animals, less hunted out than the East, and playing up its wildness for an Eastern audience. The result is that the Southwest comes off as a place not merely only partially-civilized, but actually blurring the boundaries between species.

Melville deploys these conventions in The Confidence-Man, and to the same effect. There is plenty of slippage between the animal and human worlds. Pitch, when introduced, is described as having "sporting a shaggy spencer of the cloth called bear's-skin; a high-peaked cap of raccoon-skin, the long bushy tail switching over behind" (106). Pitch compares himself to a raccoon and challenges the herb-doctor, "Can you, the fox, catch him?" (111) When Pitch later meets the cosmopolitan, he calls him a "toucan fowl" (131) and compares him to an "intelligent ape" and "great chimpanzee" (132). Moreover, the graft-ridden world of Southwestern humorists appears in The Confidence-Man. Many schemes in which the con-artist characters are involved imply a

122

background of massively corrupt institutions.  Examples include the Philosophical

Intelligence Office agent, and the man in the grey coat and white tie who is collecting for

the "Widow and Orphan Asylum recently founded among the Seminoles" (28).  Thus,

Melville presents the Southwest of his text as an environment rich in danger and

deception.

In addition to the setting, Melville also uses the character types of Southwestern

humor, which tended to be simplified stereotypes; one of the most common character

types was the *swindler*.  Examples included Simon Suggs, or Joseph Glover Baldwin's

crooked lawyer Ovid Bolus, as well as any number of short-lived and amateur swindlers

created by other writers.  The central trait of such characters was their devotion to the

swindle; Baldwin described his Bolus as "a natural liar, just as some horses are natural

pacers, and some dogs natural setters" (312).  Such characters were notable for their

ability to turn any random situation into an opportunity for dishonest profit.  In "Simon

Speculates" (1845), Suggs, lying in his bed in a boarding-house, overhears a conversation

between two strangers planning to travel to another town to speculate on land. Suggs sets

out that morning and encounters one of the strangers, who is having trouble with his

horse.  Striking up a conversation, Suggs pretends that he is an agent for a competing

company, going to speculate on that same piece of land.  The stranger begs Suggs to trade

horses, which Suggs does very reluctantly, making almost two hundred dollars on the

deal.  The Southwestern humorists often also distinguished their characters by distinctive

physical traits: Hooper provides a long description of Suggs, highlighting a "sharp chin,"

mouth with an "ever-present sneer," and a nose with an "extremity of singular acuteness"

(257).  Money was usually the object of the swindle, but not always.  There were

swindling tricks for pure revenge: Sut Lovingood, in "Parson John Bullen's Lizards" (1867), takes advantage of a romantic rival by putting lizards in the rival's clothing. And there were swindles for the love of it: some Southwesterners, in John S. Robb's "Swallowing an Oyster Alive" (1845), trick a Yankee into thinking he is on the verge of death and drinking an entire bottle of hot sauce. The Southwestern swindler is the recurrent character type of Southwestern humor.

The swindler is the most prominent character in <u>The Confidence-Man</u>; in fact, he gives the book its title. The recurring character of the confidence-man in is no ordinary diddler; he is a swindler according to the best traditions of Southwestern humor. In most of his guises, the confidence-man has the ability to improvise audaciously through a swindle. The man in the travelling-cap requires only a sideways mention of the (possibly fictitious) Black Rapids Coal Company in order to ensnare the eager college student. The man with the weed takes an audacious chance in speaking to Mr. Roberts and, when he finds out Mr. Roberts has had a brain fever, sticks to his suggestion of temporary amnesia until he squeezes some money out of Mr. Roberts. And certainly the agent of the Philosophical Intelligence Office takes clever advantage of Pitch's already-stated trouble with boys to spin a tale of the boys he can supply and to make formidable arguments for "some rather new views of boys" (128). Moreover, Melville distinguishes his confidence men not just by their ability to extract lucre but, often, by their appearances as well. The confidence-men are often identified by one feature of clothing, often a striking one, like a weed or a brass plate; the Cosmopolitan's dress is "fantastic" and "grotesque" (131). Moreover, though these swindles are usually for money – at their height, for a hundred dollars – they are not always, or at least they cannot solely be explained in this way. The

124

Cosmopolitan diddles the barber for merely a free haircut – hardly an ambitious take. Pitch, after having his money taken by the Philosophical Intelligence Office agent, meditates thus: "He revolves, but cannot comprehend, the operation, still less the operator. Was the man a trickster, it must be more for the love than the lucre. Two or three dirty dollars the motive to so many nice wiles?" (130). The one-legged cynic also points out this principle, saying "Money, you think, is the sole motive to pains and hazard, deception and deviltry, in this world. How much money did the devil make by gulling Eve ?" (32). Confidence-men, in Melville's text, are very much types of the Southwestern-humor swindler, in their features and in their swindling activities, motivated by both greed and by delight in the con itself.

Given that the characters of Southwestern humor were simplified to this degree, and given that striking incidents were the basis of the interest in Southwestern humor, we should not be surprised to discover that complicated, lengthy plots did not occur in this genre. Southwestern humor came in small doses rather than large ones. The usual form was the "sketch," published in such newspapers as The Spirit of the Times, the New Orleans Delta, the New Orleans Picayune, the St. Louis Reveille, and the Cincinnati News. These short sketches presented a single action – a "scrape," for example – and left it complete at the end. When authors of fiction in this genre published books, they simply compiled those sketches. Book-length forms could obtain more unity by compiling sketches about a single character: for example, Johnson Jones Hooper compiled all his stories about Simon Suggs in the form of Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers (1845), and George Washington Harris compiled his stories of Sut Lovingood in Sut Lovingood. Yarns spun by a "nat'ral born

durn'd fool." Warped and wove for public wear (1867) However, such books consisted

of sketches that were, strictly speaking, formally independent of one another. Since the

protagonists were types more than they were personalities, all the sketches would present

the character performing similar actions under similar circumstances. In each sketch in

Harris's book, Sut encounters a scrape without being fundamentally altered. Rather than

development, such texts were structured around *repetition*. Given this characteristic

structure, and given that the swindle was the most common form of action in

Southwestern humor[4], book-length texts could be built around the structure of the

*repeated swindle*. Hooper's Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs is a textbook example.

In each chapter, Suggs pulls a different swindle on a different person.

The structure of the repeated swindle is an apt description of the structure of The

Confidence-Man, as many critics have noted. Repetition, rather than development, is the

key to the structure of Melville's text. As Sten puts it, "Instead of defining a single,

linear action, his narrative inscribes a plot that repeats itself almost endlessly yet seems to

go nowhere" (285-286). The text consists of several episodes, each one consisting of

identical elements: two individuals encounter one another on the *Fidèle* by chance, one

attempts to diddle the other out of some sum of money by an appeal to optimism or

"confidence." In most cases the swindle is successful; in some cases it is not. There are

episodes that do not follow this pattern (the metafictional chapters, the interpolated

stories such as the one about Goneril, and the occasional conversations), but the majority

of the action is a series of swindles. This repetitive plot structure fits the pattern of

Southwestern humor: the structure is based on elements found in shorter sketches, and

compiled in the way that authors of this genre usually compiled shorter pieces. So, as we

126

can see, there is a strong case for reading The Confidence-Man as an example of how

Melville has adapted the conventions of Southwestern humor in order to make a

philosophical point of deep pessimism: a series of grotesque charlatans, against the

background of a chaotic moral wilderness, repeatedly tricking and diddling the

unsuspecting world.

III.   "VERY HIGH, SOBER, SOLITARY, PHILOSOPHIC, GRAND, OLD

       BOOTS, INDEED": THE CONFIDENCE-MAN AS METAPHYSICAL

       NOVEL

       The other fictional genre that Melville deploys in The Confidence-Man is that of

metaphysical fiction,[5] a genre first critically described by Eigner.  The writers of

metaphysical fiction, according to Eigner, sought to establish a new form of fiction on the

basis of an idealistic philosophy.  Eigner adopts the term 'metaphysical' from Bulwer-

Lytton's preface to The Disowned:

> Besides the multiform representation of real life, the narrative fiction takes
>
> two other shapes. . . . And these two shapes are of one species – both may
>
> be called the philosophical.  The first appertains to the philosophy of wit –
>
> the second to that of poetry.  I will call the first the satirical, the second the
>
> metaphysical, novel (vii-viii).

Eigner expands on this definition to argue that metaphysical fiction responds to realistic

fiction by adapting its material for visionary ends.  In order to represent both the

mundane and the ideal, the genre inserts allegorical techniques into realistic fiction,

pushing it beyond an examination of day-to-day reality and forcing it to explore the realm

of the ideal or the mystical.  Melville adopts the conventions in The Confidence-Man in

ways that make it a metaphysical fiction.

Because metaphysical fictionists were concerned with bringing out the ideal

qualities in contemporary life, they often chose settings that were at one remove from that

life.  In Eigner's reading, such a setting would serve three of the important purposes of

the metaphysical novelists: to make unusual or peculiar events more believable, to keep a

weight of everyday details from obscuring the symbolic and allegorical dimensions of the

work, and to revolt against the Lockean materialism that ruled contemporary life.

Sometimes, metaphysical fictionists achieved the necessary distance by means of

historical settings.  Bulwer-Lytton experimented with ancient Rome and medieval

Europe, Judd used pre-revolutionary America.  At other times, however, metaphysical

fiction writers used contemporary settings, but used special techniques to create "an

almost believable though slightly distorted contemporary world, peopled . . . with ideal

types" (Eigner 146-147), such as Dickens's phantasmagoric London.  Such settings

achieved the goals of setting in metaphysical novels – the possibility of the odd or the

unusual and the removal from ordinary reality – while still being set in the author's own

day.

We have seen that the setting of The Confidence-Man is in the Southwest, but in

its mode of presentation it can be described as a metaphysical-fiction setting.  It is set in

contemporary America, in the Southwestern region[6].  The Southwestern setting of the

action was at least moderately remote for any Eastern readers – indeed, part of the

function of Southwestern tales was to introduce readers to exotic locales in their own

country – and Melville himself – or Melville's narrator – suggests that he has tried to make the setting a little more out-of-the-way than might be expected:

> There is another class [of readers], and with this class we side, who sit down to a work of amusement tolerably as they sit at a play, and with much the same expectations and feelings. They look that fancy shall evoke scenes different from those of the same old crowd round the custom-house counter, and same old dishes on the boarding-house table, with characters unlike those of the same old acquaintances they meet in the same old way every day in the same old street. (182)

Since the action is set on a riverboat, it is set nowhere in particular, and this allows for all kinds of "scenes different from those of the same old crowd." It is a world sufficiently abstracted from the everyday that chance encounters of nearly any kind may occur, a world in which a "whole cabin-full of players [are] playing at games in which every player plays fair, and not a player but shall win" (55).

The setting in time is especially significant for seeing the way in which Melville uses the conventions of metaphysical fiction: the action of the novel takes place on April Fool's Day. As H. Bruce Franklin states, "the significance of this fact cannot be overstated" (168). As Franklin shows, American mythologists in Melville's day were studying the connections between April Fool's Day and other vernal festivals among the ancient Celts or the Hindus. Mythologists were particularly interested in rituals involving processions of masqueraders presenting themselves as gods. By analogizing the the various confidence-men in the text to a sequence of specific deities, including Krishna and Vishnu, Franklin argues that these processions recall themselves in The Confidence-

<u>Man</u>, with its procession of masked figures (168-187).  The April Fool's Day setting thus

presents the *Fidèle* as a world that fuses the everyday and the divine.  Such a world was

the characteristic world of metaphysical fiction, which combined the real and the ideal.

      As with the setting, the characters that inhabited metaphysical fiction were a

similar mixture of the realistic and the ideal: characters placed in a realistic world, but

with allegorical characteristics.  According to Eigner, the metaphysical novel does not so

much represent personages and events that are hypothetical but conceivably real; rather,

it presents characters as aspects of a single mind.  Thus, in Dickens's <u>David Copperfield</u>,

the secondary characters are not personages on the same ontological level as the

protagonist but semi-allegorical figures who "perform a multitude of possible and

unsatisfactory careers, and [Copperfield himself] responds to them so strongly because he

recognizes each of their lives as potentially his own" (Eigner 73).  What this meant was

that characters could be conceived of as at least partially items in a schematic allegory.

Bulwer-Lytton went so far as to discuss his characterization in detail in the afterword to

<u>Zanoni</u>.  In fact, he provided a list:

> *Meljnour* – Contemplation of the Actual, – SCIENCE  Always old, and
>
> must last as long as the Actual.  Less fallible than Idealism, but less
>
> practically potent, from its ignorance of the human heart.
>
>     *Zanoni* – Contemplation of the Ideal, – IDEALISM.  Always
>
> necessarily sympathetic: lives by enjoyment; and is therefore typified by
>
> eternal youth.  Idealism is the potent Interpreter and Prophet of the Real;
>
> but its powers are impaired in proportion to their exposure to human
>
> passion.

. . .

> *Mervale* – CONVENTIONALISM
>
> *Nicot* – Base, grovelling, malignant PASSION
>
> *Glyndon* – UNSUSTAINED ASPIRATION: Would follow
>
> Instinct, but is deterred by Conventionalism, is overawed by Idealism, yet
>
> attracted, and transiently inspired, but has not steadiness for the initiatory
>
> contemplation of the Actual.  He conjoins its snatched privilege with a
>
> besetting sensualism, and suffers at once from the horror of the one and
>
> the disgust of the other, involving the innocent in the fatal conflict of his
>
> spirit.  When on the point of perishing, he is rescued by Idealism, and,
>
> unable to rise to that species of existence, is grateful to be replunged into
>
> the region of the Familiar, and takes up his rest henceforth in Custom.
>
> (537-539)

Such a detailed guide states explicitly the guiding principles of characterization in

metaphysical fiction.

Because the characters in metaphysical fiction are mental projections rather than

mimetic representations, they display appropriate characteristics.  Most importantly, they

are "undeveloping" (Eigner 84): they may change, but they do not undergo psychological

growth as realistic characters do, since we see them from the outside more than the

inside, as projections of mind rather than minds themselves.  Metaphysical-fiction

characters are also "disappearing" (Eigner 88): they may be removed from the narrative

at will and replaced with an equivalent character – one who fills the same role in the

mental drama.  Eigner cites the thematic minor characters from Dickens, who replace

131

other characters who are similarly thematic, such as Krook and the Lord Chancellor in Bleak House.  Metaphysical-fiction characters, thus, are more thematic masks frozen in one posture than like personalities.

The characters in The Confidence-Man conform to this description of the characters of metaphysical fiction.  Eigner points to the book, in fact, as the definitive example of disappearing characters:

> And nothing in literature illustrates the technique of thematic substitution better than the many disguises of the Confidence-Man and the various manifestations of his victims, whose abrupt disappearances certainly do not represent any changed intention. . . .Melville helps out also by giving us very early in the book something like a cast of disappearing characters, the guises which the Confidence-Man will assume in the course of his masquerade. . . . The revolving Drummond light of Melville's original mind brilliantly illuminates one of these substituting confidence-men until his thematic significance is expressed; then it passes on to the next.  (94-95)

Melville relies on disappearing characters even more than Eigner here indicates.  The confidence-man, in his various masquerades, is not the only character to reappear and disappear.  As we have seen, the text's characters fall into three different categories, and in each of these categories a different multi-part masquerade goes on.  The cynics – Pitch, John Moredock, and so forth – all appear one after the other.  Even when the cynics Mark Winsome and Egbert appear on stage together, the Cosmopolitan accuses them of being one and the same person: "Oh, this, all along, is not you . . . but some ventriloquist who

usurps your larynx. It is Mark Winsome that speaks" (206).  Moreover, the dupes – the

clergyman who gives to the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum, the charitable lady,

and so forth – are just as interchangeable as the confidence-men who swindle them.

The characters in The Confidence-Man are capable of disappearing and replacing

each other because they are, in the manner of the metaphysical novel, semi-allegorical.

However, Melville's characters are not products of pure allegory, after the manner of the

characters in Pilgrim's Progress or the minor characters in the allegorical sections of

Mardi.  Rather, they are fleshed out into a world firmly based on our own, rather than a

purely allegorical world, like Mardi or Christian's journey toward the Celestial City.

Hence, the characters are on a particular river, and have antecedents in particular places –

St. Louis and Cairo.  These details reflect metaphysical fiction's aim to locate the ideal in

the everyday by producing characters halfway between allegorical and realistic modes.

Like the characters, the form of metaphysical fiction brings together the ideal and

the everyday.  One predominant plot structure that Eigner identifies is the *two-part*

*structure*, built around a contrast between skeptical pessimism and mystical affirmation,

the world of experience and the world of the ideal.  Specifically, Eigner identifies one

variety of the two-part structure as the *sequential form*.  This form presents a pattern of

problem and solution: "[t]he realistic, first part of a metaphysical novel depicts the

alienation, of which the skeptical world view was both cause and symptom, and for

which the mystical conclusion was supposed to provide a radical cure" (213).  A

paradigmatic example is Bulwer-Lytton's A Strange Story, which begins in a

conventional English town, ruled over by the worldly Mrs. Poyntz (she explicitly calls

herself "the world"), and ends in faraway Australia.  Eigner argues that the two-part

structure in <u>A Tale of Two Cities</u> allows Dickens to move from historical realism to religious allegory, and to change Sydney from a flawed being to a Christ-like figure.  The two-part sequential structure of certain metaphysical fictions allow the authors to illustrate the triumph of affirmation over negation (Eigner 207-228).

This plot structure (and other variations) served the basic action of metaphysical fiction: *initiation*. The protagonist of metaphysical fiction becomes aware, over the course of the narrative, of the mystical and ideal dimension of life.  In this plot the protagonist undergoes or attempts initiation into "higher mysteries."  The protagonist of <u>A Strange Story</u>, Fenwick, begins his life as an advocate of materialism, and over the course of his adventures is taught the reality of the soul.  These mysteries may be genuinely mystical, as in <u>Zanoni</u>'s invocation of Rosicrucianism and alchemy, or they may be as tame as Unitarianism, as in <u>Margaret</u> (1845), or they may be as vague as the "I DO believe!" (232) of Kimball's <u>St. Leger</u> (1850).  But the mysteries are generally optimistic in character, pointing the character not towards disillusionment and pessimism, but towards love and, generally, a more positive and beneficial relationship between the self and the universe.

It is possible to read <u>The Confidence-Man</u> as exhibiting a two-part structure of just this kind, and along just these lines.  Dolan points out that the confidence-man collects increasingly more money up until Chapter 20, and then increasingly less thereafter.  As Tom Quirk points out, moreover, in the second half, the confidence-man is increasingly contrasted to more and more unpleasant and heartless cynics, starting with the merely inflexible and grouchy Pitch, moving to the murderous Colonel Moredock and then the soulless Mark Winsome and Egbert.  If we see the text as exhibiting a two-part

structure, we are better prepared to see that one can read its central action as *initiation*, in the manner of metaphysical fiction. The herb-doctor attempts (and fails) to initiate Pitch to see the ideal in nature. The PIO agent, on the other hand, steps in to demonstrate the way in which *human* nature evolves upward, showing that a bad boy may metamorphose into a good man. The Cosmopolitan is earnestly concerned with demonstrating all the advantages of the text's oft-stated virtue of confidence, an idealistic virtue, and seeks to make converts everywhere – of Frank, of the barber, and so forth. All of the confidence-men, in fact, can be seen as initiators, themselves enlightened into higher mysteries and seeking also to enlighten their fellow travelers of the ideal world. The Confidence-Man, read in this way, follows the pattern of metaphysical fiction.

IV.     **"FACT IS, WHEN ALL IS BOUND UP TOGETHER, IT'S SOMETIMES CONFUSING": THE CONFIDENCE-MAN AS MIXED-GENRE TEXT**

As we can see, The Confidence-Man is a text apparently both fish and fowl: both Southwestern humor and metaphysical fiction. Melville achieves this double character through an astonishing fusion of genres, one that goes considerably beyond his previous work along these lines. The text is not properly described as an example of Southwestern humor with elements of metaphysical fiction, or vice versa, because the text is, in Alastair Fowler's terminology, a *hybrid* text, combining two genres in such a way that neither one dominates the other (Fowler 184). This is the same general technique that Melville had used in Moby-Dick and Pierre. But whereas in the former works particular sections were identifiable as belonging to particular genres (for example, the first, domestic, half of Pierre as distinct from the second, city-mysteries, half), in The

Confidence-Man no particular section generically differs from another in that way.  The genres are not combined by an external structure, but by a *fusion*.

Melville's combination of different fictional genres illustrates his tragic nihilist position in two ways: first, by a repetition of the technique he used in Moby-Dick and Pierre; second, by an extension of that technique.  To begin with, the pivotal question of confidence receives an equivocal answer, because the two separate genres answer the question differently.  Southwestern humor, which depicts a world of moral chaos in which dishonesty is universal, is a work that advises *against* confidence, *for* confidence in distrust.  Metaphysical fiction, by attempting to initiate readers into an ideal realm, pushes *for* confidence.  And Melville, as we have seen, emphasizes just those elements that underscore this opposition between the two genres.  Since the text as a whole gives both answers, and the answers are incompatible, the hybrid design of the text pushes towards the tragically nihilistic conclusion: that neither confidence nor confidence in distrust are appropriate responses towards a world that is meaningless and indifferent.  Moreover, because Melville uses specific fictional genres to underscore this point, he demonstrates the ways in which our own dispositions and illusions, represented by those genres, make it impossible for us to believe this truth.

But Melville's use of *fusion*, rather than simple combination, to put the two genres together, forces the text from this first level of tragic nihilism to a second one, one that had been implied but had gone largely unexplored in his previous texts.  By combining different genres that embodied different moral ideas, Melville was able to demonstrate how our own beliefs are delusive.  But in Moby-Dick, for example, there were long, discrete stretches written in single-genre mode.  The pessimism of Ahab

represented by the illustrious-criminal adventure genre may have been false, but it was at least coherent enough to be convincing. The different means of hybridization in The Confidence-Man tells a different story. Because there are no identifiable borders between the Southwestern humor and the metaphysical fiction in the text, there is no reliable way to separate optimism from pessimism. Rather than stable or durable (though false) aspects of our personality, or of human nature broadly, our beliefs, Melville shows, are unstable, constantly slipping from one thing to another. Melville demonstrates, in The Confidence-Man, that our beliefs are not merely false, but are in fact totally incoherent, even to ourselves.

The combination of settings in The Confidence-Man illustrates the first level of tragic nihilism in the text. He uses the Southwestern-humor setting to present a shifting, chaotic world, one where genial and trustworthy appearances cover avaricious intentions. On the other hand, he uses the metaphysical-fiction setting to present a world with depth; not just deeper levels of intention, but genuinely deeper levels of *being*, and thus of ultimate reality. However, these play off of each other, without canceling each other out. As Dolan notes, the setting allows for both scenes in which an arriving stranger comes to con you or to offer you aid, concluding that "the dramatic setting of a Mississippi riverboat provided Melville with a fluid, even polyvalent, medium for the indeterminate contents of his novel" (141), showing that the riverboat setting, with its ability to produce chance meetings, is suited to bringing together both swindler and victim, or helper and helpless. Thus, the debate between Pitch and the doctor must be inconclusive. "Nature," the world in which the characters move, may indeed have depths, but are they depths of goodness? The herb-doctor asserts that nature is kind; Pitch asserts that it is cruel. The

137

metaphysical-fiction aspects of the setting tell us that we are certainly going to get an answer to this foreboding question, whereas the Southwestern-humor aspects of the setting hint to us that we should not trust whatever answer we get.

We can also see Melville illustrating this first level of tragic nihilism through his combination of the protocols for representing character. Melville uses the content of Southwestern humor, emphasizing brilliant and somewhat freakish swindlers, but the mode of metaphysical fiction, using semi-allegorical presentation of replaceable and disappearing characters to underscore the ideal realm whose elements these characters represent. This combination presents a quandary. How can the trickster, a liar, be an ideal quality? This combination is only possible if something at the ideal level of reality is dishonest, shifty, or conniving. Yet the revelations of metaphysical fiction are meant to bring truth. Melville is showing that the search for truth is, at some level, a con-game.

In his use of generic fusion, moreover, Melville uses character to go to the second level of tragic nihilism. By using characters who are themselves profoundly unstable in their identities, Melville illustrates the ways in which every attempt to formulate a positive truth is itself unstable. The narrator, in Chapter 14, "Worth the Consideration of Those to Whom it May Prove Worth Considering," argues that inconsistency is human nature. The narrator points out that the merchant of the previous chapter has behaved inconsistently, by switching from being "full of confidence" to displaying a "depth of discontent" (69). The narrator anticipates that some readers may object and judge the work aesthetically inferior as a result and claim that "there is nothing a writer of fiction should more carefully see to . . . than that, in the depiction of any character, its consistency should be preserved." However, the narrator urges, this is logically

inconsistent with other aesthetic criteria the "sensible reader" probably also holds.  First,

the reader will probably agree that fiction ought to be realistic – that "fiction based on

fact should never be contradictory to it" – and therefore, since a consistent personality in

the world of fact is a "rara avis," realistic fiction should not display consistent

personalities, and a fiction that does "either exhibits but sections of character, making

them appear for wholes, or else is very untrue to reality" (69-71).  Therefore, the aesthetic

of the novel, as the narrator states, is based on representing characters in complexity, and

this aesthetic is based on a belief in human inconsistency in the world.

　　　This human inconsistency is by no means a secret held only by the narrator;

discussions often turn to inconsistency of character, and the truth of the narrator's

doctrine is subject to argument.  The debate between Pitch and the Philosophical

Intelligence Officer is a debate about transformations of character.  Pitch maintains that

character is inflexible, and all change is superficial, leaving the essential character

untouched: the "butterfly is the caterpillar in a gaudy cloak; stripped of which, there lies

the impostor's long spindle of a body, pretty much worm-shaped as before" (124).  The

Philosophical Intelligence Officer, on the other hand, argues that character is mutable and

that noble qualities (like beards) may be latent in a boy, who will transform just as St.

Augustine changed from a "sad dog" to a "saint" (125).  The Cosmopolitan is surprised

by the story of Colonel John Moredock, maintaining that his character is too inconsistent

to be believed, asking "If the man of hate, how could John Moredock be also the man of

love?" (156)  As the barber comments to the Cosmopolitan, humans usually display an

inconsistency between their apparent and their real characteristics; a man might be

naturally bald but display a head to the world "radiant in curling auburn" (232).

Discussions and debates rotate constantly around inconsistency and change in character[7].

Not only do the characters of The Confidence-Man comment on the inconsistency of character, they demonstrate it, by shifting between roles and altering their personalities. The debate between Pitch and the Philosophical Intelligence Officer, for example, results in Pitch himself changing. He resists it at first, almost seeming to sense that it involves a transformation of his whole identity, and signals that resistance by twice asserting his identity more fervently: "My name is Pitch; I stick to what I say" (117, 126). But the change comes nonetheless, and he "soften[s]"; in the following chapter, however, Pitch reverts to his previous beliefs, as if "one beginning to rouse himself from a dose of chloroform treacherously given" (129). In the language we have learned to use to describe texts of this sort, we can describe what happens to Pitch thusly: he changes from the cynic to the dupe and then back into the cynic. All characters who are swindled over their own resistance, such as the miser or the barber, who regards himself as being "charmed" into accepting the Cosmopolitan's agreement, undergo a similar transformation. Similarly, the young salesman of the final chapter has the double character of a cynic and a confidence-man, for he appeals to the suspicions of others in order to peddle his (possibly) worthless goods. The same doubleness applies to the crippled man of Chapter 19. He is a cynic to the herb-doctor, emphasizing his hatred for the "happy man" and telling a story of his life that is so incompatible with the Herb-Doctor's optimism that the latter can hardly believe it, but a confidence-man to the rest of the *Fidèle*'s passengers, presenting himself as an injured veteran in order to obtain a

penny or two.  Throughout the text, characters transform themselves and transform

themselves again.

These shifts in character demonstrate Melville's conviction of the worthless

subjectivity of moral belief, and generic fusion is his strategy for demonstrating it.  The

shifts are possible because Melville has adopted the material of Southwestern humor:

characters must change their minds in order to be diddled.  Pitch must change his mind

about the worthlessness of boys in order that the Philosophical Intelligence Officer can

persuade him to try a new boy.  However, because Melville has also adopted the

strategies of metaphysical fiction, this change of mind represents more than a mere

everyday trick.  Characters in metaphysical fiction represent ideal qualities and therefore

don't change; in Melville's particular order of characterization, they represent

fundamental philosophical positions like optimism and pessimism.  For one to change to

another so readily – for pessimism to change to optimism and then back again –

demonstrates a profound incoherence at the heart of all such beliefs about the world.

By using generically-fused and unstable characters, Melville is able to fuse the

plots of the two genres.  If one can't tell an optimist from a pessimist, one also can't

distinguish wisdom from nonsense.  Such a narrative strategy further illustrates the

second level of tragic nihilism.  As we have seen, Melville overlays a repeated swindle

on a two-part structure of negation and affirmation.  The swindles of the second half thus

present themselves as initiations rather than swindles, with Melville's Cosmopolitan an

agent of renewal, but the combination of genres, with characters blending into one

another, founders in moral incoherence.  Because dupe and confidence-man are one,

swindle and initiation are also one, and no action can be described without also being

described as its opposite.

The Cosmopolitan's interactions with other characters in the second half are

describable as both swindles and initiations. Tom Quirk shows that, in the three major

incidents that dominate the second half of the text, both characters appear to be

confidence-men. Charlie Noble, Quirk argues, is himself a swindler who encourages his

friend to drink while avoiding liquor himself and who takes his leave as soon as the

Cosmopolitan has spoiled his plans by himself making a request for money.[8] Mark

Winsome even identifies Charlie as a "Mississippi operator" (196). The barber, too, is a

kind of confidence-man, confessedly dealing in deception and imposture, and attempting

to secure a monetary deposit from the Cosmopolitan. Even the language of the barber –

"lather," or smooth talk, "shaving," or cheating – suggests swindling. Mark Winsome

and Egbert, Quirk argues, are operators of a different kind, peddling a philosophy that is

itself a massive con-job, and this points clearly to Melville's philosophical conclusions.

Winsome's philosophy, as expostulated by both himself and Ebgert, is supposedly lucid

but explained in incomprehensible Greek and Egyptian. They both tout it as practical,

but it resists any application (Quirk 126-129, 141-146). Moreover, their role as idealist

philosophers on the take reflects an idiosyncratic reading of the history of philosophy.

Winsome presents philosophy itself as a confidence game, stating "I am no one-ideaed

one, either; no more than the seers before me. Was not Seneca a usurer? Bacon a

courtier? and Swedenborg, though with one eye on the invisible, did he not keep the other

on the main chance?" (198). Melville's use of these characters and their activities points

to the interchangeable character of idealism and cynicism, optimism and pessimism,

indicating not just the interchangeability of Melville's characters and actions, but of the philosophies behind them.

The text thus presents both optimism and pessimism as equally incoherent. The text presents a confidence-man, a dupe, and a cynic, as the same thing. To swindle and to enlighten are the same thing. Optimism and pessimism are – *the same thing*. The moral meaning of this fusion is best illustrated by a striking portrait of profound ambiguity in the final chapter. The Cosmopolitan criticizes the old man whom he encounters in the gentlemen's cabin for using a Counterfeit Detector to test a bill he has, not because the Detector tells the old man that the bill is false, but because the Detector gives an ambiguous answer. It might give a reading of the bill as false, because the red marks are absent, but this reading might be unreliable, because the red marks may have been worn away. The old man is rendered neither a cynic nor a dupe by his Counterfeit Detector; rather, he is in the position of all of us, unable to determine if the bill is good or not, unable to determine if the universe is benevolent or malevolent. This ambiguity is symbolized by the image in the solar lamp, alternating between a devilish "horned altar, from which flames rose" and an angelic "figure of a robed man, his head encircled by a halo" (240). But since we need light to see, all our attempts to solve the problem of the bill will be frustrated by the way our perceptions and moods constantly shift. Our moral beliefs are not merely false, but genuinely incoherent as well, and Melville demonstrates this through his strategy of generic fusion.

## V. "THOSE READERS WHO DO NOT SKIP IT": <u>THE CONFIDENCE-MAN</u> AND READERS

The Confidence-Man, first of all, represents a continued use of the strategies

Melville had pursued in Moby-Dick and Pierre.  Melville combines different popular

genres in order to dramatize the collision between incompatible moral beliefs,

demonstrating all moral beliefs to be ultimately delusory.  Furthermore, Melville's

mixed-genre structure continues to reflect Melville's ambivalent stance towards his

readers: his deep need to reach them mingled with his sense that to communicate he must

attack.  However, The Confidence-Man also shows a development in Melville's approach

to his readers.  Melville's philosophy of tragic nihilism carried within itself implications

for Melville's stance towards his readers: if our conceptions of ultimate reality, religious

truth, and moral value are always subjective and never true, then our reading of texts

should be no different.  Therefore, though Melville wrote The Confidence-Man to

dramatize the truth of tragic nihilism, he also believed that readers would only understand

it through their own delusive subjectivity.  Just as optimism or pessimism were illusory

but inescapable, so one's reading of a text might be just as illusory.  The major

innovation of The Confidence-Man is to apply tragic nihilism to reading itself.

In The Confidence-Man, Melville proposes specific strategies for readers to

emulate.  In some cases, interpretation is a simple affair: one goes outside the text and

examines intentions in order to verify meaning.  A bottle marked with a text of its own –

the letters "P. W." – presents a problem of interpretation, a "pleasing poser" for Charlie,

the Cosmopolitan's companion.  The Cosmopolitan, however, interprets it readily:

"'Shouldn't wonder,' said the cosmopolitan gravely, 'if it stood for port wine.  You

called for port wine, didn't you?'"  This settles the problem, and the Cosmopolitan states

that it is an elementary matter: "'I find some little mysteries not very hard to clear up'"

(161).  In this case, the problem of interpretation requires going outside the text, in this

case the letters on the bottle, and referring to something outside the text that clarifies the

question of meaning – Charlie's intentions.  When the text in question is fairly simple –

and especially when the meaning is under the control of a person immediately present –

these mysteries are easy to clear up.  When the man with the weed encounters the

collegian, the former takes the latter for a man in danger of misanthropy, noting that he is

reading Tacitus, and advising the collegian that Tacitus, because of his misanthropic and

pessimistic opinions, is "moral poison" (26).  When the collegian gets an opportunity to

speak for himself, however, he explains the error of the man with the weed's

interpretation, by explaining that he reads Tacitus in a different way: not for the Roman

author's "gloom," but for his "gossip" (49).  In this case, again, the evidence of intention

settles the question of interpretation.

Even some of the trickiest texts are subject to solution when one can verify

intention.  When the Cosmopolitan is settling up his contract with the barber, a confusion

arises over whether the Cosmopolitan should place a deposit with the barber or not.  The

barber points out that the contract they have drawn up requires the Cosmopolitan to

insure him against "a certain loss."  The Cosmopolitan replies with surprise, "Is it so

certain you are going to lose?"; he interprets "certain" here as meaning "guaranteed."

The barber responds by clarifying his meaning, stating that "Why, that way of taking the

word may not be amiss, but I didn't mean it so. I meant a certain loss; you understand, a

CERTAIN loss; that is to say, a certain loss" (237); the barber clarifies that he means that

the contract requires for the Cosmopolitan to insure him for a specific amount.  Similarly,

the Cosmopolitan finds that his companion Charlie's panegyric to the press is in fact in

praise of the wine-press, rather than the printing press; Frank misinterprets it at first, but the more he hears from Charlie, the better able he is to get the correct interpretation.

But not all of these little mysteries are so easy to clear up, and The Confidence-Man also illustrates the limits of all interpretation. In the case of the Apocryphal passages in the Bible, the Cosmopolitan confesses that he is still confused. His confusion cannot be settled by considering the intentions of the author, since God is not quite forthcoming. Similarly, the discussion between the Cosmopolitan and Charlie over the morality of certain Shakespearean characters also founders on the question of interpretation. Charlie maintains that Polonius's advice to Hamlet is "monstrous," a series of cynical exhortations to self-interest. The Cosmopolitan maintains that such an interpretation "won't do" (170). Without Shakespeare present to clear these matters up, the Cosmopolitan and Charlie cannot solve the problem by recourse to evidence. How do they determine, then, their interpretations? Charlie suggests that Frank resists seeing Polonius as a cynic because of his optimism, saying, "You are so charitable with everybody" (170). aIn the absence of the sort of detailed evidence of intention that is available in a restricted class of cases – the meaning of two letters on a bottle of wine one has ordered – it would seem that interpretation is only a matter of one's temperament, one's personality.

The most detailed example of this problem of interpretation for Melville is in the nested narrative of the Indian-hater, Colonel John Moredock. The title of this section, "The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating," is a signal that this will delve into Indian-hatred from a philosophical point of view. Indeed, Moredock is revealed to be a signal unreliable reader, subject to his own uncritical acceptance of his own subjectivity.

146

Moredock is presented as having reasons to hate Indians: his mother, who was herself "thrice widowed by a tomahawk" (152), was killed, along with Moredock's eight siblings, by an Indian attack.  At the same time, he is also shown to have other reasons for believing his position, less rational than habitual: he has absorbed it naïvely, "with his mother's milk," as well as having been extensively instructed by "his schoolmasters, the old chroniclers of the forest," in the history of Native American misdeeds: "histories of Indian lying, Indian theft, Indian double-dealing, Indian fraud and perfidy, Indian want of conscience, Indian blood-thirstiness, Indian diabolism" (146).  So Moredock's 'reading' of Indians is based as much on his own character, a character shaped by his environment, as on reasons and judgment.  In fact, Moredock proves to be a very unsound reader, for anything relating to Indians he manipulates to fit his own interpretation: "when a tomahawking red-man advances the notion of the benignity of the red race, it it but part and parcel with that subtle strategy which he finds so useful in war, in hunting, and the general conduct of life" (147).  Indian evil justifies his Indian-hating, but so does Indian goodness.  Moredock is the signal unreliable reader of the text: a reader who interprets everything according to his own subjectivity, a subjectivity that is unreliable and unstable, but that is inescapable.

The case of Moredock becomes, in miniature, the absolute limit of all the interpretive problems with which the text confronts the reader.  Melville takes the text to the limits of total unreliability, while at the same time instructing the reader how to cope with such unreliability.  By producing a text that is formally unrecognizable, he challenges the reader's expectations.  Moreover, by entering the text in the form of a self-conscious commenting narrator, he urges the reader to be critical and self-aware.  No

147

interpretation of The Confidence-Man is possible without taking its complex overtures to readers into account.  And yet those overtures continually warn readers of the dangers and difficulties inherent in interpretation.

Melville does not protect his readers from these difficulties; he confronts them openly.  He opens the first chapter of the narrative with texts that demand interpretation, placed in a pattern that seems to defy simple interpretation.  Two men both present 'texts': the man in the cream colors presents the words "Charity thinketh no evil," "Charity suffereth long, and is kind," "Charity endureth all things," "Charity believeth all things," and "Charity never faileth"; the barber presents his own text: "NO TRUST." Even the meanings of these individual texts is suspect because their authors do not gloss them: the man in cream colors is a "mute," and the barber pushes away the people around him (3-6).  The meaning of their juxtaposition – a juxtaposition that has no apparent author – is thus doubly insoluble in the terms of The Confidence-Man.  This textual moment, moreover, is a case in miniature of the whole text, which consists of Southwestern humor (in effect, the "NO TRUST" sign) and metaphysical fiction ("Charity") juxtaposed.  Melville condemns the reader to puzzle through these two signs for the entire book.

The reader must interpret the text, just as the reader must interpret the world, and yet Melville also gives the reader no assistance in doing either.  The Confidence-Man thus takes Melville's literary project to its ultimate limit, and to a climax.  Beginning with Moby-Dick, Melville had written fictions intended to illustrate his belief that life was meaningless, and humans were tragically deluded about its meaninglessness.  In The Confidence-Man, Melville showed that humans were deluded about even their own

delusions. In previous works, Melville had combined genres to show the paradoxes of moral beliefs; in <u>The Confidence-Man</u>, Melville combined genres so thoroughly that the text itself was paradoxical. In previous texts, Melville had both addressed and attacked his readers; in <u>The Confidence-Man</u>, Melville attacked his readers with the notion that even his address to them was a delusion. Nothing further could follow from this masquerade.

NOTES

[1] The claims that form the "standard line" of interpretation are best articulated in Elizabeth Foster's introduction to The Confidence-Man, Richard Chase's "Melville's Confidence Man," John Seelye's The ironic Diagram, and Lawrance Thompson's Melvilles Quarrel with God.

[2] See Tom Quirk's Melville's Confidence Man: From Knave to Knight, Richard Boyd Hauck's A Cheerful Nihilism and "Nine Good Jokes: The Redemptive Humor of the Confidence Man and The Confidence-Man," Leon Selzer's "Camus's Absurd and the World of Melville's The Confidence-Man," and Ernest Tuveson's "The Creed of the Confidence-Man."

[3] Cohen and Dillingham identify 1835-1861 as the period of the greatest concentration, while also acknowledging that its influence persists post-Civil War writers such as Mark Twain and William Faulkner (xvii).

[4] Cohen and Dillingham provide a wonderful list of the usual subject matter of Southwestern humor:

1. The hunt
2. Fights, mock fights, reluctant fighters, and animal fights
3. Courtship, rejected suitors, weddings, and honeymoons
4. Frolics and dances
5. Games, horse races, and other contests
6. Militia drills
7. Elections and electioneering
8. The legislature, the courtroom, and lawyers
9. Sermons, camp meetings, preachers, and religious experiences
10. The visitor in a humble home, rude accommodations for travelers
11. The naïve country boy in the city
12. The riverboat, life on the river
13. Adventures of a rogue
14. Pranks and tricks of a practical joker, hoaxes
15. Gambling
16. Trades and swindles
17. Cures, sickness and bodily discomfort, medical treatments
18. Drunks and drinking
19. Dandies, foreigners, Yankees, and city slickers
20. Odd characters and local eccentrics
21. Modest, immodesty, and false modesty
22. Actors, the theater, and theatrics (xii)

[5] Eigner's preferred term is "metaphysical novel"; despite the difficulty of the novel/romance distinction, I argue that Eigner successfully shows sufficient coherence in the material of the genre he designates as"'metaphysical" for the genre to be a useful and coherent term for the purposes of our discussion, although one that Eigner frequently uses

too capaciously.  His study takes the premise that *all* texts by one of the authors he has designated as a "metaphysical novelist" (Hawthorne, Melville, Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton) must be a metaphysical novel.  However, as I have argued, many of those (Moby-Dick, Paul Clifford) fit more readily into other categories.  To avoid confusion with the novel/romance discussion, I use the term "metaphysical fiction" except when quoting directly.

[6] The Confidence-Man gives itself no particular historical period, but one should assume an 1857 setting in the absence of any specific plot element from the historical past.

T[7] See Renker's discussion of "character" in The Confidence-Man, where she argues that the constant invocation of the word 'character' signifies the both the unreadability of character (that is, the difficulty of understanding personality) and the impenetrability of *written* characters (words and letters) that plagued Melville (72-100).  As in my discussion, both the subject of the writing, and writing itself, dissolve into insoluble puzzles.

[8] There is no sure evidence, of course, that Charlie Noble plans any such action in regards to the Cosmopolitan.  It is enough to note that his behavior is consistent with that of a frustrated operator.

CHAPTER 5


"BUT LEVER THERE IS NONE": <u>MARDI</u> AND GENRE


About halfway through <u>Mardi</u>, the Polynesian traveler Samoa tells the story of an

early brain transplant that involves putting part of a pig brain into the skull of an injured

warrior, whose personality changed as a result. The philosopher Babbalanja, his

imagination inspired by the tale, muses "I have long thought, that men, pigs, and plants,

are but curious physiological experiments; and that science would at last enable

philosophers to produce new species of beings, by somehow mixing, and concocting the

essential ingredients of various creatures; and so forming new combinations" (299). One

can imagine this to be a description of <u>Mardi</u> itself, which is s a "new combination" of the

"essential ingredients" of "various" different genres – a "new species" produced by

"mixing" and "concocting" different kinds of literary texts.

<u>Mardi</u> combines genres, as do Melville's later works, but in a different way. In

later works, Melville's mixed-genre structures were at the service of his philosophical

position of tragic nihilism. When Melville wrote <u>Mardi</u>, however, Melville had not yet

come to the tragic nihilist conclusion. Rather, the mixed-genre structure of <u>Mardi</u> reveals

an author attempting to transform himself from one kind of writer, with one stance

towards his readers, to another.  By carefully examining the etiology of <u>Mardi</u>, we can

see why the structural strategy differs, and how Melville succeeded in breaking free of an

old model of authorship and moving towards a new, more independent one, but failed in

creating a text with any central theme.  In turn, this analysis will show just how important

the *philosophical* principle that informed the genre combinations of Melville's later

works was, and why <u>Mardi</u> displays some of the surface qualities of later works like

<u>Moby-Dick</u> and <u>The Confidence-Man</u>, but none of the substance.


## I.      "AND THUS WAS SKETCHED THE PLAN OF OUR VOYAGE": THE GENETICS OF MARDI

To understand how Melville carried out these experiments in <u>Mardi</u>, we must

understand its composition, which was an unusually tangled affair.  Melville began it in a

state of distraction, writing along the lines of his previous bestsellers.  At some point in

early 1848, however, his intentions shifted radically, changing the book he was writing.

The facts give credence to this shift in intention.  On January 29, 1847, Melville sent

proofs of <u>Omoo</u>, his previous book, to John Murray, his British publisher.  On March 31,

1847, Melville wrote to Murray saying that he was planning to "follow [<u>Omoo</u>] up by

something else, immediately" (87), indicating that he may have begun thinking about

<u>Mardi</u> at some point during that year.[1]  On September 23, Melville's friend Evert

Duyckinck wrote to his brother George after attending the wedding of Melville's younger

brother Allan where he doubtless discussed the embryonic <u>Mardi</u> with its author, saying

that "Herman Melville is preparing a third book which [will] exhaust the South Sea

marvels" (Leyda 260).  By October 29, Melville was far enough along that he could write

to Murray, saying "I am now engaged upon another book of South Sea Adventure continued from, tho' wholly independent of, 'Omoo'" (98).

Later documentary evidence suggests that Melville was cognizant that he was

working in a very different mode from his previous works.  In the above-quoted letter to

Murray, Melville added that "[t]he new work will enter into scenes altogether new, &

will, I think possess more interest than the former; which treated of subjects

comparatively trite" (98).  Clearly, Melville was aware that <u>Mardi</u> was to be strikingly

different from <u>Typee</u> and <u>Omoo</u>, but his continuing comments in that letter suggest that

he had not yet conceptualized that difference: "indeed, I only but begin, as it were, to feel

my hand. – I can not say certainly when the book will be ready for the press – but

probably the latter part of the coming Spring – perhaps later – possibly not until Fall"

(99).  Melville knew that what he was doing in <u>Mardi</u> was something different, but he

was also aware that he had a long way to go.  As that difference developed, Melville

wrote to Murray about <u>Mardi</u> twice in early 1848.  In the first, on New Year's Day,

Melville cast aspersions on his previous two books, saying "you may be led to imagine

that after producing two books on the South Seas, the subject must necessarily [*sic*]

become somewhat barren of novelty" (100).  However, Melville deliberately

distinguished this text from the previous one, stating "the plan I have pursued in the

composition of the book now at hand, clothes the whole subject in new attractions &

contains in one cluster all that is romantic, whimsical & poetic in Polynusia [*sic*]" and

boasted that "it shall have the right stuff to it, to redeem its faults, tho' they were legion"

(100-102).  He added, "All this to be sure, is confidential – & egotistical – decidedly the

latter" (102).  And on March 25, Melville went further, aggressively differentiating <u>Mardi</u>

from <u>Typee</u> and <u>Omoo</u>, saying that

I think my last [letter] but one – gave you to understand, or implied, that the work I then had in view was a bona-fide narrative of my adventures in the Pacific, continued from 'Omoo' – My object in now writing you – I should have done so ere this – is to inform you of a change in my determinations.  To be blunt: the work I shall next publish will be downright & out a 'Romance of Polynesian Adventure' – But why this? The truth is, Sir, that the reiterated imputation of being a romancer in disguise has at last pricked me into a resolution to show those who may take any interest in the matter, that a *real* romance of mine is no Typee or Omoo, & is made of different stuff altogether. . . . proceeding in my narrative of *facts* I began to feel an incurable distaste for the same; & a longing to plume my powers for a flight, & felt irked, cramped & fettered by plodding along with dull common places, - So suddenly abandoning the thing alltogether [*sic*], I went to work heart & soul at a romance which is now in fair progress. . . . It opens like a true narrative – like Omoo for example, on ship board – the romance & poetry of the thing thence grow continuly [*sic*], till it becomes a story wild enough I assure you & with a meaning too.  – As for the policy of putting forth an acknowledged *romance* upon the heels of two books of travel . . . That, Sir, is a question for which I care little, really.  (106)

So Melville definitely started Mardi and then determined to change it in mid-composition, attempting to differentiate it from his previous two books as much as possible.

At this point, the trail of documentary evidence runs out.  To further elaborate the process of <u>Mardi</u>'s composition, we must rely on internal evidence.  Accounts differ, but two major possibilities exist: first, that Melville wrote <u>Mardi</u> in sequential narrative order; second, that he did not.  The first possibility, articulated by Merrell Davis in his magisterial <u>Melville's Mardi: A Chartless Voyage</u>, claims that the narrative order more or less matches the compositional order (that is, the order in which Melville wrote), so that Melville began the narrative with Jarl and the narrator's escape, then introduced Yillah, then moved on to the sections involving Media, Babbalanja, Media, and Yoomy, but concluded with a return to the Yillah narrative.  The second possibility, for which Watson Branch argues, is that the Yillah sections entered later in the compositional order, with Melville writing the Babbalanja sections and then adding the Yillah sections, inserting some of them into earlier parts of the text.  I argue that the Branch thesis is true, and that it can make clear Melville's intentions in <u>Mardi</u>, showing how Melville changed genres in the process of writing as part of the process of recreating himself as an author.

The Davis thesis outlines a process of composition that moves in three phases; Davis uses the terms "Narrative Beginning," "Romantic Interlude," and "Travelogue-Satire" for those phases.  Davis argues that Melville wrote these sections in that order, starting the book with the Narrative Beginning, moving into the Romantic Interlude in early 1848, and finally moving into the Travelogue-Satire shortly afterwards and completing the book around the middle of that year.  One of Davis's crucial points has to do with the inclusion of elements in <u>Mardi</u> that date themselves.  Davis identifies four important ones:

First, the chapter about Franko (France) and Porpheero (Europe) which

describes the effects of the 1848 revolutions; second, the chapters on

Dominora (England) which describe the Chartists' abortive march on

Parliament in 1848; third, the chapter concerned with the reception in

Vivenza (the United States) of the news of the 1848 revolutions as well as

the excitement over the Free-Soil Convention at Buffalo; and fourth, the

chapter describing the gold rush in California.  (Davis 81-82)

Davis's thesis thus argues that <u>Mardi</u> as it appears represents Melville's changing

intentions in a straightforward way.

The Branch thesis gives a different account of <u>Mardi</u>'s composition, an account in

which the text represents Melville's changes of intentions in a more tangled fashion.  The

primary difference between Branch's and Davis's accounts is that Branch argues that

Melville, in fact, developed the material relating to Yillah and Hautia after writing the

allegorical and satirical section featuring Media, Babbalanja, Mohi, and Yoomy, despite

the fact that the narrative order is the reverse.  Branch presents a five-stage sequence for

<u>Mardi</u>'s composition, which I must necessarily quote at some length, since I will be

following it closely and supplementing it with my own arguments:

1.      Melville recounts the adventures of the narrator and his companion

         Jarl on board the Arcturion and the Chomois, their meeting with

         Samoa and Annatoo on board the Parki, the death of Annatoo and

         sinking of the Parki, their fatal confrontation with Aleema, and

         their escape from his vengeful sons.

2. Melville moves from sea to land and continues the adventures of the narrator (now called Taji), Jarl, and Samoa, and the newly added King Media on the successive Mardian islands of Odo, Valapee, Juam, Ohonoo, and Mondoldo.

3. Melville introduces "three acquaintances," Babbalanja, Mohi, and Yoomy, revises the chapters in Stage 2 to include the three new characters, interpolates some sailing chapters between these island visits, and continues the voyage (transformed from a romantic, whimsical, poetic tour of Polynesia into a quest for happiness symbolized by the poet Yoomy's lost maiden, Yillah) on to Maramma and a series of new islands, including allegorical representations of real geographical countries, and ending at Serenia. Melville also inserts passages of inflated and highly allusive reflective writing into the Stage 1 material.

4. Melville expands the section of Stage 3 having to do with real countries to include references to events taking place during most of 1848.

5. Melville adds the narrator's confrontation with Queen Hautia, revises in the Aleema section of Stage 1 to introduce a mysterious white maiden, adjusts the chapters that follow to transfer Yillah,

who has been Yoomy's lost maiden in Stages 3 and 4, to Taji, thus

creating a conventional romantic love story for his narrator, and

writes and inserts a series of chapters that carry forward the

combined Taji-Hautia-Yillah romance.  (318)

Branch agrees with Davis that the first chapters of <u>Mardi</u>, the Narrative Beginning, were

written first and represent Melville's earliest intentions for the text, intentions that

Melville quickly grew beyond.  Initially, Branch argues, Melville crafted a narrative

about the Polynesian characters – Babbalanja, Mohi, and Yoomy – searching for

"Yoomy's lost maiden, Yillah" through various islands, without any reference to Taji's

search for Yillah.  Only much, much later – after, in fact, the events of April, May,

August, and September or October 1848 that Davis argues were added last – did Melville

add the events involving Taji's encounter with Yillah, with Hautia, and some of the

pursuit by the avenging sons of Aleema added to the text by Melville.  This would give

Melville only a few months to write these sections, insert them in the narrative, and make

whatever other changes were necessary to fit these sections with the rest of the narrative

with a minimum of inconsistency, since Melville sent the final proofs out at the end of

January 1849.

I argue that Branch's account is superior, because it resolves a number of

interpretive problems.  Branch cites four that stand out.[2]  First, as Branch notes, assuming

Yillah to have been a lost maiden of Yoomy's and one that was relatively vaguely

conceived helps explain the "unevenness of the presentation of the quest theme" (323).

Second, the "double ending" of <u>Mardi</u> – the quest's climax in Serenia and the continued

search for Yillah – makes more sense given that Taji's search for Yillah was a later

addition. The idea that Melville thought of Serenia as the climax of the story at the time

is strengthened, Branch points out, by the fact that one of the chapters leading up to the

arrival in Serenia is called "L'Ultima Sera" – the last night (325). Third, assuming that

Melville wrote the narrator off the ship and through his adventures with Samoa and then

directly to the island of Odo, and then inserted the earlier (in the narrative) chapters

dealing with Yillah, gives us a clear explanation of the fact that Taji, while in Mardi and

Odo, very rarely thinks about Yillah; as Branch states, "[f]rom the moment they land on

Odo, Yillah says almost nothing. . . . Melville added her name to a sentence here and

there to keep her alive, but she is not even mentioned in Chapters 56, 57, 60, or 63. In

Chapter 58 Melville inserted two sentences about Yillah at the easiest point – the end of

the chapter" (330). Also, the language Melville uses is frequently revealing: Taji, when

he chooses to dwell on a lonely islet, speaks of "*my* retreat," as opposed to 'our,' and "*my*

dwelling" (Melville 188-189, qtd. in Branch 330). Fourth, at numerous points during the

sections dominated by Babbalanja, Media, Mohi, and Yoomy, references are made to

Yillah as the object of Yoomy's quest; for example, Yoomy utters a soliloquy in Chapter

136 that speaks of him seeking a lost maiden (Branch 331). These points of language and

structure indicate that Melville added the Romantic Interlude after writing the

Travelogue-Satire, and did it hastily.

However, Branch's account lacks a fully developed explanatory element[3] – what

was the significance of these shifts in authorial intention, and what was their precise

motivation? I argue herein that the shifts in genre and materials were caused by

Melville's evolving sense of himself as an author. Melville began writing Mardi as one

kind of author and finished as another. The changes he went through during the process

of writing the text were important for three reasons, each crucial to his future development.

First, Melville realized during the composition of <u>Mardi</u> that his mission as a writer was to unfold truth.  Melville had defended his previous works as truthful in a narrow sense, defending the accuracy of his representations of Polynesian life and of his descriptions of his adventures.  When Murray asked him for documentary evidence about the events described in his first two books, Melville's response was blustery and sarcastic – but also indicated that he shared the implied standard of strictly factual accuracy.  The notion of truth that informed <u>Mardi</u> was different.  Rather than accurate descriptions of factual matters, truth for Melville had become metaphysical, meaning truth about God, human nature, or morality.  Truth about shallower subjects was irrelevant from this point of view; it was this new notion of truth that informed Melville's subsequent works.  Moreover, Melville's attempts to unfold truth in his books was not merely one feature of his work but central to his literary project.  It was in <u>Mardi</u>, I argue, that this ambition first emerged.

Second, Melville realized the significance of genre combination, which would prove his most fruitful strategy in his most important subsequent work.  Melville employs three separate identifiable genres, all of them in some circulation in nineteenth-century America, in the course of <u>Mardi</u>.  The text begins as a frontiersman adventure, a story of survival in the aquatic wilderness written from a scrupulously truthful point of view.  But Melville became bored with the limitations of the genre, and switched to the genre of allegory, taking a group of representative personages across a highly stylized and simplified landscape in search of a destination representing a valuable creed.  And

Melville was not content to end there; he changed genres again, to the genre of metaphysical fiction as practiced by authors such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton, in order to bring the ideal and the mystical into his narrative. This practice of combining popular genres as a way of bringing complicated ideas into his work would be the fundamental structural principle of <u>Moby-Dick</u>, <u>Pierre</u>, and <u>The Confidence-Man</u>.

Third, Melville began to experiment with his authorial stance; that is, he began to experiment with how his texts defined the relationship between author and audience. Previously, Melville had defined himself as a humble writer of unvarnished facts. For example, as William Charvat notes, in the second edition of <u>Typee</u>, Melville deleted a reference to "state-room sailors," that readers might take as referring to them; the reference in the first edition was unflattering, and the revision avoided a possible insult to the reader (Charvat 204-205). This gesture was one of many that Melville used to ingratiate himself. With <u>Mardi</u>, however, Melville began to consider himself capable of other stances. He began the composition of <u>Mardi</u> in that same early mode, presenting knowledge of the sea in the same fashion as <u>Typee</u>'s narrator does, but as the writing of <u>Mardi</u> continued, Melville imagined himself capable of rising above the reader and instructing his audience on any number of different subjects not obviously the province of a common tar. And as the composition of <u>Mardi</u> continued further, Melville came to conceive of himself as more than just an allegorist, capable of instructing the reader; in fact, he came to think of himself as a writer of metaphysical fiction, one who comes from a seer's height to impart knowledge to his readers, knowledge that is literally out of this world. Such an author is entitled to take liberties with his readership – esoteric symbolism, long-winded digressions on philosophical and aesthetic issues – that a writer

of frontiersman adventure after the mode of Cooper or Dana would be forbidden even to attempt.

However – and this is a key point – Melville did not conceive of his truth as having any particular content: Melville had no defined philosophical position when he began Mardi and did not arrive at one during the process of composition. Despite the fact that Melville saw Mardi as a text that was engaged in the process of revealing truth, Melville did not know what that truth *was*. Thus, the text oscillates between many different possible beliefs, including liberal Christianity and profound skepticism, and the conclusion fails to align the text effectively with any of them. Since the philosophical position of tragic nihilism would undergird Melville's important later works, this meant that Mardi, ultimately, met the fate of the Koztanza: "His own world is full before him; the fulcrum set; but lever there is none" (593).

## II.     "A VOYAGE THITHER": MARDI AS FRONTIERSMAN ADVENTURE

For the first thirty-eight chapters, the Narrative Beginning, Melville's Mardi is written in the genre of frontiersman adventure. This genre presented, in fiction or nonfiction, adventure on the frontiers of civilization. Melville had explored this genre in Typee and Omoo, and Mardi begins as a relatively "straight" rendition of this genre, but Melville's dissatisfactions with it manifest early and begin to tear it apart. This genre, and its somewhat humble authorial stance, represented Melville's roots and what he wanted to escape from, and his escape from this genre – an escape inscribed in the text itself – represented the beginning of Melville's recreation of himself as an author.

As discussed earlier,[4] frontiersman adventure was a popular genre in antebellum America, both in fictional and nonfictional forms. The genre was set on the frontier between civilization and wilderness, and concentrated on those adventurers who explored and defended that frontier. The plot emphasized adventure and survival in the frontier setting; moreover, authors used the genre to provide information about the flora, fauna, and meteorology of the wilderness environment and the customs and practices of the men who lived and worked there. Melville employs these conventions in the Narrative Beginning of <u>Mardi</u>.

Besides the emphasis on survival and adventure, and the rich factual accounts, frontiersman adventures set at sea emphasized thematic points appropriate to their shipboard settings. These thematic points were particularly important to <u>Mardi</u>. One important theme was the conflict between authority and individuality. Because these actions were set on ships, where the absolute authority of the captain over his men's lives contrasted dramatically with the relative freedom and democracy of the land, this theme was of especial interest to readers. Dana, in <u>Two Years Before the Mast</u>, meditates on this tension in his depiction of a sailor's unjust flogging at the hands of his captain:

> All these preparations made me feel sick and almost faint, angry and excited as I was. A man – a human being, made in God's likeness – fastened up and flogged like a beast! A man, too, whom I had lived with and eaten with for months, and knew almost as well as a brother. The first and almost uncontrollable impulse was resistance. But what was to be done? . . . what is there for sailors to do? If they resist, it is mutiny; and if they succeed, and take the vessel, it is piracy. If they ever yield again, their

punishment must come; and if they do not yield, they are pirates for life. If a sailor resist his commander, he resists the law, and piracy or submission are his only alternatives. Bad as it was, it must be borne. It is what a sailor ships for.  (97-98)

Somewhat in contrast to the theme of the absolute authority of a ship's commander, frontiersman writers often dealt with the way in which men on ships, given their homosocial environments, often formed fierce bonds with one another, bonds of friendship[5].  All of these specific traits were closely connected to the genre's essential purpose of giving an accurate picture of life, work, and adventure.

Melville's use of the frontiersman adventure genre in <u>Mardi</u> differs strikingly from his use of the genre in <u>Moby-Dick</u>.  In the latter text, the genre and its conventions were opportunities for him to use creatively, but in 1848, the genre represented less of an opportunity and more of a problem for him.  In <u>Typee</u> and <u>Omoo</u>, he had used this genre in a fairly straightforward way, and he would return to this straightforward use in <u>White-Jacket</u> and <u>Redburn</u>, two sea stories that he characterized as mere potboilers.  In <u>Moby-Dick</u>, however, Melville's better-defined philosophical position allowed him to *metaphysicalize* the genre, retaining its conventions without being hemmed in by them. The plot and character motifs of the genre became tools for him to explore issues of metaphysics and theology, and the thematics of the genre became an expression of a compelling, though ultimately untrue, attitude towards the universe.  <u>Mardi</u>'s rendition of frontiersman adventure represents the worst of both worlds.  Melville's purpose was still unclear to himself, which prevented him from finding a creative use for the genre, but his sense of mission and of his own artistry made him strain against its limitations.  What one

166

sees in the Narrative Beginning of <u>Mardi</u> is a combination of straightforward rendition and contemptuous rebellion, and these coexist in the text from its very first chapter.

The very beginning of <u>Mardi</u> shows Melville using the conventions of the frontiersman genre. Two types of action predominate the Narrative Beginning. First, there is the survival action: Jarl and the narrator attempt to survive once they have left the *Arcturion*, preparing by packing biscuits and salt beef and then monitoring, when on the open water, their water supply. Second, there is the encounter with the exotic culture in the wilderness, although the particular terms under which Melville conducts their encounter are unusual. Jarl and the narrator encounter two Polynesians, Samoa and Annatoo, on a wrecked brigantine. This encounter requires negotiation and care on the narrator's part, to cope with Annatoo's irrational thieving. Handling these problems provides the dominant action of the first part of <u>Mardi</u>, making it a typical example of frontiersman adventure.

Like other writers in the genre, Melville used the nautical setting of the Narrative Beginning of <u>Mardi</u> to inform the reader about interesting facts about the aquatic wilderness. He covers the operation of ships and shipboard practices, describing, for example, the preference of whalers for sperm whales over other game (6), the way in which boats are set up on a ship, with particular attention to the davits that support the tackles that hold up the boats (19), and the procedures for a "man overboard" (27-28). In addition, he informs his readers about the watery world around the ship. His narrator takes time out of the narrative to instruct the reader about "what strange monsters float by" in the "ocean moors of the Pacific" (39). Jarl notices a "Bone Shark," which the narrator goes on to describe very specifically as being "[f]ull as large as a whale, it is

167

spotted like a leopard and tusk-like teeth overlap its jaws like those of the walrus" (40).

He also discusses nautical practices in relation to the Bone Shark: "[g]reat ships steer out

of its path.  And well they may; since the good craft Essex, and others, have been sunk by

sea-monsters, as the alligator thrusts his horny snout through a Carribean [sic] canoe"

(40).  He then proceeds to produce a thorough taxonomy of the shark, identifying such

species as the "Brown Shark," the "Blue Shark," the "Tiger Shark," and the "White

Shark" (40-41), as well as the "Shovel-Nosed Shark" (53), and describes in detail their

physical appearance and habits, as well as the "inscrutable" symbiotic relationship

between the Shovel-Nosed Shark and the Pilot Fish that accompany it.  In numerous such

moments, Melville's frontiersman narrator informs his readers about the "watery world."

We also see that the particular themes of frontiersman adventure at sea – the

conflict between individualism and authority, and the strong homosocial bonding

between sailors – play out in a straightforward fashion in the Narrative Beginning of

Mardi.  The first conflict to surface in the text, and the lever that begins the motion of the

plot, is between the narrator and the captain of the Arcturion.  The narrator asserts his

individual prerogative in the matter, stating twice that continual service off to the

Nor'West coast is not what he shipped for.  The captain asserts, in return, his supreme

authority, telling the narrator that "right or wrong, my lad, go with us you must" and

likening himself to the ship itself with his comment that "*I* make no port till this ship is

full to the combings of her hatchways."  The narrator's imagery underscores this point,

likening the captain to "Julius Caesar," his own condition to that of a "prisoner in

Newgate," and his desire to leave to a "frenzy" (6-7).  In contrast, the narrator's

relationship with Jarl is frankly egalitarian and sympathetic: Taji routinely refers to Jarl

as "my Viking" for whom he has a "wonderful liking" (13).  Taji presents this bond as

one typical of the genre and situation, even characterizing himself and Jarl as green and

salt, stating "It is sometimes the case, that an old mariner like him will conceive a very

strong attachment for some young sailor, his shipmate; an attachment so devoted, as to be

wholly inexplicable, unless originating in that heart-loneliness which overtakes most

seamen as they grow aged; impelling them to fasten upon some chance object of regard"

(13-14).  Both these thematic features of Mardi align it closely with the genre of

frontiersman adventure at sea.

As we can see, in many ways the beginning of <u>Mardi</u> is a typical example of

frontiersman adventure, particularly of the nautical sort.  Yet in other ways, even these

early sections of <u>Mardi</u> are atypical for the genre, and indicate Melville's dissatisfaction

with the limitations of the genre.  First, Melville innovates in his style.  Post-Lauria

demonstrates convincingly that Melville, in the first sections of <u>Mardi</u>, adopts a self-

consciously literary style through the use of literary and poetic language:

> the emphasis here is not on the teller's emotional response to the image or
>
> event depicted.  Rather the image evokes an aesthetic response from the
>
> narrator, a cultural and literary eulogy in richly figurative language and
>
> style that prefigures the author's later style (70).

Post-Lauria attributes such literary moves to the influence of the popular "sentimental"

style and also to Melville's desire to stretch beyond the limits of his previous works (65-

71).

In addition to the difference in style, the narrator of <u>Mardi</u> also presents himself as

somebody special and different, a literary fellow, and this causes him to be dissatisfied

169

with life on the ship.  Melville, in these opening chapters of <u>Mardi</u>, inscribes his personal

dissatisfactions with the genre using his narrator.  From the first, the narrator wants to

escape.  He begins asking questions about the course of the ship's journey in the *fourth*

*sentence* of the text, and announces plainly his "bitter impatience" to leave the

"monotonous craft" (1) before the first chapter is half over.  His desire to escape,

moreover, is motivated at least in large part by his need to leave a ship where his

intellectual ambitions cannot be satisfied.  He characterizes the ship as a stupid place,

where the "stale" literature is confined to "flat repetitions of long-drawn yarns, and the

everlasting stanzas of Black-eyed Susan sung by our full forecastle choir" and the

captain's library restricted to "Bowditch, and Hamilton Moore," nautical works.  Even

his beloved Jarl is described as "illiterate"; "in Delhi," the narrator points up, Jarl never

"turned over the books of the Brahmins" (13).  The narrator, on the other hand, desires to

"talk sentiment and philosophy"; he is "pining" for someone who can "page" him a

"quotation from Burton on Blue Devils" (5).  Indeed, he himself is not quite an ordinary

salt.  Despite the fact the he protests his perfectly ordinary, working-class sailor

masculinity,[6] he has come to be known on all his ships as a "nob," with a "drawing-room

title," because of his intellectual and literary manner: "It was because of something in me

that could not be hidden; stealing out in an occasional polysyllable; an otherwise

incomprehensible deliberation in dining; remote, unguarded allusions to Belles-Lettres

affairs; and other trifles superfluous to mention" (14).  The character does not quite

belong on the ship, and the author does not quite belong in the genre that the ship

represents.

The narrator's escape, then, from the *Arcturion* is equivalent to the author's escape from the narrative. The narrator disliked the intellectual limitations of shipboard life; similarly, Melville disliked both the intellectual limitations of the genre – the focus on straightforward fact at the expense of imagination – and the limitations it placed on his own self-conception as a writer: he desired to present himself as an artist rather than as a recorder. In addition, the narrator's confession of shame and humiliation over being forced to hunt the inferior right whale reflects Melville's dislike for the inferior material of the frontiersman adventure. As we have seen, Melville confessed as much personally: he grew "irked" with his "narrative of facts," and wanted to "plume his pinions for a flight"; therefore, it was away with the frontiersman adventure and "out with [that is, 'bring out'] the romance," "romance" here indicating imagination as opposed to fact.

The use of, and deviation from, frontiersman adventure at sea in the Narrative Beginning of <u>Mardi</u>, then, traces in a remarkably clear fashion the second important move in his career as an author (the first being the writing of <u>Typee</u>). Melville, who had established himself writing in a particular genre, used that genre as a launchpad to escape from its own limitations. <u>Mardi</u>, in order to continue Melville's artist growth, would have to abandon that genre and seek another.

### III. "THE MAP OF MARDI WAS THE MAP OF THE WORLD": <u>MARDI</u> AS ALLEGORY

As the composition of <u>Mardi</u> progressed, the text shifted generic gears. As Branch has established, Melville moved on from the Narrative Beginning, the story of Jarl, Samoa, and the narrator, to the Travelogue-Satire section, the lion's share of which

deals with the adventures of Babbalanja, Media, Mohi, and Yoomy, with Taji only nominally accompanying them, in search of Yillah, traveling from island to island in an increasingly improbable Polynesian landscape and conducting a series of conversations within a carefully worked out society.  It is no longer appropriate to describe this section as an adaptation of the frontiersman-adventure genre; Melville begins working with the conventions of a different genre, popular allegory, as a means by which he reinvents himself as a writer and redefines his relationship with his audience as one in which the author is clearly the superior and the instructor, not only in matters of his special experience, but in broader moral, political, and religious matters as well.

Allegory is a representational mode found throughout the history of Western literature, from Plato's allegory of the cave to John Barth's Giles Goat-Boy (1966).  A good working definition of allegory is:

> A form of extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself.  Thus, it represents one thing in the guise of another – an abstraction in that of a concrete image.  By a process of double signification, the order or words represents actions and characters, and they, in turn, represent ideas. (Holman 11)

Edwin Honig further clarifies this by noting that "vital belief" (12) is an essential component of allegory's representational strategies, whether that belief is philosophical idealism (Plato), Puritanism (Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress), or the criticism of Soviet totalitarianism (Orwell's Animal Farm).  In the context of romanticism, theorists starting with Goethe and Coleridge have carefully distinguished between allegory and

172

symbolism, arguing that allegory represents by means of an abstract formula and symbolism represents by means of an organic connection between signifier and signified, making the procedures of allegory straightforward and symbolism ambiguous. Straightforward representational strategies and vital belief thus form the substance of allegory.

Allegory has been important in the American context since the Puritans, and has been a site of both authority and ideological contention. Deborah Madsen provides an insightful discussion of the ideological role of allegory in America. The Puritans relied on allegorical rhetoric to consolidate their sense of America's religious destiny. John Cotton, invoked allegorical rhetoric based on typology, using the image of Christ as mediator between heaven and Earth as an allegory for the mediating role of the New England clergy (Madsen 49). But dissenters, such as Roger Williams, relied on similarly allegorical imagery to challenge the power of the established church: Williams used the metaphor of a sword to distinguish between the one-edged sword of temporal authority and the two-edged sword of spiritual authority to indicate the limits of church power (Madsen 46). As Reynolds shows, allegorical fictions in the nineteenth century retained this authority to critique, though it broadened its topoi to both religious and secular subjects, including, for example temperance allegories, such as George B. Cheever's Deacon Giles' Distillery (1835), which used demonic rituals poisoning the water to represent the poisoning of the body politic by alcohol (Reynolds 37-38). As John Evelev notes, allegory was a mode that many authors used to critique existing social conditions, authors including Lydia Maria Child, Margaret Fuller, and William Starbuck Mayo, who conceived the author's role in reformist terms. Mayo, in his adventure story Kaloolah,

presented a mythical North African city of Framazugda as a utopian urban setting, one that New York readers could explicitly learn from[7]. In addition to such homegrown allegories, John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress exerted a powerful influence on the Puritan settlers and the culture descended from them. Allegory, thus, traditionally claimed moral and social authority, and that authority still retained some reach when Melville wrote Mardi.

In order to claim this authority, Melville adapts the conventions of allegory. One of the defining features of allegory, Fletcher argues, is its distinctive procedures of characterization. Fletcher colorfully describes allegorical characters as daemonic: allegorical characters, he argues, possess the qualities of those who are possessed: "[i]f we were to meet an allegorical character in real life, we would say of him that he was obsessed with only one idea, or that he had an absolutely one-track mind, or that his life was patterned according to absolutely rigid habits from which he never allowed himself to vary" (40). Allegorical characters, because they refer to abstract qualities outside themselves, act only in accordance with those qualities, and are thus hypersimplified compared to characters in mimetic fiction. Since American allegory served ideological purposes, the characters in allegorical works played roles according to the particular purpose of the works. The first chapter of Edmund Botsford's The Spiritual Voyage (1819) gives a roll call of the crew of the ship Convert that thoroughly illustrates the flavor of this convention: the first lieutenant is called "Mr. Serious-Consideration," the second mate is "Mr. Sincerity," the head of the marines is "Captain Resist-Unto-Blood," and miscellaneous crewmen are named "Jack Honesty" and "Bob Endure-All Things,"

among others (4).  Such characters restrict themselves to exemplifying single qualities, and exemplifying them all the time.

Just as characters in allegories were subordinate to the allegory's vital truth, so action tended to support that vital truth.  One type of allegorical action that was frequently used by American allegorists was the *progress*: Fletcher identifies two major plot patterns for allegory, the battle and the progress, or allegorical quest (151). Progresses moved characters towards a destination that would embody the vital truth of the allegory.  Honig describes one key feature of allegory as the 'anagoge': "the anagoge stands for the ideal reality, the highest meanings; as a component part of a total allegory it rounds out the purpose of all events" (152).  In allegorical progresses, this means that successful quests will arrive at destinations of tremendous allegorical significance. Fanfare accompanies the conclusion of the quests of the ship Convert or the travels of Search-For-Life as they enter anagogical geographical regions representing heavenly salvation.

The Travelogue-Satire section of <u>Mardi</u> follows many of these allegorical conventions.  The most notable examples are to be found in the way Melville deals with the characters who travel with Taji: Media, Babbalanja, Mohi, and Yoomy.  These four characters are daemonic in Fletcher's sense, and represent, respectively, worldly authority, speculative philosophy, history, and poetry, and Melville sets them up to do those jobs in an efficient manner.  The introductory descriptions of the characters highlight what we should expect from them.  Media enters the narrative both imperiously and generously: "Advancing quickly toward the boat, he exclaimed – 'I am Media, the son of Media. Thrice welcome, Taji. On my island of Odo hast thou an altar. I claim thee

for my guest'" (166).  Mohi is first identified by his long beard, reflecting his age and the

age of the past he archives.  Yoomy's description emphasizes the youthful spiritedness,

the moodiness, and the aesthetics of a lyric poet: he is "youthful, long-haired, blue-eyed

minstrel; all fits and starts; at times, absent of mind, and wan of cheek; but always very

neat and pretty in his apparel; wearing the most becoming of turbans, a Bird of Paradise

feather its plume, and sporting the gayest of sashes" (197).  Babbalanja is first presented

as a "man of mystical aspect" (197).  These characters are restricted to representing

particular ideas, and representing them all the time.

There are also a number of set-pieces, in which actions of the characters, not

necessarily advancing the main plotline of the narrative, give expression to their key

traits.  Chapter 121, "They Regale Themselves With Their Pipes," is entirely given over

to such a set-piece, wherein the pipes the characters smoke are physically representative

of the characters themselves.  Mohi's pipe is a historian's pipe, representing the dead past

through its "death's-head bowl" (372).  Yoomy's pipe, on the other hand, is appropriate

for a lyric poet: "[i]ts stem, a slender golden reed, like musical Pan's; its bowl very merry

with tassels" (372).  Media's pipe, which resembles a "turbaned Grand Turk" is the

appropriate pipe for a king with worldly power:

> It was an extraordinary pipe, be sure; of right royal dimensions. Its mouth-
> piece an eagle's beak; its long stem, a bright, red-barked cherry-tree
> branch, partly covered with a close network of purple dyed porcupine
> quills; and toward the upper end, streaming with pennons, like a Versailles
> flag-staff of a coronation day. These pennons were managed by halyards;
> and after lighting his prince's pipe, it was little Vee-Vee's part to run them

up toward the mast-head, or mouth-piece, in token that his lord was fairly

under weigh.  (372)

Finally, Babbalanja's pipe is a philosopher's pipe, with an "immense, black, serpentine

stem of ebony, coiling this way ant that, in endless convolutions, like an anaconda round

a traveler in Brazil" (372), its dark color and twisted structure resembling the obscurity

and convolutions of Babbalanja's complicated philosophy.

Two similar set-pieces focus on the characters' reactions to things.  On the

quorum's visit to Verdanna (Mardi's Ireland), the characters each give a short verbal

response:

"Alas, sweet isle!  Thy desolation is overrun with vines," sighed Yoomy,

gazing.

"Land of caitiff curs!" cried Media.

"Isle, whose future is in its past.  Hearth-stone, from which its

children run," said Babbalanja.

"I can not read thy chronicles for blood, Verdanna," murmured

Mohi.  (492)

Yoomy's response is poetic, Media's is lordly, Babbalanja's is speculative, and Mohi's is

historical.  This pattern is repeated in the quorum's responses to Serenia: Mohi is

impressed by the verity of their teaching of Alma's doctrines, saying, "Sure, all this is in

the histories!" (629); Yoomy's response is aesthetic, proclaiming "Poetry! . . . and poetry

is truth!  He stirs me" (629); Media concentrates on his kingly authority, the better to note

its dissolution: "Cease, cease, old man! . . . thous movest me beyond my seeming.  What

thoughts are these?  Have done!  Wouldst thou unking me?" (630), and Babbalanja caps

the sequence by radically revising all of his ideas:

> ". . . What wild, wild dreams were mine; – I have been mad. Some things
> there are, we must not think of. Beyond one obvious mark, all human lore
> is vain. Where have I lived till now? Had dark Maramma's zealot tribe but
> murmured to me as this old man, long since had I been wise! Reason no
> longer domineers; but still doth speak. All I have said ere this, that wars
> with Alma's precepts, I here recant. Here I kneel, and own great Oro and
> his sovereign son."  (630)

In these cases, Melville employs a fully daemonic mode of characterization in

conforming the Travelogue-Satire section of <u>Mardi</u> to the requirements of allegory.

As with other allegorists, Melville set his daemonic characters on a quest.  This

quest is nominally a search for Yillah, but as Branch has shown, the white-skinned

maiden beloved by Taji and destined for sacrifice was a later insertion; rather, Yillah in

the allegorical sections was conceived by Melville in far vaguer terms.  A reading of the

Travelogue-Satire shows that Yillah is a convenient tag for the real object of the

quorum's search: "a happy life" (386), as Babbalanja's beloved sage Bardianna puts it.

"No Yillah was there" is the refrain of their voyage, starting with their sojourn on

Ohonoo, where king Uhia labors night and day to move the island, in pursuit of destiny, a

pursuit that "robs his days of peace; his nights of sweet unconsciousness" (276).  This

inability of Uhia's to be satisfied with his life, Babbalanja demonstrates, is endemic to all

the inhabitants of Ohonoo, and as a result, this island of unfulfilled ambition and fruitless

hope is abandoned by the quorum, as a place without Yillah.  Also found Yillah-less are

the island of Mondoldo, ruled by the hedonistic Borabolla; the island of Maramma, ruled by priests who value ritual and dogma over authentic faith and simple compassion (Babbalanja cunningly detects the once-healthy seed within the rotten husk, opining that "Yillah may have touched these shores; but long since she must have fled"); the vain and worldly island of Pimminee (Babbalanja knows that Yillah is not there even before the quorum lands); the island of Dominora, representing contemporary England; Porpheero (immediately after the volcanic eruption that symbolizes the European revolutions of 1848), and so forth. The allegorical quest faces allegorical obstacles in its movement. Moreover, like other allegorical progresses, it terminates in an anagogical locale. The travelers cease their wanderings when they arrive at Serenia, the island that embodies the "happy life," and this climax utterly transforms them and ends their wanderings. Serenia embodies a faithful practice of the worldly teachings of Christ without revolutionary utopianism, and without metaphysical dogmatism. This anagoge is welcomed by the travelers and they proclaim that their wanderings will here cease, bringing the allegorical progress to a close.

One can see Melville consciously stressing his new authority in allegorical scenes in Mardi. The most dramatic example of this is in Chapter 161, when a "fiery youth" (524) delivers a passionate oration, reading aloud an anonymous scroll found attached to a palm tree. This oration consists of a detailed polemic against Vivenzan (American) presumptions of cultural and political exceptionalism, and precedes a disagreement between Babbalanja and Media regarding its authorship, each accusing the other of the crime of composition, and each denying it.[8] What cannot be denied, however, is that the real author of the scroll is Herman Melville, who presents himself through the device of

allegory as instructor to his readers, teaching them to change their unthinking patriotism for a more tempered creed.  This stance is duplicated in other incidents in the allegorical portions of the text, as when Babbalanja meditates in Chapter 162 about both the evils of American slavery and the difficulty of extracting it.  As allegorist, Melville had the authority to make such pronouncements.

However, Melville was not satisfied with allegory; as Branch shows, he went on to write the Romantic Interlude involving Taji, Yillah, and Hautia, and abandoned the allegorical genre.  The reasons for this are threefold.  First, Melville refused to abide by the technical limitations of the genre.  His style became very playful and allusive during the writing of this section, and the characterizations could not be hemmed in by the schematic logic of allegory: Yoomy attempts to philosophize; Babbalanja critiques other philosophers for their jargon after employing it himself.

Second, as Melville's conclusion to the Travelogue-Satire demonstrates, he came to doubt his allegory's vital truth.  Allegories required a clearing away of ambiguity, but Melville forced his own allegory to confront ambiguity and ended up emphasizing his own doubts.  This doubt is reflected in Babbalanja's vision, a very inconclusive conclusion.  Although the Serenians offer a vision of earthly happiness that Babbalanja claims has provided him with repose, in the next chapter, Babbalanja relates a vision that attempts to settle some theological issues that the Serenians are not competent to settle. In this vision, Babbalanja hears a voice from the heavens explaining the destiny of the souls of the dead; however, most of Babbalanja's questions remain unanswered, because the voice refuses to relate certain things, such as whether happiness in heaven is absolute, or what the destiny of the souls of the evil is.  "No mind but Oro's can know all" (634), it

recites, and answers Babbalanja's last, desperate question – "why create the germs that sin and suffer, but to perish?" – with the proclamation that "is the last mystery which underlieth all the rest. Archangel may not fathom it; that makes of Oro the everlasting mystery he is; that to divulge, were to make equal to himself in knowledge all the souls that are; that mystery Oro guards; and none but him may know" (634-635). Such proclamations defer mysteries rather than solve them. There was, however, no way to solve those mysteries within the confines of the genre, since allegorical progress necessarily ends with a discovery of the anagoge and a successful quest. In order to explore further these mysteries, Melville had to change genres yet again.

Third, allegory's authority in 1848 was narrowing in range in comparison to more mimetic modes of fiction. Authors still used the genre's mantle to denounce religious heresy and intemperate drinking, but readers were becoming more and more enchanted with less didactic formsT[9]. Although the genre of allegory still allowed Melville authority to proclaim on various topics in a way that frontiersman adventure did notT[10], he could not stop there. He needed to find a genre that would speak to a broader mass of readers, and he also needed to find a genre that would allow him to stretch, as a writer, beyond the formal and intellectual limitations of allegory. These needs operated in the composition of <u>Mardi</u> to produce, again

IV.    **"THE TRUTHFUL SYMBOLS OF THE THINGS WITHIN": <u>MARDI</u> AS METAPHYSICAL FICTION**

In the last few months of his composition of <u>Mardi</u>, Melville shifted genres one last time. The difference between the Travelogue-Satire and the Romantic Interlude

(which was written last) is the difference between the genres of allegory and metaphysical fiction. This shift allowed Melville to move beyond the limits of allegory and to deal with truths less straightforward and more mystical, as well as granting him an even higher pedestal as an author, one from which he dispensed not merely instruction to his readers, but prophecy.

As we have seen, metaphysical fiction was a genre that combined mimetic, fantastic, and allegorical techniques. Its conventions of plot, setting, and character blurred the boundaries between the everyday world and the supernatural. It combined idealism, the belief in a higher reality, and mysticism, an aura of mystery around that reality, with certain realistic protocols. The author of metaphysical fiction often took on the stance of a seer or prophet, deigning to initiate readers into higher mysteries.

Melville's use of metaphysical fiction in Mardi differs from his later use in The Confidence-Man. By the time he wrote The Confidence-Man, he had established and mastered the strategy of combining genres in antithetical ways in order to express his tragic nihilism. Thus, in The Confidence-Man, he used metaphysical fiction in a sophisticated way as part of his larger structural plan. There he made a focused use of the conventions of metaphysical fiction in order to express the genre's optimism and put that optimism into dialectic with the pessimism of southwestern humor. However, Mardi lacks the philosophical consistency and structural sophistication that made The Confidence-Man possible. In Mardi, Melville grasped at the idealistic and mystical aspects of the genre without any serious philosophical thought, primarily as a way of donning the metaphysical-fictionist's authority and elevating himself as a writer even higher above his audience.

182

In the Romantic Interlude, Melville employs the representation techniques of metaphysical fiction in ways markedly different from other sections of <u>Mardi</u>. Yillah, as a character, combines the visionary and the matter-of-fact in a way quite different from other characters. Jarl, whose home is the frontiersman-adventure Narrative Beginning, is introduced in terms of realistic data: his profession, his nationality, those elements of his physical appearance that are consistent with his profession ("his hands were brawny as the paws of a bear"(12)) and his nationality ("his long yellow hair waved round his head like a sunset" (12)). Babbalanja, from the Travelogue-Satire, is introduced first in terms of his allegorical role of philosopher (described as a "man of a mystical aspect, habited in a voluminous robe. . . . learned in Mardian lore; much given to quotations from ancient and obsolete authorities"(197)). Subsequent characterization is meant to reinforce that impression. Yillah, on the other hand, first emerges as a strange and mystical entity. Melville mentions her before introducing her, with Taji conceiving the ambition of saving her from sacrifice before he has even seen her. Melville first describes her as "like a saint from a shrine" (136), and stages this scene so it is clear that Yillah is on another order of reality from the realistic. Taji asks "[d]id I dream?" and describes her as a "mysterious creature. . . . of another race," whose language is "vaguely . . . familiar." Her "snow-white skin" and "blue . . . eyes" and "Golconda locks" mark her ethnically as other than Polynesian without making her white (136-137). In every respect, Yillah, on her first appearance, is a creature of another order of reality, mystical and magical. At the same time, Melville provides Yillah with a detailed biography, placing her firmly in the real world. Yillah fits the atmosphere of the metaphysical-fiction combination of realism and fantasy.

At the same time, Yillah embodies "dim and shadowy" allegorical properties. On the one hand, she is not fully allegorical in the way that Mohi and Yoomy are: it is easy to see what allegorical properties they represent. Yillah's representational properties are more elusive. At the same time, critics agree that Yillah refers beyond herself. Matthiessen notes that she does so, but in a mystifyingly subtle way:

> In some passages the two girls [Yillah and Hautia] seem to stand for Taji's good and evil angels; and the loss of Yillah seems to symbolize the fact that good based on an initial act of evil is doomed to end in disaster. Elsewhere, however, Hautia appears to suggest experience in contrast with Yillah's innocence, and Taji's rejection of the dark girl's advances thus to involve a denial of mature passion. (384)

Though Yillah has representational significance, just as allegorical characters do, it is in an ambiguous fashion. Clearly, the Romantic Interlude is of another generic order from the Travelogue-Satire, abandoning straightforward allegory for metaphysical fiction.

This mode of presentation was part of Melville's developing (re)visionary stance of the meaning of his authorship in relation to his readers. Not only did the particular techniques that he uses in these sections display his adoption of the metaphysical-fictionist's mantle as a seer with astonishing wisdom, but he also directly comments on his self-conception as an author, in three stand-alone chapters that are entirely independent of the narrative ("Dreams," "Faith and Knowledge," "Sailing On"), and in one of the episodes of the popular-allegory section (Chapter 180, "Some Pleasant, Shady Talk in the Groves, Between My Lords Abrazza and Media, Babbalanja, Mohi, and Yoomy").[11]

184

Melville's stance towards his readers, in these sections, becomes a pose founded on grandiose claims of tremendous authority. In one direct comment on his own authorship, Melville urges the reader to appreciate the astonishing journey he has undertaken: "Oh, reader, list! I've chartless voyaged" (556). He goes further elsewhere, asserting himself *qua* author to be a cosmic being, one with all others in human history. These two sections from different chapters are really part of the same monologue:

> But for me, I was at the subsiding of the Deluge, and helped swab the ground, and build the first house. With the Israelites, I fainted in the wilderness; was in court, when Solomon outdid all the judges before him. I, it was, who suppressed the lost work of Manetho, on the Egyptian theology, as containing mysteries not to be revealed to posterity, and things at war with the canonical scriptures; I, who originated the conspiracy against that purple murderer, Domitian; I, who in the senate moved, that great and good Aurelian be emperor. I instigated the abdication of Diocletian, and Charles the Fifth; I touched Isabella's heart, that she hearkened to Columbus. I am he, that from the king's minions hid the Charter in the old oak at Hartford; I harbored Goffe and Whalley: I am the leader of the Mohawk masks, who in the Old Common-wealth's harbor, overboard threw the East India Company's Souchong; I am the Vailed Persian Prophet; I, the man in the iron mask; I, Junius. (297)
>
> . . .
>
> In me, many worthies recline, and converse. I list to St. Paul who argues the doubts of Montaigne; Julian the Apostate cross-questions Augustine;

and Thomas-a-Kempis unrolls his old black letters for all to decipher.

Zeno murmurs maxims beneath the hoarse shout of Democritus; and

though Democritus laugh loud and long, and the sneer of Pyrrho be seen;

yet, divine Plato, and Proclus, and Verulam are of my counsel; and

Zoroaster whispered me before I was born. I walk a world that is mine;

and enter many nations, as Mungo Park rested in African cots; I am served

like Bajazet: Bacchus my butler, Virgil my minstrel, Philip Sidney my

page. My memory is a life beyond birth; my memory, my library of the

Vatican, its alcoves all endless perspectives, eve-tinted by cross-lights

from Middle-Age oriels.  (367-368)

These claims inflate Melville from a common author to a cosmic being who possesses

wisdom that he deigns to distribute to mere mortals.  His vocabulary, too, becomes

increasingly high-toned and suited for a demigod-like author, as in his references to Rigel

and Betelguese (astronomical phenomena), ancient philosophy (Plato, Proclus), and

history (Columbus, the East India Company).  Most importantly, Melville claims not just

*knowledge* of these matters, but special *personal* acquaintance with them.  Authorship is

not just a matter of factual knowledge: it transcends space, time, and mortality.

The most explicit metacommentary within <u>Mardi</u>, as all readers of the text have

acknowledged, is in the chapter "Some Pleasant, Shady Talk in the Groves, Between My

Lords Abrazza and Media, Babbalanja, Mohi, and Yoomy."  The subjects of discussion,

Mardian masterpiece-poem Koztanza and its author Lombardo, are figures for <u>Mardi</u> and

Melville respectively.  In this section, it is Babbalanja, wisest of the quorum, who has

memorized the Koztanza; all the while, there are hints that only those who are not up to

186

the challenges of the Koztanza ignore it: Lombardo's work is poked at by trivial readers and "hooted during [his] life" (602). Melville sets up a model of authorship in which only the truly wise are up to the challenge of reading.

Like many other metaphysical-fiction writers, Melville expresses a stance towards his readers that is challenging and ambitious. The author is not merely providing facts, but teaching deep doctrines and ideas. To embrace these stances, Melville needed to rethink his conception of authorship. Wai-Chee Dimmock argues that Melville, in writing <u>Mardi</u>, saw himself as an "imperial self," reigning over Mardi like a monarch over his domain.[12] Even more so; Melville describes the great Mardian poet Vavona as an actual deity, who proclaims "I will build another world. Therein, let there be kings and slaves, philosophers and wits; whose checkered actions—strange, grotesque, and merry-sad, will entertain my idle moods" (592). If the author is king and God over the text, it follows that readers, visitors to the created and ruled domain, must be subjects and worshippers. But in <u>Mardi</u>, Oro is still a benevolent deity, and desires only for His subjects to appreciate the magnificent world He has created.

V.    **"IT WAS I, WHO WAS THE AUTHOR OF THE DEED THAT CAUSED THE SHRILL WAILS THAT I HEARD": <u>MARDI</u> AND AUTHORSHIP**

Melville's achievement in <u>Mardi</u> was tremendous. He redefined the nature of his own literary project, centering his vocation around the concept of truth. He began <u>Mardi</u> as an uncomfortable entertainer, and ended his composition of the text as a confused but excited prophet. Although his next two compositions recoiled from that truth-speaking destiny, he returned to it with a vengeance. As Elizabeth Renker notes, "[t]he terms

Melville himself invokes to talk about his project as a writer center on the idea of telling the truth" (xv), and this truth is one that, paradoxically, is difficult to tell[13]. The notion of truth, and of himself as the bringer of a (frequently unpleasant) truth to readers, informed his whole literary career after <u>Mardi</u>. The esotericism of the truth that Melville sought to reveal through his fiction allowed him also to redefine his status in relation to his readers by elevating himself above his audience.

Melville's elevation in <u>Mardi</u>, however, was incomplete. The author of <u>Mardi</u> is, like Oro, a deity – not a demon. This author is superior to his readers and makes demands on them, but there is no hint that these demands are dangerous or painful beyond merely being difficult. No sense of attack accompanies the author's stance. The tattoos on Queequeg's back in <u>Moby-Dick</u> are a contrasting example. These tattoos are of tremendous philosophical importance; they contain "a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" (273). But, as Ahab asserts, their meaning is a "devilish tantalization of the gods" who have deliberately obscured the meaning from the reader. Similarly, Pierre's troubles would be allayed (he suspects) if he had only the rest of Plotinus Plinlimmon's pamphlet. But just as the text is itself missing vital parts, keys to its interpretation, so the author himself presents a foreboding visage. The author's face is itself impossible to interpret, for it "convey[s] to most philosophical observers a notion of something not before included in their scheme of the Universe" (291). For the author is himself in the business of obscuring things, by operating under an alias, refusing to write his own documents and thus authorize them, and telling a visiting well-wisher who interprets his behavior one way that his interpretation is wrong, without supplying the correct one.[14] The relationship between

author and audience in these cases is *necessarily* one of opposition.

Along with his sense of vocation as truthbearer and his elevation above his readers, Mardi also granted Melville a sense of the profound possibilities of genre combination as a literary strategy. The use of generic mixture provided the structural underpinnings for Melville's most important work[15]. Moby-Dick dramatizes the struggle between optimism and pessimism by the combination of frontiersman and illustrious-criminal genres; Pierre further shows how an action's moral meaning may appear two different ways by the combination of two different genres, the domestic and the city-mysteries; finally, The Confidence-Man combines Southwestern humor and metaphysical fiction to break down any attempt on the reader's part to find certainty. All of these profound strategies were first essayed in Mardi. However, for all the immensity of the leap forward Melville took as an artist in Mardi, it is still, as practically all critics agree, an unrealized work.[16] As I have shown in previous chapters, Moby-Dick relies on alternation, Pierre on parabolic juxtaposition, and The Confidence-Man on fusion of their particular genres. By way of contrast, the combination in Mardi is haphazard, the result of improvisation. As a result, the structure is unfocused, and does not combine the genres to any particular end.

This jumbled combination is the result of Melville's lack of any meaningful philosophical position. As I have argued, Melville combined different genres in his mature works in order to demonstrate the failure of any positive truth about the world to obtain. Since Melville did not have such a position at the time of Mardi's composition, he could not consciously combine the genres to this end. As I have shown, this lack of intellectual content makes Melville's use of the genres unfocused. Rather, Mardi

189

experiments with any number of different philosophical, religious, and political ideas: liberal, undogmatic Christianity (the Serenians), skepticism (Babbalanja), pragmatism (Media's replies to Babbalanja)[17], and Transcendentalism[18], but the text never endoreses one over the other.  It was this very lack of a coherent and consistent position on Melville's part that led to <u>Mardi</u>'s failure.  It remains, however, an astonishing document, and the key to understanding the true nature of Melville's later successes.

NOTES

[1] However, Davis argues that Melville could not have started writing the book itself until after April 10, 1847, since that is the day Melville bought a copy of Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy (according to the marking in the book), and the first chapter of Mardi contains a reference to "Burton on blue devils"

This is only an indication, of course, that Melville did not begin writing until after April 10, 1847 *if* we assume that Melville wrote at least the first section of the book before anything else, he wrote it all in order, and he did not revise it in any serious way.

[2] Branch cites a wealth of evidence supporting his argument; I have chosen to highlight only the most convincing ones.

[3] To establish the facts of Melville's composition, Branch is necessarily brief on the causes, suggesting Melville's interest in more sophisticated reading and the necessity of tying up unresolved strands of conflict in the plot.

[4] See my Chapter 2.

[5] See the discussion of this theme in Green.

[6] See my Chapter 4.

[7] See Evelev 313-319. Evelev argues independently of me that Melville's genre shifts were motivated by his reconceptualization of himself as an author. However, he views Melville's array of genres largely in terms of the authorial figure and his relation to work implied in these genres, rather than in terms of more formal attributes as plot, character, and setting.

[8] James Duban argues interestingly but perhaps oversubtly that the text is, in fact, written by Media.

[9] Baym notes Poe's notorious excoriation of Bulwer-Lytton, as well as citing a rich array of critical responses:

> "His allegorical design," the Mirror commented ironically on a novel by G. P. R. James, "may excuse him for making his villain a perfect demon" (July 16, 1842). "The moment the incidents and the charactes are made allegorical," the Literary World said of Lady Alice; or, The New Una, "they lose all the interest with which their previous reality has invested them" (July 21, 1849). Hugo, by Elizabeth Oakes Smith, was, to a reviewer for Harper's, an "allegory of a very refined and subtle character, appealing but indirectly to the mass of human sympathies" (December 1850). A Graham's reviewer of Mrs. Marsh's Ravenscliffe noted that "the characters are only seen in their passionate moods. . . . Though this gives emphasis to the ethical intent of the authoress, she sacrifices to it some of the most important principles of the true method of characterization. Her persons are apt to slide into personified passions" (April 1852). (Baym, 1984, 92)

[10] Of course, many writers of frontiersman adventure *did* use the genre as a platform for broader pronouncements. Melville himself found ways to put such proclamations into the genre, as in White-Jacket. However, such pronouncements were still necessarily off the main track of the genre, and Melville in Mardi did *not* see a way to work them into his frontiersman-adventure Narrative Beginning.

[11] In terms of the way I have divided up the text's structure in relation to the Branch thesis of <u>Mardi</u>'s composition, this chapter technically belongs to an earlier section, the Travelogue-Satire (it presents an incident in the history of the traveling quorum, in a style consistent with other such incidents). However, given that we already accept that Melville inserted sections later in the compositional order into a place earlier in the narrative order, there is good reason to believe this to be an example of that practice of Melville's. Its references to the Koztanza's heterogenousness would be more explainable if Melville had changed his intentions yet again at this point, and was attempting (perhaps frustratedly) to sum up what seemed to him to be an impossibly mixed text. Moreover, it was clearly on Melville's mind when he was done writing, since his sister imagined <u>Mardi</u> as a Koztanza (Leyda 287), suggesting that Melville may have been talking about it in that way recently.

[12] See Dimmock 42-75.

[13] In addition to Renker, see Dryden for the centrality of truth-telling to Melville's sense of authorship.

[14] Finding Plinlimmon thus unfurnished either with books or pen and paper, and imputing it to something like indigence, a foreign scholar, a rich nobleman, who chanced to meet him once, sent him a fine supply of stationery, with a very fine set of volumes,—Cardan, Epictetus, the Book of Mormon, Abraham Tucker, Condorcet and the Zend-Avesta. But this noble foreign scholar calling next day—perhaps- in expectation of some compliment for his great kindness—started aghast at his own package deposited just without the door of Plinlimmon, and with all fastenings untouched.

"Missent," said Plotinus Plinlimmon placidly: "if any thing, I looked for some choice Curagoa from a nobleman like you. I should be very happy, my dear Count, to accept a few jugs of choice Curagoa."

"I thought that the society of which you are the head, excluded all things of that sort"— replied the Count.

"Dear Count, so they do; but Mohammed hath his own dispensation."

"Ah! I see," said the noble scholar archly.

"I am afraid you do not see, dear Count"—said Plinlimmon; and instantly before the eyes of the Count, the inscrutable atmosphere eddied and eddied round about this Plotinus Plinlimmon. (398)

[15] See Brodhead, <u>Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel</u>, and also Chapters 1-3.

[16] Indeed, one may say that "failure" is the discursive key term in <u>Mardi</u> criticism. "Despite its apologists' efforts to explain away its artistic failings," Branch characteristically states, "*Mardi* must finally stand or fall on its own, and fall it does" (Bryant 140).

[17] Media frequently puts an end to Babbalanja's purely logical arguments by swamping them with practical consequences. Sometimes Media *refers* to the practical consequences, as in his tipsy answer to Babbalanja's skepticism. Babbalanja argues that, in his absence, his wife would have more grounds to believe him nonexistent than otherwise. Media proposes a hypothetical in which Babbalanja finds his wife acting on that "metaphysical presumption" by cuckolding him. Babbalanja responds that he "would demolish my rival in a trice." Media nicely Q.E.D.s his point and then passes out: "Would you? – then – then – so much for your metaphysics, Bab – Babbalanja."

(343)  In another case, Media actually introduces the practical consideration; Babbalanja resentfully mutters, in one such situation, "The strong arm, my lord, is no argument, though it overcomes all logic" (343).

[18] Refer to John B. Williams, <u>White Fire</u>, 95-104 for a discussion of the Transcendentalist aspects of <u>Mardi</u>.

CHAPTER 6


CONCLUSION


As we have seen, Melville's development was a gradual process. His experiments in Mardi sparked his ambition as a truth-telling author, and introduced him to the possibilities of genre combination. However, it took time for Melville to formulate his position of tragic nihilism and then put it into form in Moby-Dick, which set his trajectory through 1857 as a fiction writer. It is this trajectory that I have outlined herein, and I argue that understanding Melville's project as I have described it both resolves a number of long-standing problems of interpretation and casts Melville's relationship to antebellum popular fiction in a new light.

The problems confronting the reader of Melville are qualitatively different than many of the classic interpretive quandaries of literary history. To take "Bartleby the Scrivener" as a microcosm, Lewis Leary understates the situation when he states that "no one key opens it so simple, or single, or precise meaning" (25). For Lewis Mumford, Bartleby is a projection of Melville himself, dramatizing his cutting himself off from society in refusal to "abandon his inner purpose" (60); for Egbert S. Oliver, Bartleby is the exact opposite, a warning that one must not cut oneself off from society. Mordecai

Marcus reads the story as essentially antisocial, as the "criticism of a sterile and impersonal society" (107), whereas Leo Marx reads it as essentially pro-social, a "compassionate rebuke to the self-absorption of the artist, and so a plea that he devote himself to keeping strong his bonds with the rest of mankind" (105). Critics agree that the story is about the conflict between the individual and society; however, they disagree about Melville's basic stance in that conflict, what side he takes. In other words, there is no consensus about this story at even the most *fundamental* thematic level.

If such debates raged around only a single Melville work, it would be one thing: that single work was an anamoly, a failed experiment, a misstep, or simply too bound up in the assumptions of a vanished age for contemporary readers to appreciate. But "Bartleby" is typical, not isolated. Critics have cast Moby-Dick as the story of a tragic hero struggling against a malevolent God, and as a story critiquing that tragic hero. Similarly, critics have read The Confidence-Man as an argument for the importance of pessimism, casting the confidence-man as a preyer on the naïve, and as an argument against suspicion, casting the confidence-man as a regenerative agent in an unduly cynical world. Such contradictory readings are simply the basic situation in Melville studies. It is as if Shakespeare scholars disagreed on whether King Lear was a comedy or a tragedy.

Identifying Melville's position as tragic nihilism as distinct from pessimism (or optimism) resolves many of those dilemmas. Solving the problem of whether Ahab or Ishmael embodies the text's values dissolves if there are no values for the characters to embody. Similarly, the problem of Melville's evaluation of Pierre as a noble idealist or a self-deceiving fool, or of Melville's position in regard to the optimism of the confidence-

195

man or the cynicism of Pitch, disappears if we bring the implications of Melville's nihilism to bear: neither optimism or pessimism can be true, because both assume the kind of truth that does not exist. My analysis of Melville's tragic nihilism helps to show the conceptual limits of conventional solutions to the recurrent problems in Melville criticism; moreover, my analysis also shows how Melville's great innovation in these works was to bring different beliefs into collision at the structural level. Seeing this element of his career allows us to see why such fundamental interpretive problems have accrued around his work.

The other important task that this dissertation accomplishes is to reconfigure discussions of Melville's relationship with popular literature of the nineteenth century. The first academic discussions of Melville ignored this element of Melville's context and reconfigured Melville as a "classic" author[1]. This was an understandable reaction to Melville's existent reputation as a nineteenth-century curiosity, and set scholars free to consider the complexity of his vision.

This approach, though, left out vital and important parts of Melville's project. A later generation was able to fill in this gap. The necessary foundation for this work was the group of scholars who excavated nineteenth-century popular fiction and cultures of reading; Nina Baym, for example, demonstrated that domestic fiction was a thriving genre, and Jane Tompkins began reconstructing nineteenth-century reception of popular literature. Building on such work, and drawing in other popular genres, Reynolds attempted a comprehensive portrait of antebellum popular culture and fiction, and an account of the connections between that body of work and the work produced by Poe, Emerson, and other canonical writers. Post-Lauria then drew on Reynolds to look more

intensively at Melville as a nineteenth-century author drawing on popular motifs extant in his time.

My own work attempts to follow up on this recent trajectory, while resituating Melville *both* in relation to popular literature and the concerns of earlier generations of critics. Melville's writing *cannot* be separated from his ambitions as a nineteenth-century writer and the influence that context exerted on him. At the same time, Melville's relationship to that context *cannot* be understood without reference to Melville's esoteric and philosophical literary ambitions. The former gave shape to the latter, and the Isolato lurks within the Cosmopolitan.

NOTES

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[1] The constant invocation of Shakespeare in Charles Olson's <u>Call Me Ishmael</u>, for example, or the very title of Matthiessen's <u>American Renaissance</u> are indicative of this tendency.  For a good history of Melville's reputation, see Higgins and Parker's introduction to <u>Critical Essays on Herman Melville's </u>Moby-Dick.

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