Scepticism at Sea:

Herman Melville and Philosophical Doubt

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores Herman Melville's relationship to sceptical philosophy. By reading Melville's fictions of the 1840s and 1850s alongside the writings of Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant, I seek to show that they manifest by turns expression, rebuttal, and mitigated acceptance of philosophical doubt.

Melville was an attentive reader of philosophical texts, and he refers specifically to concepts such as Berkeleyan immaterialism and the Kantian "noumenon". But Melville does not simply dramatise pre-existing theories; rather, in works such as *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick,* and *Pierre* he enacts sceptical and anti-sceptical ideas through his literary strategies, demonstrating their relevance in particular regions of human experience. In so doing he makes a substantive contribution to a philosophical discourse that has often been criticised – by commentators including Samuel Johnson and Jonathan Swift – for its tendency to abstraction.

Melville's interest in scepticism might be read as part of a wider cultural response to a period of unprecedented social and political change in antebellum America, and with this in mind I compare and contrast his work with that of Dickinson, Douglass, Emerson, and Thoreau. But in many respects Melville's distinctive and original treatment of scepticism sets him

apart from his contemporaries, and in order to fully make sense of it one must range more widely through the canons of philosophy and literature. His exploration of the ethical consequences of doubt in *The Piazza Tales*, for example, can be seen to anticipate with remarkable precision the theories of twentieth-century thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Stanley Cavell.

I work chronologically though selected prose from the period 1849-1857, paying close attention to the textual effects and philosophical allusions in each work. In so doing I hope to offer fresh ways of looking at Melville's handling of literary form and the wider shape of his career. I conclude with reflections on how Melville's normative emphasis on the acknowledgement of epistemological limitation might inform the practice of literary criticism.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Vivienne Thomas.

CONTENTS

Introduction

> List the harp in window wailing
> Stirred by fitful gales from sea:
> Shrieking up in mad crescendo –
> Dying down in plaintive key!
>
> Listen: less a strain ideal
> Than Ariel's rendering of the Real.
> What that Real is, let hint
> A picture stamped in memory's mint.[1]
> – Melville, "The Aeolian Harp"

> God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please, you can never have both. Between these, as a pendulum, man oscillates. He in whom the love of repose predominates [...] gets rest, commodity, and reputation; but he shuts the door of truth. He in whom the love of truth predominates, will keep himself from all moorings and afloat.[2]
> – Emerson, "Intellect"

In October 1856, after he had completed work on his final novel, *The Confidence-Man*, Herman Melville set out on a journey to the Holy Land, or Levant, a common destination for cultured Americans of the time. He left his ranch in Massachusetts and spent an evening with Evert Duyckinck's literary circle in New York, regaling the company with "sailor metaphysics and jargon of things unknowable", spiced with the odd bawdy tale lifted from Boccaccio's *Decameron*.[3] A few days later he left for Britain, where he hoped to catch a steamer bound for the Middle East. But upon arrival in Scotland he lingered for a while, and after some desultory sight-

[1] Melville; Douglas Robillard (ed.), *The Poems of Herman Melville* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2000), p.290.
[2] Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), p.425.
[3] Evert Duyckinck, quoted in Andrew Delbanco, *Herman Melville: His World and Work* (London: Picador, 2005), p.251. I am indebted to Delbanco's account of Melville's journey, pp.250-254. I have also consulted Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography – Volume 2 1851-1891* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp.295-301.

seeing – Loch Lomond, Dumbarton Castle, Scott's Abbotsford – headed south to meet Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was then working at the US consulate in Liverpool.

The two men, once neighbours in the Berkshires, had not seen one another for three years, but Hawthorne noted that Melville looked much as he always did, "except a little paler, and perhaps a little sadder". On a chilly November afternoon they went for a long walk along the coastline near Southport, and Hawthorne's journal entry captures Melville's mood. Here he is, scruffy, voluble, ambivalent:

> We sat down in a hollow among the sand hills (sheltering ourselves from the high, cool wind) and smoked a cigar. Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated"; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists – and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before – in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest or courageous not to try to do one or the other.[4]

In what is perhaps the most illuminating contemporary portrait of Melville, Hawthorne discerns a temperament that seems pathologically incapable of repose. Lacking the certainty of a "definite belief", keenly aware of his own weaknesses, Melville nevertheless avoids lassitude: there is something obstinate about his willingness to trudge to-and-fro across doubt's dismal dunes.

The "strange" restlessness Hawthorne recognised is, I think, reflected in Melville's distinctive body of writing. Largely neglected in his lifetime, he has come to be regarded as the pre-eminent American author of the nineteenth century, and his status tends to disguise the fact that he spent only around a

[4] Hawthorne, quoted in Delbanco, *Herman Melville*, p.253.

decade as a professional writer. Yet even during that brief period his corpus undergoes an astonishing range of stylistic and generic shifts: someone with no prior knowledge of Melville would be hard pressed to recognise, say, the offbeat travelogue *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and the rebarbative satire *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* (1852) as having issued from the same pen. His novels – if such they are – lurch from fantastical allegory to stern social critique, from baggy romance to nimble pastiche. His readers were at first delighted and scandalised, then bewildered, then bored; by the time he turned to poetry in the 1860s there were few of them left.

This popular neglect is not altogether surprising, especially when one considers that Melville's wild thematic oscillations are reflected in his difficult prose. His sentences rise and fall, expand and contract, as if recapitulating in miniature the movements of his wider oeuvre.[5] When, in *Mardi and a Voyage Thither* (1849), the narrator Taji recalls absconding from ship in a whaleboat, his account begins with a series of strained exclamatives ("at sea in an open boat, and a thousand miles from land!"), subsides into morbid interior monologue ("one feels like his own ghost unlawfully tenanting a defunct carcass"), and then inflates with braggadocio once more ("drown or swim, here's overboard with care!").[6] Similarly, in *Moby-Dick* (1851), Melville flits between the grand Shakespearean soliloquies of Ahab and the more muted and playful discourse of Ishmael, alternating between aesthetic poles he would name, in a later metapoem, as "mad crescendo" and

[5] As Hawthorne's wife Sophia noticed, this rhythm was also evident in Melville's conversation, which moved from voluble bombast to muted reticence and back again: "While conversing [Melville] is full of gesture and force, and loses himself in his subject [until] his animation gives place to a singularly quiet expression out of those eyes [...] an indrawn dim look, but which at the same time makes you feel that he is at that instant taking deepest note of what is in front of him." Quoted in Delbanco, *Herman Melville*, p.135.

[6] Melville; Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, G. Thomas Tanselle (eds.), *Mardi and a Voyage Thither* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1998), pp.29-30. Further references to this text will be provided parenthetically in the main body of the thesis.

"plaintive key". Faced with such writing one often feels, appropriately enough, like a sailor in heaving seas, scrabbling for purchase as the deck rocks disconcertingly underfoot.

A number of scholars have commented on what we might call the "rhythm" of Melville's work. Andrew Delbanco thinks that *Moby-Dick* "reads like a transcription of a patient under analysis moving from bravado to depletion", and observes that we would nowadays diagnose "'bipolar' mood swings";[7] John Bryant places what he calls Melville's "flip-flops" between "disintegration and coherence" in the context of an antebellum culture of therapeutic humour;[8] and William Spanos sees in Melville's alternations between "experiential verisimilitude" and "'eccentric' flights of imagination" a political art whose subversive import has been violently ignored.[9] Few, however, have made the connection between such manoeuvres and the particular "wandering" Hawthorne noticed on that Southport beach, or the deeper problem that he adduced as its cause. What Hawthorne's journal entry invites us to consider, it seems to me, is that Melville was preoccupied by the limits of knowledge, that he oscillated between convictions and doubts. Indeed, look closely, and the contrasting tonalities of his writing tend to correspond to epistemological postures: the roaring pitch of Ahab's quarter-deck speech, with its confidence that the "Truth" of the whale can be grasped, counterpoised with the more subdued note struck in Ishmael's dictum: "I know him not, and never will."[10]

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[7] Delbanco, *Herman Melville*, pp.134-135. Similarly, John Updike invoked Melville's "mood swings from depression to manic ebullience, whose pulse can be felt in the gutsy outpourings of his prose". See Updike, "Introduction", in *The Complete Shorter Fiction* (London: Random House, 1997), xiii.

[8] John Bryant, *Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.184, 200.

[9] William V. Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick* (London: Duke University Press, 1995), p.13.

[10] Melville; Delbanco, Tom Quirk (eds.) *Moby-Dick* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.414. Further references to this text will be provided parenthetically in the main body of the essay.

Melville's wriggling between these two positions suggests that he was endowed with "negative capability": the ability to countenance "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason". Keats' phrase has in recent years come to represent a sort of "aesthetic quietism",[11] a sense of comfortable detachment from empirical concerns that would seem rather at odds with Melville's deeply felt engagements with the world. As critics such as Li Ou have argued, however, negative capability more properly designates a productive tension, a willingness to open oneself to "the actual vastness and complexity of experience" that may well be "disturbing or even agonising for the self".[12] Keats fleshed out the idea in a letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey in 1818, the year before Melville was born:

> The two uppermost thoughts in a Man's mind are the two poles of his World he revolves on them and every thing is southward or northward to him through their means – We take but three steps from feathers to iron. Now my dear fellow I must once for all tell you I have not one idea of the truth of any of my speculations – I shall never be a Reasoner because I care not to be in the right, when retired from bickering and in a proper philosophical temper.[13]

Keats' admission that he "has no idea of the truth" of his opinions evidences not so much self-deprecation as an awareness that truth itself is ambiguous or multivalent. In acknowledging this he shuttles between "poles" of thought, much as Melville hops between ideas and stylistic approaches in his responses to questions of knowledge and doubt. The poet and critic Charles Olson, who wrote at length about Melville's affinities with Keats, possibly had this conception of negative capability in mind when he described Melville as "half horse half

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[11] Jean-Claude-Sallé, quoted in Li Ou, *Keats and Negative Capability* (London: Continuum, 2009), p.19.
[12] Ibid., p.2.
[13] Keats to Bailey, March 13, 1818. Quoted in Ou, *Keats and Negative Capability*, p.3.

alligator",[14] a hybrid genius whose abrupt transitions between equine vigour and reptilian torpor point to a determination to avoid settling for too long in any one perspective.

Olson takes Melville's attempt to write with one eye on "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" as a reflection of his particular historical moment, which was marked by the advent of non-Euclidean geometry and a wider tendency to challenge "accepted axioms and truths". But he fails to mention what I take to be a more pertinent context for Melville's vacillations: that of *scepticism*. As Maurice Lee recently observed, the poignancy of this term has "gone largely untapped" in literary criticism, generally employed as it is to refer to political iconoclasm or an ill-defined notion of authorial inclusiveness.[15] Within Melville studies, scepticism is usually used in the latter sense, as when Robert Zoellner seeks to explain the "probing, skeptical, ironic tonalities of the preponderant Ishmailian voice",[16] or when John Seeyle comments on the "companionable skepticism" of Melville's genial narrators.[17] By scepticism I mean to refer to the philosophical tradition that

[14] Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.13. In a later essay, "Equal, That Is, To the Real Itself" (1958), Olson more explicitly associates Melville with Keats' concept, arguing that both writers realised that "no matter what it amounts to, mystery confusion doubt, it has a power". See *Chicago Review*, Vol.12, No.2 (Summer, 1958), pp.98-104. Olson's insights have been taken up by, among others, Spanos, who describes Ishmael's classification of the Cetacea in terms of a "negatively capable ontology" which is also reflected in the distinctive form of Melville's narrative: "The negative capability of Melville's text does not manifest itself in the privileging of an Origin [...] but in an irony-propelled demystification of the Origin [...] and as a mockery of the high seriousness of the Adamic narrative on behalf of retrieving man's lowly station." Where Olson reads negative capability as part of an historical moment defined by the advent of non-Euclidean geometry, Spanos' use of the term is bound up with his interest in Heideggerian phenomenology and late twentieth-century discourses of political emancipation. See Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, pp.161-162. See also Spanos' recuperation of Olson's thought in his early essay "Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A Phenomenological Interpretation", *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 21, No.1 (Winter, 1980), pp.38-80.

[15] Maurice Lee, *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism and Belief in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.47.

[16] Robert Zoellner, *The Salt-Sea Mastodon: A Reading of Moby-Dick* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), p.123.

[17] John Seelye, *Melville*: *The Ironic Diagram* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p.3.

extends from Pyrrho down to Montaigne, and from Descartes down to Wittgenstein and his inheritors. In what follows I will argue that Melville participated in this tradition; that his writings manifest, by turns, expression, rebuttal, and mitigated acceptance of philosophical doubt. In so doing I hope to offer new ways of considering his relationship to philosophy and his handling of literary form.

There are different varieties or modes of scepticism, and Melville's uncommonly wide-ranging and allusive work touches on a great many of them. At times one can discern a direct philosophical influence, as when he invokes the "noumenons" of Kant; at others Melville finds literary ways of expressing ideas that others were only later to develop conceptually, as when, in *Moby-Dick*, he seems to express something very like Wittgenstein's notion of the quotidian "language game". He keeps returning to the darker excesses of Cartesianism, as if to a bad dream (which is one way of describing that weird novel *Pierre*), but also finds succour in anti-sceptical thought. In flitting between the two axes he seeks a balance between radical doubt and robust realism, to preserve a redemptive sense of uncertainty without permitting it, finally, to overwhelm him. In his finest work – *Moby-Dick*; the exquisite *Piazza Tales* (1856) – he achieves it.

In his excellent *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* (1990), one of the few full-length studies to present a writer of literature as having made substantial contributions to the sceptical tradition, Mark Wollaeger contends that Conrad's novels "defend against skepticism even as they express it".[18] I would like to argue something similar of Melville. He seems to have found in scepticism at once a liberating sense of openness and an existential threat no less real than those he faced as a sailor in the Pacific, and uses literary techniques to evoke both aspects of

[18] Mark Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.5.

the problem. In his copy of Byron's *Don Juan* he approvingly underscored the line "I doubt if doubt itself be doubting", which opens out into a canto that likens sceptical thought to the hazards of the sea:

> It is a pleasant voyage perhaps to float,
> Like Pyrrho, on a sea of speculation;
> But what if carrying sail capsize the boat?
> Your wise men don't know much of navigation;
> And swimming long in the abyss of thought
> Is apt to tire: a calm and shallow station
> Well nigh the shore, where one stoops down and gathers
> Some pretty shell, is best for moderate bathers.[19]

Melville knew better than Byron what it meant to carry a sail and capsize a boat, and he also knew rather more about Pyrrho (who, though nominally a sceptical philosopher, harboured few ambitions to plumb the "abyss of thought"). He may well have agreed, however, that scepticism is a risky strategy that carries the sceptic far beyond the *terra firma* of common sense and conventional knowledge, even if the journey is worth the risk for the insights it reveals into the human condition. In his writing, as in his life, Melville continually sets out to sea, before returning, chastened, to port. He doubts doubt itself; he can neither believe, nor rest comfortably in his unbelief. His topsy-turvy fiction is a splendid consequence.

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It is as well to say at the outset that this is not a historical study: my interest lies in the content, rather than the germinating circumstances, of certain intellectual traditions. I hope this approach will appear neither so naive nor so old fashioned as it might have done a decade ago, when the New Historicist hold on American

[19] Byron; Truman Guy Steffan and Willis W. Pratt (eds.), *Don Juan: A Variorum Edition, Volume III* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957), Canto IX, p.191.

Studies was still strong. While the criticism of the 1980s and 1990s did much to revitalise the discipline and restore to prominence unjustly marginalised voices, it had the effect of subordinating conceptual study to questions of politics, society, and economics. As Richard Gravil once complained, American literature has too often been read "under definitions of context that take literary encounters to be of less account than those of merchant banking".[20] One of the happy developments in scholarship of recent years has been the attempt to take such depreciated literary currencies – and their philosophical equivalents – and restore to them their proper value.

One of the progenitors of this trend was Stanley Cavell, whose work has steadily grown in influence over the last two decades. Cavell, almost uniquely, straddles the divide between literature and philosophy. As well as being a key part of the sceptical tradition I investigate in this thesis – his philosophical writings have been particularly important in showing the occurrence of doubt in everyday life and the unanswerable nature of certain sceptical questions – he has demonstrated, across a vast and endlessly fascinating body of writing, the relevance of American literature, particularly the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, to the investigation of scepticism.[21]

A number of recent studies have followed Cavell's lead in bringing philosophical questions to bear on American texts. Branka Arsić, in books such as *Passive Constitutions or 7 1/2 Times Bartleby* (2007) and *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (2010), pays close attention to the ways in which the writings of Melville and Emerson embody an engagement with philosophical forebears: her focus is on

[20] Richard Gravil, *Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities 1776-1862* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p.xii.

[21] Cavell's thoughts on scepticism's relationship to literature are expressed in the essay collections *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), and *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). His key philosophical work is *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

questions of idea and form. Maurice Lee, in *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2012), adumbrates a broad thesis – simply put, that antebellum writers in the United States were informed by a new awareness of the role of aleatory uncertainty in their lives – through close attention to certain representative writers. I hope that my research here will be of interest to those working, like these scholars, to establish "how specific philosophical traditions relate to specific congeries of [American literary] texts".[22]

While I will refer throughout to Melville's cultural and historical situation, my primary interest lies in teasing out the continuities between his fictions and aspects of European thought. At the same time, I hope my thesis will not be anathema to those in Melville studies who do things differently: my readings of Melville's depictions of otherness, for example, intersect at various points with the more contextualised approaches of Wai-Chee Dimock and Geoffrey Sanborn.[23] Likewise, though I do not explicitly discuss Melville's relationship to issues of gender and sexuality, in emphasising the importance of doubt as a motivating force in his work I am not far from the methods of recent critics who have adopted a "queer model that proposes contingency instead of certainty";[24] I am in agreement with Leland S. Person that "uncertainty is such a common feeling for Melville's readers, and contingency such a common experience for Melville's

[22] The phrase is Lee's. See "Skepticism in American Literature and Philosophy", in Russ Castronovo (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.254.

[23] See chapter four, in which I discuss Melville's critique of the appropriative gaze. My conclusions in this area come close to Dimock's conceptions of the "proprietary self" and Sanborn's post-colonialist reading of "Benito Cereno" as depicting an "unassimilable" otherness. See Dimock, *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp.68-69; and Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal: Melville and the Making of a Postcolonial Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p.122.

[24] Robert K. Martin, quoted in Leland S. Person, "Gender and Sexuality", in Wyn Kelley (ed.), *A Companion to Herman Melville* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p.244.

characters, that a 'queer model' of approach to just about any issue in Melville's writing makes sense."[25]

That said, my work has most in common with the likes of Robert Milder and John Wenke,[26] who seek to explain how Melville's engagement with philosophical ideas shaped his fictional forms.[27] Through showcasing various discoveries in source study and sifting through what we know of Melville's reading, I hope to draw attention to direct philosophical influences that have previously been overlooked. But I also range more widely through the sceptical tradition in order to make sense of Melville's figurations of doubt, drawing on twentieth-century thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Levinas, and Cavell. Throughout, I endeavour to keep Melville's writing – and the relationship between author and reader it implies – central to my account. (This leads me, in my concluding chapter, to consider parallels between my own approach and the techniques of "ethical" criticism.)

In order to give a sense of the development of Melville's scepticism I move chronologically through selected writings from the period 1846-1857; I adopt this tight focus in order that I might devote sufficient attention both to the textual effects and to the philosophical allusions in each work. Sadly, this means that there is no space for a discussion of the poetry – to reckon satisfactorily with *Clarel* (1876) one would need rather more "sea-room", to use Melville's phrase – nor of the

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[25] Person, "Gender and Sexuality", pp.244-255.

[26] I have in mind particularly Milder's *Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life We Imagine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Wenke's *Melville's Muse: Literary Creation and the Forms of Philosophical Fiction* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1995).

[27] In the 1950s and 1960s much attention was devoted to the Platonic and Romantic resonances in Melville's work, by writers such as Olson, Merton Sealts and Charles Feidelson: see in particular Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp.77-108, and Sealts' writings on Melville and the Platonic tradition collected in *Pursuing Melville: 1940-1980* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982). But while the sceptics Descartes, Kant and Hume won cursory mention in these readings, the sceptical tradition as a whole was not considered germane to Melville's thought. Melville scholarship moved on to grapple with more broadly political issues in the 1970s and 1980s as if the question of his philosophical inheritance had been settled, leaving Melville's sceptical dimension largely unexplored. One of my aims here is to remedy this oversight.

posthumously published novella *Billy Budd*. It also means that I must eschew for the most part sweeping claims about scepticism's relevance for the American Renaissance as a whole, although I do at certain points compare Melville with his contemporaries Emerson, Poe, Dickinson, and Douglass. Before we proceed, however, it may be helpful to sketch out some broad historical background relevant to Melville's engagement with scepticism, along with a few methodological considerations touching on the relationship between philosophy and literature.

Scepticism in America

The rise of philosophical scepticism in America has been recounted by scholars such as Cavell, Richard Popkin, Herbert Schneider, and Terence Martin.[28] The received view that emerges from these readings is that scepticism first flourished "with the rise of romantic philosophy in the middle of the nineteenth century",[29] before later going on to inform the autocthonous pragmatism of William James and Charles Sanders Peirce. In fact, while it is true that European Romanticism played a significant role in transmitting sceptical ideas across the Atlantic, the history of scepticism in the United States is far older, and can be traced to the early years of the eighteenth century. Lee perceptively points out that, contrary to certain accounts of intellectual history, "American literature and philosophy do not

[28] Popkin's major work, first published in 1960 but since revised and expanded, is *The History of Skepticism from Savaronola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), but he discusses the American reception of scepticism in more detail in *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1980); see especially "Berkeley's Influence on American Philosophy", pp.339-335. Terence Martin explores how Americans used the Scottish Realist tradition to stave off radical doubt in *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961).

[29] Lee, "Skepticism in American Literature and Philosophy", p.254. This is not Lee's own view, but his account of the scholarly consensus.

advance in a linear fashion from naive, derivative metaphysics towards more skeptical, more sophisticated epistemologies".[30] Indeed, the development of scepticism in American thought resembles the dialectical push-and-pull it assumes in Melville's writing: it is by turns posited, ridiculed, deepened, accepted, contested.

Berkeley, Priestley, and Common Sense

The United States' first encounter with scepticism probably came via George Berkeley, whose thought might be considered a refinement on that of his predecessor Descartes. Berkeley denied that he was a sceptic; indeed, like Descartes, his philosophy was aimed expressly at defeating scepticism. But in his attempt to do away with the division between mind and world he ended up casting doubt on the existence of the latter. The crux of Berkeley's "immaterialism" was the maxim "*esse est percipi*" (to be is to be perceived); he believed that physical objects have no reality beyond the ideas one has of them (ideas which are, in turn, supplied and confirmed by God). His work is the source of that famous philosophical thought experiment regarding the sound made by falling trees in deserted forests. As he put it in his *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710):

> But say you, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and no one by to perceive them. But what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in your mind certain ideas which you call books and trees, and at the same time omitting to frame the idea of anyone who may perceive them? But do you yourself not perceive them or think of them all the while? This therefore […] only shows you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind; but it does not show that you can conceive it

[30] Ibid., p.255.

> possible, the objects of your thought may exist without the mind. To make out this, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy. When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while contemplating only our own ideas. […] A little attention will discover to anyone the truth and evidence of what is here said, and make it unnecessary to insist on any other proofs against the existence of material substance.[31]

Berkeley thought that in rejecting the dualistic conception of mind and world he was closing a gap through which scepticism could enter. But in challenging mind-independent reality he was, not surprisingly, read as exacerbating the sceptical problem. How is one to come to knowledge of the world if it lacks "material substance"? As Roger Woolhouse writes, "it seemed to Berkeley that the view that there exist both material things and immaterial minds or spirits invited scepticism about those material things. But it seemed to his readers that his forthright denial of material things was explicitly sceptical."[32]

Despite, or because of, their sceptical thrust, Berkeley's ideas were to permeate American life. As Popkin writes: "No figure in the history of European philosophy has had a more direct and enduring influence on American thought than George Berkeley, first through his voyage to America, where he personally bestowed on the young colonies his wise assistance, and later through his philosophical achievements. [His] enduring influence reflects America's rise from philosophical infancy to maturity."[33] Berkeley lived on a Rhode Island plantation from 1728 to 1732, and his ideas were readily taken up by some and vehemently contested by others. Jonathan Edwards, for instance, agreed with aspects of the Berkeleyan view – he stated that "all material existence is only an idea" – while

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[31] George Berkeley; Roger Woolhouse (ed.), *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (London: Penguin, 1988), p.61.
[32] Woolhouse, "Introduction", Ibid., p.11.
[33] Popkin, "Berkeley's Influence on American Philosophy", in *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, p.339.

Frederick Beasley, Provost of Pennsylvania University, dismissed it as a "philosophical day dream".[34] What is clear is that whether American thinkers of this period agreed or disagreed with scepticism they saw in it a problem that required a response.

This has to do, in part, with the shift in the eighteenth century from Calvinism, with its emphasis on submission and piety, to Unitarianism, which allowed far greater scope for intellectual inquiry.[35] As Mark Noll has written, while Calvinists were little interested in the substance of human knowledge (as opposed to faith), Unitarianism might be seen as "an extension of the liberalizing religion of an earlier Enlightenment rationalism", characterised by "a trust in reason instead of the practice of enthusiasm".[36] Priding themselves on their openness to scientific investigation, Unitarians were forced onto philosophy's turf, and therefore compelled to defend themselves against the sceptical assault on truth. (It must be stressed at this juncture that scepticism does not necessarily entail atheism – as the sceptical views advanced by Berkeley, who was Bishop of Cloyne, and the theologian Edwards make clear. Radical scepticism, given its tendency to unravel conventional opinion, was often associated with irreligiousness, but for the most part it was possible to discuss the boundaries of knowledge without necessarily being charged with doubting the existence of God.)

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[34] Edwards and Beasley are quoted in Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, pp.340,341.

[35] Unitarians required "a stay against radical skepticism [...] Orthodox ministers could simply denounce [new theories]. But Unitarians had always prided themselves on being hospitable to scientific inquiry and secure in their faith that no contradiction could exist between God's revealed Word and the truths inscribed in the Book of Nature. They were therefore faced with tasks of recuperative hermeneutics that grew more formidable all the time." Barbara Packer, "The Trancendentalists", in Sacvan Bercovitch (ed.), *The Cambridge History of American Literature – Volume II: Prose Writing 1820-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.342-344.

[36] Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.284. Noll argues that although Unitarians were numerically insignificant "the Unitarian controversy was still decisive for the entire era […] Because the Unitarians were successful at maintaining themselves as elite bearers of reason, good taste, benevolence, and refined sensibility in Boston, the center of New England's learned culture, they enjoyed an influence far out of proportion to their actual numbers." See pp.286-287.

The Unitarians sought to stave off the threat of scepticism by drawing on two particular traditions. The first was indebted to Joseph Priestley, who displayed a "robust immunity to the problem of scepticism", and advanced instead a thoroughgoing materialism.[37] Contra Berkeley, Priestley thought that it was perfectly possible to establish a causal relation between particular mental states and external stimuli. Similar physical situations tend to produce similar psychological outcomes, and that led Priestley to affirm that "there must be a sufficient reason in the nature of things, why [mental states] should be produced in these circumstances".[38] This was the basis of his famous doctrine of necessity, or determinism, which insists on the presence of discoverable natural laws. When he emigrated from Britain to Pennsylvania in 1794, Priestley was accorded a "rapturous welcome", and his materialist philosophy became popular.[39]

The second was the Scottish "common sense" tradition, exemplified by Dugald Stewart and Thomas Reid, whose work was "disseminated through American textbooks and burgeoning transatlantic print culture".[40] These realists, while unable to formulate a rational counter to Berkeley's scepticism, thought that its incompatibility with common sense was sufficient basis to reject it. As Reid puts it: "There are certain principles which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, *without being able to give a reason for them* – these are what we call the principles of common sense, and what is manifestly contrary to them, is what

[37] James Dybikowski, "Joseph Priestley, Metaphysician and Philosopher of Religion" in Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (eds.) *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher and Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.88.
[38] Ibid., p.98. I am indebted to Dybikowski's lucid exposition of Priestley's thought for my own understanding of the link between his determinism and his anti-sceptical materialism.
[39] See Jenny Graham, "Joseph Priestley in America", in *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher and Theologian*, pp.203-231.
[40] Lee, "Skepticism in American Literature and Philosophy", p.256.

we call absurd [my emphasis]."[41] This common-sense response to doubt became "a standard part of the American philosophical repertory",[42] and was particularly influential at Harvard in the early nineteenth century, where it was considered a passable rebuttal of both Berkeley and his fellow sceptic David Hume. As Martin has argued, Scottish realism also assumed an influence beyond the academy, and became tied to a wider cultural movement, a philosophy attuned to the American character: it embodied a "safe, stabilizing and conservative spirit" that allowed certain truths to be acknowledged as soothingly self-evident.[43]

Kant and Romanticism

Not all were convinced, however. Ralph Waldo Emerson, having studied the Scottish realists in his junior year at Harvard in 1817, reported in an undergraduate essay that they "had not quite managed to remove the terror which attached to the name of Hume".[44] Emerson's dissatisfaction with the realists' response to scepticism was a belated echo of philosophical developments across the Atlantic. In the late eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant argued that the likes of Reid based their notion of truth on "the judgement of the multitude"[45] rather than reason, and set about defeating scepticism on its own terms. His *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) might be considered an elegantly-designed redoubt against doubt. Kant contended that all one needed to refute scepticism was an appreciation of the *a priori* conditions by which we are able to apprehend the world at all. (His philosophy marked a break with predecessors such as Locke, who conceived of the human

[41] Thomas Reid, quoted in Knud Haakonssen, *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth Century Philosophy: Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.408.
[42] Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, p.344.
[43] Martin, *The Instructed Vision*, p.4.
[44] Quoted in Packer, "The Transcendentalists", p.343.
[45] Kant; Gary Hatfield (ed.), *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Hatfield, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.9.

mind as a mere *tabula rasa*, an empty cupboard that grows progressively cluttered with the fruits of experience.) The crux of the argument is conveyed in Robert Stern's precis: "We have certain experiences, etc; a necessary condition for us having these experiences, etc is the truth of *P*, therefore *P*."[46] This is what Kant called a "satisfactory proof" of the validity of our beliefs about an external world: it would be impossible for us to have those beliefs if the external world was not, in some important sense, *real*.

However, Kant's response to scepticism, for all its brilliance, came with a significant caveat. A consequence of his emphasis on the conditions by which the human subject comes to know the world is that knowledge of the world becomes dependent on the human subject. We have access only to phenomenal reality as we individually perceive it, not the "noumenal" thing-in-itself. As Kant himself put it: "And we indeed, rightly considering the objects of sense as mere appearances, confess thereby that they are based upon a thing in itself, though we know not this thing in its internal constitution, but only know its appearances, viz. the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something."[47] In other words, one may be assured of the presence of an external world, but one's perceptions of it are subjectively determined.

This subtle distinction was often missed by Kant's Romantic interlocutors in Europe, who interpreted him not so much as defeating scepticism as retuning it at an exquisitely higher pitch. For such thinkers phenomenal truth was no truth at all. This was the source of Kleist's "Kant crisis", which he recounted in an anguished letter of 1801: "Not long ago [...] I became acquainted with the Kantian philosophy, and I now have to tell you of a thought I derived from it, which I feel free to do because I have no reason to fear it will shatter you so profoundly and painfully as

[46] Robert Stern, "Kant's Response to Skepticism", in John Greco (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.266.
[47] Op cit., p.66.

it has me [...] We are unable to decide whether that which we call truth really is truth, or whether it only appears to us to be." He likened Kant's notion of perception to "green glasses" that tint our view of the world and prevent us from seeing it as it really is. Faced with this predicament Kleist felt "wounded" in "the deepest and most sacred part of his being".[48] Other Romantics, resisting Kleist's solipsism but nevertheless frustrated with the limits on knowledge imposed by the Kantian epistemology, dreamt of grasping the elusive noumenon – which is one way of thinking about the familiar Romantic yearning for transcendence.

It was these Romantic interpretations of Kant, rather than his own, magisterial arguments against scepticism, that took root in America in the early years of the nineteenth century. As has been well documented, "a mania for all things German"[49] arose in the 1820s after the publication of texts such as Sampson Reed's treatise *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* (1826); Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (1829); Victor Cousin's *Introduction to the History of Philosophy* (1832); and Carlyle's early articles for the *Edinburgh Review* on German intellectual history.[50] This influx of new thought was intensely exhilarating but also rather chaotic. As Barbara Packer writes: "It bothered no one that the Romanticism intoxicating Cambridge was decades old, the Kantianism even older, or that the ideas being hailed as revolutionary were a jumble of bits and pieces torn from their contexts

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[48] See Diane Morgan's lucid account of Kleist's breakdown in *Kant Trouble: The Obscurities of the Enlightened* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.47.

[49] The phrase is Packer's. See "The Transcendentalists", p.33.

[50] During this period, Kant became the philosopher *de rigueur* in New England; as Charles Feidelson notes, between 1801 and 1829 only five articles dealing with Kant appeared in American periodicals, while fifteen appeared between the years of 1838 and 1845 alone. See *Symbolism and American Literature*, pp.77-108; 286, n.11. This may in part be due to the influence of Charles Follen, a German émigré and former lecturer at Jena, who arrived as professor of German at Harvard in 1830 and helped introduce the nascent Transcendentalist movement to German texts. See George Ripley, "Charles Follen's Inaugural Discourse", in Perry Miller (ed.), *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp.59-72. See also Leon Christopher Chai's monumental work *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), which examines the influence of Romantic thought on Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville.

and served up by a haphazard collection of editors, translators and book reviewers."[51]

With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that Kant was misinterpreted in some quarters as an arch sceptic. One example is the Unitarian minister Orestes Brownson, who in 1830 experienced a crisis very like that which had afflicted Kleist. This may have been prompted by his reading of Cousin; as Brownson's biographer Patrick W. Carey writes, the French philosopher took Kant to have reaffirmed scepticism: "According to Cousin, Kant had made important contributions to modern philosophy by emphasising the *a priori* conditions of knowledge and thereby legitimately modifying the realism of Scottish Common Sense philosophy which had such a strong influence on the modern philosophical tradition. But Kant had gone too far in the direction of idealism by placing the forms of knowledge within the subject, making it impossible for him to demonstrate the existence of the world outside the self. Brownson accepted this Cousinian perspective on Kant."[52] Though he was later to recover from his own *Kant-Krise*, Brownson remained dismayed at the rise of Kantianism in the United States and what he saw as the sceptical tendencies carried like a germ within the body of idealist thought. In a review of Emerson's *Nature* in 1836, Brownson turned to a maritime metaphor in order to warn against the Transcendentalist susceptibility to doubt: "He who denies the testimony of the senses, seems to have no ground for believing the apperceptions of consciousness, and to deny those is to set oneself afloat upon the ocean of universal skepticism."[53]

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[51] Packer, "The Transcendentalists", p.357.

[52] Patrick W. Carey, *Orestes Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* (Cambridge: Wm B. Erdmans Publishing Co., 2004), p.143. Arsić suggests that Emerson's scepticism is also indebted to Cousin. "Fine sketch of the life of Descartes in Cousin", he writes in a journal entry of 1835. See Arsić, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp.337-338, n.25.

[53] Interestingly, Brownson in his work and life demonstrated a pattern very similar to Melville's oscillations between certainty and doubt. He was mocked for this in a James

Brownson was not wrong to detect sceptical conceits in Emerson's work. Like Brownson, Emerson learned of German philosophy principally through a clutch of secondary Romantic sources (in his case, Carlyle and Coleridge), and saw Kant as having opened the doors to doubt. His essay "Experience" (1844) is representative: here Emerson describes his grief at the passing of his young son, and gives intimations of intellectual frailty that seem to be associated in his mind with Kant's *Critique*. He offers a recognisably Kantian account of subjectivity before giving it a sinister twist: "We suspect our instruments [...] we have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these coloured and distorting lenses. Perhaps these subject-lenses have creative power; *perhaps there are no objects*."[54] That concluding line, with its abrupt transition from Kantian phenomenology to Berkeleyan ontology, shows how Romanticism allowed the more radical scepticism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to reassert itself as a pressing problem in the America of Melville's time.[55]

Cartesian Country

Strands of this contemporary sceptical discourse are woven throughout Melville's work: *Mardi*, for example, alludes to both Berkeley and the common-sense repudiation of him; while *Pierre* follows Brownson and Emerson in uncovering a

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Russell Lowell poem: "[Brownson] shifts quite about, then proceeds to expound/That 'tis merely the earth, not himself, that turns round/And wishes it impressed on your mind/That the weathercock rules and not follows the wind/Proving first, then as deftly confuting each side/With no doctrine pleased that's not somewhere denied/He lays the denier away on the shelf/And then – down beside him lies gravely himself". Ibid., p.xiii.

[54] Emerson, "Experience", in *Essays and Lectures*, p.487.

[55] For Cavell, what is "directly un-Kantian" in Emerson "is his notion that the senses are the scene of illusions. This at a stroke misconceives the undertaking of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, an essential half of which was exactly to answer, by transforming, the skeptical question about the existence of the external world, to show that things (as we know them) *are* as the senses represent them." Cavell was later to revise this view, but I think this passage captures Emerson's fundamental misprision of Kant. See Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp.94-95.

sceptical void beneath Kantianism's veneer of epistemological confidence. As we will see, in many ways Melville's responses to philosophical doubt were distinctive and – at times – wholly at odds with that of his New England neighbours, and his engagements with philosophical doubt cannot be reduced to what he might have gleaned from his milieu. What we can say, however, is that Melville's scepticism, like that of his contemporaries, was well suited to an environment characterised by profound flux.

The resurgence of scepticism in nineteenth century America should perhaps come as no surprise; the sceptical strains in Romanticism would certainly have struck a chord with a population faced with social, political, and economic instability. Consider the key event of the period – the debate over slavery, and its culmination in the outbreak of Civil War in 1861 – which compelled Americans to reconsider long-held beliefs. As Noll has written, those with similar theological views often held contrasting opinions on slavery, and that brought into question the authority of Scripture: "'[S]imple' readings of the Bible yielded violently incommensurate understandings of Scripture, with no means, short of warfare, to adjudicate the differences […] Although the United States had become one of the most ostensibly Christian societies on the face of the earth, the Civil War's division of the country's ardent Bible believers called into question the reputation of the Bible as an omnicompetent, infallible authority for life now and forever, at least as that adequacy had been formulated by Protestants since the Reformation."[56] The prospect of a rupture over the issue of slavery thus threatened citizens' faith both in the Bible and the very existence of their country, at least as they had once known it. The lives of the slaves themselves, subject as they were to the often brutal whims of their owners, were of course marked by an altogether more visceral form of uncertainty.

[56] Noll, *America's God*, pp.396-397.

If the antebellum era was marked by sharpening tensions it was also a time of great optimism, as the nation expanded both geographically and economically. But the market revolution itself generated a degree of epistemological chaos. As Edward Balleisen writes, America's "remarkable economic growth between 1815 and 1860 occurred not as the result of steady expansion of production and consumption, but through the far more wrenching oscillations of boom and bust".[57] A series of so-called financial "panics", including two in the late 1830s, generated a slew of bankruptcies and wiped out livelihoods overnight. (Melville, whose father was a failed merchant, knew only too well how quickly fortunes could be made and lost in such a volatile environment.) These fluctuations "[unsettled] foundational assumptions, including theories of essential value and teleological progress", and provoked a widespread awareness of the role played by chance in the life of the nation and its people.[58]

Economic development also prompted a rapid growth in urban populations and a corresponding breakdown in social bonds. As Karen Halttunen writes in her study *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America 1830-1875*, "major social forces [were] transforming American society: a high rate of geographical mobility and particularly of migration to the city, the decline of social deference and a loosening of ties between family generations, the breakdown of traditional restraints over single workingmen, and in general a replacement of traditional hierarchical social relationships with modern peer relations".[59] One consequence of these trends was that uncertainty began to colour American social life, as individuals were increasingly brought into contact with people whose character and background were unknown to them. Concentrating on

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[57] Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), pp.31-32.
[58] Lee, *Uncertain Chances*, p.10.
[59] Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America 1830-1870* (London: Yale University Press, 1982), p.35.

literary and visual representations of the other in the period, Halttunen describes antebellum America as a "world of strangers".[60]

Lloyd Pratt has rightly warned that Halttunen's study risks an "empathic" approach by which the "literature of the period sets the terms of its own analysis": it seems more likely that contemporary texts were "assigning" the category of stranger to particular people than that they were passively reflecting some pre-existing condition of "strangerhood". Nevertheless, there seems to have been, as Pratt puts it, an "emergent sense of the stranger's ubiquity", and the prevalence of depictions of the stranger in the literature of the period is a significant fact (we will consider this point in more detail in chapter four).[61] One of the most vivid contemporary illustrations of this social dynamic was provided by Alexis de Tocqueville in his preface to the second volume of *Democracy in America* (1840); Tocqueville argues that knowledge is of little practical use in a society like America's, and goes on to draw an analogy between the typical American and the quintessential philosophical sceptic:

> The United States is one of the countries where philosophy is least studied, and where the precepts of Descartes are best applied [...] In the midst of the continual movement which agitates a democratic community, the tie which unites one generation to another is relaxed or broken; every man readily loses a trace of the ideas of his forefathers or takes no care about them. Nor can men living in this state of society derive their belief from the opinions of the class to which they belong, for, so to speak, there are no longer any classes, or those which still exist are composed of such mobile elements, that their body can never exercise real control over its members. [Citizens] are constantly brought back to their own reason as the most obvious and proximate source of truth. It is not only confidence in this or that man which is then destroyed, but the taste for trusting the *ipse dixit* of any man

[60] Ibid., p.35. Halttunen borrows the phrase from urban sociologist Lyn Lofland.
[61] Pratt, "'I Am a Stranger With Thee': Frederick Douglass and Recognition After 1845", in *American Literature 2013*, Vol 85 (No.2), 247-272, pp.255-256.

> whatsoever. Everyone shuts himself up in his own breast, and affects from that point to judge the world.[62]

In Tocqueville's analysis America appears not so much a society as a ragged concatenation of strangers – or distrustful Cartesians. The United States, on this view, is the sceptical country *par excellence*, in which the apposite national motto would be not so much *E pluribus unum* as *Cogito ergo sum*. At around the same time, Brownson offered an intriguing pen-portrait of Descartes: "Here, then, is Descartes, without tradition, without experience, reduced, as it were, to a state of primitive destitution; all is before him: nothing is behind him. He has no ancestors, no recollections; or, if some, in point of fact, none but are to be theoretically repulsed."[63] Like the American posited by Tocqueville, Descartes is "without tradition", bereft of ancestors, and prone to solipsistic withdrawal.

Form: Philosophy and Literature

Tocqueville, in drawing on Descartes to illuminate aspects of everyday experience, shows us that scepticism is not exclusively a theoretical problem and that it carries implications for ordinary human life.[64] It follows that scepticism is a subject that philosophy and literature might address independently. While poets and novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries read and responded to philosophical source texts they also felt moved to explore the experience of scepticism through their own, imaginative literary forms, raising new questions about the relationship between "philosophy" and "literature" as practices.[65]

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[62] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London: Wordsworth, 1998), pp.179-180.
[63] *Brownson's Quarterly Review, Volume 1* (New York: AMS Press, 1965), p.160.
[64] Cavell makes this point convincingly, especially in his *In Quest of the Ordinary*.
[65] As Lee argues, treatment of sceptical themes blurred the lines between literature and philosophy in the nineteenth century. "Skepticism [...] is fundamental to philosophical inquiry, though nineteenth century literature is especially active in challenging

This might be a good point to catch up with some definitional housekeeping. Philosophy and literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had yet to coalesce into wholly separate disciplines, and too strictly defining their borders may prevent us from noticing the fertile cross-currents that connected them. But it still seems intuitively true to say that Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) counts as philosophy while Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) does not, even if we grant that there are "philosophical" (even "Kantian") dimensions to Coleridge's work. What does it mean to write a "philosophical poem", or a "philosophical novel"? One approach is suggested by Michael Levin in his reading of *Moby-Dick*:

> A philosophical novelist like Melville supplies something generally lacking in the formal development of a philosophical system: what it is like to experience the world as the system represents it. The system-builder's job is to refine his system, give reasons for accepting it, and perhaps draw from it some practical consequences. A novelist like Melville is trying to articulate the world as seen through the lens of the system.[66]

As is common in much writing on philosophy and literature, Levin ascribes to the former systematic rigour and the latter descriptive power. No doubt there is some truth in this categorisation: Melville's work certainly has a pictorial immediacy beyond the range of most philosophical writing, which allows him to powerfully evoke a living and breathing fictional world. However, Levin's account presupposes something I wish to contest: that in philosophical literature the literature is subordinated to the philosophy, that literature can only explore

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epistemological confidence [...] As the Enlightenment gave way to modernity, and as literature and philosophy became more established as disciplines, imaginative writers in the United States found skepticism threatening and inspiring." See "Skepticism in American Literature and Philosophy", pp.252-253.

[66] Michael Levin, quoted in Sealts, *Pursuing Melville: 1940-1980*, p.316.

concepts already provided by philosophy (and then only on the basis of a dramatised subjectivity).

Emerson is worth considering in a little more detail here, both because his interest in scepticism has been demonstrated[67] and because his writing would seem to complicate neat generic compartmentalisation. One must be careful to distinguish the two types of scepticism in Emerson's work: the sort elucidated in his essay "Montaigne; or, The Skeptic" (1850) – in which scepticism designates a dispassionate *epoche*, a tranquil detachment from the world – and the sort shadowed forth in his darker essays, which arises, as in Descartes and Berkeley, as a by-product of an attempt to probe the limits of knowledge. In his treatment of the latter variety of doubt, Emerson offers a case study in how sceptical insights might be contained within literary prose: informing it conceptually but also animating and directing its form.

As Richard Poirier has convincingly argued, Emerson's philosophy is not simply adumbrated via the discursive content of his writings but – and this would be the literary dimension – *enacted* at the level of language and structure. "Emerson's skepticism is not theoretical in nature [...] Instead, he lets his language reveal the pathos of discovering in his own sentences how words resist efforts to represent what he believes to be the flow or stream of his experience. Emerson in fact is not *describing* a situation [...] Rather, his writing *enacts* the struggle."[68] If one looks closely at "Experience" one can see what Poirier means. Emerson argues that "life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they

[67] See for example Cavell's *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* and John Michael's *Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988).
[68] Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp.26-27. Wollaeger also uses the concept of "enactment" in accounting for literature's approach to scepticism: "Rather than simply offering commentary on skepticism [...] the narrative, descriptive, and generic modes of Conrad's fiction *enact* the operations of skepticism as a perpetual assessment of 'our constructions of the world'". *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Scepticism*, p.xvii.

prove to be many–colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus."[69] As if to "enact" this point he describes existence using a variety of separate images that never quite cohere: they are strewn throughout the essay like a collection of colourful but ill-assorted jigsaw pieces. In the first paragraph alone human life is compared to an endless staircase; a door tended by a Genius proffering a cup of lethe; and the lower levels of a waterway depleted by the workings of rapacious factories upstream.

Similarly, the rhythm of Emerson's prose seems deliberately halting, stop-start, as if he were repeatedly attempting to begin the essay anew in response to some encountered epistemological impediment. Individual sentences pull in separate directions, commas and semi-colons straining to keep two divergent thoughts in touch. "I am very content with knowing, if only I could know," he writes.[70] Not, notice, "I *would be* very content with knowing", which conditional phrase would allow the second clause to follow semantically from the first. No: Emerson is *both* possessed of knowledge *and* seemingly bereft of it. This sort of writing does not merely use the pallid prose of philosophy to describe the sceptical position but conveys uncertainty through its handling of the intricacies of grammar and lexis. As Lee puts it, "essays and paragraphs do not progress to a single point but proliferate in superabundant theses that overwhelm linear logic and argumentative closure [...] terminology slides between and within sentences as Emerson slips between various philosophical positions, thus unsettling all epistemological claims."[71]

Emerson's writing shows us how literary treatments of scepticism can deepen our understanding of the problem through their interrogation of form, "enacting" ideas and thereby causing readers to reflect in ways other than those provoked by

[69] Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p.473.
[70] Ibid., p.491.
[71] Lee, "Skepticism in American Literature and Philosophy", p.260.

conventional theoretical argument.[72] Melville's prose bears similar scrutiny. Take, for example, the following line from *Moby-Dick*: "The warmly cool, clear, ringing, perfumed, overflowing, redundant days, were as crystal goblets of Persian sherbet, heaped up – flaked up, with rose-water snow" (p.135). Here Melville both describes the days that pass on the *Pequod*'s voyage as "redundant" and, through his use of a number of strictly unnecessary adjectives and verbs lends his own language an aspect of redundancy: he tries a word, discards it ("heaped"), tries another, seems to prefer its particular timbre ("flaked"), and thus the sentence, like the book as a whole, swells and inflates. By this process he suggests that language stands in excess of the world it is designed to describe, and casts doubt on the isomorphic fit between words and world – which in turn renders problematic the notion of an objective truth accessible within language.

There is, however, a key difference between Emerson's writings and Melville's, in that Emerson has more in common with traditional philosophical discourse: his sentences, however structurally eccentric, might still be taken to have a referential "truth content" that allows him to participate in philosophical debates about the real world. Fictive forms such as those preferred by Melville, on the other hand, have been shown by literary theorists such as Peter Lamarque and S.H. Olsen to lack such content.[73] (Simply put, the construction "Captain Ahab

[72] Martha Nussbaum has similarly argued that the difference between philosophy and literature is that the latter depends on a certain "organic connection between form and content". In literature, "certain thoughts and certain ideas, a certain sense of life, reach towards expression in writing that has a certain shape and form [...] conception and form are bound together; finding and shaping the words is a matter of finding the appropriate, and, so to speak, the honorable fit between conception and expression". Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.4-5.

[73] See Lamarque and Olson, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Of further relevance here is Lamarque and Olson's distinction (indebted to Anthony Quinlon) between "philosophy *in* literature" and "philosophy *through* literature". Philosophy in literature refers to a form of writing in which "the object of philosophical deliberation is given literary interpretation in terms of an imaginative world artistically constructed"; it is a "relation where philosophy is subordinated to the purpose and function of literature, and consequently the aspect identified as philosophical [...] can only

stood upon his quarter-deck" is not "true", because it does not refer to a real-world circumstance beyond the page: "Captain Ahab" never existed, at least not in the sense that Kant or Emerson's son existed.) If this is the case, how can Melville be considered as contributing to the tradition of scepticism – to questions of what we can know and what we cannot know about the world – and not merely reflecting or dramatising particular philosophical arguments in the manner Levin describes?

One answer is suggested by the recent work of scholars such as John Gibson. Building on Cavell's thinking about how literature and philosophy direct attention to the same fundamental questions, Gibson argues that the cognitive dimension of literature lies in its "ability to operate upon the truths we already possess".[74] Fictional narrative may not have the capacity to advance arguments based on extra-literary truths but it can articulate "patterns of salience, value and significance", showing us what exactly is "at stake" when we adopt particular intellectual positions. "Othello's gift to the mind," argues Gibson, lies not in his contribution to what we know about the concept of jealousy "but in the ways in which he can embody [it], bring it to life, and give it shape, structure and vitality".[75] In embodying jealousy Othello opens up a way of thinking about the concept, a way of considering its pertinence in particular regions of human experience.

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be identified as an integral part of, or as partially constitutive of, aesthetic value". Philosophy through literature, on the other hand, refers to "the use of imaginative literary forms as devices of exposition for the more effective communication of philosophical conceptions that have already been fully worked out" (pp.391-392). Melville, I argue, comes closer to the former, in that his sceptical concerns are not simply reflections of pre-existing theories.

[74] John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.102.

[75] Ibid., pp.115-116. In choosing *Othello*, Gibson may have had in mind Cavell's own, masterful reading of the play, which focuses on Othello's failure to "acknowledge" his epistemological separateness from Desdemona. See part four of *The Claim of Reason* and "Othello and the Stake of the Other", in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.125-143.

In what follows I seek to argue that Melville's fictions perform a similar function with regards to doubt. Melville does not simply provide commentary on scepticism via discursive passages in the omniscient voice, nor by allocating monologues to protagonists who adopt conveniently discrete intellectual positions.[76] Melville's writings both allude to particular arguments within philosophy and enact a struggle with scepticism that can be traced in his narrative trajectories, his choice of generic modes, and the grain of his prose. In so doing they contribute to the sceptical tradition by showing us what is at stake in the terms of the discussion, whether it is the tendency of anti-sceptical thought to issue in self-effacing quietism or pompous self-aggrandizement (*Mardi*); the redemptive qualities of a balanced or mitigated scepticism (*Moby-Dick*); the infinite regress of radical doubt (*Pierre*); or the tangled ethical consequences that arise from awareness of the stranger's unknowable otherness (*The Piazza Tales*).

My thesis is divided into two parts. In part one I examine how *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* enact responses to scepticism regarding the material world. In "Transcendental *Gulliver*: *Mardi*'s Sceptical Chiaroscuro", I argue that Melville's encounter with Cartesian thought led him to work through two very different responses to doubt – one based on a common-sense approach to knowledge; the other on a willed escape into transcendence – which results in a text that sways unsettlingly between opposed philosophical positions and literary models. In "Almost True: *Moby-Dick*, Irony, and Mitigated Doubt", I consider *Moby-Dick* as a progression on *Mardi*'s dichotomous formal arrangement, in which Melville more successfully integrates common-sense and transcendental responses to scepticism

[76] Wollaeger argues that "by its very nature, skepticism is not susceptible to narrative expression [in such fashion] given that, far from constituting a particular conceptual arena, skepticism is engaged in a sustained interrogation of the very categories that permit rational discussion to begin". Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*, p.xvii.

via Ishmael's roving, omniscient narration. Locating virtue in a modest and tentative approach to questions of knowledge, Melville comes close here to Hume and, at a stylistic level, the Romantic irony of Friedrich Schlegel.

Part two follows Melville's turn to a more extreme form of scepticism that encompasses (what philosophy calls) the problem of other minds. In "'Tear All Veils': *Pierre* and Radical Scepticism" I argue that Melville uses a recurring image of the "veil" as a metaphor for the barriers that separate Pierre from knowledge of the world and other people, evoking the oppressiveness of solipsism. In my fourth chapter, "The Wages of Doubt: *The Piazza Tales* and Sceptical Ethics", I examine Melville's turn to social and political themes in his short fictions of the 1850s. In "The Encantadas", "Benito Cereno" and "Bartleby, The Scrivener", Melville refines a narrative form that sheds light on the moral implications of scepticism. Exploring the question of how one might respond to the plight of the other if her thoughts and feelings are inaccessible to knowledge, these tales anticipate with remarkable precision the sceptical ethics of Cavell and Emmanuel Levinas. In my conclusion I examine some of the implications of scepticism for literary criticism via a reading of *The Confidence-Man*.

One last thought: none of the categories presented in this introduction are intended to be final or inalienable: one of the consequences of scepticism, after all, is a suspicion of overarching interpretative frameworks. But I hope the few navigational pointers offered here as to the relative latitudes of scepticism, philosophy, and literature will be sufficient for us to plot a course in the right direction. It can be difficult to follow Melville, as he yaws between scepticism and anti-scepticism, between influences literary and philosophical. Nevertheless, I shall do my best – as Captain Ahab might put it – to "keep him nailed".

Chapter One

"Transcendental *Gulliver*":

Mardi's Sceptical Chiaroscuro

> All, all is chaos! What is this shining light in heaven, this sun they tell me of? Or do they lie? Methinks, it might blaze convictions; but I brood and grope in blackness; I am dumb with doubt; yet, 'tis worse, I doubt my doubt.[1]
>
> – *Mardi*

What to make of *Mardi*? If, as Henry James put it, nineteenth-century novels resemble "loose baggy monsters", then *Mardi* is looser and baggier than most. It begins in the picaresque manner of Melville's earlier Polynesian travelogues, before becoming a voyage across "the world of mind" (p.557), in which realistic elements are transfigured into dreamscapes and the narrative flow is arrested by passages of recondite philosophical argument. Melville was just twenty-eight when he took up this vast project, while still in the first flush of his success as a writer, and it took him fully two years to complete. While his ambition has never been questioned, the substance of his achievement continues to be debated.

The early reception was not uniformly negative: Melville's ability to pick out a vivid image was praised – "no-one paints a shark better than Mr. Melville", commented a London journalist – and the American *Democratic Review* approved

[1] *Mardi*, p.339.

of his "graceful, pure and glowing" prose style.[2] Yet most of the reviews struck a tone of befuddlement, and critics seem to have been especially confused by the novel's failure to conform to any recognisable genre. As the *Athenaeum* put it: "If this book be meant as pleasantry, the mirth has been oddly left out – if as an allegory, the key to the casket is 'buried in the ocean deep' – if as a romance, it fails from tediousness – if as a prose-poem, it is chargeable with puerility." Others saw Melville as having written both a "rhapsody" and a narrative in the "Rabelaisian vein".[3] None was able to ascertain what kind of book Melville was aiming to write, and it therefore seemed impossible even for sympathetic readers to judge *Mardi* on its own terms.

Interestingly, little seems to have changed over the past century-and-a-half. Despite the critical recuperation of Melville's writings since the 1920s, *Mardi* is still routinely denigrated as prolix and unapproachable. Though the book has been thoughtfully appraised by the likes of Milton R. Stern, Robert Milder, and Wai-Chee Dimock,[4] others dismiss it as a marginal effort: in *Melville's Anatomies*, for instance, Samuel Otter argues that the "verbosity" of *Mardi* is merely "excess for the sake of excess", and that its "shapelessness" renders it a "less [than] revealing work".[5] Of all Melville's books *Mardi* seems the most resistant to critical exegesis; it is, perhaps as a consequence, the least read.

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[2] See Hershel Parker and Brian Higgins (eds.), *Herman Melville, The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 197, 232.
[3] Ibid., pp.193-242.
[4] Stern examines *Mardi* at length in his *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957), interpreting the narrative as a foiled quest after "ideality". Dimock discusses *Mardi* in relation to the rise of possessive individualism in the nineteenth century and Melville's own "commitment to proprietorship", which is revealed in his imposing of his own authorial sovereignty on his characters (hence, Dimock argues, the characters' flatness, and the book's narrative monotony). See *Empire for Liberty*, pp.66-70. Milder's reading, which associates *Mardi* with the legacies of Romanticism, has most in common with my own; I discuss it in further detail below. See "The Broken Circle: Mardi and (Post-) Romanticism" in *Exiled Royalties*, pp.27-49.
[5] See Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p.7.

A new way of thinking about the problem of *Mardi* is offered in a recent essay by Jordan Alexander Stein, who argues that the book has been considered "formless", even "boring", not because those qualities are inherent but rather because it fails to conform to the inflexible critical categories on which such judgements rely.[6] Defining a text as a particular kind of novel allows a certain number of interpretative contexts to be brought into play, and therefore provides a framework within which to determine the text's various strengths and weaknesses. *Mardi*, however, seems uniquely to shun the very notion of context: "*Mardi*'s sentences proffer context for neither their own local semantics nor for a cumulative sense of narrative development. If anything, *Mardi* seems invested in exploring how long one can engage with a suspended meaning and still not know what it means [...] It becomes difficult to tell what a stable context would look like according to *Mardi*."

Stein discusses both *Mardi*'s bewildering structure and hones in on its "maddening" prose, including the description of George Berkeley as "extremely matter-of-fact in all matters touching matter itself" (p.62). In suggesting that "matter is equal to the several things that count as itself", Stein writes, this statement stretches the verb "to be" until it becomes as loose and baggy as the novel as a whole, and in doing so renders meaningless the very notion of fixed identity. Repeated again and again, this sort of grammatical construction calls into question critical attempts to clarify what exactly *Mardi* "is": Meville "offers an implicit skepticism by which the contexts and criteria for identity and category are held in reflexive suspension".[7]

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[6] Jordan Alexander Stein, "Are 'American Novels' Novels? Mardi and the Problem of Boring Books", in Castronovo (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, pp.42-58.
[7] Ibid. pp.52-53.

Stein's analysis is inventive, and provides a valuable corrective to scholarly reliance on rigid and unexamined critical models. But it seems to me to beg the questions posed by *Mardi* in the way that Northrop Frye had in mind when he likened interpreters of *Moby-Dick* or *Tristram Shandy* to "the doctors in Brobdingnag, who after great wrangling finally pronounced Gulliver a *losus naturae*".[8] Stein excuses the scholar from pursuing avenues of inquiry by suggesting that they were deliberately foreclosed by the author himself. And yet, interestingly, in drawing on Melville's allusion to Berkeley, and highlighting the "skepticism" implicit in the novel as a whole, he suggests that "context" may not be so useless an explanatory tool after all. For, as I wish to show in this chapter, reading *Mardi* against the context of scepticism provides us with some interpretative purchase; a way of making sense both of Melville's idiosyncratic prose and his handling of generic form.

In what follows I would like to read *Mardi* as exhibiting or "trying out" two diverging responses to Cartesian scepticism: one lies in an emphasis on robust common sense, while the other consists in a quest after transcendence. I argue that this approach might help us to explain the text's bipartite structure, which displays aspects of both the Swiftian satire and the symbolic Romantic novel. In doing so I hope not simply to show that Melville participates in recognisable philosophical and literary traditions, but also to account for the somewhat bewildering experience of reading *Mardi*, with its lurches between scatological humour and earnest profundity, between philosophical dialogue and propulsive storytelling, between fideist acceptance and Romantic defiance.

[8] See Frye, "The Four Forms of Prose Fiction", in *The Hudson Review* , Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter, 1950), 582-595, p.593. Milder also draws on this passage to challenge the "question begging" propensities of Melville criticism. See *Exiled Royalties*, p.74.

1. From Tommo to Taji: The Cartesian Turn

Melville's first book, *Typee*, describes, not without embellishment, his experiences in the Pacific in 1842. The narrator, Tommo, arrives with his ship at the Marquesas islands, and persuades a comrade, Toby, to desert and accompany him into the lush interior. The pair eventually find themselves among the Typee, a tribe notorious for their warlike manner and cannibalistic tendencies. Toby manages to escape, but Tommo's leg has been injured in the flight from the ship, and he is forced to remain and endure the islanders' dubious hospitality. They treat him well, but he is afraid that they mean to eat or – and this appears to him just as terrifying a prospect – forcibly tattoo him.[9]

Much of the narrative is taken up by Tommo's account of his attempts to know and understand the culture of the Typee. At times he reflects that they are not so different from "civilised" people, and pays tribute to their solicitude, their resourcefulness. (He notices, for example, that each hut contains a pile of firewood, in much the same way as one would keep "a box of lucifer matches in the corner of the kitchen-cupboard at home".[10]) But more often Tommo is left perplexed by inscrutable rituals and obscure artefacts. Indeed, the novel displays a curious slippage between Tommo's Rousseau-like faith in the innocent simplicity – and perhaps innate superiority – of the "noble savage", and his repeated insistence on the tribe's unknowable otherness.[11] Declarations of interpretative failure become a

[9] In his perceptive and compelling reading of the text, Otter examines Tommo's fear of tattooing in the context of racial anxiety and "the antebellum specter of whites being coerced into indelible color". See *Melville's Anatomies*, p.30. See also Geoffrey Sanborn's argument that Tommo worries tattoos would "blot out a highly visible sign of his social privilege: his white skin". *The Sign of the Cannibal*, p.104.
[10] *Typee* (London: Penguin, 1938), p.122.
[11] Cf. Melville's reference to Rousseau in chapter 17: "The continual happiness which, as far as I was able to judge, appeared to prevail in the valley, sprung principally from that all-pervading sensation which Rousseau has told us he at one time experienced, the mere buoyant sense of a healthful physical existence." Ibid., p.137.

refrain. Considering the *pi-pi*, or piles of giant rocks that constitute the foundation of the Typee settlement, he is unable to determine how they were formed: "How could such enormous masses have been moved or fixed in their places? and how could [the Typee] with their rude implements have chiselled and hammered them into shape?"[12] He is flummoxed by a pyramidical pile of skulls, the purpose of which "to this hour [...] remains a complete mystery to me".[13] During a lively festival, he wanders around querying his hosts as to its significance:

> In vain I questioned Kory-Kory and the others of the natives, as to the meaning of the strange things that were going on; all their explanations were conveyed in such a mass of outlandish gibberish and gesticulation that I gave up the attempt in despair. All that day the drums responded, the priests chanted, and the multitude feasted and roared till sunset, when the throng dispersed, and the Taboo Groves were again abandoned to quiet and repose. The next day the scene was repeated until night, when this singular festival terminated.[14]

As is made clear by the calm, matter-of-fact air with which he concludes the passage, Tommo is not unduly perturbed by his inability to fathom particular aspects of Typee life; indeed, his narration seems to share something of the valley's pervading "quiet and repose". After all, although the Polynesian tongue is difficult to decipher, his interlocutors usually speak with a "running commentary of signs and gestures which it was impossible not to comprehend".[15] In most cases he manages to glean enough information to satisfy his curiosity, and to sustain a narrative which is intended, at least in part, as a repository of facts about the region and its people. As Melville puts it in his introductory chapter: "There is no cluster of islands [...] of which so little has hitherto been known as the Marquesas,

[12] Ibid., p.171.
[13] Ibid., p.176.
[14] Ibid., pp.184-185.
[15] Ibid., p.114.

and it is a pleasing reflection that this narrative of mine will do something towards withdrawing the veil from regions so romantic and beautiful."[16]

Melville's experiences in the Pacific clearly taught him something about the limits of cognition, and, perhaps, the relative nature of human beliefs and practices. But in both *Typee* and its picaresque sequel, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847), the reader is left in no doubt that the protagonist's epistemological difficulties will subside when, as planned, he returns to genteel America. The failures of his understanding rarely provoke a more general reflection on the nature of knowledge or truth. Now compare Tommo's genial protestations of ignorance with the following passage from "A Calm", the second chapter of *Mardi*, in which the narrator Taji evokes the psychological turbulence prompted in a sailor by a sudden oceanic stillness:

> At first he is taken by surprise, never having dreamt of a state of existence where existence itself seems suspended. He shakes himself in his coat, to see whether it be empty or no. He closes his eyes, to test the reality of the glassy expanse. He fetches a deep breath, by way of experiment, and for the sake of witnessing the effect. If a reader of books, Priestley on Necessity occurs to him; and he believes that old Sir Anthony Absolute to the very last chapter. His faith in Malte Brun [a French-Danish geographer], however, begins to fail; for the geography, which from boyhood he had implicitly confided in, always assured him, that though expatiating all over the globe, the sea was at least margined by the land. That over against America, for example, was Asia. But it is a calm, and he grows madly skeptical. [...] To his alarmed fancy, parallels and meridians become emphatically what they are merely designated as being: imaginary lines drawn on the earth's surface. The log assures him that he is in such a place; but the log is a liar; for no place, nor any thing possessed of a local angularity, is to be lighted upon in the watery waste. At length horrible doubts overtake him... (pp.9-10)

[16] Ibid., p.12.

Taji recounts this startling episode in the third person, a rhetorical manoeuvre that not only lends the passage a universal resonance, but also suggests that he needed to reach for a more detached and tolerable key in order to render the true horror of the experience. Doubt, here, is figured as a terrible predicament that is not easily escaped. The chapter builds to a climactic image of bodily transformation, as, like Kafka's Gregor Samsa, the sailor's flesh seems to transmogrify into a sort of hollow carapace: "His voice begins to grow strange and portentous. He feels it in him like something swallowed too big for his oesophagus. It keeps up a sort of involuntary interior humming in him, like a live beetle. His cranium is a dome full of reverberations. The hollows of his bones are as whispering galleries" (p.10).

How to account for the new tone struck in this strange sequence? One possible answer is supplied by the previous chapter, in which Taji announces that he has grown bored with life aboard the *Arcturion*, a whaling ship plying the Pacific. His "bitter impatience" with the "monotonous craft" (p.3-4) derives not simply from the lack of action on board, but also from the dearth of enlightened discussion. He tells us that "there was no soul to magnet mine". The captain "had a tongue for a sailor [...] but what of that? Could he talk sentiment or philosophy? Not a bit. His library was eight inches by four: Bowditch, and Hamilton Moore" (p.5). These two authors wrote navigational textbooks; Taji clearly longs for deeper intellectual stimulation.

So, too, did Melville. In 1847, having moved with his wife Elizabeth from Albany to downtown New York, he scoured the Public Library and Duyckinck's well-stocked shelves for books that would satisfy his escalating intellectual ambitions, such as Montaigne's *Essais*, Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, and a number of (as yet undetermined) texts by Jonathan Swift, along with more recognisably

philosophical works.[17] His background reading for *Typee* and *Omoo* had centred on narratives that he had by now come to disdain as litanies of "unvarnished facts";[18] indeed, the preface to the latter, penned as *Mardi* was already taking shape, specifically stated that the book carried "no pretensions to philosophic research",[19] as if to distinguish it from the grander work to which he now aspired.

When Taji comments on his "monotonous craft", then, the noun may well be freighted with a double meaning, referring also to Melville's impatience with his own "craft" as a writer, which had heretofore been restricted by the confines of the travelogue genre. As Milder writes, Taji's dissatisfaction with commonplace life seems in some sense to allegorise Melville's own "awakening hunger [...] for the speculative, the melancholic, the meaning-laden".[20] As is registered in the passage quoted above, however, philosophical speculation is not to be undertaken lightly, as it can open up new and daunting oceans of thought. Taji's distress may well be informed by Melville's experiences at sea,[21] but it is couched more obviously in terms of reading.[22] That peculiar construction "local angularity" – which carries a

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[17] See Merton Sealts' invaluable *Melville's Reading* (Columbia: University of Southern Carolina Press, 1988). For a useful discussion of specific influences on *Mardi*, see Wenke, *Melville's Muse*, pp.3-26. The reading of Swift in this period is suggested by the journalist Thomas Powell's comments about Melville's tendency to "stuff himself with Swift, Rabelais and Browne". As Hershel Parker notes, Powell was in a position to know Melville's reading habits as he had previously discussed them with Duyckinck. See Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography – Volume 2 1851-1891*, p.277.

[18] He used this phrase in a rather dismissive review of J. Ross Browne's *Etchings of a Whale Cruise* in February of 1847. See Melville; Sealts (ed.), *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860* (Evanston: and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), p.205.

[19] Melville, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (London: Penguin, 2007), p.3.

[20] Milder, *Exiled Royalties*, p.33.

[21] Cf. Mary K. Bercaw Edwards' valuable account of how Melville's years at sea – particularly the intensification of self felt during still, stifling Pacific afternoons – influenced his writing. "[His] sea-stories, surprisingly, are most often set in the midst of calms [...] calms breed intensity that can lead to metaphysical storms." Edwards, "Ships, Whaling and the Sea", in Kelley (ed.), *A Companion to Herman Melville*, pp.90-91.

[22] This point is well made by Cindy Weinstein in her reading of *Mardi* in *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.91-92. See also Bryan Collier Short's discussion of "A Calm", in which he too associates Taji's discomfort with Melville's new direction as a philosophical novelist. *Cast by Means of*

subtle echo of Emerson's phrase "the solid angularity of facts"[23] – implies that Taji's interest in "sentiment and philosophy" has led him away from the clearly delineated waypoints of empirical knowledge. This may explain the repeated use of words beginning with "ex" (*ex*istence, *ex*panse, *ex*periment, *ex*patiate, *ex*ample): in Latin the prefix means literally "out" or "beyond", and in deploying it Melville deepens the sense that the sailor has progressed past conventional modes of thought. (Incidentally, there are shades, here, of Wittgenstein's idea that when we move away from "everyday" cognition and try to master philosophical concepts, we find ourselves on "slippery ice where there is no friction", no solid epistemological ground on which to gain purchase.[24])

All this suggests that Melville had read something that led him to reflect on the nature of uncertainty, and Descartes may well have been in the mix.[25] In Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Melville would have come across a discussion of the "Cartesian opinion", phrased in maritime metaphors that he would no doubt have found congenial:

> Here I found myself all afloat. Doubts rushed in; broke upon me 'from the heavens of the great deep' and fell 'from the windows of heaven'. The frontal truths of natural religion and the books of Revelation alike contributed to the flood; and it was long ere my ark touched on Ararat, and rested. [...] I began to ask myself, what proof I had of the outward existence of anything? Of this sheet of paper for instance, as a thing in itself, separate from the phenomenon or image in my

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Figures: Herman Melville's Rhetorical Development (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), pp.64-66.

[23] "Time dissipates to shining ether the solid angularity of facts." Emerson, "History", in *Essays and Lectures*, p.240.

[24] Ludwig Wittgenstein; P.M.S. Hacker, Joachim Schulte (eds.), *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Hacker, Schulte, G.E.M. Anscombe (London: Blackwell, 2009), §107, p.51.

[25] I will in this thesis, when the evidence is compelling, claim that Melville was directly influenced by one passage or another. But it is for the most part difficult to argue for the exclusivity of any particular source. Instead, I look to tease out instances of what John Wenke has called the "uncanny interplay of echoing themes" in Melville's resources, as in the coincidence I examine here between *Mardi*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and the Cartesian *Meditations*. See *Melville's Muse*, p.17.

> perception. I saw, that in the nature of things such proof is impossible.[26]

Here Coleridge probably had in mind Descartes' *Meditations On First Philosophy* (1641), in which reflection is – to use Melville's own phrase – wedded to water: "[My thoughts have] filled my mind with so many doubts that it is no longer in my power to forget them [...] just as if I had all of a sudden fallen into very deep water, I am so disconcerted that I can neither make certain of setting my feet on the bottom, nor can I swim or support myself on the surface."[27]

As this quotation from the Second Meditation suggests, Descartes had in the course of his musings extended the limits of doubt to an unsettling degree. He entertained what has become known as "methodological" scepticism, in order to demonstrate that it is possible to overcome its premises and gain a position of indubitable certainty. But in doing so, like a magician whose illusions expand beyond the sphere of his own control, he made the problem a much more wide-ranging and corrosive one than had previously been considered. His decisive contribution was the famous thought experiment of the "*malin génie*":

> I shall then suppose that some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity. [...] I may at least do what is in my power and with firm purpose avoid giving credence to any false thing, or being imposed upon by this arch deceiver. But this task is a laborious one, and insensibly a certain lassitude leads me into the course of my ordinary life. And just as a captive who in sleep enjoys an imaginary liberty, when he begins to suspect that his liberty is but a dream, fears to awaken [...] so insensibly of my own accord I fall back into my former opinions,

[26] Samuel Taylor Coleridge; H.J. Jackson (ed.), *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.258.
[27] Descartes; Enrique Chavez-Arvizo (ed.), *Key Philosophical Writings* (London: Wordsworth, 1997), p.139.

> and I dread awakening from this slumber, lest the laborious wakefulness which would follow the tranquility of this repose should have been spent not in daylight, but the excessive darkness of the difficulties which have just been discussed.[28]

The Ancient Greek philosophers had been willing to consider the idea that a belief may be false, even the notion that one may be dreaming at any given moment.[29] But here Descartes "universalises" the problem of scepticism. As one scholar puts it, Descartes' nightmarish evil genius conceit marks the transition from the supposition that "*any* of my beliefs might be mistaken" to the supposition that "*all* my perceptual beliefs might be mistaken". The penumbral shadow of Cartesian doubt covers "almost all beliefs about the external world".[30]

There is ongoing debate about what it was that allowed Descartes to take this radical step, and most think it has to do with his dualism, which separates mind from body and, in doing so, opens up a gap between self and world – or, more specifically, a given sensory experience and its cause – into which doubt can better insinuate itself. What is clear is that Descartes' response to scepticism, which was rooted in his famous formulation "*Cogito ergo sum*" (I think therefore I am, or, because I am conscious of myself as a thinking being then I must exist), did not seem quite equal to the spectacular doubt that he entertained in order to generate it. The *malin génie* was out of the bottle.

Now, if I am right in assuming that Melville's reading made him aware of Descartes, and that the grim spectre of doubt stalks *Mardi*'s "madly skeptical" opening, then this would explain the shift in tone that separates Melville's third novel from his earlier Polynesian travelogues. The failures of Tommo's knowledge

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[28] Ibid., pp.138-139.
[29] Both Socrates (in the *Theaetetus*) and Aristotle (in his *Metaphysics*) discuss the possibility of confusing dreams with reality. See José Luis Bermúdez, "Cartesian Skepticism: Arguments and Antecedents", in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, pp.61-62.
[30] Ibid., p.63.

never prove particularly troubling because they are ascribed to straightforward differences in cultural norms, and are therefore limited to specific contexts. Taji's doubts, on the other hand, have a much deeper phenomenological basis, and lead to a more radical questioning of his own knowledge. As with Descartes, he suspects the "reality of the glassy expanse", even "existence itself".

However, *Mardi* does not simply dramatise Cartesian doubt, but also seeks to formulate ways of evading it. As we will see, Melville uses his narrative strategies to trace two very different escape routes from scepticism: an anti-intellectual acceptance of common sense, and an attempt to grasp absolute certainty. These responses can be associated with opposing literary and philosophical paths that emerged in the eighteenth century, as various thinkers argued over the *Meditations*: the one leads us back, by way of Thomas Reid and Jonathan Swift, to the Pyrrhonist fideism of Montaigne, while the other leads us forward, by way of Berkeley, to Kant and the Romantics.[31]

2. Common Sense

Berkeley and Swiftian Irony

One of the problems left open by Descartes was the link between one's ideas and what is known as the "external world". Even if one grants that the *Cogito* is true, one must still bridge the gap between the operations of one's own mind and the substance of one's physical surroundings if one is to claim knowledge concerning

[31] In this formulation I deliberately echo Thomas H. Huxley, who writes: "[There are] two paths opened up to us in [Descartes'] 'Discourse on the Method', the one leads, by way of Berkeley and Hume, to Kant and Idealism; while the other leads, by way of La Mettrie and Priestley, to modern physiology and Materialism." I have chosen to emphasise the tradition of philosophical common sense, which was a clearer influence on Melville's work than the materialist doctrine. Quoted in Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*, p.28.

those surroundings – pondering this problem is what led Berkeley to his peculiar doctrine of *esse est percipi*. Berkeley wanted to refute scepticism, but in the process "inadvertently [committed] himself" to doubt by opening the door to total subjectivism.[32] This meant that he, like Descartes, was considered a sceptic by many of his contemporaries, and attracted their scorn accordingly.

Melville alludes to Berkeleyan immaterialism in chapter 20 of *Mardi*, "Noises and Portents". After Taji and his friend, the grizzled and taciturn Jarl, escape the *Arcturion* in a stolen boat, they come across a seemingly abandoned brigantine. Boarding this mysterious vessel, they are troubled by rumblings in the hold. Taji endeavours to explain the sounds as "the creakings and wheezings" of the rotting timbers, but Jarl suspects the presence of "goblins", and even begins to doubt that the brigantine is real at all; he takes her for an "arrant imposter, a shade of a ship", like the Flying Dutchman of legend. Nevertheless, he takes the helm and safely navigates the surrounding reefs. Taji reflects on his friend's ability to overcome his fears:

> And here be it said, that despite all his superstitious misgivings about the brigantine; his imputing to her something equivalent to a purely phantom-like nature, honest Jarl was nevertheless exceedingly downright and practical in all hints and proceedings concerning her. Wherein, he resembled my Right Reverend friend, Bishop Berkeley – truly, one of your lords spiritual – who, metaphysically speaking, holding all objects to be mere optical delusions, was, notwithstanding, extremely matter-of-fact in all matters touching matter itself. Besides being pervious to the points of pins, and possessing a palate capable of appreciating plum-puddings: – which sentence reads off like a pattering of hailstones. (pp.62-63)[33]

[32] See Robert A. Imlay, "Berkeley and Scepticism: A Fatal Dalliance", in *Hume Studies* Vol.XVII, No.2 (Nov. 1992), 501-510, p.501.

[33] One might compare this to a markedly similar scene in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which Marlow, absorbed by the mechanics of piloting a rusty steamboat up the Congo river, is able to forget his forebodings about his "unearthly" jungle surroundings: "I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man." Conrad;

Melville makes a cogent philosophical point. Berkeley might have speculated that the material world is an illusion, but he shelved those thoughts when he came to interact with it. Thoroughgoing epistemological doubt, in other words, is incompatible with life's everyday considerations; "matter", as Melville's repeated emphasis on the noun makes clear, will always obtrude. The simile in the final sentence refers us not just to the cadence of Melville's own prose, but also, perhaps, to the "pattering of hailstones" against a window, a sound that rouses the philosopher from his reverie and reminds him of the existence of a world beyond the study.

In passages such as these Melville can be seen to respond to the anti-sceptical discourses I highlighted in my introductory arguments. In "A Calm" Taji invokes "Priestley on Necessity", as if appealing to determinism to allay his sceptical fears; here, he seems closer to Scottish realists like Thomas Reid. Nevertheless, "Noises and Portents" has a lightness of tone that is lacking from Reid's somewhat dour and pragmatic writings. As the reference to Berkeley shows, Melville knew that the best way to draw attention to the "absurdity" of immaterialism was through the adoption of a specific literary mode: irony. Melville is clearly making fun. The second sentence of the quoted passage, with its nested clauses and sprinkling of commas, has a stop-start quality that is perhaps intended as a pastiche of Berkeley's own, cumbrous style. Consider also Melville's juxtaposition of first- and second-person possessive phrases in a way that draws attention to the contradiction between Berkeley's humanity ("my Right Reverend Friend") and his

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Robert Hampson (ed.), *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.63. Mark Wollaeger interprets this passage as Marlow's attempt to define his work as a "refuge" from sceptical doubt: "One needs to shield oneself in work, here defined as part of surface reality, in order to escape the vague threat of a hidden, second-order reality." *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*, pp.62-63.

metaphysics ("your lord spiritual"). That "your" is also, of course, a chummy nod from Melville to his readers – he wants us to share in the joke.

Melville's mocking dismissal of the sceptic has its literary ancestors. Boswell reports a conversation with Johnson about Berkeley's idealism: "Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, 'I refute it *thus.*'" In a similar vein, whenever Berkeley called on his neighbour Jonathan Swift, "Swift refused to open the door, declaring that if it was merely a collection of Berkeley's ideas, he ought to be able to walk right through it or wish it away".[34] Swift, as this anecdote suggests, thought little of scepticism, and he reserved his most vituperative criticism for Descartes. In the allegorical "The Battle of the Books", published as a prolegomena to Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), a fictionalised version of Descartes is hit by an arrow loosed by a superior thinker, and is sucked into a "vortex" of his own making: "Des-Cartes it hit; The Steel Point quickly found a Defect in his Head-piece, it pierced the leather and the Past-board, and went in at his Right Eye [...] Death, like a Star of superior influence, drew him into his own *vortex*."[35]

In the chapter "A Digression Concerning Madness" in *A Tale of a Tub* proper, Swift includes Descartes in his roster of the "introducers of new schemes in philosophy" who "take it into [their] heads to advance new systems, with such an eager zeal, in things agreed on all hands impossible to be known". To challenge such a project, Swift's narrator, a Grub Street hack, develops a sort of ad hominem argument to the effect that intellectuals like Descartes are afflicted by what he calls "the circulation of a vapour or spirit" that leads eventually to madness. (Swift probably had in mind Descartes' references to "dark bilious vapours" in his

[34] See Alan Musgrave, *Common Sense, Science and Scepticism: A Historical Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.127.
[35] Swift; Ernest Rhys (ed.), *A Tale of a Tub, The Battle of the Books and Other Satires* (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1811), p.160.

Meditations,[36] or the important role played by "vapour" in his writings on physiology and meteorology.[37]) For Swift, Descartes' self-sealing solipsism becomes a buffoonish big-headedness, an insane tendency to reduce the world to his own perception of it. Swift goes on to arraign any "pretended philosophy which enters into the depths of things", and, on the basis that "credulity is a more peaceful possession of the mind, than curiosity", advises that we trust the evidence of our senses.[38]

Melville read Swift while writing *Mardi*, and may well have been influenced by his ironic treatment of the sceptic. Consider the characterisation of Babbalanja, a Polynesian philosopher in whose company Jarl and Taji cruise around the Mardian archipelago. Babbalanja is a caricatured mixture of Descartes and Berkeley: he advances "a brutality of indiscriminate skepticism", holding that "things visible are but conceits of the eye" (p.284), and that objects inaccessible to vision do not, properly construed, "exist" at all. His fellow travellers find this idea ridiculous, and the leader of the group, Media, makes it the subject of a rather convoluted jape: "Supposing you had a wife, Babbalanja, would you deem it sensible in her to imagine you no more, because you happened to stroll out of her sight? [...] Assume that, returning home, you found her newly wedded, under the metaphysical presumption, that being no longer visible, *you* had departed this life. What then, my dear prince?" (pp.489-490). Babbalanja rejoins that he would challenge his rival to a duel, which only goes to prove Media's point that scepticism is incompatible with everyday common sense. As he puts it: "Babbalanja, your philosophy is but a

[36] Descartes, *Key Philosophical Writings*, p.135.
[37] For a rich discussion of Descartes' "vapours" see Arsić, *Passive Constitutions or 7 1/2 Times Bartleby* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). For Descartes, "every phenomenon comes about through different forces or intensities of attractions and repulsions of vapors".
[38] Swift, *Tale of a Tub*, pp.106-107; 110.

dream that seems true while it lasts; but waking again into the orthodox world, straightway you resume the old habit" (p.370).

Babbalanja is not, at least at first, put off by this sort of reproach. As with Descartes and Berkeley, his scepticism is the by-product of his search for truth, rather than an end in itself, and it is a quest he is loath to renounce: he is intent on reaching "the essence of things", "that which lies beneath the seeming, the precious pearl within the shaggy oyster" (p.352), and on training himself "down to the standard of what is unchangeably true" (p.390). But he seems to lack even Descartes' minimal faith in the *Cogito*, and his monologues begin to drift on ever widening ripples of existential paranoia:

> [Though] I have now been upon terms of close companionship with myself for nigh five hundred moons, I have not yet been able to decide who or what I am. To you, perhaps, I seem Babbalanja; but to myself, I seem not myself. All I am sure of, is a sort of prickly sensation all over me, which they call life; and, occasionally, a headache or a queer conceit admonishes me, that there is something astir in my attic. But how know I, that these sensations are identical with myself? For aught I know, I may be somebody else. At any rate, I keep an eye on myself, as I would on a stranger. There is something going on in me, that is independent of me. Many a time, have I willed to do one thing, and another has been done. I will not say by myself, for I was not consulted about it; it was done instinctively. My most virtuous thoughts are not born of my musings, but spring up in me, like bright fancies to the poet; unsought, spontaneous. Whence they come I know not. I am a blind man pushed from behind; in vain, I turn about to see what propels me. (p.456)

Babbalanja evokes an odd form of self-estrangement, drawing on a range of pronouns ("I", "me", "myself", "my", "self") as if to demonstrate that that such linguistic multiplicity reflects a deeper, ontological fragmentation. Intriguingly, the passage also implies that Babbalanja's scepticism regarding non-visible objects has begun to threaten his own sense of self. Notice the way Melville phonetically links pronouns with references to seeing (the rhyming constructions "to *see* what

propels *me*" and *"I* keep an *eye* on *my*self"), which suggests that self-awareness depends on vision – a problematic notion given that one is never, as it were, entirely visible to oneself.

Many of Melville's literary contemporaries explored the connection between vision and self. The imagistic compression and aural richness of the passage above recalls, for instance, Emily Dickinson's "Before I got my eye put out", in whose opening lines "I", "my" and "eye" are implicitly joined.[39] Dickinson's poem associates visual reach with possessive grasp ("The Meadows – mine/The Mountains – mine/All forests, Stintless stars/ As much of noon as I could take/ Between my finite eyes"), in much the same fashion as Emerson in his famous description of himself as a "transparent eye-ball; I am nothing, I see all".[40] Emerson's image has been read, by Myra Jehlen among others,[41] as collapsing together notions of vision, knowledge, and possession.

What I find interesting is Melville's probing at the dark converse of this idea (where Emerson's construction places the emphasis on the "*all*", Melville is preoccupied by the "*nothing*"). If we accept that one's sense of self, one's grasp of the world, depends on visual access, then what do we make of the fact that our own bodies are to a large degree invisible from our own point of view? Babbalanja's monologue conjures what Drew Leder has called the "absent body", the way it tends to recede from our own experience. Leder coins the term "dys-appearance" to refer to the epistemological difficulties raised by this problem,

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[39] Thomas H. Johnson (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (London: Faber, 1970), p.155.
[40] Emerson, "Nature", in *Essays and Lectures*, p.10.
[41] Jehlen sees the link between vision and possessiveness as an ideological trope that characterized nineteenth-century American literature. See *American Incarnation: The Individual, The Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp.11; 76-123.

which he sees as having prompted Descartes' original sense of doubt.[42] That scepticism in *Mardi* stems from a similar source is suggested in the chapter "Faith and Knowledge": "Though your ear be next to your brain, it is forever removed from your sight. Man has a more comprehensive view of the moon, than the man in the moon himself. We know the moon is round, he only infers it. It is because we are in ourselves, that we know ourselves not" (pp.296-297). (Cf. Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, which accounts for the sceptical position in strikingly similar terms: "The sceptical picture is one in which all our objects are moons. In which the earth is our moon. In which, at any rate, our position with respect to significant objects is rooted, the great circles which fix their front and back halves fixed in relation to it, fixed in our concentration as we gaze at them. The moment we move, the 'parts' disappear."[43])

If Swift were to respond to any of this, he would no doubt point to the link between the moon and madness. And Melville, too, despite the rich phenomenological detail with which Babblanja's scepticism is presented, is quite prepared to subject it to ridicule, to suggest it issues from a form of *lunacy*: "'He's stark, stark mad!', sighed Yoomy. 'Aye, the moon's at full', said Media" (p.421). As the novel progresses Babbalanja seems ever more deluded: anticipating Pierre Glendinning's tangled tautologies, he spouts statements such as "the mystery of mysteries is still a mystery" (p.389), and frequently speaks in tongues: "Gogle-goggle, fugle-fi, fule-fogle-orum!" (p.578). Media exhorts him to "drop your metaphysics man, and fall on to solids!" (p.387). Eventually, ravaged by a series of fits, he complies.

Towards the end of the novel, the party lands at the island of Serania, populated by a pious sect that preaches "mystic love". It is hardly a utopia – the

[42] Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p.1. On "dys-appearance" in Descartes, see pp.126-148.
[43] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p.202.

Serenians admit that their "social state" is "imperfect" – but it offers Babbalanja a refuge from his anguished philosophising. As he listens to the islanders describe their worship of Alma (perhaps an allegorical Christ figure) Babbalanja sinks to his knees and cries that "in *thee*, at last, I find repose [...] Gone, gone! are all distracting doubts. I have been mad. Some things there are, that one must not think of. Beyond one obvious mark, all human lore is in vain" (pp.627, 630). He says that "in things mysterious [I] will seek no more, but rest content with knowing aught but love", and eschews what he calls the "arrogance of knowing". Babbalanja's scepticism, then, leads finally to a renunciation of his philosophical project altogether, and a meek acceptance of "tranquility" and "repose".

Satire, Pyrrhonism, and Repose

Here Babbalanja displays just the sort of humble acceptance of finitude that the Swiftian ridicule of the sceptic was designed to bring about. As J.T. Parnell has argued,[44] Swift's objections to Descartes and Berkeley had as much to do with the presumed impiety of their interrogations of truth as it did the absurdity of their solipsism; Swift insists on an unbridgeable chasm between reason and faith. Swift was, in Harold Bloom's words, "the most savage and merciless satirist and ironist in the history of Western literature",[45] and his barbs were all the more cutting for their being directed at specific targets; in this case the epistemological aspirations of the sceptic, which he took as a threat to the Christian faith he preached in his capacity as a clergyman in the Irish branch of the Anglican Church.[46] Melville's

[44] See J.T. Parnell, "Swift, Sterne and the Skeptical Tradition", in Tom Keymer (ed.), *Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy: A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.23-50.
[45] Bloom, *Novelists and Novels* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), p.10.
[46] For a helpful discussion of Swift's parody, and its parallels with the conservative critiques of Descartes in the seventeenth century, see Michael R.G. Spiller, "The Idol of the

description of a captive school of fish in chapter 94 – "by the time they graduated, the salt was well out of them, like the brains out of some diplomaed collegians [...] the most unchristian, inhospitable, heartless and cold blooded of creatures" (p.288) – captures the tone of much of Swift's irony.[47]

Herein lies *Mardi*'s affinity with a particular genre of novel, the narrative satire or "anatomy", which deprecates individual claims to truth. Melville's adoption of the anatomy form was recognised as early as 1857, when the critic Fitz-James O'Brien described him as "a man born to create, who resolves to anatomize".[48] More recently, Samuel Otter has examined Melville's handling of this "heterogenous, omnivorous, encyclopaedic, rhetorically experimental, stylistically dense form, in which linguistic features – diction, syntax, metaphor – become the vehicle for intellectual inquiry".[49] It is true that the anatomy genre has historically served as a showcase for an author's erudition and curiosity, but Otter fails to mention that it has often also carried an *anti*-intellectual thrust: in juxtaposing so many ideas and perspectives the authority of any one of them is lessened.

As Anthony Cascardi writes, Descartes himself disliked the anatomy for just this reason, wary as he was of the "perspectival refractions generated by the

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Stove: The Background to Swift's Criticism of Descartes" in *The Review of English Studies,* Vol. 25, No.97 (Feb., 1974), pp.15-24.

[47] Both Melville and Swift were influenced by Robert Burton's miscellany *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), which might have informed the anti-intellectualism of their satire. Consider this passage: "For what matter is it for us to know how high the Pleiades are, how far distant Perseus and Casseiopea from us, how deep the sea, etc? We are neither wiser [...] nor modester, nor better, nor richer, nor stronger for the knowledge of it [...] I may say the same of those genethliacal studies, what is astrology, but vain elections, predictions? all magick, but a troublesome error, a pernicious foppery? physick, but intricate rules and prescriptions? philology, but vain criticisms? logick, needless sophisms? metaphysicks themselves, but intricate subtilties, and fruitless abstractions? alcumy, but a bundle of errors? To what end are such great tomes? why do we spend so many years in their studies? Much better to know nothing at all, as those barbarous Indians are wholly ignorant, than, as some of us, to be so sore vexed about unprofitable toyes; *stultus labor est ineptarium;* to build an house without pins, make a rope of sand; to what end?" *The Anatomy of Melancholy, Volume 1* (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1862), pp.480-481.

[48] Quoted in Otter, *Melville's Anatomies*, p.4.

[49] Ibid.

novel's constituent discourses".[50] Descartes saw that in presenting an array of different viewpoints novels such as *Don Quixote* (1605) undermined epistemological authority and the seriousness of philosophical investigation. More than this, anatomies often explicitly condemn or ridicule philosophy as an airy irrelevance. What *Mardi* shares with these works – and I think here of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564), Swift's own *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) in particular – is, along with a certain relish for scatological humour, a tendency to counter intellectual ambition with earthy and reductive common sense, a desire to cut the pompous philosopher down to size. As Frye writes in his definition of the genre, "a constant theme in the tradition is the ridicule of the *philosophus gloriosus* [...] the Menippean satirist sees [evil and folly] as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the *philosophus gloriosus* at once symbolises and defines".[51]

One thinks of those moments in *Gulliver's Travels* when the means and ends of rational inquiry are questioned, such as the Glubbdrubdib episode in which "new Systems of Nature" are derided as mere "Fashions" which flourish "but a short period of Time";[52] or Rabelais' depiction of the impractical *philosophe* Trouillogan (often described as a "sceptic"), who frustrates his companions by refusing to give a simple answer to straightforward queries.[53] Sterne's novel, too, tends to advance a "constant ridicule of philosophers and pedantic critics", endorsing instead the "'simple', Christian, 'common sense' beliefs, expounded at

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[50] Anthony Cascardi, "The Novel", in Richard Eldridge (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.166.
[51] Frye, "The Four Forms of Prose Fiction", p.590.
[52] Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1947), p.217.
[53] See especially Part III, chapter 36: "The Further Responses of Trouillogan [the name is sometimes translated as 'Wordspooler'], an Ephetic or uncommitted, and Pyrrhonian or Skeptical, Philosopher", in which the philosopher responds to queries with frustrating phrases like "as you please", "that depends" and "I would have thought so" – the effect is strangely reminiscent of Melville's obdurant copyist Bartleby. See Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Burton Raphael (London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1990), pp.334-338.

Figure 1. Der Philosoph Pyrrhon in stürmischer See (detail), by Hans Weiditz (1495-1537), date unknown

critical moments by Toby, Trim and Yorick".[54] For all its exuberent playfulness, *Tristram Shandy* often resolves into rather conservative aperçus that would seem to advise a sort of aquiescence. As Tristram himself puts it: "We live amongst riddles and mysteries – the most obvious things, which come our way, have dark sides, which the quickest sight cannot penetrate into [...] yet we find the good of it [...] *and that's enough for us*" (my emphasis).

For Swift, Sterne, and Rabelais, then, one function of the anatomy was to satirise the pursuit of truth. As scholars such as Parnell and Gregory Lynell have

[54] J.T. Parnell, "Swift, Sterne and the Skeptical Tradition", p.41.

demonstrated,[55] this tendency bears affinities with a more venerable (and very different) form of scepticism, that of Pyrrho, the aim of whose doctrine was the renunciation of claims to truth and the inculcation of *ataraxia*, or freedom from disquiet (something like the obverse of the Cartesian project). Pyrrhonian scepticism worked as a sort of mental purge that allowed the sceptic "to follow his natural inclinations, the appearances he is aware of, and the laws and customs of his society, without ever committing himself to judgement about them".[56] For this reason, later writers saw the Pyrrhonian method as a way of clearing away pretensions to truth and readying human beings for the unthinking reception of God's wisdom. Montaigne, for example, described the Pyrrhonian as "acknowledging [man's] natural weakness, fit to receive from above some outside power, stripped of human knowledge, and all the more apt to lodge divine knowledge in himself, annihilating his judgement to make more room for faith".[57] On this reading Pyrrhonism embodies an acceptance of weakness and the sublime unknowability of God – Swift, with his doctrine of "peaceful credulity", would no doubt have approved.[58]

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[55] Lynell writes that "Swift's 'fideist skeptic' convictions […] would lead him to question any human claim of unraveling the divine secrets of the universe". See "Swift's Caricatures of Newton: 'Taylor', 'Conjuror' and 'Workman in the Mint'" in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels* (New York: Infobase, 2009), pp. 101-119.

[56] Popkin, *The History of Skepticism*, p.xix.

[57] Montaigne; M.A. Screech (ed.), *The Complete Essays* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.858.

[58] In his discussion of Pyrrhonism, Montaigne quotes Corinthians 1:19-21: "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." Ibid., p.848. The inherent conservatism of Pyrrhonian scepticism is suggested by the fact that it became popular among the reactionary proponents of the Counter Reformation in the fifteenth century, who, like Montaigne, drew parallels with St. Paul, and adopted positions very similar to Pyrrho's in challenging Martin Luther's apostasy. Erasmus, for example, argued that since it was difficult in matters of faith "to distinguish truth from falsehood with certitude, it was better to let the the institution that had been making this distinction for centuries to take the responsibility". Likewise, the occult scientist Agrippa von Nettesheim wrote in 1526 that it was best to abandon truth in the interests of faith and the prevailing Catholic orthodoxy: "It is more profitable to be Idiotes, and knowe nothinge, to beleve by faith and charity, and to become the next unto God, [than to be] lofty and prowde through the

Montaigne's phrase "stripped of all human knowledge" brings to mind one of Pyrrho's most famous maxims, said to have been coined after the sceptic was briefly discomposed by the attentions of an aggressive dog: "It is difficult to strip oneself completely of being human."[59] It also illustrates a possibly apocryphal story about Pyrrho to which Montaigne refers elsewhere in his *Essais*. The tale, lifted from Diogenes Laertius' *The Lives of the Philosophers*, has the sceptic aboard a rocking boat in the middle of a tempest. Addressing his terrified fellow passengers, Pyrrho gestures to a pig contentedly eating food on deck, and advises everyone to try to emulate its apparent sense of calm. Montaigne thought that the anecdote provoked a number of questions: "To what end serves the knowledge of things if we thereby lose the tranquility and repose we should enjoy without it? And if it puts us into a worse condition than Pyrrho's hog?" Montaigne is calling on us to justify the search for truth when the alternative, "tranquility" and "repose", is so seductive. But Montaigne's defence of Pyrrho also contains a tacit admission that if we place too great an emphasis on peaceful, rustic, Christian common sense, at the expense of any deeper "knowledge of things", then we are at risk of losing the dignity conferred by a healthy curiosity about the world.

The drawbacks to thoroughgoing *ataraxia* are further suggested by another sixteenth-century rendering of Diogenes' tale, a painting by German artist Hans Weiditz named "The Philosopher Pyrrho in a Stormy Sea" (see Figure 1). Weiditz depicts the sceptic, clothed in Renaissance finery, gesturing to the snuffling hog while those around him cling desperately to the bulwarks and sails. A Latin inscription, emblazoned on the side of the vessel, reads: "*Oportere sapientem hanc illius imitari secruritatem*" ("It is right wisdom then that all imitate this security").

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subtilties of science and to fall into the possession of the Serpente." See *The History of Scepticism*, p.8-9.

[59] See David Sedley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.153.

Yet the image itself suggests that there is an absurdity in such a teaching. Where his contemporaries Aristotle or Archimedes might have used their knowledge to help save the vessel, perhaps drawing on astronomical or meteorological observations to pilot it to safety, the sceptic points idly and ridiculously to the creature at his feet. Weiditz's Pyrrho evinces not so much equanimity as a porcine indifference towards his surroundings. And such seems the fate of Babbalanja when he decides to remain on Serania, having concluded that "tranquility", rather than truth, is "the uttermost that souls may hope for" (pp.633, 636).[60]

3. The Romantic Quest

Kantian Antinomies

One narrative strand in *Mardi*, then, looks to contest Cartesian scepticism through an emphasis on the unthinking acceptance of one's immediate experience, an approach that brings Melville close to common-sense philosophy and the literary models developed by Swift, Sterne, and Rabelais. But Melville also considers another avenue of escape from Taji's "horrible doubts", one that lies not in an acceptance of epistemological limit, but rather in a quest after the absolute. To explicate this narrative strand we must follow a different path away from

[60] As John Seelye rightly puts it, Babbalanja's contentment involves "a surrender of self, a sort of death-in-life". Seelye, *Melville*: *The Ironic Diagram*, p.41. See also Merlin Bowen's argument that Babbalanja evinces a "humble acceptance of limit", a "submission". Bowen, *The Long Encounter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p.209. Babbalanja might be compared with other Melville characters whose geniality seems bound up with a lack of dignity, such as "Happy Jack" in *White-Jacket*, who shows an "invincible indifference [...] a fellow without shame, without a soul, without the least dignity of manhood". Jack, like Pyrrho, refuses to pass judgement on the injustices of his society; in his case, the flogging of innocent crew members aboard a naval warship. Melville, *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick* (New York: Library of America, 1998), p.369.

Descartes, one that leads us forward to the idealism of Immanuel Kant and his Romantic interlocutors.

As we have seen, Kant sought to defeat Cartesian scepticism by interrogating the *a priori* conditions by which we come to know the world. His ambition was in some sense therapeutic: he sought to restore the sense of epistemological calm that was lost with the advent of Cartesian doubt, and to furnish philosophy with the refuge of a "dwelling-place for permanent settlement".[61] I think we can appraise Kant's estimation of his own achievement in this regard if we consider his revision of one of Hume's nautical metaphors. The sceptic's anguish, the tortured self-questioning and doubt, is powerfully captured at the conclusion of Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), in which Hume describes his battle with "doubt and ignorance" as akin to "putting out to sea in a leaky weather beaten vessel". Compare the determinedly matter-of-fact tone of Kant's response:

> These *Prolegomena* will give them to understand that there exists a completely new science, of which no one had previously formed merely the thought, of which even the bare idea was unknown and for which nothing from all that has been provided before now could be used except the hint that Hume's doubts had been able to give; Hume also foresaw nothing of any such possible science, but deposited his ship on the beach of (scepticism) for safekeeping, where it could then lie and rot, whereas it is important to me to give it a pilot, who, provided with complete sea-charts and a compass, might safely navigate the ship wherever seems good to him, following sound principles of the nautical art drawn from a knowledge of the globe.[62]

As we have seen, Melville's Taji is prone to think that geographical charts are merely "imaginary lines", that the navigational "log is a liar". Kant looks to do

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[61] Kant; Patricia W. Kitcher (ed.), *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (New York: Hackett, 1996), pp.663, 697.

[62] Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, p.12. As we will see in chapter two, however, there is more than a hint of *mauvaise foi* in Kant's reading of Hume.

away with such doubts by securing our knowledge of the empirical world, allowing the sceptical sailor to continue serenely on his way.

However, as Cavell has wryly noted, Kant's "bargain with scepticism" came at such a high price that many were left thinking "thanks for nothing".[63] Even if one avoided the sort of misprision of Kant that generated Kleist's "crisis", the Kantian epistemology, in circumscribing human knowledge and placing "noumenal" certainty beyond reach, had dispiriting implications: one's access to truth was fundamentally limited. This problem was taken up by those within the European Romantic movement, which has been interpreted as the attempt to recapture in art the claims to absolute freedom and certainty that Kant relinquished in philosophy. As Nicholas Halmi puts it, the Romantics were "no longer content, as Diderot and Kant had been, to renounce noumenal truth for the sake of phenomenal knowledge, objective significance for the sake of subjective purposiveness […] They believed that knowledge of nature had to be guaranteed finally by participation in the absolute."[64]

Truth and Symbol

Melville seems to have been aware of Kant's reckoning with scepticism. Characters in *Mardi* reference both Kant and the "Abstract Noumenons" (p.561) of the first *Critique*, and Melville repeatedly dramatises the problem of curtailed perspective. In chapter 82, for example, we are introduced to an indolent Polynesian prince named Donjalolo, who seeks to come to a knowledge of the world beyond his island by sending out emissaries and having them report back to him. Taji and his troupe witness his discussion with two islanders who, after having been sent to a

[63] See *In Quest of the Ordinary*, p.31.
[64] Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.83.

coral reef, return with detailed descriptions and samples. But their accounts never quite cohere, prompting Donjalolo to muse on perspectival nature of truth:

> Oh Oro! how hard is truth to come at by proxy! Fifty accounts have I had of Rafona, none of which wholly agreed; and here, these two varlets, sent expressly to behold and report, these two lying knaves, speak crookedly both. How is it? Are the lenses in their eyes diverse-hued, that objects seem different to both; for undeniable is it, that the things they thus clashingly speak of are known for the same, though represented with unlike colors and quantities. (pp.249-250)[65]

Donjalolo does not doubt that the reef exists – the coral specimens are "known" to derive from the same place – but he is unable to determine which of his varlets is telling the truth, and eventually dashes the coral specimens against the ground in a fit of pique.

Later, Babbalanja tells an epistemological "nursery tale" that carries a similar import. "Nine blind men with uncommonly long noses" travel to the island of their birth, and search for the root of the banyan tree that stands at its centre. Groping around in the forest, each of them grasps what he thinks is the original trunk. In fact, they have fastened on to separate branches, unaware that the tree has grown so large that it covers the entire atoll: "The tree was so vast and its fabric so complex and its rooted branches so similar in appearance and so numerous, from the circumstance that every year had added to them, that it was quite impossible to determine the [original] point" (pp.355-356). When the blind

[65] This speech also, incidentally, comes remarkably close to the sceptical argument as it is described in Sextus Empiricus' *Hypotyposes*, or *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: "It is the differences among the most important parts of the body, especially to those which are naturally fitted for deciding and perceiving, that can produce the greatest conflict of appearances. For instance, people with jaundice say that what appears white to us is yellow, and people with blood suffusion in the eye say it is blood-red. Since, then, the eyes of some animals are yellow, of others blood-shot or white or some other colour, it is likely, I think, that their grasp of colours is different." Quoted in Julia Annas, Jonathan Barnes (eds.), *The Modes of Scepticism: Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.31, 34.

men realise their errors they fall to "beating each other with their staves". The tale emphasises the point that each of us is locked in the sphere of our own perception, with no way of adjudicating between perspectives.

Taji's solution to this problem is something like the polar opposite of Babbalanja's decision to forsake his truth-seeking ambitions and to rest content with "knowing aught but love". Taji dreams of *transcending* mortal perspective. At the end of the opening chapter, "Foot in Stirrup", he climbs the ship's masts and contrasts the "brown planks of the dull, plodding" vessel below him with the "visions" of the sky above:

> The entire western horizon high piled with gold and crimson clouds; airy arches, domes and minarets; as if the yellow, Moorish sun were descending behind some vast Alhambra. Vistas seemed leading to worlds beyond. To and fro, and all over the towers of this Nineveh in the sky, flew troops of birds. Watching them long, one crossed my sight, flew through a low arch, and was lost to view. My spirit must have sailed in with it...(p.8)

Taji imagines following the birds through heavenly palaces to "worlds beyond", and as he puts it later: "This new world here sought, is far stranger than his, who stretched his vans from Palos. It is the world of mind; wherein the wanderer may gaze round, with more of wonder than Balboa's band roving through the golden Aztec glades" (pp.556-557). The focus of the imagery on an Oriental elsewhere aligns him with various Romantic authors, from Byron's *The Corsair* (1814) to Southey's *Madoc* (1805), while the image of the soul in flight, as Leon Christopher Chai has speculated, may be a response to Keats' notion of the "viewless wings of poesy".[66]

What is clear is that this passage points us away from normal experience and towards a higher realm, a greater altitude of perception. In Melville's Swiftian,

[66] See Chai, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*, p.314.

common-sense mode, he encourages us to forget the threat of scepticism by paying attention to the quotidian detail of life, pouring scorn on Jarl's and Babbalanja's doubts and preaching an unconscious acceptance of the world as it is. But here he imagines a response to scepticism from above, as it were, rather than from below; one that rests on the attainment of exalted Truth. Taji has aspirations to immortality. When he first lands at Mardi, he attempts to "conciliate the natives" by telling them that he is a demi-God – "men of Mardi, I come from the sun" (pp.161, 163) – and this associates him with what Melville later calls, in a direct and alliterative address to the reader, "the great central Truth, sun-like and fixed forever in the foundationless firmament" (p.368).

The Romantic element in Melville's characterisation of Taji, and its consequences for his aesthetics, might be illustrated with reference to his essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850). Ostensibly a review of Hawthorne's story collection *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Melville's article becomes along the way something more akin to an aesthetic manifesto. Full of impeccably democratic – and obliquely self-serving – sentiments regarding the untapped potential of American literature, the piece also advances another, more elitist and Romantic view of art. Melville's conviction is that literary "men of genius" can reach places others cannot. He writes that the minds of men such as Hawthorne and Shakespeare both "soar to such a rapt height as to receive the irradiations of the upper skies" and "drop down into the universe like a plummet".[67] The latter phrase brings to mind both Taji's dive at the close of *Mardi* – "show me that which I seek, and I will dive with thee, straight through the world" (p.651) – and a description of Emerson that Melville had offered in a letter to Duyckinck in 1848:

[67] Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses", in Harrison Hayford, Merton Sealts (eds.), *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860*, pp.239,242.

> Now there is something about every man elevated above mediocrity which is, for the most part, instinctually perceptible. This I see in Mr. Emerson [...] I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more [...] I'm not [just] talking of Mr. Emerson now – but of all the corps of thought-divers, that have been diving and coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began.[68]

Melville's view seems to be that men "elevated above mediocrity" have access, albeit fleetingly, to glimpses of a plane beyond the mere surface appearances of things. These great artists, as he puts it in "Mosses", make "short, quick probings at the very axis of reality" and render their findings intelligible to mere mortals through the peculiar alchemy of literary creation, having mastered "the great Art of Telling the Truth – even though it be covertly, and by snatches".[69] Melville quotes with approval Hawthorne's statement that the "Artist" can "rise high enough to achieve the Beautiful", and, through the creation of a literary "symbol", render it "perceptible to mortal senses".[70] In this way, the symbolic work provides a gateway between heaven and earth, like Jacob's ladder: "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (Gen. 28:18). Not for nothing does Melville liken Hawthorne to an angel in his review.

As Sacvan Bercovitch has demonstrated, America had a native tradition of Puritan symbolism that directed attention towards the immanence of God in everyday life.[71] But it seems to me that Melville's account of symbolism might more productively be read alongside the British Romantics and their German influences. Kant's contemporary Fichte, for example, conceived of symbolic artists

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[68] Melville; Lynn Horth (ed.),*Correspondence* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p.121.
[69] "Hawthorne and His Mosses", p.244.
[70] Ibid., p.239.
[71] See "From Hermeneutics to Symbolism" in Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp.109-136.

in much the same way as Melville in "Mosses", depicting "literary men" as a "perpetual priesthood, standing forth generation after generation, the dispensers and living types of God's everlasting wisdom, to show it and embody it in their writings and actions".[72] For Fichte, art – and more specifically a particular form of narrative – is the place where the Kantian antinomies of phenomena and noumena might be elided, and epistemological doubt definitively overcome. As Bernd Fisher puts it, the symbolically freighted novel that became popular in the wake of Kant – Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1799, translated into English in 1842) is the finest example – "represented the Romantic solution to the epistemological disorder" of scepticism.[73]

The aesthetic method of this literary genre lay in what Goethe described as "*a living momentary* revelation of the Inscrutable".[74] As Paul Kluckhohn writes, a work like *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is not realistic nor allegorical but properly "symbolic" in that it aims "to show the immanence of transcendence in this life, the essential nature of the divine in the earthly".[75] Novalis himself described his project as an attempt to show the "true bonds of connection between subject and object".[76] His eponymous hero dreams of a blue flower, which manifests the link between material and immaterial realms, and embarks on a quest for it that sheds reflexive light on the aesthetic ambitions of the writer. The intention of the Romantic novel was, then, to both depict in narrative terms a journey towards the ideal and, in its rendering of symbol, to allow the author himself to grasp a transcendent Truth.

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[72] I use Carlyle's phrase, from *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (Philadelphia: A.Hart, 1852), p.64. This was a volume Melville had read (he purchased a copy from his publisher John Wiley in 1849).
[73] Bernd Fisher, *A Companion to the Works of Heinrich Von Kleist* (New York: Camden House, 2003), p.115.
[74] Quoted in René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950, Volume I: The Later Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.211. I emphasise the adjective to bring out the parallel with Melville's notion of getting at Truth "by snatches".
[75] Quoted in Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.212.
[76] Ibid., p.210.

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a key influence on Melville's work, adopts a similar approach. Coleridge describes a quest beyond the "line", which noun denotes not simply the equator but a metaphorical barrier that delimits human experience and understanding. In his reading of the poem, Cavell argues that the line can be interpreted as the epistemological demarcation point "implied in Kant's *Critique*, below and beyond which knowledge cannot penetrate [...] on Kant's view the effort to breach it creates, for example, skepticism and fanaticism, efforts to experience what cannot be humanly experienced. Coleridge's poem demonstrates that Kant's lined-off region can be experienced and that the region below the line has a definite, call it a frozen, structure."[77] In other words, Coleridge's mariner is dissatisfied with Kant's "settlement" with scepticism, seeking to grasp the certainty of the *Ding an Sich*. At the same time as he depicts this transcendent voyage Coleridge develops an array of symbols, such as the slayed albatross, that signal his own intention to reach for an aesthetic absolute, to evoke the "translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal" flow of his poetry.[78]

This literary tradition might help us to make sense of *Mardi*'s intermittent flashes of grandiosity. Consider Melville's treatment of Ofo, the peak that lies at the centre of the titular island chain. The name of this mountain is phonetically aligned with the name for the Polynesian deity, "Oro", a semblance that, as Chai puts it, "evokes the idea of a divine presence visibly embodied at the centre of the Mardian archipelago". Melville evokes this presence in glittering prose:

> Towering above all, and midmost, rose a mighty peak; one fleecy cloud sloping against its summit; a column wreathed. Beyond, like purple steeps in heaven at set of sun, stretched far away, what seemed lands on lands, in

[77] Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, p.50.
[78] See Coleridge's account of symbolic writing in "The Statesman's Manual" (1816), in *The Major Works*, p.661.

> infinite perspective. Gliding on, the islands grew more distinct; rising up from the billows to greet us, revealing hills, vales, and peaks, grouped within a milk-like zone of reef, so vast, that in the distance all was dim. The jeweled vapors, erewhile hovering over these violet shores, now seemed to be shedding their gems; and as the almost level rays of the sun, shooting through the air like a variegated prism, touched the verdant land, it trembled all over with dewy sparkles. (p.160)

As Coleridge writes in *The Statesman's Manual* (1816), the symbol should be concretely realised, both suggestive of the divine and, crucially, "*[partaking] of the reality which it renders intelligible* [...] itself a living part in that unity of which it is representative [my emphasis]".[79] Melville's depiction of Ofo, as it appears briefly beyond the scudding clouds, would seem to satisfy these conditions. His attention to shape, light, and colour – the "purple" of the sky, the "verdant" land and the "milky" white reefs form a kaleidoscopic but finely delineated palette – ensures that the passage is not lost in any mystical or oneiric vagueness. Melville subtly dramatises Taji's desire to scale Ofo's heights – the narrator names his boat *Chamois,* after a species of sure-footed alpine antelope – and, in his description of the mountain seems himself to reach for an aesthetic absolute, for a point at which the author might command, if only for one brief instant, an "infinite perspective".

Melville aligns his own aesthetics with Taji's quest again at the novel's close. After Babbalanja has decided to remain on Serenia, we find Taji eager to continue in his pursuit of the lost maiden Yillah, who has come to personify an ideal, Melville's answer to Novalis' blue flower.[80] Like the eponymous hero of Melville's epic poem *Clarel*, who "abjures the simple joy/And hurries the briny world away", Taji is impervious of his friends' entreaties for him to remain in the bucolic idyll, and takes off alone into the ocean: "The mystery I die to fathom [...] Why put back? Is a life of dying worth living o'er again? Let me, then, be the unreturning

[79] Ibid.
[80] Yillah is "more than mortal [...] really divine" (pp.137, 139).

wanderer. The helm! By Oro, I will steer my own fate, old man. – Mardi, farewell!" He reaches the "outer barrier", the reef that encircles the archipelago, and, like Coleridge's mariner breaching the equatorial line, "*darted* through" to continue his journey over "the endless sea" (pp.653-654). Notice the similarities between the imagery here and Melville's definition of great artists in the Hawthorne essay as those who make "*short, quick probings* at the very axis of reality". Melville is, I think, both dramatising Taji's continuing quest and providing a subtle commentary on his own method, his ambition to "dart" through conventional forms in order to render, for a brilliant moment, the lineaments of the "True" and the "Beautiful".

4. Sceptical Chiaroscuro

Despite the gestures to the Romantics, however, and the odd, powerfully descriptive scene, *Mardi* makes for an unconvincing symbolic work, lacking as it does the authorial precision brought to bear by Novalis or Coleridge. (Indeed, at times Melville's careless handling of imagery would seem to have more in common with what Coleridge decried as "abstract" and "shapeless" allegories.[81]) In any case, it is difficult for the reader to reconcile the earnest literariness of the Ofo sequence with the corrosive anti-intellectual satire arrayed elsewhere in the novel, whose thrust is encapsulated in Taji's pithy aside "Kant be forgotten" (p.13). An early critic's description of the book as "a transcendental *Gulliver*"[82] strikes me as particularly apposite: an oxymoronic phrase for an oxymoronic novel.

[81] It is, for instance, occasionally difficult to tell whether Melville envisaged the Mardian archipelago as a tropical or temperate environment: at one point Taji spies a moose swimming through the coral seas (p.615). For Coleridge's distinction between symbolism and allegory see *The Major Works*, p.661.

[82] The review ran in the New York Examiner on March 31, 1848. Quoted in Elizabeth Foster's "Historical Note" in *Mardi*, p.666.

Needless to say, *Mardi* was not a commercial success. In a half-apologetic letter to Richard Bentley, his publisher in England, Melville wrote that "you may think in your own mind that a man is unwise – indiscreet, to write a work of [this] kind, when he might have written one perhaps, merely to please the general reader […] But some of us scribblers, My Dear Sir, always have something unmanageable in us, that bids us to do this or that, and be done it must – hit or miss."[83] The problem, however, was not so much that Melville had done this or that; it was that he had done this *and* that. He had written what amounted to two books in one – Romantic journey jostling with genial satire – and no wonder readers were confused.

There were antecedents in America for the novel's "intellectual quest" elements. Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), for example, features a journey to the Southern polar regions that comes to be associated with the pursuit of a higher "Truth". Similar themes had underpinned Poe's intriguing story of 1833, "MS. Found In a Bottle", which is recounted by a narrator who expresses a love for "the German moralists" and for sceptical thought ("the Pyrrhonism of my opinions has at all times rendered me notorious").[84] He writes his manuscript while on a ghostly ship tenanted by mute sailors, heading south to an unknown destination, and is both intrigued and horrified by the prospect of the "exciting knowledge" he might discover there: "To conceive the horror of my sensations is, I presume, utterly impossible – yet a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death. It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge – some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is

[83] Melville, *Correspondence*, pp.131-132.
[84] *Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1985), p.1.

destruction."[85] The notion of a secret to be "penetrated" in the name of "knowledge" anticipates Taji's own perilous quest after Truth in the final stages of *Mardi*.

The comic elements in Melville's novel, meanwhile, might have found approval with readers of the fictions of Washington Irving. As John Evelev has perceptively shown, the "mildly mocking tone" Melville's narration adopts when discussing overtly philosophical matters mirrors Irving's "adaptation of the eighteenth-century litterateur's habit of displaying his learning lightly in order to avoid pedantry".[86] (Melville was not the only American writer of his time to draw on the satirical modes of eighteenth-century fiction.) If he had stuck to either one of these registers then *Mardi* might have been more warmly received. What is bewildering about the book is its willingness to encompass both modes – the dark Romance and the bathetic comedy – in writing that must have looked, to those of Melville's contemporaries minded to reach for native comparisons, something like a weird compound of Irving and Poe.[87]

The few modern Melville scholars who have engaged in detail with *Mardi* have accounted for its odd structure in different ways. For critics such as Richard H. Brodhead, it is simply a function of the novel's status as the "first draft of [Melville's] subsequent works": the intention was to lay out a number of ideas in inchoate form, ready to be developed later on.[88] Others, such as John Seelye, have argued that *Mardi* expresses a "divided attitude toward the existential problem" that goes to the root of Melville's theology.[89] Milder, in *Exiled Royalties*, argues that

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[85] Ibid., p.7.
[86] John Evelev, *Tolerable Entertainment: Herman Melville and Professionalism in Antebellum New York* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), p.54-58.
[87] "The language possess all the quality of an Irving", wrote one contemporary critic. Higgins and Parker (eds.), *The Contemporary Reviews*, p.223.
[88] Brodhead, "*Mardi:* Creating the Creative", in Faith Pullin (ed.), *New Perspectives on Melville* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1968), p.50.
[89] Seelye, *Melville: The Ironic Diagram*, p.39.

the Taji/Babbalanja dichotomy might be traced to the author's own "divisions of mind and temperament" – which are seen to derive from his peculiar position as sailor-cum-*philosophe* – and to his engagement with Romanticism. Milder considers *Mardi* alongside the Romantic tendencies outlined in Schiller's aesthetic credo *Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1795), and argues that the novel registers a shift from the "Romantic quest narrative [to a] Victorian recognition of intellectual limits".[90] This reading is compelling, but I think that in examining *Mardi* in Romantic and Victorian contexts Milder overlooks the influence of earlier authors, from Rabelais to Berkeley to Swift. It is precisely Melville's juggling of pre- and post-Romantic literary modes that lends the novel its peculiar stylistic contrasts.

At first Melville attempts to effect a synthesis of these modes in Taji's singular narrative voice. In the early stages of the narrative Taji both yearns for the transcendent and cleaves to the quotidian, and his ambivalence is registered at prose level, notably in the brief and beautifully turned chapters that recount the slow progress of the *Chamois* across the vastnesses of the Pacific. In "The Watery World is All Before Them", for instance, Taji moves from limning heroic knight errantry ("of the quaking recruit, three pitched battles make a grim grenadier [...] to yield the ghost proudly, and to march out of your fortress with all the honors of war, is not a thing of skin and bone") to ironic bathos ("'tis no great valor to perish sword in hand, and bravado on lip [...] even the alligator dies in his mail, and the swordfish never surrenders"). Similarly, in "Jarl Afflicted with the Lockjaw", he begins by musing with apparent seriousness on Jarl's lack of interest in conversation ("surely it was based upon no philosophic taciturnity [...] it was inconceivable that his reveries were Manfred-like and exalted, reminiscent of

[90] Milder, *Exiled Royalties*, p.32. I too see in Mardi "a recognition of intellectual limits", but for me the pertinent influence on this narrative strand is a pre-Romantic fideism that has its roots in a reaction against the scepticism of Descartes and Berkeley, just as the Taji strand has its roots in a reaction against the "bargain" with scepticism made by Kant.

unutterable deeds") before ending his speculation with a folksy, demotic twist ("he carried so lengthy a phiz"). When he describes the boat's coarses – "up, up – slowly up – toiling up the long, calm wave; then balanced on its summit for a while, like a plank on a rail; and down, we plunge headlong into the seething abyss, till arrested, we glide upward again" – he might just as well be referring to his own undulating rhetoric (pp.29-36).

But for the most part Melville's efforts to encapsulate the two tendencies within Taji's voice seem aesthetically clumsy. The narrator who pours scorn on Berkeley scarcely seems the same character as the solipsist of "A Calm", or indeed, the swashbuckling Romantic of "Foot in Stirrup". Melville's eventual recasting of the narrative as a rambling philosophic anatomy, around a third of the way through the novel, is perhaps an admission of his failure in this regard, because after this juncture opposed points of view are allocated to and expounded by different characters. Taji is subsumed in the dialogic to-and-fro, belatedly re-emerging as a thoroughgoing idealist in the final stages, while Media becomes the personification of the sort of conservative common sense to which Babbalanja finally submits.[91]

This gradual narrative bifurcation is reflected in Melville's imagery. As the book progresses it is increasingly marked by visual oppositions: the Mardian archipelago is depicted as a land of light and shade, with little dappled ground in-between.[92] Donjalolo's island provides perhaps the best example: his "House of the Morning" is an airy palace situated "on a natural mound, many rods square, almost completely filling in the recess between deep-green and projecting cliffs,

[91] In this I agree with John Wenke's point that in the latter stages of *Mardi* "ideas are dressed up as characters". Wenke, *Melville's Muse*, p.57.
[92] Taji's description of a sunset across the volcanic isle of Porpheero is characteristic: "The sun was now setting behind us, lighting up the white cliffs of Dominora, and the green capes of Verdanna; while in deep shade lay before us the long winding shores of Porpheero" (p.497).

overlooking many abodes distributed in the shadows of the groves beyond"; the "House of the Afternoon", on the other hand, to which he retires after breakfast, is built in a darkened grotto, into which a waterfall cascades "like a sheeted ghost" and "green and oozy" dolmens stand watch (pp.231-234). As Seelye has noted, these twin abodes "offer a series of contrasts", both in the play of "darks and brights" and in the implied sexual division between phallic mound and womblike cave.[93] In this sense *Mardi* anticipates Melville's diptych stories of the 1850s: "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" and especially "The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids".

But there is an important difference between *Mardi* and those later, more finely honed fictions: here Melville does not seem to have any particular moral or aesthetic point to make; he is simply painting an imagistic dichotomy that analogously reflects the "philosophical neither/nor"[94] of the narrative structure. *Mardi*'s frantic denouement offers us a stark choice between Babbalanja's rather ignoble acceptance of frailty and Taji's arrogant, dangerous, and almost certainly abortive quest for the nobility of a "central Truth". Melville never manages to reconcile his two sceptics and the literary techniques with which they are associated, and ends his novel simply by offering the reader a kind of narratorial chiaroscuro.[95] Later, however, in the roving, digressive storytelling of *Moby-Dick*, Melville was to find a middle way.

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[93] I am indebted to Seelye's reading of the Donjalolo sequence in *The Ironic Diagram*, pp.37-38.

[94] I borrow Milder's fine phrase. *Exiled Royalties*, p.48.

[95] This Manichaean denouement illustrates a point made by Wollaeger: "[There is a] danger that an over-reaction to skeptical consciousness can issue in either dehumanization or authoritarianism." Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*, p.12.

Chapter Two

Almost True:

Moby-Dick, Romantic Irony, and Mitigated Doubt

> What may man know?
> (Here pondered Clarel;) let him rule –
> Pull down, build up, creed, system, school,
> And reason's endless battle wage,
> Make and remake his verbiage –
> But solve the world! Scarce that he'll do:
> Too wild it is, too wonderful.[1]
> – *Clarel*

> Make me, unmake me, build me up, to pieces break me.[2]
> – *Redburn*

While *Mardi*'s critical reception disappointed Melville, it did not seriously disrupt his literary career. His bestselling debut in *Typee* had, at least for the time being, ensured him a residual goodwill, and all but the severest reviewers expressed confidence that if he dropped the esoteric philosophising then he might still make it as a writer of popular maritime yarns. It seems he took the advice on board,[3] because his next two books were, if not straightforward adventure novels, then much more traditional than *Mardi* in style and form.

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[1] Melville; Harrison Hayford (ed.), *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1991), part four, canto three, pp.397-398.
[2] Melville, *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*, p.275.
[3] As Parker and Higgins argue, Melville was "eager to see as many of his reviews as possible", and they not only influenced his sales but "also frequently influenced the nature of the next book he wrote". "Introduction", in *The Contemporary Reviews*, pp.ix.

Redburn (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850) for the most part eschew digressions and follow neat narrative lines. The eponymous narrators are unfussy sailors who lack the bookish curiosity of a Taji or Babbalanja: Redburn reads Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* but tires of it and idly doodles on the endpapers; White-Jacket avows his preference for "practical wisdom" over the "unrealised ideal" and looks on his ship's chaplain, who wanders around clutching a copy of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, with ironic bemusement.[4] Melville treats his audience with a new, somewhat dainty solicitude; early in *Redburn*, for example, he aborts a divagation with a self-conscious aside: "These thoughts [...] must be uncongenial enough to the reader, so no more of that, let me go on with my story."[5] Melville was perhaps concerned about becoming one of those writers Mohi scorns in *Mardi*, "slippery poetasters, who are too full of silly imaginings to tell a plain tale" (p.280).

But Melville did not extirpate philosophy from these books entirely, and what he left in is instructive. In one of *Redburn*'s rare reflective passages he praises David Hume: "[Hume] was humble, composed, without bravado, and though the most skeptical of philosophical skeptics, yet full of that firm, creedless faith, that embraces the spheres."[6] This is the first occasion that Melville invokes the Scottish philosopher, and it suggests he had continued to read and respond to sceptical texts after *Mardi*, even if he was reluctant to incorporate them into his fictions of this period. A contemporaneous diary entry is similarly illuminating. After submitting the manuscript of *White-Jacket* to his publishers in late 1849, Melville travelled on a packet to London, and struck up a friendship with George J. Adler, a German-American professor of philology, which gave him the opportunity to hold forth, drink in hand, on his favourite philosophers. "We talked metaphysics

[4] Melville, *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*, pp.131, 510.
[5] Ibid., p.15
[6] Ibid., p.317.

continually", Melville wrote in his journal, "& [Friedrich] Schlegel, Kant etc. were discussed under the influence of the whiskey."[7]

These references indicate the direction Melville's thought was taking, and indeed there would be traces of Hume and Schlegel in his next book. But when Melville returned to philosophical fiction in *Moby-Dick* it was nevertheless with a palpable sense of caution, as if he remained concerned about exhausting his readers' patience. The early chapters of the novel are written predominantly in a mode that recalls the faux-travelogue style of his early work, and are perhaps calculated to entice the reader with the promise of an unadorned tale of sailors and seafaring. The protagonist Ishmael decides that he wants to see the "watery part of the world" (p.1), and takes off for Nantucket in search of a place on a whaling crew. He falls in with the Polynesian prince Queequeg, a specialist in harpooning whales, and Melville mines a rich seam of comedy from their awkward yet affectionate relationship. It is only when the new friends ship aboard the *Pequod* that Melville's true ambitions for *Moby-Dick* become apparent: footnotes proliferate; Ishmael's first-person narration segues into a roving, apparently omniscient voice; and Captain Ahab emerges from his cabin.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his preface to Jean Giono's 1939 French translation, nicely captures the moment at which the reader comes to realise that the book is something more than just an offbeat *Bildungsroman*:

> We think at first – a result of [Melville's] naively didactic concerns, the slow, peaceful pace of the narrative, and a certain humour typical of the period – that we are in the presence of some eccentric Jules Verne novel, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Across the Sea*, or *The Adventures of A Whale Hunter*. And then, little by little, a cancerous proliferation begins to swell and warp the clean and easy style of this American Jules Verne, just as *Crime and Punishment* is only a cancer eating away at *Les Mystères de*

[7] Melville; Howard C. Horsford, Lynn Horth (eds.), *Journals* (Evanston: Northwestern Newberry Press, 1989), p.8.

> *Paris*. The documentary comes apart at the seams. What happened was that Melville suddenly realised that there was an idea in the whale hunt; he saw "in a white heat" that strange tie between man and animal, the hunt. A relationship of dizziness and death. And it is this relationship that is revealed abruptly at the end of the first hundred pages.[8]

I would suggest that Melville did not "suddenly realise" that there was "an idea" worth exploring in the whale hunt; rather, he slyly keeps his philosophical proclivities implicit until Ishmael – along with the readers his light and limber narration is designed to seduce – are stowed safely at sea. An early reviewer at the New York *Literary Gazette*, noting the ruse, commented that *Moby-Dick* "professes" to be a conventional swashbuckler;[9] before long, it reveals itself to be something different: an encyclopaedia of whaling, a rambunctious miscellany, a metaphysical what-you-will.

Moby-Dick's transformation into something altogether grander and stranger becomes evident in chapter 23, "The Lee Shore". Here Ishmael recalls Bulkington, a character introduced earlier in the narrative. Bulkington had arrived at the Spouter-Inn in New Bedford after four years at sea, and Ishmael, lodging at the same tavern, had noticed his "noble" bearing, commenting portentously that "the sea-gods ordained that he should become my shipmate" (p.13). And yet, when Ishmael sights Bulkington at the helm of the *Pequod*, the night the ship "blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic" (p.116), we are informed in passing that he has no further part to play:

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[8] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*", trans. Richard McCleary, in Michael T. Gilmore (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Moby-Dick* (London: Prentice-Hall International, 1977), pp.95-96.

[9] "It professes to be the narration of the incidents of a whaling voyage out of Nantucket. But there is so much of caricature and exaggeration mixed with facts, that it can be hard to discriminate." Quoted in Higgins and Parker (eds.), *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, p.375.

> Some chapters back, one Bulkington was spoken of […] When on the shivering winter's night, the Pequod thrust her vindictive bows into the cold, malicious waves, who should I see standing at her helm but Bulkington! I looked with sympathetic awe and fearfulness upon the man, who in midwinter just landed from a four years' dangerous voyage, could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term. The land seemed scorching to his feet. Wonderfullest things are ever the unmentionable; deep memories yield no epitaphs; this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington. (pp.116-117)

Critics have speculated that Bulkington is a remnant of an earlier version of the novel, in which he was slated to lead the crew in a mutiny against Ahab.[10] This seems plausible enough – Bulkington certainly fits the description of a popular leader – but it does not explain why Melville did not simply excise the redundant mariner altogether upon revising the narrative.

One possibility is that Melville is commenting reflexively on the alternative *Moby-Dick* those early chapters seemed to promise. Bulkington is the archetypal hero whose presence one would expect in a typical seafaring tale, and by removing him in this odd valedictory chapter Melville signals that the novel is to take a somewhat different course. Indeed, it is here that Ishmael first begins to muse on the imperative of "deep earnest thinking" and the hunt for "mortally intolerable truth" (pp.94-95), themes that course through the remainder of the book. In signalling his turn away from commercial fiction and back to philosophy Melville tacitly aligns himself with Ahab, who stands atop the quarter-deck a few

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[10] The classic formulation of this argument is to be found in Richard Chase's *Melville: A Critical Study* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1949), p.58: "Bulkington disappears from Moby-Dick because if he had been more a part of the story it would have been inevitable that he should do what Starbuck can only try to do: oppose the command of Ahab and save the ship." In his seminal essay "Unnecessary Duplicates: A Key to the Writing of Moby-Dick", Harrison Hayford argues that Bulkington is a remnant of an earlier compositional stage, in which he and not Queequeg was to become Ishmael's close friend and comrade, and to be the book's "heroic figure". See Hayford, *Melville's Prisoners* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003), pp.39-63. Less convincing explanations include Robert K. Wallace's argument that Bulkington is meant to represent J.M.W. Turner, whose paintings Melville admired. See *Melville and Turner: Spheres of Love and Fright* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

chapters later to inform the crew that they are not, as expected, shipped on a normal whaling cruise, but instead on a quest after a single albino monster, and with it a "Truth" that "hath no confines" (p.178). The crew's bewilderment at this revelation no doubt echoes that of early readers (and dismayed publishers) who had picked up Melville's monstrous novel anticipating the undemanding gamesomeness of a *Redburn* or an *Omoo*.

I think Bulkington has a deeper significance, however. His fleeting appearance indicates Melville's tendency to use Ishmael's narration to both create and destroy, to simultaneously make and unmake a fictional world. As Sartre noticed, Melville's narrative "comes apart at the seams" even as he weaves it; much as, in that delirious chapter "A Bower in the Arsacides", Ishmael's "weaver-god" fashions a "freshet-rushing carpet" that "slides away" at the very moment of its creation (p.490). What Melville gives with one hand he takes away with the other. An illustrative parallel for this aesthetic process is to be found in the *History of British Birds* (1797), an influential work by the English naturalist and wood engraver Thomas Bewick. This vignette (Figure 2) would seem to depict a peaceful countryside scene, but it has been almost entirely obliterated by the dark imprint of the artist's thumb. We might compare Bulkington to the half-obscured rider at the far left of this image, a figure drawn and then just as quickly effaced, as if on a whim, to leave only a vestigial trace. (One thinks also of the "boggy, soggy, squitchy picture" [p.13] Ishmael encounters at the entry to the Spouter-Inn – perhaps the "black mass" in the centre of the painting is, like Bewick's thumbprint, an act of authorial self-sabotage.)

Figure 2. "But what puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture…" (p.13)

Simultaneously indulging in both creation and decreation, Melville might be seen to exercise "Romantic irony", an aesthetic practice developed by Schlegel in the late eighteenth century. As critic Anne K. Mellor has put it, Romantic irony represents "a way of looking at the universe and an artistic process very different from the perspective embedded in secularized Judeo-Christian traditions [...] it posits chaos and incomprehensibility rather than a divinely ordained teleology".[11] But crucially, it does not posit *only* chaos and incomprehensibility. The Romantic ironist harbours aspirations to unity and wholeness as well as an awareness of life's fragmentariness.[12] In aesthetic terms, the approach manifests itself in the "desire for a complete work of art and the ironic abandonment [*parabasis*] of the work in a moment of parodic dissolution".[13] This might explain what is going on when Bewick stubs out his exquisite pastoral sketch – indeed, Mellor considers the

[11] Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), p.20.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Simon Critchley, "Unworking Romanticism", in *Very Little…Almost Nothing* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 135.

engraving as an "excellent visual example" of Schlegel's approach – and when Melville summarily casts the sailor Bulkington overboard.

I am not the first to suggest that *Moby-Dick* might be examined through the lens of Schlegel's critical thought. Seelye's svelte but pathbreaking study *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* begins with an account of Melville's "sympathy with the forms and attitudes of romantic irony", and the suggestion that "much of what Melville had to say about the artistic process is abstracted from Coleridge and Schlegel".[14] More recently, Milder has argued that Melville came to share Schlegel's "mixture of ironic wit and ontological dread", and his interest in both "self-creation and self-destruction";[15] while Richard Gravil contends that Melville built aesthetic "counterpointing" into his text after the fashion of the Romantic ironist.[16]

What I find particularly interesting about Melville's adoption of Romantic irony is that it helps to explain the progression – in both literary and philosophical terms – from the awkward contrasts of *Mardi* to the exquisite balance of *Moby-Dick*. Where, in the earlier book, Melville was caught between the Romantic quest narrative and the Swiftian or Rabelaisian anatomy, here he hits upon a generic model that combines the two, bringing together symbolism and satire in a way that recalls no contemporary narrative so much as Schlegel's unfinished novel *Lucinde* (1799). And if *Moby-Dick*'s "unworked" structure solves the problem of *Mardi*'s bipartite form then it also, concomitantly, offers a new way of thinking about its central philosophical conundrum. Ishmael's narration, in its manoeuvres of self-effacement, its incorporation of both Romantic aspirations and rustic *savoir faire*, seeks not to evade scepticism in the manner of Taji or Babbalanja but, rather, to find an accommodation with it – a way of accepting that certainty is as elusive as the white whale itself. This approach, as we will see, bears echoes of Hume's

[14] Seelye, *Melville: The Ironic Diagram*. p.2.
[15] Milder, *Exiled Royalties*, pp.92-95.
[16] Gravil, *Romantic Dialogues*, pp.157-161.

notion of mitigated scepticism, which acknowledges the sceptic's insight into the limits of knowledge while retaining a commitment to rational inquiry.

1. Captain and Crew

Many readings of *Moby-Dick* draw attention to the contrast between Ahab's defiant individualism and the free-and-easy sociality represented by his crew. Robert K. Martin has taken the male friendships on board the *Pequod* to represent redemptive "homosocial ties" that provide a counterpoint to Ahab's isolation.[17] Others offer a more political slant on the same interpretative schematic: C.L.R. James' classic study *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, for example, considers Ahab as a proto-totalitarian whose cult of personality is contested by the resourceful praxis of the *Pequod*'s labourers;[18] similarly, Robert Shulman depicts Ahab as a calculating, anti-liberal tyrant who stands opposed to the "instinctive passions and vitality" embodied by his underlings.[19] Without wishing to depart from the basic symmetry established in these readings I wish to argue that Ahab and the crew might be taken to exemplify contrasting *epistemologies*, establishing the philosophical poles between which Ishmael passes and repasses.

[17] Robert K. Martin, *Hero, Captain and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p.12.
[18] C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001). See especially "The Captain and the Crew", pp.5-34.
[19] Robert Shulman, *Social Criticism and Nineteenth Century American Fictions* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), p.209.

Descartian Vortices

As in *Mardi*, echoes of Cartesian philosophy become apparent fairly early on in *Moby-Dick*. At the close of a chapter titled "The Mast Head", Ishmael reflects on how a young sailor on watch, stationed high up in the rigging to spy for whales, can be lulled to a reverie by the gentle swaying of the ship, and the "blending cadence of waves and thoughts":

> While this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise forever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists! (pp.172-173)

Melville often expresses his suspicion of the poetic tendency to elide nature and consciousness.[20] Here he emphasises the gap that separates them, and draws attention to the philosopher who first theorised the schism. He suggests that Cartesian dualism is ineluctable, mind and world distinct – and that it is a lesson those who espouse airy Pantheism would do well to heed.

This unusually specific reference to Descartes' "vortices" is worth parsing further, for it suggests a conceptual source for a recurring image in the novel. In an essay on the employment of the vortex metaphor in *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, David Charles Leonard argues that Melville read and responded to a précis of Descartes' thought in Ephraim Chambers' *Cyclopaedia: Or, a Universal Dictionary of Arts and*

[20] In June 1851, Melville wrote Hawthorne to describe his nearly-completed novel, and to make some dry remarks on Goethe, whom he had apparently been reading: "I came across this saying: 'Live in the all'. That is to say, your separate identity is but a wretched one: – good, but get out of yourself, expand yourself, and bring to yourself the tinglings of life that are felt in the flowers and the woods [...] What nonsense." Horth (ed.), *Correspondence*, p.193.

Sciences (1728), a volume he acquired from his uncle Herman Gansevoort in 1846.[21] Melville may indeed have read Chambers' entries on "Cartesianism" and "The Vortex", and learned that "the Cartesian philosophy [posits] a System or Collection of particles of matter moving the same way, and round the same Axis [...] such *Vortices* are the grand machines by which these Philosophers solve most of the motions of phenomena and the heavenly bodies."[22] In that case Melville would have understood that the vortex was an important part of Descartes' mechanical philosophy, as outlined in his vast treatise *Le Monde* (1629-1633).[23]

But it seems to me that Melville associates the vortex with a rather different aspect of Descartes' thought. The "Descartian vortices" of "The Mast-Head" are not so much astronomical parabolas as whirlpools that threaten to swallow us up. In addition to the scientific passages highlighted by Leonard, Melville would have had access in Chambers' text to a brief history of scepticism, and an account of Descartes' role in introducing the "great Principle of *doubting all things"*. Under an entry titled "Doubting", he might have read that "the *Cartesians* of all things bid us to *doubt* our senses [...] they are perpetually inculcating the deceitfulness of our senses, and we are to doubt every one of their Reports".[24]

Moby-Dick presents us with a number of characters who are prone to this line of thought, and Ahab in particular seems to evince Cartesian traits. Consider the following account of the captain's addled mind:

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[21] David Charles Leonard, "Melville, and the Mardian Vortex", in *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol.45, No. 2 (May 1980), pp.13-25.
[22] I have consulted the University of Wisconsin's digital edition of the *Cyclopaedia* at digitallibrary.wisc.edu/1711.dl/HistSciTech.Cyclopaedia.
[23] Descartes' conception of the universe as a system of vortical motion was influential, but by Melville's time it was under attack. In an 1847 issue of the *United States Democratic Magazine and Review*, which, as I argue below, Melville might well have read, there is an article on "Cosmogony" that describes the idea that "the universe is a vortex" as "absurd" and "contradictory to the settled laws of mathematics and physics also". Thomas Prentice Kettell (ed.), *The United States Magazine and Review* (New York, August 1847), pp.107-119.
[24] Op. cit.

> Often, when forced from his hammock by exhausting and intolerably vivid dreams of the night, which resuming his own intense thoughts through the day, carried them on amid a clashing of phrensies, and whirled them round and round and round in his blazing brain, till the very throbbing of his life-spot became insufferable anguish; and when, as was sometimes the case, these spiritual throes in him heaved his being up from its base, and a chasm seemed opening in him, and from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them; when this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship; and with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from his state room, as though escaping a bed that was on fire. (p.219)

This passage seems intended to evoke the "Descartian vortices". Ahab's thoughts are whirled "round and round and round", and Melville's repetitive prose, with its spiralling clauses, seems itself to take on a vortical movement: the passage begins with Ahab leaping from his quarters ("forced from his hammock") before circling languorously back to the same point ("burst from his state room"). But if the passage recalls "The Mast Head" it also looks forward, anticipating the scene in which the *Pequod* and its attendant boats are sunk by the white whale: "Concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, *all round and round in one vortex*, carried the smallest chip of the *Pequod* out of sight" (p.623, my emphasis). The vortex metaphor suggests an implicit connection between Cartesian doubt, Ahab's madness, and the disaster that finally overcomes the ship.

Ahab's injury, ostensibly the source of his anguish, may also carry a disguised allusion to Descartes. Despite the fact that it has been ripped off by Moby Dick and replaced with a planed whalebone spar, Ahab claims that he still "feels" his right leg. Descartes documents just this phenomenon in his Sixth Meditation – "I have learned from some persons whose arms and legs have been cut off, that they sometimes feel pain in the part which had been amputated" – and

uses the example to buttress his argument that sense-perception is a maladroit index of epistemological certainty: "[This] made me think that I could not be quite certain that it was a certain member that pained me, even though I felt pain in it."[25] With Ahab, too, the notion of the "phantom limb" prompts sceptical reflections, as can be seen when he enjoins the ship's carpenter to fashion him a replacement prosthesis, and confides the "tingling" he feels in his absent leg:

> Look ye, carpenter, I dare say thou callest thyself a right good workmanlike workman, eh! Well, then, will it speak thoroughly well for thy work, if, when I come to mount this leg thou makest, I shall nevertheless feel another leg in the same identical place with it; that is, carpenter, my old lost leg; the flesh and blood one, I mean. [...] Look, put thy live leg here in the place where mine once was; so, now, here is only one distinct leg to the eye, yet two to the soul. Where thou feelest tingling life; there, exactly there, there to a hair, do I. Is't a riddle? Hist, then. How dost thou know that some entire, living, thinking thing may not be invisibly and uninterpenetratingly standing precisely where thou now standest; aye, and standing there in thy spite? In thy most solitary hours, dost thou not fear eavesdroppers? (p.513)

As Cavell has put it, the sceptic sees the world not only as a phantasmagoric *trompe l'oeil* but a "generalised *trompe l'ame*",[26] and Ahab illustrates that thought precisely: "Here is one distinct leg to the eye, yet two to the soul." The spectre of the malignant *génie* seems present here, and, like Descartes, Ahab proceeds from his own, fallible experiential data to question the basis of all knowledge: "Oh how immaterial are all materials! What things real are there, but imponderable thoughts?" (p.574). We find him "convulsively grasping" at the ship's sails, as if to assure himself of their objective reality (p.175). He even begins to doubt his own

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[25] Descartes, *Key Philosophical Writings*, p.180.
[26] "What befalls me is a generalized and massive *trompe l'ame*; my soul (and what it wishes?) cheats me (supernaturally cheats me) into taking it that it has company." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p.424.

existence: "Is Ahab, Ahab?", he asks. "Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (p.592).[27]

Romance and Truth

Ahab, like Taji before him, responds to scepticism with an outpouring of Romantic grandiloquence. Consider his famous speech on the quarter-deck, in which he attempts to justify the hunt for Moby Dick to the ship's cautious and business-minded first mate Starbuck:

> 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 the wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then I could do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. But not

[27] There is an intriguing parallel in the work of Melville's contemporary Silas Weir Mitchell. During the American Civil War, Mitchell, an army surgeon in Philadelphia, recorded amputees' complaints of what he was the first to call "phantom limb pain". Though at first Mitchell doubted their veracity he finally accepted that those in his care were experiencing "a form of suffering as yet undescribed". Unable to explain the phenomenon in neurological terms, Mitchell turned to fiction to try to make sense of it. In 1866 he published in the *Atlantic Monthly* a curious short story, "The Case of George Dedlow", which depicts a veteran who loses his arms and legs at the Battle of Chickamauga. His body reduced to little more than a twitching torso, a "useless trunk", Dedlow nevertheless retains feeling in his lost appendages: "I began to suffer the most acute pain [...] so perfect was the idea that was thus kept up of the real presence of these missing parts that I found it hard at times to believe them absent." The slippage between his perception of the world and objective reality prompts him to question his very existence: "I found to my horror that I was less conscious of myself, of my own existence, than used to be the case." See *The Autobiography of a Quack and the Case of George Dedlow* (New York: Century Company, 1900). For a fine account of Mitchell's life and work see Lisa A. Long, *Rehabilitating Bodies: Health, History and the American Civil War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp.29-56.

> my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth hath no confines. (p.178)[28]

The passage makes clear that Ahab's desire to find the whale consists of more than just a crude lust for vengeance: it is the whale's "unknown" and "inscrutable" nature that frustrates him. Ahab conceives of a "reasoning thing" beyond "visible objects", but admits to thinking sometimes that "there is naught beyond". Though he quickly corrects himself ("'tis enough"), he has let slip his most troubling doubt: that there is a nothingness at the heart of all things. As John Bryant has perceptively noticed, Ahab has a habit of punning on the idea of nothingness, which suggests the concept preoccupies him. When, a little after his appearance on the quarter-deck, he claims that "'nought's an obstacle to the iron way" (p.183), he

[28] I have come across a potential source for Ahab's speech which seems to have been overlooked in previous Melville scholarship. In 1850, Evert Duyckinck lent Melville an issue of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. We do not know which number this was, but in August 1847 the magazine had carried an editorial that quoted extensively from a warm review of *Omoo* in the British press, using it to illustrate the stylistic differences between blustering "Bullism" and Yankee straightforwardness. The piece would have made entertaining (and flattering) reading for Melville, and it is conceivable that Duyckinck recommended it. If so, he might have turned the page to find an essay titled "The Existence of the Deity", in which an anonymous author describes in detail a sense of "utter skepticism" brought on by his reading in philosophy. "I will not attempt to paint the intense gloom of my situation", he tells us, before proceeding to do just that, with more than a hint of Ahabian hyperbole: "Death seemed to ride on the present hour as a race-steed of destruction [...] Every voice in creation was a wail of agony." The author works his way out of this funk with some specious geometrical reasoning, but afterwards lingers on the phenomenology of scepticism, as if fascinated by the impulse to doubt: "In all [cases] of sensible motion, our eyes see nothing but the visible phenomena. We behold the appearance, not the power which produced it. The surface is plain enough to view; the solid centre eludes our vision. Yet we know there is a producing power – we believe with absolute certainty in a centre. We cannot help doing so, lest we would turn into maniacs." The phrasing is near-identical to Ahab's, who, like the sceptics discussed in this essay, speaks in the "maddened language of Shelley". See "The Existence of the Deity", in Kettell (ed.), *The United States Magazine and Review* (New York, August 1847), pp.102-115, 253-266. Lee references "The Existence of the Deity" in *Uncertain Chances* (pp.55; 203 n.21), using the piece to suggest the prevalence of probabilistic thinking in the America of Melville's time, although he does not seem to have noted the parallels between the "utter skepticism" described in the piece and Ahab's quarter-deck speech.

implies both that nothing can stop him and the opposite – that the idea of "nought" or nothingness is a grim impasse.[29]

This, perhaps, is the occasion of Ahab's own *Kant-crise*: the speech might be taken to show that his experience of radical doubt is not assuaged by Kant's attempt to "bargain" with scepticism. Like the European Romantics, Ahab is frustrated by the thought that perception is limited to the phenomenal world of "masks"; fearing an ontological nothingness, he dreams of peeling back the pasteboard frontages of the material world to check whether noumenal "Truth" lies beyond. He wants not knowledge – of the pragmatic sort possessed by Kant's metaphorical sailor, who rejects scepticism to follow "sound principles of the nautical art" derived from "sea-charts and compass" – but certainty. Melville takes pains to show that his captain is an extremely adept navigator, who is able to trace the migrational patterns of whales and to follow their movements: "[H]e knew the sets of all tides and currents; and thereby calculating the driftings of the sperm whale's food; and, also, calling to mind the regular ascertained seasons for hunting him in particular latitudes; *could arrive at reasonable surmises, almost approaching to certainties,* concerning the timeliest day to be upon this or that ground in search of his prey" (p.216, my emphasis). The point is that, for Ahab, "almost" certain is not certain enough.

In chapter 118, Ahab becomes frustrated with his quadrant because the instrument informs him only where he "*is*", and not "where I *shall* be". With a cry ("Science! Curse thee thou vain toy!") he casts it to the deck and tramples it with his "live and dead feet" (pp.544-545). This scene, too, might be taken to signal Ahab's dissatisfaction with Kantian epistemology, its inability to provide certainties that transcend the circumscriptions of time and space. As we saw in the

[29] See Bryant, "Moby-Dick as Revolution", in Robert Levine (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.74. Spanos makes the same point in *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, p.141.

introduction, Kleist describes Kant as having settled "green glasses" on every person's nose, tinting, tainting, and limiting her perception of the world. And Melville uses a very similar image to evoke Ahab's frustration with the quadrant, which is furnished with "colored glasses" that preclude unmediated observation of "the objects on the unknown, thither side of thee, thou sun" (p.544).

In reacting to doubt by reaching after supernal "Truth", Ahab calls to mind other Romantic influences: his desire to "strike the sun", for example, recalls the cosmic defiance depicted in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). The Shelleyan parallels are even more pronounced in "The Candles", in which *Pequod* sails into a thunderstorm, the points of its masts illumined by orbs of corpusant flame. Starbuck, ever the voice of reason, calls for the ship's metal rods to be cast overboard so as to conduct lightning away from the deck. As is his wont, Ahab demurs: "Avast! Let's have some fair play here, though we be the weaker side". His animistic insistence on nature's "fair play" reflects the earlier speech on the quarter-deck, as does his avowed ambition to "leap, leap up! And lick the sky!" in an act of rebellion. As the lightning strikes one of the harpoons, Ahab catches hold and brandishes it, calling himself a "true child of fire", aligning himself with the Promethean ambition to snatch flames from the gods (pp.548-551). He stands like a "lone, gigantic elm" on the deck, and Melville may have had in mind Shelley's notion of the "tree of life", the embodiment of the "ideal of high poetry, and the mythic point of origin and symbol of return".[30]

And yet, while Ahab evokes the grandeur of Shelley's art he also demonstrates the pitfalls of the Romantic emphasis on the self. In both "The Quarter-Deck" and "The Candles" Ahab's language is distinguished by a dizzying proliferation of personal pronouns: "*I* think"; "he tasks *me*; he heaps *me*"; "*I* see";

[30] I borrow Shawn Thomson's construction. See Thomson, *The Romantic Architecture of Moby-Dick* (London: Associated University Presses, 2001), p.42.

"*I* hate"; "*I*'d strike"; "*I* could"; "*my* master"; "whenceoe'er *I* came; wheresoe'er *I* go; yet while *I* earthly live..." This tautological emphasis on a subjective perception of the world is one link between scepticism and Romanticism: it joins Descartes' motto "I think therefore I am" with the Romantic celebration of the individual that Coleridge lampooned in the *Biographia Literaria*:

> Here on this market-cross aloud I cry:
> I, I, I! I itself I!
> The form and the substance, the what and the why,
> The when and the where, and the low and the high,
> The inside and outside, the earth and the sky,
> I, you, and he, and he, you and I,
> All souls and all bodies are I itself I!
> All I itself I![31]

Melville surely intends to evoke a similar sort of deflationary irony when he has Ahab interpret the embossed images on the doubloon he has nailed to the ship's mast: "The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that too is Ahab; all are Ahab…" (p.471). Ahab is so self-involved that, like a circus-goer trapped in the hall of mirrors, he sees himself reflected on every surface. Hence his faintly tragic-comic status as a man of both Promethean rebelliousness and pathetic solitariness; he is at once defiant fire-snatcher and "hermit immemorial" (p.551), a Timon of the high seas.[32]

The Crew

Melville tells us that Ahab is prone to a "sultanism of his brain" (p.160), that he conceives of subalterns as mere "anthills of [gun]powder" (p.183) to be used up as

[31] Coleridge, *The Major Works*, p.234.
[32] Melville gives us a subtle reference to literature's quintessential recluse. The corpusants that illuminate the *Pequod* are not livid flames but rather a "supernatural pallor", a "pale, forked fire", such as that invoked in *Timon of Athens,* Act iv, scene three: "The moon's an arrant thief, / And her pale fire she snatches from the sun."

ammunition in his fiery assault on Moby Dick. There are signs, however, that Ahab looks on his crew not just with disdain but with envy, of the sort felt by the intellectual towards those content to lead the unexamined life. Ahab follows his speech on the quarter-deck with a soliloquy that comments on "the Pagan leopards" he commands, "unrecking and unworshipping things, that live; and seek, and give no reasons for the torrid life they feel!" (p178). The phrase "give no reasons" evokes Thomas Reid's defence of common sense as a set of principles to which we adhere "without being able to give a reason for them", rules to be followed unthinkingly because of their practical efficacy. Ahab probably means to refer to men like the ship's carpenter, who works not by "reason or instinct" but "merely by a kind of spontaneous, literal process" (p.510). The carpenter is, needless to say, untroubled by doubt, and finds the captain's musings all-in-all rather "queer": "What was that now about one leg standing in three places, and all three places standing in one hell – how was that? Oh! I don't wonder that he looked so scornful at me!" (p.514).

Melville repeatedly draws attention to the contrast between Ahab and his charges. Most conspicuously there is the difference in language: between Ahab's high-flown Shakespearean idiom and sailors' salty slang. As Peleg informs Ishmael before the Pequod ships out: "Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges as well as 'mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves" (p.88). It seems more than just his lofty rank that keeps Ahab from mixing with the crew; while he is able to stir up base passions, as can be seen in the skilful demagoguery of "The Quarter-Deck", he is for the most part "too deep for common regardings" (p.138), unable or unwilling to converse. Melville takes evident delight in juxtaposing the atmosphere at the cabin table when Ahab eats with his senior officers – the captain presiding over the mute assembly with

"nameless invisible domineerings" (p.164) – and the loud, lip-smacking relish with which the harpooneers take their repast.

In "The Sunset", Ahab himself recognises – and laments – his inability to partake of the sensuous pleasures of the voyage: "Oh! Time was, when as the sunrise nobly spurred me, the sunset soothed. No more. […] All loveliness is anguish to me, since I can ne'er enjoy. Gifted with high perception, *I lack the low enjoying power*" (p.182, my emphasis). The latter phrase is cunningly ambiguous, but a later reference to an injury in the vicinity of Ahab's "groin" suggests that sex is one of the enjoyments in which he cannot indulge.[33] This is another point of contrast with the sailors: the captain's sunset soliloquy is followed by an account of drunken, priapic revelry on the forecastle, in which the crew fantasise about the women of the Polynesian islands, and "those swift glances of warm, wild bosoms in the dance" (p.190). The sailors embody an instinctive, physical energy, a lust to satisfy "common, daily appetites" (p.231), that Ahab lacks.

This is not to say that the *Pequod*'s crew is intellectually void – as we will see, Wittgenstein and Heidegger might have approved of their ludic or pragmatic approach to experience – but the sailors do seem, for the most part, uninterested in the world beyond the immediate surroundings of the whale-ship, and content to find satisfaction where they can. Unlike *White-Jacket*'s grizzled "sea Socrates" Ushant, or *Omoo*'s Dr. Long Ghost, the sailors of the *Pequod* are little given to discourse on intellectual matters (all the better to distinguish the bookish Ishmael). Stubb sums up the general outlook of the crew: "Think not, that's my eleventh commandment; and sleep when you can, that's my twelfth" (p.139). Ahab's yearning for "Truth" is no concern of theirs.

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[33] In "Ahab's Leg" Melville writes that "not very long prior to the Pequod's sailing" Ahab suffered a "seemingly inexplicable, unimaginable casualty, his ivory limb having been so violently displaced, that it had stake-wise smitten, and all but pierced his groin" (p.505).

This is shown most vividly in chapter 110, in which Queequeg comes down with an illness so severe that he asks the carpenter to build him a personalised coffin in anticipation of an ocean burial. When he recovers he uses the coffin for a sea-chest, and carves the wood with intricate patterns based on his tattoos, which "had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by these hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" (p.525). Queequeg does not understand these markings, but nevertheless takes enjoyment in copying them out: he is interested only in mimetic surface, not hermeneutic depth. As Cesare Cascarino has written, Queequeg "reproduces the scriptures of his body onto the surfaces of the coffin not because they supposedly mean, and explain, and represent 'the heavens and earth' […] but because they are the world made flesh, because they are the point of contact and interface between corporeal surfaces and the surfaces of the world, the point at which any distinction between such surfaces is not exactly erased but rather suspended in a state of infinite and osmotic proximity".[34]

There may be a degree of racism in Melville's characterisation of Queequeg as passive and lacking profundity. Nevertheless, in "Queequeg and His Coffin" Melville seems to be making a point not about the harpooneer himself but about a particular contrast with Ahab: at the end of the chapter the captain turns away from scrutinising Queequeg's tattoos – which would offer him the "Truth" he desires, if only he could decipher them – with the cry: "Oh!, devilish tantalisation of the gods!" (p.524). It is unclear whether Ahab's anguished, interiorised quest for the secret of the universe, which leaves him isolated and unhappy, is preferable to

[34] Cesare Cascarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p.107.

Queequeg's contented, surface-bound involvement in life. Ishmael, in any case, finds himself attracted to both.

2. Ishmael

In a striking passage in "The Spirit-Spout", Melville draws attention to the "antagonistic influences" that co-exist on the ship: "The strange, uplifting tendency of the taffrail breeze filling the hollows of so many sails, made the buoyant, hovering deck to feel like air beneath the feet; while still she rushed along as if two antagonistic influences were struggling in her – one to mount direct to heaven, the other to drive yawingly to some horizontal goal" (p.254). These competing tendencies would seem to correspond to the two poles we have outlined thus far: if Ahab aspires to ascend to "heaven" then the common sailors are content with "horizontal" or terrestrial horizons. It is Ishmael, in flitting between Ahab and the crew, who manages to keep these two antagonistic influences in touch, lending the novel its balance and preventing it from splitting, as did *Mardi*, along its narrative keel.

Ishmael and Ahab

As we have seen, Ahab feels threatened by doubt and responds by mounting a fixed and singular quest after the absolute. In common with many Romantic over-reachers, he makes for a compelling, even seductive figure, and our narrator often seems in his thrall. Ishmael is won over by Ahab's rhetoric on the quarter-deck – "my shouts had gone up with all the rest [...] Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (p.194) – but unlike his fellow sailors, who seem mostly to be swayed by the

captain's promises of gold and grog, Ishmael truly shares Ahab's fascination with the whale as an emblem of the inscrutable.

In "The Whiteness of the Whale" Ishmael seeks to justify this fascination in philosophical terms. The chapter resembles a long and rambling essay, in which Ishmael argues that the whale's albino colour, or lack of colour, lends it an "elusive quality" that both attracts and – the choice of verb is apposite – "appals": "Whiteness is [...] at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay the very veil of the Christian's Deity; and yet [...] the intensifying agent in all things most appalling to mankind" (p.212). The whale's whiteness, Ishmael argues, lends it the "profoundest idealised significance", and makes it a glittering cynosure, freighted with meaning. But it is also suggestive of the very opposite, an absence or emptiness that evokes the "heartless voids and immensities of the universe". As with Ahab, this unsettling thought is voiced both in terms of straightforward blasphemy – whiteness, Ishmael says, is the "colorless all-color of atheism" – and a detailed phenomenological testimony that evokes the excesses of Cartesian doubt:

> And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers [...] that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge – pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino Whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt? (p.212)

Ishmael suspects that there is "naught beyond" the visible world, and even that the visible world itself, which we apprehend only via the dubious, "mystical"

medium of light, is a kind of illusion that the sceptic obdurately resists.[35] The phrase "colored glasses" links Ishmael's "wretched infidel", who refuses optical mediation, with Ahab and his quadrant. In both cases, vision is held to be misleading or deceptive, much like the fraudulent tumblers Peter Coffin uses to dupe thirsty sailors in the Spouter-Inn: "Though true cylinders without – within, the villainous green goggling glasses deceitfully tapered downwards to a cheating bottom" (p.15). Ishmael's pun on the word "glasses", here, along with the "green" tint of the lenses, shows that he, like Ahab, has absorbed the writings of Kleist ("If all men had green glasses instead of eyes…").[36]

If Ishmael's distrust of his senses resembles Ahab's, their responses to doubt are also partly alike. In "The Try Works" Ishmael stands at the tiller and experiences a "bewildered feeling" as he is, for a disturbing moment, unable to tell whether he is sleeping or awake. "I was half-conscious of putting my fingers to the lids and mechanically stretching them still further apart. But, spite of all this, I could see no compass before me to steer by […] A stark, bewildered feeling, as of death, came over me" (p.464). This sceptical "hallucination" compels him to imagine a way of transcending the contingencies of everyday life: he ends the chapter with the image of a "Catskill eagle" which soars "higher than the other birds on the plain" (p.465). In a similar vein, "The Lee Shore", finds him celebrating "mortally intolerable truth" and pouring scorn on "slavish"

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[35] D.H. Lawrence may have had this passage in mind when he wrote that Melville makes us feel "the sheer naked slidings of the elements". See Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.134.

[36] Ishmael even begins to sound like Ahab, here, what with that peremptory final phrase ("Wonder ye then…") and its archaic, Quakerish pronoun. Indeed, Ahab seems to have this effect on many of those around him: much like Bartleby, whose use of the verb "prefer" is subconsciously taken up by his colleagues, Ahab's talk of "fair play" is inadvertently mimicked by Starbuck as he stands over his sleeping captain and briefly contemplates mutiny: "I'll hold the musket boldly while I think. – I come to report a *fair* wind to him. But how *fair*? *Fair* for death and doom, – that's *fair* for Moby-Dick. It's a *fair* wind that's only *fair* for that accursed fish…" (p.558, my emphases).

landlubbers: "But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God – so better it is to perish in that howling infinite, than be dashed ingloriously upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! Who would craven crawl to land!" (p.117). The phrasing here, with its reference to a "shoreless" realm of truth, parallels Ahab's apostrophe "Truth hath no confines", and aligns Ishmael with his captain's Romantic desire to transcend the crimping uncertainties of mortal life.

Given such convergences it is perhaps not surprising that critics have at times been unable to tell Ishmael and Ahab apart. In all editions of *Moby-Dick* prior to the Northwestern-Newberry edition of 1988, a crucial paragraph in the chapter "The Gilder", which contains thoughts on how an island's "glassy glades" reflect the "mingled, mingling threads of life", was included without quotation marks, making it part of Ishmael's own narrative musings. Later editions usually follow Hayford and Parker in restoring the punctuation – which was presumably excised by mistake in the novel's earliest iterations – to reattribute the soliloquy to Ahab, although some scholars, such as Spanos, have continued to use the speech to characterise "Ishmael-Melville".[37] The confusion is understandable, because while the context and the lexis imply that the speech is Ahab's, its poised and balanced account of life is more reminiscent of Ishmael: "Through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence's doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If" (p.535). As Bryant observes, "The Gilder" may well be intended to yoke Ishmael

[37] For Hayford and Parker's persuasive explanation for their reading of this passage see their "Discussion of Adopted Readings" in *Moby-Dick* (Chicago and Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1988), p .901. William Spanos uses the phrase "the pondering repose of If" to characterise "Ishmael-Melville" in *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, p.57.

and Ahab, to suggest a "mingled mingling of voices" and to momentarily segue narrator and Romantic hero into one.[38]

Ishmael and the Crew

Despite these similarities, however, Ishmael is clearly a very different character from Ahab. He is as drawn to the camaraderie of the sailors as he is to the ideal embodied in the white whale, and is as likely to spout ribald slang as he is high rhetoric. As Spanos has noted, Ishmael will not be pinned down within any one perspective; his is an "'errant art' [...] a turning to and fro".[39] His demotic, reductive humour – his comparison of the top-heavy ship to "a dinnerless student with all Aristotle in his head" (p.110) is representative – shows that, as in *Mardi*, Melville is drawn to both cerebral ambition and to low-slung anti-intellectual comedy. Time spent with the crew inducts Ishmael into a "free and easy" approach to life (p.247), and in this he finds a shelter from doubt that his intermittent gestures to Romantic transcendence are unable to provide.

To determine how precisely Ishmael interacts with the crew it may be helpful to return to the carpenter, who is described as "a pure manipulator; his brain, if he ever had one, had early oozed into the muscles of his fingers" (p.504). The focus on the carpenter's hand in contradistinction to Ahab's distrust of the body (it is set alongside Ahab's monologue about his phantom leg) is significant because it points us to certain anti-Cartesian arguments in twentieth-century philosophy. (This is one of those cases where the philosophical implications of Melville's

[38] Bryant, "*Moby-Dick* as Revolution", in Robert Levine (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, pp.87-88. Like Bryant, Wenke suggests that Melville may have "teasingly" elided Ahab and Ishmael in a moment of "rhetorical and ontological symbiosis", and that their voices were intended to be indistinguishable in "The Gilder". See *Melville's Muse*, pp.144-147.
[39] Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, p.86.

thought go beyond what he might have gleaned from contemporary texts and compel us, in turn, to depart from strictly diachronic analysis.) There are, for example, shades of Heidegger's non-dualist phenomenology, in which "the thinking hand" and "handicraft" are key concepts,[40] and also of G.E. Moore's essay "Proof of an External World" (1936), which proffers a terse rebuttal of scepticism:

> I can prove now, for instance, that two hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'Here is another'. And if by doing so I have proved ipso facto the existence of external things, you will all see that I can do it in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.[41]

In one sense this is another restatement of Reid's common-sense principle, and is superficially similar to Swift's and Samuel Johnson's dismissive responses to Berkeley's idealism. But Moore insists that it satisfies the requirements for a logical argument: the premise adduced as evidence for his conclusion is different from the conclusion he adduced it to prove, and he "*knows*" the premises to be true, because he is, after all, "absolutely certain" that he is in possession of hands. Many sceptics would hold that Moore has simply begged the question here, or at least shifted the frame of the argument (indeed this logical manoeuvre has become known as a

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[40] See especially *What is Called Thinking?* (1954): "Perhaps thinking, too, is just something like building a cabinet. At any rate it is a craft, a 'handicraft'. 'Craft' literally means the strength and skill in our hands. [...] Only a being who can speak, that is, think, can have hands and be handy in achieving works of handicraft. But the craft of the hand is richer than we commonly imagine. The hand does not only grasp and catch, or push and pull. The hand reaches and extends, receives, and welcomes – and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hands of others. The hand holds. The hand carries. The hand designs and signs, presumably because man is a sign. Two hands fold into one, in a gesture meant to carry man into the great oneness. The hand is all this, and this is the handicraft." Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), p.16.

[41] G.E. Moore, "Proof of an External World", in Robert R. Ammerman, *Classics of Analytic Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), p.81.

"Moorean shift"). But what I find interesting is his choice of example. Why hands, after all?

One possibility is that we use our hands to interact with the world, and by that method assure ourselves of its presence. A similar idea underpins the later work of Wittgenstein, who was influenced by Moore's elegant repudiation of the sceptical position. Wittgenstein placed an emphasis on the linguistic contexts within which we are able to grasp knowledge. He called these contexts "language games", and they have their root in practical engagement with the world: "The speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life."[42] This engagement is mediated through our hands: the example Wittgenstein uses in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), of a "builder's language game" composed of nouns referring to objects to be manipulated (block, pillar, slab, beam), is indicative of his attention to lived experience. For Wittgenstein, it would simply be absurd for a builder on a building site to start questioning the existence of his tools, because such a thought is entirely at odds with his experiential and linguistic environment.[43] In Wittgenstein's terms, we might say that Ahab's problems arise from his use of philosophical terms that do not make sense within his own particular context – that is, as Starbuck seeks continually to remind him, the business of whaling.

There is another role of the "hand" in anti-sceptical thought, and it has to do with the fact that we connect with other people using our hands. As Wittgenstein puts it, we are guided by the hands of others: "[When] someone leads you by the hand, sometimes left, sometimes right; you have constantly to be ready for the tug of his hand, and must also take care not to stumble when he gives an unexpected tug. [...] Or: you are guided by a partner in a dance; you make yourself as receptive

[42] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p.lii.
[43] Ibid., pp.2-9.

as possible, in order to guess his intention and obey the slightest pressure."[44] We are touched, thrilled, comforted, by the touch of a hand. Raising a hand is an eloquent riposte to scepticism because it suggests the presence of another person, and, as sceptics from Descartes onward have recognised, it is difficult to maintain a sceptical train of thought in the presence of company.

Melville's relationship with Queequeg is therapeutic in this sense. In an early chapter, "The Counterpane", Ishmael wakes to "strange sensations" and is unable to tell whether what he is experiencing is "reality or a dream" – he is reminded of a childhood memory of a spectral presence at his bedside. The passage foreshadows the nightmarish episode at the tiller in "The Try Works", but here Ishmael is saved from scepticism not by intimations of the absolute but by the pressure of Queequeg's "pagan arm thrown round me". The harpooneer's "bridegroom clasp", helps bring him back to his senses and dispels the spectre of doubt (pp.29-30): touch here is presented as a more reliable alternative to vision, which can be misleading. (The frequent descriptions of Ishmael and Queequeg as a married couple bring to mind, too, Cavell's idea that marriage is "the fictional equivalent of what [Wittgenstein] understands to be the ordinary or the everyday", i.e. an alternative or antidote to scepticism.[45])

Melville's chapter "A Squeeze of the Hand" might also be considered in this anti-sceptical light. Here Ishmael renounces Ahab's defiant Romantic individualism and sides with his fellow sailors, in whose company he seems to locate a sort of quasi-sexual pleasure. The crew has cut open a whale's head to extract the spermaceti oil it contains, and sit on the deck squeezing the lumps out of the fluid to prepare it for storage. Their easy sociality leads Ishmael to rethink

[44] Ibid., p.76.
[45] Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, pp.129-130.

his earlier, scornful appraisal of "miserable traditions and towns", and to forget the coiled intensities of the intellect:

> [The globules] richly broke to my fingers, and discharged all their opulence, like fully ripe grapes their wine; I snuffed up the uncontaminated aroma – literally and truly, like the smell of spring violets; I declare to you, that for the time I lived as in a musky meadow; I forgot all about our horrible oath [...] I squeezed that sperm till I felt myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-labourers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say – oh my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humour or envy? […] Would I but keep squeezing that sperm forever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. (pp.455-456)

Notice that what strikes Ishmael here is no longer a sense of the contingency of the world, its otherness or separateness, but rather the opposite, a sense of immersion: "I felt myself almost melted into it."[46] The corporeal divisions between Ishmael and other people also seem to break down, encouraging not just a "loving" feeling for his fellow crew-members but a re-calibration of his philosophical trajectory. No longer will he reach for the "highest truth", the "howling infinite", but instead for the more modest felicity to be found in bed, table, fire-side. Ishmael forsakes the absolute and rests content with what Emerson called, in "The American Scholar",

[46] As Lee notes, "'A Squeeze of the Hand' breaks down boundaries between subject and object". "The Language of *Moby-Dick*", in Kelley (ed.), *A Companion to Herman Melville* p.405.

"the near, the low, the common".[47] He uses his hands in each of the senses implied in Moore's anti-sceptical argument, both in a practical context and as a way to connect with his fellows, "squeezing their hands" and in so doing effacing all "social acerbities".[48]

Part of Ishmael's decision to eschew metaphysics and to immerse himself wholeheartedly in the community offered by the crew would seem to lie in his interest in their use of language (the verb "lower" for instance, may refer to both the reduction of Ishmael's goals and the whaler's term for chasing or "lowering" after whales). Immediately after he describes the squeezing of the sperm he changes tack, and begins to document the lexicon whalemen use to describe the different anatomical parts of the whale, words that derive from the physical practice of whaling. There is "the white-horse", obtained from the whale's midriff; the onomatopoeic "slobgollion", which refers to "oozy, stringy" cartilage; the "nippers" of the tail; and "plum-pudding", which denotes "certain fragmentary parts of the whale's flesh". Ishmael concludes by telling us that "to learn about all these recondite matters" one should "descend into the blubber room, and have a long talk with the inmates", that is, those who act, work, and speak accordingly (pp.373-375).

That reference to "plum-pudding" is not, I think, coincidental, bringing to mind as it does the Swiftian response to Berkeley's scepticism we saw earlier in *Mardi*. But if this passage looks back to the eighteenth-century exponents of common sense it also, fascinatingly, looks forward to Wittgenstein's notion of the

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[47] Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p.68.

[48] My argument comes close here to that of Lisa Ann Robertson in her excellent essay "'Universal Thump': The Redemptive Epistemology of Touch in *Moby-Dick*": "Touch is reassuring and blissful, so pleasurable that it induces its own temporary insanity which offers a reprieve from the frustratingly fruitless search for meaning." *Leviathan,* Vol 12., No. 2, (June 2005), 5-20, p.7. See also *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, in which Martin argues that Queequeg leads Ishmael to "discover the body as a source of pleasure and instruction" as an alternative to the "lure of the Ahabian quest", pp.73-74.

language game as an alternative to sceptical doubt.[49] Although I would not wish to push the comparison too far, Ishmael seems to be moving tentatively towards Wittgenstein's insight that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world", and to be asserting his willingness to acknowledge those limits: to "lower" his epistemological ambitions by paying close attention to the whaler's language game. Ahab, on the other hand, moves progressively further away from the easy certitudes of shared language. By the end of the novel, even the simplest terms seem alien to him. "Omen? omen? – the dictionary!" (p.602), he cries, as if the term is no longer part of his vocabulary. "Gone? Gone? What means that little word?" (p.610), he asks as he stands aboard his flimsy whaleboat, Moby Dick's crooked jaw bearing down on him.[50]

Ishmael and Mitigated Scepticism

Though *Moby-Dick* is clearly more richly situated in the sceptical tradition, and though Ishmael's oscillations between Ahab and the crew offer it a greater sense of thematic balance, my reading thus far makes it sound rather like *Mardi*, with its depiction of two divergent and incompatible forms of escape from doubt. The parallels between the two texts are brought out by Seeyle: "The dichotomy of characterisation [in *Mardi*] looks forward to *Moby-Dick* [...] Ahab – attended by the

[49] Interestingly, Wittgenstein used the practice of hunting animals as an example of the empirical and contextualised approach to knowledge he described: "People have killed animals since the earliest times, used the fur, bones etc. etc. for various purposes; they have counted definitely on finding similar parts in any similar beast. They have always learnt from experience; and we can see from their actions that they believe certain things definitely, whether they express this belief or not. By this I naturally do not want to say that men *should* behave like this, but only that they do behave like this." Wittgenstein, "Scepticism and Certainty", in Anthony Kenny (ed.), *The Wittgenstein Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p.244.

[50] K.L. Evans has also offered a reading of *Moby-Dick* through the concept of Wittgenstein's language game, but her conclusions are different from mine: she sees Ahab, rather than the crew, as seeking to bring whaling into a commonly understood language. This reading seems to me to ignore Ahab's physical and linguistic distance from the crew. See Evans, *Whale*! (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

Azzageddi-like Pip – advances as the Babbalanja-like advocate of blackness. Immediately before Taji sheds all his illusions to become Ahab-like in his total commitment to darkness, Babbalanja undergoes a conversion akin to Ishmael's mystic experience around the whale tubs."[51]

I agree with this up to a point. But there is an important difference between Ishmael and Babbalanja. Ishmael is not content to remain in the sensuous idyll depicted in "A Squeeze of the Hand"; he manages to avoid succumbing to the pitfalls of sleepy repose and to maintain his curiosity about the "Truth" of the world. In moving between Ahab and the crew Ishmael comes to embody a restless, tempered scepticism: an awareness of the fallibility of human cognition that conditions, but never precludes, the search for knowledge.

This is illustrated in the suite of chapters on "Cetology". In these Ishmael investigates the biology, ethology and cultural history of whales, and manages to convey an enormous amount of information without ever claiming to have hit upon unshakeable scientific certainty. He acknowledges that he is unlikely to reach the deeper truths of the whale – "dissect [the whale] how I may, then, I go but skin deep; I know him not, and never will" (p.339) – but nevertheless carries the attempt with impressive empirical rigour.[52]

Perhaps the best example of his incremental, self-conscious epistemology is "The Fountain", which considers the origins of the whale's mysterious spout. "Between his ribs and on each side of his spine he is supplied with a remarkable involved Cretan labyrinth of vermicelli-like vessels, which vessels, when he quits the surface, are completely distended with oxygenated blood" (p.407), Ishmael observes. On the quiddity of the spout itself, specifically on the issue of whether it

[51] Seeyle, *Melville: The Ironic Diagram,* p.39.
[52] Jennifer J. Baker has demonstrated that "empirical modes of analysis" play an important (and often overlooked) role in Ishmael's narrative. See "Dead Bones and Honest Wonders: The Aesthetics of Natural Science in Moby-Dick" in Otter, Sanborn (eds.), *Melville and Aesthetics*, pp.85-101.

is composed of water or vapour, he admits that "no absolute certainty can be arrived at" (p.407), although he proffers various informed speculations. It is, he says, important to "hypothesize, even if we cannot prove and establish":

> My hypothesis is this: that the spout is nothing but mist. And besides other reasons, to this conclusion I am impelled, by considerations touching the great inherent dignity and sublimity of the sperm whale; I account him no common, shallow being, inasmuch as it is an undisputed fact that he is never found on soundings, or near shores; all other whales sometimes are. He is both ponderous and profound. And I am convinced that from the heads of all ponderous and profound beings, such as Plato, Pyrrho, the Devil, Jupiter, and so on, there always goes up a certain semi-visible stream, while in the act of thinking deep thoughts. While composing a little treatise on eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me; and ere long saw reflected there, a curious involved worming and undulation in the atmosphere over my head. The invariable moisture of my hair, while plunged in deep thought, after six cups of hot tea in my thin shingled attic, of an August noon; this seems an additional argument for the above supposition. (p.409)

This passage traces a parabolic trajectory from the "great inherent dignity and sublimity of the whale" to self-mocking humour. Yet there is a serious point being made here. As we saw in our discussion of *Mardi*, Melville's ironic treatment of the sceptic draws on the caustic depiction of Descartes in Swift's *Tale of a Tub*. Melville's joke about the "semi-visible" stream of vapour emitted by all "ponderous and profound beings" is, I think, a direct reference to Swift's notion that "human understanding, seated in the brain, must be troubled and overspread by vapours", which rise like "mists from the earth, steams from dunghills, exhalations from the sea".[53]

[53] Also: "Cartesius reckoned to see, before he died, the sentiments of all philosophers, like so many stars in his romantic system, wrapped and drawn within his own vortex. Now, I would gladly be informed, how it is possible to account for such imaginations as these in particular men, without recourse to my phenomenon of vapours, ascending from the lower faculties to overshadow the brain, and there distilling into conceptions, for which

This allusion to Swift involves a tacit endorsement of his criticism of thinkers, like Descartes, whose speculations run to absurd extremes. But while Melville draws on Swift in *Moby-Dick* he also explicitly rejects the anti-intellectualism implicit in the satirist's approach. "The Spout" ends with a maxim we are surely intended to take in earnest:

> And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts, many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with an equal eye. (p.409)

Ishmael stresses the need for flexibility, a form of scepticism that does not succumb to Cartesian solipsism but which allows for a discerning approach to questions of knowledge. In contrast to Ahab's monomaniac absolutism, Ishmael demonstrates a humble self-awareness, a willingness to "surmise" when certainties are unavailable. This is reflected in the imagery in this passage, which rejects the chiaroscuro of *Mardi* for a more subtle mixture of light and dark: the "mists" of doubt are sporadically "enkindled" by the rays of truth. Notice also that there is an balance to the prose which reflects its normative message, the sentences carefully freighted with words that match for polysyllabic heft ("enkindling" and "heavenly"; "believer" and "infidel") – like a ship with a whale's head hoisted on each side.

Many scholars have noted Ishmael's "balanced" epistemology and reflected on its significance in the novel. Sanborn sees Ishmael's equal eye as a sort of moral stance, "a vital and deeply ethical subjectivity" that is coloured by its awareness of

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the narrowness of our mother tongue has not yet assigned any other name besides that of madness, or phrensy." Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, pp.104,107.

that which exceeds any particular point of view; while it lacks the "consolations of stability or multiplicity" it carries an insight into the partiality of all knowledge.[54] On Sanborn's account this is enabled by Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg and his gradual relinquishment of "racist" modes of vision. Hester Blum comes at the phrase from a slightly different angle: in her reading Ishmael's "eye" encapsulates a syncretic, synthetic approach to knowledge that derives from Melville's own experience at sea. In moving between practical labour and theoretical contemplation, Blum argues, Ishmael dramatises a maritime epistemology that was shared by many American sailors of the nineteenth century, who tended to be more literate than terrestrial labourers and who prided themselves on both their *savoir faire* and their familiarity with the latest literary and philosophical texts.[55]

Where Sanborn examines the "equal eye" in the context of postcolonialism, and Blum in the context of sailor narratives, I would like to point out a striking philosophical parallel. In sceptical terms, the proper analogy for Ishmael's "equal eye" is not Swiftian fideism nor even the twentieth-century anti-scepticism of Wittgenstein and Moore (which would do away with doubt altogether), but rather the "mitigated scepticism" espoused by Hume, whose *A Treatise of Human Nature* is an extraordinary record of the author's ambivalence. Hume oscillates, remarkably like Ishmael, between a thoroughgoing naturalism and the Cartesian vortex. He begins confidently enough, outlining a project that will, he argues, "explain the principles of human nature". Indeed, what he proposes is no less than a "compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and

[54] See Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal*, particularly pp.160-165.
[55] Blum associates Ishmael with those "sailors [who] developed a materialist epistemology by which the practices of mechanical labor became the empirical basis for both applied and imaginative knowledge". See *The View from the Masthead* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), p.109.

the only one on which they can stand with any certainty".[56] But gradually doubts begin to eat away at the foundations of this "compleat system", and he describes the resulting crisis in language that would not look out of place in the closing sequences of *Moby-Dick*: "Methinks I am like a man, who having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escap'd shipwreck in passing a small frith, has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel [...] The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties, I must employ in my enquiries, encrease my apprehensions. And the impossibility of amending or correcting these faculties, reduces me almost to despair, and makes me resolve to perish on the barren rock, on which I am at present, rather than venture myself upon that boundless ocean."[57] Hume indulges his literary impulses here, and some exegetes have found this famous passage rather "stagey" and "overdone"[58] – perhaps he felt that only this sort of strained, poetic writing could do justice to his sense of sceptical torment.

And yet, only a few paragraphs later Hume recovers his equanimity. All he needs to do to dispel the storm-clouds of doubt, it seems, is to leave his study and spend some time in the company of his fellow men: "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or fours hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find it in my heart to enter into them any further [...] I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve to never more renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy."[59] Just as Ishmael forgets about Moby Dick when he squeezes the

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[56] Hume; David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (eds.), *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.4.
[57] Ibid., pp.171-172.
[58] John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions* (Cambridge University Press, 1952), p.133.
[59] Op.cit, p.175.

spermaceti, Hume manages to let go of his sceptical speculations when he leaves his study. The presence of other people "obliterates the chimeras" of his doubt.

Crucially, however, Hume does not simply dismiss scepticism out of hand. To arrest rational inquiry just because it provokes psychological disturbance would be to give up on the search for truth: indeed, when Hume writes that "'tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, *like those of beasts*, in that narrow circle of objects, which are the subject of daily conversation and action", he might be offering a rejoinder to Pyrrho's exhortation to absorb the wisdom of pigs.[60] No, he resolves to continue with philosophy, with its concomitant sceptical threat, but to temper its "fiery" tendencies with an "earthy" admixture of common sense inspired by "honest gentlemen [...] employ'd in domestic affairs"; the rustic wisdom of the common man. This results in a position Hume calls "mitigated" or "moderate" scepticism; a modest, tentative philosophical outlook that resolves to make sallies on truth without ever resorting to abstruse theory: "The conduct of a man, who studies philosophy in this careless manner, is more truly sceptical than that of one, who feeling in himself an inclination to it, is yet so overwhelmed by doubts and scruples, as to totally reject it. A true philosophical sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them."[61]

As Robert J. Fogelin demonstrates in his lucid close reading of Hume's text, "careless" in this context means something other than "not giving sufficient attention": "The expression 'free of care' comes closer to Hume's eighteenth-century use of the term. One pursues a philosophical topic for the pleasure it gives. One accepts things and perhaps one reports them to others when they strike one as

[60] Ibid., p.176.
[61] Ibid., p.177.

right and lets it go at that."[62] When Melville has Ishmael comment that "in some enterprises a careful disorderliness is the true method", I think he has in mind a modest and diffident approach to truth that brings him very close to Hume. The mitigated scepticism of the *Treatise* is the result of the "interaction of two forces, a *departure* from common instinctive belief, counteracted by the *persistence* of common instinctive belief".[63] Ishmael, with his oscillations between Ahab's ambitions and commonplace enjoyments, would seem to present an exemplary case.

3. *Moby-Dick* and Style: Romantic Irony

Surprising as it now seems, Ishmael's centrality to *Moby-Dick* was a relatively late discovery in Melville scholarship. Before the late 1930s, critics usually focused on Ahab as the thematic focus of the book, and saw his quest as bound up with Melville's own literary project.[64] In 1938 Willard Thorp did the opposite, yoking narrator and author to give us the hyphenated construct "Ishmael-Melville", and this approach has been adopted by modern scholars such as Spanos. Clearly, it is impossible to establish for certain whether or not Melville intended Ishmael as his own representative in the book, but I would argue that Ishmael's narration is, at least in part, revelatory of Melville's own aesthetic practice, and not merely a tale to be attributed wholly to the recollections of a fictional character.[65]

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[62] Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.135.
[63] Ibid. p.158.
[64] Lewis Mumford, in 1929, went against the grain in arguing that Melville does not merely use Ahab to ventriloquise his own views. See Hayford's account of the "critical consensus" in "Is *Moby-Dick* a Botch?", in *Melville's Prisoners*, pp.71-73.
[65] In a 1951 essay Walter Benzanson argued that everything in the book issues from Ishmael himself, or rather, one of two "Ishmaels": on the one hand the storyteller, an older Ishmael looking back on youthful experiences and providing the "enfolding sensibility of the novel, the imagination through which all matters of the book pass", and on the other

It seems to me that Ishmael's sceptical oscillations between Romance and common sense reflect Melville's approach to his art, his entertaining of aspirations to an aesthetic absolute *and* a down-to-earth sense of his own limitations. If Hume provides a model for Ishmael's sceptical ambivalence in the more discursive chapters, then Romantic irony provides a model for how Melville's particular formal aesthetics operate in the novel as a whole. (It is one of the overlooked achievements of *Moby-Dick* to show us that Hume and Schlegel are, as it were, two sides of the same aesthetico-philosophical doubloon.) In the remainder of this chapter I would like to examine how Melville's writing "unworks" itself at prose level, both gesturing to the transcendent symbol and undercutting those gestures with bathetic twists and turns.

In "The Whiteness of the Whale" we see Melville begin to comment reflexively on his own writing. He refers to "Coleridge's wild Rhyme" in a footnoted discussion of the albatross, a bird through whose "inexpressible, strange eyes" Ishmael imagines he has "peeped into secrets which took hold of God [...] and lost the miserable warping memories of traditions and towns" (p.206). The disdain for domesticity and tradition here recalls those comments in "The Lee Shore" on "worm-like land". However, the reference to Coleridge's poem and the albatross as an incarnation of the divine associates Melville not just with callous Romantic absolutism but a precise and coherent vision of symbolic art as a vehicle for capturing a fleeting moment of transcendence. The chapter as a whole, which implies that the whale, like the goney, is the vessel of the sublime, both accounts for Ishmael's fixation on cetaceans and lays the theoretic groundwork for Melville's depiction of Moby Dick as an embodiment of a higher Truth. At

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"the young man of whom, among others, narrator Ishmael tells us his story". See Benzanson, "*Moby-Dick*: Work of Art", in Tyrus Hillway, Luther Mansfield (eds.), *Moby-Dick: Centennial Essays* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1953).

moments such as these, Ishmael's desire to solve the mystery of the whale and Melville's ambitions for his own art are spliced like sailors' ropes.

Melville's handling of symbolism in *Moby-Dick* is a progression on *Mardi*, in which, with the exception of scenes such as the approach to Mount Ofo, the treatment of the absolute tends to be rather indefinite. *Moby-Dick* is far more concretely realised. In what must rank as one of the greatest descriptive passages in American literature, Melville gives us the white whale in the few tantalising moments before Ahab reaches him. It is worth quoting at length:

> Like noiseless nautilus shells, their light prows sped through the sea; but only slowly they neared the foe. As they neared him, the ocean grew still more smooth; seemed drawing a carpet over the waves; seemed a noon-meadow, so serenely it spread. At length the breathless hunter came so nigh his seemingly unsuspecting prey, that his entire dazzling hump was distinctly visible, sliding across the sea as if an isolated thing, and continually set in a revolving ring of finest, fleecy, greenish foam. He saw the vast, involved wrinkles of the slightly projecting head beyond. Before it, far out on the soft Turkish-rugged waters, went the glistening white shadow from his broad, milky forehead, a musical rippling playfully accompanying the shade; and behind, the blue waters interchangeably flowed over into the moving valley of his steady wake; and on either hand bright bubbles arose and danced by his side. But these were broken again by the light toes of hundreds of gay fowls softly feathering the sea, alternate with their fitful flight; and like to some flag-staff rising from the painted hull of an argosy, the tall but shattered pole of a recent lance projected from the white whale's back; and at intervals one of the cloud of soft-toed fowls hovering, and to and fro skimming like a canopy over the fish, silently perched and rocked on this pole, the long tail feathers streaming like pennons. [...] Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished Europa clinging to his graceful horns […] not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified white whale as he so divinely swam. (p.596)

The "divine" nature of Moby Dick's swimming form, and the mythic references (Jupiter, Europa, Jove) with which Melville layers it, suggest the "eternal"

dimension Coleridge saw as properly symbolic, but not at the expense of a vivid description of the creaturely reality. Melville draws on a range of pictorial and aural effects – note the alliteration of soft consonants ("*f*inest, *f*leecy *f*oam", "*f*owls","*f*eathering", "*f*itful *f*light") that evokes the mingled sounds of foaming water and fluttering birds – to suggest what both Goethe and Coleridge define as the "*living*" presence within the poetic symbol.

Zoellner describes this luminous passage as an "epiphanic" moment of aesthetic and ontological "unity", in which the eternal and the transient are brought into sudden focus and "the interface between noumenon and phenomenon collapses".[66] Whether one considers this to be a full-blown realisation of the symbolic ideal or not, what is certain is that here, moreso than anywhere else in his work, Melville comes close to meeting the exalted aesthetic ambition he outlined in "Hawthorne and His Mosses". And there are signs that he conceived it as such, because the passage is followed by a subtle reference to Shakespeare, whom Melville celebrated in that essay for his ability to reveal "the Truth". The whale dives, and Ahab thinks it will remain beneath the surface for "an hour". But something soon emerges from the depths: "He profoundly saw a spot *no bigger than a white weasel*, with wonderful celerity uprising, and magnifying as it rose, till it turned, and then there were revealed two long crooked rows of white, glistening teeth, floating up from the undiscoverable bottom" (p.597, my emphasis). This is probably a reference to *Hamlet*, Act iii, scene 2, in which Hamlet and Polonius discuss the shape of a cloud, observing that it resembles a "weasel" before transforming into something that looks "very like a whale".[67] Melville's allusion subtly aligns his novel with that greatest of all literary works, and is a signal of his intent in going toe-to-toe with the Bard himself.

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[66] Robert Zoellner, *The Salt-Sea Mastodon: A Reading of Moby-Dick,* pp.242-243.
[67] Melville includes the line "very like a whale" as one of his many epigraphs to the novel.

However, just as Melville lends the novel a sense of the sublime he does the opposite, indulging in bathos. Even at the book's fevered climax he persists in offering footnotes, which act reductively on the passages they are meant to explicate. Here is the whale "pitchpoling": "Ripplingly withdrawing from his prey, Moby Dick now lay at a little distance, vertically thrusting his oblong white head up and down in the billows [...] the now rising swells, with all their confluent waves, dazzlingly broke against it." An asterisk refers us to the bottom of the page, where Melville begins his explanation of the whale's behaviour with a line of such dry banality – "this movement is peculiar to the sperm whale" (p.599) – that it completely effaces the sense of drama that had been so meticulously established in the preceding sentence. The effect is rather like watching an artist sketch an exquisite scene of nature before blotting it out with the inky impress of his thumb.

Often these reductive tonal shifts are effected *within* Melville's sentences, which begin in earnest before pursuing an ironic dogleg:

> That instant, the White Whale made a sudden rush among the remaining tangles of the other lines; by so doing, irresistibly dragged the more involved boats of Stubb and Flask towards his flukes; dashed them together like two rolling husks on a surf-beaten beach, and then, diving down into the sea, disappeared in a boiling maelstrom, in which, for a space, the odorous cedar chips of the wrecks danced round and round, like the grated nutmeg in a swiftly stirred bowl of punch. (p.608)

The extraordinary simile that closes this passage is significant for a number of reasons. First, it clearly marks a very different literary approach from the Shakespearean grandeur of the "divinely" swimming whale; mythic allusions are eschewed here in favour of the quotidian. Second, it evokes the "vortex" that Melville associates with Descartes and Ahab's delirium. In likening this unsettling image to a stirred bowl of punch Melville localises or domesticates the problem of scepticism, and thus renders it less threatening. Third, it tells us something about

the relationship between Melville and his readers: like Ishmael squeezing the spermaceti with his fellow sailors, Melville extends a hand of friendship to his audience by drawing his whaling adventure into their own frame of reference. As Ted Cohen has put it, a successful metaphor "invites [the reader] to join a community with [the writer], an intimate community whose bond is a shared feeling about something."[68]

This last dimension of Melville's prose is evident throughout the novel, as unfamiliar maritime sights are repeatedly lassoed into familiar, homely contexts via metaphoric language. A mariner leaps between the ship's sails like "a grasshopper in a May meadow" (p.6); a harpooned sperm whale drags its pursuers "as a horse walks off with a cart" (p.228); the rowers of a whaleboat drive their vessel along "like a horizontal burst boiler out of a Mississippi steamer" (p.239); a jet of the whale's blood is the colour of the "purple lees of red wine" (p.311); a group of sailors hangs from the rigging "like a knot of numbed wasps from a drooping orchard twig" (p.550). (One might point out that this linguistic tendency, in bringing the sights and sounds of whaling into the drawing room, is analogous to the industry itself, which was predicated on converting the whale's body into products for domestic consumption. Melville makes this connection explicit at the close of a chapter which discusses the recovery of ambergris from a dead whale's digestive tract: "The motion of the Sperm Whale's flukes above the water dispenses a perfume, as when a musk-scented lady rustles her dress in a warm parlor" [p.368]. The line suggests both a metaphoric and literal connection between the whale and the imagined gentlewoman: whalebone dresses were a feature in the parlours of Melville's day.)

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[68] Quoted in John Gibson, "Literature and Knowledge", in Eldridge (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, p.477.

The most sustained use of "domesticating simile" in *Moby-Dick* comes in Melville's description of the ship's first chase after a pod of whales:

> It was a sight full of quick wonder and awe! The vast swells of the omnipotent sea; the surging, hollow roar they made, as they rolled along the eight gunwales, like gigantic bowls in a boundless bowling green; the brief, suspended agony of the boat, as it would tip for an instant on the knife-like edge of the sharper waves, that almost seemed threatening to cut it in two; the sudden profound dip into the watery glens and hollows; the keen spurrings and goadings to gain the top of the opposite hill; the headlong, sled-like slide down the other side; – all these, with the cries of the headsmen and harpooneers, and the shuddering gasps of the oarsmen, with the wondrous sight of the ivory Pequod bearing down upon her boats with outstretched sails, like a wild hen after her screaming brood; – all this was thrilling. (p.243)

This may, as Melville puts it, have been a "sight full of quick wonder and awe", but at each stage those impressions are hollowed out via a rhetorical meiosis. The churning waves seem rather less awful when they are compared to pastoral images of "glens" and "bowling greens", and the gaining *Pequod* altogether less "wondrous" when it is likened to a mother hen. This passage appears in a chapter called "The First Lowering": the verb refers to the deployment of whaleboats, but it might just as well refer to a "lowering" of Melville's aesthetic targets. Here he does not reach for symbolic absolutes, but takes as his reference point a sort of semi-rural Americana, just as, at the narrative level, Ishmael "lowers his conceit of attainable felicity" and contents himself with the cosy signifiers of a Yankee domesticity.[69]

[69] This might be seen as part of a tradition of vernacular prose that runs to the present day, and which, as James Wood has argued, Melville instigated along with Mark Twain (see Wood's chapter on Melville in *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* [London: Pimlico, 2000]). John Updike's criticism, for example, is often composed of measured, classically constructed sentences that abruptly lurch into the demotic: "Having patiently read both versions [of Larkin's *Collected Poems*] this reviewer believes that the second, chastened version, confining itself to the four trade volumes Larkin supervised and the

In a discussion of *Moby-Dick*, Brett Zimmerman writes that Melville showcases a "stylistic versatility", and implies that his rhetorical hops and jumps amount to nothing more than an attempt to offer the chastened reader some variation: "One cannot maintain the grand style throughout an entire work, so Melville switches to the middle and low often."[70] I hope it will be clear by now that my view is somewhat different. The instability of Melville's style reveals an ambivalent response to doubt, a "wriggling" that issues from an attempt to find the proper comportment in the face of uncertainty.[71] In continually setting up symbolic structures only to efface them with demotic jokes and pithy reversals Melville offers a stylistic analogy to Ishmael's movements between heaven-assaulting Ahab and the fleshly crew. He simultaneously makes and unmakes his work, revealing himself to be a Romantic ironist after the fashion of Schlegel.

As has been pointed out by scholars of Schlegel, Romantic irony is the aesthetic equivalent to the philosophy of Hume, making it the appropriate form for a literary work responsive to the *Treatise*.[72] Schlegel referred approvingly to something he called "quasi-genuine scepticism", which like Hume's variety avoids the "self-annihilation" of radical doubt by retaining a "respect for mathematics"

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uncollected poems 'published in other places', does give the verse itself *a better shake*." Updike, *Due Considerations: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

[70] Brett Zimmerman, "Teaching Melville and Style: A Catalogue of Selected Rhetorical Devices", in *Style,* Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring 2003), pp.13-25.

[71] I borrow Hilary Putnam's term for the intellectual difficulty of grappling with scepticism. See Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.177.

[72] As Mellor puts it, Romantic irony has its source in the "intellectual confusion caused by Hume's radical skepticism" and a more general "post-Enlightenment distrust of the capacity of human reason to ascertain the laws of nature, or, indeed, any absolute truths concerning the ways of the world". Mellor, *English Romantic Irony*, pp.3-4. See also Ernst Behler's point that "the insurrection of scepticism forms an essential element of Romantic irony, and constitutes a countermovement of enthusiasm and skepticism described by Schlegel in many instances as a 'constant alternation of self-creation and self-destruction'". *German Romantic Literary Theory*, p.69. Simon Critchley discusses the relationship between the Romantic irony of Schlegel and Cavellian scepticism, particularly the notion of "acknowledgement" in *Very Little, Almost Nothing*, pp.99-165.

and a tendency to "[fall] back on common-sense".[73] In an essay called "On Incomprehensibility" (1800) he attacks the notion that what is not understood is "really so contemptible and evil […] methinks the salvation of nations and families rests on [incomprehensibility]". As with Hume's mitigated scepticism, Schlegel teaches a redemptive awareness of uncertainty, or "acknowledged incomprehensibility", that manages to combine a commitment to rationality with recognition of doubt.[74]

Schlegel's distinctive style reflects this acknowledgement. Romantic irony depicts the universe as essentially chaotic, and ultimately resistant to attempts to inscribe meaning on it, but while it recognises human limitations it simultaneously retains an emphasis on the dignity and curiosity of the individual subject. As Mellor puts it: "The [Romantic ironist] plays a dual role. He must create, or represent, like God, a finite, ordered world to which he can enthusiastically commit himself; and *at the same time* he must acknowledge his own limitations as a finite human being and the inevitable resultant limitations of his merely fictional creations. The artistic process, then, must be one of simultaneous creation and de-creation: a fictional world must be sincerely presented and sincerely undermined."[75]

Such manoeuvres of "creation and decreation" are exemplified by Schlegel's fragments, which were originally published in the journals *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* in the early nineteenth century. These brief, ambiguous pieces of writing are animated by the central Schlegelian idea: "It is equally fatal to the spirit to have a system and not to have a system. It will simply have to decide to combine the

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[73] Schlegel, *Athenaeum* fragment 400, in Friedrich Schlegel; Peter Firchow (ed.), *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p.227.
[74] Ibid., pp.259-271.
[75] Ibid., p.30.

two."[76] Such a combination takes the form of a movement between "wit" and diaretic "irony". "Wit", for Schlegel, is the unification of disparate elements – "many witty ideas are like the sudden meeting of two friendly thoughts after a long separation" – where "irony" is the dissolving agent that breaks them apart.[77] On a deeper level these manoeuvres represent two tendencies, both "the joyful acceptance of the limited character of language" and the desire to "transcend those limits through poetry".[78] The relationship between these two intensities lends the fragments their rich, productive tension.

Schlegel translated these aesthetic ideas into fiction in his novel *Lucinde*, which was, fittingly enough, never completed (Schlegel left plans for the novel's further development but never got around to integrating them into the extant text, and the novel was published in unfinished form in 1799). Ostensibly the story of young Julius, and his journey from adolescent debauchery to the mature pleasures of monogamous love and parenthood, the narrative breaks down into a series of loosely-connected, chronologically-jumbled vignettes. Schlegel described it as a "shaped, artistic chaos", a work both "chaotic and systematic".[79] This formulation brings to mind Ishmael's description of his own project – "the classification of constituents of a chaos" – and there are further affinities between the two novels. As in *Moby-Dick*, the narrator oscillates in tone between excess and restraint ("I begged you that you might give yourself over to frenzy […] still, I listened with cool composure"[80]), and interrupts the narrative flow with ironic asides to the reader ("But all of this and much more doesn't belong here!"; "these words are dull and turbid"; "this mad little book…"[81]). As with Melville's Bulkington, there

[76] Schlegel, *Athenaeum* fragment 53, Ibid., p.167.
[77] Schlegel, *Athenaeum* fragment 37, Ibid., p.166.
[78] I use Behler's formulations. *German Romantic Literary Theory*, p.273.
[79] Ibid., p.291.
[80] *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, p.44.
[81] Ibid., pp.46,52,60.

are signposts to narrative paths not taken: towards the end of the novel the protagonist's roommate, Edward, is introduced, and then quickly discarded, as the revealed trace of an alternative work.

Elements of Romantic irony have been detected in other American works of the antebellum period: indeed, in his lucid and wide-ranging book *Transcendental Wordplay* Michael West goes so far as to argue that "Romantic irony more than anything else is the trait that makes our antebellum American authors Romantics".[82] West links the enthusiasm for punning shared by Melville, Whitman, Poe, and the Transcendentalists to contemporary investigations into the connection between words and world (and, on a less exalted level, a widespread schoolroom mania for etymology and grammatical parsing). But it seems to me that Melville stands somewhat aloof from his contemporaries in this regard: whereas the wordplay of other writers was often – as I will argue in more detail in the next chapter – directed towards discovering an originary correspondence between language and nature, Melville was more inclined to lay bare the rupture between words and world and to grapple with the sceptical consequences. (In this regard Melville is probably closer to an obscure philosopher of language such as Alexander Bryan Johnson than he is to Whitman or Thoreau.[83])

The point I wish to emphasise here is that Melville's Romantic irony is not merely a linguistic exercise: what makes *Moby-Dick* authentically Schlegelian are

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[82] West, *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), p.xi.

[83] Johnson emigrated to America from Britain at the age of 14, and wrote a number of philosophical works, including *The Philosophy of Human Knowledge, or a Treatise on Language* (1828, second edition 1836) and *The Meaning of Words* (1854). As West convincingly argues, Johnson both anticipated modern sceptical language philosophy and absorbed the chastened wisdom of Schlegelian irony. In his *Treatise*, Johnson writes: "To deem ourselves shut up in the universe with no capacity to know or even speak any thing of it but what our senses reveal, seems a narrower range than we are accustomed to attribute to our knowledge. Still, such is our situation. Language cannot enable us to pass the barrier of our senses." His emphasis on the limits of language led him to perfect a self-deprecatory and ironically digressive style that West compares to both Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Schlegel's fragments. Ibid., pp.219-238.

the connections Melville draws between language and the limits of thought. *Lucinde* and *Moby-Dick* both carry the aspiration to an encyclopaedic breadth of knowledge[84] and express, with a certain sad-eyed wisdom, that such knowledge lies just beyond reach.[85] Telling in this regard is Schlegel's fragment on the "category 'almost'": "I'm disappointed in not finding in Kant's family tree of basic concepts the category 'almost', a category that has surely accomplished, and spoiled, as much in the world and in literature as any other. *In the mind of natural sceptics it colors all other concepts and perceptions*" (my emphasis).[86] Ishmael, we find, uses the word "almost" obsessively, particularly in the "Cetology" chapter: "It is but well to attend to a matter *almost* indispensable"; "the Sperm Whale was *almost* wholly unknown"; "[this] monster […] has been seen in *almost* every sea"; "blackness is a rule amongst *almost* all whales"; "He is found at *almost* all latitudes"; "the common porpoise [is] found *almost* all over the globe" (pp.116-128). The adverb suggests a persistent doubt that prevents one from grasping complete certainty: in deploying it so freely Ishmael signals that he is comfortable with this partial, pragmatic form of knowledge, knowledge "colored" but not "spoiled" by doubt. Truth, for Ishmael, is always on the tip of the tongue. It marks the key point of contrast with Ahab, for whom any truth "*almost* approaching to certainties" is not true enough.

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[84] Behler argues that Schlegel, along with his brother August Wilhelm and others within their Jena circle, created "characteristic conceptions of what constitutes an encyclopedia" and sought to build on Diderot's famous example. See *German Romantic Literary Theory*, p.287.

[85] Both novels, in other words, pull themselves apart by moving in two directions at once. This is perhaps what Deleuze and Guattari had in mind when they included Melville in their roster of "half-philosophers", "hybrid geniuses who neither erase nor cover any differences in kind but, on the contrary, use all the resources of their "athleticism" to install themselves within this very difference, like acrobats torn apart in a perpetual show of strength". Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Graham Burchell, Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 2003), p.67.

[86] Schlegel, *Lyceum* fragment 80, in *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, p.152.

Schlegel defended his mode of writing – "transcendental buffoonery", as he once termed it[87] – via an apologia in one of his *Lyceum* fragments:

> In this sort of irony everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden. It originates in the union of savoir vivre and scientific spirit, in the conjunction of a perfectly instinctive and a perfectly conscious philosophy. It contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication. It is the freest of all licenses, for by its means one transcends oneself, and yet it is also the most lawful, for it is absolutely necessary. It is a very good sign when harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant to be a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke.[88]

All this applies just as well to *Moby-Dick*, what with its thematic movement between "perfectly conscious" Ahab and the "perfectly instinctive crew", and the stylistic fluctuations between "absolute" and "relative" modes of reference. Indeed, Schlegel's precis of the ironist's project is close to a moment of parabasis in "The Hyena":

> There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange, mixed affair we call life when man takes in this whole universe for a vast practical joke […] That sort of wayward mood I am speaking of, comes over a man only in a time of extreme tribulation; it comes in the very midst of his earnestness, so that what just before might have seemed to him a thing most momentous, now seems but a part of the general joke. There is nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy... (pp.204-205)

As with Schlegel's Romantic irony, Melville's "genial, desperado philosophy" involves an admixture of humour and seriousness, and leads to a dense, oxymoronic prose (the casual manner in which he throws together the adjectives

[87] Schlegel, *Lyceum* fragment 42, Ibid., p.148.
[88] Schlegel, *Lyceum* fragment 108, Ibid., pp.155-156.

"genial" and "desperado" masks the fact that it is not exactly an harmonious pairing). What this finally amounts to is a normative argument rather like Keats' negative capability, outlining a programme by which we might maintain a salutary impression of life's uncertainty and of our own finitude. Melville's narrative manoeuvres, like the yawing of a ship as it deviates from a plotted course, allow him to entertain the threat of scepticism without ever succumbing to its excesses. But in his next novel he was to lose – or, rather, to deliberately forsake – this sense of balance, and *Pierre* declines inexorably into the vortex of radical scepticism.

Chapter Three

"Tear All Veils":

Pierre and Radical Scepticism

> Like the air, Silence permeates all things, and produces its magical power, as well during that peculiar mood which prevails at a solitary traveler's first setting forth on a journey, as at the unimaginable time when before the world was, Silence brooded on the face of the waters.
>
> – *Pierre*[1]

> And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
> If to the human mind's imaginings
> Silence and solitude were vacancy?
>
> – Shelley, "Mont Blanc"[2]

When *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* was first published, the critical notices were almost uniformly hostile. The New York *Albion* pronounced the book "an incoherent hodge podge"; the Washington *National Era* called it a "slough of metaphysical speculation" that "accomplishes nothing".[3] Others were less polite. "The amount of utter trash in the volume is almost infinite," railed the *Boston Post*. The bemused editors at the *New York Day Book*, meanwhile, could only conclude that the author of this strange novel had lost his mind altogether: their review ran under the

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[1] Melville; William C. Spengemann (ed.), *Pierre, Or The Ambiguities* (London: Penguin, 1996), p.204. Further references to this edition will be included in parentheses within the main body of the thesis.
[2] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Selected Prose and Poetry of Shelley* (London: Wordsworth, 1994), p.128.
[3] Parker, Higgins (eds.), *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, pp.426, 429.

sensational headline "Herman Melville Crazy".[4] As Parker and Howard have written, *Pierre* was denounced "in terms excessive even in the journalism of that day".[5] Indeed, the reception was so scathing that it seems worth considering just what it was about the novel that critics found objectionable.

The morality of it was a target for many. The Concord *Congregational Journal* described the tone as "morbid and unhealthy" throughout, and many reviewers – including Evert Duyckinck – were uncomfortable with the insinuation of an incestuous relationship at the book's core.[6] But by far the most common criticism concerned the manner of the novel's composition. In an essay that spanned ten close-typed pages, the *American Whig Review*'s G.W. Peck dissected Melville's prose style in detail, deeming it "the most extraordinary thing that the American press ever beheld [...] Word piled upon word, and syllable heaped upon syllable, until the tongue grows as bewildered as the mind."[7] The *Herald* deplored the apparent influence of Thomas Carlyle on Melville's language, which had strayed from the "plain, honest, Anglo Saxon style" of his earlier work; likewise, *The Literary World* took issue with the "infelicities of expression" into which the once "substantial" author of pleasant maritime yarns had now lapsed.[8]

This last complaint is significant. Praise for Melville's earlier novels had often centred on the clarity and vividness of his language.[9] For example, in 1847 the *Anglo-American Magazine* hailed the "descriptive power" of *Typee* and *Omoo*, books in which "the enchanting scenery of Polynesia is presented to the very eye itself, as

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[4] Ibid., pp.179, 419.
[5] Parker, Leon Howard, "Historical Note", in Melville; Parker, Harrison Hayford, G. Thomas Tanselle (eds.), *Pierre; Or the Ambiguities* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), p.381.
[6] Op cit., pp.429-431, 433.
[7] Ibid., pp.441-448.
[8] Ibid., pp.431, 439.
[9] Christopher Lukasik makes this argument in an excellent essay on *Pierre*, "The Physiognomic Fallacy", in *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp.186-231.

if suffused with rays from illuminated roses". Similarly, the *Christian Inquirer* hailed the latter novel as "very good picture-writing".[10] Even *Moby-Dick*, for all its metaphysical digressions, was redeemed by the author's ability to delineate character and landscape with an observational sharpness that recalled daguerreotype photography.[11] *Pierre* was dismissed as a botch in part because it failed to provide the sort of presentational immediacy that had characterised these previous works.[12] The *Daily Times* of Boston encapsulated this view: "No man has more foolishly abused great powers than has the author of this singular work. Endowed largely with the power of *observing real life, and also with that of telling well what he sees*, Mr. Melville, after affording great promise [...] has sunk down to something compared with which mediocrity is not only bearable, but praiseworthy" (my emphasis).[13] The Springfield *Republican* put it more succinctly: "Melville has changed his style entirely, and is to be judged of as a new author."[14]

From the very first, then, *Pierre* was recognised as a departure for Melville. The early critics would scarcely grant him any conscious intent in writing in this new way; they preferred to attribute the book to a "lunatic" mind, a "diseased" fancy, even a "distempered stomach".[15] Scholarship after the Melville revival has been rather more generous on this point, but the idea that *Pierre* can be understood only by reference to some kind of inner turmoil on its author's part has proved a surprisingly enduring theme. In 1949, Harvard psychologist Henry Murray described the novel as "the performance of a depleted puppeteer [...] a prodigious by-blow of genius, whose organic worth is invalidated by the sickness of

[10] Op.cit., p.103.
[11] According to a review of *Moby-Dick* in the *Newark Daily Advisor*: "Every character seems pictured by a daguerreotype, so natural are the features, and so clear are the outlines." Ibid., p.393.
[12] I borrow the phrase "presentational immediacy" from Henry Murray. See Murray, "Introduction" in Melville; Murray (ed.), *Pierre* (Grove Press, 1957), p.xcvi.
[13] Op cit., p.421.
[14] Ibid., p.426.
[15] Ibid., pp.447, 451.

despair".[16] Parker, who co-wrote the influential "Historical Note" to the Northwestern-Newberry edition of 1971, has assembled textual evidence to suggest that when Melville's publishers rejected his original draft he returned to the manuscript and "ruined the novel with his exuberance and self-absorbed seriousness".[17] Similarly, Nina Baym has argued that Melville was "not certain about what he ought to be doing" in *Pierre*, and as a result "tumbled into the abyss".[18] More recently, Elizabeth Renker has interpreted the novel as the result of Melville's struggle with failing eyesight and a rare species of writer's block.[19]

Yet there are reasons to believe that *Pierre* was rather more carefully thought out than it has been given credit for, that Melville's turn away from the "pictorial" descriptiveness of his earlier fiction was premeditated. A letter to Hawthorne, written shortly before Melville began work on the novel, shows that he had been pondering his oeuvre, and that he resented the fact that *Typee* remained his most famous book.[20] When, in *Pierre*, the eponymous hero makes an auspicious literary debut with a "delightful love-sonnet" (p.245) set in the tropics, one suspects that Melville had his own Polynesian romance in mind.[21] There follows another, more subtle allusion to the previous book, in which Melville appears to refer directly to

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[16] Murray, "Introduction", p.xciii.
[17] I use Jonathan Crimmins' description of Parker's views on *Pierre*. See Crimmins, "Nested Inversions: Genre and the Bipartite Form of Herman Melville's *Pierre*", in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 64, No.4 (March 2010), p.438.
[18] "Melville [in Pierre] is not certain about what he ought to be doing but is absolutely certain that he does not want to be doing it." Nina Baym, "Melville's Quarrel With Fiction", in *PMLA*, Vol. 94, No.5, (October 1979), p.910.
[19] Elizabeth Renker, *Strike Through the Mask: Melville and the Scene of Writing* (New York: John Hopkins Press, 1996).
[20] In June 1851, Melville wrote: "What reputation 'H.M.' has is horrible. Think of it! To go down to posterity is bad enough, any way; but to go down as a man 'who lived among the cannibals'! When I speak of posterity, I only mean those babies who will probably be born in the moment immediately ensuing upon my giving up the ghost. I shall go down to some of them, in all likelihood. 'Typee' will be given to them, perhaps, with their gingerbread." See Horth (ed.), *Correspondence*, p.193.
[21] Pierre, like Melville, dreams of writing a more "profound" sort of book; as he works tirelessly on this esoteric text, Melville has the narrator ask of him, "is this the warm lad that once sung to the world of the Tropical Summer?" (p.306). This, of course, is precisely the sort of question that those bewildered reviewers asked in response to *Pierre*. Melville, it seems, had to some extent anticipated the criticism his new form of writing would inspire.

his own stylistic *volte face*. In the opening chapter of *Typee*, Melville had promised to "withdraw the veil" from exotic lands in order to make them "known":

> There is no cluster of islands in the Pacific that has been any length of time discovered, of which so little has hitherto been known as the Marquesas, and it is a pleasing reflection that this narrative of mine will do something towards withdrawing the veil from regions so romantic and beautiful.[22]

The narrator of *Pierre*, in contrast, vows to "draw a vail [sic]" of mystery over the most ordinary and familiar of New England scenes:

> Here we draw a vail. Some nameless struggles of the soul can not be painted, and some woes will not be told. Let the ambiguous procession of events reveal their own ambiguousness. (p.181)

Melville's novel has been judged by something like Joseph Conrad's famous criterion for successful writing – the ability "before all, to make you *see*" – but this aside shows us that his intentions were rather different. As I will argue in this chapter, the "veil" works as the book's central metaphor: Melville employs it not just to comment on the mechanics of his own fiction, but also to evoke his characters' abortive attempts to understand and explain the world around them. With this in mind, Melville's unconventional prose begins to look less like an aberration and more like part of a consistent authorial purpose. His tangled syntax ("entangledly stood mute"), baffling neologisms ("humannness," "unemigrating," "perfectest"), and repetitive phrasing ("mysteries interpiercing mysteries, and mysteries eluding mysteries") can be regarded as an attempt to make of his own prose an impenetrable surface analogous to the "veils" that torment his protagonists.

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[22] *Typee*, p.12.

While *Pierre* resembles Melville's previous work in drawing on Romantic tropes, it enacts a far more radical scepticism than he had previously countenanced. Where the likes of *Moby-Dick* wrestled with the idea that knowledge of nature is inevitably partial and fallible, the presence of other people was usually – as in that memorable sequence in "A Squeeze of the Hand" – held to be a therapeutic distraction in this regard. But in *Pierre* the existence of the other itself becomes a dubious prospect: the hero is confronted by inscrutable faces and unreadable veils that shadow forth the idea of ontological nothingness. And this dark conceit is reflected in Melville's prose, which is so thick and dense that it would seem to cast doubt on the communicative potential of language. In bringing out these connections between form and content I hope to show that *Pierre*, far from the incoherent rigmarole deprecated by the early critics, is in fact a highly sophisticated literary experiment, in which obfuscation is raised to the level of an aesthetic principle.[23]

1. *Pierre*'s Romantic Strain

As the novel opens, we find nineteen-year old Pierre Glendinning living what seems to be a paradisiacal existence. Descended, on both sides, from veterans of the War of Independence – like Melville's, "Pierre's was a double revolutionary descent" (p.20) – he resides on the sprawling family estate of Saddle Meadows in upstate New York. In his account of Pierre's ancestry in the early chapters, Melville

[23] In taking this view I follow those Melville scholars who have argued that *Pierre* is a coherent and successful work. These include Priscilla Wald, who regards *Pierre* as an "fascinating narrative experimentation [...] a complete, successful and brilliant work" ("Hearing Narrative Voices in Melville's *Pierre*", *boundary 2*, Vol.17, No.1 [1990], p.100); Crimmins, who argues that the novel has a finely honed structure that anticipates the bipartite format of Melville's later magazine sketches; and Samuel Otter, who goes so far as to say that *Pierre* "is both acme and finale, the text in which Melville most ardently inhabits antebellum discourse", *Melville's Anatomies*, p.209.

turns genealogy into geology: the Glendinning heredity provides the young hero with a "proud stone" (p.8) on which to stand. In one passage Melville has Pierre balance on the "ancestral kitchen hearth-stone" inside Saddle Meadows' capacious chimney, feeling "a little twinge or two of family pride" (p.12).[24] Pierre admires the "fame column [...] erected by his noble sires" (p.8), and views it as a "noble pedestal" (p.12), a "stand-point in Time" (p.5), which secures his sense of self. Similar structural metaphors recur in the account of Pierre's relationship with his father, who died while he was a boy (this another link to the author himself). Pierre nurses an image of Glendinning *père* as a marble statue, "a niched pillar, deemed solid and eternal, and from whose top radiated all those innumerable sculptured scrolls and branches, which supported the entire one-pillared temple of his moral life, as in some beautiful gothic oratories, one central pillar, trunk-like, upholds the roof" (p.68).[25]

The "one-pillared temple" of Pierre's life begins to look rather more fragile after he receives a letter from Isabel, a mysterious woman who claims to be his father's illegitimate daughter. Pierre's response to her revelation resembles Cavell's description of the sceptic's epistemological project: "There is [...] something amiss, something which must be accounted for; the going over of a situation to see where an unnoticed reference or assumption may have been made; the sense that something in this one incident contains a moral about knowledge as a whole."[26] Shaken in his "foregone persuasions", Pierre looks back over his life and questions his father's integrity and the nobility of his bloodline. This brings on a deeper sense of doubt; he begins to "refuse the evidence of his own senses"

[24] Not coincidentally, "Pierre" is linked etymologically to "stone" in French.
[25] Howard Bruce Franklin is among the scholars who have commented on Melville's consistent employment of this "geological" imagery: "Melville uses rocks or stones as [his] chief symbols" in *Pierre*. See *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), p.121.
[26] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p.141.

(p.117). The sharp outlines of rock and statue, symbolic of his self-assurance, are gradually eaten away by a "subtile acid" (p.9).[27] Melville renders scepticism as an unsettling, liquid mutability: doubts "rolled down on [Pierre's] soul like melted lava" (p.67); "the physical world of objects slidingly displaced itself from around him, and he floated into an ether of visions" (p.85). As Emerson might have put it, the once-solid world of the Glendinnings is "slid into oblivion".[28]

The imagery here recalls Descartes' account of scepticism as an existential threat that brings about the "downfall of the whole edifice" and leaves him whelmed in "deep water".[29] As we have seen, Descartes decides to "commence to build anew from the foundation" in the name of a "firm and permanent structure" for his philosophy, which he eventually locates on the ground of the *Cogito*.[30] Pierre's decision, once he rouses himself from his sceptical funk, is described in similar terms: "For him the entire structure of the world must [...] be entirely rebuilded again, from the lowermost cornerstone up" (p.87). As with Descartes, it is the indubitable existence of his own self that provides this cornerstone: "[Pierre] staggered back upon himself, and found support only in himself" (p.89).[31]

Yet Pierre's hunt for truth could not be further removed from Descartes' calm, methodical approach.[32] Melville more than once refers to his protagonist's "Enthusiasm",[33] and if we take the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of the term –

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[27] Melville associates this "acid" with a peculiarly American "element" that is "forever producing new things by corroding the old".
[28] See Emerson, "Representative Men", in *Essays and Lectures*, p.664.
[29] Descartes, *Key Philosophical Writings,* p.139.
[30] Ibid., p.134. The Cartesian project to restore and secure certain beliefs or premises as the basis for knowledge about the world is known in epistemology as the "foundational" conception of knowledge. See Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp.81-93.
[31] See also p.65, in which Pierre concludes, after the sceptical deluge, that "myself am left, at least".
[32] I would point out, however, that Melville's blank chapter titles have a certain Cartesian flavour; "Book III: The Presentiment and the Verification" sounds rather like a phrase lifted from the philosopher's epistemological handbook, the *Discourse on the Method*.
[33] Pierre is "intensely agitated by the ever-creative fire of enthusiastic earnestness", pursues a "manly enthusiast cause" (p.167), and sheds "soft enthusiast tears" (p.152), to

in its arcane usage, "a religious fervour supposedly resulting from divine inspiration, typically involving speaking in tongues and wild, uncoordinated movements of the body" – it would seem apposite.[34] An early soliloquy catches Pierre in this mood of abandonment:

> Unhand me all fears, and unlock me all spells! Henceforth I will know nothing but Truth, glad Truth, or sad Truth, I will know what *is*, and do what my deepest angel dictates [...] Thou Black Knight, that with visor down, confrontest me, and mockest me, Lo! I strike through thy helm, and will see thy face, be it Gorgon! Let me go, ye fond affections; all piety leave me; I will be impious, for piety hath juggled me, and taught me to revere, where I should spurn. From all idols, I tear all veils, henceforth I will see the hidden things, and live right out in my own hidden life. Now I feel that nothing but Truth can move me so. (p.65)

On reading this, one might be inclined to agree with Peck's comments in the *American Whig Review*: "[*Pierre* is] precisely what a raving lunatic who had read Jean-Paul Richter in translation might be expected to spout under the influence of a particularly moonlit night".[35] The critic was not wrong to notice a certain Teutonic quality to Melville's prose, but I would argue that the specificity of the imagery, here – the "veil" that shrouds "Truth" from view – suggests not any ad hoc or unconscious inheritance but rather a deliberate response to German Romanticism.

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choose just three examples. William B. Dillingham, in his *Melville's Later Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), sees a Gnostic colouring to Pierre's "Enthusiasm". See pp.203-207.

[34] Here is Pierre in a typical episode: "He dashed himself in blind fury and swift madness against the wall, and fell dabbling in the vomit of his loathed identity" (p.171).

[35] *The Contemporary Reviews*, p.441.

The Veil of Isis

Pierre's speech immediately reminds us of Ahab on the Pequod's quarter-deck, with his talk of striking through the "mask" in the name of "Truth". But I believe that the shift from mask to "veil" is significant, in that it signals Melville's renewed interest in a particular Romantic conceit. One clue as to the provenance of the veiling metaphor is to be found in an 1844 work, *Sketches of Modern Philosophy*, by New Englander James Murdock:

> The chief aim of [post-Kantian thought] is to penetrate into the *terra incognita* of Kant, that is, into the region of noumena and *supersensible* things. These authors were unwilling to believe we can know so little, as Kant had represented. They therefore attempted to *rend the vail* [sic, my emphasis] which conceals the unknowable; or to bridge the unpassable gulf of Kant, which separates between phenomena and noumena in the material world.[36]

Murdock probably has in mind, here, Kant's aesthetic treatise *Critique of Judgement* (1790), in which the veil features as an epistemological trope. Kant draws on the Egyptian myth of Saïs or Isis, the statue symbolising "Truth" whose veil no mortal was permitted to lift.[37] According to Plutarch, on whose rendition Kant bases his account, the temple that housed the statue bore a prosopopeic inscription: "I am all that is and that was and that shall be, and no mortal hath lifted my veil." "Nothing more sublime was ever said", writes Kant, and by "sublime" he has a specific experience in mind: "It is only by means of [the sublime] faculty and its Idea of a noumenon – which admits of no intuition, but which yet serves as the substrate for the intuition of the world, as a mere phenomenon – that the infinite of the world of

[36] James Murdock, *Sketches of Modern Philosophy, Especially Among the Germans* (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1844), p.94.
[37] See Kant; J.H. Bernard (ed.), *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Bernard, (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), §49, p.160, n.44.

sense, in the pure intellectual estimation of magnitude, can be *completely* comprehended […] although in the mathematical estimation of magnitude by concepts of number it can never be completely thought."[38] In other words, while noumena are inaccessible to intellection, one can nevertheless experience an intimation of the infinite. Kant referred to this feeling as one of terror or awe, a "sacred shudder" that should serve as a warning against one's reaching after the elusive *Ding an sich*.

The Isis myth became something of a commonplace in Romantic literature at the turn of the nineteenth century. The Rosetta Stone was discovered by the Napoleonic army after it invaded Egypt in 1798, sparking an interest in the notion of a "key" with which the country's ancient mysteries might be deciphered. (It would, however, take another twenty years before Jean-François Champollion learned how to use the Stone to interpret hieroglyphics.) This interest was, in turn, coloured by the Kantian legacy: as John T. Irwin writes, "post-Kantian doubt of the certainty of knowledge inevitably raises questions about how one reads inner meaning from outer shape, questions that are 'hieroglyphical' in nature".[39] The Romantic authors' formulations of the Isis myth show that they were divided as to whether it was wise to pursue this "inner meaning". Novalis wrote in his essay "The Disciples at Saïs" that "if it is true that no mortal can raise the veil [...] then we will just have to try to become immortal. Whoever gives up trying to raise the veil is no true disciple of Saïs".[40] Others took a different view. In Schiller's poem "The Veiled Statue at Saïs", a youth "impelled by by a burning desire for knowledge" reveals the statue, only to be killed by what he sees. Goethe, in his

[38] Ibid., §26, p.93.
[39] John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), p.55.
[40] Johann Gottfried von Herder took a similar position; in a letter of 1795, he expressed dismay at Schiller's more cautionary reading of the Isis myth. For an erudite survey of the German Romantics' formulations of the myth see Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp.265-273.

poem "Genius Unveiling a Bust of Nature", advises readers to "respect the mystery" because "Nature the Sphinx/Will terrify you with her innumerable breasts". These writers aligned themselves with Kant, in affirming the presence of an unknowable substratum to the world.[41]

There is much evidence to suggest that this intellectual tradition was in Melville's thinking. Compared with *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, the allusions to Kant in *Pierre* are more specific. In Book XIX he invokes the "sublimated Categories of Kant" (p.267), and his phonetic spelling of the philosopher's name – "Kant (can't)" – shows that he has understood Kant's emphasis on human limitation.[42] As with Schiller's youth, his protagonist is an epistemological knight-errant who wants to lift the veil to reveal "absolute Truth" (p.282). After the earlier "tear all veils" *cri-de-coeur*, Pierre says that he wants to "gospelize the world anew, [to reveal] deeper secrets than the Apocalypse" (p.263),[43] and to "deliver [...] miserably neglected Truth to the world" (p.283).

And yet the narrator's frequently sardonic commentary casts doubt on Pierre's ambition, speaking of "that inevitable perverse ridiculousness" inherent in the desire to reach "imperfectly discerned ideals" (p.299). Apparently writing in the diachronic wake of Pierre's demise, the narrator foreshadows it, striking a cautionary note that recalls the allusion to Saïs in *Moby-Dick*: "Clear Truth is a thing for salamander giants only to encounter, how small the chances for the provincials then? What befell the weakling youth lifting the dread goddess's veil at

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[41] Ibid.

[42] In a letter to Hawthorne dated June 1851 – just before he started work on the novel – he muses on "Truth" and cites Goethe and Schiller. Horth (ed.), *Correspondence*, pp.190,193. The reference indicates that he can be aligned with those who read the Isis myth as an admonition.

[43] A writer as aware of etymology as Melville would have known that "apocalypse" in Greek means an "uncovering". Cf. *The Confidence Man*, Chapter XLV, in which Melville indulges in some wordplay that contrasts "apocrypha" (hidden things) with "Apocalypse".

Saïs?"[44] On this view, the hunt for truth is a perilous undertaking. So it proves for Ahab, whose attempt to strike through the "pasteboard masks" of "visible objects" ends in disaster. So, too, for Pierre, whose quest ends on the floor of a cramped and malodorous police cell.

The difference is that Pierre, unlike Ahab, succeeds in catching a glimpse of the world beyond the veil. Soon after he suffers his first bout of scepticism, Pierre describes his eagerness to scale an "exalted mount" (p.180) where he might seek the "transcendental object" (Kant's alternative phrase for the noumenon). Towards the end of the book, he experiences a vision of the mountain that overlooks Saddle Meadows,[45] and Melville renders this fever-dream in a passage of such brilliant, sustained grotesquery that it is worth quoting at length:

> Long and frequent rents [in the verdure] revealed horrible glimpses of dark-dripping rocks, and mysterious mouths of wolfish caves [...] As among the rolling sea-like sands of Egypt, disordered rows of broken Sphinxes lead to the Cheopian pyramid itself, so this long acclivity was thickly strewn with enormous rocky masses, grotesque in shape, and with wonderful features on them, which seemed to express that slumbering intelligence visible in some recumbent beasts – beasts whose intelligence seems struck dumb in them by some sorrowful and inexplicable spell [...] You still ascended toward the hanging forest, and piercing beneath its lowermost fringe, then suddenly you stood transfixed [...] cunningly masked hitherto, by the green tapestry of the interlacing leaves, a terrific towering

[44] *Moby-Dick*, p.370. Melville would also have come across Kantian ideas in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, which centres on the German Professor Teufelsdröckh and his parodic "philosophy of clothes". Teufelsdröckh views all material things as mere representations of some eternal "Idea": "All emblematic things are properly Clothes, though woven or hand woven". Like Ahab and Pierre, he is unsatisfied with surfaces and wants to get at the interior "Truth": his intention is to "sever asunder" the "thin penetrable curtains of earthly space". Carlyle suggests that there is a kind of madness in this: "To look through the shows of things into the *Things themselve*s he is led and compelled [...] everywhere do the shows of things oppress him, withstand him, threaten him with fearfullest destruction: only by victoriously penetrating into *Things themselves* can he find peace and a stronghold." The language here, contrasting the appearance of mere things with "Things themselves", makes explicit the origins of the veiling motif in Kantian epistemology. See *Sartor Resartus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.21, 26, 155.

[45] Probably based on Greylock, the Massachusetts peak visible from Melville's writing desk at Arrowhead, his Pittsfield home. He dedicates the novel to "the Most Excellent Purple Majesty of Greylock" (p.1).

> palisade of dark mossy massiveness confronted you; and trickling with unevaporable moisture, distilled upon you from its beetling brow slow thunder-showers of water drops, chill as the last dews of death. Now you stood and shivered in that twilight, though it were high noon and August down in the meads. All round and round, the grim scarred rocks rallied and re-rallied themselves, shot up, protruded, stretched, swelled, and eagerly reached forth, on every side bristling with a hideous repellingness. Tossed, and piled, and indiscriminate among these, like bridging rifts of logs up-jammed in alluvial rushing streams of far Arkansas; or, like great masts and yards of overwhelmed fleets hurled high and dashed amain, all splintering together, on hovering ridges of Atlantic sea, – you saw the melancholy trophies which the North Wind, championing the unquenchable quarrel of the Winter, had wrested from the forests, and dismembered them on their own chosen battle-ground, in barbarous disdain. 'Mid this spectacle of wide and wonton spoil, insular noises of falling rocks would boomingly explode upon the silence and frighten all the echoes, which ran shrieking in and out among the caves, as wailing women and children in some assaulted town. Stark desolation, ruin, merciless and ceaseless, chills and gloom – all here lived a hidden life, curtained by that cunning purpleness, which, from the piazza of the manor house, so beautifully invested the mountain once called Delectable, but now styled Titanic. (pp.343-344)

Pierre peers beyond the world's overlaid verdure, but apprehends only "stark desolation and ruin", a terrible massif. As we have seen, he had declared his intention to tear away the concealing screen to view "the hidden things", the "hidden life". Melville repeats the latter phrase here, perhaps in wry comment on the earlier soliloquy; peering through "rents" in the "tapestry" or "curtain" of nature, Pierre sees that what was "hidden" might have been better left veiled.

This wild mountain seems completely devoid of human trace, demonstrating that the layers Pierre strikes beyond are, in part, cultural and historical ones. The imagery here bears some affinities with the contemporaneous landscape painting of Thomas Cole, in which, as Bryan Jay Wolf has put it, "the veil of familiarity is

lifted from the face of nature and an alien strangeness left in its stead".[46] As Robert Abrams argues, this aesthetic "taste for wild, desolate scenery" – which Cole shared with other American artists of the mid-nineteenth century, such as Frederic Edwin Church – involved the delineation of a "wayward and uncontrollable materiality not amenable to rigid conceptual stabilisation", and can be seen to issue from an ideological desire to erase the indigenous tribal history of the land by presenting nature as "pure" or "naked".[47] Something like this desire may be at work in Melville, too, but his allusions elsewhere in the novel to remnants of the "Indian wars" and "cyphers of Indian kings" (p.6) would seem to indicate a willingness to acknowledge, at least in passing, America's human heritage.

Pierre's vision might be explained more clearly with reference to the post-Kantian philosophical contexts discussed above. The references to desert sands and broken Sphinxes, for instance, point to the influence of the Saïs myth and its Egyptian provenance, while the "mossy palisade" (etymologically, either a shelf of rock or a defensive wall), along with the pervading tone of portentousness, imply that Pierre has transgressed the Kantian limit, questing beyond the veil like Schiller's impetuous youth. The passage is followed by an account of the Greek myth of Enceladus, the rebellious giant who battled the Olympian Gods; Melville thus associates Pierre with "heaven-assaulters" (p.346) who fatally over-reach

[46] Wolf, *Romantic Re-Vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.186.
[47] Robert E. Abrams, *Landscape and Ideology in American Renaissance Literature: Topographies of Skepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.7-9.

Figure 3. "Landscape with Dead Tree", by Thomas Cole (1828)

themselves.[48] Like Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound*, Melville plays with the symbolism of the amaranth flower – the "purpleness" on Pierre's mountain denotes a bloom of amaranths – to suggest the immortality to which his hero aspires.[49] The vision of the world as a blasted, rocky landscape, meanwhile, brings

[48] Enceladus is the "incestuous son of heaven and earth", and is represented here by a half-buried rock at the base of the mountain. Pierre's vision, it seems, places him in just this intermediate state; he transcends the earth to reach after truth but is "still not wholly earth emancipated" (p.347). This is reminiscent (indeed, so strongly reminiscent as to suggest a direct source) of a discussion of Fichte in Carlyle's *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, a volume Melville purchased from his publisher John Wiley in 1849. In it, the reacher after the Kantian "Idea" or noumenon is described as an "ambiguous mongrel" who "hovers between two worlds, without pertaining to either". *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, p.63.

[49] "Prometheus saw, and waked the legioned hopes/ Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers/ Nepenthe, Moly, Amaranth, fadeless blooms..." *Prometheus Unbound*, act II scene iv. "Amaranthus" is a Greek adjective which means "everlasting" or "unfading". For a discussion of Shelley's use of the term see Donald H. Reiman, Neril Fraistat (eds.), *The Complete Poetry of Persy Bysshe Shelley, Volume II* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University

to mind Shelley's famous sonnet of 1818, in which the land "behind" the "painted veil" – which the poet, like Kant, delivers a stern injunction not to lift – is imagined as a "chasm [...] sightless and drear".[50]

But why, exactly, is this landscape so dreadful? For an answer one might look to the geological focus of Melville's imagery, which seems an ironic recasting of the early description of Pierre's heredity as a "proud stone". Looking at the expanses of "igneous rock", Pierre gets an inkling of an "antediluvian" time frame that stretches back "untold ages" (p.345), making even his venerable bloodline seem trivial.[51] His sense of "discomfiture and woe" at this notion mirrors the responses to "deep time" – a concept that emerged from the work of geologists such as James Hutton in the eighteenth century, later taking hold of the American cultural imagination[52] – and suggests that Melville is lending a chronological inflection to the Kantian sublime, which is usually described as a response to spatial, rather than temporal, vastness.[53] One of the reasons that "it is not for man to follow the

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Press, 2004), p.417. Prometheus is cited again at the end of *Pierre*: "What wondrous tools Prometheus used, who knows?" (p.358).

[50] See "Lift not the painted veil which those who live...". *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley*, p.224. For a helpful discussion of Shelley's handing of this imagery see Peter H. Butter, *Shelley's Idols of the Cave* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1954), p.109-114.

[51] This theme was foreshadowed early on, in one of the narrator's more portentous asides: "How unadmonished was our Pierre by that foreboding and prophetic lesson taught [...] by Palmyra's ruins. Among those ruins is a crumbling, uncompleted shaft, and some leagues off, ages ago left in the quarry, is the crumbling corresponding capital, also incomplete. These Time seized and spoiled, these Time crushed in the egg, and the proud stone that should have stood among the clouds, Time left abased within the soil" (p.8).

[52] Awareness of "deep time" often seemed to provoke a feeling of awe or terror that comes close to Kant's sacred shudder. "The mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into into the abyss of time", wrote a contemporary of Hutton's, as he joined him on a visit to a quarry and stared into the earth. John Wyatt, *Wordsworth and the Geologists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.150. See also Wai-Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents*: *American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). The scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century, Dimock writes, brought about a new awareness of the "feebleness of the human mind" in America (p.54).

[53] For Kant, the "mathematically sublime in nature" means the height of a mountain or the scale of the universe, not its longevity. See the *Critique of Judgement*, p.71.

trail of truth too far" (p.165) is the fact that too much knowledge brings home a crushing sense of one's own insignificance.[54]

Yet it seems to me that the dread Pierre experiences as he looks upon this scene has a more profound source. "Palisade" has another meaning – a layer of cells beneath the surface of a leaf – and the concept of geological stratification is suggested by the imagery of rocks "piled" one upon another, and the fact that the mountain's surface is pitted with "wolfish caves". Perhaps, then, the rocky landscape is itself just another surface interposed between the hero and the inner substance for which he strives. Similar imagery elsewhere in the novel supports this reading. Just as the "hanging forest" conceals a scene of "stark desolation", the window of Pierre's room in New York looks out on "desolate hanging wildernesses of tiles, slate, shingles and tin" (p.270). The tiles, like the "interlacing leaves" of the mountain, suggest a textured, imbricated surface. The "piled" rocks of the Titan-repelling mountaintop are echoed, too, in the "fearful pile of Titanic bricks", that make up the abode of the Apostles, and the "piled" structure of the prison at the denouement, which is hollowed out by "long tiers of massive cell-galleries", an image reminiscent of Piranesi's dungeons (p.360). In another sequence, the narrator describes the Alps, in which one sees "peak crowded on peak, and spur sloping on spur, and chain jammed behind chain", before proceeding with an excursus on interiority:

> Yet now, forsooth, because Pierre has begun 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

[54] Something like that sense is evident in other texts of British and American Romanticism, notably in Wordsworth's travelogues. See *An Unpublished Tour* (written in 1811-12), in which Wordsworth looks down into a rocky cleft: "Among sensations of sublimity, there is one class produced by images of durate […] by the sight of rocks of *ever-lasting* granite, or basaltic columns, a barrier upon which the furious winds or the devouring sea are without injury resisted" (my emphasis). *Wordsworth and the Geologists*, pp.150-151.

> surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies. By vast pains we mine into the central 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 man! (p.285)

Here is the sceptical notion to which Melville's imagery of the veil has been leading: were one to get beyond the surfaces of the world, one would find precisely nothing: "God's hand" is "Hollow" (p.139). Implied here is not just the notion of the *deus absconditus* but also a generalised ontological absence in nature, a lack of quiddity. There is no "unlayered substance" as Pierre had fondly thought; in Melville's dark reworking of the Isis myth, the impetuous youth peeking beneath the veil encounters only a "horrible interspace" (p.134), a vacuum as profound as that "beyond the uttermost orbit of the sun" (p.284).[55]

There are strong parallels, here, with Emerson's "Experience", with its vision of the world as "scene-painting and counterfeit", and its intimations of "the new molecular philosophy [that] shows *astronomical interspaces* betwixt atom and atom, […] shows that *the world is all outside: it has no inside*" (my emphasis).[56] But where Emerson's essay ends on an optimistic note – with a famous line about transforming "genius into practical power" – *Pierre* never quite shakes off the idea of the world's veiled nullity. As the novel progresses Melville explicitly associates himself with the darker aspects of the sceptical tradition – there are references to "Descartian Vortices" and the "Berkleyan philosophy" (p.267) – that cast doubt on

[55] There are references throughout the novel to physical forms that disguise an inner vacancy. I think of the "deep oaken recess of the double casement" (p.149) in Isabel's room; her guitar, into which she invites Pierre to peer (p.148); the "great vase of air" in which ashes are "urned" (p.198); the "scooped acclivity" in which the farm-house is situated (p.110); the "vast, inverted, rounded cones of verdure" of linden trees, which resemble "huge green balloons" (p.110); the "two hollow barrels" in Pierre's writing room (p.302).

[56] Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, pp.480-481.

the very existence of the world.[57] And not just the world: note that in the quoted passage the epistemological focus is reversed, from the substance of nature to that of human beings. The final, anguished line expresses a fear that the human form is as appallingly "vacant" as the earth itself.

2. Unsettling the Ordinary

My argument thus far casts Pierre as a hero in the vein of much Romantic literature, and indeed, of *Mardi*'s Taji and *Moby-Dick*'s Ahab: a quester after Truth who finds only anguish and despair. But there is a difference: unlike Melville's previous work, *Pierre* offers no alternative to the protagonist's journey towards a desired absolute. As we have seen, both *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* locate in ordinary, commonsensical approaches to the world a (perhaps momentary) refuge from doubt. Pierre finds no such solace: like a returned war hero who cannot forget the horrors he has witnessed on the battlefield, repose eludes him.

As he works on his book in the miserable apartment he has come to share with Isabel and a third outcast, Delly Ulver, the women encourage him to take a break. Emerging from his study with "a most comfortless staggering of a stroll", he "sits down next to the neat table of Delly; and Isabel soothingly eyes him, and presses him to eat and be strong. But his is the famishing that loathes all food. He can not eat but by force. He has assassinated the natural day; how then can he eat with appetite?" (p.305). Evidently, unlike Bishop Berkeley, Pierre's scepticism

[57] There may also be an implicit allusion to the most sceptical sceptic of them all, Bayle (whose first name was Pierre). Bayle took the insights of Descartes and Berkeley to even greater extremes, "carrying the sceptical onslaught to all type of theories – of knowledge, metaphysics, theology and science – and [unravelling] the warp and woof of man's intellectual world". "For Bayle", as Leibniz put it in a metaphor that might have struck a chord with Melville, "the onion is peeled until nothing is left." See Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, pp.28-29. For some informed speculation on Bayle's influence see Millicent Bell, "Pierre Bayle and Moby-Dick", *PMLA*, Vol.66. No.5 (Sep. 1951), 626-648.

would prevent him from enjoying plum puddings. Later, he leaves his study and heads for that proverbial site of communal merriment, the alehouse. As he walks the streets during a storm, the "vindictive pelting of hailstones [...] melted into soft dew, and harmlessly trickled off him". When he reaches the tavern he nurses a "half-pint of ale", but finds himself only in the midst of "social castaways". He experiences another sceptical fit, a "terrible vertigo" during which he "knew not where he was [...] and did not have any ordinary life-feeling at all" (pp.340-341). Again, for Pierre, the scene of the ordinary proves to be just another theatre of doubt.

This, in part, is what makes Pierre such a queasy, uncomfortable novel to read; unlike *Mardi* or *Moby-Dick*, in which doubt is experienced out on the high seas, here scepticism irrupts into the most intimate of surroundings.[58] Melville's use of simile is instructive in this regard. In *Moby-Dick* we saw that he repeatedly compares outlandish sights to homely ones, as if tracing out a course for an eventual return to the ordinary. In *Pierre* things run in the other direction: the most domestic of Yankee scenes are made strange by Melville's odd, exotic comparisons.[59] Pierre's home is like the wilds of Canada in the wake of a forest fire (p.86); a lover's cheeks, wet with tears, are like "moist fish-wings" (p.33); a quiet street lined with lamp-posts is like an "avenue of Sphinxes" (p.269), on which the passers-by resemble "broken-hearted pelicans" (p.267); illness descends "like a sky-hawk"(p.340); Pierre's pen is like the "beak of the vulture" (p.305),[60] and so on. And there are everywhere incongruous maritime references, and allusions to far-

[58] Feidelson brilliantly described *Pierre* as "*Moby-Dick* gone sour". *Symbolism and American Literature*, p.185.
[59] The narrator, apparently growing frustrated at the sort of enumeration of detail expected of the realist novel, asks "who shall tell stars as teaspoons?" (p.25). This explicitly sets the novel apart from *Moby-Dick*, in which teaspoons are just the sort of everyday object to which outlandish natural sights might be compared.
[60] This last is probably another allusion to Prometheus, whose replenished liver was eaten anew each day by vultures as he lay stricken on the mount.

flung places and historical events that few of Melville's readers can have been expected to know much about: Turkey and Hindustan (p.24); Babylonian Nineveh (p.34); fourth-century Persian satrap Prince Mausolus (p.369); the "hyperborean regions" of the Arctic (p.165); the Manchu assault on the Great Wall of China (p.167); the "great Oronoco [sic]" (p.231); the Roman legend of Curtius (p.379); the Azores isle of Pico (p.304); and the Niger (p.381), to take a mere sample.[61] These tenuous and often recondite connections work to unsettle the ordinary.[62] The effect is compounded by the narrator's peculiar neologisms, many of which are formed by adding the substantive suffix "-*ness*" ("heroicness", "humannness", "patriarchalness", "youngness", "visibleness"), and which corrupt and make strange the most familiar of "household adjectives".[63]

[61] In some cases even Melville himself may have been unsure of the precise reference intended; unless, as William Spengemann speculates, "Wonderful Mutes" (p.244) is a printer's error ("muses" would make more sense), it may just be a suitably exotic-sounding phrase that Melville concocted. See Spengemann's "Explanatory Notes" in *Pierre*, p.376.

[62] A similar trajectory, from the ordinary to the exotic, can be seen in Melville's letters of the period. On April 16, 1851, he ended a letter to Hawthorne with a wry acknowledgment of his tendency to outlandish digressions: "You see, I began with a little criticism extracted for your benefit from the 'Pittsfield Secret Review', and here I have landed in Africa." On January 8,1852, he replied to a "highly flattering" letter from Sophia Hawthorne in praise of *Moby-Dick*. Melville affected surprise that she liked the book ("for a general thing, women have small taste for the sea"), and promised that his next book would be "a rural bowl of milk". Melville enquires after her "domestic affairs", but ends the missive with a sudden movement away from the quotidian: "Life is a long Dardanelles, My Dear Madam, the shores whereof are bright with flowers, which we want to pluck, but the bank is too high, & so we float on & on, hoping to come to a landing-place at last – but swoop! we launch into the great sea! Yet the geographers say, even then we must not despair, because across the great sea, however desolate & vacant it might look, lie all Persia and the precious lands roundabout Damascus. So wishing you a pleasant voyage at last to that sweet & far countree [sic]..." What the Hawthornes made of these strange letters is not known. See Horth (ed.), *Correspondence*, pp. 187, 218-220. See also Irwin, who writes that *Pierre*, like a number of Poe's tales, features "scenes in which the familiar suddenly becomes unfamiliar and thus uncertain in the profoundest sense". *American Hieroglyphics*, p.258.

[63] I borrow the phrase from Stephen Rachman's essay "Melville's Pierre and Nervous Exhaustion; or 'The Vacant Whirlingness of the Bewilderingness'", in *Literature and Medicine*, Vol. 16, No.1. (1997), 226-249, p.237. For Rachman, Melville's "supercharged neologisms" suggest a "more-than-local property" to common words.

Doubt and the Other

That domesticity holds no solace for Pierre suggests that he is suffering from a more serious strain of what Hume called the "malady" of scepticism than we have considered to this point. This is "other minds" scepticism, the solipsistic doubt that other people exist, or in a less severe formulation, doubt that we can ever be certain of the character or substance of other people's thoughts. The problem, as with the external-world variety, finds its classical formulation in Descartes:

> I may by chance look out of a window and notice some men passing in the street, at the sight of whom I do not fail to see men [...] and nevertheless what do I see from this window except hats and cloaks that may cover automatic machines? But I *judge* these to be men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind.[64]

Descartes implies that it is impossible to *know* that the figures walking by on the street are people; one can only *judge* that they are so.[65] This opens up the potentially tragic possibility that our judgement may be wrong, that we have read the visual signs incorrectly. The figure we took to be a passer-by may be an automaton; the person in need whom we endeavour to help may, in fact, be dissembling.

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[64]See the "Meditations on First Philosophy", in *Key Philosophical Writings*, p.146 (the emphasis here is mine). There is little else in Descartes to suggest he was bothered by "other minds", as distinct from external-world scepticism, but later philosophers have inferred a latent, radical sense of the unknowability or inaccessibility of the other. In Husserl's reading of the fifth Cartesian meditation, for example, he interprets Descartes as saying that while the self is transparent to us, the other can be known only be indirect means, or what he calls "analogical appresentation". See Paul S. MacDonald, *Descartes and Husserl: The Philosophical Project of Radical Beginnings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). See also the discussion of this point in Hillis Miller, *The Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.65.

[65] Note that it is the limits of optical perception as an epistemological index that is at issue here, rather than the obscuring hats and cloaks in this particular case. After all, the "automatic machines" may conceivably be so advanced as to look identical to human beings beneath their clothing.

It seems to me that something like other minds scepticism inflects the relationship between Pierre and Isabel.[66] Early in the novel, before he has received Isabel's letter, Pierre sights her across a crowded New England drawing room:

> [Isabel's face] was not of enchanted air; its mortal lineaments of mournfulness had been visibly beheld by Pierre. Nor had it accosted him in any privacy, or in any lonely byway, or beneath the white light of a crescent moon, but in a joyous chamber, bright with candles, and ringing with two score women's gayest voices. Out of the heart of mirthfulness, this shadow had come forth to him [...] In natural guise, but lit by supernatural light, palpable to the senses, but inscrutable to the soul, in their perfectest impression on us, such faces [...] overthrow us in all foregone persuasions, and make us wondering children in this world again. (p.43)

Melville emphasises the fact that this mysterious face appears within the most ordinary of scenes; not in "privacy" but in the very "heart of mirthfulness", in the presence of a crowd. Contemplating Isabel's face, Pierre asks "what is it that thou has veiled in thee so imperfectly, that I seem to see its motion, but not its form! It visibly rustles behind the concealing screen [...] I conjure thee to lift the veil" (p.41). When he first visits her at the farmhouse where she lives, in a room draped with curtains, he is beguiled by her long hair, which "shrouds" or "veils" her.[67] As she plays her guitar, "her long dark shower of hair fell over it, and vailed it; and still from out the vail came [...] the sounds" (pp.126-127).

For Pierre, the veil of doubt covers people as well as things. In his eyes "men" tend to be "[piled with] belying surfaces" (p.224). Looking into the eyes of his betrothed, Lucy Tartan, Pierre sees a "spangled vail of mystery" (p.33). Isabel's letter is brought to him by a "hooded and obscure looking figure" (p.61); and

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[66] Pierre's tendency to other minds scepticism means that he would agree with Emerson, who wrote in "Friendship" that "I cannot deny it O friend [...] the vast shadow of the Phenomenal includes thee also." *Essays and Lectures*, p.344.

[67] Her hair is also likened to the black veils that "muffle" Peruvian women attending mass (p.149).

Pierre himself comments that "a coat of iron mail seems to grow round and husk me now", just as the "bitterest winters are foretold by a thicker husk upon the Indian corn" (p.42). Then there is Plinlimmon, the enigmatic leader of a philosophical sect, whose "clothes seemed to disguise" him (p.290).[68]

As with the "veil" that drapes nature, Pierre wants to reach past these deceptive external appearances to grasp the "inner" character they conceal. To do this he draws – apparently unwittingly – on the methods of the Swiss-born thinker Johann Kaspar Lavater, to whose widely disseminated volume *Essays on Physiognomy* (1775-1778) Melville alludes ("[There was] a wonderful work on Physionomy [...] in which the strangest and shadowiest rules were laid down for detecting people's innermost secrets by studying their faces" [p.79]). Lavater once said that his book gave the reader access to "knowledge of the correspondence between the external and internal [...] the visible superficies and the invisible contents",[69] which makes it sound rather like a Rosetta Stone for deciphering the riddles of the human form.[70] Practitioners of physiognomy required what he called "precision in observation":

> The very soul of physiognomy is precision in observation. The physiognomist must possess a most delicate, swift, certain, most extensive spirit of observation. To observe is to be attentive, so as to fix the mind on a particular object, which it selects, or may select, for consideration, from a number of surrounding objects.[71]

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[68] The "infinite traceries of the feminine art" which allow ageing women such as Mary Glendinning to glow "like a vase" (p.15), and the reference to a male equivalent in the "beard restorer" of Book XVII ("the cunning compound of Rowland and Son" [p.253]), have a similar import.

[69] Lavater, *Physiognomy, or, The Corresponding Analogy Between the Conformation of the Features and the Ruling Passions of the Mind* (London: Cowie, Low and Co, 1826), p.31.

[70] Melville compares Lavater to Champollion in *Moby-Dick*, and the reference evidences a scepticism regarding Lavater's project: "Champollion deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man's and every being's face. Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable." *Moby-Dick*, p.311.

[71] Ibid., p.99.

We often find Pierre standing motionless with his vision "fixed" on a particular person or thing. "Pierre's glance is palely fixed" on Isabel in the drawing room scene (p.46); later, "his eyes fixed on the girl's wonderfully beautiful ear" (p.119). Noticing this tendency, she remarks on his "fixedly regardful glance" (p.159).[72]

Another clue as to Pierre's adoption of the physiognomic method is his interest in portraiture. Lavater thought that knowledge of the correspondence between inner substance and outward appearance might be gauged more accurately by using a painting of the subject: "Each perfect portrait is an important painting, since it displays the human mind with the peculiarities of personal character [...] We here frequently see [these peculiarities] better than in nature herself, since in nature nothing is fixed, all is swift, all is transient."[73] To verify Isabel's story, Pierre revisits an old portrait of his father, which was painted before he was born. By comparing this painting to a later one, and by sifting through his family's various responses to it, he is convinced that he can divine the secret of his father's "pensively smiling" expression: Glendinning *père* was, at the time, conducting an affair with Isabel's mother. Moreover, Pierre begins to notice a resemblance between the portrait and Isabel herself: "And now, by irresistible intuitions, all that had been inexplicable mysterious to him in the portrait, and all that had been inexplicably familiar in [Isabel's] face, most magically these coincided..." (pp84-85). Pierre is so convinced that he has hit upon the proof of his and Isabel's shared paternity by way of this physiognomic reading that he renounces everything to help her. He burns the incriminating painting, and whisks

[72] There are many other examples: "both their eyes were fixed on the portrait" (p.79); "fixing his glance" (p.219); "fixedly gazes" (p.270); "fixedly eyeing" (p.319). This notion of observational "fixing" aligns the physiognomist with the philosophical sceptic, who also seeks knowledge of an "inner" substance. Descartes stares at a piece of wax; Hume at a table; H.H. Price at a tomato. As Cavell puts it, "the sceptical picture is one in which […] our position with respect to significant objects is *rooted*, the great front and back halves fixed in relation to it, fixed in our concentration as we gaze at them." *The Claim of Reason*, p.202.

[73] Lavater, *Physiognomy*, p.301.

his "sister" off to New York to avoid the wrath of his shrewish mother, who would not countenance a formal acknowledgement of Isabel's claims.

Pierre's faith in the physiognomic method marks him out as a man of his times. As Christopher Lukasik writes in a recent work on visual culture in antebellum America, physiognomy gained currency as a way of "confronting and recognising" the moral character of other people – supposedly manifested in the lumps and bumps of the head – in a society marked by perpetual flux.[74] Thomas Green Fessenden's poem of 1825 illustrates the kind of epistemological confidence this bestowed on the movement's adherents:

> The Deity, in kindness to our race
> Hath set a stamp on every human face
> By which, together with the shape and air,
> A shrewd observer may at once declare
> From characters of no ambiguous kind
> What are the leading lineaments of the mind.[75]

Such was the popularity of Lavater's methods that he was depicted, in a play by dramatist J.R. Planché, as a crime-busting detective, able to determine a man's guilt simply by scrutinising his features. (Melville saw a production of "Lavater, The Physiognomist; Or Not a Bad Judge", while in London in 1849.[76]) One thinks in this context of Poe's investigator Dupin, who often relies on physiognomy to catch criminals: his proficiency in the art is demonstrated in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), where he is associated with the skilful player at cards who, by examining "the countenance of his partner" can tell whether or not he is bluffing.

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[74] Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, p.13. I discuss in more detail the social and political conditions that contributed to the popularity of physiognomy in chapter four.
[75] Fessenden, "Physiognomy", quoted in Lukasik, Ibid., p.1.
[76] Ibid., p.270, n.24. Melville purchased a copy of Lavater's essays (which he already owned) two weeks later. He also brought back with him from London a copy of Goethe's autobiography, which recounts the author's friendship with Lavater (of whom he is not uncritical). For a perceptive discussion of Goethe's characterisation of the physiognomist, and its possible influence on *Pierre*, see Dillingham, *Melville's Later Novels*, pp.152-158.

And yet, in other stories, Poe casts doubt on the physiognomic method. The narrator of "A Man of the Crowd" (1840) seems at first glance to share Dupin's talent for ratiocination: he sits in the window of a London coffee house, observing the crowds disgorged by the surrounding offices, and is able to deduce, from the appearance of each individual, his or her likely employment and social standing: "I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years." But then he spots a man whose "absolute idiosyncrasy" of expression renders him completely unreadable. He follows this unfathomable stranger out into the streets, but despite tailing him for hours on end is unable to determine anything about him. The narrator concludes that "there are some secrets that will not be told".[77]

Like Poe's story, Melville's narrative dramatises the failure of physiognomic methods.[78] Once Pierre reaches the city with Isabel and Delly, he begins to question his initial conclusions. Is Isabel *really* his sister? "How knowest thou I am your brother?", he asks her. "Did my mother tell me? Did my father say so to me?" (p.273). His doubt is compounded when he meets Plinlimmon, whose face is surrounded by a strange nimbus, an "atmosphere [that] seems only renderable in words by the term inscrutableness". Plinlimmon's features are such that "his very face, the apparently natural glance of his eye disguised this man" – his is a blank

[77] *Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, pp.240-247. For a discussion of the relationship between physiognomy and detective work in Poe see James V. Werner's valuable essay "The Detective Gaze: Edgar A. Poe, the Flaneur, and the Physiognomy of the Crowd", in *The American Transcendentalist Quarterly*, Vol.15, No. 1 (March 2001), 5-22.

[78] As we will see in chapter four, both Poe's and Melville's depictions of the inscrutable other might be read as part of a contemporary cultural discourse surrounding the nature of strangerhood.

Figure 4. "Evening on Karl Johan Street", by Edvard Munch (1892)

and unreadable visage, rather like that of Poe's nameless wanderer, or the haunting, half-formed characters in Edvard Munch's paintings. The encounter causes Pierre to experience a feeling of "trepidation", even of "peculiar depression and despair" (pp.292, 293). Later, as he sits at his desk, he spies Plinlimmon at a window opposite, and in a telling reversal of his usual methods, tries to veil the face and obscure it from view: "He procured some muslin for his closet-window, and the face became curtained like any portrait" (p.293). Pierre has come to suspect that his physiognomic strategy is fallible.

Pierre loses all faith in his ability to read from surface to inner truth when, with Isabel and the jilted Lucy (who has decided, bizarrely enough, to come and

live with the three misfits), he attends a portrait gallery on the New York wharves. Two paintings in the exhibition catch his eye. One is a copy of Guido Reni's famous portrait of Beatrice Cenci, the sixteenth-century Italian noblewoman who, so the legend goes, was raped by her father, and took vengeance by bludgeoning him to death.[79] Pierre realises that one would have no inkling of this terrible story by looking at the woman's angelic face: "With blue eyes and fair complexion, the Cenci's hair is golden, physically, therefore, all is in natural keeping, which, nevertheless, still the more intensifies the suggested fanciful anomaly of so sweetly and seraphically blonde a being, being double-hooded, as it were, by the black crape of the two most horrible crimes (one of which she is the object, the other the agent) possible to civilized humanity – incest and parricide" (p.351). The features Pierre focuses on – the "blue eyes and fair" complexion – are identified in Lavater's book as indicative of "weakness, effeminacy and yielding",[80] hardly the characteristics one would expect of a notorious murderer. It is a "fanciful anomaly" that casts doubt on physiognomic prescriptions.

Opposite the Cenci is another painting, named "The Stranger". This one depicts a man – patently not a Glendinning – who bears a striking resemblance to Pierre's "sister". "This second portrait," Pierre realises with horror, "was just as strong evidence" (p.353) for Isabel's heritage as the portrait of his own father, and so undermines the source of his original credulity. This prompts one final, especially vertiginous sense of doubt: "The most tremendous displacing and

[79] These two crimes are associated with Pierre, too. Incest, in his weirdly flirtatious relationship with his mother and, latterly, in his none-too-subtle attraction to Isabel; symbolic parricide, in the immolation of his father's portrait. Guido's portrait of Cenci was a favourite of the Romantics, yet more evidence that *Pierre* can be considered as a response to the Romantic movement. Shelley was inspired by the portrait to write his verse drama *The Cenci* (1819). Later, the painting, and the legend behind it, became one of the themes of Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860), in which the guilt or otherwise of Beatrice is discussed at length. For a discussion of the Romantics' interest in the myth, see Chai's *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*, p.421.

[80] *Physiognomy*, p.61. Cf. the remark by Pierre's mother of Lucy, "Seldom have I known blue eyes such as hers that were not docile" (p.20).

revolutionizing thoughts were upheaving in him […] How did he *know* Isabel was his sister? [...] Isabel's wonderful story might have been, someway, and for some cause, forged."[81] He comes to realise that there is no "possible, rakeable, downright presumptive evidence" for a person's thoughts, and grows "skeptical of all tendered profundities" (pp.353-354).

Pretty Vacant

What Pierre has finally begun to appreciate is that there is no visual "evidence" for a person's heredity, her thoughts or feelings. As Shakespeare's Iago puts it: "Honour is an essence that's not seen." But rather than acknowledging that the "essence" of the other's character must therefore be taken on trust, Pierre wonders whether there is any essence at all. That anguished cry "appallingly vast as vacant is the soul of man!" suggests that the human form, like nature itself, is like an empty sarcophagus. Images throughout the novel suggest that human beings lack substance: Pierre sees Isabel's face superimposed on the "pyramidical" pine trees of Saddle Meadows, whose leaf canopies disguise an "airy" interior, like "green balloons" (p.110). He thinks of Lucy as an "empty *x*".[82] Even Pierre himself is

[81] The idea of Isabel's faking or "forging" her story provides a link to the narrator's earlier comments on the dubious provenance of the paintings in the gallery ("It seemed plain that the whole must be a collection of those wretched imported daubs, which with the incredible effrontery peculiar to some of the foreign picture-dealers in America, were christened by some of the loftiest names known to Art", [p.350]). It also suggests the significance of the earlier reference to "Lord Chesterfield" (p.225). Chesterfield was an English nobleman who wrote letters to his illegitimate son advising him to dissimulate to get along in polite society. (The correspondence was published in 1774, and widely disseminated in the Anglo-American press.) If one is able to disguise one's character, as Chesterfield argues, then that would give the lie to physiognomy. Themes of forgery and deception will emerge again in *The Confidence-Man*, which I consider in my conclusion. For an account of Chesterfield's popularity in Melville's time, see Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, p.18.

[82] This striking formulation once more brings to mind Descartes, whose 1637 work *La Geometrie* inaugurated the use of "*x*" to designate an unknown quality in mathematics.

described as "vacant"; his "petrifying heart dropped hollowly within him, as a pebble down the Carrisbrook Well" (p.168).

In play here is what critic Christopher Benfey, in his study of Melville's contemporary Emily Dickinson, calls a "fantasy of human hollowness, of inner emptiness". Dickinson's poetry seems often to have been animated by such a fantasy:

> Experiment to me
> Is every one I meet
> If it contain a Kernel?
> The Figure of a Nut
>
> Presents upon a Tree
> Equally plausibly,
> But Meat within, is requisite
> To Squirrels and to Me.[83]

Is there a "kernel" within each "figure"? The suspicion that the human form is merely a *trompe l'oeil*, a hollow shape, runs through the literature on "other minds" scepticism. We have seen that Descartes worried that the "hats and clothes" he saw from his window covered no human form. George Santayana, in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923), describes the sceptic's tendency to see objects as "all surface":

> The oldest of us are sometimes no less recalcitrant to the spectacle of the garments of existence – which is all we ever saw of it – when the existence is taken away. Yet it is to these actual and familiar, but now disembowelled objects, that scepticism introduces us, as if to a strange world; a vast costumer's gallery of ideas where all sorts of patterns and models are on exhibition, without bodies to wear them, and where no human habits of motion distract

[83] Johnson (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p.487. In his commentary on this poem, Benfey rightly points out Dickinson's play on words ("meet" and its homonym "meat"). But I think he misses the subtle adjectival use of the term. "Meet" in its archaic sense means "fit and proper", which suggests that an interpersonal ethics is in discussion here. To treat people as if they lacked an inner soul would not be "meet", in this sense. Compare Emerson in his essay "Experiences": "Let us treat the men and women well, as if they are real; perhaps they are." See Benfey, *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Other Minds* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), pp.82-83; 86-87.

> the eye from the curious cut and precise embroideries of every article.[84]

In a similar vein, Cavell argues that the sceptic tends to "scoop mind out of" human behaviour, leaving just a shallow form.[85] This explains a somewhat macabre thought experiment in *The Claim of Reason*, in which the posited sceptic is so concerned that the other is merely a "shell" that he succumbs to the "temptation [...] to penetrate the other, [to] see inside".[86]

Both Lucy and Isabel sense just such a temptation in Pierre. (If Ishmael seeks to get inside the head of the whale, Pierre seeks to get inside the heads of other people.) After they have discussed the disclosure of secrets between lovers, Lucy says to her betrothed: "Pierre, into ten trillion pieces I could now be torn for thee, in my bosom would yet hide thee [...] now could I plant some poniard in me" (p.38). Later, Isabel, worried that Pierre doubts her story, says to him that could "[you] take out my heart, and look at in thy hand, then thou would'st find it all over written [...] with continual lines of longings" (p.158). When, at the close, Pierre decides to shoot his usurper cousin Glen, or Lucy's cantankerous brother Fred – whomever he encounters first – his conviction is put in terms expressive of penetration: he wants to "stab" at his enemies, to "plant" his bullets "in their brains" (p.358).[87] His desire for certainty leads him to "break" people and things

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[84] George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (New York: Dover, 1955), pp.71-72. Compare Eliot's line from "The Hollow Men" (1925): "Shape without form, shade without colour." Eliot studied philosophy under Santayana at Harvard: for a discussion of the philosopher's influence on the poet see Eric Sigg, *The American T.S. Eliot: A Study of the Early Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.117-124.

[85] The sceptic "stops treating behaviour as expressive of the mind, scoops mind out of it". Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.262.

[86] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp.380-381.

[87] The notion of tearing the veil of the other merely to discover an inner hollowness has obvious sexual connotations. One might consider Jacques Derrida's description of the hymen as a "fine invisible veil [...] which stands between desire and fulfilment". "The hymen is a sort of textile. Its threads should be interwoven with all the veils, gauzes, canvases, fabrics, moires, wings, feathers..." Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session", trans. Barbara Johnson, in Derrida; Derek Attridge (ed.), *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge,

"in order to satisfy a half-crazy curiosity to find out what is in the hidden heart of them" (p.148), to rend the veil of the other.[88]

3. Baseless Fabric: Melville's Veiled Text

In *Pierre*, then, Melville dramatises a radical form of scepticism that casts doubt on the substance of both the world and other people; his characters fear that visual appearances are merely belying "veils" that conceal an inner emptiness. But Melville goes further than this; he makes of his text itself a sort of veil, and deliberately withholds the key to its unravelling. The clearest indication of his intentions in this regard is a contemptuous aside on "conventional" fiction in Book VIII:

> Like all youths, Pierre had conned his novel-lessons, had read more novels than most persons of his years, but their false, inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystematizable elements, their audacious, intermeddling impotency, in trying to unravel, and spread out, and classify, the more thin than gossamer threads which make up the complex web of life, these things over Pierre had no power now. [...] While the countless tribes of common novels laboriously spin vails of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last, and while the countless tribe of common dramas do but repeat the same, yet the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all that can be humanly known of

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1992), pp.164-166. See also Luce Irigaray's comment that for the masculine gaze a woman's "sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*" (the emphasis is Irigaray's), in *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.26. That the veil is a chaste covering for a sexualised interiority is suggested when Pierre, on a nocturnal walk through the city, encounters a group of prostitutes in torn dresses: "Women of all colors, and in all imaginable flaunting, immodest, grotesque, and shattered dresses [...] the torn Madras handkerchiefs of negresses, and the red gowns of yellow girls, hanging in tatters from their naked bosoms, mixed with the rent dresses of deep-rouged white women..." (p.240). Again, the specificity of the imagery here connects the episode to the novel's other "veils"; just like the curtain of interlacing leaves on Mount Greylock, these veils are "grotesque","hanging", "torn","rent".

[88] Compare Isabel's description of the "broken" people at the hospital in which she was raised as an orphan: "They would vacantly roam about, and talk vacant talk with each other [...] some kept their hands tight on their hearts [...] one would say to another – 'Feel of it – here, put thy hand in the break'" (p.120).

> human life, these never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings, but in imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels (as mutilated stumps), hurry to abrupt intermergings with the eternal tides and fate. (p.141)

Pierre itself, I would suggest, can be read as one of those "profounder emanations"; rather than rolling back the "vail" of mystery Melville does the opposite, creating a veiled surface that works to "abrupt" the reader's engagement with the text.[89]

One "imperfect, unanticipated" narrative development in particular has been the subject of critical debate. In Book XVII Melville belatedly reveals that Pierre is a published poet of some repute. In an effort to explain this apparent disjunction, Parker and Howard have produced textual evidence to suggest that the sections on Pierre's authorship were late additions that ruined the finely honed structure of Melville's original manuscript. These "interpolation[s] into the narrative" were, they speculate, a "delayed petulant reaction" to Duyckinck's review of *Moby-Dick* in the *Literary World*. (Parker later produced his own, ostensibly more coherent edition of the novel, in which he excised these sections.[90])

Some comments from T.S. Eliot's "Hamlet and His Problems" (1921) may cast some light here. Eliot describes the play as a "stratification" that bears the traces of various stages of creative input. Shakespeare "superimposed" his Hamlet upon earlier versions of the story, and himself made successive alterations that led to

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[89] True to his word, the narrator never disentangles the central mystery, and to the end we are left in the dark as to whether or not Isabel really *is* Pierre's sister. Lukasik points out that in many of the conventional American novels of domestic romance – probably the sort of "common" narrative Melville had in mind here – a social imposter is rooted out by means of the physiognomic method (*Discerning Characters*, p.202). By discrediting physiognomy, therefore, Melville disassociates *Pierre* from that "tribe of common novels". We have seen that he draws attention to the appearance of Beatrice Cenci, and the disjunction between her crimes and the popular connotations of fair hair and pale skin. He also, towards the end of the novel, emphasises that Lucy was *more* inscrutable to Pierre than Isabel ("her most singular behaviour [amazed] him [...] scarcely had even the mystery of Isabel fascinated him more" [p.327]), a move that disrupts the conventional narrative model that plots a course between Fair Maiden and Dark Lady. For Pierre, Lucy and Isabel are merely a Scylla and Charybdis of doubt.

[90] See Parker and Leon Howard's "Historical Note", p.376.

anomalies: "He has left in it superfluous and inconsistent scenes which even hasty revision should have noticed."[91] Parker and Howard's commentary on *Pierre* shows us that the novel displays just this sort of structure. But the question is why Melville chose not to revise those "inconsistent scenes", to iron out the folds in the narrative (it would, presumably, have been relatively straightforward for him to have returned to the novel's opening stages and added a paragraph or two hinting at Pierre's literary ambitions). The answer I would propose is that Melville intended his work to have just the sort of structure that Eliot noticed in Shakespeare, that the novel's "stratification" was a deliberate aesthetic choice.

This can be seen in Melville's handling of genre. As Samuel Otter has noticed, *Pierre* "begins with the allure of the 'Sentimental' Lucy, moves through the 'Gothic' mysteries of Isabel, and climaxes in the striving, mutilated torso of the 'Romantic' Pierre".[92] Otter's categorisation is perceptive – although I would identify a pseudo-Dickensian "urban" genre in play too – and he is right to point out that the generic progression recapitulates a century of changing literary fashions in Britain and America. But the transitions are not as seamless as he implies. Each "new" genre, with its structuring symbols, appears *within* the framework of the old. Melville had written to Sophia Hawthorne describing *Pierre* as a "rural bowl of milk", and the novel's opening scenes seem to deliver on his promise, displaying as they do the conventions associated with the sentimental romance – the country setting, the symbolic portraits, the thrusting male and "true" maiden – that was so popular at the time. (Susan Warner's *The Wide Wide World* [1850] "was threatening to outsell the Bible" as Melville took up *Pierre*.[93])

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[91] T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems" in *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (London: Modern Library, 2001), p.137.
[92] *Melville's Anatomies*, p.243.
[93] See Spengemann's "Introduction" to *Pierre* (p.x).

But as Isabel arrives – and as we have seen, she makes her entrance in the most domestic of contexts – she brings with her a wholly different set of themes and tropes: contemplating her face, "Pierre felt that what he had always before considered the solid land of veritable reality was now being audaciously encroached upon by bannered armies of hooded phantoms, disembarking in his soul, as from flotillas of specter-boats" (p.49). This "solid land" refers not just to Pierre's physical surroundings but, in narrative terms, the basis of the sentimental romance, which is "encroached upon" by the numinous symbolism and darker thematic concerns – patricide, suicide, incest – of the Gothic.[94] Likewise, Pierre's grand, "Romantic" ambition occurs in an "urban" milieu; he works at his book amongst characters such as the poor, genial copyist Charlie Millthorpe – an antecedent of Bartleby – who seem to have been introduced from another sort of novel entirely.

These shifts generate what Jonathan Crimmins has described as "a pattern of inversions", in which each genre is "nested" within another in order to

[94] The Gothic elements associated with Isabel suggest the influence of Hawthorne, but also a further German source; Melville had been reading Carlyle's *German Romance*, and the tone of *Pierre* recalls some of the darker tales in that volume, particularly "The Runenberg" by Ludwig Tieck. There is a scene in this story in which an itinerant woodsman happens upon a ruined palace in the mountains of Central Europe, and spies a woman singing a gnomic lyric: "She took a golden veil from her head; and her long black hair streamed down in curling fulness over her loins [...] her heavy waving locks formed round her, as it were, a dark billowy sea, out of which, like marble, the glancing limbs of her form beamed forth." (*German Romance: Specimens of its Chief Authors* [Edinburgh: William Tait, 1827], pp.94-95.) The sequence is strongly reminiscent of the episode in Melville's novel in which Pierre visits Isabel at the farm-house; like Tieck's forest woman, Isabel sings, and as she does so "immense soft tresses of the jettiest hair" fall over her. Melville's version of the Gothic draws on the oneiric eroticism of such stories. Thematically, the conceit of brother-sister incest suggests a Gothic inheritance closer to home, in what Leslie Fiedler calls the "anti-bourgeois" narratives of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) and *Ira and Isabella* (1807), and the work of Charles Brockden Brown. In such novels incest represents a challenge to bourgeois codes, and thus might be seen as a correlative to the "threat to the ordinary" posed by scepticism. See Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 1960), pp.105-162.

destabilise it.[95] The "nesting" effect is compounded by the arrangement of the novel into individual "books", subdivided into brief chapters; by the use of a narrator to frame the story in the third person; and by specific narrative concerns, notably the strand concerning Pierre's authorship (as Priscilla Wald has pointed out, *Pierre* is in this sense a prismatic *mise en abyme*, "a book about a writer writing a book about a writer"[96]). The critic who seeks to pin down *Pierre* within a single classifiable genre is thus faced with the sort of problem the hero himself encounters, a "surface stratified on surface" in which the central ordering structure of the text itself is obscure.

If Melville's desire to "spin vails of mystery" is evident in the novel's structure, it is also apparent in the manoeuvres of his prose. As we have seen, the novel's first critics were unimpressed by his adoption of a new, less immediate style. The work of J.M.W. Turner – an artist Melville much admired – was often greeted with similar critical apathy, and a comparison may be instructive here. Writing in 1808, the critic John Landseer took umbrage at Turner's "indistinctness": "People of precise taste abjure this indefinity."[97] The satirical magazine *Punch* quipped that Turner's pictures generated effects that are otherwise only encountered in "lobster salads".[98] In his study of the relationship between Melville and Turner, Robert K. Wallace argues that Melville's approach in *Moby-Dick* is indebted to what he calls an "aesthetic of the indistinct" that was influenced by the painter,[99] and he is right to note the parallels. Ishmael comes across something very like one of Turner's crepuscular maritime scenes in "The Spouter-Inn":

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[95] See Crimmins, "Nested Inversions: Genre and the Bipartite Form of Herman Melville's *Pierre*", in particular pp.449-460.
[96] Wald, "Hearing Narrative Voices in Melville's *Pierre"*, p.132.
[97] Quoted in Robert K. Wallace, *Melville & Turner: Spheres of Love and Fright*, p.23.
[98] Ibid., p.12.
[99] Melville saw many of Turner's best known paintings, and met with Turner connoisseurs, while on a trip to London in 1849. Ibid., pp.262-306.

> On one side hung a very large oil painting so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal crosslights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could in any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose. Such unaccounted masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched [...] A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet there was a sort of indefinite, half-attained sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it...[100]

I would argue, however, that Wallace is not entirely correct in adducing from Ishmael's tortuous ekphrasis a clue to Melville's own method in *Moby-Dick*. He describes Melville's renderings of whirlpools as "vortical visions" that in their own way approximate to the "chaos bewitched" of the Spouter-Inn painting, building to "an amorphous inner chaos" that becomes the very "center of his art".[101] But, as we have seen, the climactic whirlpool in the novel could not be more concretely described, likened as it is to a "swiftly stirred bowl of punch".[102]

It seems to me that if an "aesthetic of the indistinct" is at play anywhere in Melville's oeuvre, then it is in *Pierre*. A clue in this regard is the reference in Book XX to that which is "picturesquely conspicuous" in "the dismantled thatch in a painted cottage of Gainsborough" (p.277). Melville's use of the term "picturesque" is quite specific, here. In Hazlitt's *Table-Talk* (1821), a work of criticism which Melville had read, the "picturesque" is associated with the delineation of vivid detail: "The picturesque is that which stands out, and catches the attention by

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[100] *Moby-Dick*, p.9. Wallace shows that the comparison of the whale to the Eddystone Lighthouse in chapter 133 was also influenced by Turner (Melville had seen a mezzotint engraving of Turner's painting of the lighthouse in December 1849). Op cit., pp.313-314.
[101] Ibid., p.569.
[102] *Moby-Dick*, p.494.

some striking peculiarity."[103] This is precisely the sort of approach that *Pierre* does away with, and indeed the reference to Gainsborough is derisive. What we get instead is a textual practice that distracts, rather than "catches", the attention.

Pierre's narration is often marked by an evasive approach that manifests itself in elision and ellipsis. We rarely learn what a character looks like beyond a few unavoidable features. The introduction of Mary Glendinning is characteristic; she appears in a "resplendently cheerful morning robe [...] holding a gay wide ribbon in her hand" (p.14). The colour of the ribbon – surely a pertinent detail – is not given, and we learn little else about Mary beyond the fact that she has retained her good looks and that she is fastidious in applying make-up. When Lucy appears, we learn that her pale cheeks are flushed, that her teeth are white and her hair blonde (p.24). But the narrator soon tires of enumerating her appearance: "Never shall I get down this vile inventory! [...] Who shall put down the charms of Lucy Tartan upon paper? And for the rest; her parentage, what fortune she may possess, how many dresses on her wardrobe, and how many rings upon her fingers, cheerfully would I let the genealogists, tax-gatherers and upholsterers attend to that" (p.25). He admits that "this may seem an irregular sort of writing", and just how irregular can be seen if we compare the introduction of these two major characters to the entrance of a relatively minor player in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, published in the year before *Pierre*:

> The door, which moved with difficulty on its creaking and rusty hinges, being forced quite open, a square and sturdy little urchin became apparent, with cheeks as red as an apple. He was clad rather shabbily (but, as it seemed, more owing to his mother's carelessless than his father's poverty), in a blue apron, very wide and short trousers, shoes somewhat out at the soles, and a chip-hat, with the frizzles of his curly hair sticking through its crevices. A

[103] William Hazlitt; Duncan Wu (ed.), *Table-Talk; or, Original Essays* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), p.371.

> book and a small slate, under his arm, indicated that he was on his way to school.[104]

This highly particularised description fits Hazlitt's notion of the "picturesque". Indeed, Hawthorne grants this largely irrelevant urchin's appearance more attention than Melville does Pierre's, about whom few physical details are available.[105]

More often, however, Melville's prose is characterised not by lacunae but, rather, a form of linguistic excess. In criticising Melville's prose – "word piled upon word" – Peck at the *American Whig Review* actually came very close to an accurate description of Melville's style in *Pierre*. Rather like Turner applying paint to his canvases in a thick impasto, Melville *layers* words on the page. Witness the peculiar eulogy to Pierre and Lucy, delivered by Mary in the first chapter:

> A noble boy, and docile [...] I thank heaven I sent him not to college. A noble boy, and docile. A fine, proud, loving, docile, vigorous boy. Pray God, he never becomes otherwise to me. His little wife, that is to be, will not estrange him from me, for she too is docile, – beautiful, reverential, and most docile. Seldom yet have I known blue eyes such as hers, that were not docile [...] How glad I am that Pierre loves her so, and not some dark-eyed haughtiness, with whom I could never live in peace, but who would be ever setting her young married state before my elderly widowed one, and claiming all the homage of my dear boy – the fine, proud, loving, docile, vigorous boy, and with such sweet docilities! See his hair! He does in truth illustrate that fine saying of his father's, that as the noblest colts, in three points – abundant hair, swelling

[104] Hawthorne, *House of the Seven Gables* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). p.49.
[105] Another example of Melville's authorial evasiveness is to be found in the episode in which Pierre scrutinises his father's portrait. The narrator does not describe the picture but instead tells us what a critic might have said about it, delegating the ekphrasis to an imagined third party: "Had this painting hung in any annual public exhibition, and in its turn been described in print by the casual glancing critics, they would probably have described it thus, and truthfully: 'an impromptu portrait of a fine-looking, gay-hearted, youthful gentleman...'" (p.72). The effect of this displacement is to remove the description to what the literary theorist Gérard Genette calls an "extradiegetic" level – more fictional and therefore less ostensibly "truthful" than the narrator's own account would have been – putting a distance between the reader and the narrative. For a discussion of diegetic levels see Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithica: Cornell University, 1983), p.228-229.

> chest, and sweet docility – should resemble a woman, so should a noble youth. (p.20)

The irregular repetition in this passage, the effect achieved by aggregating adjectives and nouns, is repeated across the novel as a whole. The word "inscrutable" appears twenty times; the word "mystery" and its derivations recur more than one hundred times.[106] This tautology makes the novel ripe for the sort of critique levelled against *Heart of Darkness* by F.R. Leavis, who famously complained of the "adjectival insistence" – all those references to the "inconceivable", the "inscrutable", the "unspeakable" – by which Conrad "makes a virtue out of not knowing what he means".

Yet I would argue, alongside the apologists for Conrad,[107] that Melville's repetitions have an important function. By piling one adjective upon another in the passage quoted – "noble", then "docile", "proud", "loving", "vigorous" – each is emptied of meaning. They become mere sounds, or rather marks on a page, a material surface analogous to the veil that so torments Pierre himself. A similar effect is wrought during the description of Pierre at work on his book:

> From throbbing neck-bands, and swinging belly-bands of gay-hearted horses, the sleigh-bells chimingly jingle; – but Pierre sits there in his room; Thanksgiving comes, with its glad thanks, and crisp turkeys; but Pierre sits there in his room; soft through the snows, on tinted Indian mocassin, Merry Christmas comes stealing; – but Pierre sits there in his room; it is New Year's, and like a great flagon, the vast

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[106] See the scene in Isabel's room, in which she regales Pierre with an odd dirge: "Mystery! Mystery! Mystery of Isabel!/ Mystery! Mystery! Isabel and Mystery!" When she finishes singing, "instantly the music changed, and drooped and changed, and changed and changed, and lingeringly retreated as it changed, and at last was wholly gone" (p.127). The term has a visual component, the root of "mystery" is the Greek *myein*: "to shut the eyes". See Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics*, p.328.

[107] See, for instance, Hillis Miller's defence of Conradian style in his essay on *Heart of Darkness* in *The Other* (pp.125-126), in which he argues that the Leavis criticism judges Conrad according to a "straightforward mimetic, descriptive paradigm" that he was turning away from in his novella. Mark Wollaeger sees Conrad's "verbal excess" as constituting a powerful "negative theology" that gestures towards linguistic limitation. See *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Scepticism*, pp.61-62.

> city overbrims at all curbstones, wharves and piers, with bubbling jubilations; – but Pierre sits there in his room; Nor jingling sleigh-bells at throbbing neck-band, or swinging belly-band, nor glad thanks, and crisp turkeys of Thanksgiving, nor tinted Indian moccasin of Merry Christmas slowly stealing through the snows, nor New Year's curb-stones, wharves, and piers, over-brimming with bubbling jubilations: – Nor jingling sleigh-bells, nor glad Thanksgiving, nor Merry Christmas, nor jubilating New Year's – Nor Bell, Thank, Christ, Year; – none of these are for Pierre. In the midst of the merriments of the mutations of Time, Pierre hath ringed himself in with the grief of Eternity. (pp.303-304)

Again, Melville builds layers of imagery and then removes them one by one, until we are left with a meaningless, hollow series of words ("Bell, Thank, Christ, Year"), rather like a mantra repeated over and over again until all sense is lost. In a resonant image, Pierre, his eyesight failing, begins to perceive the written page as "fretted with wires" (p.340), as if he can no longer make sense of the words, so thick has their material presence become.

The highly deliberate and self-conscious nature of Melville's textual practice becomes clear at the close of Book XV. Here we learn that Pierre has written to Glen, a resident of New York, to ask for lodgings when he and Isabel reach the city. This was "perhaps the briefest letter" Pierre had ever sent, but unlike Isabel's or Lucy's messages to Pierre the narrator does not reproduce the piece of writing. He proffers a strange explanation:

> Not here and now can we set down the contents of Pierre's letter, without a tautology illy doing justice to the ideas themselves. And though indeed the dread of tautology be the continual torment of some earnest minds, and, as such, is surely a weakness in them, and though no wise man will wonder at conscientious Virgil all eager at death to burn his Aeneid for a monstrous heap of inefficient superfluity; yet not to dread tautology at times only belongs to those enviable dunces, whom the partial God hath blessed, over all the earth, with the inexhaustible self-riches of vanity, and folly, and a blind self-complacency (p.227).

In her reading of this passage, Elizabeth Renker takes the narrator at his word: "The reproduction of the letter's physical form – its letters laid out on a page – threatens to block the transmission of 'the ideas themselves' that it is meant to contain." The material "force" of the writing would thus constitute a "blockage" that would interfere with the reader's engagement with the conceptual moment of Pierre's letter.[108] But I think that such an interpretation misses the heavy irony in play in this passage.[109] The narrator's trumpeted avoidance of "tautology" is itself repetitive (the word itself appears three times), and when he proceeds to paraphrase the letter his summary spans two long paragraphs – "inefficient superfluity" indeed, especially if Pierre's missive was as concise as we had been led to believe. Pierre had written with "wonderful condensativeness", writes Melville; that ponderous, polysyllabic second noun (his own coinage) is of course anything but condensed, opening up an ironic gap between narrator and protagonist at prose level.[110] Moreover, the notion that reproducing the letter would obstruct the communication of "the ideas themselves" is a strange one, given that the letter is apparently straightforward and lacking in detail; Pierre merely states the circumstances of his leaving Saddle Meadows, hinting "no word of possible commentary" on the events related.

I think Melville's use of tautology here is closer to the kind of technique Renker sees at work in *The Confidence-Man*. She argues that tautology, as it is employed in that book, "suspends language at the level of its own materiality,

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[108] Renker, *Strike Through the Mask*, p.33.

[109] Eric Sundquist's comments on irony are apposite here: "Irony invokes an object of reference only to call it into question; in extremis it mutilates its own discourse and *hollows out its own authority, leaving a lacuna in the stead of signification* [my emphasis]." The narrator's irony can thus be associated with the "void" that Pierre fears. See *Home as Found: Authority and Genealogy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979), p.171.

[110] See also the narrator's account of Pierre's composition of his book. "Let us peep over the shoulder of Pierre, and see what he is writing there..." He gives us only "random slips" from Pierre's work, rather than a continuous passage, keeping the rest hidden from view.

refusing to penetrate its surface in order to 'mean' something [...] tautology thus violates the proposition that the surface of language has an 'inside' or meaning".[111] Confronted by the barrier of Melville's prose, the reader begins to suspect that it, too, harbours an inner vacancy; that the book itself is as hollow as an empty pyramid.[112]

Language, Hieroglyph and Veil

Unlike *Moby-Dick*, which moves with limber lightness between transcendental riffs and folksy humour, the writing in *Pierre* seems to turn its back on the reader altogether, as if Melville has lost faith in the ability of language to reveal truths or even to establish a minimal communicative relationship. The buoyant vessel of Melville's Romantic irony has in this novel foundered and rusted over. A few scholars have been moved to suggest that Melville was ahead of his time, and that a sort of proto-modernism or even post-modernism is at work in *Pierre* (Priscilla Wald, for example, argues that the novel "opens itself to the possibility of a Derridean deconstruction, a reduction to noise").[113] What is certain is that unlike *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, there are no clear literary antecedents for Melville's approach; his radical scepticism seems to have led him to experiment with an entirely new type of literary form.

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[111] Renker, *Strike Through the Mask*, p.78. Consider also that the archaic noun "taut" means "mat" or "tangle", an etymological link between Melville's tautological practice and the obscuring "veils" that recur throughout the narrative.

[112] Melville often associates the written text with pyramidical structures. The book itself is dedicated to Mount Greylock's "most excellent majesty", and the epigraphs to the embedded texts – Plinlimmon's philosophical pamphlet and Pierre's mooted "Collected Works" – are typographically displayed in triangular forms.

[113] Wald, "Narrative Voices in Melville's *Pierre*", p.120. Lukasik agrees with Wald (and William Spengemann) that "Melville shares much with the modernists", *Discerning Characters*, p.191.

It seems to me that underlying Melville's idiosyncratic writing strategy is a distinctive philosophy of language. To elucidate his position it may be helpful to compare and contrast *Pierre* with some other works of the American Renaissance. Melville was certainly not the only writer of his era to respond to philosophical discourse on truth, and nor was he alone in employing Egyptian motifs – the pyramid, the sphinx, the sarcophagus – as epistemological symbols. Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphics in the 1920s contributed to "a wave of interest" in Egyptology across America during the period,[114] and Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman each, to varying degrees, used the hieroglyph as a metaphor for the relationship between self, language, and world, between surface appearance and "inner" substance. By considering the use they made of these metaphors we might better understand what set Melville apart from his contemporaries.

In his first book, *A Week On the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), Thoreau conceived of nature's surface as a hieroglyphic expressing a deeper, hidden meaning:

> The bass, *Tilia Americana*, also called the lime or linden, which was a new tree to us, overhung the water with its broad and rounded leaf, interspersed with clusters of small hard berries now nearly ripe, and made agreeable shade for us sailors. The inner bark of this genus is the bast, the material of the fisherman's matting, and the ropes and peasant's shoes of which the Russians make so much use, and also of nets and a coarse cloth in some places. According to poets this was once Philyra, one of the Oceanides. The ancients are said to have used its bark for the roofs of cottages, for baskets, and for a kind of paper called Philyra. [...] The sight of this tree reminded us that we had reached a strange land to us. As we sailed under this canopy of leaves we saw the sky through its chinks, and as it were, the meaning and idea of the tree stamped in a thousand hieroglyphics on the heavens. The universe is so aptly fitted to our organization that the eye wanders and reposes at the same time. On every side there is something to soothe and refresh this sense.[115]

[114] Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics*, p.3.
[115] *Thoreau* (New York, Library of America, 1985), p.128.

Thoreau, like Pierre, sees nature as a sort of veil: the wood from the tree is associated with the production of "matting" and "coarse cloth", and the "canopy" of the leaves throws a shadow over the sailors.[116] He sees "through" this covering and beyond, to "the idea of the tree stamped" on the heavens. The "idea" is rendered in hieroglyphics, but that does not prevent Thoreau from experiencing a sense of blissful repose in contemplating the scene. The sentence that follows, with its notion of a universe "fitted" to human "organization", evokes the epistemological confidence of Wordsworth's "Prospectus" to *The Recluse*: "How exquisitely the individual mind/(And the progressive powers perhaps no less/Of the whole species) to the external world/ Is fitted: – and how exquisitely, too,/Theme this but little heard of among men – /The external World is fitted to the Mind."[117] A world "fitted" to the mind is a world that is at least potentially explicable. One infers that the hieroglyphs will be deciphered, that a Champollion will come along to make the inner "meaning" of the tree apparent, just as artisans have discovered the use value of its raw materials. One of these uses, the conversion of the bark into a form of paper, draws attention to Thoreau's own act of writing, as does the later comparison he sketches between the variety of the leaves and the "alphabets" of human language. The penetrative gaze that pierces the veil is explicitly that of a crafter of words.

Thoreau returns to these themes in *Walden* (1854). Here he associates himself with the "oldest Hindoo or Egyptian philosopher [who] raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity [...] still the trembling robe remains raised, and I

[116] It is likely that Melville had looked into *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. He borrowed it from Duyckinck, and an episode in Theodore K. Wolfe's book of portraits, *Literary Shrines: The Haunts of Some Famous American Authors* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1885), has Melville and Hawthorne discussing the book and mocking its title (p.191).
[117] Roger Sharock (ed.), *Selected Poems of W. Wordsworth* (London: Heinemann, 1958) pp.31-32.

gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did".[118] In a later, much-discussed sequence, Thoreau describes the thawing of ice along a riverbank, exposing a mass of foliage that resembles

> the lacinated, lobed, and imbricated thalluses of some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, or leopard's paws or bird's feet, of brains and lungs and bowels, and excrements of all kinds. It is a truly grotesque vegetation, whose forms and colour we see imitated in bronze, a sort of architectural foliage more ancient and typical than acanthus, chicory, vine, or any vegetable leaves; destined, perhaps, under some circumstances, to become a puzzle to future geologists. The whole cut impressed me as if it were a cave with its stalactites laid open to the light.[119]

Thoreau gets the sense that he is seeing into "the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me [...] as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe". He seems to have peered beyond the massed foliage and into the very workings of creation, in doing so trumping those "future geologists" whom, he speculates, will be confounded by the sight.

The passage is immediately reminiscent of Pierre's phantasmagoric view of the Mount of the Titans through rents in the "hanging curtain" of its verdure. But where Pierre sees only a desolate massif, Thoreau finds an inner fecundity, indeed, the very womb of creation, within his riverbank. Moreover, where Melville's tautological prose strategy seems an analogy for the surfaces of nature in *Pierre* ("All round and round, the grim scarred rocks rallied and re-rallied themselves, shot up, protruded, stretched, swelled, and eagerly reached forth"), Thoreau takes a different approach in *Walden*; instead of layering on words he removes them, shearing down through the surface of language in search of the perfect terms with which to describe the world:

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[118] *Walden* (New York: Dover, 1995), pp.197-198.
[119] Ibid., p.157-158.

> No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly. The atoms have already learned this law, and are pregnant by it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally*, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick lobe, a word especially applicable to liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat (λειβω, *labor, lapsus,* to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; λοβος, *globus*, lobe globe; also lap, flap, and many other words), *externally* a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of lobe are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single lobed, or B, double lobed,) with a liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward. In globe, *glb*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of birds are still drier and thinner leaves. Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly.[120]

Thoreau goes on to apply the same methodology to the human form: "The ear may be regarded, fancifully, as a lichen, *umbilicaria*, on the side of the head, with its lobe or drop. The lip, *labium*, from *labor* (?), laps or lapses from the sides of the cavernous mouth."[121] Thoreau believes he has uncovered the underlying pictographic quality of language, a secret link between the things we see and the conventional names we have for them. He goes on to reflect that this "one hillside illustrated the principles of all the operations of nature", and wonders "what Chapollion will decipher this hieroglyphic for us". The implication is, of course, that Thoreau himself is the interpreter, having already peered beyond the massed foliage of the bank and also the imbricated layers of language, from outer surface to inner meaning in each case.[122] His discovery inspires an optimism about our place in the world; he gives us a vision of the earth as "in her swaddling-clothes [stretching] forth baby fingers on every side".[123]

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[120] *Walden*, p.198.
[121] Ibid., p.199.
[122] I follow Irwin's reading of this passage: "The answer [to the Champollion question] is, obviously, Thoreau himself". *American Hieroglyphics,* p.19.
[123] Op. cit.

Thoreau's exercise in etymology points us to the significance of Egypt in the Romantic imagination: it represented, in part, a form of origin.[124] Specifically, the decipherment of hieroglyphics promised the key to the origins of language. By discovering hidden correspondences beneath language and world, the poet might enact a closer, more harmonious relationship with nature. Emerson's essay "The Poet" resonates with this idea. In it, he writes: "The poet is the person, without impediment, who sees that which others dream of." By using language in the right way the artist might "reconcile me to life and nature", and "[re-attach] things to nature and the whole". "Language is fossil-poetry", as Emerson puts it, evoking the notion of the poet as archaeologist, delving through the layers of language to unearth pristine, pictographic forms, words whose correct use would elide the antinomies of a fallen world.[125] Whitman's position is similar: in "Song of Myself" (1855), he expresses a desire to "see through" the veil of nature – "Undrape! You are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded/ I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no"[126] – and, as in Emerson and Thoreau, the key to this penetrative method is seen to lie in the artist's wielding of language. As Whitman writes in "A Passage to India" (1871), the poet completes the epistemological project begun by "the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, the ethnologist"; "The poet worthy that name/The true son of God shall come singing his songs [...] All affection will be responded to, the secret shall be told/All these gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and link'd together".[127]

While Melville looked to interpose "belying surfaces" between reader and the inner meaning of his work, then, others expounded an idealistic view of the writer

[124] When Melville, in his June 1852 letter to Hawthorne, commented on "seeds taken out of Egyptian pyramids", he was drawing on this connection between Egypt and the notion of origin. Horth (ed.), *Correspondence*, p.193.
[125] "The Poet", in *Essays and Lectures*, pp.445-468.
[126] *Leaves of Grass* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.28. See also"To the Garden and the World", from the same collection: "Existing I peer and penetrate still", p.140.
[127] Whitman, *Selected Poems* (New York: Dover, 1991), p.107.

as doing the very opposite – uncovering, penetrating, deciphering secrets. The foundering of Pierre's literary project, his Whitman-like attempt to "gospelize the world anew", indicates Melville's opposition to such artistic messianism (which he himself had flirted with, of course, in the symbolic tendencies of his earlier work). For Melville – in *Pierre*, at least – language is always a barrier, a mediating surface. There is no pristine, isomorphic tongue; Melville contests the Emersonian doctrine of Adamic naming with an insistence on the "endless descendedness" of names (p.9). He also appears to suggest that if we were able to reach the origins of language they would not embody a paradisiacal link to the earth, as his contemporaries imagined; rather, they would mark the very beginnings of our separation from nature, a moment of loss.[128]

This thought underpins Isabel's autobiographical narrative, in which she recalls her orphaned childhood and her first, tentative linguistic steps. She encountered in an early adoptive home a "beautiful infant" who "first made me sensible that I was something different from stones, trees, cats", and whose immersion in sensuous experience she "envied". She reflects further:

> I must have been nine, or ten, or eleven years old, when the pleasant looking woman carried me away from the large house. She was a farmer's wife, and now that was my residence, the farm-house. They taught me to sew, and work with wool, and spin the wool; I was nearly always busy now. This being busy too, it must have been, which partly brought to me the power of being sensible of myself as something human. Now I began to feel strange differences. When I saw the snake trailing through the grass, and darting out the fire-fork from its mouth, I said to myself, That thing is not human, but I am human. When the lightning flashed, and split some beautiful tree, and left it to rot from all its greenness, I said, That lightning is not human, but I am human. And so with all things. I can not speak coherently here; but somehow I felt

[128] I agree with Edgar A. Dryden's thought that Melville saw "inscribed within all cultural constructs [...] and within language itself a radical absence suggesting an original loss". "The Entangled Text: Melville's Pierre and the Problems of Reading", in *boundary 2*, Vol. 7, No.3 (Spring, 1979), 145-174, p. 162.

> that all good, harmless men and women were human things, placed at cross-purposes, in a world of snakes and lightnings, in a world of horrible and inscrutable inhumanities. I have had no training of any sort. All my thoughts well up in me; I know not whether they pertain to the old bewilderings or not, but as they are, they are, and I cannot alter them, for I had nothing to do with putting them in my mind, and I never affect any thoughts, and I never adulterate any thoughts, but when I speak, think forth from the tongue, speech being sometimes before the thought; so often, my own tongue teaches me new things. (pp.122-123)

This passage can be read, I think, as an allegory for the origins of language, and the way in which it mediates between self and post-lapsarian world (the imagery of snake and tree clearly suggests the Fall).[129] Note that it is Isabel's act of speaking that causes her to recognise the "strange differences" between herself and all that Emerson would include under the umbrella of the "NOT ME":[130] "I *said to myself*: That thing is not human [...] *I said,* lightning is not human, but I am human." It is just as she learns to use language to understand the world that she realises that the world is "inscrutable". The notion of language as veil is further suggested by the nature of Isabel's "work", the spinning of "wool", that is associated with her developing subjectivity.

The episode can be seen to dramatise an argument Melville advanced during his correspondence with Hawthorne:

> We incline to think that the Problem of the Universe is like the Freemason's mighty secret, so terrible to all children. It turns out, at last, to consist in a triangle, a mallet, and an apron, nothing more! We incline to think that God cannot explain His own secrets, and that He would like a little more information upon certain points Himself. We mortals astonish Him as much as He us. But it is this *Being*

[129] See also the sequence in the police station, in which Pierre is confronted by pimps and prostitutes speaking "English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, interlarded, now and then, with the foulest of human lingoes [...] a combined babel of persons and voices" (p.240). The notion of a linguistic Babel casts doubt on the search for origins, by placing an emphasis on the ineluctable multiplicity of human tongues.

[130] "Introduction" to "Nature", *Essays and Lectures*, p.8.

> of the matter; there lies the knot with which we choke ourselves. As soon as you say *Me*, a *God*, *Nature*, so soon you jump off from your stool and hang yourself on the beam. Yes, that word is the Hangman. Take God out of the dictionary and you would have him in the street [emphases Melville's own].[131]

It is here that Melville begins to consider language itself as an epistemological barrier. Note that the "problem" is not the ontological status of "me", or "God", or "nature" but rather language; it is only "as soon as you *say*" the words themselves that you run into trouble. Melville has discovered an aporia; language is the means by which we endeavour to understand the world, but because language ineluctably *mediates* it opens up a gap between sign and referent, and is therefore an imperfect tool. If we could efface language, lay down the dictionary, then we might be granted a closer intimacy with the world, we might even encounter God "in the street", but such a thing is impossible.

Of course, if language *only* separates, if it is construed *only* as a frustrating, resisting force, then the efficacy of linguistic communication itself must be called into question. In chapter two we saw that in *Moby-Dick*, Melville identified the quotidian parlance of the sailors as a refuge from the metaphysical abstractions of scepticism, and that their speech represented a shared experience of the "ordinary" that also served to bridge the gap between Melville and his readers. Such genial communality is entirely extirpated from his writing in *Pierre*. Here dialogue tends to the artificial ("then no flower that, in the bud, the April showers have nurtured, no such flower may untimely perish" [p.36], says Pierre to Lucy); to the inscrutable ("stout's the word, 2151 is my number" [p.319], quips a porter, alluding to some obscure code); or to plain gibberish ("g'lang, you dogs! whist! whee! wha! g'lang!" [p.240], cries a cab driver). As Isabel recognised, language inevitably places human beings at "cross-purposes". This applies to the writer and his readers; the

[131] Horth (ed.), *Correspondence*, p.186.

narrator's gnarled syntax signals a resistance to the sociability of storytelling, ostentatiously keeping us at arm's length.[132]

I have argued that Melville's sophisticated handling of metaphor in *Pierre* aligns form and content, making it an admirable and unjustly overlooked experimentation. But, as the novel's hostile reception makes abundantly clear, obfuscation and evasion are not sustainable strategies for the writer of fiction interested in retaining a readership. The author of *Pierre*, like Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun*, retreated from his readers to "retire behind the curtain".[133] In the next chapter, we will see that Melville's short fiction sees him begin to reach out from behind the veil, and to rediscover the affective potential of his art.

[132] As Wollaeger writes, "radical skepticism undermines one's belief in the existence of a usable audience [...] the novelist who loses all faith in language has a short career". *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*, p.109.
[133] Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun: Or, The Romance of Monte Beni* (London: Orion, 1995), p.4.

Chapter Four

The Wages of Doubt:

Sceptical Ethics in *The Piazza Tales*

> The soul selects her own society,
> Then shuts the door.
> On her divine majority
> Obtrude no more.[1]
> – Emily Dickinson

In July 1852, Melville joined his father-in-law Lemuel Shaw on an excursion to Nantucket. Stopping in New Bedford, they dined with Massachusetts attorney general John Henry Clifford, who recounted a story he had come across while working on a case. It concerned one Agatha Hatch, a local woman who married a sailor, James Robertson, after rescuing him from a shipwreck. Robertson deserted Agatha soon after she became pregnant, returning briefly seventeen years later, to bestow money and gifts of dubious provenance, before disappearing once again. After Robertson's death it became clear that he had married twice more during his absences. Agatha suspected his bigamy, but had endured without complaint the loneliness and ignominy of her position.[2]

This anecdote gave Melville the idea for a novel, and he asked Clifford to send him a fuller typewritten account. His initial thought was not to make use of it himself, however, but instead to offer it as a gift to Hawthorne, ostensibly because the creator of such long-suffering female characters as Hester Prynne and Mrs.

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[1] Johnson (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p.303.
[2] For a useful account of this meeting and the background to the Agatha story see Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography – Volume 2, 1851-1891*, pp.113-116.

Wakefield would find it congenial, but also, perhaps, out of a desire to reignite their friendship, which had begun to cool after the intimacies of the previous summer. Upon returning to his Pittsfield home in August, Melville sent Hawthorne a letter in which he outlined the story and, risking what he called a "strange impertinent officiousness",[3] elaborated the various ways it might be developed into fiction. The piece survives as an extraordinary record of his working methods as he entered the final phase of his career as a professional writer of prose.

Melville begins by laying out what he sees as the broad theme: the "great patience, & endurance, & resignedness of the women of the island in submitting so uncomplainingly to the long abscences [sic] of their sailor husbands". Although he leaves Clifford discreetly unnamed, he writes that the "gentleman" who told the story did so with a palpable sense of "emotion" that any written version should seek to emulate. He goes on to propose a narrative structure ("supposing the story to open with the wreck") and a series of symbols and motifs. Hawthorne might begin with the image of a "sheep from the pasture" standing on the shore, so as to imply the "strange and beautiful contrast" between the "innocence" of the land and the "malignancy of the sea".

Melville's comments on characterisation are particularly illuminating. In the depiction of Robertson – or "Robinson", as Melville tellingly misrenders the name – "charity should be allowed a liberal play [...] I do not suppose that his desertion of his wife was a premeditated thing [...] No. He was a weak man, and his temptations ('tho we know little of them), were strong. The whole sin stole upon him insensibly – so that it would perhaps have been hard for him to settle upon the exact day when he could say to himself, '*Now* I have deserted my wife.'" This "charitable" interpretation of Robertson's behaviour insists upon the difficulties of

[3] Horth (ed.), *Correspondence*, p.237.

ascribing motive and refuses to entrap him within preconceived notions of the inconstant husband. Likewise, Melville stresses the importance of making the heroine something more than a victim: "Agatha should be active during the wreck, & should, in some way, be made the saviour of the young Robinson."[4]

Melville signs off the letter by informing Hawthorne that it was written in "a great hurry", but there are striking, finely wrought passages that suggest he pored over it at some length. Here he imagines Agatha's fruitless journeys to the island's post-box from her residence in an isolated lighthouse:

> Owing to the remoteness of the lighthouse from any settled place no regular mail reaches it. But some mile or so distant there is a road leading between two post-towns. And at the junction of what we shall call the Light-House road with this Post Rode [sic], there stands a post surmounted with a little rude wood box with a lid to it & a leather hinge. Into this box the Post boy drops all the letters for the people of the light house & that vicinity of fishermen. [...] And, of course, daily young Agatha goes – for seventeen years she goes thither daily. As her hopes gradually decay in her, so does the post itself & the little box decay. The post rots in the ground at last. Owing to its little being used – hardly used at all – grass grows rankly about it. At last a little bird nests in it. At last the post falls.[5]

Such precise imagery (the "leather" hinge; the "rank" grass) and deceptively artful formulations (note the elegant chiasmic reversal from "daily young Agatha goes" to "she goes thither daily") would seem to elevate the letter to a work of art in its own right.[6] Indeed, I think we might consider the piece as a foreshadowing of the themes and techniques Melville was to develop in his subsequent work. It shares many ingredients with the short fiction he was just then beginning to write: the

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[4] Ibid., pp.234-237.
[5] Ibid., p.236.
[6] Hershel Parker has noted a stylistic and thematic resemblance to the self-enclosed "Town Ho's Story" in *Moby-Dick*, which similarly dramatises the relationship between speaker and listener in an act of storytelling. See *Herman Melville: A Biography – Volume 2, 1851-1891*, p.115. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. makes a similar point in *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1975), pp.14-15.

detached yet sensitive depiction of a vulnerable protagonist; the emphasis on the affective potential of storytelling; the interest in "charity" as an interpretative mode; the characterisation's loose, tentative weave.

That such would emerge as Melville's chief concerns as an artist so soon after *Pierre* – that most bilious and anti-social of novels – might seem surprising. Nevertheless, in his short fiction Melville retains his view of the other's inscrutability, the existential predicament explored so thoroughly and queasily in that book. But he also begins to move beyond solipsism in order to explore the ethical implications of other minds scepticism. If *Pierre* was haunted by the idea that the other is a veiled *trompe l'oeil*, this later body of work shows Melville reconceiving of the other as a fellow human subject to whose needs, however unknowable, we must strive to attend.

As we will see, this new stance leads Melville to engage more directly with political issues – from slavery to the implications of laissez-faire capitalism – as well as a literary discourse that posits "sympathy" as a palliative for social problems. Melville's turn from the broadly metaphysical themes of *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Pierre* to the more specifically historical concerns of the likes of "Benito Cereno" and "Bartleby" necessitates a corresponding shift in my own approach. In this chapter I aim to more fully contextualise Melville's writings, and to bring in modern literary-critical debates over the culture of sympathy in antebellum America, though I return to philosophy to distinguish *The Piazza Tales* from the contemporaneous sentimental narratives they superficially resemble.

Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, I argue that Melville's stories adumbrate an alternative to sympathy, one based on the recognition of an unknowable otherness. In this I follow the lead of scholars such as Linda Bolton and Lorna Wood, who have demonstrated the usefulness of Levinas' interpretative schema when it comes to sorting through the ethical issues raised by the historical

turmoil of nineteenth century America.[7] Levinas is not generally considered part of the sceptical tradition, but I wish to demonstrate here that he stresses the need to recognise epistemological limitation in much the same way as the thinkers we have discussed thus far (I see particular parallels with Cavell), and that it makes sense to describe his ethics as "sceptical". By engaging with his work in this chapter I hope to show that Melville's stories identify a moral benefit in the acknowledgement of the "mystery" of the other.

1. Sympathy

The Bachelor

There were a number of practical reasons for Melville's turn to short fiction in late 1852. With his third child on the way, and his novels selling in dispiriting numbers, an immediate source of income was badly needed. The new monthly literary magazines *Harper's* and *Putnam's* paid well: "Bartleby", published in the latter, earned Melville $85 (to put that figure in context, Melville's lifetime royalties on *Pierre* amounted to $157).[8] Both journals had a policy of anonymous authorship that allowed Melville to write without having to worry about the kind of biting personal criticism that *Pierre* had received. It has also been argued that he found the shorter form therapeutic after expending so much intellectual and physical energy on grander projects. It seems to me, however, that Melville was not simply

[7] Bolton draws "on the perspective of Levinasian ethics to critique the ideal of freedom" as it has been constructed in American texts from Crévecour's *Letters from an American Farmer* to the rhetoric of the abolitionist John Brown. *Facing the Other: Ethical Disruption and the American Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004). Wood offers inventive Levinasian readings of canonical American texts in "Emmanuel Levinas and the American Renaissance Canon". See Donald R. Wehrs, David P. Haney (eds.), *Levinas and Nineteenth Century Literature: Ethics and Otherness from Romanticism to Realism* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 2009), p.166-207.

[8] John Updike, "Introduction", in *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, xiii.

writing himself out of a psychological or economic hole in these pieces, but systematically working through a very specific clutch of themes and motifs.

Many of Melville's stories feature an individual who, like Agatha, is in the grip of some sort of material or psychological hardship. The action is commonly recounted from the perspective of a middle-aged male protagonist who encounters the suffering individual and responds with a greater or lesser degree of appropriateness. These "bachelor" figures, genial and lacking in introspection, seem in part indebted to Washington Irving. As Robert Bruce Bickley Jr. puts it: "The 'bachelor' is the controlling influence in Irving, as he was in Melville's novels and would continue to be, with some interesting variations, in his tales [...] The bachelor-observer senses his estrangement from the world and lingers as a non-participant on the fringes of life."[9]

Melville's narrator-protagonists are often solitary men who retreat from the messy entanglements of sociality, like Irving's Rip Van Winkle. But he tends to be more critical than Irving of the bachelor's detachment, associating it with a wider, cultural insensitivity to the needs of others.[10] "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" (1854), for example, centres on two bachelor figures: the poet Blandmour, a blowhard and buffoon, and an unnamed, diffident narrator. The latter listens to Blandmour hold forth on the eternal kindness of nature (the poet thinks of frost as "a sort of gruff philanthropist"), before visiting a poor rural household. Welcomed by the farmer Coulter and his wife, the narrator is impressed by their reticence and dignity. But while he offers some vague sentiments on the importance of kindness,

[9] Bickley, *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction*, p.29.
[10] Marvin Fisher writes that Melville's bachelor stories address a widespread "insensitivity to the needs of the individual" in antebellum America. See Fisher, *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), p.52.

he does little to aid the Coulters' plight, and rather coldly opines that "when a companion's heart of itself overflows, the best one can do is nothing".[11]

A similar callousness is registered in the likes of "Cock-A-Doodle Doo! Or, The Crowing of the Noble Cock Benevantano" (1854), in which an affluent man remains strangely unmoved as he witnesses an impoverished family picked off by consumption, and "The Piazza" (1856), whose aesthete narrator does his best to forget the misery of a woman he encounters on his travels. In these stories Melville follows through the implications of the extreme scepticism explored in *Pierre*: in "Poor Man's Pudding", for example, the Coulters' troubles are ascribed to a "secret cause" (p.291). Yet in depicting his bachelors' manoeuvres of evasion and self-deception Melville also suggests that too strong an insistence on the inscrutability of the other precludes the kind of affective engagement on which any humane sociality must depend.

What this engagement might entail is implied in an unpublished story named "The Two Temples", in which Melville contrasts the vapid elegance of an Episcopalian church gathering with a more authentic form of fellowship.[12] Here it is the bachelor-narrator who finds himself in need of help. In the first sketch of the diptych, he is ejected from a New York chapel by a bumptious official and steals back in through a side entrance, only to be unimpressed by the buttoned-up formality of the proceedings. In the second, he recounts a trip to London, where, as he wanders lost and penniless, a stranger buys him a ticket to a play so that he might escape the cold: "The plain fact was, I had received charity [...] And [as] a stranger, in the very maw of roaring London too! I felt a queer feeling in my left

[11] Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces,* pp.290, 295. Further references to this edition of the stories will be provided in parentheses within the main body of the thesis.
[12] The editors at *Putnam*'s magazine rejected the story for fear that Melville's criticism of organised religion would offend readers. Their editorial policy was to ensure that "nothing in the remotest degree offensive to propriety or good taste defaces these pages". Quoted in Robert Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne and Melville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.165.

eye, which, as sometimes is the case with people, was the weaker one, probably from being on the same side as the heart." Inside the theatre he finds a sense of fraternity that he associates with a sense of "perfect love" (pp.312, 314).

What I find interesting in this story is its suggestion that questions of "knowledge" and "truth" are to be distinguished from those of morality. The stranger who buys the narrator his ticket to the performance, and the boy who offers him a draught of coffee once he is inside, know nothing of his background or identity, but are nevertheless open and generous in their dealings with him. Similarly, the fact that the actors on stage are merely performing – that they are not, in other words, truly who they purport to be at the moment of their appearance – does not prevent the audience from greeting them with warmth: "The curtain falls. Starting to their feet, the enraptured thousands sound their *responses*, deafeningly; unmistakably sincere. Right from the undoubted heart. I have no duplicate in my memory of this. *In earnestness of response, this second temple stands unmatched.* And hath mere mimicry done this? What is it then to act a part?" (p. 314, my emphasis). Melville implies that when knowledge is unavailable, as it invariably is in our relations with others, some kind of felt "response" must take up the epistemological slack.

Whose Sympathy?

In their staging of encounters between strangers, Melville's stories were very much a product of their time. As the United States grew into a major power in the antebellum period it saw an "exceptionally high rate of population growth", which has been attributed both to an "unusually rapid rate of natural increase" and an

expansion in immigration from Western Europe.[13] As we saw in the introduction, Alexis de Tocqueville found this environment to be generative of epistemological crisis: in severing the interpersonal links of culture and tradition America compelled every citizen to "shut himself up in his own breast" and adopt a sceptical stance towards the world and other people. Faced with a fluctuating population that lacks any obvious markers of heredity or class rank, he contended, Americans disperse, preferring to draw on their own reason than rely on the dubious testimony of the stranger.[14]

As I argued in the previous chapter, pseudo-sciences such as physiognomy became popular as individuals looked for hermeneutic tools with which to navigate this increasingly bewildering and fragmented social landscape. But as Melville's stories make clear (in a way that *Pierre* does not, at least in quite the same way), the phenomenon Tocqueville identifies has an ethical component as well as an epistemological one. As Wai-Chee Dimock points out, many of the people designated strangers in the antebellum period would have been indigent immigrants or members of a growing urban underclass.[15] What if the stranger is in need or in pain? How are we to comport ourselves in the face of suffering if knowledge of the other is lacking? Melville's apparent solution to this problem – that one is to respond emotionally – brings him close to the advocates of sympathy,

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[13] Stanley L. Engerman, Robert E. Gallman, "The Emergence of a Market Economy before 1860", in William L. Barney (ed.), *A Companion to 19th Century America* (London: Blackwell, 2001), p.128.

[14] Later, in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville evokes this mixture of fusion and entropy in American society, describing both the "dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West" which brings together people from "distant and opposite zones", and the tendency of the group to disintegrate "into quartettoes, trios, couples, and even solitaries [...] involuntarily submitting to that natural law, which ordains dissolution equally to the mass, as in time to the member". Melville; Tony Tanner (ed.), *The Confidence-Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) pp.8-9.

[15] "During the 1830s around 600,000 immigrants came to the United States, a fourfold increase over the 1820s. In the next decade the figure rose to 1,700,000, and to 2,600,000 in the 1850s. These new arrivals, indigent and primarily Catholic, provoked not only Know-Nothing nativism and anti-Catholic violence but also fearful visions of a permanent (and ultimately insurgent) underclass. […] Jacksonian America, in short, was, an America newly confronted with class difference." *Empire for Liberty*, pp.11-12.

which emerged with the force of a "cultural ideal" in the antebellum period.[16] The concept derived from Adam Smith's *The Theory of Modern Sentiments* (1759):

> As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in a like situation. Though our brother is on the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. [...] By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive of ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begins at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels.[17]

As Caleb Crain has put it, for "a century and a half" after Smith this notion of sympathy came to be regarded by Americans as "a biological fact, as if it were as essential to human nature as sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell".[18] It is not difficult to see why: Smithian sympathy – conceived as an imaginative projection that allowed the sympathiser to overcome a lack of knowledge and to arrive at a form of interpersonal understanding – seemed tailored to America's peculiar conditions, and writers and thinkers of Melville's era seized on it as a palliative for social atomisation.

The most conspicuous vehicle for the dissemination of Smith's view of sympathy was the sentimental novel. As Elizabeth Barnes writes, the genre rested on the notion of "sympathetic identification – the act of imagining oneself in

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[16] Caleb Crain, *American Sympathy: Men, Friendship, and Literature in the New Nation* (London: Yale University Press, 2001), p.4.
[17] Smith; James R. Otterson (ed.), *Adam Smith: Selected Political Writings* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), pp.11-12.
[18] Crain, *American Sympathy*, p.4.

another's position. [This] signified a narrative model whereby readers could ostensibly be taught an understanding of the interdependence between their own and others' identities." Novels such as Susan Warner's *The Wide Wide World* typically taught readers to "identify with characters in such a way that they come to think of others – even fictional 'others' – as somehow related to themselves", foregrounding "examples of sympathetic bonding in their story lines as a model for the way in which readers themselves are expected to respond".[19] But "canonical" authors, too, were influenced by Smithian sympathy. For all Hawthorne's objections to the techniques of popular writers (or to use his own, rather more pejorative phrase, "that damned mob of scribbling women"), in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) he celebrates what he calls "sympathetic knowledge"[20] in much the same way, using sympathy "to affirm literature's role as a medium through which disparate individuals are brought together".[21] Likewise, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* features a sequence in which the poet looks upon the suffering of others and makes it "his own" in the Smithian manner. Casting an eye over "lank loose-gown'd women", "silent faced infants" and "the lifted sick", he proclaims: "All this I swallow, it tastes good, *I like it well, it becomes mine,*/ I am the man, I suffered, I was there" (my emphasis).[22]

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[19] Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1997), p.ix. It is for this reason that I would disagree with those who would read Melville's *Pierre* as a sentimental novel, or a straightforward pastiche of one (Otter describes the novel as the period's "most enthralled ode to sentiment", *Melville's Anatomies,* p.211). As we have seen, Melville takes pains to erect textual barriers between reader and characters, precluding the sort of affective "identification" on which sentimental texts depend.

[20] Hawthorne, *Collected Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1983), p.192.

[21] Ibid., pp.5-6. On this I am with Otter, who argues that "contrary to the stereotypes in either their old or their new forms, antebellum American culture was not polarized between two camps – sentimental and anti-sentimental – and 'sentiment' was not a genetically or generically female practice. Instead, both female and male writers participated in an urgent, subtle exchange with their readers, whose aim was to shape a language that would convey the motions and responses of the heart". He goes on to draw parallels between Poe, Whitman, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Melville's Anatomies*, p.211.

[22] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p.70.

Recent scholarship has found fault with the notion of sympathetic identification that underpins these texts. The problem with sympathy of the Smithian stripe, argues Barnes, is that it is "ultimately circular. If we can only judge our actions through the eyes of other people, and we can only gauge their sentiments as we relate them to our own, we are still left with the self as our original point of departure."[23] In this sense, sympathy merely deepens the solipsistic tendency Tocqueville identifies: while the sympathetic subject may be affected by the other's misery, she remains "shut up" in her "own breast", affecting from that point to "judge the world". Sympathy therefore risks a sort of interpretative violence – or, as Christopher Castiglia has put it, a "surveillant discipline"[24] – whereby the other is reduced and occluded by the sympathiser's subjective bias. If, as Smith puts it, the sufferer's agonies are "adopted and made our own", they by definition no longer belong to the sufferer herself. (Scholars such as Dimock and Terry Castle have seen this phenomenon as intrinsic to American individualism, "whose ultimate fantasy is to reduce all principles of otherness into projections from one's own self", a process by which the other is "internalised […] incorporated and possessed".[25])

This kind of objection has informed a critical assault on the sentimental genre, as well as those ostensibly more "literary" texts that draw on Smithian sympathy. Audrey Jaffe, for example, has argued that such fictions perniciously enforce the

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[23] Ibid., p.24.

[24] Castiglia focuses on the effects of sympathy on slaves: "Even while serving as a keynote of benevolence […] sympathy was a form of surveillant discpline – what we might call sympathetic discipline – in which the black sufferer had to imagine himself or herself always in the eyes of whites, becoming a body shaped by an idea of a body." *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States* (London: Duke University Press, 2008), p.124.

[25] Dimock draws on and develops Castle's notion of the "spectralization of the Other" in American literature in *Empire for Liberty*, pp.68-69, although I would contest her idea that Melville, in *Mardi*, is complicit in this process in asserting "dominion" over his characters. I wish to show that, at least in the short fiction – which Dimock does not discuss – the opposite is true.

social distinctions they would profess to elide, encouraging middle-class readers to find covert pleasure in condescending to those worse off than themselves. The orphans and fallen women of sentimental narratives are, for Jaffe, figures "about whom it feels good – indeed virtuous – to feel bad," mere elements in a "scene" of sympathy that confers aesthetic pleasure (witness the way Whitman savours sympathy like a connoisseur: "It tastes good, I like it well").[26] Similarly, Laura Wexler writes that sentimentalism in the antebellum United States worked towards "the subjection of different classes and even races who were compelled to play not the leading roles but the human scenery before which the melodrama of middle-class redemption could be enacted".[27] Likewise, Saidaya Hartman argues that the sympathetic manoeuvres of abolitionist texts such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) reduce slaves to a projected "fantasy", highlighting "the dangers of a too-easy intimacy, the consideration of the self that occurs at the expense of the slaves' suffering, and the violence of identification".[28]

This sort of criticism has itself come under pressure of late, and scholars such as Cindy Weinstein have argued forcefully that sentimental literature was not a "monolithic", conservative force but a complex and multifaceted genre that provided a platform for writers to explore alternative models of family and domesticity.[29] I tend to agree with Weinstein that readings such as Jaffe's place too great an emphasis on ideological fetters and too little on the praxis of the creative artist in resisting them, and later I will look to progress beyond this politicised framework by drawing on the ethical criticism of Levinas. For now, however,

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[26] Ibid., p.112.
[27] Laura Wexler, "Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform", in Shirley Samuels (ed.), *The Culture of Sentiment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.15.
[28] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.19-20.
[29] See Weinstein, *Family, Kinship and Sympathy in Nineteenth Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.3-4.

given the strong parallels between Melville's strategies of affect and those of sentimental literature it behoves us to determine to what extent he is vulnerable to the attacks made against it.

Certainly, Melville's shorter tales share with the sentimental genre a common thematic interest in the encounter between genteel individuals and the less fortunate. As Sheila Post-Lauria has demonstrated, Melville's stories for *Harper's* in 1853 would have appeared alongside the sort of sentimental fictions condemned by Wexler and Burke: "Celebrating the economic success of middle-class readers, *Harper's* tales relegate the stance of acquiescence and toleration to the lower classes, who are the subjects, rather than the narrators. In this way, middle-class narrators displace in their fiction the very people whom the stories ostensibly chronicle."[30] Indeed, Melville's choice of narrative form may have been influenced by this sort of sentimental writing: his focus, as we have seen, is usually on a middle-class bachelor figure rather than the suffering interlocutor. Furthermore, the diptych structure of the likes of "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs", "The Two Temples", and "The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartatus of Maids" resembles the techniques used in novels such as Maria Jane McIntosh's *The Lofty and the Lowly; Or Good in All and None All-Good* (1853) and in the pictorial juxtapositions of *Godey's Lady's Book*, which presented scenes of middle-class life alongside representations of urban squalor.[31]

It seems to me, however, that Melville avoids the problems scholars have identified in sentimental literature, in as much as he interrogates and criticises the

[30] Post-Lauria, *Correspondent Colorings: Melville in the Marketplace* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), pp.168-170. Post-Lauria mentions an anonymous tale named "Better than Diamonds", which depicts a middle-class narrator's contact with a poverty-stricken family in a manner that echoes Melville stories such as "Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!".

[31] As Post-Lauria writes, the "January 1853 number opens with a provocative illustration of an elegant boudoir where a rich, young, beautiful woman adorns herself in a gilt mirror on the left, while the right side depicts an impoverished one-roomed cottage in which a poor, exhausted, older, woman slumps over her sewing." Ibid., p.172.

mode of sympathy they take as paradigmatic.[32] Significant in this regard are his references to something he calls "a not unpleasant sadness", by which he would appear to identify and arraign just the sort of sympathetic "good and bad" feeling Jaffe identifies. Melville repeatedly implies that one's "sadness" in the face of suffering is accompanied by a tincture of consolation, even smugness: in *Redburn* he writes of a "soft, pleasing sadness";[33] in *Mardi* he states that "sadness is tranquillity";[34] in *Pierre* he describes sadness as a "snug sofa". The latter novel features the coinage "*povertiresque*", which refers to the pleasure people take in regarding the circumstances of those in an inferior social position to themselves:

> To such an one, not more picturesquely conspicuous is the dismantled thatch in a painted cottage of Gainsborough, than the time-tangled and want-thinned locks of a beggar, *povertiresquely* diversifying those snug little cabinet-pictures of the world, which, exquisitely varnished and framed, are hung up in the drawing-room minds of humane men of taste, and amiable philosophers of either the "Compensation," or "Optimist" school. They deny that any misery is in the world, except for the purpose of throwing the fine *povertiresque* element into its general picture.[35]

The narrative context suggests that Melville had in mind the sort of self-interestedness exemplified by the minor character Falsgrave, a simpering clergyman, and the concept is not developed any further in *Pierre*. But the implications of this peculiarly resonant little passage are followed through in Melville's later stories, many of which dramatise the recourse to representation at the expense of true feeling. "The Piazza", for instance, depicts a solitary man

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[32] Here I agree with Barnes, who writes that Melville "employ[s] the conventions of sentimental sympathy [...] to critique the assumptions upon which those conventions are based". She is writing of *Billy Budd*, which lies outside the scope of this thesis, but her point applies to Melville's shorter fiction of the 1850s. See *Love's Whipping Boy: Violence and Sentimentality in the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), p.120.
[33] Melville, *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*, p.157.
[34] Melville, *Mardi*, p.636.
[35] Melville, *Pierre*, p.277.

whose taste for the aesthetic leads him to deny the claims placed on him by the plaints of a miserable stranger. A close reading of the tale should help us to distance Melville from the Smithian notion of sympathy.

Sympathetic Fairytale

The narrator of "The Piazza" lives alone in an "old-fashioned farmhouse", and has built a porch so that he might better enjoy the view of the mountain that sits opposite. One evening he sights an "uncertain object" sparkling on the slopes, and resolves to set out the next morning to get a closer look. Fancying that he will discover an enchanted "glen or grotto" tended by fairies, he instead comes across a dilapidated cottage, wherein he finds a young woman named Marianna.[36] It transpires that Marianna lives with her brother, but as he is often absent she is profoundly "lonesome", spending her days sewing and staring out of the window at the valley below. Having noticed the narrator's house on the plain, she too nurses illusions: she imagines the residence to be a sunlit and "happy" place. Discomfited by Marianna's sorry situation, the narrator chooses not to reveal that the house is his, and takes his leave. Retreating to his piazza, he decides never again to light out for "fairy-land" (pp.1-12).

At the beginning of the story the narrator reveals a fondness for the artistic, a tendency to treat the world as a canvas devised to gratify his own taste for the picturesque. The country about his house is "such a picture, that in berry time no boy climbs hill or crosses vale without coming upon easels planted in every nook, and sun-burnt painters painting there. A very paradise of painters. The circle of the

[36] Marianna has some distinguished antecedents. The name evokes Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, in which Mariana is a forlorn maiden awaiting her lover in a "moated grange", and Tennyson's poetic recasting of this material in his poem *Mariana* (1830), with its famous, melancholy refrain: "My life is dreary, dreary/[...] I am aweary, aweary, I would that I were dead."

stars cut by the circle of the mountains" (p.1). In picking out the "circle" carved out by the stars and mountains Melville may have had in mind the circular Claude glasses used by nineteenth-century artists as framing devices, so-called "black mirrors" that were designed to lend landscapes a "soft, mellow" effect reminiscent of Claude Lorrain's paintings, eliminating "distracting details and imperfections" and conferring an "idealized and universal quality".[37]

The narrator seeks just this sort of gentle, inoffensive vista. He tells us that the piazza was designed to enable him to regard nature in a posture of repose, like a visitor to an art gallery: "For a house so situated in a country, to have no piazza for the convenience of those who wish to feast upon the view, and take their time and ease about it, seemed as much of an omission as if a picture-gallery should have no bench, for what but picture-galleries are the limestone walls of these same limestone hills? – galleries hung, month after month anew, with pictures ever fading into pictures ever fresh. And beauty is like piety – you cannot run and read it; tranquillity and constancy, with, now-a-days, an easy chair, are needed" (p.2). What he wants from his prospect across the mountains is a sense of comfort, much as in *Pierre* the connoisseurs of melancholy seek a "snug sofa", and the amiable theorists of the "povertiresque" furnish their "drawing-room minds" with "snug little cabinet pictures".

Melville, always alert to accretions of meaning, would have been aware of the many different senses of "snug". According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word has its origins in the sixteenth century, deriving from the Swedish "snygg" or the Danish "snøg", and was originally used to refer to a ship made seaworthy and secured against bad weather. Soon it was being used to denote a sense of ease, and by the eighteenth century it had acquired an additional meaning of

[37] See Sophie Thomas, *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.10. Fisher discusses Claude glasses in his discussion of "The Piazza" in *Going Under*, p.17.

concealment: under "snug" in Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* of 1721 are listed the adjectives "close, hidden, concealed".[38] The narrator of "The Piazza" desires "snugness" in all these senses. He wants a shelter that will provide comfort while keeping out the worst of the elements, and in order to maintain this feeling of tranquillity certain truths must be hidden or secreted away. Here is his first description of the house across the valley: "From the piazza, some uncertain object I had caught, *mysteriously snugged away*, to all appearance, in a sort of purpled dress pocket, high up in a hopper-like hollow, or sunken angle [...] these mountains, somehow, they play at hide-and-seek" (p.4, my emphasis). At this point the location of the house piques the narrator's interest, but after he has discovered the miserable reality of the place he seeks to "snug" it once more, to restore the untroubling prettiness of the view: "Enough. Launching my yawl no more for fairy-land, I stick to the piazza. It is my box-royal; and this amphitheatre, my theatre of San Carlo. Yes the scenery is magical, the illusion so complete" (p.12).

It is not that the narrator fails altogether to show concern for Marianna. He questions her as to her circumstances and suggests remedies for her melancholy: he recommends that she take exercise, and pray regularly. Yet even as they converse he continues to impose on her an imaginative schema that fits with his prior conceptions of the house on the hill, and which bolsters his sense of himself as a Romantic quester. Here is Melville's description of the approach to the cottage:

> I saw, through the open doorway, a lonely girl, sewing at a lonely window. A pale-cheeked girl and fly-specked window, with wasps about the mended upper panes. I

[38] Bailey, *The Universal Etymological English Dictionary Vol 11*, (London, 1721). (I have consulted the digital edition at books.google.co.uk/books?id=o-gIAAAAQAAJ.) Melville often uses "snug" in this context: see for example *White-Jacket* ("snugly hidden in one corner of his chest, Blunt had an extraordinary looking pamphlet..." [p.103]) and *Mardi:* "I lighted upon sundry out-of-the-way hiding places of Annatoo's, in which were snugly secreted divers articles" (p.101).

> spoke. She shyly started, like some Tahiti girl, secreted for a sacrifice, first catching sight, through palms, of Captain Cook. Recovering, she bade me enter; with her apron brushed off a stool; then silently resumed her own. With thanks I took the stool; but now, for a space, I, too, was mute. This, then, is the fairy-mountain house, and here the fairy queen sitting at her fairy-window. (pp.8-9)

Despite the clear signs of Marianna's suffering the narrator continues to aestheticise: the "lonely" woman in her squalid abode is likened, with rather absurd incongruity, to a "Tahiti girl", which eliminates any concrete sense of her situation and lends a shade of pleasant exoticism to the scene. The narrator's implicit comparison of himself to the heroic figure of Captain Cook, meanwhile, is the sort of self-aggrandising conceit typical of sentimental sympathy. The final line, which transfigures the "pale-cheeked girl" into a "fairy queen" and the "fly-specked" casement into a "fairy-window", suggests that despite the optical evidence to the contrary the narrator persists in viewing Marianna as a kind of woodland nymph. Marianna's individuality, her particularity, is almost entirely elided as a result of the narrator's imaginative projections: she is reduced, to borrow Wexler's phrase, to a piece of "human scenery". What looked like detachment is revealed as interpretative violence: far from passively regarding the world the narrator actively manipulates his canvases.

At the very end of the story, however, the bachelor belatedly concedes that his exquisitely constructed illusions will not be maintained: "Every night, when the curtain falls, truth comes in with the darkness. No light shows from the mountain. To and fro I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna's face, and many as real a story" (p.12). He is finally compelled to realise that Marianna will not be made a part of the picturesque spectacle, and this throws a retrospective shadow over his account. By making his abortive self-deception explicit at the conclusion Melville invites us to re-read the narrator's tale, and to sort through all

his self-exculpatory hedging from the beginning; the result is that we are unable to rest in a comfortable perspective on suffering. Bickley perceptively comments that Melville's method is "rhetorically demanding of the reader", making of the "narrator's moods and attitudes an emotional and intellectual grid through or around which the reader must, in Jamesian terms, 'see'".[39] We are encouraged to discern the lineaments of the narrator's interpretative frame, and to notice the paucity of an "aesthetic" attitude towards the other.

What remains, once the "curtain" of the narrator's artifice falls away, is "Marianna's face", a haunting vision of the other. (Unlike Pierre, in which the "veil" would seem to obscure only an ontological absence, in "The Piazza" the emphasis is on the unavoidable *presence* of the other, albeit a mysterious, inscrutable presence.) I see a parallel here in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who writes of "an epiphany of the face".[40] For Levinas, the sight of the human face instigates a primordial "call to responsibility [...] a bodily articulated susceptibility one cannot evade, an imperative one cannot shake".[41] What I find interesting is that this notion of "responsibility" or "obligation" is based on something very different from sympathy as Smith conceives of it. For Levinas, any humane sociality rests upon the ability to recognise the other's very *otherness* or "alterity", to see the other as one who "impedes mastery and resists incorporation into one's own conceptual, cognitive framework".[42] This, I think, helps to explain what is going on at the end of "The Piazza", when the narrator finally begins to think of Marianna as someone who will not be subsumed into his fairy-tale. It may also, more broadly, allow us to conceptualise how Melville's scepticism inflected his ethics.

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[39] Bickley, Jr., *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction*, p.29.
[40] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (LaHaye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p.213.
[41] Wehrs, Haney (eds.), *Levinas and Nineteenth Century Literature*, p.23.
[42] Ibid.

Levinas, Scepticism, Ethics

Levinas' writings on ethics were informed by his historical context, which in certain respects resembled Melville's own. Like America in the years preceding the Civil War, the Europe of Levinas' time was scarred by the violent treatment of particular social groups and a more widespread "decomposition of human relations".[43] As a Jewish intellectual Levinas was held in a prisoner-of-war camp for five years after 1940, and lost members of his family in the Holocaust. The ordeal was the primary influence on his thought, and might explain why he tends to be suspicious of overarching moral systems that fail to address the lived experience of the human individual. He does not prescribe grand remedies for suffering: for Levinas, the only possible redemption lies in isolated acts of kindness. As he puts it in a discussion of Vasily Grossman's sweeping novel of Stalin's Russia, *Life and Fate*: "[Grossman] offers a complete spectacle of desolation and dehumanization", and shows that "every attempt to organize humanity fails". Yet the book also demonstrates that "goodness is possible" in the "relation of one man to another".[44]

As with the literary exponents of sympathy, Levinas's writings on ethics dramatise specific encounters between individuals, one of whom is customarily described as a socially marginalised "other" in need of assistance: "The Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, but not because of the Other's character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other's very alterity. *The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, the 'orphan and the widow'*, whereas I am the rich or the powerful. It can be said that the intersubjective space is not symmetrical" (my

[43] Levinas, quoted in Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.23.
[44] Ibid.

emphasis).[45] The weak, the poor, the orphan, the widow: these are just the sort of overlooked, ill-used figures that tend to feature in sentimental fictions. However, the Levinasian encounter works not, as with the sympathetic scenario, to comfort or console the socially "superior" participant in this asymmetrical space but to do the opposite: to discomfort and disturb. For Levinas, the presence of the other has a disruptive aspect, a tendency to frustrate the subject's attempts to impose any pre-existing hermeneutic pattern.

The roots of Levinas' ethics lie in his aversion to traditional Western metaphysics. The problem with this philosophical project, as it is advanced by thinkers from Hegel to Heidegger, is that it depends on overcoming the gap between self and other in the name of knowledge. It celebrates the wholeness and integrity of the knowing subject at the expense of ethical awareness, assimilating otherness into what Levinas calls *le Même* (the same). Levinas' objection to this philosophical paradigm is more or less precisely echoed by the modern literary-critical objections to sympathy: Hegel's rapacious *Geist*, which becomes progressively engorged as it swallows up worldly antagonists, and the sympathetic subject, which effaces the other with a violent interpretative projection, operate in much the same manner. Linda Bolton, in *Facing the Other*, develops a Levinasian critique of sympathy on this basis: "[With sympathy] the alterity of the Other's experience is made comprehensible only through its translation into the cognitive and emotional experience of the I [...] In terms of Levinasian ethics, sympathy fails in such moments, for in its recovery of the Other's experience, it becomes a kind of emotional appropriation [...] As a response generated in the desire for knowledge, even as a desire for emotional

[45] "Time and the Other", in Sean Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.48.

commiseration, sympathy returns the Other to the emotional province of the self (-same)."[46]

I do not appeal to Levinas simply to lend philosophical depth to the critique of Smithian sympathy we surveyed above. Unlike the politicised critical approach of Jaffe and Barnes, Levinas' work provides us with a way of thinking through an alternative to sympathy, based on a respect for the integrity and dignity of the other.[47] For Levinas, this more substantive human relationship is inaugurated when we are "called into question" by another person. The meeting with the other – particularly a confrontation with the other's face – destabilises our prior beliefs and attitudes, and presents us with an "obligation" that lies beyond the scope of reason. We must recognise the "alterity" of the other, as one who cannot be comprehended or encompassed, but at the same time we must be open to communication, to response. The ideal relationship is "neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge": "In the other's proximity, distance is integrally maintained. [The encounter] is made of both this proximity and duality."[48] Unlike sympathy, which risks an interpretative violation, and radical scepticism, which, as we saw in our reading of *Pierre*, risks excessive detachment, Levinas' ethical stance strikes an exquisite balance between solicitous intimacy and respectful distance.

For Levinas, it is what is unknown, or "mysterious", about the other that confers her dignity and moral worth as an individual. This argument might be

[46] Bolton, *Facing the Other*, p.41.
[47] In this sense – and this is an argument I will follow through in greater detail in my conclusion – it points the way forward to an alternative critical paradigm, one that allows us to entertain the idea that Melville might be doing something more with his art than merely subverting (or supporting) the hegemonies of his time. As the editors of a recent anthology put it, the sort of "ethical criticism" pioneered by Levinas, Stanley Cavell, Wayne Booth, and Tobin Siebers "poses the question of ethics as distinct from, or preliminary to, questions of politics and power – in other words, interrogating the possibility that ethical signification within a literary discourse may be distinguished from moralistic or hegemonic modes of manipulation and naturalization". See Wehrs and Haney, *Levinas and Nineteenth Century Literature*, p.15.
[48] Levinas, "Time and the Other", pp.50, 54.

placed alongside Keats' negative capability, or Cavell's injunction to "live our scepticism",[49] in that it stresses the need to accept the unknowable nature of the other without reaching after knowledge (in this it can also be seen to translate into the ethical plane the stance toward "external world" knowledge we found exemplified in *Moby-Dick*). Worth remarking on here are the strong parallels between Levinas' notion of obligation and the Cavellian concept of "acknowledgement". For Cavell, the "truth of scepticism" lies in its exposing the limits of human cognition.[50] We can never access another person's thoughts; one is "sealed" within one's own sphere of perception. This means that one's communication with the other cannot be based on reason; rather, it must involve an acknowledgement of one's finitude and a respect for what Cavell calls the "separateness" of the other.[51] For both thinkers, it is only when we come to recognise that the other will not be reduced to an access of knowledge that an ethical relationship is formed.[52]

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[49] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p.440.
[50] Ibid., p.7.
[51] See "Knowing and Acknowledging", in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p.261. In his essay "The Scandal of Philosophy" (2005), Cavell remarks on his surprise at coming across "precise phenomenological coincidences" between Levinas' work and his own, and muses on their shared inheritance of Descartes. Cavell, "The Scandal of Philosophy", in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp.132-154. See also Morgan's discussion of the relationship between Levinas' concept of "recognition" and Cavellian "acknowledgement" in *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, pp.74-79.
[52] Although Levinas was not a sceptical thinker per se, his writings are responsive to the tradition of scepticism in philosophy. In *Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence* (1974), Levinas writes that "to conceive of the 'otherwise than being' requires, perhaps, as much audacity as scepticism shows [...] If, after the innumerable 'refutations' which logical thought sets against it, scepticism has had the gall to return (and it always returns as philosophy's legitimate child), it is because [...] in general signification signifies beyond synchrony, beyond essence." Levinas, *Otherwise than Being Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (LaHaye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p.7. Indeed, in his useful article, "The Face and Reading: Immediacy and Mediation", Jean Greisch argues that Levinas' thought necessarily implies the truth of scepticism: "[A consequence of Levinas' position] is that henceforth philosophical rationality will no longer be able to dispense with skepticism. Skepticism is not the more or less perverse practice of the subversion of all position-taking and all affirmation. As in Wittgenstein, it is the constant reminder of the distance between the saying and the said, which philosophical discourse always risks ignoring or reducing." Critchley, Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *Re-reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University

I think that this conception of ethics enables us to make sense not just of Melville's interrogation of self-centred sympathy in his tales but also of his tentative efforts to discover a more satisfactory mode of emotional comportment, to reach "a peculiar kind of fraternity beyond the sympathetic".[53] In this light, we might consider "The Piazza" as tracing a path from "sympathy" to a broadly Levinasian "ethics". If we look to Levinas' descriptions of the birth of ethics in works such as "Time and the Other" (1947) and *Totality and Infinity* (1961) we find some remarkable parallels with the structure of Melville's story. In Levinas' account, the solitary subject initially finds "enjoyment" in an "aesthetic" approach to the world: "The world is an ensemble of nourishment [...] to stroll is to enjoy the fresh air [...] it is an ecstatic experience" in which the subject "absorbs" the world into itself. That is, until an "encounter with the indiscrete face of the Other" prompts an epiphany: the face "calls me into question [...] The Other paralyses possession, which he contests in the epiphany of the face." Just as Melville's protagonist, with his fondness for the aesthetic, is halted by the thought of Marianna's "weary face", Levinas' subject is "paralysed" by an encounter with the other which interrupts his possessive mode of knowledge.[54]

The vividness of Levinas' writing in these passages, along with his enthusiasm for novelists such as Grossman, leads us to consider the particular connection between ethics and narrative. What Levinas finds congenial about *Life and Fate* is not its sweeping evocation of historical developments but its detailed rendering of encounters between human participants. In the meeting between a German prisoner and a Russian woman who, seemingly inexplicably, offers him

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Press, 1991), p.78. See also Bernasconi's article "Skepticism in the face of Philosophy", in the same volume.

[53] The phrase is Bolton's, *Facing the Other*, p.48.

[54] My reading of these two texts draws on Morgan's commentary, which lucidly synthesizes Levinas' various comments on the birth of ethics. See *The Cambridge Introduction to Levinas*, pp.36-41.

her last piece of bread, Levinas discerns a moment of "goodness in an inhuman world". Levinas' interest in such scenes derives not simply from the fact that they illustrate aspects of his own philosophy. In presenting concretely realised dilemmas and confrontations Grossman implicates the reader herself, drawing her into an affective constellation with author and character that is philosophically interesting. As Adam Newton writes: "Certain kinds of textuality parallel [Levinas'] description of the ethical encounter in several obvious ways. *Cutting athwart the mediatory role of reason, narrative situations create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text* [...] Prose fiction translates the interactive problem of ethics into literary forms" (my emphasis).[55] Where sympathetic fictions seek to bind reader and protagonist through a consoling perspective on suffering,[56] in the sort of text Newton identifies reader and character are joined by a shared sense of trauma or astonishment when confronted with an alterity that exceeds comprehension.[57]

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[55] Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.13.

[56] As Barnes puts it: "Sentimental narratives typically foreground examples of sympathetic bonding in their story lines as a model for the way in which readers themselves are expected to respond." *States of Sympathy*, p.5.

[57] In narrative terms, the other, in the fictions favoured by Levinas, functions rather like the "tricky slave" identified by Frye, which represents in part "a world of mystery which is glimpsed and never seen", and "threaten[s] the unity" of the mood established in romantic texts. These characters "[intervene] in normative moral antitheses by challenging the legibility of interiority itself", and serve as a troubling, disruptive presence (I borrow Castiglia's precis of Frye, from *Interior States*, p.221). As Bolton has shown, the disruptive other in American fiction is often a (literal) slave. In her lucid reading of *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), for example, she shows that Crèvecour's Farmer James, who displays the generally sanguine temperament of the Melvillean bachelor, experiences an "ethical disruption" when he comes across a slave caged in the countryside and left to die. Like the narrator of *The Piazza*, he was "leisurely travelling" when this sight of suffering "arrested" him with "affright and terror". As Bolton argues, "The African's power actively to interrupt James' sojourn, to 'arrest' him in the experience of a seemingly innocent and spontaneous enjoyment of his uncontested freedom, represents the disruptive potential of ethics, embodied in the face and speech of the stranger". Confronted by the "alterity" of the African's face and speech, James is compelled to respond. *Facing the Other*, pp.35-56. We will see a similar narrative trajectory in "Benito Cereno".

In what follows I would like to consider Melville's *Piazza Tales* as ethical fictions of this sort, which will hopefully allow for a new appreciation of the book's impressive thematic coherence. This coherence has been overlooked in previous critical approaches, many of which have tended to ignore the collection itself in order to range more widely through Melville's stories of the period. This is to some extent understandable: the circumstances of publication meant that only Melville's stories for *Putnam's* were eligible, and many of his better efforts failed to make the cut. But by focusing on *The Piazza Tales* we can nevertheless hone in on a particular narrative structure that is articulated and rearticulated, like a musical leitmotif, through the volume. "The Piazza" was written specifically as an introduction to the collection, and, as Parker has observed, it was "brilliantly contrived for [the] book".[58] Its premise – a bachelor protagonist is brought into contact with a suffering stranger – is repeated more or less precisely in "The Encantadas", "Benito Cereno", and "Bartleby, The Scrivener".[59] In each case the bachelor begins by affecting sympathy, before coming to recognise the otherness of the stranger, a form of recognition Melville seeks also to bring about in his readers as they engage with the text.

By reading these stories as staging "interactive" ethical encounters I want to offer a fresh way of thinking about what has been called the "epiphanic method"

[58] Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography – Volume 2. 1851-1891*, p.273. Melville's publishers, Dix and Edwards, had requested some prefatory material to go with the other stories. Until Melville wrote "The Piazza" the collection was slated to be called *Benito Cereno & Other Sketches*.

[59] There are two other pieces collected in *The Piazza Tales*: "The Lightning-Rod Man", a tale of a peripatetic huckster's visit to a Melvillean bachelor, and "The Bell-Tower", the story of a bell-striking automaton that kills its architect in Renaissance Italy. They depart slightly from the narrative structure of the other tales, and while they both might be considered as variations on the ethical encounter ("The Lightning-Rod Man" is a characteristic depiction of a meeting between mutually distrustful strangers; "The Bell-Tower" might be considered an oblique allegory on the denial of humanity involved in slavery) I have decided to pass over these pieces in order to concentrate more fully on the other, more substantial tales.

of *The Piazza Tales*.[60] I also want to suggest a new way of approaching the vexed question of Melville's politics. Although he alludes to political themes in the *Tales* – notably the position of women, slavery, and the consequences of free-market capitalism – he eschews any direct discussion or allegorical treatment of social justice; as with Levinas, his politics tend to issue as a function of his ethics – that is, his interest in the problem of one's behaviour towards the unknowable other. Concomitantly, I hope to bring out the difference between the short stories and *Pierre*: where that novel expressed through form and content a profound scepticism about the communicative efficacy of language, *The Piazza Tales* evidence Melville's newfound (albeit muted) optimism in his ability to affect his readers.

2. Ethical Epiphanies

Hunilla's Story

"The Encantadas", an episodic narrative or sketch-cycle, dwells on the natural history and folklore of the titular archipelago, which Melville visited on three occasions during his voyages of the early 1840s. First published in *Putnam's* in 1853, under the pseudonym Salvator R. Tarnmoor, it depicts a terrain reminiscent of Rosa's desolate landscapes, a fallen world traversed by outcasts and thieves and great, shambling tortoises. The narration is delivered by a sailor who has returned from a voyage to the islands, his testimony intermixed with legend and hearsay.

The mariner begins with the observation that there is something sinisterly "enchanted" about the islands and their "optical delusions" (p.129), which associates the story with Melville's earlier tales of dreaming and doubt. But as with the other shorter fictions the emphasis here is on the ethical consequences of

[60] The phrase "epiphanic method" is Fisher's. See *Going Under*, p.56.

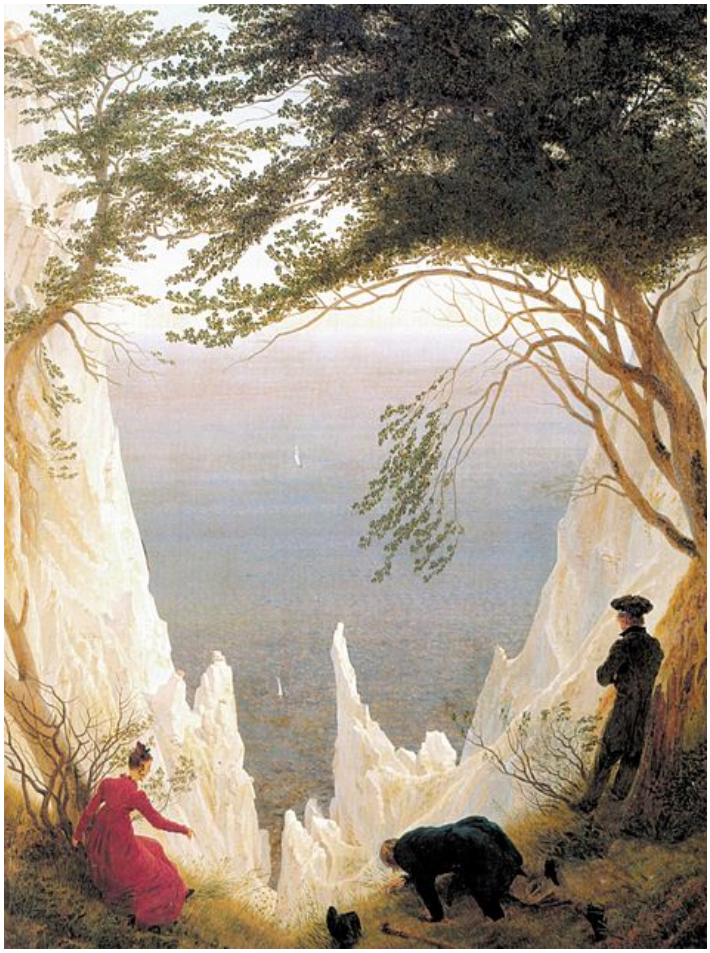

Figure 5. Caspar David Friedrich, "Chalk Cliffs on Rugen" (1818)

scepticism rather than scepticism itself. This is apparent in the eighth sketch of the series, which tells the story of Hunilla, a "Chola widow" stranded on the isle of Norfolk and fortuitously rescued by the narrator's ship. Hunilla had arrived at the island with her brother, Truxill, and husband, a Spaniard named Felipe, who intended to spend some time gathering tortoise oil to sell on the South American mainland. But after the two men died on a fishing trip Hunilla was left alone, and – so we are led to infer – raped by passing sailors.[61]

[61] This embedded narrative carries clear, and perhaps awkwardly incorporated, traces of the Agatha correspondence: John Updike writes that the Hunilla episode is "where all the

Like Melville's other bachelors, the narrator initially regards Hunilla's story with "thoughts of sympathy" which are not "unpleasurable" (p.126). As with the aesthete of "The Piazza", his sympathetic imagination reduces the suffering woman to an element of a wider spectacle. When he first spots Hunilla his immediate response is to transform her into a picture: "It is not artistic heartlessness, but I wish I could draw in crayons; for this woman was a most touching sight; and crayons, tracing softly melancholy lines, would best depict the mournful image of the dark-damasked Chola widow" (p.152). The reference to "crayons" here is doubly significant, in that it suggests both the narrator's approach – his preference for "soft, melancholy" lines over more sharply-etched realism – and his affinity with Irving's detached bachelors ("Geoffrey Crayon" was an Irving pseudonym).

Melville foregrounds the narrator's aestheticising tendency once again in the account of the accident that kills Hunilla's brother and husband:

> [B]oth adventurers perished before Hunilla's eyes. Before Hunilla's eyes they sank. The real woe of this event passed before her sight as some sham tragedy on the stage. She was seated in a rude bower among the withered thickets, crowning a lofty cliff, a little back from the beach. The thickets were so disposed, that in looking upon the sea at large she peered out from among the branches as from the lattice of a high balcony. But upon the day we speak of here, the better to watch the adventure of those two hearts she loved, Hunilla had withdrawn the branches to one side, and held them so. They formed an oval frame, through which the boundless sea rolled like a painted one. And there, the invisible painter painted to her view the wave-tossed and disjointed raft, its once level logs slantingly upheaved, as raking masts, and the four struggling arms undistinguishable among them; and then all subsided into the smooth, creamy flowing waters [...] Death in a silent picture; a dream of the eye; such vanishing shapes as the mirage shows. [...] So instant was the scene, so trance-like in its pictorial effect, so distant

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pent-up affect of the aborted Agatha story tries to force itself on [an] inarticulate heroine". Updike, "Introduction", in Melville, *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, p.xxvi. I see greater nuance in Melville's handling of the material.

> from her blasted bower and her common sense of things, that Hunilla gazed and gazed, nor raised a finger or a wail. (p.154)

As in his precis of the Agatha story, Melville begins the passage with an asymmetrical chiasmus ("...perished before Hunilla's eyes. Before Hunilla's eyes they sank") that reiterates the central fact of the case. He goes on to have the narrator liken the wreck to a stage-set or a painting viewed from Hunilla's position of repose, framed naturally by the "oval" formed by the interposed branches (notice the parallel with the piazza's "circular" prospect). In doing so, he incorporates Hunilla into the scene she witnesses: her individuality is, as Levinas might put it, "absorbed" into the background, much as the men she watches "subside" beneath the "smooth, creamy flowing" waves. (The effect is rather like Caspar David Friedrich's technique of *Rückenfigur* [see Figure 5], which, in the words of one scholar, resolves figures into the landscape they contemplate: "man and nature meet" and the "individual's solitude [is] replaced" by an aesthetic "unity".[62])

However, there is a sudden disruption that forces the narrator to break out of his sympathetic mindset. As in "The Piazza", this shift follows a confrontation with the woman's mysterious face: "Construe the comment of her features as you might; from her mere words little would you have weened [...] She but showed us her soul's lid, and the strange ciphers thereon engraved; all within, with pride's timidity, was withheld" (p.155). Having recognised the inaccessible nature of Hunilla's suffering the narrator loses his carefree lucidity and becomes increasingly hesitant. As he approaches the subject of Hunilla's rape he breaks off

[62] Jens Christian Jensen, quoted in Reinhold Brinkmann, "Shoenberg and the Contemporary: The View from Behind", in Juliane Brand, Christopher Hailey (eds.), *Constructive Dissonance: Arnold Schoenberg and the Transformations of Twentieth Century Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp.196-221. Brinkmann himself takes against this view, arguing that the technique introduces a distancing effect.

altogether, and the prose fractures into aposiopesis: "And now follows – [...] Against my own purposes a pause descends on me here" (p.156); "When our Captain asked whether any whale-boats had – [...] But no, I will not file this thing" (p.157). The ruptures in the fabric of the text enact the ruptures in the narrator's world, as he is brought into confrontation with one whose suffering calls into question his appropriative mode of thought.[63]

We saw in the Agatha correspondence that Melville misnames the sailor "Robertson" as "Robinson", which effects a (perhaps subconscious) connection between the tale and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Sketch Eighth of "The Encantadas" carries clearer traces of that novel, in its depiction of an encounter between a solitary island dweller and an unknown interlocutor. Intriguingly, in an essay titled "The Transcendence of Words" (1949), Levinas uses the example of Crusoe to illustrate the revelatory aspect of the meeting with the other, writing of the "situation Robinson Crusoe is privileged to experience when, in a magnificent tropical landscape, where he has continued to maintain civilization through his tools and his morality and his calendar, he still finds in his encounter with Man Friday the greatest event of his insular life".[64] For Levinas, *Robinson Crusoe* demonstrates his idea of an "original bifurcation", by which a subject who initially

[63] That it is the thought of Hunilla's rape that causes the narrator pause is significant. In her excellent book on sympathy in American culture, Kristin Boudreau notes that contemporary critics of Smith's concept tended to conceive of it as akin to a bodily violation: "Sympathy constituted both a cure and a violation and took place at both the spiritual and physical levels. If sympathy could bring together radically separate individuals by means of a mobile, fluid perception that could be poured from one person into another, guaranteeing that we all judge in similar ways, it could also be seen as a way of taking individual perceptions captive in order to replace them with hostile, foreign ways of judging. If it could cure societies of conflicts between individuals, the inevitable price of that cure [...] was the rape of the individual." Smith, as we have seen, described the sympathetic imagination as "[entering] as it were into [the other's] body", thereby invoking what Boudreau calls the "potential rape of the suffering spectacle". In this light, the failure of Melville's narrator to articulate and "sympathise" with Hunilla's rape might be seen as a reluctance to visit on her story an analogous interpretative violence. See Boudreau, *Sympathy in American Literature: American Sentiments from Jefferson to the Jameses* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), especially pp.5-13.

[64] Levinas, "The Transcendence of Words", in Sean Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell: 1989), pp.144-149.

"situates himself purely and simply *at the heart of his own spectacle, like an artist*", is brought to an awareness of alterity.[65] This might help to explain the reticence shown by the narrator of "The Encantadas": the breakdown in his language is the textual equivalent of a "bifurcation" in experience occasioned by the encounter with one who will not be swallowed into the artistic "spectacle".[66] In recognising her otherness the narrator stops thinking of Hunilla as the subject of a pleasant crayon sketch and comes to an ethical appreciation of his obligation towards her.

At the end of the story, as if newly tethered to her by an affective bond, the sailor follows Hunilla as she visits the husband's grave: "It was not curiosity alone, but something different mingled with it, which prompted me [to follow]" (p.160). When he directly addresses the reader, ostensibly to pass comment on his own, increasingly fragmented and evasive narration, it is to encourage a similar felt response: "Terrible to see how feline fate will sometimes dally with a human soul, and by a nameless magic will repulse a sane despair with a hope which is but mad. Unwittingly I imp this cat-like thing, sporting with the heart of him who reads; for if he feels not, he reads in vain" (pp.156). If I read Melville aright, this "feeling" denotes not the sort of sympathy that is limned at the beginning of the story, but rather, the appreciation of otherness that causes the narrator to belatedly discover his status as a being *pour l'autre*. As in "The Piazza", we find the Melvillean bachelor-narrator turning from sympathy to ethics.

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[65] Ibid., p.499. For an excellent Levinasian reading of *Robinson Crusoe* see John Llewelyn, "What is Orientation in Thinking?: Facing the Facts in *Robinson Crusoe*", in Melvyn New, Robert Bernasconi, Richard A. Cohen (eds.), *In Proximity: Emmanuel Levinas and the Eighteenth Century* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2001), pp.69-90.

[66] Melville's elliptical, fragmented approach in "The Encantadas" brings him close to the surrealist writer Michel Leiris, whose work is the ostensible subject of "The Transcendence of Words". Levinas writes that Leiris' "bifurcations" (*bifurs*) and "erasures" (*biffures*) challenge the epistemological paradigm of Western philosophy, based as it is on "clarity and evidence". Ibid., pp.145-146.

"Hive of Subtlety"

Levinas' reference to the encounter with Man Friday in "The Transcendence of Words" occasions us to consider how racial difference informs Melville's view of the encounter with the other. The issue of Hunilla's "Chola" heritage is for the most part skirted in "The Encantadas", and so I turn here to "Benito Cereno", Melville's most sustained engagement with race.[67] The piece is a fictional reworking of a true story concerning a violent slave revolt: Melville turns this charged material into a "life-and-death epistemological drama"[68] whose focus is not the institution of slavery itself – while Melville abhorred slavery he was not an active abolitionist – but the blinding effects of racial prejudice.

The plot is based on an episode from the memoirs of an American sailor, Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817), and recounts Delano's rendezvous with a Spanish slave ship off the coast of South America. Melville writes in the third person, but cleaves closely to Delano's perspective as he visits the ship and is duped by the mutinous slaves into thinking that the European sailors remain in control. As we will see, Melville's tale, with a remarkably subtle marshalling of effect, dramatises Delano's failure to accord black men and women their proper status as human beings, to recognise them as subjects possessed of an interiority parallel to his own.

The narrative begins aboard Delano's ship, which Melville rechristens the *Bachelor's Delight*. This is our first clue to his intentions: it seems he wants to align Delano with the other carefree and inattentive bachelors that populate his stories.

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[67] One might also mention "The Gees" (published in *Harper's* in 1856), which purports to be an ethnological treatise about the titular inhabitants of Fogo, one of the Cape Verde islands. I agree with Carolyn Karcher's exemplary reading of this story as illustrative of the absurdity of scientific reductionism. See Karcher, "Melville's 'The Gees': A Forgotten Satire on Scientific Racism", in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No.4 (Oct, 1975), pp.421-442.

[68] I use Milder's phrase. See Milder, "Introduction", in *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.xxiii.

Indeed, Delano is described early on as a man of "singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms" (p.47). Sighting the Spanish vessel, the *San Dominick*, listing across a bay, he immediately sets out in a whaleboat to offer his help. When he reaches the ship and arrives on deck he is surrounded by "a clamorous throng of whites and blacks [...] the latter outnumbering the former more than could be expected" (p.49). The captain, the eponymous Cereno, proves to be a "gentlemanly, reserved-looking" and apparently melancholy young man, accompanied at all times by a diminutive slave named Babo. Delano is informed that scurvy and fever have carried off many of the passengers and that the remainder are in desperate need of water. He promptly sends his men back to *The Bachelor's Delight* to fetch supplies, and remains on board to pass the time with Don Benito.

From this point on the narrative develops into something like a detective story, structurally similar to Poe's tales of ratiocination. Unlike Poe's preternaturally shrewd Dupin, however, Delano proves a fallible investigator: while he notices certain suspicious signs – he takes in the ill-discipline of the slaves and the curious timidity of the white officers – he fails to recognise the true state of affairs on board the *San Dominick*. Meanwhile, Melville's readers are invited to solve the "riddle" for themselves. Melville freights the ship with visual metaphors that refer to the unravelling or unlocking of mystery: a group of old slaves pick rope into heaps of oakum; padlock and key – "significant symbols, truly" (p.63) – hang around another's neck. At one point an aged white crewman conspiratorially throws a knot at Delano and tells him to "undo it, cut it, quick" (p.76), advice that would seem to be directed at the reader as much as at the obtuse American captain.

Not that Delano is entirely untroubled by the peculiarities of the *San Dominick*. It is rather that when doubts begin to gather in his mind he very deliberately wards them off. Here he is mulling the business of the knot: "All this is very queer now, thought Captain Delano, with a qualmish sort of emotion; but as one feeling incipient sea-sickness, he strove, by ignoring the symptoms, to get rid of the malady" (pp.76-77). This might be seen as the kind of strategy employed by Melville's other bachelors, the attempt to restore mental quietude by wilfully ignoring all that might prove a disturbance. But there is more going on in *Benito Cereno*, and it has to do with Delano's appraisal of the slaves' capabilities. In what is the story's most resonant scene, Benito finds himself stranded amongst heaps of rope in a gloomy spot on the poop deck. He receives disconcerting glances from the sailors around him, before a "pleasant sort of sunny sight" restores his sense of calm. He sees a youthful slave woman tending affectionately to her child, and reflects:

> There's naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love, thought Captain Delano, well pleased. [...] The incident prompted him to remark the other negresses more particularly than before. He was gratified with their manners; like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution; equally ready to die for their infants or fight for them. Unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves. Ha! thought Captain Delano, those perhaps are some of the very women whom Mungo Park saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of. These natural sights somehow insensibly deepened his confidence and ease. (p.73)

The reference is to Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* – published the same year (1799) the action of *Benito Cereno* putatively takes place – which features a description of black women as abounding in "maternal affection" that Melville

may have had in mind here.[69] Park writes that "negroes" are a "very gentle race, cheerful in their dispositions, inquisitive, credulous, simple, fond of flattery", and taught to respect the "practice of truth" from an early age.[70] If Delano is beginning to suspect that the slaves have taken the ship then it would make sense for him to be reassured by this reminder of Park's opinions on Africans' inherent simplicity and openness.[71]

This passage establishes the story's particular rhythm. Again and again Delano comes close to realising that the slaves have taken the ship, but reassures himself on each occasion by restating the stereotype of the "negro" as essentially dull-witted and subservient. The narrative thus takes on the familiar Melvillean oscillation between faith and doubt, figured here as the symptom of a reactionary *mauvaise foi*. When Delano perceives the strange, "noisy indocility" of the slaves he finds "humane satisfaction" in turning his eyes on Babo, who convincingly affects the sort of tameness that "has gained for the negro the repute of making the most pleasing body servant in the world" (p.52). Similarly, there is the deliciously tense scene in which Babo insists upon shaving Benito in Delano's company. Even as the blade rests on the neck of the stricken Spaniard, Delano satisfies himself by opining that blacks are simple creatures who display the "unaspiring contentment of the limited mind" (p.84). When a second crewman tries to get Delano's attention, gnomically gesturing to the cabin, he entertains briefly the possibility

[69] Dana Nelson has argued that in this scene Delano "enjoys the anthropological dissymmetry of looking on this African woman with her child because it fills out and confirms his whiteness and manhood"; the thought that he is sharing this experience with another white man only helps to "stabilize [his] sense of self". Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1998), pp.3-4.

[70] Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (London: Wordsworth, 2002), pp.242-243.

[71] We later learn that the "negresses [...] were knowing to the revolt". Terry J. Martin has convincingly argued that the woman in this scene deliberately affects a motherly posture to deceive Delano: "Since the mother picks up the baby and smothers it in maternal transports only after she sees Delano looking at her, the sequence suggests that her act is not spontaneous but rather cynically calculated to place him off his guard." See Martin, *Rhetorical Deception in the Short Fiction of Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), p.59.

that Benito is conspiring with the slaves, before reminding himself that the latter would not be competent enough to form or maintain such an alliance: "Could then Don Benito be any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostasize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes?" (p.75). That dilatory qualifier "almost" fails to exonerate Delano: he clearly thinks of the slaves as subhuman.

The point is not that Delano is a particularly unkind or cruel man. Melville insists that the captain displays "sympathy" (p.88) in his dealings with black people:

> [His] nature was not only benign, but familiarly and humorously so. At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of color at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor, invariably he was on chatty and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs. (p.84)

This brilliantly arch passage, with its ruthless knife-twist of a concluding phrase, strikes at the heart of Delano's paternalistic prejudice. He thinks fondly of black people in the abstract, but when it comes down to it will not credit their status as human beings like himself: they are, like "Newfoundland dogs", worthy of affection but not respect as equivalent centres of self. Cavell touches on just this mode of thought in *The Claim of Reason*, where he argues that the defender of slavery "need not deny the supremacy of justice; he may be eloquent on the subject. He need deny only that certain others are to be acknowledged as falling

within its realm. It could be said that what he denies is that the slave is 'other', i.e. other to his one."[72]

The genius of Melville's tale, with its sly withholding of significant information, is that in order to "solve" the mystery of the narrative the reader must do precisely what Delano does not: that is, acknowledge the slaves as others, as human beings possessed of the foresight and ingenuity to construct the brilliantly elaborate deception on board the *San Dominick*. Melville uses a number of methods to prompt this readerly epiphany: the narrative has a certain *rallentando* effect – Melville comments reflexively that the action as it happens proceeds "far swifter than these sentences" (p.96) – which gives the reader time to linger on the details. In a technique that anticipates Brechtian dramaturgy, he freezes key scenes into *tableaux-vivants* designed to rouse the reader to awareness: in the shaving sequence, for example, Babo stands "suspended for an instant" (p.85) as he holds the razor at his master's throat. Furthermore, the prose is tangled and contorted throughout, not, I think, to flaunt its own texture (as was the case in *Pierre*), but to offer the reader a linguistic clue that something is being obscured. The climactic scene, in which Cereno, pursued by Babo, jumps from the ship's deck into Delano's departing boat, is marked by a weird, convoluted syntax: "Not Captain Delano, but Don Benito, the black, in leaping into the boat, had intended to stab" (p.99). That sentence is like a tightly-wound knot that must be untied if its meaning, and that of the preceding narrative, is to become clear.

But despite these various invitations for the reader to engage with and unparse the text, the riddle will only be solved once we take the step – no doubt a simpler matter now than it was for the readers of Melville's own time – of crediting the slaves' agency and accepting that Babo is a consummate strategist. Melville makes a point of emphasising that it was Babo's "brain, not body", that had

[72] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp.376-377.

"schemed and led the revolt" (p.116), and in doing so covertly arraigns the racism that casts black people as physical, instinctive creatures. However, he does not linger on Babo's motivation, and the details of the mutiny itself are provided in the dry form of a deposition delivered at the subsequent court case (as in the trial of Conrad's Lord Jim, the very precision of this legalistic discourse serves only to highlight the ambiguities it leaves out). The onus is on the reader to respond by confronting and recognising Babo as an autonomous, dignified other.

The story departs slightly from the narrative structure we have already identified in "The Piazza" and "The Encantadas", in that Delano, the tale's centre of consciousness, does not forsake sympathy. Rather, it is Cereno whose experiences motivate a change in perspective and a recognition of the slaves' alterity. With the ships safely stowed at a Peruvian port, and the ringleaders of the mutiny imprisoned, Delano asks Don Benito what is troubling him: "The past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves." Cereno responds: "Because they have no memory [...] because they are not human" (p.116). That final noun resonates, all the more so when Cereno explains that it is "the negro" that has "cast the shadow" of melancholy upon him. His gloom might be explained by the repetitive *tête-à-tête* that takes place between Cereno and Babo on board the ship: "The black man with one arm still encircled his master, at the same time keeping his eye fixed on his face" (p.55); "with mute concern his servant gazed into his face" (p.94).[73] Babo's face confronts his master with the accusatory

[73] Newton, who draws on Levinas in his reading of the tale, notices that "Babo's concentrated devotion possesses almost all the features which Levinas assigns to his paradigm for ethical relation: face locked onto face, eyes 'threaded on a double string', solicitude, asymmetry, height, even, and most ironical of all, mastery". But I disagree with Newton's argument that the face-to-face encounters in the story are "counter-moral, the stuff of deception not revelation". Though Babo's attention helps to maintain the ruse, Cereno's melancholy at the end of the tale suggests that it has revealed to him the ethical bond between human beings that slavery destroys. See Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, p.215.

power Levinas describes, and it is a power it retains unto death. Melville ends the tale with the image of Babo's severed head, which has been fixed on a pole in Lima's town square: "The body was burned to ashes, but for many days, the head, *that hive of subtlety*, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites" (p.117, my emphasis).

The delicacy in Melville's handling of the theme of racial prejudice in "Benito Cereno" is such that it was almost entirely missed by early critics. Even so distinguished a scholar as F.O. Matthiessen dismissed the novella as "superficial" in its depiction of the blacks as atavistic mutineers and the whites as kindly souls to whom evil is done.[74] Post-1960s scholarship has challenged this view, taking the story to be "a scornful attack on Delano's blinding innocence, a damning indictment of the evils of chattel slavery, and a rousing celebration of black rebellion".[75] While I would broadly agree with the thrust of these antislavery readings I would argue, with Robert Levine, that they tend to pass over certain ambiguities.[76] Melville, as in the Agatha correspondence, practices his principle of "liberal charity" in characterisation, refusing to reduce characters to preconceived types: Babo, capable of cruelty, is no model hero; Delano is no dastardly villain. This makes the text resistant to political interpretations that would cast its author as a sort of literary Thaddeus Stevens. Melville's intention was not so much to inspire action against the institution of slavery as to lay bare the psychological manoeuvres that enabled and sustained it.

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[74] F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p.508.
[75] This summary of the critical trend comes from Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance*, p.166.
[76] Levine: "Reading Benito Cereno [in the wake of these critical approaches] has become an exercise in certainty, in literary mastery, and occasion to offer pious denunications of Delano and Cereno and fraternal embraces to Babo and his fellow conspirators. As a result, a dynamic and threatening text has been stripped of any felt anxiety, implicating presence, and, ironically, transhistorical power." Ibid., p.166.

I think we might productively compare Melville's approach to what is perhaps the most important contemporary account of American slavery: the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). Having grown up as a slave in Maryland before escaping to New York, Douglass' life and milieu were, of course, profoundly different from Melville's. But their respective treatments of slavery are similar. Douglass focuses on the ways in which the humanity of the slave is systematically denied through a racist interpretation of her role in the "scale" of nature. As he puts it: "Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subject to the same narrow examination."[77] That phrase "narrow examination" might apply just as well to Melville's Delano, who evinces something like tunnel vision in his opinion of slaves as docile beasts. Like Melville, Douglass sees this pernicious reduction of slave to animal status as having to do with a denial of black interiority. He comments wryly that his ordeal would have been more tolerable had he been the insentient brute his owners believed him to be: "I often wished myself a beast [...] anything, no matter what, to get rid of thinking!"[78]

In terms of literary technique, too, Melville and Douglass are close. Douglass uses the resources of his art to twist racist discourse inside out (the white slaveowners are themselves likened to animals: "crocodiles" and "wild beasts"). Douglass disdains easy sentiments, and wants the reader to interact with the text rather than receive passively its hard-won wisdom. This is evident in the famously coy account of his escape to freedom: "I remained firm, and, according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in

[77] Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), p.46.
[78] Ibid., p.42.

reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind. How I did so, – what means I adopted, what direction I travelled, and by what mode of conveyance, – I must leave unexplained..."[79] Douglass' ostensible reason for this laconic summary is that if he revealed further details he would close off a prospective escape route for other slaves. I think his reticence has another, deeper source: a desire to have readers recognise for themselves the harsh circumstances through which this prisoner had to pass in order to win his freedom. As William L. Andrews writes, Douglass did not want the relationship between writer and reader "to be predicated on the assumption that whites could read slave narratives from the standpoint of the distanced, uncommitted collector of facts [...] He wanted his reader to learn something about his or her responsibility to the text."[80] Like Melville, who similarly obscures the most conventionally "dramatic" portion of the narrative in "Benito Cereno", he demands engagement.

Engagement, that is, but not "sympathy" or identification of the Smithian kind, which as we have seen derives from a projection of the self into the position of the other. What the *Narrative* teaches us is that is impossible to know or feel directly the experiences of another person, especially when those experiences are as burningly vivid as Douglass's own. That, at least, is what I glean from the following, justly famous passage:

> It was a most painful situation; and, to understand it, one must needs experience it, or imagine himself in similar

[79] Ibid., p.89.
[80] William L. Andrews, "The Performance of the *Narrative*" in Robert Levine, Samuel Otter (eds.), *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), p.181. Like many scholars, Andrews takes the view that the *Narrative* should be distinguished from Douglass' later work in that it appeals to readers' sympathy, whereas what came after was predicated on a more thoroughgoing presentation of the slave's inaccessible individuality (Pratt calls this the "standard" reading). But as I argue here, I find moments of rupture and withdrawal in the earlier text too, techniques that alienate the reader in ways that other critics see as the preserve of the later writings. See Pratt, "'I Am a Stranger with Thee': Frederick Douglass and Recognition after 1845", p.267, n.2.

> circumstances. Let him be a fugitive slave in a strange land – a land given up to be the hunting-ground for slaveholders – whose inhabitants are legalized kidnappers – where he is every moment subjected to the terrible liability of being seized upon by his fellowmen, as the hideous crocodile seizes upon his prey! – I say, let him place himself in my situation – without home or friends – without money or credit – wanting shelter, and no one to give it – wanting bread, and no money to buy it, – and at the same time let him feel that he is pursued by merciless men-hunters, and in total darkness as to what to do, where to go, or where to stay, – perfectly helpless both as to the means of defence and means of escape, – in the midst of plenty, yet suffering the terrible gnawings of hunger, – in the midst of houses, yet having no home, – among fellow-men, yet feeling as if in the midst of wild beasts, whose greediness to swallow up the trembling and half-famished fugitive is only equalled by that with which the monsters of the deep swallow up the helpless fish upon which they subsist, – I say, let him be placed in this most trying situation, – the situation in which I was placed, – then, and not till then, will he fully appreciate the hardships of, and know how to sympathize with, the toil-worn and whip-scarred fugitive slave.[81]

Some critics have interpreted Douglass as making a straightforward appeal to the reader's solidarity here: Andrews, for instance, sees Douglass as implying that "real sympathy [...] can only come through an imaginative leap into the total situation of the fugitive and the world of the text".[82] But it seems to me that the point of Douglass' passage, with its teetering pyramid of conjunctive clauses, is that it is so richly particularized as to suggest that there is no way we could possibly "sympathize" in this way. Douglass's experience is his own, and it is the task of the reader to acknowledge it as such. The idea behind Douglass' *Narrative* is to present the reader with an otherness that precisely *cannot* be comprehended, a suffering that lies beyond hermeneutic grasp. By refusing to dwell on the details of

[81] Douglass, *Autobiographies*, p.90.
[82] Andrews, "The Performance of the *Narrative*", p.182.

his escape he retains that sense of otherness that must form the basis of any ethical relationship.[83]

No doubt this makes the *Narrative* rather less politically efficacious than it might have been had Douglass made a more traditional appeal to his readers' sentiments, less likely to arouse immediate feelings of anger or empathy that could be channelled into abolitionist fervour. Yet I would argue, along with Lorna Wood, that "conventional slave narratives, no matter how influential, were (and are) less likely to help readers overcome racial prejudice than Douglass's because they do not accuse readers or return them to a humbling contemplation of the Other's transcending mystery, as Douglass's narrative still does today, long after emancipation".[84] Without this ethical respect for the other as a separate centre of self, a democratic politics will mean little of any value. As Lloyd Pratt has shown, Douglass' later writings locate pathways to democratic community in "experiences of strangerhood" which, much like the ethical encounters we have been describing, involve the "endless assertion of an ineluctable barrier to mutual intelligibility that also functions as a kind of hinge point for mutuality."[85] Melville himself never sought to work his ethics into a wider political stance, but both he and Douglass began in the same place, confronting readers with the unknowable otherness of the

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[83] These literary methods set Douglass apart from contemporary commentators such as Elizabeth Chandler, who wrote in her essay "Mental Metempsychosis" (1831) that it is only through sympathy that the attitudes underpinning the institution of slavery might be altered: "Could we but persuade [slaveholders] to imagine themselves for a moment in [the slave's] very circumstances, to enter into his feelings, comprehend all his wretchedness, transform themselves into his very self, they would not surely long withhold their compassion." Quoted by Barnes in *Love's Whipping Boy*, p.68.

[84] Wood, "Emmanuel Levinas and the American Renaissance Canon", p.198. Nor was Douglass' book alone in drawing attention to the otherness of the black subject: Hannah Crafts' contemporaneous *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, for example, adopts similar techniques in asserting a hidden interiority beyond the abused and "possessed" bodies of slaves. Castiglia reads the novel as showing "the process of [sympathetic] identification […] to be the disabling work of romantic civility and [as offering] fantasy and superstition as potent alternatives to identification." As in Douglass' narrative and in "Benito Cereno", there are "moments of rupture" in which the "apparent correspondence between visual representation and inner truth" is complicated. See *Interior States*, pp.13,234-255.

[85] Pratt, "'I Am a Stranger with Thee': Frederick Douglass and Recognition after 1845", pp.247, 265.

slave, the "recesses of whose condition" (p.115) are as wondrous as any human being's.

"Fraternal Melancholy"

"Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853) is another Melville tale in which the treatment of a socio-political issue – nominally, in this case, the drudgery of wage labour – is coloured by Melville's ethics.[86] Notice that the subtitle runs together a specific historical reference – to Wall Street, the locus of free-market capitalism – and a gesture to a metaphysical limitation. The story itself is replete with images of "walls": Bartleby's desk is screened off from the rest of the office, and his window obstructed by a neighbouring building, which prompts "dead-wall reveries" (pp.29, 37). Of course Bartleby's impassiveness itself presents a kind of wall, one that frustrates our genial narrator to distraction.

The lawyer who recounts Bartleby's story is another of Melville's bachelors: kindly in a sort of abstract sense, reserved, set in his ways. He is an eminently "safe" man whose motto is that "the easiest way in life is best". Like the narrator of "The Piazza", he desires "the cool tranquillity of a *snug* retreat" from which to assay opinions on the world (p.14, my emphasis). He sees virtue in decorum, respectability and material wealth: he prudishly dismisses Lord Byron as "the mettlesome poet" (p.20), and, with an orotund faux-modesty, name-checks the late businessman John Jacob Astor, by whom he "was not unemployed". He admits that he likes to recite Astor's name to himself, for it has a "rounded and orbicular quality, and rings like unto bullion" (p.14).

[86] Some scholars have interpreted "Bartleby" as a straightforward political critique: see, for example, Louise K. Barnett's "Bartleby as Alienated Worker", which reads the story through Marx's theory of alienation. See *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol.11, No.4 (1974), 379-386.

As in all of Melville's "bachelor" stories, a stranger arrives to disturb the protagonist's peaceful existence. Engaged as a copyist, the "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable" Bartleby begins with a flurry of activity, and the lawyer is pleased with his efforts. But on the third day of his employment, when asked to check the accuracy of his work, he demurs with the words "I would prefer not to". At first the issue is one of simple disobedience: the lawyer reacts angrily to his employee's refusal of what is an eminently reasonable instruction. But as the story develops the focus shifts to the unfathomable nature of Bartleby's stance. The narrator becomes increasingly desperate as he realises that there is no way of knowing what ails Bartleby, and that there is therefore no way of helping him: the scrivener's motivation lies, like the tenets of the philosophical sceptic, beyond "common usage and common sense" (p.22). Pale and etiolated as a "ghost" (pp.25, 38), Bartleby is removed as a vagrant to the New York Tombs, where he dies after refusing food.

From the beginning Bartleby's inscrutable nature is emphasised. "No materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of the man", the narrator tells us. "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable" (p.13) This places him in opposition to the lawyer's other employees, whose eccentricities are more readily intelligible. Turkey is a man of florid complexion who is calm in the mornings but flustered and clumsy in the afternoon; Nippers, usually an assiduous worker, is prone to sudden choleric fits. The lawyer explains these character traits with reference to Turkey's fondness for the "red ink" (a euphemism for alcohol) and Nippers' "dyspeptic" trouble (p.23). His avowed admiration for Joseph Priestley's treatise "on Necessity", which he shares with *Mardi*'s Taji, is a hint as to his reliance on deterministic interpretation of human life. But while he casts around for an explanation as to Bartleby's recalcitrance – he invokes the medieval theory of the cardinal humours and the scrivener's meagre diet as potential factors

– the "paramount consideration" governing Bartleby's behaviour remains obscure (p.22).

This causes a problem for the narrator because he, like the aesthete of "The Piazza" and the good-natured racist Delano, is wont to regard people using his own rigid terms of reference, foreclosing other interpretations. He admits that he is motivated by "mere self-interest" in his relations with others (p.36). His chief concern in the story's early stages is the productivity of his employees, who become mere cogs in a money-making machine: he boasts of how he has obviated the problems caused by Turkey's and Nippers' quirks by shrewdly managing their workload (he only gives Turkey important writing to do in the morning, for example, when his hands have not yet begun to tremble). Likewise, his initial sympathy for Bartleby turns out to have an entirely self-serving justification, based on the scrivener's "usefulness":

> Poor fellow! thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence; his aspect sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are involuntary. He is useful to me. I can get along with him. If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less indulgent employer, and then he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve. Yes. Here I can purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience. (pp.23-24)

At this point the narrator believes that Bartleby's condition is temporary, and that by indulging him he will satisfy his own conscience. Note the strange linguistic tic by which he reduces states of mind to base notions of money or food ("*purchase* a *delicious* self-approval"; "*sweet morsel* for my conscience"): Bartleby is simply grist for the narrator's mill, gobbled up by the narrator even as he himself wastes away from want of nourishment. (This further suggests the parallel between sympathy and the sort of interpretative violence to which Levinas objects, the "assimilation of

otherness into sameness [through which] the Other is digested like food and drink".[87])

In depicting his lawyer as savouring sympathy like a connoisseur, I think Melville is once again challenging the sort of complacent Smithian position that would enclose the other within a subjective projection. As J. Hillis Miller puts it in his sensitive reading of the tale, "the narrator has the most urgent need to contain Bartleby, to reduce and encompass him, to read him, so he can get on with his work and repossess his own integrity".[88] This can be seen in his use of language, not just in his tendency to semantically reduce Bartleby to a "valuable acquisition" but also via a process of grammatical sublation. Miller points us to the lawyer's repeated employment of litotes ("not unemployed", "not insensible") which act like "miniature bits of dialectical reasoning, in which the initial negative is negated in turn to create a synthetic positive".[89] The significance of Bartleby's phrase "I would prefer not to" is that it complicates this progressive mode of thought: the mysterious construction, with its ambiguous, dangling infinitive, will not be sublated because it is not verifiable, that is, it has no obvious connection to extralinguistic circumstances, no isomorphic truth-value. As Francesco Bigagli puts it, "Bartleby's formula provokes a short-circuit in the context of the utterance. It causes a hermeneutic breakdown bordering on incomprehensibility [...] 'prefer' invades discourse and jeopardises coherence".[90]

However, the lawyer manages eventually to reconcile himself to Bartleby's otherness. Around halfway through the story he discovers that the copyist's plight is worse than he imagined: not only does Bartleby spend his days sitting mutely in

[87] See Critchley, Bernasconi (eds.), *Rereading Levinas*, p.xi.
[88] Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.162.
[89] Ibid., p.150.
[90] Bigagli, "'And Who Art Thou Boy?': Face-to-Face with Bartleby; Or Levinas and the Other", in *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, Vol. 12, No.3 (2010), pp.37-53. Bigagli's essay is useful as one of the few readings of Melville in Levinasian terms.

the office, he has secretly been living there too, spending evenings and weekends alone in the vacant building. As he surveys Bartleby's squalid living space – a rolled-up blanket, a blacking-box, a "few crumbs of ginger-nuts and a morsel of cheese" wrapped in a sheet of newspaper – the narrator begins to fathom the true depths of Bartleby's anguish: "What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed!", he cries. "His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!" But crucially, the narrator also recognises here that "poverty" and "solitude" will not by themselves explain Bartleby's predicament. The pain the scrivener feels has no obvious cause and no clear anodyne: "What I saw that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of an innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body, but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach" (pp.27-28). Note that this passage marks a shift both in the lawyer's mode of thought and in his use of language. There is no sublation here, no dialectical progress from negative to positive: in the final sentence opposing thoughts are presented in adjacent clauses, with no final syntactical synthesis.

For Barnes, this sequence shows that the narrator has begun to recognise the "cost of connection", the risk that by sympathising too closely with Bartleby his own psychological health will suffer.[91] But it seems to me that this reading would only hold if the lawyer completely washes his hands of Bartleby after this point, and that is not exactly what happens. What we see here, rather, is the narrator's realisation that his sympathy for Bartleby has heretofore involved nothing more than a self-centred affectation: "For the first time in my life a feeling of

[91] See Barnes, "Fraternal Melancholies: Manhood and the Limits of Sympathy in Douglass and Melville", in *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, pp.233-257. Barnes is right to point out the narrator's fear that Bartleby's condition might be in some sense infectious: the narrator notices that he and his other employees have inadvertently begun to use the word "prefer" in conversation since the advent of the copyist, and worries that there may be further contagion: "Somehow of late I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it yet produce" (p.31).

overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Until now I had experienced naught but a not-unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy!" (p.28). Melville is once again drawing on his notion of a comforting sadness to critique the Smithian form of sympathy; the difference is that here the narrator himself recognises the flaws in such an attitude, and arrives at a more authentic conception of "common humanity" that incorporates a chastened awareness of cognitive limits.

This awareness provides an ethical basis for the narrator's attempt to improve Bartleby's material circumstances. True, the lawyer does not act immediately to help Bartleby – indeed, he tries to put distance between them, having his business moved to another office so that they will no longer be in contact – but he is unable to forsake him completely. Summoned to his old premises by the new tenants, who are disconcerted by Bartleby's presence, he offers to find the scrivener another job, and even invites him to his own home, where he might remain "till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement" (p.41). When Bartleby is removed as a vagrant to the Tombs, he visits him and receives a cool response; nevertheless, he speaks to the resident cook and ensures that the prisoner will be well looked after. These ameliorative efforts have little effect, but the point is that the narrator has come to recognise a responsibility for Bartleby even in the absence of any rational grounds for action. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues in an excellent essay on the story, the narrator accepts that he will not get to the source of Bartleby's pain, and persists in trying to formulate a way to "do him justice" despite the fact that he "resists all attempts at understanding".[92] In Levinas' terms,

[92] See Weinstock, "Doing Justice to Bartleby", in *American Transcendental Quarterly*, Vol.17, No.1 (2003), pp.23-42. While Weinstock's article does not mention Levinas it arrives at remarkably Levinasian conclusions: "Rather than attempting to neutralize Bartleby's strangeness, to contain his otherness within a narrative that presumes to know Bartleby, to explain his actions, the narrator ultimately leaves Bartleby to himself, recognizes Bartleby's strangeness, his lostness, and therefore attempts to mourn him as lost." The

we might say that the lawyer recognises an "obligation" toward Bartleby, an inescapable affective tug whose source lies beyond the bounds of reason.

Any reading of "Bartleby" must grapple with the ending of the story, which would seem to offer a clue as to the scrivener's trauma in a titbit of information concerning his employment in a "Dead Letter Office". The narrator recounts "one little item of rumor" about Bartleby's experiences in handling letters destined never to reach their recipients: "Pardon for those who died despairing, hope for those who died unhoping, good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities..." (pp.44-45). Were one to take this as the definitive key to Bartleby's distress then it would contradict my interpretation, in that I have taken the story as portraying the narrator's gradual realisation that there is, in fact, no such easily accessible key. I prefer to see the epilogue as an oblique, normative comment on the reader's approach to the text: my view is that the story itself can be seen as a kind of letter, addressed to the reader, and requiring of a particular kind of response (one which involves the acknowledgement that in a strictly literal sense, the "dead letters" rumour is a red herring). If the reader fails to follow the narrator in recognising the inscrutable nature of Bartleby's suffering, of his status qua other, then the story is rendered a communicative failure. Hence that resonant image we have of Bartleby tossing letters into the inferno.

Proximity, Distance, Correspondence

"Bartleby" is not the only Melville story to muse on the nature of correspondence. Indeed, letters carry metaphoric significance throughout *The Piazza Tales*. In "The

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coincidence shows just how precisely Melville's story seems to anticipate aspects of Levinas' thought.

Encantadas", for example, there is a discussion of dilapidated post-boxes dotted around the islands:

> And though it may seem very strange to talk of post-offices in this barren region, yet post-offices are occasionally to be found there. They consist of a stake and bottle. The letters being not only sealed, but corked. They are generally deposited by captains of Nantucketers for the benefit of passing fishermen; and contain statements as to what luck they had in whale-fishing or tortoise-hunting. Frequently, however, long months and months, whole years go by and no applicant appears. The stake rots and falls, presenting no very exhilarating object. (p.172)

These sealed and corked letters are, like Bartleby's, "dead", symbols of failed communication. And in this case, too, I think Melville intends comment on the relationship between reader and text. Recall the narrator's reflections earlier in "The Encantadas" on "him who reads [...] if he feel not, he reads in vain". Melville is keenly aware that his stories might be ignored, or fundamentally misinterpreted; may finish up like a mouldering missive on a remote island. Which brings us back to where we began this chapter: to Hawthorne, and to Agatha Hatch. Note the similarities between the crumbling post-box on the Galapagos and the one Agatha visits: "[The] little box decay[s]. *The post rots* in the ground at last. Owing to its little being used – hardly used at all – grass grows rankly about it. At last a little bird nests in it. At last *the post falls*" (my emphases).

This notion of fiction as a letter sent from author to reader is worth following a little further, as it allows us to flesh out our earlier description of Melville's writing as enacting an ethical "call and response". It seems to me that the dynamic of correspondence in some sense reflects the mode of interpersonal communication that is thematised throughout *The Piazza Tales*. Janet Altman's comments on correspondence as a form of "meeting" are germane here: "As an instrument of communication between sender and receiver, the letter straddles the gulf between

presence and absence; the two persons who 'meet' through the letter are neither totally separated nor totally united. The letter lies halfway between the possibility of total communication and the risk of no communication at all."[93] This notion of a midway point between intimacy and distance comes very close to the mixture of "proximity and duality" identified by Levinas.[94]

In conceiving of his stories as letters Melville conceptualises a reader-writer relationship that opens up a space for affective response but which also acknowledges the reader's privacy and, concomitantly, her interpretative freedom. In other words, he practices the respect for otherness that he preaches in his tales: he is aware that his message, like a dead letter, may not reach its target. In this he differs from Hawthorne, who was little troubled by the thought that his work would be misinterpreted. As Bercovitch has observed, the scarlet "A" may seem indeterminate, but by having Hester Prynne volunteer to wear it Hawthorne allows the letter to delineate a symbolic community, implicating the reader as a "co-producer of meaning in a single, coherent moral-political-aesthetic design".[95] When Sophia Hawthorne, after reading the novel, identified a singular moral ("as terrific and stunning as a thunderbolt. It shows that the Law cannot be broken"), one suspects that her husband would have approved, for he was looking in his readers for a "heart and mind of perfect sympathy".[96]

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[93] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p.43.
[94] Silvia Benso has dicussed Levinas in relation to correspondence: "Does letter-writing not presuppose the acknowledgement of the other, to whom the written texts are addressed?" See Benso, "Missing the Encounter With the Other: Goethe's Sufferings of Young Werther in Light of Levinas", in *In Proximity: Emmanuel Levinas and the Eighteenth Century*, p.200.
[95] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York, Routledge, 1993), p.212.
[96] As Elizabeth Hewitt observes in her excellent survey of correspondence in antebellum culture, Hawthorne often uses this phrase to refer to Sophia in his love letters. *Correspondence in American Literature*: *1770-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.95.

In his preface to *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne reflects on the act of reading, assuming a "personal relation with the public" and addressing "the few who will understand".[97] Discovering the letter, he describes it in terms of direct influence: "Certainly there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streaming forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of mind."[98] Hawthorne thus "positions himself as a privileged reader who inevitably is in perfect sympathy with the text he reads",[99] and suggests what he expects from his own audience. As David Leverenz has memorably put it, "this intrusive, aggressive, yet self-mocking and faintly guilty author seems to be seeking a combination of wife and double in his readers".[100]

Significantly, Hawthorne consciously disavows the metaphor of writing as correspondence in "The Custom House", perhaps because the absence connoted by the letter form precludes his notion of reading as an intimate sympathetic communion. Melville, on the other hand, was keenly aware that language will never completely efface the gap that separates reader from writer, and that other interpretations will not be foreclosed. In this he can be viewed as one of those nineteenth-century authors who acknowledged what Georg Lukacs has called "the new solitude". As with the work of Lukacs' exemplar Stefan George, Melville's writings "are completely intimate and yet they keep their author at an immense distance from us", expressing "the technical expression of the psychological

[97] Hawthorne, *Novels*, p.121-122.
[98] Ibid., p.146.
[99] Hewitt, p.95. I differ slightly from Hewitt in that she takes Hawthorne to be betraying a view of literature as correspondence, despite his assertions to the contrary. I think that for Hawthorne the idea of writing as a letter did not quite capture the close tie between reader and author that he was looking to effect.
[100] David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1989), p.35.

problem of closeness and distance".[101] If there is a comparison to be made with another writer of the American Renaissance it would probably be with Dickinson,[102] who also used correspondence as a metaphor for the relationship between reader and writer:

> The way I read a letter's this,
> 'Tis first I lock the Door –
> And push it with my fingers next,
> For transport it be sure
>
> And then I go the furthest off
> To counteract a knock;
> Then draw my little Letter forth
> And slowly pick its lock.
>
> Then, glancing narrow, at the Wall –
> And narrow at the floor
> For firm conviction of a Mouse
> Not exorcised before,
>
> Peruse how infinite I am
> To – no one that You know!
> And sigh for lack of heaven, – but not
> The heaven the creeds bestow.[103]

The poem stages the act of opening the letter as a meeting between two people, in which privacy and intimacy are held in the kind of delicate equilibrium Melville's stories enact. Dickinson retreats into an inner sanctum to "pick the lock" of the letter: a sense of privacy is required in order that she might peruse it properly. The confined nature of the space – note the emphasis on the word "narrow", repeated

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[101] "Closeness and distance: what is the meaning of the relationship between these two? From the standpoint of human relationships it means the rhythm which the alternation of telling and not telling creates. Today we tell everything, we tell it to someone, to anyone, no matter to whom, and yet we have never really told anything; other people are so close to us that their closeness transforms what we have to give them of ourselves; yet they are so far from us that everything becomes lost on the way from us to them." See Lukacs; John T. Sanders, Katie Terezakis (eds.), *Soul and Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p.106. Benfey discusses Dickinson in relation to Lukacs' notion of solitude in *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others*, pp.50-51.

[102] See Hewitt:"Those for whom issues of social mediation are paramount repeatedly turn to letter-writing as both practice and theoretical model for conceiving of social reciprocity." *Correspondence in American Literature*, p.3.

[103] Johnson (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, pp.314-315.

twice in the second stanza – is contrasted with the sense of freedom opened out by the reading the letter and coming into contact with another person. Yet even this exhilarating apprehension of the "infinite" is tempered by the bittersweet tone of the concluding lines, which perhaps register a sense that unmediated communication is impossible.

Dickinson's perceptive reflections on writing and privacy have been examined in the context of her own reclusiveness. I would not wish to force any autobiographical reading of Melville's own model of social reciprocity here, although we can see in his correspondence a gradual progress towards the position he adopts in his stories. In his early letters to Hawthorne Melville lurches between intimacy and detachment: in one note, he fantasises about a shared plane of experience that is very close to the sort of sympathetic identification to which he would later object. "Your letter was handed to me last night [...] I felt pantheistic then – your heart beat in my ribs and mine in yours, and both in God's," he writes. "Ineffable socialities are in me. [...] Whence come you, 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." But he also effects a sudden withdrawal: "Don't write a word about [*Moby-Dick*]. That would be robbing me of my miserly delight [...] This is a long letter, but you are not at all bound to answer it." He goes on append two, tonally very different post-scripts:

> 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 riband I should write a thousand – a million – a 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*.
>
> P.P.S. Don't think that by writing me a letter, you shall always be bored with an immediate reply to it – and keep both of us delving over a writing-desk eternally. No such

> thing! I sh'n't always answer your letters, and you may do just as you please.[104]

The first post-script imagines a magnetic connection that dissolves discrete individuality into oneness (with the benefit of avoiding any awkward conversations about whose is the bigger "magnet"), while the second emphasises detachment. Correspondence, in these early letters, is conceived either as a method by which two people are brought into a radically close – perhaps even an eroticised – connection, or a form of contact that reveals only the absence of the other. Either total communication, or no communication at all.

The latter option, as we have seen, is manifested in *Pierre*, in which correspondence is used to emphasise the thick materiality of language and the impossibility of perfect communication between two people. But in the Agatha exchange Melville comes to strike a balance between the two extremes.[105] He acknowledges Hawthorne's fundamental otherness; that he will have his own views on the material that will not be closed off by Melville's rendition of the tale

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[104] Melville, *Correspondence*, pp.212-214. Emerson's letters, particularly those to fellow Transcendentalists such as Margaret Fuller, display a strikingly similar oscillation between the sympathetic fantasy and an emphasis on the inviolable self. In his essay "Friendship" Emerson encapsulates his vacillating view of social life in the form of a template for a letter: "Dear friend – if I was sure of thee, sure of my capacity, sure to match my mood with thine, I should never think again of trifles in relation to my comings and goings. I am not very wise; my moods are quite attainable, and I respect thy genius; it is to me as yet unfathomed; yet dare I not presume in thee a perfect intelligence of me, and so thou art to me a delicious torment. Thine ever, or never." (*Essays and Lectures*, pp.345.) Emerson here restates his belief in the inscrutable nature of human beings, but also avers that his own moods "are quite attainable", hinting that while the epistemological gap is profound it might easily be overcome, much as the sympathetic fantasy posits that self and other can be joined. He signs off with a formulation that lurches suddenly from fraternity ("thine ever") to callousness (thine "never"), and which resembles a grammatically compressed form of Melville's juxtaposed postscripts. For a useful discussion of Emerson's correspondence with Fuller and what it reveals of his philosophy, see Hewitt, *Correspondence in American Literature*, pp.52-83. I discuss Emerson's social scepticism in my concluding chapter.

[105] In the interim – which coincided with the composition of *Pierre* – the correspondence between Melville and Hawthorne dwindled, and, though I would not wish to advance any autobiographical explanations for the apparent cooling of the relationship, one might draw a connection with the scepticism displayed in that novel, its radical doubt that the other's words are even intelligible (as we saw in the previous chapter, Melville uses the epistolary form in *Pierre* to stress the obdurate, frustrating quality of language).

("you must of course be your own judge – I but submit the matter to you – I don't decide"). And yet he also, clearly, wishes to renew and nourish the friendship: not through the sort of pantheistic communion he imagined before, but in a rather more careful, tactful manner. He wants Hawthorne to engage with the tale, but knows that he cannot prescribe too heavily the terms of that engagement ("turn this over in your mind and see if it is right. If not – make it so yourself"), and strikes the sort of tentative, exploratory tone that was to characterise his later stories.

In his letters, then, we see Melville slowly coming to a realisation that contact with the other must inevitably be partial, imperfect, reliant on the active engagement of each participant: words and gestures, if unheeded, are rendered dead letters. In the same way, fiction depends on establishing, at least for a moment, an affective connection between reader and writer. Like his letters to Hawthorne, Melville's stories both hold open the promise of such a relationship and, at the same time, betray his doubt that he and his audience are ever really on the same page.

Conclusion:

On Reading Sceptically

> It's sad, people say, to be deceived. Not at all. It's far sadder not to be deceived. Human affairs are so complex and obscure that nothing can be known about them for certain.[1]
>
> - Erasmus

By reading Melville's fictions alongside philosophical texts, I have sought to demonstrate that his engagement with the problem of scepticism influenced his handling of literary form. In *Mardi*, as we saw in chapter one, Melville enacts two very different responses to doubt, lending his novel an odd, bipartite structure. After this point Melville seems to accept that scepticism is in some sense inescapable. *Moby-Dick*'s Romantic irony is of a part with Ishmael's investigations into how we might maintain our curiosity about the world – to interact with it; to make claims concerning it – in the face of uncertainty. *Pierre* forsakes the flexible, negatively capable epistemology of its predecessor to investigate a more radical form of scepticism, and Melville's prose becomes an obscuring skein. In *The Piazza Tales*, Melville moves on to consider the ethical consequences of other-minds scepticism, dramatising a series of encounters that bring into focus issues of knowledge and doubt in the interpersonal space.

As well as seeking to offer a fresh perspective on the ideas that animate Melville's work, and a new account of the shape of his career, I have argued that his oeuvre constitutes an original contribution to the sceptical tradition. Melville

[1] Quoted in Keyner (ed.), *Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy: A Casebook*, p.27.

was influenced by the sceptics, as is evidenced by his precise and thoughtful references to Pyrrho, Descartes, Berkeley, and Kant. But his work can also be seen to foreshadow developments in philosophy that came after: *Moby-Dick*'s explorations of etymology bring Melville close to Wittgenstein and Cavell, while the epiphanic encounters of the short stories carry a proleptic echo of the Levinasian notion of otherness. Melville's significance, in treating these ideas through fictive forms, is that he shows us what is at stake in the sceptical debate. He weaves what John Gibson has called "patterns of salience, value, and significance", investigating how scepticism finds expression in particular regions of human experience.

Mardi reveals that, carried to extremes, the classic responses to scepticism tend to issue in either a self-isolating pursuit of a higher "Truth" or a pallid, anti-intellectual acceptance of everyday common sense. To accept too readily the sceptical premise, on the other hand, is to step upon the Escher staircase of radical doubt; and, as can be seen in the case of Pierre Glendinning, that way madness lies. But in *Moby-Dick* and *The Piazza Tales*, Melville finds a balance between certainty and unrestrained doubt: both works are imbued with what Emily Dickinson called "Wonder" – that is, the condition of "Not precisely knowing/And not precisely knowing not".[2] In these works scepticism becomes not so much an existential threat as a pragmatic mode of interpretation, a way of comporting oneself within uncertainty. As the short stories make clear, there may even be something morally redemptive in this sort of sceptical stance.

As we have seen, Melville does not simply allude to sceptical philosophers or dramatise epistemological dialogues; rather, his novels enact sceptical and anti-sceptical ideas through their literary strategies. One consequence of this is that the

[2] Johnson (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p.577.

reader is implicated in the play of doubt the narratives delineate: in *Pierre* the thick, clotted prose mires us in ambiguity; in "Benito Cereno" we cleave to the perspective of Captain Delano as he wanders the mysterious slave ship, given only hints as to the truth of the mutiny. In Melville, to modify Emerson's phrase, the vast shadow of doubt includes the reader also. With this in mind, it might be helpful to conclude by examining how literary critics have responded to the uncertainty that accompanies the reading of the Melvillean text. Might Melville's scepticism have anything useful to tell us about the act of literary criticism itself?

In *The Confidence-Man* (1857), the last novel he published before turning to the bleak and chastened poetry of his later years, Melville thematises issues of knowledge and interpretation in ways that seem uncannily to anticipate modern scholarly arguments over the book. The action, such as it is, takes place on board the *Fidèle*, a steamboat carrying passengers up and down the Mississippi. Melville depicts the interactions between the passengers and a number of apparent con artists – perhaps avatars of a single, shapeshifting entity – who attempt to win the trust of their interlocutors, usually as a preliminary to asking them for money.

As this minimal, somewhat vague precis might suggest, *The Confidence-Man* repeats Melville's tactic of placing the reader in a position analogous to its bewildered protagonists. Characters come and go, and then reappear in a slightly different guise. Scenes are strung together along the most tenuous of narrative threads. Moreover, as John Wenke observes, the detached, third-person narrator is in the habit of actively "victimizing the reader" by obscuring "the motives, the psyche, and the essential identity of the Confidence Man". In seeking to explain Melville's approach Wenke goes so far as to compare the book to the writings of

Gadamer, Bakhtin, and Derrida, on the basis of its "preoccupation with hermeneutics, dialogic play and logocentric displacement".[3]

For all the poststructuralist namedropping, Wenke essentially restates a view advanced by the novel's earliest, exasperated reviewers[4] – namely, that to look for "meaning" in such a work is to go hunting for snarks. It seems to me, however, that there is another way of looking at *The Confidence-Man*: rather than being completely unknowable, it is, like *Moby-Dick* and *The Piazza Tales* before it, a book about coming to terms with the unknown. In doing so, it invites us as readers to reflect on how we might grapple with the uncertainties that attend literary interpretation.

Confidence and Charity

Much of *The Confidence-Man*'s peculiar difficulty stems from the narrator's unwillingness to offer motive or explanation for the protagonists' behaviour.[5] It is a disconcerting device, and, in the first of three authorial interpolations in the text, Melville sets about justifying himself to the reader: "It might be thought that he, who, in view of its inconsistencies, says of human nature the same that, in view of its contrasts, is said of divine nature, that it is past finding out, thereby evinces a

[3] Wenke, *Melville's Muse*, pp.193, 199.

[4] As one unimpressed contemporary critic put it, "a novel it is not, unless a novel means forty-five conversations [...] conducted by personages who might pass for the errata of creation, and so resembling the dialogues of Plato to be undoubted Greek to ordinary men". See Hershel Parker, Mark Niemeyer (eds.), "Contemporary Reviews", in Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (New York: Norton, 1971), p.273.

[5] Perhaps the closest point of comparison in this regard would be an experimental novel like Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1972), in which the author deliberately refuses to reach beyond the surface of its characters' behaviour in explanation or censure. I think also of Virginia Woolf, whose scepticism "denies her access to the minds of her own characters". The phrase is Wollaeger's. See *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*, p.123.

better appreciation of it than he who, by always representing it in a clear light, leaves it to be inferred that he clearly knows all about it" (pp.90-91).

This vexingly circuitous apologia, along with the novel's prevailing atmosphere of drift and uncertainty, would seem to suggest that Melville is taking a retrograde step, back to the darker scepticism of *Pierre*. Indeed, *The Confidence-Man* shares with the earlier text a preoccupation with costume and surface. When the "Cosmopolitan", a sort of Ur-trickster, arrives on the *Fidèle* around halfway through the novel, the best part of a chapter is devoted to describing his dress: "The stranger sported a vesture barred with various hues, that of the cochineal predominating, in style participating of a Highland plaid, Emir's robe, and French blouse..." (p.175). Melville even revisits *Pierre*'s thought that there is a nothingness at the heart of the human figure, via a series of paranoid aperçus: "[A] metaphysical lover of our species [might] doubt whether the human form be, in all cases, conclusive evidence of humanity, whether, sometimes, it may not be a kind of unpledged and indifferent tabernacle" (p.77); "The data which life furnishes, towards forming a true estimate of any human being, [is] insufficient" (p.253); "You can conclude nothing absolute from the human form" (p.300).

If we look closer, however, I think we can see that the novel does not merely look back to the radical scepticism of *Pierre* but, more pertinently, recapitulates the ethical form of the short stories, staging narrative situations that "frame relations of provocation, of call and response, that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text". The beginning of the novel sees a deaf mute board the *Fidèle*, a character Melville calls simply "the stranger". The man proceeds to trace epigrams on a slate – "charity thinketh no evil; "charity suffereth long, and is kind" – holding them aloft for passengers to read, but he is greeted with derision and, soon enough, hostility: "He with the slate continued moving slowly up and

down, not without causing some stares to change into jeers, and some jeers into pushes, and some pushes into punches" (p.4).

There is a hint of Bartleby in this pathetic, ill-used figure;[6] just as the dehumanising treatment of Black Guinea, a disabled beggar, recalls the racism anatomised in "Benito Cereno". As Guinea shuffles across the deck, performing tricks in return for coins, an audience gathers round: he is compared to a "black steer" a "Newfoundland Dog", a "curious object" (pp.10-11). As Gustaaf Von Cramphout has put it, these characters are made into "an alien spectacle" by those who would "deny their humanity",[7] much as the strangers of Melville's short stories are subjected to the sympathetic gaze.

The rough treatment doled out to the mute and Black Guinea would seem to originate not so much in malign sympathy, however, but in a deep-rooted *suspicion* of "strangers, utter strangers" (p.25).[8] The mute, for example, despite his aspect of "innocence", is regarded as a potential fraudster or "escaped convict" (p.6). Guinea, meanwhile, is subject to accusations that his "deformity [is] a sham" (p.12), that he is "a sort of black Jeremy Diddler" (p.19). The reference shows that Melville had in mind a particular social phenomenon: Diddler was a character in James Kenney's play "Raising the Wind (1803), and lent his name to the practice of diddling, or swindling, that became prevalent in the antebellum period.[9] In a

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[6] Like Bartleby, whom the lawyer initially thinks is "moon-struck" (or stupid), the mute is described by a fellow passenger as a "moon-calf" (p.6).

[7] Cromphout, "The Confidence-Man: Melville and the Problem of Others", *Studies in American Fiction*, 21:1 (1993: Spring) p.41. I am in agreement with Cromphout that charity in the novel is conceived as a way of maintaining one's moral or epistemological compass in the wake of scepticism.

[8] At first glance suspicion and sympathy would seem to have little in common, but philosophically they are two sides of the same coin: both derive from a narrow conception of the ideal human relationship as one based on knowledge. Sympathy responds to the stranger by incorporating her into a subjective interpretation, sloughing off all that is "other"; the suspicious person rejects the stranger completely, on the basis that what is unknown poses a threat. This may account for the similarities between the bachelors of the short stories and the diffident passengers of the *Fidèle*.

[9] In 1843 Poe wrote an essay, "Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences", which reflected on the art of diddling in response to gossip about actual "diddles". Melville may

typical "diddle", a gentleman would be approached by a well-dressed stranger purporting to be an old acquaintance in need of financial assistance.[10] As Lisa Long writes, this sort of encounter, as with those examined in *The Piazza Tales*, was enabled by the particular urban environment of antebellum America: "The emergence of confidence men at mid-century resulted from an increasingly uncertain social system where, it was feared, men and women could pretend to a social status they did not hold."[11]

To be sure, Melville's novel explores the risk of being diddled, and we suspect, for instance, that the sums donated by passengers to the "Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum" (pp.43, 58) may end up somewhere other than with their intended recipients. But the novel is more than just an attack on the credulous who fall prey to fraudsters. In 1849 Evert Duyckinck wrote an editorial in the *Literary World*, in which he discussed recent reports of diddling, and argued that "it is not the worst thing that can be said for a country that it gives birth to a confidence man", in that the success of such swindles at least showed that Americans were not so cold hearted as to reject strangers out of hand.[12] Similarly,

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be alluding to Poe when he describes a "haggard, inspired sort of man" who peddles a "rhapsodical tract" around the steamer (p.250).

[10] One such incident was reported by the *New York Herald* in July 1849: "For the last few months, a man has been traveling about the city, known as the 'Confidence Man'; that is, he would go up to a perfect stranger on the street, and, being a man of genteel appearance, would easily command an interview. [...] He would say, after some little conversation, 'have you confidence in me to trust me with your watch until tomorrow?'; the stranger, at this novel request, supposing him to be some old acquaintance, not at the moment recollected, allows him to take the watch, thus placing 'confidence in the honesty of the stranger.'" Ibid., pp.ix-x.

[11] Lisa Long, *Rehabilitating Bodies*, p.31. The accusation that Black Guinea is faking his injury also reflects cultural trends. Long has identified how the notion of malingering became a "cultural trope" in mid-century America, as people found it easier to accuse those purportedly in pain of faking it than to take steps to ameliorate their suffering. Silas Weir Mitchell, who was later to invent the "rest cure" for supposedly hysterical women, was wont to accuse soldiers of "feign[ing] illness out of laziness or greed", and published an article on the evils of malingering. One might draw a connection with the sceptical discourse on "pain behaviour"; that is, the problem of how to respond to someone evincing symptoms of pain when knowledge of their "true" feelings is unavailable. Cavell discusses this issue with reference to Wittgenstein in *The Claim of Reason*, pp.37-48.

[12] See Tony Tanner, "Introduction", in *The Confidence Man*, p.xii.

in Melville's novel, it does not seem the worst thing to be taken in by a deception, when the alternative might involve hounding a disabled black man seeking alms for fear he is a "white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy" (p.15).

With this in mind, consider the character Mark Winsome, a casuistical "mystic" who resembles a "kind of cross between a Yankee peddlar and a Tartar priest" (p.250), and who is generally agreed to be an unflattering portrait of Emerson. Winsome, like his original, is troubled by doubt – "Who are you? Who am I? Nobody knows who anybody is" – which prompts a desire for truth: he strikes a posture of "condescending appropriativeness, as of one who, out of devotion to knowledge, disdains not to appropriate the last crumb of it, even from a pauper's board". When such knowledge is unavailable he proves profoundly distrustful of others. He sits "purely and coldly radiant as a prism", advising the Cosmopolitan that he should avoid the other passengers for fear that there is a "Mississippi operator, an equivocal character" among them (pp.251-260).[13]

In response to this sort of unseemly social manner Melville places normative emphasis on the concept of "charity". "Charity" appears in each of the mute's scrawled epigrams in the first chapter: as he rubs out and re-writes the other words "'charity', as originally traced, remained throughout uneffaced, not unlike the left-hand numeral of a printed date, otherwise left for convenience in blank" (p.3). Similarly, through all of the conversations that take place in the novel "charity" is a

[13] Melville's characterisation plays on the contradictions that mark Emerson's essays, particularly those collected in the "First Series" of 1841. In "Self-Reliance" he avers that "man is [...] clapped into jail by his consciousness", and in "Friendship", that "I cannot make your consciousness tantamount to mine", that human relationships are marked by an "infinite remoteness". But elsewhere in "Self-Reliance" he writes that "the soul is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them". In "History" he remarks that there is "one mind common to all men", and that "we two meet in a perception, that our two souls are tinged with the same hue, and do as it were run into one". (*Essays and Lectures*, pp.249,261,269,344.) The impression is that Emerson, unlike Melville, never really follows through the darker implications of his individualistic philosophy: in Charles Feidelson's words, he is forever "beat[ing] a hasty retreat into a transcendent unity". See *Symbolism in American Literature*, p.122.

constant, repeatedly proffered as a humane alternative to the distrust that mars social life on board the steamboat. As Walter Berthoff has put it, "the command to charity so remarkably erected [by the mute] stands over the whole book and carries with it a positive force".[14]

While Berthoff is right to notice an element of Pauline "command" in the mute's injunctions, "charity" as it is manifested in the novel comes to mean not so much a Biblical code of conduct – or indeed, a literal monetary donation such as those prised from the wallets of the steamboat's passengers – as a sort of social ethos or sensibility, a way of interacting with and interpreting the inscrutable other: in chapter three charity is invoked as a way of "judging [one's] character" (p.16). The Cosmopolitan's comments on charity might shed some light here: "Charity would beget toleration, you know, which is a kind of implied permitting, and in effect a kind of countenancing: and that which is countenanced is thus far furthered" (p.100). Charity in this sense denotes at once the granting of space to the other (in its aspects of "toleration" and "permitting") and an altruistic engagement: through charity the other's interests are both "countenanced" and "furthered". It entails neither total faith nor total suspicion, and in this suggests a way of navigating an uncertain social landscape, much like the idea of recognition we found exemplified in the short stories, with its balance between proximity and duality.

In exploring "charity" dialogically *The Confidence-Man* formalises the ethical approach endorsed in *The Piazza Tales*. But Melville goes a step beyond the shorter fiction in enacting the idea of "charity" in his prose. Where the likes of "The Piazza" and "Bartleby" depicted the inner lives of the bachelor-protagonists in order to dramatise an ethical epiphany, in his final novel Melville does not purport

[14] Berthoff, "Herman Melville: The Confidence-Man", in Henning Cohen (ed.), *Landmarks of American Writing* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), pp.131-132.

to have privileged access to his characters' minds. The narrator draws on the principle of charity in his characterisation, unwilling to exert any authorial force over the passengers of the *Fidèle*. They seem continually to surprise him, and he can only guess at their wants and needs. One consequence of this is that the reader must hack through thickets of speculative grammatical construction: "Meditation over kindness received *seemed* to have softened him something, too, *it may be, beyond what, might, perhaps*, have been looked for…" (p.30); "*Possibly* her attention *might have recently been* turned..." (pp.56-57, my emphases).

Here, once again, Melville's correspondence provides us with a clue as to his authorial strategy. Recall that in offering the Agatha story to Hawthorne, Melville advised that "*charity should be allowed a liberal play* [...] I do not suppose that [Robertson's] desertion of his wife was a premeditated thing [...] No. He was a weak man, and his temptations ('tho we know little of them), were strong." Charity, here, designates not only a determination to avoid any outright condemnation of Robertson's behaviour, but also a sensitivity or tact that derives from an awareness of epistemological limit: note Melville's reluctance to impute any motive to Robertson, his careful, hedged, tentative appraisal of his actions ("we know little"; "I do not suppose"; "it would perhaps"). Charity in this sense points us to a mode of interpretative comportment.

Scepticism and Criticism

Here I would like to bring in Peter J. Bellis' oft-cited essay "Melville's *Confidence-Man*: An Uncharitable Interpretation", which challenges what Bellis calls "the standard line" of scholarship on the text. Bellis, too, discusses the novel in relation to charity, but he proceeds from the Augustinian concept of a charity based on "unity", drawing on Augustine's comments on Biblical study in *On Christian*

Doctrine: "What is read should be subjected to diligent scrutiny until an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity is produced." For Bellis, charity denotes a critical method by which a text's "meaning" is tendentiously reconstructed, and Melville's treatment of charity might be construed as a tacit warning against such an approach.[15]

Bellis accuses critics of *The Confidence-Man* as "[exemplifying] the scholarly desire to 'recover' [its] formal and/or thematic unity, even if this means reshaping it in the image of one's own interpretive ideal". The received view of the novel, laid out by Elizabeth Foster in the early 1950s and later taken up by Hershel Parker and others, is that the confidence men are "avatars of a single ubiquitous figure". Reading the novel in such a way allows the critic to "'discover' not only a central character and narrative thread but also a primary theme – usually, the confrontation between good and evil – and often a single, unequivocal lesson – that evil is to be exposed and resisted whenever it appears". All this despite the fact that "Melville's dialogues reveal the unreliability of any possible 'evidence' of identity, whether physical or verbal". The attempt to recover such evidence through this kind of reading involves a degree of "blindness", and an unwillingness to accept that Melville's narrative invites a "seemingly infinite interpretive regress".[16]

Bellis' commentary on previous scholarship can be acute. He shows, for example, how the embedded tale "The Metaphysics of Indian hating" has been taken as the "crux of the book" because it implies a moral absolutism that enables the "good versus evil" interpretation, despite the fact that it is recounted by a character whose own rhetorical intentions are far from clear.[17] However, in

[15] Bellis, "Melville's *Confidence-Man*: An Uncharitable Interpretation", in *American Literature*, Vol.59, No.4, (Dec. 1987), 548-569, pp.548-549.
[16] Ibid., pp.549-551, 568.
[17] Ibid., pp.551-557.

insisting on the radical instability of the text, its "decentred" nature, I feel Bellis goes too far in the other direction: rather than imposing a structure, he states that the text lacks structure altogether.

What I find particularly interesting about the critical argument Bellis constructs in his essay is that it would seem to re-enact the novel's own dramatisation of confidence and distrust. Anthony Larson has commented on how often "belief, confidence, faith, fidelity, credit, credibility and credulity are deployed in an attempt to explain a text which itself takes those concepts as its subject",[18] and Bellis' article is a good example: he accuses critics who appeal to the "standard" reading as being "gullible", like the rubes deceived by the antics on board the *Fidèle*. But as we have seen, there are worse things than being deceived. Perhaps, in emphasizing the impenetrable semiotics of the text, Bellis himself resembles Mark Winsome: so keen to avoid being "taken in" by Melville's slippery prose that he ends up coolly resistant to the novel's subtler themes and effects.

Bellis writes that "*the search for interpretive certainty* and stability has been one of Melville's themes (and targets) all along" (my emphasis).[19] The thrust of his argument is that where certainty is absent – as it undoubtedly is in *The Confidence-Man* – one can make only negative judgements, that is, point out what we cannot know of the text and contest any reading that would pretend otherwise (Bellis offers no explanation as to why Melville might have chosen, at this late stage of his career, to write in this new way). And this view is common to a strand of criticism on the novel – often informed by the hermeneutic "suspicion" of poststructuralist theory – that includes Wenke and Peggy Kamuf, who writes in her critique that "credit or belief [carries over] from the thematic register of the text to the register

[18] Larson, "On the Uses and Abuses of Literature for Life: Falseness and the Literary Critic", in Phillipe Romanski, Aissatu Sy-Wonyu (eds.), *Trompe l'oeil: Imitation and Falsification* (Rouen: Rouen University Publications, 2002), p.83.
[19] Op cit., p.568.

of reading that, unable to make present the value of its assertions, has likewise to proceed on credit", rendering any critical judgement dubious.[20]

The implication of this kind of argument is that Melville's other, less ostensibly "difficult" texts – i.e. those that do not offer a self-reflexive discourse on credulity, suspicion, credibility and so on – contain a central "truth" that the conscientious reader might be confident of revealing. But, as I have sought to demonstrate in this thesis, Melville's work teaches us that "certainty" – in life, as in literature – is *always* elusive. The critic, like Ishmael surveying the whale's wrinkled brow, or the attorney conversing with Bartleby, cannot ever know absolutely that her claims have hit the mark. That does not render criticism futile; it merely teaches us that a measure of self-awareness should be integral to the enterprise.

It seems to me that, just as Melville offers a "charitable" depiction of his protagonists in *The Confidence-Man* – gesturing tentatively towards their thoughts and feelings while refusing to impose restrictive characterisational models – so we might offer a "charitable" reading of his text that looks to tease out pertinent themes and motifs without claiming to have hit upon the definitive, unified interpretation. Melville once complained, in *White-Jacket*, about the rapaciousness of "literary men", those "commentators" who, "settling on [Shakespeare's] sacred text like locusts, devour it clean up, leaving never a dot over an I";[21] like Bellis, he was concerned that heavy-handed readings could obscure the very work they purport to illuminate (I may, of course, have made this mistake in my own reading of the text, in placing undue emphasis on the role of charity). And yet the obverse – critical detachment stemming from the conviction that the text is a play of floating signifiers – is challenged by Melville's self-reflexive statement in *The Confidence-*

[20] Kamuf, *The Division of Literature: Or, the University in Deconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.172.
[21] Melville, *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*, p.523.

Man that "fiction […] should present another world, and yet one to which *we feel the tie*" (p.244, my emphasis). His ideal form of reading lies in a form of response to the text that does not "devour it" in the urge for completeness.

At this point I am, no doubt, getting dangerously close to letting Melville set the terms of analysis for his own work. Nevertheless, his views as I have represented them here bear some interesting parallels with the "ethical" criticism derived from the work of Levinas and Cavell, which has become increasingly influential in twenty-first century literary studies.[22] As we saw in the last chapter, the notion of ethics advanced by these thinkers, in their different ways, has to do with the "acknowledgement" or "recognition" of that which is other or unknowable, and they each carry this thought into their writings on aesthetics. Hence Cavell's detailed and admiring readings of those literary and cinematic genres he sees as acknowledging the "truth" of scepticism, from Shakespearean theatre to the sophisticated comedy films produced in Hollywood's golden age. Likewise, Levinas' preference is for works, such as Grossman's *Life and Fate*, that struggle to represent alterity, and which effect a "commerce with the obscure": "An artist – even a painter, even a musician – tells. He tells of the ineffable […] Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of night, an invasion of shadow."[23]

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[22] I think here of recent, stimulating essay collections such as Donald Wehrs and Stephen Haney's *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature*, and Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie's *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*. See, for example, "'Is 'Us' Me?' Cultural Studies and the Universality of Aesthetic Judgements", in which R.M. Berry explores how Cavell's work might help us to make sense of the relationship between form and content in an experimental fiction such as Michael Martone's *The Blue Guide to Indiana* (Eldridge, Rhie [eds.], *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism* [London: Continuum, 2011]), or N.S. Boone's "Escaping Emersonian Egicentrism: Poe's Moral Tales of the Haunting Other", which offers a new perspective on Poe's more oblique tales by drawing on the Levinasian conception of alterity (in Wehrs, Haney [eds.], *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature*). I stand apart from these critics in many respects – mine is not a "Levinasian" or "Cavellian" reading of Melville – but I share their desire to move beyond New Historicist and anti-humanist frameworks in order to restore critical focus to the text itself.

[23] "Reality and its Shadow", in *The Levinas Reader*, p.132.

But despite focusing on the obscure or ineffable dimensions of art they do not shirk the critical commitment to interpretation and argument. In terms reminiscent of Melville's description of locust-like Shakespeare scholars, Levinas writes in "Reality and its Shadow" that "alongside of difficult art, criticism seems to lead a parasitic existence", and argues that the proper alternative is neither hermeneutic suspicion nor aesthetic idolatry but rather, a modest "intervention of the understanding", which is necessary for "integrating the inhumanity of art into human life and into the mind".[24] Similarly, Cavell proceeds from the sceptical idea that the text is inherently ambiguous, like the Gestalt figure of the "duck-rabbit" discussed by Wittgenstein (see Figure 7): it follows that "there must be conceived to be competing interpretations possible, where 'must' is a term not of etiquette but of (what Wittgenstein calls) grammar, something like logic". And yet he affirms the need to advance and defend one's own perspective: "Reading in, going too far, is a risk inherent in the business of reading, and venial with comparison with not going far enough."[25]

In some respects the critical sensibility I am sketching out here bears comparison to the hermeneutic procedure adumbrated by E.D. Hirsch Jr. in his influential *Validity in Interpretation*, which places an emphasis on the intentions of the author while insisting on the impossibility of reconstructing those intentions with absolute accuracy: "Since genuine certainty in interpretation is impossible," Hirsch writes, "the aim of [literary criticism] must be to reach a consensus, on the basis of what is known, that correct understanding has *probably* been achieved."[26]

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[24] Ibid., pp.130-131.
[25] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.36.
[26] E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), p.17. See also Michael Fischer's account of the Cavellian position, which illustrates the parallels with Hirsch's view: "We cannot be absolutely certain about the meaning of a literary work (or a remark by a friend, a smile, and so on) [but] commitment to certainty is out of place in literary criticism and everyday life, where, as finite, limited creatures, we

The difficulty of interpretation lies not simply in reconstructing the author's meaning but in appreciating that certainty is unattainable – we must learn to live with that "probably".

Hirsch challenges what he calls the "dogma of historical skepticism" which, out of commitment to unrealistic epistemological standards, would give up on the search for determinate meaning: this constitutes an "abject intellectual surrender, [an] abandonment of responsibility".[27] Interestingly, he contests this form of "skepticism" or "solipsism" with those "more limited and reasonable doubts that any interpreter might entertain in a particular case with respect to understanding a particular complex of verbal meanings from the past". Hirsch seems to regard this "proper" or "healthy skepticism" as if it were a matter of mere common sense or decorum.[28] But, as we have seen in this thesis, the modest or flexible form of doubt that retains a commitment to knowledge has a distinguished philosophical pedigree that encompasses the mitigated scepticism of Hume, the interpretative ethics of Levinas and Cavell, and – if I read his intentions aright – the novels of Herman Melville.

The Critic at Napoleon's Tomb

Of course, one problem for critics who insist on the impossibility of certainty is that there is no cast-iron guarantee that their own arguments are valid. This may lead to a fear that they are being somehow misled by the work, or duped by the artist into devoting attention to an inferior piece. Something like this fear is, I think, evident in Bellis' article on *The Confidence-Man*: faced with Melville's forbiddingly

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have to be content with half-truths, probabilities, inferences, educated guesses, and so on". *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.140.
[27] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, pp.42,168.
[28] Ibid., p.42, 117.

elusive narrative, he refrains from offering any substantive critical judgement, concerned that he will be compelled into error like the victims of the metamorphosing shills.

In this context it is interesting to consider Levinas' argument that "the most lucid writer finds himself in the world bewitched by its images [...] and nonetheless plays the fool".[29] A certain amount of risk is attendant upon any form of interpretation; that is the adventure of art. Also relevant here are Cavell's observations on critical responses to modernism. For Cavell, pieces such as John Cage's "4'33'" reveal that

> the possibility of fraudulence, and the experience of fraudulence, is endemic in the experience of contemporary music; that its full impact, even its immediate relevance, depends on a willingness to trust the object, knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed. I do not see how anyone who has experienced modern music can have avoided such experiences, and not just in the case of music. [...] Contemporary music is only the clearest case of something common to modernism as a whole, and modernism only makes explicit what has always been true of art.[30]

Cavell is contributing here to the somewhat tired debate over whether certain artworks count as such (are the paintings of Warhol and the installations of Duchamp merely elaborate practical jokes?). But as he makes clear, the concern that we might be in some way misled is inherent in any aesthetic experience. When it comes to artistic reception we are inevitably thrown *in medias res*; we may come no nearer to knowing what a book or painting is about even if the artist is there to

[29] "Reality and its Shadow", in *The Levinas Reader*, p.255.
[30] Cavell, "Music Discomposed", in *Must We Mean What We Say*, p.188.

Figure 6. Nathaniel Currier, "The Tomb and Shade of Napoleon, from a Natural Curiosity at Mt. Helena". Lithograph, undated

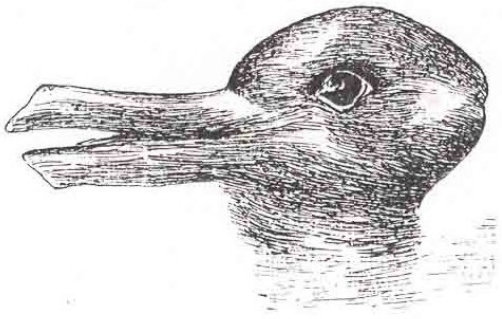

Figure 7. The "Duck-Rabbit"

explain it to us. But that does not render the critical effort useless: it merely compels the critic to the realisation that there is no indubitably "correct" response.

"How can fraudulent art be exposed?," asks Cavell. "Not, as in the case of a forgery or counterfeit, by comparing it with the genuine article, for there is no genuine article of the right kind."[31] That is, if we agree that there is no "Truth", then there is no Platonic ideal of art in light of which all lesser manifestations might be judged. These comments may serve to illuminate a scene in the final chapter of *The Confidence-Man*. Concerned about pick-pockets on board the *Fidèle*, an elderly man purchases a money belt from a young salesman, who also gives him a "Counterfeit Detector" in order that he might determine the authenticity of some of the bills he has been given: "Laying the Detector before him on the table, he then [...] placed the two bills opposite the Detector, upon which, the examination began, lasting some time, prosecuted with no small research and vigilance, the forefinger of the right hand proving of lawyer-like efficiency in tracing out and pointing the evidence, whichever way it might go."

The man's painstaking attention to the text might evince a "lawyer-like efficiency" but it also places him in a position analogous to the literary critic. His perplexity, as he seeks to verify the notes, reflects scholars' responses to *The Confidence-Man* itself: "'I don't know, I don't know', returned the old man, perplexed. 'There's so many marks of all sorts to go by, it makes it sort of uncertain'" (p.331). Ignoring the cosmopolitan's pleas to take the validity of the bills on trust, the miser persists:

> Stay now, here's another sign. It says that, if the bill is good, it must have in one corner, mixed in with the vignette, the figure of a goose, very small, indeed, all but microscopic; and, for added precaution, *like the figure of Napoleon outlined by the tree*, not observable, even if

[31] Ibid., p.189.

> magnified, unless the attention is drawn to it. Now, pore over it as I will, I can't see this goose. (p.332, my emphasis)

The allusion Melville is making here is to a *trompe l'oeil* engraving (I include one of many nineteenth-century variations in Figure 6) that depicts Napoleon's tomb, overlooked by trees whose boughs frame a portly silhouette of *le petit caporal*. But despite the fact that this image is also discussed by Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Irony*, the reference seems to have been overlooked in Melville criticism: perhaps, mindful of that veiled warning about engaging in a wild "goose" chase, scholars have been dissuaded from engaging too closely with the passage.

Stephen Prickett, discussing Kierkegaard's treatment of the engraving, has written that it "demands an interactive response from the viewer. A passive, unresponsive glance is not an option. It can only be 'understood' by seeing what is, at first glance, completely hidden. This, in other words, is a picture that demands 'conversation' with those who encounter it."[32] It seems to me that in tacitly aligning his own novel with this puzzling image Melville encourages readers to "interact" with it, and does not so much warn us that there is no intended or determinate meaning to his work as signal his awareness that there will, inevitably, be more than one way of reading it. That goes not just for *The Confidence-Man* but for his oeuvre as a whole, which continues to inspire fruitful critical debate and – at times – wildly different interpretations. To read with an awareness of doubt would be to argue for a particular way of looking at Melville's texts – as an engagement with scepticism, say – while admitting of possibility that they might be read differently. The critic who cleaves too inflexibly to one angle, or who denies the validity of all readings, is at risk of what we might call, after Wittgenstein, aspect blindness – or,

[32] Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism Versus Irony 1700-1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.262.

to take a cue from Melville's visual metaphor, a failure to see Napoleon for the trees.

At times in this thesis I will, no doubt, have overstated my case, or failed to shift my frame of reference to encompass other pertinent perspectives. Nevertheless, I have tried to strike the right balance between making assertions on the basis of the available evidence and doing justice to the elusive and ambiguous nature of these fictions. Melville's astonishingly rich and varied explorations of the comportments one might adopt in the face of uncertainty have led me to continually reflect on my own comportment towards his work. Or, to put it another way, in writing of Melville's scepticism, I have found it appropriate to remain a little bit sceptical.

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