Melville the Scrivener

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The world of events, which was never too kind to Herman Melville in his lifetime, has been extremely thoughtful of him in the past year or two, by way of celebrating the centennial of *Moby-Dick*. The whaler *Anglo Norse* harpooned a great white whale in the Pacific. The leader of a group of Ku Klux Klan floggers in North Carolina turned out to be a lightning rod salesman. Attorney General McGrath, booted out of his job by President Truman, said as his last words in office "God bless the President of the United States." On the flood of scholarly and critical works, omnibus volumes, radio programs, library displays, and centenary addresses, the Herman Melville Society (secretary Mr. Tyrus Hillway, Colorado State College of Education, Greeley, Colorado) floated happily, and a centennial edition of *Moby-Dick* was published with 315 pages of notes and apparatus, more than half as long as the novel itself, justifying the editor's boast "No other American novel has ever received such liberal annotation." In it Melville enthusiasts who had clapped for Tinker Bell as children could learn with some consternation that Sir James M. Barrie had modeled Captain Hook on Ahab. The author of a study of *Redburn* gave the present numbering of Melville's old home in Lansingburgh "for anyone who may wish to make a pilgrimage."

What are we to make of our Herman, "the phoenix of American letters" as Vincent puts it, "one of the foremost poetic imaginations in the world's literature" to Mr. Mason in England, although he was "never more than a literary amateur"? What indeed are we to make of our Melville industry, with its radar post at Yale manned by Stanley T. Williams, its up-to-date electrocut-
ing harpoons, its giant mechanized try-works, and its machinery for immediate canning or quick-freezing? We know so much about Melville, all of it patiently and marvelously won by our scholars: Sealts cataloguing Melville’s reading, Vincent turning up the whaling documents he used, Anderson tracking him through the South Seas, Freeman straightening out the Budds, and all the others; we know it despite the ledgers and documents burned, the manuscripts destroyed or used as scratch paper by Melville himself, the letters cut up for signatures, the inscribed pages torn from books, and the correspondence thrown out by Harpers (which saved the contracts).

Our Melville scholars utilize each others’ by-products in the most impressive of symbiotic relationships; the authors of all the current Melville studies acknowledge each others’ moment-to-moment cooperation and bow individually to each of their predecessors—all except Mr. Thompson, who crustily goes his own way, identifying all readings and interpretations not his own as misreadings and misinterpretations. The critics who have worked with Melville, whether mavericks like Edward Dahlberg and Charles Olson, who first gave us an insight into the importance of Shakespearian drama in fledging our phoenix, or respectable professors like the late F. O. Matthiessen and Newton Arvin, who gave us our first serious critical readings of Melville, have used this scholarship and have themselves contributed fact as well as insight to it.

What had first to be killed off was the biographical fallacy, brought to birth alongside the Melville revival by Raymond Weaver, that the early realistic novels are in large measure literal autobiography. Yet the most devoted exercise in exposing this fallacy, Gilman’s study of Redburn as a work of fictional imagination, is itself a mosaic of: “If young Pierre’s presence at his father’s sickbed had any foundation in life,” “Herman may have

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experienced at this time the kind of fantasy he describes in Redburn," "If the experience Melville records in his story "The Fiddler" is autobiographical," "if Melville, like Redburn," "Of Melville's further experiences in Liverpool, a few are identifiable with Redburn's and others may be safely assumed as true," "we must turn to allusions in his books for clues to his impressions."

We know so much about how Melville read the Bible, how he actually lived in the South Seas, what he took on a picnic in the Berkshires, but the man himself eludes us. We understand so little of what motivated this mysterious great writer that Gilman can explain, in all seriousness, that when Melville wrote Hawthorne in 1851 "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay," he meant "impassioned strictures on the evils of contemporary life"; Thompson can give us a Melville "sophomoric" and "of arrested development" writing Little Blue Books against God disguised as fictions; Mason can entirely miss the blunt sexual metaphor of "The Tartarus of Maids" and read it as "a bitter little descriptive essay on the indignity of mass labour"; Merrell Davis can believe that the avengers of Aleema in Mardi are in the book as a carry-over from its earlier conception as a romance.

THE PUBLICATION of Jay Leyda's Log, 900 pages of relatively unhewn biographical material, much of it new and striking or at least printed for the first time in full, gives us an unparalleled opportunity to study Melville for what he primarily was, a writer; to try to find out what being a writer in America was like or could be, how the artist lives, how he functions, and what he ultimately means. The people who write books and articles on Melville live almost without exception by teaching and write avocationally, and almost without exception they display an absolute incapacity to understand what writing profes-

sionally consists in and what it involves; they show an absolute unawareness that the area between writing for a living and writing for fun is at least as broad as the gap between the ranch and the dude ranch, or the brothel and the sorority house. "The literary career seems to me unreal," Arnold wrote in *Essays in Criticism*, "both in its essence and in the rewards one seeks from it, and therefore fatally marred by a secret absurdity." In his copy of the book, after thirteen years in the Customs House, Melville wrote alongside the passage "This is the finest verbal statement of a truth which everyone who thinks in these days must have felt." It is doubtful if many of our Melville authorities have felt or thought any such thing.

In the context of his society, Melville's outstanding characteristic would seem to be what Arvin in *Herman Melville* somewhat uncharitably calls "the tormented psychology of the decayed patrician." Impoverished and declassed, he could neither quite sustain the attitudes he had been trained in as a child nor substitute more satisfactory ones. He seems to have been a moderate Jacksonian Democrat all his life, drawn one way by loyalty to his brother Gansevoort, who was a fire-eating Tammany orator, and the other by the experience of his grandfather Thomas Melville, a hero of the Boston Tea Party, who was callously fired from his job as Inspector of the Port of Boston by Jackson in 1829, an act that, according to a writer of the time, more "deeply shocked the moral sense of the community" than any other operation of the Jacksonian spoils system. Melville's writings show consistent awareness of the social issues of his day: Yoomy several times cries out against slavery in *Mardi*; Redburn's vision of the starving family in Launcelott's Hey is as terrifying a protest against society's iniquity as anything in *Capital*; *The Confidence-Man* is a bitter portrait of commercial America; the early books take up such "good" causes as the abuses of the missionaries, the horrors of flogging, the right of immigration, etc. "There is no telling who does not own a stone in the Great Wall of China," Redburn muses, and the imagery of marriage used for the fellow-
ship between Queequeg and Ishmael, shocking as it is to our touchy age, seems to be the same mystic equalitarianism in another metaphor.

We have no way of knowing the intensity of Melville's concern with these matters. It comes as something of a surprise to note that the source for one of Melville's sharpest social criticisms—the story "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs," about the London poor fighting for leftovers from the Lord Mayor's banquet—is an amused and dispassionate record of the incident in his London journal, followed by the notation "A good thing might be made of this." If Melville is not above working up social outrage for literary effect, we are entitled to distrust the degree to which any of the attitudes of his protagonists speak for him.

On the other great topic that agitated his time, religion, Melville is in approximately the same shifty middle position. We know that his irreverent language in conversation disturbed several of his friends. The note in Hawthorne's journal during 1856 is probably our best authority on Melville's views: "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other." Melville's own journal notes, on the voyage to Smyrna the next year: "Heartily wish Niebuhr & Strauss to the dogs.—The deuce take their penetration & acumen." None of this evidence of serious questioning accords with Thompson's contention in Melville's Quarrel With God that all the books are conscious, cleverly-concealed tracts of heresy and blasphemy, but it probably accords no better with the view, omnipresent in our time, that "Billy Budd" is a final testament of Christian reconciliation. Melville's most elaborate discussion of the problem, Clarel, is a dramatic symposium where a number of conflicting viewpoints are posed and never reconciled, leaving us with Melville's own view as the sum and reduction of them all. Billy the Handsome Sailor is a Christian, if not a Christ, but this says little for his creator unless we are to assume that inventing Fedallah makes
Melville a Parsee. At least we know from the record that he turned down that lightning rod.

MELVILLE'S RECEPTION by the special class of American society called reviewers was neither so bad nor so unanimous as we have been led to believe. Reviewing *Omoo*, Greeley recognized Melville as "a born genius," while George Washington Peck was attacking the book for "the perfect want of heart everywhere manifested in it"; *The United States Catholic Magazine and Monthly Review* added that its voluptuousness was not unreasonable, since its author was a Protestant. At least one anonymous reviewer, perhaps William Gilmore Simms, found *Mardi* "wild, warm, and richly fanciful." When Evart Duyckinck attacked *Moby-Dick* idiotically in *The Literary World*, charging, among other things, that there was too much of Ahab, Hawthorne wrote him innocently that he thought the anonymous *Literary World* reviewer had missed the boat. Amid all the clamor of "bombast," "caricature," "clumsy as it is ineffectual," "sad stuff, dull and dreary, or ridiculous," "a monstrous bore," "maniacal," three or four reviewers praised *Moby-Dick* with qualifications, and at least one found it "a very superior" work, its final chapters "really beyond rivalry." If the *Boston Post* thought *Pierre* "perhaps the craziest fiction extant," and *The Albion* reported that "there is scarcely a page of dialogue that is not absurd to the last degree," we can at least see what they were talking about, and we can hardly quarrel with the *Anglo-American Magazine*'s description of the book as "a species of New York Werther," or Godey's *Lady's Book* 's nastily accurate parody of its style. An article on Melville by Fitz-James O'Brien in *Putnam's Monthly* 's Young Authors series praised every work but *Pierre*; and a review of *The Confidence-Man* in *The Literary Gazette* attacked it by comparison with *Mardi*, "that archipelago of lovely descriptions," and *Moby-Dick*, "ghostly and grand as the great gray sweep of the rolling sea."
The real problem was sales. After the moderate popular success achieved by *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville lost his audience with *Mardi* and never regained it, despite every effort. In America during the typical twenty-month period from August 1, 1876, to February 9, 1878, *Omoo* sold 33 copies, *Redburn* 35, *White-Jacket* 58, and *Moby-Dick* 66. From 1851 to 1887, *Moby-Dick* sold a total of 3,147 copies in this country. Melville wanted fame and adulation, but even more he wanted sales and needed money. After Harpers turned down *Typee* as obviously untrue and therefore "without real value," Melville's attitude toward publishers ranged from wary to contemptuous (Leon Howard, a partisan of publishers against thoughtless and greedy authors, several times reproves him for this). Melville's letter to John Murray (reprinted as an appendix to *Melville's Mardi*), the English publisher of his first books, are a typical author's: cocky, patronizing, placating, wheedling for money, suspicious that he is being cheated, and entirely unconcerned with the publisher's realities. He writes:

In the first place, however, let me say that though your statement touching my previous books do not, certainly, look very favorably for the profit side of your account; yet, would it be altogether inadmissible to suppose that by subsequent sales the balance-sheet may yet be made to wear a different aspect?—Certainly,—without reference to the possible future increased saleableness of at least some of those books, on their own independent grounds, the success, (in a business point of view) of any subsequent work of mine, published by you, would tend to react upon those previous books. And, of course, to your advantage.—I do not think that this view of the matter is unreasonable.

*Melville's Growth* to fame was a curiously organic process, but slow. For much of his lifetime he was the least-known serious writer in America. In 1856, less than five years after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, G. W. Curtis wrote him off

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with: "He has lost his prestige." So far as the record survives, he got only one mash note in his life, in 1857, from a Scottish girl named Eliza Gordon, who wrote:

I have for this many a day been wishing to see you "to hear you speak to breathe the same air in which you dwell" Are you the picture of him you so powerfully represent as the Master piece of all Gods works Jack Chase?

A paragraph in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* in 1886 said Melville was "generally supposed to be dead." A column in *The Boston Post* replied that "such a state of things would be impossible here in Boston," where they had no trouble distinguishing the quick from the dead. When Melville died in 1891, the *Tribune* obituary said: "He won considerable fame as an author by the publication of a book in 1847 entitled *Typee*... This was his best work, although he has since written a number of other stories, which were published more for private than public circulation." An obituary tribute in the *Times* was headed "The Late Henry Melville."

In England, Melville fared a little better. A review of *Typee* in *The Spectator* found it credible that an American sailor could have written the book, since the American lower classes were so much better educated than their English equivalents (Ah Gansevoorts!). Christopher North placed Melville with a review of *Redburn* in *Blackwood's*: "He will never have the power of a Cringle, or the sustained humor and vivacity of a Marryat, but he may do very well without aspiring to rival the masters of the art." If *The Athenaeum* found cause to dismiss *Moby-Dick* as "trash belonging to the worst school of Bedlam literature," *John Bull* reported that few books "contain as much true philosophy and as much genuine poetry" as this "extraordinary" book. If English reviewers tended to praise *The Confidence-Man* because it attacked "the money-getting spirit which appears to pervade every class of men in the States," or noted snidely that "few Americans write so powerfully as Mr. Melville, or in better Eng-
lish," the first serious appreciations of Melville's genius were by Englishmen, and a complete set of his works was in print in England as early as 1924, when only isolated volumes were available here.

The first active propagandist for Melville's work, and the man to whom all the volumes of Melville studies might fairly be dedicated, was William Clark Russell, a minor British sea novelist. In 1883, Russell tried to interest an American writer, A. A. Hayes, in doing a biography of Melville, "the greatest genius your country has produced." The next year he published an appreciation of Melville in an article entitled "Sea Stories" in *The Contemporary Review*, ranking him first among the "poets of the deep" and calling *Moby-Dick* his finest work, comparable to Blake and *The Ancient Mariner*. Russell wrote to assure Melville that "your reputation here is very great," corresponded with him, used every opportunity to praise his work as fit to rank with Elizabethan drama, dedicated *An Ocean Tragedy* to Melville, and in turn had *John Marr and Other Sailors* dedicated to him.

Shortly after Russell discovered Melville, two other Englishmen, James Billson and Robert Buchanan, took up the cause. Billson entered into correspondence as a fan, and Buchanan visited America and tried to locate Melville. He later wrote:

When I went to America, my very first inquiry was concerning Melville. . . There was some slight evidence that he was "alive," and I heard from Mr. E. C. Stedman, who seemed much astonished at my interest in the subject, that Melville was dwelling "somewhere in New York," having resolved, on account of the public neglect of his works, never to write another line. Conceive this Titan silenced, and the bookstalls flooded with the illustrated magazines!

In 1885 Buchanan published in *The Academy* a poem in praise of Whitman, with a section devoted to Melville, "the one great imaginative writer fit to stand shoulder to shoulder with Whitman on that continent." A few years later a Nova Scotian pro-
fessor named Archibald MacMechan entered into correspondence with Melville, and before Melville's death in 1891, Henry S. Salt had praised him in print, W. H. Hudson and Robert Louis Stevenson had become fans—the latter referring to him as "a howling cheese" in a letter—and a writer of boys books named Charles St. Johnstone had walked up to Russell one evening and asked him casually whether he had ever read "the noblest sea book ever written, called Moby-Dick."

When this generation of English supporters died or retired from the battle, a new generation took it up, and D. H. Lawrence, E. L. Grant-Watson, and Viola Meynell were writing in highest praise of Melville's work before American writers knew it existed; Barrie had paid it the sincerest form of flattery, while T. E. Lawrence wrote to a friend "Melville is a great man," and found his war poems "magnificent." The tradition of English praise has continued down to the present, with Auden's perceptive study in The Enchafèd Flood. Only Mason's apparent ignorance of any English appreciation besides the Lawrences, and John Freeman's volume in the English Men of Letters series in 1926 enables him to publish The Spirit Above the Dust "in the hope of re-directing the interest of English readers and critics back to the swarming complexities and relevances of Melville's unusual art."

The growth of fame in America came much more slowly, and to this day probably fewer Americans would agree with Henry A. Murray that Moby-Dick is "of the same high order as the Constitution of the United States and the scientific treatises of Willard Gibbs" than would agree with the summary of a contemporary reviewer in the Boston Post that Melville "has produced more and sadder trash than any other man of undoubted ability among us." In 1885, while Buchanan was complaining of his inability to meet the Titan, the New York correspondent of the Boston Literary World met "an old gentleman with white hair" in a bookshop, discovered him to be Herman Melville, and
wrote his paper fondly "Had he possessed as much literary skill as wild imagination his works might have secured for him a permanent place in American literature." In 1888, the year Russell dedicated his book to Melville as an avowal "of my hearty admiration of your genius," Charles F. Richardson wrote in the chapter "The Lesser Novelists" in his book American Literature that Melville "failed completely for lack of a firm thought and a steady hand." By 1900, when MacMechan had just published "The Best Sea Story Ever Written" about Moby-Dick in the Queen's Quarterly, Barrett Wendell's Literary History of America managed to say that Melville "began a career of literary promise, which never came to fruition."

The American revival began in 1919, the centenary of Melville's birth, with a two-part article by Frank Jewett Mather, Jr. in The Review, surveying all the works of "one of the greatest and most strangely neglected of American writers." The first full-length biography, Raymond Weaver's Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic, appeared in 1921, a foolish and enormously influential book. By the next year Carl Van Vechten had written in The Double-Dealer that Moby-Dick "is surely Melville's greatest book, surely the greatest book that has yet been written in America, surely one of the great books of the world." All that remained to do was to rediscover the other works, a process in which we are still engaged, with two books on Melville in the twenties, one in the thirties, five in the forties, and at least half a dozen so far in the fifties. "You know perhaps that there are goodly harvests which ripen late," Melville wrote Bentley, "especially when the grain is remarkably strong."

Melville was perhaps no more and no less appreciated by his fellow writers in America than is usually the case, 'shock of recognition' theories to the contrary. Although Emerson, on the evidence of his journal and letters, was extremely interested in the legend of a great white sperm whale that attacked whaling ships, I know no evidence that he ever read any of Melville's
writings, except possibly the anonymous "Hawthorne and His Mosses." Thoreau read *Typee* and mentioned an item of information from it in the first draft of *Walden*. Alcott also read *Typee* and mentioned in his journal that it was "a charming volume, as attractive even as *Robinson Crusoe*." Whitman reviewed it in *The Brooklyn Eagle* as "a book to hold in one's hand and pore dreamily over of a summer day," and reviewed *Omoo* in the same journal, recommending it as "thorough entertainment—not so light as to be tossed aside for its flippancy, nor so profound as to be tiresome." Longfellow noted in his journal, with a certain limitation of vocabulary, that *Typee* was "very curious and interesting," that he was reading *Omoo*, "a series of sketches of wild adventure," and that a day or two after *Moby-Dick* was published he "sat to read all the evening in Melville's new book, *Moby Dick or the Whale*. Very wild, strange and interesting." Margaret Fuller reviewed *Typee* in the *New York Daily Tribune* and advised "Generally, the sewing societies of the country villages will find this the very book they wish to have read while assembled at their work."

George Ripley, who had attacked *Mardi* in the *Tribune* as Melville "leaving his sphere," reviewed *Moby-Dick* anonymously in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* with greater perception than any of his fellows, writing:

A new work by Herman Melville, entitled *Moby Dick; or, The Whale*, has just been issued by Harper and Brothers, which in point of richness and variety of incident, originality of conception, and splendor of description, surpasses any of the former productions of this highly successful author. . . . Beneath the whole story, the subtle, imaginative reader may perhaps find a pregnant allegory, intended to illustrate the mystery of human life. Certain it is that the rapid, pointed hints which are often thrown out, with the keenness and velocity of a harpoon, penetrate deep into the heart of things, showing that the genius of the author for moral analysis is scarcely surpassed by his wizard power of description.
An editor at *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* wrote to Melville in 1854 that James Russell Lowell had read "The Encantadas" and "that the figure of the cross in the ass' neck, brought tears into his eyes, and he thought it the finest touch of genius he had seen in prose." There is no evidence that any of these authors ever wrote directly to Melville, or made any effort to meet him. A later generation of writers tried to get him to join the Authors Club in New York in the 1880's, but he pleaded that "his nerves could no longer stand large gatherings," rescinded his original acceptance, and only dropped in once or twice over the years. In 1890, a year before Melville's death, E. C. Stedman, perhaps persuaded by Buchanan, managed to get him to attend a literary dinner in his honor.

**The only** friendships Melville had with his fellow writers were with Oliver Wendell Holmes—who was his doctor in the Berkshires and, probably, the original of the doctor in "Me and My Chimney"—with Richard Henry Dana Jr., and the celebrated friendship with Hawthorne. As early as 1846, Hawthorne had reviewed *Typee* in the *Salem Advertiser* noncommittally, noting that it would be extreme to call its "freedom of view" a "laxity of principle." When Melville's anonymous "Hawthorne and His Mosses" appeared in *The Literary World* in 1850, Sophia Hawthorne wrote to Duyckinck that the author was "the first person who has ever in print apprehended Mr Hawthorne. Who can he be, so fearless, so rich in heart, of such fine intuition?" At the same time, she and her husband sent part of their letters to Duyckinck praising the Melville books he had sent them. Hawthorne noted that *Mardi* "is so good that one scarcely pardons the writer for not having brooded long over it, so as to make it a great deal better." As the friendship between Hawthorne and Melville grew, and they saw more and more of each other at Pittsfield and Lenox, Sophia Hawthorne wrote in praise
of Melville to her mother, affirming, with natural Peabody discretion, "I am not quite sure that I do not think him a very great man." Melville wrote Duyckinck in praise of Hawthorne's work, concluding "Still there is something lacking—a good deal lacking—to the plump sphericity of the man. What is that?—He doesn't patronise the butcher—he needs roast-beef, done rare.—Nevertheless, for one, I regard Hawthorne (in his books) as evincing a quality of genius, immensely loftier, & more profound, too, than any other American has shown hitherto in the printed form."

Melville and Hawthorne spent their evenings together talking "about time and eternity, things of this world and of the next, and books, and publishers, and all possible and impossible matters." When Hawthorne in a letter appreciated and understood Moby-Dick—which had been dedicated to him "In token of my admiration for his genius"—to its author's satisfaction, Melville wrote him "But I felt pantheistic then—your heart beat in my ribs & mine in yours, and both in God's"; asked "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 & not mine"; and concluded "But truth is ever incoherent, and when the big hearts strike together, the concussion is a little stunning." Melville wrote Sophia Hawthorne, in a statement that has been taken too seriously by our scholars, that "the speciality of many of the particular subordinate allegories, were first revealed to me, after reading Mr Hawthorne's letter, which, without citing any particular examples, yet intimated the part-&-parcel allegoricalness of the whole." Scholars interested in taking Melville's rhetoric seriously might better have noted his special imagery for procreation, the paper mill, in the postscript to Hawthorne: "I should have a paper-mill established at one end of the house, and so have an endless riband of foolscap rolling in upon my desk; and upon that endless riband I should write a thousand—a million—billion thoughts, all under the form of a letter to you."
After this passionate drinking of the flagon of life together in the Berkshires, there was little contact between the two until 1856, when Melville visited Hawthorne at his consulate at Liverpool, Hawthorne noting in his journal "we soon found ourselves on pretty much our former terms of sociability and confidence." There is no record that they ever quarrelled except for Melville's ambiguous "Monody" on Hawthorne's death:

To have known him, to have loved him,
After loneness long;
And then to be estranged in life,
And neither in the wrong;
And now for death to set his seal—
Ease me, a little ease, my song!

The evidence suggests, however, that the big hearts only struck together once, and then, stunned by the concussion, each darted back into its own rib cage. In 1883, Melville told Julian Hawthorne he was convinced Julian's father "had all his life concealed some great secret," but failed to tell him, or us, what it was. Newton Arvin has noted that their friendship began on an "astonishingly sexual image," Melville's writing in "Hawthorne and His Mosses":

Already I feel that this Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul. He expands and deepens down, the more I contemplate him; and further and further, shoots his strong New England roots in the hot soil of my Southern soul.

It ended, fittingly enough, on imagery of reticence and concealment.

If, as is generally believed, Hawthorne profoundly influenced the final form of Moby-Dick, the only other contemporary writer who seriously affected Melville's work may have been George William Curtis. Reading for Putnam's in 1855, he advised J. W. Dix, the new owner and editor, "I should decline any novel from Melville that is not extremely good." When "Benito Cereno" arrived, he reported: "Melville's story is very good. It is a great
pity he did not work it up as a connected tale instead of putting
in the dreary documents at the end," and the next day, "He does
everything too hurriedly now." Some months later Curtis wrote
Dix that before he printed "Benito Cereno" he should "alter all
the dreadful statistics at the end," and concluded "Oh! dear, why
can't Americans write good stories. They tell good lies enough,
& plenty of 'em." The next year he wrote Dix praising "The
Encantadas" and "Bartleby." Howard believes that Curtis had
the chance, and muffed it, to encourage Melville to build a
novel like _Moby-Dick_ out of "Benito Cereno." He suggests that
it was submitted as notes for a novel, and that when Melville
found he could sell it in its unaltered form he did so for the quick
money, thus profoundly reshaping his career, which never again
included a long prose work. If this oversimple but plausible con­
jecture has any truth, it would make Curtis at least as negatively
influential as Hawthorne was positively influential, the bad ma­
gician who bottled up the djinn Hawthorne the good magician
had briefly loosed.

FINANCES WERE at the heart of Melville's problems, and
his whole life was a search for that viable economy for the writer
that we have not found yet. A strong sense of insecurity was bred
in him by what Gilman has charted as "four cycles of prosperity
and adversity, or of promise and discouragement," in his first
twenty-one years. _Typee_ suggests the quality of Melville's mem­
ories of those years:

There are none of those thousand sources of irritation that the in­
genuity of civilised man has created to mar his own felicity. There
were no forclosures of mortgages, no protested notes, no bills payable,
no debts of honour, in _Typee_; no unreasonable tailors and shoemak­
ers, perversely bent on being paid; no duns of any description; no
assault and battery attorneys, to foment discord, backing their clients
up to a quarrel and then knocking their heads together; no poor re­
lations everlastingly occupying the spare bedchamber, and diminish­
ing the elbow-room at the family table: no destitute widows with
their children starving on the cold charities of the world; no beggars; no debtors' prisons; no proud and hard-hearted nabobs in Typee; or, to sum up all in one word—no Money! That root of all evil was not to be found in the valley.

A standard of living beyond his means was set for him by his mother, who, greatly to Gilman's displeasure, kept a servant in the worst period of adversity, although Gilman believes "she and her older daughters could have carried on the household without assistance." As early as 1847, when he was the successful and relatively prosperous author of *Typee* with *Omoo* due to appear, Melville started trying to get a job in the Treasury Department in Washington. Almost twenty years later, in 1866, Melville got his job as Inspector of Customs at New York at $4 a day. In the interval his writing had been unable to support him, writing and farming together were no more successful, and writing and lecturing had failed for the good reason that he was a dull and boring lecturer, although a Cincinnati paper found his voice "as soft and almost as sweet as the warbling of the winds in cocoa groves."

By 1875 he was a vanity author, publishing *Clarel* at his uncle Peter Gansevoort's expense (it set Uncle Peter back $1,200). Inspectors' pay at the Customs House was reduced to $3.60 a day, although the next year it was restored to $4. In 1877, Melville was almost dismissed, and his working hours were increased.

He wrote to his aunt, Catherine Lansing:

> So it appears that I used in my letter to you the expression "people of Leisure." If I did, it was a faulty expression—as applied in that case. I doubtless meant people the disposition of whose time is not subject to another. But it amused me—your disclaiming the thing, as if there was any merit in not being a person of leisure. Whoever is not in the possession of leisure can hardly be said to possess independence. They talk of the dignity of work. Bosh. True Work is the necessity of poor humanity's earthly condition. The dignity is in leisure. Besides, 99 hundredths of all the work done in the world is either foolish and unnecessary, or harmful and wicked.
In 1886, the New York Commercial Advertiser noted that Herman Melville, generally supposed to be dead, "had, indeed, been buried in a government office" and "of late years he has done nothing in literature." In 1890 George Parsons Lathrop wrote to Horace Scudder, who had proposed that Lathrop do a Melville biography, "Melville, I believe, is alive still, clinging like a weary but tenacious barnacle to the N. Y. Custom House," although he had resigned five years before, and was now independent and even wealthy from good-sized legacies his wife and he had received. A columnist for a Boston paper wrote in 1889: "If I am not mistaken, Melville in his later years has been free from the drudgery of the custom house, but with him, as with many other literary men, pecuniary independence came too late to enable him to revive his powers of invention and description."

Few modern Melvillians, bolstered by academic tenure and 2½¢ a word from The Walloomsac Review, realize how seriously Melville tried to be a popular and successful writer. He was at least as practical about money as Wellingborough Redburn, who, down to his last penny after buying supplies for the voyage, pitched it into the water, noting that "if the penny had been a dollar, I would have kept it." Melville wrote to Hawthorne in 1851, just after finishing Moby-Dick:

I am so pulled hither and thither by circumstances. The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which a man ought always to compose,—that, I fear, can seldom be mine. Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. My dear Sir, a presentiment is on me,—I shall at last be worn out & perish, like an old nutmeg-grater, grated to pieces by the constant attrition of the wood, that is, the nutmeg. What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.

Babbalanja in Mardi suggests the same split when he says that Lombardo was impelled to write by "Primus and forever, a full
heart. . . . Secundo, the necessity of bestirring himself to procure his yams," and adds that wanting the second motive, it is doubtful if the first would have sufficed.

Melville wrote Bentley in 1849, about Mardi: "But some of us scribblers, My Dear Sir, always have a certain something unmanageable in us, that bids us do this or that, and be done it must—hit or miss." Within a few months he was writing Lemuel Shaw to precisely the opposite effect about Redburn and White-Jacket:

But no reputation that is gratifying to me, can possibly be achieved by either of these books. They are two jobs, which I have done for money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood. And while I have felt obliged to refrain from writing the kind of book I would wish to; yet, in writing these two books, I have not repressed myself much—so far as they are concerned; but have spoken pretty much as I feel.—Being books, then, written in this way, my only desire for their "success" (as it is called) springs from my pocket, & not from my heart. So far as I am individually concerned, & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to "fail."—pardon this egotism.

Melville's journal in London that fall noted that Blackwood's was foolish to take Redburn seriously and "waste so many pages upon a thing, which I, the author, know to be trash, & wrote it to buy some tobacco with." The next month he wrote Duyckinck thanking him for his review of Redburn and noting its general favorable reception:

I am glad for it—for it puts money into an empty purse. But I hope I shall never write such a book again—tho' when a poor devil writes with duns all around him, & looking over the back of his chair—& perching on his pen & diving in his inkstand—like the devils about St. Anthony—what can you expect of that poor devil?—What but a beggarly Redburn!

A year later he wrote Richard Henry Dana, who had praised Redburn and White-Jacket:
In fact, My Dear Dana, did I not write these books of mine almost entirely for "lucre"—by the job, as a woodsawyer saws wood—I almost think, I should hereafter—in the case of a sea book—get my M.S.S. neatly & legibly copied by a scrivener—send you that one copy—and deem such a procedure the best publication.

After *Moby-Dick* appeared, Sarah Morewood wrote to George Duyckinck of their friend Melville "I think he cares very little as to what others may think of him or his books so long as they sell well." Melville was willing enough to have a bowdlerized edition of *Typee* published. He wrote Murray: "The book is certainly calculated for popular reading, or for none at all.—If the first, why then, all passages which are calculated to offend the tastes, or offer violence to the feelings of any large class of readers are certainly objectionable." *Redburn* was proposed to Bentley as very much unlike *Mardi*, "no metaphysics, no conic-sections, nothing but cakes & ale." At the end of his life, Melville noted in "Billy Budd," perhaps wryly, "There is nothing nameable but that some men will undertake to do it for pay."

It is this apparent split in Melville—the desire for fame and money, and the desire to write exactly as he pleases, the spiritless complaisance and the stubborn integrity—that has puzzled commentators, who relax into a hopelessly split Melville. We see this symbolized best by the Leyda book's harpoon on the spine of one volume and customs house badge on the other, its endpapers contrasting a map of downtown New York with a map of the Pacific Ocean, a map of the environs of Pittsfield with a map of the whole world. Comprehending the unity of Melville requires a kind of critical vector analysis, calculating the point a professional writer reaches under the differing propulsions of "message" and "market," or, to change the metaphor, his point of greatest return in both economies. If *Mardi* is self-indulgent and *Redburn* hacking, or, to use a newer vocabulary, if the first is inner-directed and the second other-directed, *Moby-Dick* would seem to be the successful compromise. Here expression
meets communication, poetic weds rhetoric, opposites fuse, and
the result is a masterpiece.

If Melville found no satisfactory adjustment to the Amer-
ican economy, his relation to his domestic economy seems, on
Leyda's evidence, better than has been supposed. We see his
family and friends chiefly as they motivate and shape his writing,
but on the superficial level his family impulses seem to have
been strong, and he was an affectionate son and father and at
least a dutiful husband. In the works themselves, in terms of
symbolic action, things are somewhat more complicated. The
biographers have made much of Melville's filling in his mother's
name instead of his wife's as the mother of Stanwix on the boy's
birth certificate, but this small Freudian slip can hardly compete
with the intricacies of the mother-sister-wife ambiguity in Pierre.
We have the testimony of his niece that Herman said his mother
hated him, which may or may not be so, but of Pierre it would
be more accurate to say his hates mother him. As Arvin has
pointed out, the whale is a mother symbol as well as a father sym-
bol, and not only, I think, the mother in her role as castrator,
the mythic vagina dentata. The thing to note is that the whale
contains part of Ahab, his leg become whaleflesh, as Ahab has an
ivory leg, whalebone become Ahabflesh; that is, they are consub-
stantial in the most literal sense, tied together by the umbilical
cord of a harpoon line, and are thus in some sense patently
mother and son.

As for Melville's wife Elizabeth, who wrote to her stepmother
that part of each working day was spent making herself look "as
bewitchingly as possible to meet Herman at dinner," she is a
whole spectrum of fictional women, from Yillah to the shrewish
wife of the narrator in "I and My Chimney." If she found Mardi
full of "fogs," and tried to hush up the fact that her husband was
writing poetry, she appreciated at least his physical presence, and
during his absences found the house "utterly desolate." Henry
A. Murray, in an address "In Nomine Diaboli," which he has managed to present at five different colleges and publish twice to date,8 revives all the old Lewis Mumford gossip about sex frustration and incompatible marriage "with wall shoved near," but generalizing from the work to the man, instead of vice versa, is always risky; and E. L. Grant Watson's ingenious conjecture, stated in Mason's book, that "Benito Cereno" is an allegory of marriage—presumably Melville's—is hardly the richest reading we have of that ambiguous story.

Melville certainly, like any writer, derived material from his family and friends, but that is a far cry from obsession. The rankling grievances of Major Melvill, cast out despite his Revolutionary War services, must have inspired Israel Potter, but using the story of Potter found in an old pamphlet as a vehicle for the emotion was an act of conscious craft. As the pamphlet story embodied his grandfather's grievance, we can see the treatment accorded his grandfather serving in turn as a vehicle for Melville's own sense of inadequate reward, but by this time we are as remote from Melville biography as Lear is from Shakespeare's.

We get a similar interpenetration when we go after the family origins of "Billy Budd." On one level, Billy is certainly based on Melville's uncle Thomas Melvill, the major's son, who was court-martialed in 1832 for "yielding to paroxysms of passion" aboard the Vincennes and jumping "with his feet upon the breast of Thomas Spence an O. Seaman," and was found guilty but let off because of "the strong provocation given." On a deeper biographical level he is Melville's young son Malcolm, who inexplicably shot himself at the age of eighteen; on still a deeper one he is Melville himself, the innocent victim of inflexible law. Lieutenant Guert Gansevoort, Melville's cousin, who helped to hang three alleged mutineers on the brig Somers—one of them went to his death, after his commander explained that "the honor of

the flag and the safety of the crew required his hanging," saying
"Yes, sir, and I honor you for it; God bless that flag!"—is certainly
the original of Captain De Vere. Yet equally, the first character
is based on God the Son and the second on God the Father,
neither of whom is known to have been either a Melville or a
Gansevoort.

Gilman suggests that Melville's cousin Priscilla Melvill is the
source of Isabel in Pierre, since her mother was French and she
wrote impetuous and much-underlined letters revealing "a ro­
mantic and passionate nature." but, since we know nothing of
Priscilla, that leaves us about where we were. Vincent's ingen­
ious suggestion in The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick that Queequeg
is based on Hawthorne gives us a wonderful metaphor for their
friendship—the joint offering of burnt biscuit to a pagan idol—
but not much additional insight. Finally, there is the matter of
the origin of "Bartleby." We are told that it is "a portrait from
life" and "based upon living characters," but nothing more than
that. We know from Howard that Melville's philosopher friend
George Adler spent his later life confined in an asylum with
severe agoraphobia, and that may be the story's germ. Yet
"Bartleby the Scrivener" is no more reducible to agoraphobia
than Hamlet is reducible to aboulia, and if that overwhelming
story of the terrible strength of weakness is a portrait from life,
it is a portrait from our own lives. Gifts in Melville's household
were always and characteristically books, and it is ironically typ­
ical of that bookish man that his family and friends should have
come down to us as literary problems.

Narrowing the circle still further, we get the writer, finally,
where he belongs, at work in his study. If his wife's testimony
can be trusted—and the exaggerations of Pierre bear it out—
Melville's schedule was rigorous. Living in New York in 1847,
he spent his days: breakfast at eight, then a brief walk while his
room was cleaned, then to work until twelve-thirty, lunch, an
hour's walk with his wife, work again from two to four, dinner, reading what he had written to his wife for an hour, a walk downtown until eight, an evening with the family in the parlor until bed at ten. When he moved to Pittsfield in 1850 and was at work on *Moby-Dick*, the schedule altered: rise at eight, walk or split wood, feed the horse and cow, breakfast, write from nine to two-thirty or later, feed the horse and cow, dine, ride to the village, then the evening in his room. This approximate schedule of five or six hours of writing a day, barring interruptions and special events, or a good day when he wrote until four or five o'clock, continued until 1866, when Melville went to work in the Customs House and became an evenings-and-Sunday writer.

In short stories like "The Happy Failure" and "The Fiddler," Howard says, Melville wrote away his ambition, and in "The Lightning-Rod Man" he wrote away his fear—setting up Melville's art as personal purgation. Mason calls the movement from *Moby-Dick* to "Billy Budd" a progress from man's insanity to heaven's sense, what we would call from rejection to acceptance. The opposed terms in Melville's own cathartic dialectic were fact and fancy. He wrote Murray of the genesis of *Mardi*:

Well: proceeding in my narrative of facts I began to feel an incurable distaste for the same; & a longing to plume my powers for a flight, & felt irked, cramped & fettered by plodding along with dull common places,—So suddenly standing [abandoning?] the thing altogether, I went to work heart & soul at a romance which is now in fair progress, since I had worked at it under an earnest ardor.

In the course of writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville had written bitterly to Hawthorne:

What's the use of elaborating what, in its very essence, is so short-lived as a modern book? Tho' I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter.
With his view of the essential absurdity of authorship and its incompatibility with a system of rewards and punishments, Melville took adverse reviews as entirely gratuitous, and in 1849, in a letter to Duyckinck, foreswore the practice: "I shall never do it again. Hereafter I shall no more stab at a book (in print, I mean) than I would stab at a man." By the next year, he had forgotten his resolution and took an anonymous stab at Cooper in print, and when he did later give up reviewing, it was because he wasn't popular enough to be asked, or because, as he wrote Duyckinck in 1863, turning down a book for review, "I have not spirit enough."

With travel and non-fictional narrative equated with cramping facts, critical writing equated with personal assault, and his exercise of fancy in romantic fiction unappreciated and unrewarded, Melville was left with his final and never entirely satisfactory equation, that of fancy and poetry. During the Civil War, he wrote his brother Thomas that he had sold a great lot of his "own doggerel" to a trunkmaker at ten cents the pound, which seems to be a self-deprecating way of saying that he had burned a batch of poems, an event commemorated by his bitter lyric "Immolated." An anonymous reviewer in The Nation, perhaps Charles Eliot Norton, dismissed Battle Pieces with "Nature did not make him a poet," and when Clarel was published at Uncle Peter's expense, Melville's first thought was not to put his name to it. His second, characteristically, was to hope it would revive his fame.

Within the formal organization of his books, of course, a writer lives more fully and much more satisfactorily. Insofar as they are individual rituals, symbolic actions for reshaping himself and his environment in a fashion he is unable to encompass

Mason has only expanded this when he writes: "Melville is not at all an easy poet to appreciate with fairness, for he attempts a lyric form with the slenderest of lyric equipment. His ear was poor, his rhythmic sense uncertain, his taste by no means infallible."
realistically, each is essentially a dramatic operation. Gilman calls attention to the dramatic structure of *Redburn* as anticipating the fuller dramatism of *Moby-Dick*, and Howard notes Melville's conscious attempt to make *Moby-Dick* a dramatic romance resembling Shakespearian tragedy: the reference to Ahab as "a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies," the allusion to "tragic graces" to be woven around "meanest mariners," the stage directions, soliloquies, and curtain climaxes. The editors of the Centennial *Moby-Dick* remark on the dramatic titles and structures of a number of the chapters. Thompson's triumphant discovery of several different voices or viewpoints in the books, which he uses as evidence that Melville is gullling his readers, is actually a discovery of the novels' dramatic structure. The three viewpoints in *Redburn* he calls Wellingborough (the former naive self), Redburn (the narrator) and Melville (the author) are actually three of the dramatis personae in the action; and the split he proclaims of Melville’s psyche into Ahab and Ishmael (we should add the whale) is precisely what Rank shows us as the way Shakespeare created Antony, Brutus, and Cassius by splitting the son's ambiguous relationship with the father into three simpler strands. This is the sense in which all dramas are internal to the dramatist. We can readily see Melville's attitude toward Christianity, say, split into warring voices in *Mardi* or *Clarel*, or his view of America break up dialectically in *The Confidence-Man*. It is entirely fitting that "Billy Budd," the last work, should have converted so readily into a play and an opera.

Only Arvin, so far as I know, has taken the view that *Moby-Dick* is not dramatic, and beyond that, that Melville's "imagination was profoundly nondramatic." "The structure of the book has only a superficial analogy with that of tragedy or of drama in general," he writes, and prefers to find it epic, with its movement forward "not from climax to climax in the sharp dramatic sense, but from one wave-crest to another." Which is, really, only to isolate as essence one aspect of drama, its climaxes, while ignoring
drama's more characteristic essence, its dialectic progress of the action through conflicts or agons, which allows us to say that epics as well as novels may have dramatic structure.

The trio of great short fictions, "Bartleby," "Benito," and "Billy Budd"—one might say Melville was concerned with B-ing—develop single aspects of *Moby-Dick's* totality. Bartleby represents another phase of Ahab's quest for the absolute, although an Oriental, Nirvana one rather than Ahab's Western sacrificial immolation. Gilman describes Melville's "isolates"—Taji, Redburn, and Ishmael (why not Bartleby?)—as in a tradition of American writing from *Walden* to "Prufrock"; Mason lists the "Melville men" as Bulkington, Plinlimmon, and Bartleby, describing the theme of "Bartleby" as "the victory of the passive and independent spirit over the engaged energies of social or moral compulsion" and finding it an anticipating of Kafka; and Arvin toys with "schizophrenia" and "dementia praecox" for "Bartleby" before settling for "the bitter metaphysical pathos of the human situation itself." Our own primary grouping would probably be with Ahab, an exploration of "*non serviam*" in passive rather than demonic rebellion.

Similarly, "Benito Cereno" explores the "secret of dominance," as Howard suggests, in other terms than Ahab's, inverting the master-slave relationship, as "Bartleby" inverted the employer-clerk relationship. Appearance is an illusion, an inversion of reality (Gilman says this conflict is the theme of all Melville's principal works) as Don Benito is revealed to be not the master of his ship but the slave of his slave. What then of Ahab, in effective command of the ship and his men, but mastered by the whale, by Fedallah, by his own blind drives and black inexorable passions, and far beyond emancipation? Finally, then, the last story, "Billy Budd," takes up the problem once more, this time through the Christian metaphor—as "Bartleby" had used the Buddhist and "Benito" the Platonic—and raises it to the level of tragedy. This innocent youth, made a proper tragic hero, if we
follow Aristotle, by the *hybris* of uncontrollable temper, or if we follow the Bible, a sacrificial victim relatively without blemish, must die to restore order on the ship; that is, for our salvation. Like Ahab he must slay and be slain, but here the ritual is channelized, public, tribal, Catholic—not lonely, romantic, Protestant—and its ultimate mood is acceptance. Ahab has come full circle.

Melville's “fables” are warnings against the absolute, Howard says, quoting from a letter to Hawthorne: “But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion.” The ikon of his father is in this view the same lying prophet to Pierre that Fedallah is to Ahab, and Plinlimmon's horological time, the life of *l'homme moyen sensuel*, like Ishmael, is the solution. To Melville, Howard adds, Ahab was suffering from what we would call a “transference neurosis.” Mason finds Bartleby's death “creative” where Pierre’s was “wasted,” and sees Bartleby as Plinlimmon’s triumph. With these lonely defiers he equates Hunilla’s “lonely submission,” and, for Mason, Melville is as resolute an advocate of the absolute as Howard would have him its opponent. Vincent, in *The Trying-Out*, noted that all the characters in *Moby-Dick* are extensions of dramatic projections of Ishmael, but warned that the whale represented Evil to Ahab, not to Ishmael, and certainly not to Melville. The conception of ritual or symbolic action avoids these problems of identification by insisting that the book is a symbolic experience for the writer as well as for the reader, that he *undergoes* it and is altered by it, so that asking whether Melville agreed with Ahab is rather like asking whether Jonah agreed with the whale.

Too much of our criticism has discussed Melville's symbolism in terms of stasis rather than action, as though the symbols were fixed counters. The learned editors of the Centennial *Moby-Dick* find the chapter “Cutting In” a chapter “of pure exposition, without symbolic or special narrative purpose,” which puts them in the position of the ichthyologist whose nets had holes an inch
in diameter, and was able to assure the world that there were no
fish in the water smaller than one inch. Vincent earlier, in The
Trying-Out, noted the documents foreshadowing and embody­ing all a book’s actions, what Burke calls “Bellerophontic letters”
—the sermons in White-Jacket and Moby-Dick, Plinlimmon’s
pamphlet in Pierre—and thus could be expected to know that ac­tions can be symbols too. Mason says Melville chose the symbolic
rather than the allegorical method as Keats chose a life of Sensa­tions rather than of Thoughts, and that the dramatic intensity of
his symbolic imagination was able to fuse symbol into myth;
Moby Dick thus becoming the “grand god” to Ishmael and pres­umably to us. For Richard Chase in Herman Melville: A Criti­cal Study, however, everything is a dream book allegory: the ship
Bachelor “represents America sailing off evasively toward an ar­chaic utopia,” while the Jereboam “is America seeking with
equal evasiveness a futurist utopia,” and so forth.

Our commentators have been enormously interested in Mel­ville’s symbolism of white and black. Howard notes Melville’s
“black” truth opposed to the conventional darkness of error; Mansfield and Vincent trace Melville’s “blackness of darkness”—
used in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” as well as Moby-Dick—
back to Sartor Resartus; Mason asserts curiously that Melville’s
white is, in say White-Jacket’s jacket, both evil and innocent.
They tend to treat both symbols in isolation, rather than as the
extremes of a spectrum whose middle section is gray. “Benito
Cereno,” for example, begins with everything gray: sea, sky, fowl,
vapors, shadows. Melville’s journal shows his reaction to the am­biguities of Jerusalem: “The color of the whole city is grey &
looks at you like a cold grey eye in a cold old man.”

IN MANY of these questions, style must be our guide. At twenty,
Melville was writing letters to his brother Allen in a dialect style
that suggests Pound’s letters at their most self-indulgent. Unlike
Pound’s, his development from there was toward steadily increas-
ing discipline and control. Melville could be playfully funny in letters, like the suggestion to Duyckinck that pen and ink should be taken away from a Mr. Hart "upon the same principle that pistols are withdrawn from the wight bent on suicide," but the comedy in his works was always serious. Gilman, as Melville's friend Joann Miller did, finds parts of *Redburn* and other books very funny, but the words he uses, "comedy," "irony," "satire," "burlesque," "jollity," "whimsy," suggest that he is talking about a number of different things and blurring their distinctions. Davis compares parts of *Mardi* to Rabelais, and certainly some of the chapters in *Moby-Dick* deserve this comparison more than the one Thompson makes with Sterne, noting with what appears to be real distaste some of their deadpan phallic punning. Where Melville's irony was sharp, as in his dedication of *Israel Potter* to the Bunker Hill Monument, the resemblance is to Swift, and it is the traditional devices of satire that create the layers of belief and disbelief that Thompson devotes so much effort to peeling apart.

Duyckinck first noticed, although unsympathetically, the audacious punning in *Moby-Dick* on whaling and blubbering, climaxd by the whaler *Rachel* weeping for her children; and the preface to *Typee* contains a bold pun (lost in our blunter time) on the disadvantages to the Polynesians of "their promiscuous intercourse with foreigners." This is all pretty far from humor, and actually represents a serious compression of meaning, as Egyptian sacred texts are packed with puns to increase their magical efficacy. We can see the technique clearly in the ambiguities later attached to Biblical names like Ishmael (the outcast redeemed in exile, the wild man made blessed and fruitful), a name Melville began by using in *Redburn* as a simple synonym for outcast. Mansfield and Vincent note that the name "Moby Dick" may come from the Biblical "Moab," in Hebrew "seed of the father," but fail to note what "Dick" is apt to mean in this context. It is an evidence of Thompson's basic lack of perception, and may sug-
gest how absolute the wilful refusal to read can be, that he gets the significant name "Steelkilt" as "Steelkit" throughout his book.

**MELVILLE WROTE** Hawthorne in a famous passage, perhaps echoed by Eliot later, that he "had no development at all" until he was twenty-five, and that it was from that time that he dated his life. *The American Review* of New York, reviewing *Mardi* on publication, noted shrewdly that it had been shaped as a more pretentious work than the two that preceded it by a particular "flattering unction" from English critics, the "astonishment expressed that a common sailor should exhibit so much reading and knowledge of literature." Like Blake's, Melville's mind naturally concretized abstractions. One of the ideas that gradually became symbolic in the works was conscious diabolism. Melville wrote on the margin of his copy of *Lear* "The infernal nature has a valor often denied to innocence." Referring to *Moby-Dick*, he wrote Hawthorne of "the hell fire in which the whole book is broiled," and suggested that its secret motto was Ahab's "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli." He wrote Sarah Morewood not to buy or read the book: "A Polar wind blows through it, & birds of prey hover over it." When an anonymous large sperm whale destroyed the whaler *Ann Alexander* almost on publication day, Melville wrote Duyckinck "I wonder if my evil art has raised this monster." But that this evil art was a process, not a condition, in Melville's mind is obvious from the statement to Hawthorne that beautifully anticipates the concept of symbolic action in literature, "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb." When Henry Murray refers to the book as "a great product of the demi-urge," he is, along with a whole segment of psychoanalytic thought, simply ignoring the rebirth part of death-and-rebirth rites.

Melville's formal intellectual development could be called a progress from the naive Rousseauism of *Typee*, in which man is
born free but is everywhere (except Typee) in chains, to the equally naive Schopenhauerism of his last year, when he underscored in his copy of *The World as Will and Idea* the line "the preponderating magnitude of the evil and misery of existence." More in his fashion, Sensation rather than Thoughts, was his re-experiencing of Shakespeare's insights, as Keats did in his last years. On his first serious reading of Shakespeare, in 1849, Melville wrote, absurdly, to Duyckinck "if another Messiah ever comes twill be in Shakspeare's person." By the next year he was back on his feet, and beside the statement in his edition of Chatterton "and though Shakspere must ever remain unapproachable," he wrote "Cant. No man 'must ever remain unapproachable.'" Whether Melville ever approached the Stratford Messiah or not, a similarity of pattern emerges from Mason's very suggestive chain of comparison: *Moby-Dick* with *Lear*, *Pierre* with *Hamlet*, *The Confidence-Man* with *Timon*, and "Billy Budd" with *The Tempest*.

One of the causes of Melville's recent shift in a year to this side idolatry may have been his rather comic American chauvinism, which reached some sort of peak in 1850. At a dinner party that August, when Holmes laid down some propositions on the general superiority of Englishmen, Melville attacked him so vigorously that Holmes was led to suggest that within twenty years the United States would grow men sixteen and seventeen feet high, "and intellectual in proportion." "Hawthorne and His Mosses," written the same year, proposes that since America has so many literary geniuses, "let her not lavish her embraces upon the household of an alien." It is remarkable that Melville's reaction of fascinated distaste to London was so much like what we can presume Eliot's to have been that he put down in his journal notes for what can only be *The Waste Land*:

While on one of the Bridges, the thought struck me again that a fine thing might be written about a Blue Monday in November London—a city of Dis (Dante's)—clouds of smoke—the damned &c—coal
barges—coaly waters, cast iron Duke &c its marks are left upon you, &c &c &c

"If an inhabitant of another planet should visit the earth," John Jay Chapman is alleged to have said, "he would receive, on the whole, a truer notion of human life by attending an Italian opera than he would by reading Emerson's volumes. He would learn from the Italian opera that there were two sexes; and this, after all, is probably the fact with which the education of such a stranger ought to begin." Whether an inhabitant of another planet would learn from Melville's volumes that there were two sexes is a question of some interest. He might deduce that there were three, or none, or one, or many. He would learn from Moby-Dick, for example, of the Canaller "ripening his apricot thigh" on the sunny deck; from a letter to Duyckinck that Fanny Kemble Butler seemed so masculine on the stage that "I should be curious to learn the result of a surgical examination of her person in private," and from another that Melville loved "all men who dive." From the journal he would learn that Leigh Murray had "the finest leg I ever saw on a man"; that harem ladies in Constantinople "look like nuns in their plain dress, but with a roundness of bust not belonging to that character"; and that a picture of Lucretia Borgia in Rome showed a "Good looking dame—rather fleshy." If he read the American edition of Moby-Dick, as against the English, which deleted a number of suggestive references in "The Counterpane" and "Nightgown" chapters, he would learn that Queequeg's grasp was of a "bridegroom," that his hug was "matrimonial," and that they finally went to bed "in our hearts' honeymoon." In both editions he would learn of Stubb's supper of penis steak, of Stubb's wild phallic dream about kicking, and of the mincer's curious garment, arraying him as for an archbishopprick. If he came from a Freudian planet, the visitor would not fail to note such imagery in Mardi as Taji's description of Yillah as "my shore and my grove, my meadow, my mead, my soft shady vine, and my arbour," or her conception as
a blossom fallen into the "opening valve of a shell," or Yoomy's poem about a maiden who may or may not be Yillah in the imagery of valley, soft meadow, and dell. Then when he read a biography he would be further confused to learn of Melville's marginal checking of Shakespeare's twentieth sonnet, which Arvin calls "the most frankly epicene of the sequence," and bewildered by beachcomber gossip that Melville had a child by the original of Fayaway. He might run to Italian opera for relief, or even to Emerson.

Finally, then, we are left with Herman Melville, a writer in America a century ago. We have photographs, and the fragments of a physical picture: Duyckinck reports a worked satin vest, Willis saw him "with his cigar and his Spanish eyes," Hawthorne as "a little heterodox in the matter of clean linen," a man named Field as "the most silent man of my acquaintance," and a young visitor noted on his first encounter "His countenance is slightly flushed with whisky drinking." We know that Melville had weak eyes, that he developed severe rheumatic pains in his back in 1855, suffered the next year from "neuralgic complaints in his head and limbs" and "a morbid state of mind," and that his nervous system was disturbed by a bad spill in a carriage in 1862. He had what was apparently some sort of nervous collapse while reading proof on Clarel in 1876, and, on his wife's testimony, couldn't receive even his sisters. The next year Herman was "morbidly sensitive, poor fellow" in his wife's correspondence, and later, "poor fellow he has so much mental suffering to undergo (and oh how all unnecessary) I am rejoiced when anything comes into his life to give him even a moment's relief." About that time he wrote a postscript assuring his brother-in-law, how seriously we cannot tell, that he was not crazy. The next year he suffered from paralysis of the hands, then a kind of "rheumatic gout." By 1888, his memory had weakened, and he took a four-year-old granddaughter to Madison Square Garden, forgot her
there, and had to go back and get her. Many of his symptoms suggest a psychosomatic complaint, but lay diagnosis of a stranger over a century's gap is not without its hazards.

All his life Melville flirted with anonymity. The piece that made him his first literary friendship and ultimately helped to shape *Moby-Dick*, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," was published anonymously. Melville proposed publishing *Pierre* anonymously, then *Clarel* (giving up only on "the very strong representations of his publishers"), and *John Marr* was so published. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses" Melville writes:

Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. . . . Tormented into desperation, Lear, the frantic king, tears off the mask, and speaks the same madness of vital truth.

If all these basic questions about Melville, from his view of the absolute to his sexual leanings, are unanswerable, and if Melville is like Shakespeare ultimately unknowable, it is due to our inability to penetrate this mask, which is simply the mask or persona of art. Behind it the artist sits in darkness and anonymity, perhaps, as Joyce suggests, paring his nails. "Strike through the mask" Ahab exhorts us. How can we? Why in fact should we? In the last analysis it is the mask itself we want, and the face we see mirrored in it can only be our own.