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JANE MUSHABAC

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HUMOR IN MELVILLE

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Chapter I: Introduction

An odd situation exists in Melville criticism. Most twentieth-century Melville critics are preoccupied with Melville's myths and symbols, space and time, blackness and whiteness. But they also, even if incongruously, consider his humor a given. It seems they do so for several reasons. Melville achieved much of his first fame and popularity as a humorist. If the 1921 Melville revival largely ignored Melville the humorist to introduce Melville, "the tragic titan,"¹ ten years later Constance Rourke's American Humor² bound together the old and new Melvilles. Rourke's book legitimized Melville's humor as the literary progeny of American folk humor and the national character. In 1949 in his book on Melville and later in his book on the American novel,³ Richard Chase extended Rourke's basic approach and the ideas in her ten-page chapter on Melville. Then in 1955 appeared Edward Rosenberry's Melville and the Comic Spirit.⁴

Whether responding to the literature itself or influenced by Melville's early reputation, Rourke, Chase or Rosenberry, most critics, no matter what their approach, make at least some mention of Melville's humor. An example is Lawrance Thompson. Thompson's 1952 probing for Melville's subversive wickedness begins with a chapter of guilt-by-association. Thompson accepts Calvin's attack on Rabelais as one of those "curs who assume the attitudes of comedy in order to enjoy greater freedom to vomit their blasphemies."⁵ Even

Thompson, however, makes passing mention, not just of what he considers Melville's deceptive use of comedy, but of "his excellent sense of humor."⁶

What it amounts to is Melville's humor receives lip service from many critics but is not really understood or seen for its central role in Melville's achievement. Humor is agreed to be a difficult thing to define. It is easiest to see it as a cosmetic, as something tacked on. But I am suggesting larger questions and broader answers; humor has to do with vision--as well as style. And humor must be seen in a literary context to be understood. It is no "epiphenomenon."⁷

In the studies of Rourke, Chase and Rosenberry, humor by no means receives lip service. It receives thoughtful provocative analysis. Nonetheless these studies too have their weaknesses which, recognized, will help clarify Melville's humor.

To begin with, Rourke's sketch, important as it is as an introduction, is somewhat misleading. "Tragic though the theme was," she says, "comedy mapped the outlines of Moby-Dick and shaped its forms." Aside from raising questions about whether the theme is actually tragic, she leaves uncertain what is equally important, how tragic and comic are integrated in one organic whole. It is inadequate to say, as she does, that "Passages of comic fantasy are strewn through the narrative," and inaccurate, I believe, to label Melville's tone "sardonic."⁸ Rourke fails to connect the tone of Melville's humor with the third of the three veins of American humor she

describes in her book. Of Bret Harte, whose stories first appeared eleven years after Melville's last novel, she says, "For the first time a philosophic strain was noticeable in American comedy. . . . For the first time--barring only the submerged creations of the Negro--elements of the humor of defeat appeared."⁹

Chase's remarks on Melville's humor explain well how Moby-Dick is largely built on American folk humor with its tall tales, hoaxes, and P. T. Barnum extravaganzas. Chase is at his best in demonstrating how Melville's commitment to American folk humor and thus to the American community allowed Melville to break out of his isolation and made Moby-Dick and The Confidence-Man his masterpieces. In fact, Chase's discussion of Melville's American sources is very rich and provides an important link in the study of traditions at the root of Melville's humor. In the midst of his analysis, however, Chase gets anxious that "To the modern taste this kind of humor seems intolerable on several counts. No doubt Melville was trying faithfully to reproduce the tone and language of his time and was able to do so with a certain amount of objectivity. Still he had a weakness himself for this sort of thing, a fact which helps to account for the awkward verbiage and clumsy emotions into which his literary style sometimes degenerates."¹⁰

Indeed in his 1949 book Chase seems uneasy with Melville's humor. Critical emphasis on humor, like emphasis on adventure, would seem to threaten Melville's claim to serious conscious artistry.¹¹ Perhaps for this reason Chase in this

book is never interested in humor in itself, but only in humor as a factor in Melville's relationship to the American community. Perhaps also that is why in two thirds of this book, Chase drops humor entirely. It is interesting then that eight years later, Chase's chapter on Melville in his study of the American novel keeps returning to folklore and humor, and even, as if tacitly correcting Rourke, suggests that the theme of Moby-Dick is not tragic but melodramatic.¹² This chapter, however, like Rourke's chapter on Melville, is suggestive rather than definitive.

The closest to a full scale study of Melville's humor is Rosenberry's Melville and the Comic Spirit. Rosenberry alerts us to some Renaissance as well as American sources of Melville's humor. He notes, in addition, the way Ishmael's comic ideal is placed centrally between Stubb's trickery and Ahab's demonism in Moby-Dick. In Mardi he is attuned to Melville's humorous extravagance; and in "Bartleby" and The Confidence-Man to Melville's assurance. And he pinpoints well the ambivalence at the root of Pierre's failure.¹³

Finally, Rosenberry develops a thesis about Melville's comic spirit. The difficulty is that this thesis does not ring true. Rosenberry tells us that Melville's career explored the full range of comedy. He divides Melville's use of the comic into what he himself calls "four theoretical and somewhat arbitrary phases,"--"the jocular-hedonic, imaginative-critical, philosophical-psychological, and dramatic-structural." His point is that Melville went through various stages, at first

engaging a simple fun-loving comedy, then moving into a critical vein, and in his great work using all the possibilities of the comic.¹⁴

The problem is that humor is a vision, rather than a technique, and a vision which is a constant in Melville from the first page of Typee. But in addition, Rosenberry has not come to terms with what he means by the comic. It is confusing and disorienting that he depends essentially on George Meredith's essay for a definition of the comic spirit,¹⁵ yet fails to distinguish, as Meredith does, between the comic and the humorous. Then too Rosenberry ignores Meredith's central idea of the dependence of the comic on the equality of male and female characters in a work; Rosenberry asks no questions about how this idea applies to Melville's male-dominated fiction. Finally, the concepts of comedy of manners and "thoughtful laughter" distance us rather than bring us closer to Melville's humor because Melville was writing romance, not manners novels. As much, then, as Rosenberry has made an important contribution in devoting a whole study to Melville's comedy, his insights are fragmented and when he attempts to put them together, no truly coherent picture emerges.

Perhaps, nonetheless, it is because of Rosenberry and others interested in the comic¹⁶ that in the last few years critics have gone looking again for a starker, more sophisticated Melville. This search has yielded, I believe, Paul Brodtkorb's final image of Ishmael as a creature of despair, dread and boredom,¹⁷ Edgar Dryden's¹⁸ and John

Seelye's¹⁹ emphasis on Melville's irony, and Joseph Flibbert's on Melville's use of burlesque. Flibbert in effect expands Rosenberry's critical vein of comedy. Flibbert sees Melville's whole art--and Melville's whole attitude--as criticism of the era in which he lived.²⁰ John Seelye, much in the same way, tells us that Melville's dynamics consist of always commenting ironically on the quest at the root of all his plots. While these studies make legitimate points, they seem reductive. Also, the new approach of emphasizing romantic irony seems only an attempt to use the word irony in precisely the way in which the word tragedy was used at the beginning of the Melville revival, to remove Melville from the contagion of sentimentality associated with words like humor, and to allow him to make the leap untouched by pathos, either to what Northrop Frye has told us is the modern ironic mode²¹--or to the absurd.

In this regard Leon Seltzer's article comparing Melville and Camus²² with reference to the absurd is more convincing than his book comparing Melville and Conrad. It is relevant that, whereas Conrad was nervous about being associated with Melville,²³ Camus wisely expressed a great debt to him. But lest this new approach think it has finally made Melville safe from anything sounding like sentimentality, we may notice Richard Boyd Hauck's Melville chapter in A Cheerful Nihilism (1972).²⁴ Melville was no nihilist, so little is gained by calling him a cheerful one. Nonetheless, this approach could have been fruitful had it been rooted concretely in Melville's literary context. As it stands, the chapter is

for the most part a catalogue of jokes.

An important purpose of discussion of Melville's humor is to counteract the image of an anguished and ponderous Melville, a crude hand-me-down derived from Hawthorne's statement that Melville couldn't decide whether he believed in God or not.²⁵ The problem is that it would take more than a catalogue of jokes and a hodgepodge of sources to project a cogent understanding of Melville's greatness and of the humor at its core. Constance Rourke, Richard Chase and Edward Rosenberry have awakened readers to Melville's humor. If Rosenberry's book in particular failed to apprehend the nature of Melville's comic art, he most of all suggested the richness and importance of this whole territory.

As his book's title correctly indicates, however, Rosenberry is primarily interested in the comic in Melville's fiction, whereas what interests me is the humor. In his essay on the comic spirit, Meredith explains, "Humorists . . . are given to be sentimental; for with them the feelings are primary, as with singers. Comedy, on the other hand, is an integration of the general mind, and is for that reason of necessity kept in restraint."²⁶ The Oxford English Dictionary, contrasting humor and wit, suggests humor is traditionally characterized as "being less purely intellectual and as having a sympathetic quality by virtue of which it often becomes

allied to pathos." Freud, distinguishing among humor, comedy and wit in terms of psychic energy "saved," also suggests the connection between humor and sympathy.²⁷ Whether it's sentimentality or sympathy we may freely indulge in with humor, the experience is a very different one from what we get from the comic or witty.

A well-known comic note in Typee, for instance, is in the two anecdotes in which two ladies, one savage and one civilized, are undressed. And in White-Jacket, the Surgeon Cadwallader Cuticle operation is famous as a comic or satiric "masterpiece." Yet neither of these suggests Melville's forte. My first interest in Typee is in the humorous mixture of joviality, self-pity, pride and familiarity expressed in the outburst with which that novel--and Melville's career as a novelist--opens: "Six months at sea! Yes, reader, as I live, six months out of sight of land; cruising after the sperm whale beneath the scorching sun of the Line, and tossed on the billows of the wide-rolling Pacific--the sky above, the sea around, and nothing else!" Similarly in White-Jacket, what interests me is the distinctive and pervasive tone with which Melville seeks out and describes the subtle absurdities on board the Neversink.

It is a tone full of sexual and heretical teasing, full of Melville's teasing man for his achievements, his explorations, his encyclopedias, his sciences, his poor heavy head. It is also a tone fully indulging in braggadocio and lyricism and sympathy and all the rudiments of good fellowship. The tone I believe is crucial; it releases the tension of Melville's awareness of the difficulty of human existence, a difficulty which, it is important to note, cannot be blamed only on people in power or the brute forces of the universe.

That Melville enjoys ridiculing officers as in White-Jacket is a given. Yet that novel is not primarily a polemic against naval officers and their practices. Nor is it, we may see by comparing Melville's treatment of Captain Claret headbumping his Negroes with Faulkner's of Sutpen headbumping his, a romantic picture of the ugly brutality-potential of mankind. Melville is neither polemical nor romantic, but humorous. Everyman, Melville characteristically notes, contributes his bit to the general absurdity. In the chapter, "From Pockets to Pickpockets," he writes of the crew as in general he thinks of mankind. "With some highly commendable exceptions, they rob from one another and rob back again, till, in the matter of small things, a community of goods seems almost established; and at last, as a whole, they become relatively honest, by nearly every man becoming the reverse."

Melville's outlandish concept of a utopia of thievery is akin to his vision of the human race as a community of isolatoes. This is a vision central, I suggest, to all Melville's fiction. And so fundamental is its egalitarianism, its democracy, that we may see immediately the way humor is a take-off on comedy, a next step, a turning of the thing. Comedy is a celebration of sexuality and regeneration--it is no accident that so many comedies end with weddings. But in Melville, as in much humor before him, the emphasis is on something seedier, more lyrical, more expansive--more unreal, a wry convolution of the regenerative function. The weddings, the joinings, the egalitarianism, the good fellowship, are all between male and male and male, as if the humor itself is a comment on the

whole regenerative process of the universe, a teasing of the physical realities with lyrical hugs of fellowship between man and man--between man and his books, and in Melville ultimately between man and fish.

Melville's humorous vision and tone are reflected by plot and character to be sure, but also by tone, in the early books, for instance, through the offhand interweaving of nuances continually reminding us of the absurdity of human relations. It is as if Melville's tone, tongue-in-cheek, projects the human predicament onto everything. It does not always do so in the same manner, however. In different novels, Melville adopts different styles to embody and project the humor of his tone, and in different novels focuses on different aspects of the human predicament. Also, in different novels, Melville sings out differently; sometimes he is on the upswing, free-wheeling, expansive. Sometimes he is tart, wry, quiet. Sometimes, as in "Bartleby," he explicitly juxtaposes the two styles. Indeed, a goal of this study will be to attune the reader to these differences in humor, as Melville moves from one to the next, although he is always conveying the same vision of the universe and of man--magnificent; infinitely, transcendently wonderful; insensitive, insensible, brutal, absurd.

Various critics emphasize that Melville's power lies in his recognition of the duality of experience, of the bright and the dark.²⁸ We are repeatedly reminded that Melville's tortoise in "The Encantadas" fittingly has a dark side and a

bright side, that tortoise becoming as much an emblem of Melville's apprehension of duality as the doubloon is of infinite ambiguity. The point is not that Melville has light and dark in his work--or comic and tragic--but that his humor at once takes in hand all contradictions. Melville's description of the difficulty of learning the Taipee language is a quiet keynote for the tone of nearly all Melville's fiction, from Typee to The Confidence-Man. In the Taipee language, one and the same word is employed in a variety of senses, its various meanings all having, Melville writes, "a certain connection which only makes the matter more puzzling. So one brisk, lively little word is obliged, like a servant in a poor family, to perform all sorts of duties." Melville's wry sympathy here is for the poor human family endlessly trying to make sense of an endlessly ambiguous universe.

Melville's humor, finally, is his stamp and signature. The achievement of each of Melville's novels and stories depend upon the extent to which in it, through one style or other, Melville rallies his humor--gets it going, sustains it, gives it its depth. Melville's humor is what pitches his work forward. It is his work's play, its charm, its vision.

Melville's humor does not exist in a vacuum. In fact a considerable part of my view of Melville has to do with the way in which his humor ties him to a whole tradition of prose humor, much in the way Richard Chase suggests about Melville's American sources, but broader. A brief excursion into comic

theory for a more precise definition of humor will serve as an introduction to the context in which Melville was writing.

The literature on humor, comedy and laughter is vast and disorienting. Robert Corrigan, in an introduction to his anthology of essays on comedy, tells us by way of warning that when an ancient discussion turned to defining comedy, Aristophanes fell promptly asleep.²⁹ As critical theory is difficult in spanning so many languages, literatures and aesthetics, comic theory is even more demanding. First of all, being a highly allusive mode, humor-comedy-laughter clings to its national and historic origins more than other art, distinctly resisting attempts at universal generalizations. Secondly, while tragedy provides a neat exclusive field, comedy tends to deal with everything left out. One may contend that the two modes present the same material from opposing attitudes, or as Frye³⁰ does, that tragedy and comedy are on a continuum, the former focusing on the individual, the latter on the individual in society. The tradition, however, beginning with Aristotle, is to associate tragedy with a vigorously structured, clearly delimited objective, and then let comedy find its own definition from suggestions of what tragedy isn't.³¹

Just so, and finally, we are told that few of our lives suggest the extremes of tragedy; yet comedy thrives all around us.³² As a result, comic theory listens patiently to discussions of everything from the tickling of infants to the playfulness of baboons: are humans, after all, the only animals who laugh? These discussions do explore fascinating

questions, but they do not help us, directly at least, except in one way. An unexpected bonus we get from dabbling in this literature is a sense that we have indeed come to the right place for a study of Melville. In reviewing the issues that come up repeatedly in the discussions of humor-comedy-laughter, such as Freud's,³³ one can't help being reminded of issues and questions which have become central to the literary study of Melville. I speak, for example, of a certain mixture of freedom and oppression required for humor, of the suspicions of the melancholy personality of the joker, of the attacks on father-figures and God inherent in much humor, of the general blasphemous quality of humor, of the mix of aggression and sociality, and of the centrality of sexual images.

This is still too vague, however. What is humor, and how may we clarify its distinct aesthetic? Stuart Tave, in The Amiable Humorist,³⁴ provides a helpful definition of the word humor as it came into the English language in the sense in which we use it today. If the first difficulty of comic theory is that it spans so many different aesthetic movements without precisely defining the particular aesthetic context of which any theory of humor may only be one part, Tave not only confronts this difficulty head on but does so for precisely the period appropriate for the study of Melville, the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Tave stops the clock to examine the period when the word humor, such as we know it today, was born through a deliberate rejection of the Hobbesian concept of laughter and a transformation of the

attitude toward the classical concept of the humor. Specifically, if Ben Jonson ridiculed man's humors, the amiable humorist petted them. Tave demonstrates that simultaneous with the division of wit into false and true wit, and then with the re-naming of false and true wit as wit and humor respectively, stark comic ridicule gave way to the humorous appreciation of man's oddities. It is this shift which transformed, as Tave shows, the concepts of Falstaff and Don Quixote from fools to lovable companions. Humor, then, as it surfaced in eighteenth-century England was an amiable indulging of man's quirks and foibles.

To apply Tave's definition to Melville, we need to go forward and backward--forward to America, backward to the Renaissance roots of amiable humor.

In his study, Tave focuses on England, yet it is no coincidence that American humor began to flourish precisely in the era following the one Tave studies, or actually in the era itself, for Tave indicates that amiable humor was to persist until 1914. First, England's literary demands were for a literature which revealed amiably the foibles of its people partly as a testament to the English tradition of liberty which allows men to have their foibles, and partly out of a happy discovery that comedy cannot ridicule anyone out of his quirks anyway. Secondly, America in this period was both nervously emulating English literary trends, and trying to establish its own literary identity precisely by finding its own native foibles to lovingly expose and portray. It is no acci-

dent then that American humor not only came into being around 1825, but quickly won success in England and at home. It became in fact so much a fixture of American pride that Henry James later in the century was only one of many to express an exasperation with it.³⁵

Indeed it is curious, and to my knowledge hitherto unacknowledged, that both England and the United States have each viewed themselves as being uniquely the land of humor--and for the same reason, because both countries have prided themselves on their belief in liberty, and on the cultivation of individualism that grows out of such a belief. In America, particularly, everyone is encouraged to be his own kind of nut or crank. In addition, America's attempt to find its own Shakespeare, to find native talent that would in fact surpass Shakespeare, grew out of the central position which he was given in the romantic aesthetic in England. As has been less emphasized but as Tave makes clear, humor--like Shakespeare--had an important role in the romantic aesthetic. It is not surprising that Americans would fasten on this aspect also of romanticism. In other words, if it is a commonplace that American literature is an offshoot of the romantic movement in Europe, I think we must add a real, not a token, consideration of humor to our analysis of American literature. Although the criticism on American folk humor makes an important contribution, it by and large assumes a fallacious theory of spontaneous generation in American humor,³⁶ even while critics of other aspects of American culture are rightfully quick to point to their European

roots. In fact, a consecutive reading of Tave's The Amiable Humorist, Perry Miller's The Raven and the Whale,³⁷ and Walter Blair's "Introduction" to his anthology, Native American Humor³⁸ yields a stimulating literary-historical backdrop for nineteenth-century American literature, American humor--and Melville.

We need also, however, to go to the roots of amiable humor. To excellent purpose, Tave confines himself to his specific period, but thus gives Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy only one incidental mention, although Burton is helpful to an understanding of romantic humor. And while Tave tells us Hazlitt and Sterne both had great partiality to Rabelais, Tave does not discuss Rabelais or French Renaissance humor. I suggest that by the time we look at what is often called American frontier humor, the lineage from the continental Renaissance through England to America becomes dramatically apparent; that in fact amiable humor is a variation of the frontier humor which began in Europe when the frontier was opened by those exhilarating explorations of America. Indeed it is a central part of my thesis that Melville was working from a tradition of prose humor that began in sixteenth-century France with the opening of the New World frontier, even if the French never got around to inventing the word humor as we use it today in English.

All of this is to explain that the term humor is appropriate to our purposes because it suggests the proper context and tradition for a study of Melville. Words like sympathy and lyricism which have come to be associated with humor as opposed

to wit have come to be so precisely because of the events of the period which Tave has studied and which Melville was writing in. Most of all, prose humor seemed Melville's metier. The Continental example during the Renaissance, the English amiable humor that in part grew out of it, and American folk or periodical humor are the keys to Melville having a distinct strong tradition to use as a base in his writing--and the keys to his enjoying and freely indulging his humor.

But Melville did not just borrow. That he developed the conventions he found in earlier literature is a major point of this study. Just as Melville's work does not consist of strewing bits and pieces of humorous American folklore into either a tragic, pathetic or even comic framework, neither does it consist of a mere adoption of the amiable humorist's tone by combining the English humorous celebration of our little foibles with the American Whitmanesque celebration of ourselves. The tradition of prose humor in which Melville was working, from Rabelais and De Bergerac up through Burton through Charles Lamb and the Almanac humorists of America, suggested a range of humorous styles and sensibilities. Melville was not only aware of this range but was deliberately working to find his place in it, and to provide an outlet for his own personal as well as highly American contribution. That he, like many another humorist, was casting side glances at other kinds of humor--as comedians do humorous impersonations of other comedians partly to fix their own style and partly because humor is one of the subjects of the humorist--is clear from the number of characters

in his works who represent a range of misreadings of humor, from Think-not Stubb, to the bachelors in their paradise, to Bartleby's employer to Captain Delano.

It is, however, not merely for historical purposes that we need recognize that humor was very much a part of the way Melville was what any great artist is first of all, a man of his time. This recognition may push us to face squarely a certain anxiety about Melville's possible sentimentality. Part of the difficulty of understanding humor is a reluctance to face the framework with which it is connected, the humor-pathos combination so popular in the nineteenth century and which Perry Miller describes so well. After all that has been said about the American classical novel tradition being in part a rebellion against the popular female sentimental novel,³⁹ we should consider that perhaps Melville's fiction is only a departure in creating the male sentimental novel. If so, however, how do we reconcile our sense of Melville's achievement with our legitimate repugnance for sentimentality? That problem, however, is only one of several controversial issues which have been raised around Melville and which may be approached with reference to Melville's humor. I am speaking of D. H. Lawrence's charge of Melville's sententiousness,⁴⁰ Thompson's of Melville's duplicity, and R. P. Blackmur's of Melville's "radical inability to master a technique."⁴¹

A discussion of Melville's humor may shed light on these questions. Critics as disparate as F. O. Matthiessen and Leslie Fiedler⁴² return repeatedly to the issue of humor's

parental role in the American literary tradition. This issue, like many parents, has caused its more sophisticated children some embarrassment together with the proper filial respect. Melville's humor is an important and touchy subject because it has tied in so centrally with America's simultaneous desires to compete with Europe in an adult civilized literary fashion and assert its own rigorous, even explosive, perhaps adolescent spirit. We may not be able to answer charges of immaturity or ineptitude either way simply by recognizing Melville's humor. It does seem, however, that until we have clearly understood the conventions of humor with which Melville was consciously working, where he got them and what he did with them, we have not understood Melville or recognized his momentous artistic contribution.

Clearly, however, it is not to defend Melville against claims of one kind or another that brings us to this study. Rather it is to suggest, quite simply, the achievement of Melville the humorist. Melville's tragic awareness did not lead him to Greek austerities, but to frontier legerdemain, dazzling play, jokes, songs, drolleries, wry circumlocutions and flirtations. And these are memorable and evocative in Melville because of the self-knowledge and absolute fidelity to truth at their root.

In the following chapter, I suggest the tradition which liberated Melville's humor. In Chapter III, I look at Melville's early novels; Chapter IV, his novel masterpieces; and

Chapter V, the limitations of the humor tradition and how Melville attempted to deal with them in some problem works. Along the way I trace Melville's humorous styles and humorous fixations--on the encyclopedia, the dictionary, science, religion, the isolato, the Anarcharsis Clootz delegation, the preposterous hug, the king of the world, and the slave.

Notes

¹ In 1955 Edward H. Rosenberry would write, "An unnatural cleavage has developed between that merry figure and the tragic titan that has reached mythic proportions in modern criticism." Melville and the Comic Spirit (1955; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1969), p. 1.

² American Humor (New York: Harcourt, 1931).

³ Richard Chase, Herman Melville (1949; facsimile rpt. New York: Hafner, 1971) and The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 89-115.

⁴ See n. 1.

⁵ Melville's Quarrel With God (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 19-20.

⁶ Thompson, p. 18.

⁷ For an interesting parallel and analysis of why humor has been seen as an epiphenomenon in Chaucer, see Morton W. Bloomfield, "The Gloomy Chaucer," in Harry Levin, ed., Veins of Humor, Harvard English Studies 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 57-68.

⁸ Rourke, pp. 194-96.

⁹ Rourke, p. 225.

¹⁰ Herman Melville, pp. 79-80.

¹¹ Herman Melville, p. 283. ("The time is surely behind us when we could think of Melville as no artist at all but only a man with some unaccountable gift of genius whose stirring adventures somehow spilled over into print.")

¹² The American Novel, pp. 105-7.

¹³ Rosenberry, pp. 116-27, 82-83, 145, 148, 153-4, 149.

¹⁴ Rosenberry, pp. 4-5.

¹⁵ Rosenberry, pp. 2, 103-4, 138, 143, 155, 170, 173, 184; George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," in Comedy (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 3-57.

¹⁶ The following articles, book chapters and dissertations discuss subjects tangential to Melville's humor:

Frederick Asals, "Satire and Skepticism in the Two Temples," Books at Brown, 24, No. 1 (1971), 7-18.

- R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., "The Triple Thrust of Satire in Melville's Short Stories: Society, The Narrator, and the Reader," Studies in American Humor, 1, No. 3 (1975), 172-79.
- Hennig Cohen, "A Comic Mode of the Romantic Imagination: Poe, Hawthorne, Melville," in Louis D. Rubin, Jr., ed., The Comic Imagination in American Literature (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), pp. 85-100. On Melville, the bright and dark.
- _____, "Wordplay on Personal Names in the Writings of Herman Melville," Texas Studies in Literature, 4 (1963), 83-97.
- Marjorie Dew, "Black-Hearted Melville: 'Geniality' Reconsidered," in Artful Thunder, eds. Robert J. DeMott and Sanford E. Marovitz (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1975). In response to Merton Sealts, says Melville not genial, but black-hearted.
- Clifton Fadiman, "Herman Melville," Atlantic Monthly Oct. 1943, 83-91. This article, which says Moby-Dick is humorless, spurred a series of defenses of Melville's humor such as Joseph Jones's in 1948; one even appeared in Vienna (see Kühnelt).
- Robert M. Farnsworth, "Israel Potter: Pathetic Comedy," Bulletin of the New York Public Library, 65 (1961), 125-32.
- Joseph J. Firebaugh, "Humorist as Rebel: The Melville of Typee," Nineteenth Century Fiction, 9 (1954), 108-20.
- Edward Francis Foster, "A Study of Grim Humor in the Works of Poe, Melville, and Twain," Diss. Vanderbilt 1957. A catalogue of grim jokes.
- Charles B. Hands, "The Comic Entrance to Moby-Dick," College Literature, 2, No. 3 (Fall 1975), 182-91. Although Ahab is the central figure of the novel, Ishmael's humor can be used to get college students interested in Moby-Dick.
- Bartlett C. Jones, "American Frontier Humor in Melville's Typee," New York Folklore Quarterly, 15 (1959), 283-88.
- Joseph Jones, "Humor in Moby-Dick," University of Texas Studies in English, (1945), 51-71. See Fadiman, above.

- Harro H. Kühnelt, "Der Humor in Melville's Moby-Dick," Anglo-Americana, Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Professor Dr. Leo Hibler-Lebmannsport, Wiener Beiträge zur Englischen Philologie, Band LXII, Vienna, 111-21.
- Kenneth S. Lynn, "Herman Melville," in The Comic Tradition in America, An Anthology (New York: Norton, 1968), pp. 232-35. His Melville selections are "Cock-A-Doodle-Do!" and Chapter IX, Israel Potter.
- Luther Stearns Mansfield, "Melville's Comic Articles on Zachary Taylor," American Literature, 9 (1938), 411-18. See Chapter 3, below, for discussion.
- Egbert S. Oliver, "'Cock-A-Doddle-Do!' And Transcendental Hocus-Pocus," New England Quarterly, 21 (1948), 204-16. Melville being satirical.
- Merton M. Sealts, Jr., "Melville's Geniality," 1968 Festschrift: eds. Max F. Schulz, William D. Templeman and Charles R. Metzger, Essays in American and English Literature Presented to Bruce Robert McElderry, Jr. (Athens: Ohio University Press), pp. 3-26. Melville is genial.
- Robert Shulman, "The Serious Functions of Melville's Phallic Jokes," American Literature, 33 (1961), 179-94.
- William Bysshe Stein, "Melville's Comedy of Faith," Journal of English Literary History, 27 (1960), 315-33. On "The Piazza."
- R. E. Watters, "Melville's 'Sociality,'" American Literature, 17 (1945), 33-49. Similar to Sealts.
- Otis Wheeler, "Humor in Moby-Dick: Two Problems," American Literature, 29 (1957), 203-6.
- ¹⁷ Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., Ishmael's White World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 148.
- ¹⁸ Edgar A. Dryden, Melville's Thematics of Form (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968).
- ¹⁹ John Seelye, Melville: The Ironic Diagram (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
- ²⁰ Joseph Flibbert, Melville and The Art of Burlesque (Amsterdam: Rodopi N.V., 1974).
- ²¹ Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

- 22 Leon F. Seltzer, "Camus's Absurd and the World of Melville's Confidence-Man," PMLA, 82 (1967), 14-27.
- 23 The Vision of Melville and Conrad, A Comparative Study (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1970), pp. xxxi-vi.
- 24 A Cheerful Nihilism, Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 77-132.
- 25 Entry of November 20, 1856, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Journal, referring to Melville's visit at Southport, November 11-13, 1856. Rpt. in Jay Leyda, The Melville Log (New York: Harcourt, 1951) II, 528-29.
- 26 Meredith, p. 45.
- 27 Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960). See also William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism (New York: Knopf, 1967), pp. 574-75, although as Strachey points out, difficulties do arise because terms change in translation.
- 28 For example, Rosenberry; Milton R. Stern, The Fine-Hammered Steel of Herman Melville (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957); Merlin Bowen, Self and Experience in the Writings of Herman Melville (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960); Tyrus Hillway, Herman Melville (New York: Twayne, 1963); D. E. S. Maxwell, Herman Melville (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968); and Ray B. Browne, Melville's Drive to Humanism (Lafayette: Purdue University Studies, 1971).
- 29 Robert W. Corrigan, "Introduction, Comedy and the Comic Spirit," in Comedy, Meaning and Form (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), p. 2.
- 30 Anatomy, "First Essay. Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes," and "Third Essay. Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths."
- 31 Corrigan, p. 5.
- 32 Wylie Sypher, "Our New Sense of the Comic," in Comedy, pp. 193-214.
- 33 For another example from a very different sort of author, see George Mikes, Laughing Matter (New York: The Library Press, 1971). See also Boyce Rensberger, "It's Not a Laughing Matter, Being a Comic These Days . . . And, Psychologist Finds, Funny Men are Sad Men," The New York Times, May 28, 1974, p. 41.

³⁴ The Amiable Humorist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

³⁵ Henry James, Hawthorne (1879) and Walter Blair, "Introduction," Native American Humor (1937; rpt. San Francisco, Chandler, 1960), p. 109.

³⁶ The only exception is an early essay, Brander Matthews, "American Humor," in The American of The Future and Other Essays (New York: Scribners, 1909), pp. 161-76. Matthews suggests the roots of American humor may have been in seventeenth century English literature.

³⁷ The Raven and the Whale (New York: Harcourt, 1956).

³⁸ See n. 35.

³⁹ Herbert Ross Brown, The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789-1860 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1940) and Richard Chase, The American Novel, hint at this idea which Leslie A. Fiedler spells out in Love and Death in The American Novel (1967; rpt. Paladin, 1970).

⁴⁰ D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: Viking, 1923), pp. 145-46.

⁴¹ R. P. Blackmur, "The Craft of Herman Melville: A Putative Statement," The Lion and The Honeycomb (New York: Harcourt, 1955), rpt. in Richard Chase, ed., Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 75-91.

⁴² F. O. Matthiessen tells us that classic American literature provides tragic forms of what is comic in our folkloric myths. See "Method and Scope," and "American Demigods," in American Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941). Fiedler seems inadvertently to keep returning to comedy in his study. Finally in his conclusion he confronts it directly.

Chapter II
Extracts and Etymologies

In the years 1848-1850, Melville read voraciously and in a method recommended by Robert Burton, Samuel Johnson, as well as by himself; read what you wish when you wish. What Melville's choice was in his reading pleasure, and how it influenced his humor, I have sought to suggest by providing in this chapter a sampling of excerpts from humorous prose works that Melville read. It would be reductive to concentrate too much on any one current in Melville's reading. But if it is generally acknowledged that in his later reading Melville was teaching himself to write poetry, I would suggest that in his early period Melville was teaching himself to write prose--and specifically prose humor.

The sampling that follows is not limited to Melville's reading in 1848-1850; Melville may well have begun reading Samuel Johnson and Washington Irving earlier.¹ Neither have I attempted to provide excerpts from everything humorous that Melville read--this would be a mammoth task. The reader specifically may be surprised not to find excerpts from Cervantes and Smollett. I have omitted the former because his influence upon the development of the novel is so broad and so broadly recognized as not to be distinctly of interest regarding Melville. Smollett's picaresque novels Melville read early and enthusias-

tically. I will discuss Smollett in my comments on Omoo. Meanwhile I've chosen to use an excerpt instead from an earlier picaresque novel, Lazarillo de Tormes, which was a source for Smollett as well as for Melville.

One further note: these excerpts for the most part do not identify sources of particular passages in Melville, although the authors quoted are known to have provided him with various paragraphs and even whole incidents. We know, for instance, of the affinities of Melville's catalogue of books in Mardi with that of Rabelais in Gargantua, and of Melville's humors characters in "Bartleby" with those in Charles Lamb's "South Sea House." Source study in Melville is endless, however; we will for now drop the fragmentary and confusing approach of comparing bits and pieces in order that we may approach the central question here regarding Melville's borrowings, namely, what literary tradition of prose humor did Melville find in his reading and how did he use it. Ultimately the point will be to provide a context for understanding and discussing Melville's humor, and for evaluating its distinctive achievement. For the moment, however, in my comments on the excerpts, I will say little of Melville.

In the excerpts that follow, a distinct pattern does emerge. It is a pattern which is fundamentally tied to the nature of prose and which ties together the major sources of Melville's humor: continental Renaissance humor, English amiable humor, and American humor.

Beginning in the Renaissance and triggered by the

dramatic geographical explorations of that era, prose humor is a response to man's new sense of his vast potential in a world with a new frontier. The old forms of the discourse and the sermon which dominated prose before the Renaissance presented God and the church as the ultimate and fixed arsenals of certainty and authority. Humorous prose plays off this old function of prose. It celebrates man instead of God; it explodes the notion of authority, and it toys with an image of man as the all-powerful explorer of the universe and of knowledge in general.

This does mean man, not mankind. While sexuality plays a key role in the way humorists teasingly enjoy shocking their readers, women as characters play a minor role in most of these works. The prose humorists from the Renaissance on are toying specifically with a new male self-image. They are writing, often literally, of man the explorer and traveller, and of man the writer of almanacs, dictionaries and encyclopedias.

The three words extravagance, vagabond, and vagary--all with the root vaga, wander or travel--will be helpful for particularizing various elements in the prose humor triggered by man's explorations. In general, however, we may notice that all the humorists present an ambivalent vision of man, full of the lyricism of both braggadocio and defeat.

Authors and dates of the works excerpted, and
 dates Melville read them²,

- (1848) Francois Rabelais, 1532-1562
 (1849) Cyrano De Bergerac, 1657
 (1849) Pierre Bayle, 1697
 (1850) Lazarillo de Tormes, 1554
 (1849) Ben Jonson, 1599
 (1848) Robert Burton, 1621
 (?) Samuel Johnson, 1759
 (1849) Laurence Sterne, 1760-1767
 (1849) Thomas De Quincey, 1821
 (1849 &
 earlier) Charles Lamb, 1821
 (1847,
 1853) Washington Irving, 1819-1820
The Farmer's Almanac, 1842
Jonathan Jaw-Stretcher's Yankee Story All-My-Nack,
 1852
The Crockett Almanac, 1854

The Lives, Heroic Deeds and Sayings of Gargantua and His Son Pantagruel by Francois Rabelais. Chapter VIII, "How They Apparelled Gargantua" opens as follows:

Being of this age, his father ordained to have clothes made to him in his owne livery, which was white and blew. To work then went the Tailors, and with great expedition were those clothes made, cut, and sewed, according to the fashion that was then in request....

For his breeches were taken up eleven hundred and five ells, and a third of white broad cloth; they were cut in forme of pillars, chamfered, channel's and pinked behinde, that they might not overheat his reines; and were within the panes, puffed out with the lining of as much blew damask as was needful: and remark, that he had very good Leg-harnish, proportionable to the rest of his stature.

For his Codpeece was used sixteen ells, and a quarter of the same cloth, and it was fashioned on the top like unto a Triumphant Arch, most gallantly fastened with two enamell'd Clasps, in each of which was set a great Emerauld, as big as an Orange; for, as sayes Orpheus, lib. de lapidibus, and Plinius, libr. ultimo, it hath an erective vertue and comfourtative of the natural member. The exiture, out-jecting or out-standing of his Codpeece, was of the length of a yard, jagged and pinked, and withal bagging, and strouting out with the blew damask lining, after the manner of his breeches; but had you seen the faire Embroyderie of the small needle-work purle, and the curiously interlaced knots, by the Goldsmiths Art, setout and trimmed with rich Diamonds, precious Rubies, fine Turquoises, costly Emeraulds, and Persian pearles; you would have compared it to a faire Cornucopia, or Horne of abundance, such as you see in Anticks, or as Rhea gave to the two Nymphs, Amalthea and Ida, the Nurses of Jupiter.

And like to that Horn of Abundance, it was still gallant, succulent droppie, sappie, pithie, lively, alwayes flourishing, alwayes fructifying, full of juice, full of flower, full of fruit, and all manner of delight. I avow God, it would have done one good to have seen him, but I will tell you more of him in the book which I have made of the dignity of Codpieces. One thing I will tell you, that, as it was both long and large, so was it well furnished and victualled within, nothing like unto the hypocritical Codpieces of some fond Wooers and Wench courters, which are stuffed only with wind, to the great prejudice of the female sex.

For his Gown were employed nine thousand six hundred elles, wanting two thirds, of blew velvet, as before, all so diagonally purled, that by true perspective issued thence an unnamed colour, like that you see in the necks of Turtle-doves or Turkie-cocks, which wonderfully rejoyceth the eyes of the beholders. For his Bonnett or Cap were taken up three hundred two elles, and a quarter of white velvet....For his Plume, he wore a faire great blew feather, plucked from an Onocrotal of the countrey of Hircania the wilde, very prettily hanging downe over his right eare; for the Jewel or broach which in his Cap he carried, he had in a Cæke of gold, weighing three score and eight marks, a faire piece enamell'd....³

Rabelais projects an image of giddy desire. His book is a tall tale, the first major piece of frontier humor in Western literature.

In his opening chapter on the genealogy of Gargantua, Rabelais' narrator Alcofrybas inconspicuously asserts, "I cannot think but I am come of the race of some rich King or Prince in former times, for never yet saw you any man that had a greater desire to be a king, and to be rich, than I have." The triumph central to this work and one much simpler and far more direct than the old world's veni vidi vici is I desire, I am.

Gargantua, we recall, is the "Great Throat" born screaming for drink. As a child he dazzles his father with a childish extravaganza of scatological wit, and as a young man builds for a friend the Abbey of Theleme, a convent consecrated to delight--with no walls, no clocks and no rules. As an adult, he fathers Pantagruel, the "All Thirsty," who in his birth blasts his mother to death, and in his infancy--already we are told outdoing Hercules--tears his iron-chained cradle out of its support. His invention of Pantagruelion, the herb unquenchable by fire, leaves the gods in a trembling fit and lets him outdo another mystic titan. Prometheus only stole fire; Pantagruel has stolen the unquenchable--Desire. No wonder he falls in love at first sight with the rogue Panurge, a giant in nothing but insatiable desire which when thwarted turns him to ruggedly obscene, vengeful practical jokes.

Panurge attacks woman as the hardest embodiment of nature's resistance to his desire. But revenge leaves his desire unabated; Panurge decides to marry if only he can clear

up, as he tries in the last three books, the small problem of the threat of cuckoldry. Of course, no matter whom he consults, he cannot. Nature's intransigency is nature's practical joke on the great practical joker, as is the imponderable but exuberant oracle, "Trinc!" the book's last word.

Rabelais does not merely write about giants. He writes in a prose gargantuan with exuberance, as free of rules and as promiscuous in its delights as the inhabitants of Theleme. As Panurge, trying to disprove Pantagruel's friendly premonition that a married Panurge will be cuckolded, beaten and robbed, consults one foolish authority after another, Rabelais indulges in a triumphant ventriloquism of all the pompous male mouthpieces of supposed wisdom: lawyer, poet, philosopher, physician, even wise fool and classic writer. But Rabelais' extravagant rifling through experience is always punctuated by the same rap, like the monosyllabic Trinc. At the end of Book II, the narrator suddenly turns on the readers; it's their fault, he says, for wasting their time on such flim flam stories, not the author's for writing them.

Gargantua, Pantagruel and Panurge are embodiments of a celebration of a new freedom, a new knowledge, a new sphere of action, a new vision of the possibilities of man. As Gargantua sloughs off medieval scholasticism to embrace the new learning, as Pantagruel and Panurge voyage round a fantastic world, Rabelais himself celebrates the audacity of man pushing off and wrenching free of the old world and venturing boldly into the new. Typically, however, while he hacks back at the old world he hacks ahead at the new which he knows will prove

as preposterous as the old. It is typical that Alcofrybas' excited question, "What are you doing?" to the man in the new world he discovers in Pantagruel's throat, yields only the simple anticlimactic answer, "I'm planting a cabbage." Nonetheless, as Erich Auerbach suggests, in Rabelais "is developed an entirely different, entirely new and, at the period, extremely current theme--the theme of the discovery of a new world, with all the astonishment, the widening horizons and change in the world picture, which follow upon such a discovery."⁴

Rabelais' new world was a shuffling of the globe so profound as to jumble rich and poor, aristocrat and folk. The excitement of his prose lies as much in his decision to write in the vernacular as in his turning inside out the popular form of the sermon.⁵ We may ask why Rabelais wrote in prose rather than in drama or poetry. Prose freed him both from drama's strictures of dialogue, the unities and consistent characterization; and from poetry's strictures of prosody and rhyme. Prose gave Rabelais all the liberties of the sermon, with its rich heritage of immediacy, its energetic entertaining oral quality, its free wheeling shifting characterizations. In prose he could write as he would, changing the sermon's one requirement, preaching scripture, by the utmost audacity, to teaching a new scripture based on man's new excitement about his potential. Rabelais' sermon celebrates man's health, vigor and joy. His humor is the humor of extravagance, the humor of a voyaging beyond to a new frontier. And if the image of man as a new world giant is a fantasy, it is one that "wonderfully rejoiceth the eyes of the beholder." (For specifics on Rabelais and Melville, see below, pp. 119-20, 177-80.)

Cyrano de Bergerac's Voyage to the Moon opens with some friends walking on a moonlit night.

For my part, said I, I am desirous to add my fancies to yours and without amusing myself with the witty notions you use to tickle time to make it run the faster, I think that the Moon is a world like this and that our world is their Moon. The company gratified me with a great shout of Mirth.

"Perhaps in the same way," said I, "at this moment in the Moon they jest at some one who there maintains that this globe is a world."

But though I showed them that Pythagoras, Epicurus, Democritus and, in our own age, Copernicus and Kepler had been of this opinion, I did but cause them to strain their throats the more heartily.

...I returned home and scarcely had I entered my room to rest after the journey when I found on my table an open book which I had not put there. I recognised it as mine, which made me ask my servant why he had taken it out of the book-case. I asked him but perfunctorily, for he was a fat Lorrainer, whose soul admitted of no exercise more noble than those of an oyster. He swore to me that either the Devil or I had put it there. For my own part I was sure I had not handled it for more than a year.

I glanced at it again; it was the works of Cardan; and though I had no idea of reading it I fell, as if directed to it, precisely upon a story told by this philosopher. He says that, reading one evening by candle-light, he perceived two tall old men enter through the closed door of his room and after he had asked them many questions they told him they were inhabitants of the Moon; which said, they disappeared. I remained so amazed to see a book brought there by itself as well as at the time and the leaf at which I found it open that I took this whole train of events to be an inspiration of God urging me to make known to men that the Moon is a world.

"What!" quoth I to myself, "after I have talked of a matter this very day, a book, which is perhaps the only one in a world that treats of this subject, flies down from the shelf on to my table, becomes capable of reason to the extent of opening at the very page of so marvellous an adventure and thereby supplies meditations to my fancy and an object to my resolution. "Doubtless," I continued, "the two old men who appeared to that great man are the same who have moved my book and opened it at this page to spare themselves the trouble of making me the harangue they made Cardan. But," I added, "how can I clear up this doubt if I do not go there? And why not?" I answered myself at once, "Prometheus of old went to Heaven to steal fire!"

These feverish outbursts were followed by the hope of making successfully such a voyage.

I shut myself up to achieve my purpose in a rather lonely country-house where, after I had flattered my fancy with several methods which might have borne me up there, I committed myself to the heavens in this manner:

I fastened all about me a number of little bottles filled with dew, and the heat of the Sun drawing them up carried me so high that at last I found myself above the loftiest clouds.⁶

Within two pages, this passage carries the reader in a giddy progress from pedestrian cobblestones into space. The frame on which Cyrano builds his idea--at first a mere jest of one-upmanship--to an extravagance, is a burlesque of religious inspiration. To convince his friends he quotes scientific scripture, to convince himself he provides a miracle of the open book, and to conclude he allows himself God's shining benediction. Cyrano uses the paraphernalia of religion, however, not merely to burlesque it, but to suggest a parallel religion. Fully aware of the extravagance of his conceit, Cyrano worships the mind, the will, the imagination of man.

Cyrano's book is clearly a byproduct of the new explorers and new astronomers. It is certainly flimsy as a work of art, particularly compared to Rabelais', and the substance of the new ideas, both philosophical and scientific as they are presented, often does not even make sense. For Cyrano's purpose, however, it need not, just as the satire need not come home neatly and sharply to any particular targets. Swift would borrow from Cyrano to write his satire--just as Moliere did to write his comedies. Cyrano's work as it stood, however, was neither satire nor comedy, but jeu d'esprit.

In a later section of the book, burlesquing Genesis, Cyrano tells a silly story of how falling to the moon, he found and accidentally ate some apples. Pantagruel's ancestors had originally achieved their great stature by feasting on spectacular apples; perhaps Cyrano gets his story, as he gets much else, from Rabelais. As always, however, Cyrano's impish burlesque calls less attention to what it is dismissing than what it is

embracing, an exultant image of man feasting on knowledge and getting giddy on his new sense of power. On his visit to the sun with its people of an all-powerful imagination, Cyrano expostulates, "'But' I cried, 'is it not a dream to think that Monsieur Descartes, whom you have not seen since you left the world of the Earth, is three leagues from here, because you have imagined it?' As I spoke the last syllable we saw Descartes arrive."

Descartes has arrived. The opening of the frontier that produced the humor of extravagance could also boil down and turn around the extravagance of What I desire I am to the serious philosophical tenet of "I think therefore I am." Cyrano, however, like Rabelais, was no Columbus, no Kepler, no Descartes. Like Rabelais he was able in a work of prose humor to make good game of man eating spiritedly his apple of knowledge, and to send man off on extravagant voyages with the utmost dispatch and excitement.

(See below, pp. 230-31.)

One of Pierre Bayle's articles in his Historical and Critical Dictionary is on King Abimelech. In passing, Bayle mentions how the King discovered that Isaac and Rebecca were not, after all, sister and brother; Abimelech accidentally saw them through their window at a certain sport. Bayle's comment is as follows:

[E] A certain Sport. Some have imagin'd, that the Scripture intended, under the Word Sport, to express, modestly, the conjugal Duty, which Isaac happen'd to be paying his Wife, at a Time when Abimelech was looking out of the window....

Others will not hear of this sort of Explanation; they say, that Isaac was too wise, and too prudent, to take his Measures so ill; and that, upon such Occasion, he took care to be in a Place, where the Neighbors could not overlook him from their Windows. "We must therefore understand," say they, "by the Word Sport, a certain Pass-time, which, though it was not the last Act of the Play, was yet too familiar between Persons not married, however they might be otherwise a-kin." This Pass-time must mean something else, than talking familiarly, jesting, and laughing together; for a Brother and Sister may do all this very modestly, and without giving occasion to such a Conclusion as Abimelech drew from the sporting of Isaac and Rebecca. This Explication appears to me incomparably more reasonable, than the former: and, yet, it must be allowed, that Fondness might sometimes hinder Isaac from observing that great Precaution, which rigid Moralists would have exacted from the Patriarch: for, in short, it cannot be denied, that Abimelech, looking through a Window, surpriz'd him diverting himself with Rebecca at a certain Game, whence he could not but certainly conclude they were Man and Wife. Take notice, that they had been marry'd forty Years: Isaac was, then, eighty Years old. St. Austin, in his Book against Faustus the Manichean, a great Exploder of the Patriarchs, defends Isaac in a solid Manner; and, indeed, it is too rigorous to expect, that a Patriarch, or a Bishop, if he is married, should not recreate himself a little with his Wife, without closing all his Window-Shutters. For we must have this good Opinion of their Prudence, that if Nature inclines the greatest Men to a little indulgence, they will walk so cautiously upon this slippery Road, as to take care that no Observation shall be made of them from their Neighbour's Window. Cornelius a Lapide does not know what it is he is confuting, when he sets himself against the first Explication.... "The unchast Jews understand this Sport of matrimonial Copulation. But away with these Snarlers! Who can believe, that Isaac was so immodest, leud, and brutish, publicly, and in the King's Sight?" This is not the thing: no one pretends, that Isaac was, then, in the middle of the Street: he was in his Chamber; and had not sufficiently fasten'd his Window-Shutters. This is the whole Matter; and, if this is too much, you will be obliged to condemn the Patriarch, and to act the Cato against him. It is well known that Cato expell'd one Manlius from the Senate, because at noon Day, and in the Presence of his Daughter, he had given his Wife a Kiss. This Manlius would have been Consul, probably, the next Election. Some pretend to discover an allegorical Mystery in this Sport of Isaac and Rebecca, of which certainly neither they, nor the sacred Historian, in the least dreamt. I shall not place these Errors among those which I am compiling. It would be an Attempt like that of drinking the Sea dry. It were to be wish'd, that the greatest part of these mysterious Conceits had been unknown to the World.⁷

In his mammoth Historical and Critical Dictionary, Pierre Bayle stays at home but by the all-encompassing vastness of his enterprise, actually circumnavigates the world in a solo voyage that staggers the imagination, and it seems, was meant to do so. Bayle's task consists not just of compiling a dictionary of all human history, but of providing a personal running commentary on all that history. Bayle is perpetually interpreting and evaluating events, sorting through all the opinions of previous historians and commentators and providing his own modest reading of the facts, not just on every major and minor figure's major and minor achievement but on every controversy that comes up along the way.

As the Bayle scholar Richard Popkin writes, beginning with our century, an encyclopedia could "no longer amuse or cause philosophical and moral reflection; it had to inform and only inform..." Yet reading Bayle now we "see how the world looked to an amazing man at the end of the seventeenth century, before everyone became 'enlightened.'"⁸ Ultimately the light that Bayle reveals is that there is not very much light to reveal; rewriting Maimonides' Guide to the Perplexed,⁹ Bayle disentangled perplexities only to reknit them again. Bayle's five folio-volume dictionary tells us not just that we are full of vulgar errors, but that all reason is a vulgar error. It is in short a seventeenth-century shaggy dog story, dedicated to acatle^apsia--the utter incomprehensibility of all things.

In the quoted passage, Bayle brings his scrutiny to bear on one more exegetical question, sorting his way through the morass of critical ignorance. His commentary, however, does

not just explicate or clarify. It teasingly elevates the subject and allows foolish commentators to have their say in such a way that the loving couple is temporarily in the commentary moved from their bedroom into the street itself. Finally it creates an image of the Patriarch as a man closing, or not closing, his shutters, as a man upon "a slippery road." Indeed the essence of all Bayle's commentary seems to be precisely that: life is a slippery road. Bayle repeatedly refers to public sex because it undermines man's view of his own piety, decorum and general good grasp on things chaotic. There is an iconoclasm in public sex; so is there in public thinking aloud.

For all his quiet ridicule, however, Bayle never disparages man's love of his mind, man's love of thinking. His entire book seems actually to be his sport, a certain sport. In his seriousness he is the man he has described in his portrait of Arriaga, a subtle critical genius, the last of the great scholastics. In his humor he is more like the two characters he describes in his portrait of Hipparchia, Hipparchia herself--absurdly, preposterously, roguishly in love with the skeptic Crates--as well as the man who assaults her during an argument at dinner. "Theodorus did not waste any time answering her as a logician. He threw himself upon her and untied her gown."

Bayle's sport is that of a man who writes as he pleases, juxtaposing whatever incongruities he wishes, improvising, moving back and forth from the most scholarly erudition to the most colloquial, even nonverbal, assaults, poking fun of the extremes of allegorical and literal-minded thinking. In defense of his obscenity, he typically piles up official-sounding

arguments. He is a historian, he says, and it is his job to tell all. Then, not to tell such stories would be to omit what everyone knows and talks about anyway. And finally, with regard to his writing obscenⁱties in the vernacular: it is unfair that monks should have the pleasure of reading such matters in Latin, and the rest of the world be shut out. If the monks insist on reading, for example, a tract on the sounds women should or should not make, Bayle roguishly opens the book to all the world, and cannot resist adding his own advice, that women should not be grave and silent during conception unless they want their offspring to be dolts.

Millicent Bell would have us find in Bayle the same anguish that Hawthorne stressed in Melville. She writes of Bayle, "A French protestant, educated in Geneva, his is the essential Calvinist dilemma which Melville later re-encountered. The anguish is intense behind the words as he reviews the evil-doings of man from Eden on."¹⁰ Richard Popkin seems to be addressing himself to these very remarks when he writes that "Bayle suffered, apparently, from no Angst, no fear and trembling. Unlike his nineteenth-century admirer, Herman Melville, Bayle was not desperately seeking God or trying to pierce the heart of Moby-Dick."¹¹ If we may correct Popkin on Melville as Popkin was perhaps correcting Bell on Bayle, neither was Melville "desperately" seeking God. Indeed, what Melville very likely admired in Bayle was not the anguish of a questioning Calvinism, but a certain sport, a certain humor.

Melville did share a religious orientation with the three French renaissance writers discussed here, as well as

one other, Montaigne, but we should note exactly what that orientation was. In all of these, the reader finds evidence of faith as well as of heresy, of Christian as well as of Judaic concepts, of flirtations with Manicheanism as well as with Pyrrhonism. Critics struggling to define these writers' religious positions must eventually throw up their hands. These authors were not writing tracts; they only sought to explore their own minds, and to do so, they took every liberty they desired. Humor thrives on a certain blend of freedom and oppression, which Renaissance France provided in good measure. Melville was not the first to feel the giddy exhilaration of writing a "wicked" book¹² of free thinking; nor the first to recognize the humor in that exuberant illusion of freedom. One finally cannot put a religious label on these men, partly because their labels are nothing less than their momentous, extravagant, expository works, but also because they were not especially interested in God; they were talking about man.

(See below, pp. 201-2.)

Lazarillo de Tormes' first master was a brutal blind con artist. His second gave the boy only onions to eat and nearly bludgeoned the boy to death for trying to steal a few pieces of bread from his master's hoard. Recovering from his wounds, the boy thanked God he found a new master, a squire who was sure to treat him well, for the Squire was not only dressed well but was thoroughly devout.

At the same smart clip as before we started down one of the streets. I was the happiest person in the world to see that we weren't bothering to do any shopping for food. I had decided that my new master was obviously a man who bought things in quantities, and that his meal was probably all ready and was exactly what I needed and was pining for.

As we went along the clock struck one in the afternoon, and we came to a house in front of which my master stopped, and I with him. Hitching his cloak to the left, he drew a key from his sleeve and opened the door, and we went into the house. It was so dark and dismal in the room just inside the door that it might have been made that way on purpose to frighten people as they came in, but it opened into a little patio and a number of decent-sized rooms.

Once we were inside he took off his cloak and asked me whether my hands were clean; then we shook it out and folded it. And then very fastidiously he blew the dust off a stone bench there and laid the cloak down on it. Having taken care of that, he sat down next to it and asked me endless questions about where I came from and how I had happened to come to that city.

It took me longer to tell the whole story than I would have liked, because to my mind, at that hour it would have been more proper for me to have been setting the table and dishing up the stew, instead of supplying his curiosity. However, I satisfied him on the subject of myself insofar as my talent for lying permitted. I expatiated upon my good points and kept quiet about everything else, for I didn't feel it was the moment for intimacies. When I had finished he sat there without moving for a while, and I took that for a bad sign. There it was, nearly two o'clock and he gave no evidence of having any more appetite than a corpse.

Then I began to ponder over his locking the door behind us, and over the fact that I hadn't yet heard the footsteps of a living person either above or below us anywhere in the house. I'd seen nothing but walls, and not a single chair among them, nor stool, nor bench, nor table, nor even a chest like my old stand-by. I ended up thinking the place must be under an enchantment. And just as I came to this conclusion, he said to me:

"Have you eaten, boy?"

"No sir," I said, "for it hadn't struck eight yet when I met you."

"Well, even at that hour I had already had my breakfast, and let me tell you, if I have partaken of anything at all in the morning that way, I never touch another thing until nightfall. So get along as best you can, and we'll have supper later on."

Your Excellency may well believe that when I heard this I nearly fell down in a faint, and it wasn't just from hunger, it was the certain knowledge that fortune was dead set against me. Every-

thing that I had endured came back to me, and at the thought of my hardships I began to cry. I remembered the considerations that had held me when I had thought of leaving the priest, and how I'd told myself that however miserable and miserly he was, I might take up with somebody worse. In short, I cried for the hardships of my past life, and my death which could not be far in the future. But with all that I dissimulated as well as I could, and said:

"Sir, I'm only a boy and I don't mind much about eating, thank God. I can boast that I have a smaller appetite than any of my colleagues--all the masters that I have had up until now have praised me on that account."

"That certainly is a virtue," he said, "and I will be more warmly attached to you because of it. Stuffing is a pursuit for pigs, and men who have any self-respect should eat moderately."¹³

From the humor of extravagance to the humor of the vagabond. Instead of the humorous excitement of a wandering beyond, we have the humorous oppression of being bound to wander. If the picaresque novel in Spain came into being with the great prosperity, growth and flurry of travelling both within and without the country during the early Renaissance, the exhilaration of being on one's own and finding one's fortune is repeatedly, incessantly knocked down by the hardship and even brutality that reality brings to Lazarillo and other picaros. Lazarillo is a boy--a little Lazarus--whose mother has thrown him out on the world to survive. The vagabond becomes a rogue in the hardest sense of the word; he learns early that as he will be the victim of practical jokes, he himself must practice them on others, even if in one of his early acts of this sort, the practical joke entails killing the blind man, his first master.

In this passage we are sent back and forth from expectation to recognition. God gives Lazarillo a wonderful master who turns out to be worse off than he is; Lazarillo gets ecstatic about his good fortune, becomes "the happiest person in the world" as his master passes one stall after another, until

Lazarillo learns that, after all, the cupboard was bare, and the new master, like the new world, is not much better than the old. The wonderful interplay--humorous and sharply pathetic--between master and boy, acted out punctiliously by both as they strive to outmatch each other with displays of showmanship, is an explicit dig at the showmanship of God who puts on a wonderful display but whose house is empty. Indeed we cannot be surprised that this book was indexed. It is saturated with ironic gratitude to God. Here again, however, the "heresy" is not the point. The author is not quarreling with God by wrenching free of delusions; he is only determined to see things as they are.

Nor is the author ridiculing one group above another. That the author has sympathy for both should be especially clear in this excerpt, but his sympathy in no way obstructs his image of the emptiness and horror of living in this world. We really should not be surprised that Lazarillo, in an ironic commentary on the New Testament Lazarus' reward of heaven, is rewarded ultimately with a civil service job as a town crier, and a wife for whom he pimps, in effect, to the local Archbishop. Lazarillo's ruthlessness and moral vacuity have been growing all through the novel; the book leaves idealism in shreds but it does so nonetheless with a sympathy for man denuded of even those shreds of idealism. Lazarillo's fastidious squire is not merely the target of a satiric attack, nor the emblem for a moral lesson, but one more fool trying to shield himself from a brutally empty world. The humor of Lazarillo, the vagabond, projects the predicament of man being a vagabond on his own earth, constrained to wander, dreaming of food and enchantments, waking up to hunger and brutality, following in the pattern of God's hard moral neutrality. (See below, pp. 249-50.)

The characters in Ben Jonson's "EveryMan Out of His Humor:"

Asper: He is of an ingenious and free spirit, eager and constant in reproof, without fear controlling the world's abuses. One, whom no servile hope of gain, or frosty apprehension of danger, can make to be a Parasite, either to time, place, or opinion.

Macilente: A man well parted, a sufficient scholar, and travelled; who (wanting that place in the world's account, which he thinks his merit capable of) falls into such an envious apoplexie, with which his judgment is so dazzled, and distasted, that he grows violently impatient of any opposite happiness in another.

Puntarvolo: A Vain-glorious Knight, over-Englishing his travels, and wholly consecrated to singularity; the very Jacob's staff of complement: a Sir, that hath lived to see the revolution of time in most of his apparel. Of presence good enough, but so palpably affected to his owne praise, that (for want of flatterers) he commends himself, to the floutage of his own family. He deals upon returns, and strange performances, resolving (in despite of public derision) to stick to his own particular fashion, phrase and gesture.

Carlo Buffone: A Public, scurrilous, and prophane Jester; that (more swift than Circe) with absurd similes will transform any person into deformity. A good Feast-hound, or Banquet-beagle, that will sent out a supper some three miles off, and swear to his Patrons (Damn him) he came in Oars, when he was but wafted over in a Sculler. A slave, that hath an extraordinary gift in pleasing his palat, and will swill up more sack at a sitting, then would make all the Guard a posset. His religion is railing, and his discourse ribaldry. They stand highest in his respect, whom he studies most to reproach.

Fastidius Briske: A neat, spruce, affecting Courtier, one that wears clothes well, and in fashion; practiseth by his glass how to salute; speaks good remnants (notwithstanding the Vase-vial and Tobacco;) swears tersely, and with variety; cares not what Lady's favor he belies, or great Man's familiarity; a good property to perfume the boot of a coach. He will borrow another man's horse to praise, and backs him as his own. Or, for a need, on foot can post himself into credit with his merchant,¹⁴ only with the jingle of his spur, and the jerk of his wand...

And so on. Thirteen of the fifteen characters in the play are men.

"Every Man Out of His Humor" is a weak play which suffers from being a sequel rehashing the material of Jonson's grand success, "Every Man in His Humor." It seems Jonson was so infatuated with his idea of a cast of humors

that in the second play he let it stand alone, plot or fable becoming an unnecessary frivolity, the whole action consisting of the various characters speaking and acting out the descriptions of the Dramatis Personae. "Every Man Out of His Humor" is a parade of humors characters who mechanically scorn, razz and gull each other by turns and, in the end, all capitulate to sanity, relinquishing their humors in a predictable series of coming-to-one's-senses.

Indeed what Jonson adds here to his famous contribution of the comedy of humors is his definition of humor not merely as an imbalance of personality, but as the affectation of such an imbalance. The descriptions spell out the way the characters are not just passively foolish, but actively and thoroughly dedicated to their humors; they consecrate themselves to singularity, make a religion, a profession, an apoplexy of their foibles. Like Asper, the vagabond of a free rough spirit and the most important character of the play, they are as vigorous in criticizing others as they are in being fools themselves. Indeed the play as a parade is not just of a cast of characters before an audience; it is of a cast of characters before a chorus before an audience, whose main occupation is watching and commenting upon the parade it makes of itself. The play consists of a Virginia Reel of shifting critics and butts. In the end, by the way, even Asper--the character Jonson made to represent himself--gives up his critical humor and relaxes into amiable companionship with the audience.

In "Volpone," Jonson combines the ideas of "Every Man Out of His Humor" with a strong fable. Volpone not only has an

overruling passion but a disguise which goes out of control with the help of that guiding genius, Mosca, whom Volpone would embrace and love more "than any Venus." And to Jonson even a Sir Politic Wouldbe is interesting; his disease is making himself, as Sogliardo says of Shift, a tall man. Even in Sir Wouldbe's diary, with its miniscule notes on beans and tooth picks and urination, we find the man preposterously busy, as many of Melville's narrators will be: "Sir, I do slip/ No action of my life, thus, but I quote it."

Although Jonson wrote plays not prose, in the undramatic male-dominated "Every Man Out of His Humor," we see a very prose-like portrait of man in the Renaissance world of new aspirations and horizons. Jonson is a point of departure for amiable humor. Like the author of Lazarillo de Tormes, he basically ridicules man for his desire to be tall. His image of the universe, however, is considerably more English--more hospitable and orderly--than that of the Spanish picaresque novel.

(See below, pp. 249-50.)

In "Democritus Junior to the Reader," the preface to The Anatomy of Melancholy, Robert Burton makes a "brief survey" to show us that "all the world is mad." After seventy pages of proving his point in as many areas as one could think of, he begins "briefly" to conclude:

To insist in all particulars were an Herculean task, to reckon up mad labours, mad books, endeavours, carriages, gross ignorance, ridiculous actions, absurd gestures; as Tully terms them (in his letters to Quintus), madness of villages (villas), stupend structures, as those Egyptian pyramids, Labyrinths & Sphinxes, which a company of crowned asses, in the ostentation of riches, vainly built, when neither the Architect nor King that made them, or to what use and purpose, are yet known. To insist in their hypocrisy, inconstancy, blindness, rashness, fraud, cozenage, malice, anger, impudence, ingratitude, ambition, gross superstition, as in Tiberius' times, such base flattery, stupend, parasitical, fawning and colloquing, etc. brawls, conflicts, desires, contentions, it would ask an expert Vesalius to anatomise every member. Shall I say Jupiter himself, Apollo, Mars, etc., doted; and monster-conquering Hercules, that subdued the world, and helped others, could not relieve himself in this, but mad he was at last. And where shall a man walk, converse with whom, in what Province, City, and not meet with Signior Deliro, or Hercules Furens, Maenades, & Corybantes? Their speeches say no less. They were men sprung from mushrooms, or else they fetched their pedigree from those that were struck by Samson with the jaw-bone of an ass; or from Deucalion and Pyrrha's stones, for we are stony-hearted, and savour too much of the stock: as if they had all heard that enchanted horn of Astolpho, that English Duke in Ariosto, which never sounded but all his auditors were mad, and for fear ready to make away themselves; or landed in the mad haven in the Euxine sea of Daphne Insana, which had a secret quality to dementate; they are a company of giddy-heads, afternoon men, it is Midsummer moon still, and the Dog-days last all the year long, they are all mad. Whom shall I then except? Ulric Hutten saith, Nemo (No-body) is wise at all hours, Nemo is born without faults, Nemo is free from crime, Nemo is content with his lot, Nemo in love is wise, Nemo is good, Nemo's a wise man, and perfectly happy etc., and therefore Nicholas Nemo, or Monsieur No-body shall go free. But whom shall I except in the second place? Such as are silent, the wise man speaks but little; no better way to avoid folly and madness than by taciturnity. Whom in a third? All Senators, Magistrates; for all fortunate men are wise, and conquerors valiant, and so all great men, it is not well to trifle with the gods, they are wise by authority, good by their office and place, (some say) we must not speak ill of them, neither is it fit; let me hasten to speak favorably, I will not think amiss of them. Whom next? Stoicks? The Stoick is the wise man, and he alone is subject to no perturbations....He never dotes, [is] never mad, never sad, [never] drunk, because virtue cannot be taken away, as Zeno holds...but he was mad to say so. For this sort of thing an Anticyrian operation is needful; he had need to be bored, and so had all his fellows, as wise as they would seem to be. Chrysippus himself liberally grants them to be fools as well as others, at certain times, upon some occasions; a man's power may be lost by drunkenness or melancholy, he may be

sometimes crazed as well as the rest: "above all, he is sound, save when the phlegm troubles him." I should here except some Cynicks, Menippus, Diogenes, that Theban Crates; or, to descend to these times, that omniscious, only wise fraternity of the Rosy Cross, those great Theologues, Politicians, Philosophers, Physicians, Philologers, Artists, etc.,...whom though Libavius & many deride & carp at, yet some will have to be the renewer of all arts & sciences, reformer of the world, & now living; for so Johannes Montanus Strigoniensis, that great Patron of Paracelsus, contends, and certainly avers,....I must needs except Lipsius & the Pope.... Lipsius saith of himself that he was a grand Signior, a Master, a Tutor of us all, and for 13 years he brags how he sowed wisdom in the Low Countries, as Ammonius the philosopher sometime did in Alexandria, combining humanism with letters & science with common-sense; the High Priest of wisdom, he shall be the eighth wise man. The Pope is more than a man, as his parasites make him, a demi-god, and besides his Holiness cannot err, from the Throne belike: and yet some of them have been Magicians, Hereticks, Atheists, children, and as Platina saith of John, he showed himself a scholar sufficient, yet many things he did foolishly, lightly. I can say no more then in particular, but in general terms to the rest, they are all mad, their wits are evaporated, and as Ariosto feigns, kept in jars above the Moon.¹⁵

The Anatomy of Melancholy is another of the Renaissance extravaganzas. Burton frequently mentions Hercules; writing the Anatomy is first of all a Herculean task.

Man's triumph, however, again, is a giddy, crazy business; Burton surveys all knowledge to prove that knowledge is futile. Burton's subject, however, is specifically madness. Burton invents a persona, Democritus Jr., but he creates no dominant characters. Nor does he systematically portray biographical subjects. He begins directly with mad melancholy from which he, like Hercules, needs a distraction. Bayle's dispassionate sport here becomes a life-saving diversion. Burton's work finally is a humorous, paradoxical, encyclopedic consolation. The paradox is that the illusion of triumph is both the cause and the cure of his madness.

In this passage, Burton adopts first one method then another to sum up his babbling survey. At first claiming ingenuous-

ly that all men are mad, he continues, as if to prove the rule by its exceptions, to make a wryly ironic list of nine exceptions, in his descriptions juxtaposing the splendid and the banal, the erudite and the slang. Finally he quietly traps us in his wry illogic. His objection to calling Stoicks sane, on the simple ground that those who have no perturbations must be bored, suggests simply that you are mad if you do and mad if you don't have perturbations. Or perhaps anyone foolish enough to allow himself to be bored by this life must be mad?

Democritus, Jr. is many things but he is certainly never bored. Democritus, we should recall, was the ancient world's radical scientist, the patriarch of those men Burton calls the "Copernical Giants" who have set the earth aspin and established between atomical motion and planetary motion the essential dizziness of man's state. The essence of Democritus' boldness, as suggested by Burton, is in being free enough to apprehend his own giddy situation, and unlike Heraclitus who weeps for man--to laugh. Burton's persona, who on the first page of his Letter is already by turns gentle, indulgent and peremptory, who sings, "I am a free man born," makes the point of his book that all men, including himself, are fools, and that fools are all slaves. At the same time, however, for instance in his "Digression of Air," a spectacular magic carpet excursion to all the wonders of this world and universe, he gives us a preposterous, wish-fulfilling, self-undercutting fantasy of man Lording it in the Universe.

Where in Rabelais or Bayle we had an exhilaration offset by stinging ridicule, often heretical, sexual or scata-

logical, the Englishman Burton mellows his ridicule, emphasizing with great sympathy, the vagary--man's madness. Burton himself seems aware of the shift, for as Rabelais' characters love wine, Burton has his Democritus, Jr., good sober Englishman that he is, love water. Indeed Burton is the patriarch of English amible humor.

(See below, pp. 120-26,
180-84.)

In Chapter IV in Rasselas by Samuel Johnson, the prince has not yet left the Happy Valley.

The consciousness of his own folly pierced him deeply, and he was long before he could be reconciled to himself. "The rest of my time, said he, has been lost by the crime or folly of my ancestors, and the absurd institutions of my country; I remember it with disgust, yet without remorse; but the months that have passed since new light darted into my soul, since I formed a scheme of reasonable felicity, have been squandered by my own fault. I have lost that which can never be restored: I have seen the sun rise and set for twenty months, an idle gazer on the light of heaven: In this time the birds have left the nest of their mother, and committed themselves to the woods and to the skies: the kid has forsaken the teat, and learned by degrees to climb the rocks in quest of independent sustenance. I only have made no advances, but am still helpless and ignorant. The moon by more than twenty changes, admonished me of the flux of life; the stream that rolled before my feet upbraided my inactivity. I sat feasting on intellectual luxury, regardless alike of the examples of the earth, and the instructions of the planets. Twenty months are passed, who shall restore them?"

These sorrowful meditations fastened upon his mind; he past four months in resolving to lose no more time in idle resolves, and was awakened to more vigorous exertion by hearing a maid, who had broken a porcelain cup, remark, that what cannot be repaired is not to be regretted.

This was obvious; and Rasselas reproached himself that he had not discovered it, having not known, or not considered, how many useful hints are obtained by chance, and how often the mind, hurried by her own ardour to distant views, neglects the truths that lie open before her. He, for a few hours, regretted his regret, and from that time bent his whole mind upon the means of escaping from the valley of happiness.¹⁶

Johnson's Rasselas is not just a free man born. He is a prince, the embodiment of man's power to fulfill his wishes, young enough to have all of life before him, wealthy enough to satisfy his every wish. Furthermore he is a prince in a land of desire fulfilled, perhaps an old quintessential paradise or a perfected new world. It does not matter which; the fact is the place is surrounded by mountains, the prince is a prisoner there, and desire will not allow him to rest. "The mind, hurried by her own ardour to distant views," always absurdly sets man voyaging after impossibilities. Rasselas' reticence here, his hanging back, is

in a tug-of-war with his restlessness. But desire always makes an idiot of man; it sets him clamoring for both indolent snug security and the freedom of the road.

Meanwhile Imlac's desire makes that of Rasselas seem piddling. Imlac's sober discourse begins by tracing his early observations, his ensuing resolution to be a poet, his growing hunger for experience, his eventual voraciousness for travel, vision and fame. It builds slowly and imperceptibly until he outlines at overwhelming length the tasks and abilities required of a poet. He goes on and on, working himself up, laying one law upon another, one prescription upon another, until he sees himself as a God, an immortal presiding over futurity, and until Rasselas cuts off what Johnson calls this "enthusiastic fit"--"Enough! Thou has convinced me, that no human being can ever be a poet. Proceed with thy narration."

Neither Rasselas nor Imlac, however, attains his desire. In the Happy Valley, Rasselas had met a foolish man who would soar on mechanical wings, then Imlac who would soar on the wings of his mind. In his voyage round the world, he meets also the astronomer who has looked so long at the stars that he believes he controls them, and in a frenzy is concerned for the welfare of the world upon his decease.

Johnson does not attack man for his desire, however, for wanting even if he is born in paradise itself to voyage out of it, to consult one oracle after another until the great new frontier that man has discovered yields to the inevitable recognition that there is no frontier. Johnson writes with equanimity. Johnson's favorite book was Burton's Anatomy.¹⁷ Like Burton's, Johnson's humor is a quiet blend of ridicule and sympathy. (See below, pp.103-6.)

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent. opens as follows:

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing;--that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;--and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost:--Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,--I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that in which the reader is likely to see me.--Believe me, good folks, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it;--you have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused from father to son, etc. etc.--and a great deal to that purpose:--Well, you may take my word, that nine parts in ten of a man's sense or his nonsense, his successes and miscarriages in this world depend upon their motions and activity, and the different tracts and trains you put them into; so that when they are once set a-going, whether right or wrong, 'tis not a halfpenny matter--away they go clattering like hey-go-mad; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk, which, when they are once used to, the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it.

Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?---Good G--! cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time,--Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question? Pray, what was your father saying?--Nothing.¹⁸

In Diogenes Laertius' The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, each article runs a few pages, briefly summarizing the main biographical events and teachings of each of the great philosophers. Rabelais toys with this ancient classic in his book, The Lives, Heroic Deeds and Sayings of Gargantua and His Son Pantagruel. So does Bayle in his dictionary which provides so much commentary that it approaches being a monumental biographical portrait of the opinions of the eminent Bayle himself, more than of his subjects. Sterne's Life and

Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, however, takes the biographical game as far as it can go; it is Tristram's 600-page monologue of a biographical dictionary article on himself. No wonder Tristram peremptorily tells the reader early in the book, "Don't hurry yourself."

The egotism projects what Sterne wants us to feel: the absurdity of mind. In the quoted passage, Tristram's zealously rhetorical paragraph is cut short by a blunt ridiculous question, as was his conception. Here we have the pattern of the whole book which belittles rhapsodic syllogizing with interruption, forestallings, general ineffectiveness, and a lot of "Lullabullero." Indeed, Walter Shandy is an eighteenth-century embodiment of the Renaissance giant of mind utterly gone to seed. Walter is an amiable Gargantua of erudition and the new sciences, the most learned with regard to antiquity yet the most forward with regard to scientific innovation. He is as addicted to reading other encyclopedias such as the exhaustive Slawkenbergian one as he is to writing his own, the Tristrapedia. The latter is Gargantua's famous humanist letter to his son stretched to idiotic proportions. It has been so long in the writing that the longer he works on it the more his son has already grown up and the more useless it is. It is typical too that Shandy had wanted this son named after Trismegistus whom Shandy saw as that revered Renaissance man--"the greatest king--the greatest lawgiver--the greatest philosopher--and the great priest." All Walter's erudition and ambition go for naught, however. The boy is named Tristram, the sad one--the pathetic.

One of Tristram's digressions speaks directly to the central issue of learning and the mind:

Thus,--thus my fellow labourers and associates in this great harvest of our learning, now ripening before our eyes; thus it is, by slow steps of casual increase, that our knowledge, physical, metaphysical, physiological, polemical, nautical, mathematical, enigmatical, technical, biographical, romantical, chemical, and obstetrical, with fifty other branches of it, (most of 'em ending as these do, in ical) have, for these two last centuries and more, gradually been creeping upwards towards that 'Axun' of their perfections, from which, if we may form a conjecture from the advances of these last seven years, we cannot possibly be far off.

When that happens, it is to be hoped, it will put an end to all kind of writings whatsoever;--the want of all kind of writing will put an end to all kind of reading;--and that in time, as war begets poverty peace,--must in course put an end to all kind of knowledge,--and then--we shall have all to begin over again; or, in other words, be exactly where we started.

--Happy! thrice happy Times!

So much for the Renaissance dream of gigantic man with all his momentous possibilities. Like Rasselas, Tristram dreams of returning to the Happy Valley of our innocence. In Sterne, however, the real voyage to the out-lands and back, the literal extravagance, is no longer physically possible. As the great untristmegistused Tristram is no longer capable of great exploits and voyages, so the book pushes on to the only extravagance possible for these characters--the vagary, an impotent wandering of the mind. Walter's hobby horse, fat as it is, takes him nowhere, as Yorick's lean Rocinante takes him to the grave. And the "Northwest Passage" which Walter discovers is not a great water but the auxiliary verb.

But poking fun at mind and body, Sterne puts another part of man upon the pedestal, the heart; and his doing so was

what set all his humor--and all his popularity--in motion. Sterne was not the first to show the futility of knowledge or reason, but he may well have been the first to do so to demonstrate man's infinite lovability. If Tristram has lost among other things his great Slawkenbergian sexual credentials, he is above all a giant of heart. With him Sterne has begun and settled the great division of head and heart. Tristram like the other characters of the book is all impulse, self-gratification and love to others--all sensibility. The mammoth work is as much an act of amible affection as it is of self-love.

It is well known that two of Sterne's most important models were Rabelais and Burton. Taking the stings out of Rabelais, Sterne as an Englishman did much as Burton. He mellowed his humor, and his work, like Burton's, in an affectionately ranting consolatio. Here, however, Burton's only half realized persona, Democritus, has become the full blown amiable Tristram. Between the two, meanwhile, they have, despite all the talk of unmanning, fathered a prestigious enough lineage of pseudynimic humorists and monologuists--Geoffrey Crayon, Elia, Josh Billings, Artemus Ward and many others--to say nothing of Redburn, White-Jacket and Ishmael.

(See below, pp.184-88.)

From Thomas DeQuincey's Confessions of an English Opium Eater:

Let there be a cottage, standing in a valley, eighteen miles from any town; no spacious valley, but about two miles long by three quarters of a mile in average width, the benefit of which provision is that all the families resident within its circuit will compose, as it were, one larger household, personally familiar to your eye and more or less interesting to your affections. Let the mountains be real mountains, between three and four thousand feet high, and the cottage a real cottage, not (as a witty author has it) "a cottage with a double coach house"; let it be, in fact (for I must abide by the actual scene), a white cottage, embowered with flowering shrubs, so chosen as to unfold a succession of flowers upon the walls and clustering around the windows through all the months of spring, summer, and autumn, beginning, in fact, with May roses and ending with jasmine. Let it, however, not be spring, nor summer, nor autumn, but winter in its sternest shape. This is a most important point in the science of happiness. And I am surprised to see people overlook it and think it a matter of congratulation that winter is going, or, if coming, is not likely to be a severe one. On the contrary, I put up a petition annually for as much snow, hail, frost, or storm or one kind or other as the skies can possibly afford us. Surely everybody is aware of the divine pleasures which attend a winter fireside--candles at four o'clock, warm hearth rugs, tea, a fair tea-maker, shutters closed, curtains flowing in ample draperies on the floor, whilst the wind and rain are raging audibly without....

All these are items in the description of a winter evening which must surely be familiar to everybody born in a high latitude. And it is evident that most of these delicacies, like ice cream, require a very low temperature of the atmosphere to produce them; they are fruits which cannot be ripened without weather stormy or inclement, in some way or other. I am not "particular," as people say, whether it be snow, or black frost, or wind so strong that (as Mr.---* says) "you may lean your back against it like a post." I can put up even with rain, provided that it rains cats and dogs; but something of the sort I must have; and if I have not, I think myself in a manner ill-used, for why am I called on to pay so heavily for winter, in coals, and candles, and various privations that will occur even to gentlemen, if I am not to have the article good of its kind? No; a Canadian winter, for my money; or a Russian one, where every man is but a co-proprietor with the north wind in the fee simple of his own ears. Indeed, so great an epicure am I in this matter that I cannot relish a winter night fully if it be much past St. Thomas' day, and have degenerated into disgusting tendencies to vernal appearances; no, it must be divided by a thick wall of dark nights from all return of light and sunshine. From the latter weeks of October to Christmas Eve, therefore, is the period during which happiness is in season, which, in my judgment, enters the room with the tea tray, for tea, though ridiculed by those who are **naturally of coarse nerves or are become so from wine-drinking and are not susceptible to influence from so refined a stimulant, will always be the favorite beverage of the intellectual; and, for my part, I would have joined Dr. Johnson in a bellum internecinum**

against Jonas Hanway or any other impious person who should presume to disparage it. But here, to save myself the trouble of too much verbal description, I will introduce a painter and give him directions for the rest of the picture. Painters do not like white cottages unless a good deal weather-stained; but, as the reader now understands that it is a winter night, his services will not be required except for the inside of the house.

Paint me, then, a room seventeen feet by twelve, and not more than seven and a half feet high. This, reader, is somewhat ambitiously styled, in my family, the drawing room; but being contrived "a double debt to pay," it is also, and more justly, termed the library, for it happens that books are the only article of property in which I am richer than my neighbors. Of these I have about five thousand, collected gradually since my eighteenth year. Therefore, painter, put as many as you can into this room. Make it populous with books, and, furthermore, paint me a good fire, and furniture...¹⁹

No wonder DeQuincey is having a rough time. Sixty years before, Sterne as Tristram had soothingly, even if humorously, prophesied a great cataclysm of books--men would write and read no more--and here is DeQuincey trying to cram his five thousand books into a modest cottage. Sterne's cataclysm could not be more necessary than it has become for DeQuincey, because the great succulent apples of knowledge of the Renaissance, of Rabelais, Cyrano and Burton, are in DeQuincey's time beginning to rot and ferment. The full title of DeQuincey's book of 1821 is Confessions of an English Opium Eater, Being an Extract from the Life of a Scholar, and early in it he explains, "I give this account at the risk of being pronounced a crazy enthusiast or visionary, but I regard that little. I must desire my reader to bear in mind that I was a hard student, and at severe studies for all the rest of my time; and certainly I had a right occasionally to relaxation as well as other people."

The relaxation, of course, is opium, which taken in its liquid form fits DeQuincey nicely into the tradition from

which he is working, of the erudite and their beverages. For as Rabelais loved wine and Burton water, Sterne writes a brief treatise on the sexiness of water drinkers and Johnson, of course, insists on his tea. DeQuincey also loves tea, but in addition, had we followed his orders to his painter a little further, we would have found he wanted "ruby-colored laudanum"--and served in a bottle "as much like a wine decanter as possible." DeQuincey must have them all, the water brewed with herbs, and the opium served up as wine; the futility of knowledge has become overwhelming. In the nineteenth century, it was no longer possible for one man to write an encyclopedia, which was what he wanted to do. Indeed, DeQuincey's life consisted of a series of vast intellectual projects begun and not completed,²⁰ and his book is a grim song of eagerly embraced defeat.

DeQuincey's humor is in many ways grimmer than any we've seen before, using patterns from his predecessors and taking them as far as they will go. It is first of all a picaresque vagabond humor. The opening chapter of the Confessions tells a Lazarillo-like tale of a young boy fighting for survival in the streets. The practical jokes in DeQuincey's tale, however, as in all overripe situations, are against himself, the greatest of them all being the final one, of his relaxing from great mental excitation by taking opium. We see strong connections to Burton's humor in the ranting of the style, and the consuming imbalance of the impulse--melancholia in Burton, addiction in DeQuincey--except that Burton pulls off his encyclopedic task, whereas DeQuincey just gets by to tell us something of pleasure and pain. We know DeQuincey is aware of

Johnson. He puts his cottage in the happy valley; and like his mentor, studies that elusive thing, "happiness." DeQuincey's persona, however, unlike Johnson's Rasselas or Imlac or astronomer, is the thoroughly vulnerable individual man, the bare ego bequeathing not the cosmos but his own private dream world to his readers and followers.

DeQuincey gives his pain a gothic humor. He plays with his gothic. In one role after another in this passage, he lords it, first as a scientific analyst, then as a co-proprietor, then as an epicure, then as a scholar. Finally, just to save himself the trouble, he commands a painter to set his stage as he dictates. The slave makes the joke of being the master; the writer makes the joke that his mountains and cottages are real. DeQuincey jokes with the reader for believing that what we see in the universe we have created ourselves; and he jokes with himself for pretending to lord it in a snug cottage in an English happy valley.

(See below, pp. 188-92.)

Elia discusses his prejudices in the Charles Lamb essay, "Imperfect Sympathies." In this excerpt he turns to Scotchmen.

I have been trying all my life to like Scotchmen, and am obliged to desist from the experiment in despair. They cannot like me--and in truth, I never knew one of that nation who attempted to do it. There is something more plain and ingenuous in their mode of proceeding. We know one another at first sight. There is an order of imperfect intellects (under which mine must be content to rank) which in its constitution is essentially anti-Caledonian.

The owners of the sort of faculties I allude to, have minds rather suggestive than comprehensive. They have no pretences to much clearness or precision in their ideas, or in their manner of expressing them. Their intellectual wardrobe (to confess fairly) has few whole pieces in it. They are content with fragments and scattered pieces of Truth. She presents no full front to them--a feature or sideface at the most.

Hints and glimpses, germs and crude essays at a system, is the utmost they pretend to. They beat up a little game peradventure --and leave it to knottier heads, more rubist constitutions, to run it down. The light that lights them is not steady and polar, but mutable and shifting: waxing, and again waning. Their conversation is accordingly. They will throw out a random word in or out of season, and be content to let it pass for what it is worth. They cannot speak always as if they were upon their oath--but must be understood, speaking or writing, with some abatement. They seldom wait to mature a proposition, but e'en bring it to market in the green ear. They delight to impart their defective discoveries as they arise, without waiting for their full development. They are no sympathizers, and would but err more by attempting it. Their minds, as I said before, are suggestive merely.

The brain of a true Caledonian (if I am not mistaken) is constituted upon quite a different plan. His Minerva is born in panoply. You are never admitted to see his ideas in their growth--if, indeed, they do grow, and are not rather put together upon principles of clockwork. You never catch his mind in an undress. He never hints or suggests anything, but unlaces his stock of ideas in perfect order and completeness. He brings his total wealth into company, and gravely unpacks it. His riches are always about him. He never stoops to catch a glittering something in your presence to share it with you, before he quite knows whether it be true touch or not. You cannot cry halves to anything that he finds. He does not find, but bring. You never witness his first apprehension of a thing. His understanding is always at its meridian--you never see the first dawn, the early streaks.

He has no falterings of self-suspicion. Surmises, guesses, misgivings, half-intuitions, semi-consciousness, partial illuminations, dim instincts, embryo conceptions, have no place in his brain, or vocabulary. The twilight of dubiety never falls upon him. Is he orthodox--he has no doubts. Is he an infidel--he has none either. Between the affirmative and the negative there is no borderland with him. You cannot hover with him upon the con-

finer of truth, or wander in the maze of a probable argument. He always keeps the path. You cannot make excursions with him-- for he sets you right. His taste never fluctuates. His morality never abates. He cannot compromise, or understand middle actions. There can be but a right and a wrong.²¹

In Lamb, the apple of knowledge is still, playfully at least, a thing of joy. In a town-versus-country debate in which Lamb typically comes out emphatically for town, he explains:

O let no native Londoner imagine that Health and rest and innocent occupation, interchange of converse sweet and recreative study, can make the countryside anything better than altogether odious and detestable.²² A garden was the primitive prison till man with promethean felicity and boldness luckily sinn'd himself out of it. Thence followed Babylon, Nineveh, Venice, London, haberdashers, goldsmiths, taverns, playhouses, satires, epigrams, puns--these all came in on the town part, and the thither side of innocence. Man has found out inventions.

While making a teasing judgment on the Book of Genesis, Lamb is really saying what he likes and dislikes, telling the reader his whims. Indeed such is the essence of all Lamb's essays; to read them is to draw up a list of all Elia's pleasures and indulgences, from domesticity to Christianity, to roast pig, to memories of being a schoolboy, to sociability, cities, ornery relatives, bachelorhood, grumbling housekeepers, revealing one's inner thoughts, Sir Thomas Browne, Robert Burton, books in general, and plumcake.

In fact Lamb, particularly in contrast with DeQuincey, verges on the complacent and self-congratulatory. As soon as we have raised this critical question, however, we know the answer. The man who prides himself on his long list of willful indulgences is not after all the free man but the slave--the superannuated thrall, the customs-house clerk; and no one knows

it better than Lamb himself. The man who loved best of anyone in the world the sister who killed his mother was no saccharine fool. That Elia never speaks of that matricide in his family, but converts her into a lovably dogmatic cousin Bridget does not eliminate the author's knowledge of her. Spending an essay, "The old Margate Hoy," on how he detests the seashore, Elia plays a game of hating it because he knows its terrors all too well; instead of merely giving into them, he plays that he is above them.

While in the quoted passage, Elia easily hates the Caledonians, in other passages in that same essay he comes more problematically to Jews and Negroes. Of Jews, he concludes, "Some admire the Jewish female-physiognomy. I admire it--but with trembling. Jael had those full dark inscrutable eyes." Of Negroes, Elia says "I love what Fuller beautifully calls--those 'images of God cut in ebony.' But I should not like to associate with them, to share my meals and my good-nights with them--because they are black." Of Negroes also, "I have felt yearnings of tenderness towards some of these faces--or rather masks." Lamb's more typical ploy nonetheless is Elia's teasing the harmless Caledonians--for really all the Scotchmen threaten is irritation and boredom. Lamb's picking on an underdog here--and one which Johnson also loved to pick on--is more of the story told above, of a man playing with his humors to pretend that he is bigger than his fears.

Meanwhile Lamb's discourse is wry. What Elia provides in this essay is an argument based on the simple proposition that he cannot like Scotchmen and they cannot like him.

Upon the basis of this indisputable mutual repellant, Elia systematically divides the world into Caledonians and Anti-Caledonians, making each of these labels a constant in a geographical equation that boils down to their always being offensive and his always being admirable. Elia cannot hover on the brink of truth in this matter; he asserts it with full deliberation. In fact, the more that Lamb presses his point, the more he himself becomes exactly what he is busy telling us that he doesn't like. It is not that the world truly doesn't have Caledonians and Anti-Caledonians in it--earnest people and humorous people, for that is what his division boils down to--but that in writing his essay, Elia can't help getting as earnest and egotistical as those he detests; he too is part of some kind of machinery that he can't shut off.

Meanwhile in his Anti-Caledonians, whose faction he definitely belongs to, Lamb gives us a helpful description of the prose humorists. "They beat up a little game peradventure... They will throw out a random word in or out of season... They cannot speak always as if they were upon their oath... They seldom wait... They delight to impart their defective discoveries as they arise." Lamb's essay finally, by his own definition, is humorous. But it is also an expression of a true desperation. Those Caledonians--and certainly Hawthorne in Liverpool, commenting on Melville's agnosticism and dirty laundry, was getting close²³--won't wander with you in the twilight of dubiety.

Charles Lamb is a twilight humorist, whose ploys beat up a game against the darkness. In Lamb's essays, we have the sense that the frontier is closed. Push as far west as you

can, to the South Seas, and all you have is a hoax. No wonder the House where that Hoax was negotiated is full of quirky humorous characters. The New World itself is the greatest hoax of all.

(See below, pp. 192-96,215-20.)

In "The Art of Bookmaking," one of the sketches in The Sketch Book, Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.--Washington Irving--finds his way into the reading room of the British Museum, and musing there, has this fantasy.

While I was indulging in these rambling fancies, I had leaned my head against a pile of reverend folios. Whether it was owing to the soporific emanations from these works, or to the profound quiet of the room, or to the lassitude arising from much wandering, or to an unlucky habit of napping at improper times and places with which I am grievously afflicted, so it was that I fell into a doze. Still, however, my imagination continued busy....I dreamed that the chamber was still decorated with the portraits of ancient authors, but that the number was increased. The long tables had disappeared, and in place of the sage Magi I beheld a ragged, threadbare throng, such as may be seen plying about the great repository of cast-off clothes, Monmouth Street. Whenever they seized upon a book, by one of those incongruities common to dreams, methought it turned into a garment of foreign or antique fashion, with which they proceeded to equip themselves. I noticed, however, that no one pretended to clothe himself from any particular suit, but took a sleeve from one, a cape from another, a skirt from a third, thus decking himself out piecemeal, while some of his original rags would peep out from among his borrowed finery.

There was a portly, rosy, well-fed parson, whom I observed ogling several moldy polemical writers through an eyeglass. He soon contrived to slip on the voluminous mantle of one of the old fathers, and, having purloined the gray beard of another, endeavored to look exceedingly wise; but the smirking commonplace of his countenance set at naught all the trappings of wisdom. One sickly looking gentleman was busied embroidering a very flimsy garment with gold thread drawn out of several old court dresses of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Another had trimmed himself magnificently from an illuminated manuscript, had stuck a nosegay in his bosom, culled from "The Paradise of Daintie Devices," and having put Sir Philip Sidney's hat on one side of his head, strutted off with an exquisite air of vulgar elegance. A third, who was but of puny dimensions, had bolstered himself out bravely with the spils from several obscure tracts of philosophy so that he had a very imposing front; but he was lamentably tattered in rear, and I perceived that he had patched his small clothes with scraps of parchment from a Latin author....

But the personage that most struck my attention was a pragmatical old gentleman, in clerical robes, with a remarkably large and square but bold head. He entered the throng with a look of sturdy self-confidence, and having laid hands upon a thick Greek quarto, clapped it upon his head and swept majestically away in a formidable frizzled wig.

In the height of this literary masquerade, a cry suddenly resounded from every side of "Thieves! thieves!" I looked, and lo! the portraits about the wall became animated! The old authors thrust out, first a head, then a shoulder from the canvas, looked down curiously for an instant upon the motley throng, and then descended with fury in their eyes to claim their rifled property. 24

It is an ironic reversal that to Washington Irving, Europe, not America, was the land of freedom. Knickerbocker's History of New York tells the story of the indolent pipe-smoking Dutch being defeated by the oppressive Yankees. To Irving, Yankees are shrewd, ambitious, self-righteous, conniving people who, constantly moving about and constantly improving things, were rapacious destroyers of a man's ease. America to Knickerbocker was a land typified by the awful constraint of free enterprise, and the terrible burden of the frontier. When Knickerbocker, now Crayon, finally gets to Europe, we should not be surprised to find a backwards frontier giddiness as he experiences the "feverish excitement" of seeing from shipdeck in the distance land, Europe, "land of promise."

Irving found in "our old home" a land where a man could be melancholy in the old style and could write to dispel his own and others' melancholy. The Sketch Book's epigram states the amiable bachelor humorist's position: "I have no wife nor children, good or bad, to provide for. A mere spectator of other men's fortunes and adventures, and how they play their parts, which methinks are diversely presented unto me, as from a common theatre or scene." The quote is from Burton, as is the epigram for "The Art of Bookmaking," which sets that essay in motion: if "'It is a greater offence to steal dead man's labor than their clothes,' what shall become of most writers?" Irving is not only the dreamer in the essay, but the thief himself; he has stolen this epigram to write this very essay, as certainly as he had stolen from Rabelais, Cervantes, Fielding and Swift to write his Knickerbocker History. Like his mentor, Burton,

Irving knows how books are made, by thievery, yet this knowledge, as with Burton, is the source as well as the target of his humor. If all writing is thievery and there is nothing new under the sun to be said, the question comes up again--why write? Irving's answer is the same as that of others before him, for sport, to relieve our melancholy and divert ourselves from the uncertainties of the slippery road.

Nonetheless, Irving does have originality. His essays are all humor and hobby horses; he rejects out of hand all that hard work of scholarship. To research Shakespeare, for instance, he drops by the Eastcheap tavern. Rebelling against the vast Renaissance intellectual energy, as well as against its new world--Irving turns with a passion to indolence. In this essay, Irving drops Burton's erudition, steals a sentence, then fantasies it into a minute melodrama. Like DeQuincey, Irving turns the melancholy futile world into a patchwork of instant dreams. Irving often gives us flimsy little games, yet ultimately in all of his work, the very indolence of the plan, all the napping, smoking, drinking and trifling, is an important germ of originality.

Irving's enticement with Europe as a new frontier, as a place to escape to and return to, as the happy valley, draws a link between the amiable humorist of England and the frontier humorist of America. He wrote about Europe, but he gave America an image of indolence which would be its mental frontier in a world oppressed with the Puritan work ethic, oppressed with free dog-eat-dog enterprise.

(See below, pp. 196-97, 212-13, 229.)

From The Farmer's Almanac in 1842:

Fifty Years Ago!

It is just fifty years, Friends and Patrons, old and new... it is just fifty years since we started our unpretending but, as we trust, useful annual! Fifty years! It is a life by itself!...

Fifty years ago, and cities, now full of thousands of souls, were the hunting-ground of the Indian, and covered only by the forest or the swamp. Fifty years ago, and the city of New York contained but about 33,000 inhabitants; it has now 312,000. Boston then about 13,000, now 93,000. Philadelphia then about 40,000 now about 260,000. Baltimore, which then had but about 13,000, has now 1,000,000....

Fifty years ago, and we had nothing of the gigantic wonders of steam; we had no boiling cauldrons traversing the land and water, puffing and groaning, and pulling or pushing enormous masses with fury along, now here, now there, as the master spirit which controlled them might dictate. Fifty years ago, the worthy fathers and mothers of the present generation were willing to dress in their own home-spunThe waterfall and steam engine, the improved spindles and other machines, manufacture now millions of yards, where fifty years since only hundreds were made....

With all the changes that have been going on in the great world, the course of our America has been "onward and upward." We have had as presidents, our Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Adams, father and son, Jackson, Van Buren, Harrison, and now Tyler. England has had her Georges II, and IV., her William IV., and now has her Victoria. France has had more changes, has been the scene of more violence and more exciting and terrible commotions, than almost any other part of the civilized world, and from which, thanks to a kind Providence, we have been measurably exempt. Within fifty years Russia and all the countries of the world have had their changes, some natural, others startling and impressive. The South Sea Islander has become converted to the gospel--the whole continent of New Holland, fifty years since a barren wilderness, has been partly peopled. The Turk has recognized the Jew as a human being and a brother; he has exchanged dress with the Christian.

Within the past fifty years science has done wonders for the human race; she has by her discoveries, the facilities she has created, the powers she has developed, added to the wealth and happiness of almost every class in our land. The farmer, among others, is indebted to her for his well constructed ploughs, his improved breeds of cattle and swine, new varieties of seeds and grain, as well as trees, shrubs, and vines, and his improved implements of every kind, from the simple apple-peeler to the steam threshing machine. Domestic economy too has been indebted to science for implements to add to our convenience and comfort. Within the past fifty years, commerce has made brethren and friends of the remote inhabitants of the earth, the cause of Peace has, as we trust, been progressing, that of Philanthropy and Temperance is rapidly advancing, and we trust as nations grow wiser, better acquainted, more civilized, that vice and ignorance will give place to virtue and knowledge, and the horrors of war to the quiet blessings of peace and good fellowship....²⁵

From Jonathan Jaw-Stretcher's Yankee Story All-My-Nack, 1852.

THE VERY LATEST GLIMPSE O' THE GREAT SEA-SERPENT, THAT
FOR THE LAST FIFTY YEARS HAS HAUNTED NA-HANT !!

Certified Affidavit o' Squire Varmifuge Vampose, o' Varmount
L. S. Seal o' State

Personally appeared afore me, Jeremiah Jehosophat, a Justice
o' the Peace o' the County aforesaid, Mister Squire Varmifuge
Vampose, who deposeth as follers:--

"On Monday mornin', a little atween sunshine an' clock-
strike, as I war swimmin' off Egg Rock, I heerd a precussion in
the water. I looked up, an' I seed a figger o' a big snake,
that looked more like a worm, rise up, shake its head clean down
to the eend o' its tail, an' head a kind o' circumbendibously
for Egg Rock. Its body in diam'ter, in close kalk'lation, war
as thick round as you could see, an' its length, from the head
tu the tail, an' back, war' about as fur as from here to yan-
der; the size o' its head war about ferocious, its eyes war
like tew large augur-holes, bored through darkness intu day-
break, an its back looked like a train o' freight rail-cars,
head up with stone-coal. He just gin' a flirt, an' then a
spurt, an' then a squirm, an' the hull sea war turned into such
a sink o' soap-suds, that the fish actooally slipped down each
other's throat without a swaller. Thar' war a big ox walkin'
along Lynn Beach, the serpent tuck aim at him with his eyes,
an' he walked right intu his throat by suckion, like a worm
intu a horned trout, an' then picked his teeth with a wrecked
mainmast that floated by. It now begin tu storm like Sodom,
an' a thunderbolt bolted right down his throat; he spit the
bolt right out, all chewed up, flung a summerset, turned his
tail intu his mouth, jumped deown his own throat, an' then
vauquished."²⁶

From the Crockett Almanac of 1854:

One January morning it was so all-screwen-up cold that the forest trees war so stiff that they couldn't shake, and the very day'break froze fast as it war tryin' to dawn. The tinderbox in my cabin would no more ketch fire than a sunk raft at the bottom o' the sea. Seein' that daylight war so far behind time, I thought creation war in a fair way for freezin' fast.

So, thinks I, I must strike a leetle fire from my fingers, light my pipe, travel out a few leagues, and see about it.

Then I brought my knuckles together like two thunder clouds, but the sparks froze up afore I could begin to collect em so out I walked, and endeavored to keep myself unfriz by goin' at a hop, step, and jump gait, and whistlin the tune of "fire in the mountains!" as I went along in three double quick time. Well, arter I had walked about twenty-five miles up the peak o' Daybreak Hill, I soon discovered what war the matter. The airth had actually friz fast in her axis, and couldn't turn around; the sun had got jammed between two cakes o' ice under the wheels, an thar he had bin shinin' and workin to get loose, till he friz fast in his cold sweat.

"C-r-e-a-t-i-o-n!" thought I, this are the toughest sort o' suspension, and it mustnt be endured--somethin must be done, or human creation is done for.

It war then so antedeluvian and premature cold that my upper and lower teeth an tongue war all collapsed together as tight as a friz oyster. I took a fresh twenty pound bear animal off o' my back that I'd picked up on the road, an beat the animal agin the ice till the hot ile began to talk out on him at all sides. I then took an held him over the airth's axes, an squeezed him till I thaw'd em loose, poured about a ton on it over the sun's face, give the eairth's cog-wheel one kick backward, till I got the sun loose--whistled "Push along, keep movin'!" an in about fifteen seconds the airth givn a grunt, and begun moving'--the sun walked up beautiful, salutin me with sich a wind o' gratitude that it made me sneeze. I lit my pipe by the blaze o' his top-knot, shouldered my bear, an walked home, introducun the people to fresh daylight with a piece of sunrise in my pocket.²⁷

As unique in many ways as American folk humor was, it didn't exist in a vacuum, but was the logical next step in the frontier humor which began in the Renaissance with the discovery of the New World. It is not only that American humor may be compared to earlier prose humor cited, but that many of the American periodical humorists knew much of that earlier literature.

American humor came into being in the nineteenth-century golden age of the periodical. Popular storytellers enjoyed the excitement of seeing their stories in print and swapping in print, so that the stories themselves took on an excitement, self-consciousness, and rapid-fire worldliness quite unheard of in older cultures' folk-lore limited to oral transmission. This excitement is in itself part of what the humor consists of, that jaunty irreverent attitude of a people on the move who swap stories as they swap places and who freely pick up new stories and learn to elaborate on the old ones by swapping and reading newspapers and almanacs.

Everyone agrees that the unifying characteristic of American humor is its bent for humorous exaggeration. Richard Dorson explains, "The initial urge to glorify had been there, but a compressed American history did not permit the slow, centuries-long weaving of sober heroic legend, nor the long retrospective glance that favors credence."²⁸ The pressure cooker, of course, is science. In the nineteenth century, prose humor was still riding out the beam of Renaissance optimism created by man's new scientific awareness and explorations. The nineteenth century in America was riding that optimism harder

and faster than ever before, exploding into greatness man's image of his own capabilities. It was science and the literal fact of actually living in the New World that gave the periodical boom in America its burst of humor. The three passages I have quoted are fittingly from almanacs, those popular New World folk encyclopedias designed to tell all about everything for the modern up-to-date American.

Fifty years indeed! What would fifty years have meant to our European, Asian or African ancestors? What of importance in the old days could have possibly happened in a mere half century? That is precisely what Robert Thomas means in the exclamation mark of the title of his 1842 valedictory editorial: *We are Giants!* Thomas's passage is not humorous, but it presents the humorist's material in precisely the medium that humorists loved, the almanac. It gives us an important glimpse into precisely what Americans were so giddy about, the image of man as a being capable of all things, the omnipotent man.

Thomas just misses being a humorist here. Thomas himself had begun his almanac out of a fascination with astronomy, as almanacs, in fact, were originally astronomical diaries. His almanac over the years continually demonstrated, however, a quiet appreciation of both humorous saw and anecdote and it was typical that he mentioned enthusiastically Rabelais' burlesque of almanacs in the "famous" 1532 Pantagrueline Prognostication.²⁹ In the quoted passage, however, moved by the prospect of his own death, he puts sentiment in the place of self-parody. As the editorial fades off into some lines on death, it suggests the thin but crucial line between sentimentality and humor.

The word "almanac" comes from the Arabic for the place where camels kneel; in that place, weather and terrain forecasts were swapped. Probably few Americans, however, knew the derivation. Many instead may well have read the word in good American English as one anonymous American author translated it for his book title, Jonathan Jaw-Stretcher's Yankee Story All-My-Nack. Here clearly is the work of humorist, who is writing a book about all his uncanny abilities, or Yankees bragging about theirs, or mankind about his. The particular knack here is in seeing the sea monster that has haunted the area for fifty years, and in describing him. Here the sport is in the juxtaposition of the concept of the conqueror of monsters with that of the big talker, of legal language with misspellings, of valor with simple bragging nonsense. As Varmifuge "deposeth as follers," so the monster's diameter, "in close kalk'lotion, war as thick round as you can see," so the fellow "turned his tail intu his mouth, jumped deown his own throat, an then vanquished."

This piece of foolery is an excellent introduction to the American tall tale, for it blends the most flagrant boasting with a strong sense of defeat. The fellow bragging has actually done no more than see the monster, and he can tell us so little about it that it emerges as a muddle of vague and jumbled phrases and metaphors. If the deposer is thus deposed, then at least the monster should have his glory as a gigantic ferocious creature who embodies what man in his greatest valor must confront. The great sea-serpent, however, turns out to be nothing but a humorist himself, drenched in sexual imagery, who flirts and spurts, seduces with his eyes, then picks his teeth on man's

misfortune and spits out God's curse. The serpent, an embodiment of the humorous male ego, is just another rogue, who appears to turn tail, who has no pretensions about his honor, but who will turn up again and again.

I have included the third passage from another almanac, the 1854 Crockett Almanac, because it has become traditional to do so.³⁰ It is a gem of a tall tale that transforms our backwoodsman Davy Crockett into Prometheus. In his Autobiography, Crockett had saved his life one freezing night by climbing up and sliding down a tree one hundred times; indeed any reading of tall-tale prowess will come upon a lot of freezing, a lot of ice and a lot of snow. Here, however, the **triumph is that** Crockett saves not only his own hide and that of his bear, but the whole universe and all mankind. This tale takes the tall tale as far as you can, not just mechanically up and down a very tall tree but emotionally until the backwoodsman is lording it as the master, the universe first just its sluggish beast; but then with a lyrical turn, a boon companion who salutes his friend with a wind of gratitude, as in turn the Promethean Davy salutes his friends, the people, with "a piece of sunrise" in his pocket.

The actual Almanac passage does not end as I have ended it here, at the traditional stopping point. It goes on a bit anti-climactically, "with which I cooked my bear steaks, an enjoyed one of the best breakfasts I had tasted for some time. If I didn't, Jist wake some mornin' and go with me to the office o sunrise!" And, indeed, much of the periodical humor is not as fully realized as this piece, or as T.B. Thorpe's master short story, another classic, and one more sustained, "The Big

Bear of Arkansas." It would take a literary artist to amplify the vision of such pieces and develop them beyond the anecdote to a sustained and major work of prose humor. Nonetheless the vision is quite similar to what we have seen in the past in European prose humor: a vision of man's giddy triumph and futility, an ambivalent continually self-balancing vision of man's potential, a fantasy that "wonderfully rejoiceth the eyes of the beholder."

(See below, pp. 197-207, 244-48.)

Notes

¹ Re: Washington Irving: Merton M. Sealts, Jr., Melville's Reading (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 70, no. 292.

Re: Samuel Johnson: We have no records providing a date for Melville's reading of Rasselas. However, see F. O. Matthiessen, p. 272. "For a young American growing up in the early nineteenth century, the adventures of the Abyssinian Prince were likely to be still as much a part of his household as whale-oil lamps." Margaret Fuller was one contemporary who took for granted the appropriateness of comparing Melville's first novel with Rasselas. "The Happy Valley of the gentle cannibals compares very well with the best contrivances of the learned Dr. Johnson to produce similar impressions," "Review of Typee," New York Tribune (April 4, 1846), rpt. in Hershel Parker, ed., The Recognition of Herman Melville (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), p. 3.

Also, re: Pierre Bayle: See John T. Frederick, "Melville's Early Acquaintance with Bayle," American Literature, 39 (1968), 545-57. (In 1830 Melville read a dialogue by Lord Lyttleton, "Locke and Bayle.")

² Sealts, Melville's Reading:

Re: Rabelais: pp. 87-88, no. 417.

Cyrano De Bergerac: p. 54, no. 172.

Pierre Bayle: p. 39, no. 51. See also above, 1.

Lazarillo de Tormes, p. 74, no. 324.

Ben Jonson: p. 72, no. 302.

Robert Burton: p. 45, nos. 102-3.

Samuel Johnson: see above, 1.

Laurence Sterne: p. 96, no. 490. See also below, Chapter IV, n. 7.

Thomas DeQuincey: pp. 55-56, no. 180.

Charles Lamb: p. 73, nos. 315-18.

Washington Irving: pp. 70-71, nos. 292, 292a.

³ The Lives, Heroic Deeds and Sayings of Gargantua and His Son Pantagruel, trans. Sir Thomas Urquhart and Peter Le Motteux (New York: Simon, 1928), pp. 21-24. The exact edition Melville read is not known, but it is assumed that whichever edition, it was the Urquhart-Le Motteux translation.

⁴ Mimesis, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 269. With reference to the discovery of the new world, he continues, "This is one of the great motifs of the Renaissance and of the two following centuries." Auerbach devotes much of his chapter on Pantagruel to the characteristic Rabelaisian humor of the "everything just as at home"

theme developed in the passage describing the exploration of the new world in Pantagruel's mouth. But then, see also p. 284, his conclusions. "So much for the everyday. But the seriousness lies in the joy of discovery--pregnant with all possibilities, ready to try ^{every} experiment; whether in the realm of reality or super-reality--which was characteristic of his time, the first half of the century of the Renaissance, and which no one has so well translated into terms of the senses as Rabelais with the language which he created for his book."

⁵ Auerbach on Rabelais' debt to late medieval preaching, p. 271. For example, "much as he hated the mendicant orders, their flavorful and earthy style, graphic to the point of ludicrousness, was exactly suited to his temperament and his purpose, and no one ever got so much out of it as he." Rabelais' debt to the mendicants may be interestingly compared with Melville's to the Yankee pedlars; although Melville himself was also playing off the sermon tradition.

⁶ Voyages to the Moon and the Sun, trans. Richard Aldington (New York: Orion Press, 1962), pp. 45-47. Not known which edition or translation Melville read.

⁷ The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle, 2nd Ed. Carefully Colated, with many passages restored and the whole greatly augmented with translations of quotations and the Life of the Author, revised by Mr. Des Maizeaux (London: Knapton, 1734-38) 5 v., I, 40. Sealts, p. 39, indicates the edition was either this one or a 4-volume 1710 edition or a 10-volume 1734-41 edition. He quotes Melville's April 5, 1849 letter to Evert Duyckinck, "I bought a set of Bayle's Dictionary the other day, & . . . intend to lay the great old folios side by side and go to sleep on them," and notes that Duyckinck's edition was the 5-volume one.

⁸ "Introduction," to Pierre Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary, Selections (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. xii-xiii.

⁹ Popkin, pp. xxiv, xxv, xxxii.

¹⁰ "Pierre Bayle and Moby-Dick," PMLA, 66 (1951), 626-48.

¹¹ Popkin, p. xxvii.

¹² Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne, November 17? 1851, Pittsfield, rpt. in The Letters of Herman Melville, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 142.

¹³ The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes, His Fortunes and Adversities, trans. W. S. Merwin (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962), pp. 89-94. Sealts, p. 74, no. 324: "Edition unidentified."

14 "Every Man Out of His Humor (1640; facsimile rpt. in C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, eds., Jonson, London: Oxford University Press, 1927), III, 422-23. Note: I have modernized the spelling.

15 The Anatomy of Melancholy, eds. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1927) pp. 98-100.

16 Rasselas, in Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York: Holt, 1958), pp. 514-15.

17 C. R. Tracy, "Democritus Arise! A Study of Dr. Johnson's Humor," Yale Review, 39 (1950), 294-310.

18 Laurence Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent. (New York: Holt, 1950), pp. 3-4.

19 "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater," in Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings, ed. Aileen Ward (New York: NAL, 1966), pp. 80-82.

20 Aileen Ward, "Foreword," vii-xvii, in Confessions.

21 "Imperfect Sympathies" in The Portable Charles Lamb, Letters and Essays, ed. John Mason Brown (New York: Viking, 1948), pp. 279-80. DeQuincey's "Confessions" were published in London Magazine in October and November, 1821; Lamb's "Imperfect Sympathies" appeared in the same periodical in August of that year. I have made this slight chronological shift in order to end the English section with a figure of major rather than of minor importance to Melville.

22 As an aside, see Melville's own experience with country living evoked by Jay Leyda in "White Elephant vs. White Whale: How, in the Berkshire Festival Country, Melville wrote Moby-Dick with a 160-acre Incubus Round his Neck," in Town and Country, 101, No. 4299 (August, 1947), pp. 68, 69, 114d, 116-18.

23 The relationship between Hawthorne and Melville has received much critical attention, but perhaps with insufficient attention to the question of humor. (For a helpful suggestion on this difference, see Ruth M. Vande Kieft, "When Big Hearts Strike Together," The Concussion of Melville and Sir Thomas Browne, Papers on Language and Literature, 1969, pp. 39-50.) When Hawthorne wrote in his Liverpool notebook (see above, Chapter I, n. 26) that Melville "can neither believe nor be comfortable in his disbelief," he strangely coupled this thought with a reference to Melville's personal habits. Melville meanwhile in 1851 had written to Evert Duyckinck of Hawthorne, "There is something lacking--a good deal lacking--to the plump sphericity of the man. . . . He doesn't patronise the butcher--he needs roast-beef, done rare . . ." (Letters, p. 121). Of course both followed up their statements with comments about the other's genius, but nonetheless the difference in temperament remains.

24 "The Art of Bookmaking," in The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. (New York: NAL, 1961), pp. 81-83.

25 George Lyman Kittredge, The Old Farmer and His Almanack, Being Some Observations on Life and Manners in New England A Hundred Years Ago Suggested by Reading the Earlier Numbers of Mr. Robert B. Thomas's Farmer's Almanack, Together with Extracts Curious, Intrusive and Entertaining, As Well As a Variety of Miscellaneous Matter (1920; reissued New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967), pp. 19-22.

26 Richard M. Dorson, Jonathan Draws The Long Bow: New England Popular Tales and Legends (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), pp. 134-35.

27 Chase, Herman Melville, pp. 94-95.

28 Dorson, p. 11.

29 Kittredge, p. 48.

30 See Rourke, Chase (Herman Melville), Matthiessen, Blair, Lynn, Franklin Meine and Max Eastman.

Chapter III

Embarkations

Three Novels

After such a sampling of prose humorists, it would be anti-climactic to turn to Melville if he were a mere follower of any one particular strain of the humor quoted. He isn't. As much of a borrower as Melville was, in humor as in other things, he stands clear from all that he absorbed from the past. His humor, based as it is on the tradition just discussed, full as it is with borrowed jokes and familiar-sounding tics and mannerisms, has a striking cumulative originality which becomes clear as we set his novels against their context.

Melville had worried about his first five novels being botches,¹ and for good reason. The excitement of George Stewart's discovery of the two Moby-Dicks² gives way eventually to a broader recognition of Melville's method of writing as we read his first five novels, and count the number of Typees, Omoos, Mardis, Redburns and White-Jackets. Reading any of these five novels, one is thrown from one image of the work at hand to the next, as if Melville had begun with the intention to convey a certain experience in prose narrative, but every hundred pages or so came up with a different idea of what prose narrative at its best may be. The reader is jolted back and forth from

discourse to domestic comedy to romance to travel narrative, to the picaresque and so on. Running those first novels together, we have a catalogue of prose narrative forms. Eventually we realize how central to his method of fiction Melville's "I try everything" is, and that the botching itself may work as a technique. Melville, however, has to come to terms with it first. He has to get it under control and working for him. For the moment, in the first five novels, the hyperbolic absurdity beneath that approach is only beginning to gel.

Nonetheless, in the midst of the botches, and no matter what Melville is trying at a given moment, what seems uppermost in his image of prose is that it somehow be a vehicle for humor. Even in these first novels, as Melville turns his material over and over again, it is as if he is continually seeking a handle on it--and the handle is humor. The five novels certainly have other things in common. They are all first-person narratives and all journeys, or if we wish to use the more mythical word, quests. But these become givens in his writing. What Melville seems to be seeking is a way of working his basic materials so that they come to life, so that they are striking, memorable and bold and yet are most so by being quietly so, by being what Melville says in White-Jacket of the best books--"agreeable and companionable." It is in White-Jacket also, by the way, that we meet a man who embodies at once both writer and companion. We should note well Lemsford's attributes. His genius included a certain irrepressible irritability but, as a writer, we are told, he had wit, imagination, feeling "and humor in abundance." In Melville's

first novels we witness his learning how to live up to this standard.

Perhaps the easiest way of grasping his aesthetic is through a remark of Charles Lamb's. "Your letter was just what a letter should be," Lamb wrote to a friend in Paris, "crammed and very funny."³ As in the letter, the place where the egotism and sociability of the writer meet and blend is humor. The only way for the writer to deal with the inherent self-congratulation in conveying his experience, as with the teller of yarns--is by recognizing and exploiting it in humor. That Melville shared this image of letter writing seems clear from his own letters, which in a natural habitual way from his youth to his old age are humorous--deliberately, appealingly, sociably humorous on everything from the trivial to the profound, from the pleasant to the difficult. Melville, however, did not just wish to write letters or, as Lamb did, letters and essays. He sought a prose form with more rigor and stature. This ambition in turn made the integration of humor trickier, for expressing humor in a letter is natural and in an essay or sketch only a little more demanding, but getting a crammed and humorous novel together is an entirely different task.

Melville's ventures at this task in the five novels before Moby-Dick, particularly in Typee, Mardi and White-Jacket, are the subject of this chapter. From Omoo and Redburn we learn something also of Melville's humor and of the resources of humor for Melville, but the other three novels are the most interesting. In them we see what is from the first so

striking about Melville, what happens when he tries to be, in one and the same book, humorous and artistically assertive and ambitious. In Typee, Melville achieves the dramatic tension necessary for a great work of humor and falls easily into a style for expressing his humor. In Mardi, after some veering about, he creates a humors character who suits his temperament and artistic goals, and who has a striking originality. In White-Jacket, he learns how to place the humors character at the book's center. In Typee, Mardi and White-Jacket, Melville takes strides toward a confident deliberate humor; in them, from the first, his humor is his vision.

Typee's humor is famous. Critics for the most part agree that Melville's first novel is humorous--and consciously and deliberately so. They have surmised, however, that Melville began as a humorist because that was the handiest method of getting into print and making money; then he went on to the things he wished to do in later serious novels.⁴ Melville's comment once that Typee was "certainly calculated for popular reading or for none at all"⁵ seems to settle the issue. Melville wrote Typee for the public, Typee is clearly humorous, so Melville's humor is something intended to please the public and not himself. We should not, however, take an author's statement on his own work at face value. Kostanza in Mardi did write to procure his yams, but a "full heart" was his motive "primus and forever."

In Typee, it seems to me, Melville was doing very much what he wanted. What he achieves here, under the exuberance of writing a first novel, would set the style and method and project the vision of all his later novels and stories. Typee was a test for Melville: would he be able to give his experience a strong narrative shape to support a texture rich with humor. In a sense he met the test with more ease than he did again until Moby-Dick. Typee, however, is also a test for the reader and critic of Melville. It is a signpost for how people have read or misread Melville's humor.

What is Typee's humor? Edward Rosenberry is one of those who see the book as popular in purpose. He sees its humor as lighthearted and uncritical, and its sport as pure, without philosophical speculations or literary depths. Typee's amusement is meant to give an audience the simple pleasures of entertainment and diversion. Rosenberry speaks of Typee and Omoo as Melville's "jocular-hedonic" phase.⁶ It is interesting that this view coexists with another, at the other extreme. D. H. Lawrence finds the humor incidental. In Lawrence's mythical view, the book is a profound and disturbing quest backward in time. "Never man instinctively hated human life . . . more than Melville did. . . . Melville hated the world: was born hating it. . . . The ugliest beast on earth is the white man, says Melville."⁷ And Lawrence's extreme tallies with Lawrence Thompson's, although these two critics make strange bedfellows. In Thompson's view, Tommo, i.e. Melville, is a spoiled child, impatient and self-indulgent, who

turns up his nose first at civilization, then at paradise.⁸

Typee is neither mere entertainment nor a darkly profound history of a soul's journey, just as Typee itself is neither a purely pleasant place nor a land of extraordinary brutality. Typee gives us a tone bound at one end by Tommo's being a captive among cannibals and eventually himself a man of violence--and bound at the other by his being a young man enjoying four months of feasting, chatting, sleeping and dallying with naked ladies and gentlemen of the savage order. The genius of the work lies in the way Melville with a bold stroke apprehends the necessities of good humor: predicament and elan. And, I would add, good humor is by definition that which is rich with both philosophical and literary resonances. Humor which unphilosophically tries merely to divert us from painful truths ends by being depressing. So does humor that clings provincially to the here and now, refusing itself the perspective of old jokes, stories, and wisdoms.

Melville in Typee gives us a menacing situation. A white man is captive among cannibals. A white man encounters the cannibals' obsession to keep their prisoner and to hold over his head the threat of being butchered and eaten. This threat answers as much to an adventure tale's need for danger as to a reader's need to have a work of art deal with what he fears deeply. I deliberately avoid the word evil here, by the way, for that word with all its moral and religious baggage

has done more damage to the reading of Melville than any other. What we fear in the cannibals is not evil, but some irrational, instinctive, possessive cruelty--and we fear it in large part because it bespeaks a cruelty in ourselves. In an essay on the Dutch painters Roland Barthes points out that great art does not merely make a voyeur's spectacle, a shop window of experience, but creates an image of something, even if it is only a merchant in his finery, that stares back unabashedly at the viewer.⁹

Typee's story of captivity among cannibals could not stare back any more potently than it does. By the book's end, it is the white man who, determined on escape, suddenly becomes the murderer, brutally stabbing the one-eyed Mow-Mow with a boat hook. "Even at the moment," Tommo recalls, "I felt horror at the act I was about to commit."

Yet as soon as we have realized what Melville has given us here, we may think of Raskolnikov's crime and Kurtz's "the horror of it all." Melville has started with the predicament of being pawn to a neutral and brutal will--and taken it one turn. Instead of profoundly melodramatizing our fate, as Dostoyevsky does, instead of straightforwardly exposing it, as Conrad does, Melville plays with it, makes it the helpless toy of language--portrays it in a humorous vision. Through humor Melville retains its stark threat yet pokes fun at our continual efforts to neutralize or ignore it, to convince ourselves that we are well above it--or at least important and dignified for having to adjust to it. We may think of the two

men in a New Yorker cartoon, bound to a chain bolted into the walls, twenty feet above the floor, thirty feet from the ceiling in a room with no windows or doors. "What's the plan, Harry?" one says to the other. The language of Typee, Charles Feidelson tells us, does inhibit a symbolistic interpretation of that book.¹⁰ Precisely, and we should keep this in mind for all of Melville's books.

And so we have the humorous mixture of joviality, self-pity, pride and familiarity expressed in the outburst with which that novel--and Melville's career as a novelist--opens: "Six months at Sea! Yes, reader, as I live, six months out of sight of land; cruising after the sperm-whale beneath the scorching sun of the Line and tossed on the billows of the wide-rolling Pacific--the sky above, the sea around, and nothing else!" The loudly proclaiming excitability continues, "Weeks and weeks ago our fresh provisions were all exhausted. There is not a sweet potato left; not a single yam. Those glorious bunches of bananas which once decorated our stern and quarter-deck have, alas disappeared! and the delicious oranges which hung suspended from our tops and stays--they too, are gone! Yes, they are all departed, and there is nothing left us but salt-horse and sea-biscuit." From the first page, Melville takes the pressing sense of predicament and turns it into a joke on humankind. The heroic lament of the sea-farer goes to seed. Dignified pride gives way to familiar hobnobbing with the reader, as reserve gives way to

an irrepressible disposition to the exclamation point, and the ubi sunt motif to the absurdity of where are the sweet potatoes and bananas of yesteryear. It is not purely geographical, by the way, that bananas are so strewn around Typee, and yams around Mardi. One fruit for being phallic, the other for sounding like hams, they both have a way of undermining the sense of dignity with which we attempt to console ourselves in our hardship.

They are also, however, simply tropical, exaggeratedly sweet and soft. They hint at an indolent sexuality that consistently colors the humor of Typee. We get a start on the indolence as the opening continues:

Oh! ye state-room sailors, who make so much ado about a fourteen-days passage across the Atlantic; who so pathetically relate the privations and hardships of the sea, where, after a day of breakfasting, lunching, dining off five courses, chatting, playing whist, and drinking champagne-punch, it was your hard lot to be shut up in little cabinets of mahogany and maple, and sleep for ten hours, with nothing to disturb you but those good-for-nothing tars, shouting and tramping overhead,--what would ye say to our six months out of sight of land?

If we guess immediately that Melville is no Puritan here attacking the easy languor of the rich, but lusting after it himself in a dawdling, playful description, then the whole rest of the book in which Tommo gets to loll for four months in Paradise is fair proof. The indolents are neither attacked nor merely parodied, but envied and even sympathized with. For here we have the characteristic twist. Just as the opening invocation consists of apostrophes piled ludicrously one on top of the next--Oh reader, Oh stateroom sailors, Oh one-legged rooster, Oh poor old ship--so it turns absurdly from one person's

sensibility to the next. Finally we are left shut up in a little cabin, annoyed by people waking us, and yelling at them, so that Melville can bring us back to the original predicament, the nothingness that we try to divert ourselves from by our irritation at the uncouth fellows tramping overhead, and by our indulgence in as much indolence as our particular situation lets us get away with.

A similar pattern exists through most of the book, except that the style changes. The style of veering excitability which Melville pitches into first is the same he will sustain for much of White Jacket and for the whole of Moby-Dick. Here, however, he drops it, subsiding quickly into a humorous language full of nuances that turns all of our exertions and hardships into absurdities. The quiet style gives us a realm in which language itself, most of all the desire to write, is the final absurdity of man's exertions toward relieving his sense of being imprisoned in a sea of nothingness, whether on the fore-castle or in a snug mahogany cubicle--or within, as we shall see, the hoops of the drawings upon our own faces.

Indeed the basic humorous shift of the book is from the vision of cannibals as embodiments of evil, to seeing them as human beings making shift with a lot of time on their hands. It doesn't take long before Melville himself is being regaled in the best manner of the state-room sailor, or before we are made aware of the continual absurdity of man continually regaling himself. It does not take long to establish that Typee is a land singularly free of the petty vexations as well as the

serious hardships of civilized society. Even the idea of happiness, however, Melville turns inside out. As the Typees are not evil cannibals neither are they noble savages basking in the joy of natural living. It is just that they have hit the breadfruit jackpot. Through a continual rotating of quiet comparisons between the customs and manners of primitive and civilized man--both of whom Melville pokes fun at--this book gets its humor.

Melville's nuances play specifically with all the things we set up for ourselves as pieties in this world, to guide us through by giving us a sense of stability, order, rationale and worth. His nuances are so quiet that we hardly notice how consistently he is knocking out from under us all the supports, all the patterns of thinking that give us a way of being in a perplexing world of nothingness. The most immediate and direct of these is sexual. It is typical that Melville translates the word Typee not as cannibal or murderer but as "lover of human flesh." Indeed Melville in this book is one--and a flirt. Humor in this regard is not just an unmasking, but a literal undressing. Melville is a little heavyhanded, in fact, in the two comical incidents in which he throws up various ladies' skirts. He soon finds his characteristic balance, however, in giving us naked Fayaway as the mast for Tommo's canoe, or in speaking of the "bewitching ankle" of a lady whose garment is certainly more than décolleté.

But sexual modesty is only one of many dandled toys. Melville at one point speaks of "a highly respectable Cannibal

education," and Perseverance is the name of a whaleship sent by its owners on such a long journey that the sailors set out as babies and return--if ever--as old men, a ship spoken last "somewhere in the vicinity of the ends of the earth," somewhere near Buggery Island. Heroism is, in an aside, "the strong-rooted determination to have the biggest share of the pudding" and gratitude a subject whose maxim may be easily turned inside out: "to be sure it was rather an inglorious thing to steal away privily from those at whose hand I had received wrongs and outrages." Sheer earnestness gets its own ribbing: "It was quite amusing too," Melville writes of the Happers, "to see with what earnestness they disclaimed all cannibal propensities on their own part, while they denounced their enemies--the Typees--as inveterate gormandizers of human flesh," an earnestness Melville toys with again in his translation of the Typee dictum on their neighbors to the west, "Terrible fellows those Happers--devour an amazing quantity of men. Ah, shocking bad!"

Sociability inspires Melville to speak of the Typees' "cordial hatred" for the French, of these gourmands' "taking it into their heads to make a convivial meal of a poor devil," or of the "doctor's confidential chat with some imaginary demon located in the calf of my leg." In fact the wry phrase "confidential chat" is a favorite of Melville's from this book onward; it was only a matter of time before he wrote a whole book, The Confidence-Man, on such chats. If Typee opens with salty praise for the Dolly's hospitality, its cuts of meat "affording a never-ending variety in their different degree of toughness," Melville is more subtle and less cutting with his hosts ashore.

Their warm lavish hospitality--or is it fattening for the slaughter--is the central joke of the book. In a typical moment Mehevi "advanced at once in the most cordial manner, and, greeting me warmly, seemed to enjoy not a little the effect his barbaric costume had produced upon me."

But any exertion, physical as well as social, is suspect. Melville watching the only form of labor extant on the island, the rubbing of sticks together to make a fire, wishes he "could supersede the necessity of such a vast outlay of strength and good temper as were usually squandered on these occasions." Melville indeed loves their indolence. As his humor suggests, why should we embrace the penalty of the Fall with such passion? Thus he finds it "vastly convenient whenever an enterprising islander chooses to emigrate a few hundred yards from the place where he was born, all he had to do in order to establish himself in some new locality, is to select one of the many unappropriated pi-pis, and without further ceremony pitch his baboo tent upon it." Of sleep, Melville writes, "With the Marquesans it might also be styled the great business of life...The native strength of their constitutions is in no way shown more emphatically than in the quantity of sleep they can endure."

"To many of them, indeed, life is little else than an often interrupted and luxurious nap." Melville raises the question thus of what life is supposed to be--a rarely interrupted and oppressive work session? As if the Typees had caught a hint of that possibility, "It is a peculiarity among these people, that when engaged in any employment they always make a

prodigious fuss about it...when they do work they seem determined that so meritorious an action shall not escape the observation of those around." Yet it is these same people who at the Ti are busy "soothing the cares of Polynesian life in the sedative fumes of tobacco."

In such a context, communication itself is a considerable exertion. Melville's body-servant Kory-Kory "seemed to experience so heartfelt a desire to infuse into our minds proper views" on various subjects that he and his "stunning gibberish" are often appealing targets. On one occasion "he explained himself by a variety of gestures, during the performance of which he would dart out of the house, and point abhorrently towards the Happar Valley; running in to us again with a rapidity that showed he was fearful we would lose one part of his meaning before he could complete the other..." On another, pointing out to Tommo a variety of objects, he "endeavored to explain them in such an indescribable jargon of words that it almost put me in bodily pain to listen to him." He "had a great variety of short, smart-sounding sentences, with which he frequently enlivened his discourse; and he introduced them with an air which plainly intimated that, in his opinion, they settled the matter in question, whatever it might be." Mehevi also, disturbed by Tommo's meddling with taboo "entered into a long, and I have no doubt, a very learned and eloquent exposition of the history and nature of the "taboo" as affecting this particular case; employing a variety of most extraordinary words, which, from their amazing length and sonorousness, I

have every reason to believe were of a theological nature." Melville himself by the way will write exactly such an exposition--Moby-Dick. The point here, however, is that Melville is not only poking fun at Christianity or taboos, or even theology. The target is bigger: it is man's pretension to logic and order.

Nonetheless, in toying with pieties it is only a matter of time before we get to the piety of pieties, God himself--here, Moa Artua. "An unbounded liberty of conscience seemed to prevail. Those who pleased to do so were allowed to repose implicit faith in an ill-favored god with a large bottle nose and fat shapeless arms crossed upon his breast." In fact, Tommo continues,

this funny little image was the "crack" god of the island; lording it over all the wooden lubbers who looked so grim and dreadful;... The priest comes along dandling his charge as if it were a lachrymose infant he was endeavoring to put into a good humor. Presently, entering the Ti, he seats himself on the mats as composedly as a juggler about to perform his sleight-of-hand tricks; and with the chiefs disposed in a circle around him commences his ceremony...As for the luckless idols they received more hard knocks than supplications. I do not wonder that some of them looked so grim, and stood so bolt upright as if fearful of looking to the right or the left lest they should give any one offence. The fact is, they had to carry themselves "pretty straight," or suffer the consequences.

Melville has not only turned the whole God-man veil of trembling inside out, but made all the world, from the smallest word to the highest god a bundle of sensibilities, sensations and humors. No wonder **everything is constantly in a state of overgeneration and disrepair**. The Typees, Tommo complains wryly, are "as a back-

slidden generation. They are sunk in religious sloth, and require a spiritual revival. A long prosperity of breadfruit and cocoa-nuts has rendered them remiss in the performance of their higher obligations. The wood-rot malady is spreading among the idols--the fruit upon their altars is becoming offensive--the temples themselves need re-thatching--the tattooed clergy are altogether too light-hearted and lazy--and their flocks are going astray."

Indeed, with all these deflated pieties and meddlings with taboo, Melville in Typee is simply rewriting The True Young Men's Own Book, a conduct book which Tommo refers to early in the novel. Typee is absurdly a conduct book for life among the savages, for life on this earth. We may go further, however. Melville in Typee is playfully, teasingly rewriting the young men's book, the ultimate conduct book, the Book of Genesis. In Typee, we are told the penalty of the fall sits as lightly as the scriptural injunction to multiply. In fact in this Garden of Eden, untouched by Judeo-Christian myth, nakedness does not give way to embarrassment, God does not hover beyond the breadfruit trees, and Addammo does not hide in the palm tree's shadow. The natives instead dandle and put God in his place. In spite, however, of all this happiness, from a nameless source comes something hard and ineluctable. Melville's relatively happy image of the Typee, like that of the state-room sailor, is only a commentary on the state of man, and on the inevitability of man's imprisonment in this life, even in the paradise of paradises, that land of Typee where men do not even need to dream of heaven--

and where perhaps they hold the white man captive because he is simply their only contact with the world outside their valley. Kory-Kory quietly becomes an emblem of man in this book. Tommo's turnkey--as hideous to behold as he was truly devoted and even loving--had on his proud warrior's face tattoos "which like those country roads...go straight forward in defiance of all obstacles." His countenance itself

thus triply hooped, as it were, with tattooing, always reminded me of those unhappy wretches whom I have sometimes observed gazing out sentimentally from behind the grated bars of a prison window; whilst the entire body of my savage valet, covered all over with representations of birds and fishes, and a variety of the most unaccountable-looking creatures, suggested to me the idea of a pictorial museum of natural history or an illustrated copy of Goldsmith's Animated Nature.

Typee may have no tree of knowledge, and God there may be a rotted wooden idol, but the perverse force that is out there, making the paradox of human nature what it is, like the intransigency of reality itself, is unalterable. Kory-Kory inadvertently puts his head behind bars and let his body become an encyclopedia, just as instinctively as the poor fly that Tommo swallows, possessed by a demythicized debunked simply instinctive determination, heads for Tommo's brain. The final impact of Melville's humor is to satirize neither savage nor Christian, but to teasingly rewrite the Book of Genesis with God and the devil taken out. We still have a hovering terror--man's only barely controllable capacity for brutality; we still have the initial and underlying prodigiousness of nature's generosity--those glorious bananas the color of the

glory of the sun; and we still have man's inevitable restlessness. But Melville gives us neither religious prescription nor moral recrimination with his debunked myth. We are left with nothing but the perversity itself: that raw principle that informs all the ways of the universe.

Between the cliched pious conduct book and the Book of Genesis is one other book we ought to mention, for Melville in Typee is certainly playing off Dr. Johnson's Rasselas here. Melville's allusions to the Happy Valley and to Johnson suggest that Melville's whole game of "Typee or Happar?" is a paradoxical play on the order of Rasselas' decision to seek happiness outside the Happy Valley, just as is Tommo's desire to get out of the happy valley built upon Rasselas' desire to escape his. This use of Rasselas, a book popular in nineteenth-century America, could not help but give a unified integrity and structure to Typee's playing upon the paradox of man's desire.

It is important also to note, however, how Melville built upon Rasselas and playfully pushed even its paradox out of shape. Typee takes the exoticism of Rasselas as far as it can go, into the literal--and real--paradise of the Typee valley. It convolutes Johnson's paradox by having the Happy Valley turn out to be the Typee instead of the expected Happar, and by having as a curative to the expected boredom of happiness a penchant for the drama and spectacle of occasional cannibalism. Most of all it adds a playful eroticism that spoofs the quiet control of Johnson's book. Johnson contented himself with kidnappings and corruption, and stiffly keeps his

distance from sex. Melville, on the other hand, has for a narrator nothing less than a Peeping Tommo, and an adventure story that begins with a shipboard orgy, and then goes on to meddle with any taboo that presents itself.

In fact, particularly against the backdrop of Rasselas, we see that in its outer reaches, Typee is a love story. Tommo himself is as much a lover of human flesh as the people who have made him their beloved imprisoned guest. Ultimately beyond the erotic play and reversal, Melville's book is a romance of the misbegotten for the misbecome, for what else is the Typee but a tribe which has insured its survival by perpetuating the most aggressive of reputations about itself, and who else is Tommo but the man who has bragged that he can do without home and mother, and then defeated, gone crawling back. That Kory-Kory and Fay^away weep for Tommo and Tommo dreams of them is ultimately no laughing matter, just as it is finally not humorous that the man who has felt threatened all along by the tribe of strangers is the one to strike the blow. In the extremity of man's alienation from man, however, Melville has given his humor grounding; and in projecting a love story between the alienated and the alien, he has expressed the lyrical component that gives his humor breadth. Tommo is a stranger, so are the Typees: strangers, prisoners, creatures in a paradox. It is both the fright and the love which creates the tension required for humor, and which gives the humor meaning.

I began this chapter speaking of botches and Typee is one. Despite Typee's achievement, it is in several respects

a tentative work of art, which is simply more interesting for its successes than for its failures, as Mardi in a moment will be the other way around. Despite Melville's considerable achievement here, the anxieties of the Preface--is this to be a yarn, a travel narrative or a classical literary work of truth and beauty?--are indicative of those in the pages that follow. Similarly, the publisher's request for more descriptive information and authentic-sounding material has resulted in the padding which the reader cannot help but sense in the added chapters.¹¹ In addition, Melville can be clumsy or heavy-handed in his desire to be amusing, usually by putting up too many signposts that some comical incident is coming up. As Melville himself tells us regarding the purser's Steward in White Jacket, humor must come up quietly and straight-faced on the reader, or else take off precipitously with a broad theatricality. In various incidents like that of the pop-gun war, or of the two ladies early in the book, Melville is straining for comicality.

With regard to the latter, however, perhaps they simply suggest Melville's clumsiness with male-female comedy. Although Fayaway transcends Melville's usual self-consciousness about ladies, when in the novel he speaks of other women, Melville seems to be rebelling too hard or to be giving in too slavishly. On the whole, the book as a humorous romance, and a love story, even building on its teasing eroticism, is about Tommo, Toby, Mehevi, Kory-Kory, Marnoo--and the Ti, the place where the men regale themselves and where ladies are not

allowed. Melville's humorous vision is a love story of men passing their time together in this life.

Nonetheless, we come back to a certain thinness about the book. The anguish of Melville's infection in his leg connotes an individual pain that isn't fully handled, just as the language of the final escape scene is too heavy after the nuance humor of the rest of the book. Finally, it was a little too much of a lucky hit that for his first novel, Melville actually found a Happar Valley upon which he could graft a Rasselas-like parable.

In concluding her "Historical Note" to the Newberry Northwestern edition of Mardi, Elizabeth Foster writes, "It is probably fair to say that most modern critics forgive the gaucheries of Mardi for the sake of its riches of the spirit and language."¹² Forgive is not too harsh a word. Babbalanja's famous dictum regarding Kostanza's Lombardo, that "genius is full of trash," is frequently recalled in this context. It is, however, only the most famous of the apologies and disclaimers of which this book is full; in writing Mardi Melville was clearly continually aware of its failings. It behooves us to look well, however, into what was "trash" here. Studying the failures of the book leads us into the center of what Melville was aiming at, both here and in his work at large.

Newton Arvin writes, "Mardi has several centers and the result is not a balanced design. There is an emotional center, an intellectual center, a social and political center; and

though they are by no means utterly unrelated to one another, they do not occupy the same point in space."¹³ This is an excellent start on defining the problem; we may take it further. The book's difficulty lies in its author's not having decided what prose narrative at its best may be. Instead of moving back and forth from yarn to romance to travel narrative, as Typee verges on doing, the field is opened up. Melville cannot decide whether to write Rabelais, Swift, Bunyan, Spenser or Shakespeare, just to name a few of his possibilities.

A section like the one on Maramma, for instance, tries for a Bunyanesque intensity, Rabelaisian offhandedness and a Swiftian bite. As a result, none of these styles are realized. Rosenberry, I believe, is too generous in his remark that the visit to the oracle in Maramma is done as well as Pantagruel's to the Holy Bottle.¹⁴ That Melville manages a clever three-line dialogue--"What else dost thou see?" "Nothing" "Then thou hast found me out, and seen all"--is hardly to achieve the fully integrated and elaborated climax that Rabelais' visit to the Holy Bottle entails. Melville is too busy here looking in many directions at once to immerse himself in the humor, for example, of Panurge's specific question: should he marry or not? Yoomy is not even given a question to ask the oracle.

We may produce as many such examples as there are ventriloquisms in the book; the repartee with Azzageddi is bad Shakespeare, the visit to Hautia's hell is bad Spenser, Jarl is offensive Homer, (or good Ossian?) and so on. The problem at its worst is that Melville in these ventriloquisms inadvertently

verges on the grotesque. The only exception we need make is Burton, an author whom Melville mentions by the fifth page of the work. Melville "does" a beautiful Bur^ton, in ways and for reasons which we will return to later.

Shortly after the Maramma section, Melville, it would seem, seeks to explain his method here, but his defense rings as heavy-handed as the imitations themselves.

Like a frigate I am full with a thousand souls. . . . Ay: man, many souls are in me. . . . Yet, again, I descend, and list to the concert. Like a grand, ground swell, Homer's old organ rolls its vast volumes under the light frothy wavecrests of Anacreon and Hafiz; and high over my ocean, sweet Shakespeare soars, like all the larks of spring. Throned on my sea-side, like Canute, bearded Ossian smites his hoar harp, wreathed with wild-flowers, in which warble my Wallers; blind Milton sings bass to my Petrarchs and Priors, and laureats crown me with bays. In me, many worthies recline, and converse. I list to St. Paul who argues the doubts of Montaigne; Julain the Apostate cross-questions Augustine . . .

Neither had Babbalanja's "Nursery Tale," a few chapters earlier, solved the problem. "It's a polysensuum," Babbalanja explains to Mohi. It's all very well to mock the blind men for each thinking he has his hand on the tree, and to know ourselves that all equally have their hands on trees, but the impact of great art lies in the artist, as a kind of blind man, insisting on one tree--on one kind of approach, organizing principle or impact. To attempt to give us all the trees is to give none. It is not just that the book is tragedy manqué, but satire manqué, poetry manqué and comedy manqué. It is even literary commentary manqué. It is only one more difficulty that Melville drops a Bardiana

in order to pick up a Kostanza, lets Yoomy and Mohi tediously wrangle over history versus fiction or has Babbalanja lecture Yoomy on writers' hypersensitivity.

But perhaps the simplest way of stating the problem is this: the book continually yaws. As it opens, the narrator, impatient with Bill Marvel and his yarns is looking for a companion with a certain heroic dignity, even if only the dignity of calm taciturnity. Wise, viking Jarl, the man he finds, could not be more unlike the humorous Toby or roguish Long Ghost. Eventually Jarl loses his dignity and becomes a total blank, but his importance in the early part of the book suggests that Melville begins with the idea of a narrative with heroic, even Homeric stature. Then as soon as he sees he has gone too far, he veers back the other way.

Back the other way is domestic comedy. The Samoa-Anatoo episode--or five-act drama as Melville calls it--is the sexual comedy of Typee's two opening incidents drawn out so that what was awkward with some delightful tidbits there becomes sheer tedium here. Melville clearly threw in the episode for entertainment, but he is uncomfortable with it. In Typee, Melville had said that if one doesn't have something nice to say about a woman, one should say nothing at all. In this book he states plainly that a philosopher doesn't know what a woman wants. This is not to say that a philosopher knows what a man wants, but at least one may approach the latter question from an open boat with an easy fraternal comraderie and without the confusion of protocol or politeness. For either reason, Melville's domestic comedy

is strained. We cannot be surprised that Annatoo is the first of Melville's unsubstantial characters here to be dispatched, and with a blow on the head as heavy-handed as the caricature itself.

Having yawed from Homer to homely humor, Melville now yaws back--to hubris. Annatoo is no sooner dispatched than we have come back this way to meet Yillah, the stereotypically beautiful counterpart to the dusky termagent, Annatoo. Yillah's introduction seems intended to repair the insult of the portrait of a savage shrew, and, by the way, is nicely timed to mollify the white reader as well, for Yillah is not just lovely like Fayaway, but white. Yillah, however, is most of all a fittingly melodramatic excuse for Taji's hubris. In this section Taji picks up the guilt he left in Typee by reenacting the murder of his savage brother--or father. He picks it up like a sledgehammer, however. While Melville has made the right decision to confront head on here this important theme from Typee, he is not ready to handle it. We are suddenly handed an exotic melodrama, as unoriginal as the preceding domestic comedy aboard the Parki. Taji here becomes the missionary he was himself degrading in Typee; for it is he who attempts to correct the heathens. He is the arrogant one here, but so baldly that the episode reads like an action in a South Pacific pulp romance.

The humor that goes along with this yawing cannot help but be forced. Continual jokes at Carl's and Annatoo's expense wear thin quickly. Either Melville was pushing himself to an extreme of popular entertainment, or lost in his open boat, he

was lunging for the most accessible shores of fictional form. Either way his humor is forced and uncomfortable from the first just as the syntax throughout is awkward in its poetic involutions. A coy and sugary humor simply weighs down the prose. Perhaps what we must remember from the beginning is Melville's boredom with Bill Marvel's stories which "were told over and over again, till the beginning and end dovetailed into each other, and were united for aye. Ned Ballad's songs were sung till the echoes lurked in the very tops, and nested in the bunts of the sails. My poor patience was clean gone." No wonder then when Melville attempts to exploit conventional methods of diversion, the humor rings false. The most reliable sign that something of this sort is about to happen is the word "comical" or some other announcement. We hear Media on the Tappararians, "Faith! but they furnish most rare entertainment," or "Ha!ha! Taji we had missed much, had we missed Pimminee." Or Taji himself, just as heavy-handed, "Her daughters respectively reveled in the pretty diminutives of A, I, and O; which, from their brevity, comical to tell, were considered equally genteel with the dame's." Sometimes, however, Melville through Babbalanja, is just corny. Mardi is not just a chartless voyage; it is a book written stalling for time by a man confused about what will be next.

Mardi's initial humor, contrary then to how Rosenberry sees it,¹⁵ is not the comedy of fun--and is not successful. Indeed the straining of what Rosenberry has called the simple jocular-hedonic vein of comedy reveals a wider problem, a certain glum irritability which ultimately depressed the book, as if Mel-

ville, forcing himself to be cheerful in a way he doesn't feel, is also more distempered than he otherwise might have been.

The irritability in any event is present from the first, in Melville's preface, in the characterization of Taji who "throttling the thought of his crime, swore to be gay," in the leer of the Silenus-like figurehead of their canoe and in the continual haunting by Hautia. It colors the portrait of Borabolla and even that of Media, whose laughing pleasure, we are told, is at the expense of the oppressed people of his country. Indeed, finally, the irritability in Mardi builds to a kind of fury as Babbalanja explains that a poor slave cannot control the laughter of his body. Babbalanja introduces us to Kostanza's gloomy inadvertent laughter, and on the night of the full moon, talks of "Rabeelee" and "Demokritee." His talk that night makes Mohi's fastidiousness for the first time a wonderful relief. Mohi says, "He makes me crawl all over, as if I were an ant-hill." But, we should note, it is as wrong to call this sort of irritability demonic as it is to call the Samoa-Annatoo drama pleasurable comedy. No Prometheus, Taji is more like a young radical pointing his finger (at Babbalanja) and bragging that he is more radical than thou. Mardi's hints of the demonic get lost amidst Taji's impossible searching love for Yillah and chest-beating guilt.

All of the above is not to say, however, that Mardi is a total failure. In two central ways Mardi opens up the possibilities of humor to Melville, and in both these ways it is a remarkable book. The first of these grows out of the very

botch of a book that it is. Finally, after all its veering and yawing, the book does hold a steady course to one principle, and that is sheer extravagance. If Melville in Typee was teasingly rewriting Genesis, here, in a book complete with Chronicles, Kings, Psalms and Ecclesiastes, he is teasingly rewriting the whole Bible. The very outlandishness of such a project is the book's achievement. It is indeed a case of ends and beginnings dovetailing; Mardi's faults go so far that they begin to be its greatness, as if Melville were willing to be so bad that he stood the chance of being great. Mardi is the work of a man forcing himself to come to terms with his own writing. The result is an extravagance which in turn is the essence of the best humor in the book. It surfaces in several ways which eventually culminate in the portrait of Babbalanja. This character is the Burtonesque Solomon of this Bible. He is also the single greatest contribution this book makes toward Melville's awareness of how to build humor into the center of his novels.

The mood of this extravagant humor is most accessible in a calm. Melville writes in the second chapter:

To a landsman, a calm is no joke. It not only revolutionizes his abdomen, but unsettles his mind; tempts him to recant his belief in the eternal fitness of things; in short, almost makes an infidel of him. 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 not. 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 in that old Sir Anthony Absolute to the very last chapter.

This is a quiet version of the nothingness with which the Typee narrator for his opening giddily confronts his reader. With the alternation of high ideas and deflated realities, Melville enjoys here the humor of indeed what is no joke, and what therefore demands most of all that we have some humor about it.

The same humor of nothingness threads through the book in sentences, nuances and chapters which give the book a buoyancy even if they do not, for lack of a viable central tension, provide the coherence that humor provides for Typee. A hint at the indolence of the men "socially puffing their Baghdads," sets the humor quietly in motion. In Chapter 13, however, we get the first long specimen of the humor of Mardi, the chapter on "The Chondropterygii, and Other Uncouth Hordes Infesting the South Seas."

The next to last sentence of this chapter suggests the essence of what interests Melville in the "Chondropterygii," and what sets his humor going: "God's creatures fighting, fin for fin, a thousand miles from land, and with the round horizon for an arena." The cartoon that comes to mind here shows an aerial view of a vast desert which is crossed by one long empty highway in the middle of which two cars coming from opposite directions have found each other and crashed. In the middle of the nothingness that is the universe, you would think people would either sociably tip their hats, or hug each other in the joy of knowing what emptiness lies in the vast arena outside them. Often the latter happens, and a good deal of Melville's humor is about the hug of fellowship. What Melville relishes here, however, is the

flip side of the hug, the preposterousness of the fight. This was the basic joke of Typee--that Tommo and the cannibals loved each other--and that Kory-Kory for instance, at once hideous to behold and the most devoted of valets had a bear hug which, suffocating as it was, was an embrace.

In Mardi, Melville is beginning to explore this love-hate of God's creatures in space in a manner that is more original for being thoroughly outlandish. No wonder he quickly gets beyond the hackneyed humor of God's male and female characters fighting. Melville stood little chance of being original on that well-covered ground. Once he leaves that behind him, as Chapter 13 begins to do, by leaving behind man and man, and man and woman, to go to fish and fish, and eventually man and fish, he has a chance of being original, deft, and truly extravagant. Men still have something practical to gain from hugging women--sexual satisfaction and offspring--and the bearhug of fellowship between men certainly has its pragmatics, nicely told in White-Jacket. In the story of fish and fish--or man and fish--we have, however, the extravagance of love-hate pure and untainted by material satisfaction, a love-hate of thorough-going sensibility. Here Melville's touch can be light, and exultant, because the field is preposterous, and with the exception of American folk humor, which he builds from and opens up--even mentioning Crockett in his chapter on the swordfish--very much his own.

The nuances of this chapter like those of Typee play with our basic pretensions of cordiality, conscience and good order. Melville speaks of the Brown Sharks as "these gentry," or calls the dandy Blue Shark "a long, taper and mighty genteel looking fellow, with a slender waist, like a Bond-street beau;" or we hear of the "rude, savage swagger of the Tiger Shark: a round, portly gourmand with distended mouth and collapsed conscience," or of a "brace of confidential inseparables." The sheer superfluity of sensibility is everywhere even in the "immense sulky lower lip" of the Right Whale. This is the same strain that underlies all the humor in Typee. If the sharks are less lovable than the cannibals, we know, of course, that Melville will eventually settle, unlike his modern sensationalist disciple, Peter Benchley, on a creature in between, the whale, a creature which inspires as much love as he does fright. In any event, what Melville happens on here, and what he will open up entirely in Moby-Dick, takes Typee another step in a second vein. Here at the same time he can pretend to be writing, not a travel narrative or an anthropological commentary; he may go one step beyond that sort of conversational and informative earnestness, to the nice clean objectivity and absolute earnestness of zoological science. Melville even loves those words like Chondropterygii and Ichthyology because they are so vulnerable to deflation by juxtaposition with other words like uncouth and hordes. In his pseudo-zoology Melville is gaining ease in mocking scientific man for evading with polysyllabification the reality of the intransigence of the uncouth.

In another sense Melville's chapter on the sharks is a humorous essay on hate, very much in the tradition of Lamb's on "Imperfect Sympathies," and Hazlitt's on "The Pleasures of Hating." Melville here turns the issue inside out, first earnestly arguing with Samuel Johnson for saying we should love a hater, then explaining that we should not hate at all, if for no other reason than because "the easiest way is the best; and to hate, a man must work hard," and finally despite his preaching, returning blithely, and scientifically, to the sharks. No sooner does he recover his momentum, however, than he bursts out against the Algernine, "Atrocious Turks! a crusade should be preached against them." The absurdity of this response to the sharks--Melville had tried it on canines in Typee but the idea had gotten lost in that book--reveals the basic absurdity of man's feelings. What should man do with his feelings? Repress them, stifle them, submerge them under science and the comfortable shell of morality; this is impossible. Letting them out, however, is just as absurd, for then we go to waging war against the sharks. Despite the best of all our intentions to be reasonable and remove all the vulgar errors, like Sir Thomas Browne, who, at the beginning of this chapter, "while exploding 'Vulgar Errors,' heartily hugged all the mysteries in the Pentateuch," we dress up like the Sharks of Bond Street and the Pacific, irrepressible in our pretensions at rationality. Taji concludes "There is no telling all. The Pacific is as populous as China;" indeed Melville is talking about the endless involutions of human nature, the endless inversions of the paradox.

This sense of the inexhaustibility of subjects Babbalanja will eventually take over from Taji when the latter lapses into a taciturnity so glum and brooding that Jarl by comparison seems a social fellow. First, however, we get another fish chapter on "My Lord Shark," which extends the absurdity of human relations to the master-slave relationship, and, then most importantly, Chapter 57, in which Taji takes counsel with himself at his surprise at not being more honored as a king. Here is the Lord Shark business brought home to our narrator, himself by now a killer like the shark, and by his own decision, a Lord--a Sun God in fact. His distinction only leads, however, to the humorous recognition that rank is as impotent a shield in the face of the universe as any other logical conception or moral invention. "Instead, then, of being struck with the audacity of endeavoring to palm myself off as a god--the way in which the thing first impressed me--I now perceived that I might be a god as much as I pleased, and yet not whisk a lion's tail after all; at least on that special account...." and, Taji says, after he has adjusted somewhat, "the apparent unconcern of King Media with respect to my godship by no means so much surprised me, as his unaffected indifference to my amazing voyage from the sun; his indifference to the sun itself; and all the wonderful circumstances that must have attended my departure."

This is not a Swiftian satiric inversion. Melville is playing with something else here, that be he ever so much a god as he please, it somehow would make no dent in the universe, just as in Typee Moa Artua is nothing but a poor dandled thing

that had better "look straight." Nonetheless, if the moral here absurdly is that being a king or even a god doesn't solve the problem of the nothingness, or of our imprisonment if life, at the same time the game of the book is to play at being king, to play at What I Desire I Am. Taji has gone in fact in the first 177 pages from being in an open boat with a "king" for a companion to as far as he may go, to being a king, a king of kings, a lord of lords, a sun-God. He decides to play the game to its hilt: "I resolved to follow my Mentor's wise counsel; neither arrogating aught, nor abating of just dues; but circulating freely, sociably and frankly, among the gods, heroes, high-priests, kings and gentlemen that made up the principalities of Mardi." This is the essential humor in this book, the extravagance and sheer play of this make-believe in which we all pretend to be kings, issue broadly sociable decrees, do anything we please, go anywhere we want and with the utmost abandon say anything that pops into our heads. The sheer extravagance of Mardi is a great contribution to Melville's patterns of humor.

In this sense the biggest debt Melville owes to Rabelais here is not for any particular scenes which have been identified as Rabelaisian in origin, nor for the emphasis on drink, nor for any specifics of the satiric voyage. As several of Melville's contemporary reviewers noted, Melville's borrowings are plodding in comparison to their sources.¹⁶ In the catalogue of books, for instance, which Melville gets from Rabelais, Melville is busy trying, not to be teasingly erotic, but to get Rabelais' obscenities under control, and we have mentioned the way in

which Melville's visit to the oracle falls short of Rabelais'. What Melville does get of importance from Rabelais is the Gargantuan freedom to do anything he wants in the book, to let it run wild all over the globe, its main characters completely enjoying the aristocratic life of leisure, waited upon, going where they want, and pursuing their every fancy. As Taji says, "Now, for all the rant of your democrats a fine king on a throne is a very fine sight to behold." This in essence is the humor of Mardi. It is a humor which Rabelais helped liberate in Melville.

Before Babbalanja takes over the main thrust of the humor though, Taji has one more humorous outburst, and here the inspiration is pure Burton. "Of Time and Temples" has that Democritan exultation at the "commotion" of things. Here the game is in good part the promiscuous throwing together of temples and pleasure palaces, both wondrous to behold and taking ages to be built, Taji on two occasions in the midst of this catalogue affirming his "uttermost reverence" and assuring us he means "no derogation." What, however, is he revering really? What is his point as he takes us off on a mad voyage into space, adding new planets to the milky way, in a giddy rhapsody? Is it that the Infinite be "not less than more infinite now."? It doesn't all quite make sense. We will need Babbalanja to straighten us out, and when he does, about fifty pages later, we can see he has already moved into center position. What we should know about time is that it mellows and softens.

Babbalanja tells us this reclining, himself mellowing and softening with the leisure of his chat, as he "frankly crossing his legs" had immediately taken King Media at his word in his social decree when the companions first set out on their voyage.

The most notable advance in Melville's humor is in the characterization of Babbalanja. If ultimately we may say that this book lacks the impact of any one of its sources, the intense clarity of Bunyan, the consistent freedom of Rabelais, the striking self-confidence of Montaigne, the brilliant coherence of Shakespeare, the heroic dignity of Homer, the learning and humility of Browne, and the vigor of Swift, its stroke of originality, as well as its one successful impact on the reader lies in the characterization of Babbalanja, a figure who solidly and straightforwardly benefits from Melville's reading of Burton. Indeed it is surprising that Taji receives so much of the critical attention in this book when he is primarily only a hackneyed version of a romantic Prometheus. Of course Taji leads us to Ahab, but really he is a midpoint, heavy-handed and stereotyped, between the more subtle anguish and guilt of Tommo and the bold stroke of Ahab's arrogance. What will ultimately make possible the development of Ahab, is what Melville has learned here at some point in this novel, which is to separate out from the Tommo-Taji character the role of the affectionate skeptic, here Babbalanja and in Moby-Dick Ishmael. But the characterization of Babbalanja is not just of interest with reference to Melville's growth. It

stands on its own as the foremost achievement of Mardi.

That Babbalanja takes over Taji's initial role as humorous commentator is clear from the Chapter in which the former "regales" the company with a geological "sandwich," as giddy as Taji's on the classification of sharks was quietly humorous. What Babbalanja takes over from Taji and develops as far as it will go, is an attitude toward himself, human nature, and the universe which is open-endedly skeptical, continually sensitive to the preposterousness of man's attempts to make sense of the impenetrable. Babbalanja, however, does not merely represent an attitude here. His, not Taji's, is the spiritual journey in the book. Babbalanja, in fact, is the only character who changes in the course of the book. Taji from start to finish is the same--an impatient and arrogant rebel; Jarl, Samoa, and Annatoo are mere pieces of furniture; Media, Yoomy and Mohi are embodiments of three distinct predispositions toward experience, of power, youth and age. The latter three figures are not absolutely fixed but their clashes are with external experience--Media with the tide of revolution, Yoomy and Mohi with each other--and lead them nowhere. Babbalanja is the only character who is continually fighting within himself and it is to go as far as he can.

Babbalanja's spiritual journey rests on his continual awareness and acceptance of his confusion.

To begin with he is acutely aware of his pain: "Oh, my lord, I am in darkness" Or "I have not been able to decide who or what I am." His discomfort progresses through the stages of finding himself possessed by an impish devil, Azzageddi, to finding himself rented out to an indwelling stranger, and finally to finding himself simply a mad-house. On the night of the full moon, his confusion does build to a climax of hyena laughter which eventually yields to the recanting and the settling down in the questionable bliss of Serenia.

Babbalanja's journey is saved from melodrama, however, by his other awareness, of the utter irresolvability of things, and by his wry skepticism. What defines Babbalanja's journey is what colors the calm in the second chapter of the book, which prefigures the recanting. To a landsman a calm is no joke. To anyone human, Babbalanja's journey is no joke; it is the confrontation of man's mind with itself, man's desire with itself, in the calm of the nothingness of existence. What Melville does best, however, is to show us what is no joke with a quiet appreciation of its humor. So we have Babbalanja's irrepressible sociability; his confidence that although in some sense there is nothing to be said because the world is all nothingness, nonetheless all subjects are inexhaustible; his regaling of the company with his talk; his diverting of the company with his paradoxes; his Azzageddi's "fogle-fogle orum;" and his fine sense that you may turn people down in many ways but should never, as Bardiana says, refuse their yams.

It is true in certain ways, as Rosenberry has suggested, that Babbalanja is conceived as the court jester and wise fool,¹⁷ but his role goes beyond that. We should recall, as Media reminds

his companions, that whereas Yoomy's province is poetry, Babbalanja's is prose and his method prosiness as his Bardiana's ^{art} is essay-writing. Babbalanja is primarily a prosy Democritus, or Democritus Jr. -- Robert Burton-- or Democritus III, the man to whom life can be endlessly inexhaustibly anatomized, with a continual humorous awareness. Babbalanja's humor lies in his indefatigable attempt to take Burton to his own conclusions. As with Melville himself, prose is the vehicle for man's direct experience of himself shaking himself in his coat to see if he is still there. The joke of the book rests on Babbalanja's statement of what, after all, is our only certainty: "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." This is the "Descartian vortex" Melville speaks of elsewhere, rendered with a humorous sensibility -- not I think therefore I am, nor even just What I desire I am but finally I feel and That's all I Know. Even conceits, by the way, in this prosy Democritan realm, have sensibilities and touchy feelings -- Babbalanja's conceits admonish him. We need add one final point here, that with Babbalanja is introduced a nice humorous shift on the brutality of man's will as the central menace. With Babbalanja and Media, as with all the regaling of imprisoned kings like Donjololo, Melville shows us ^{that} the main menace hovering over man is less dramatic than brutality: it is boredom.

Perhaps we could have saved considerable time in the description of Babbalanja, as well as illuminated many of the characters in both Typee and Mardi, by simply introducing the

concept of the humors character. It has been noted, by Merrell Davis among others,¹⁸ that Melville's characters approximate humors characters. That phrase however can be too easily tossed off with little regard to the way humors characters function in a novel, the way they demand, like children, to be the center of attention, the way they absorb, like the very sponge that White-Jacket becomes in his quilted padded coat, everything in sight. Humors characters cannot simply be tossed into tragedies or allegories. They demand that in the novels in which they appear -- very differently by the way than in the comedies in which they appear -- that sensibility be "primus and forever." It is as if the prosaic form of the novel itself irremediably affixes both humors character and reader to the world of sensibility.

Babbalanja is a humors character, but we must see also how in particular Melville humors him. Indeed each prose humorist handles his humors character differently; this is the final point. Dickens, for instance, sets his humors characters down in the degenerating machinery of society and lets them struggle to be more than machines themselves. Melville sets his down against the panoply of the American adventure. In the old world one man was king; in the new every man thinks he is king -- or at least entitled to be one. It is the democratic egalitarian fantasy that makes Melville's humors characters rise as if heroically to their own idiosyncrasies; and that gives the vision of the humors character a new scope. Melville draws considerably from Lamb's and Burton's humors characters. The style of the essayist and of the anatomist have seemed most to open up for him the

egalitarian joke of the humor. In Babbalanja Melville goes further than these two also, however, in presenting a man who works through in all his personal vulnerability what it means to be a humors character. Finally what Melville has learned with Babbalanja will in large part account for the achievement of White-Jacket and Moby-Dick. Working out the humors character until he has him for his own, Melville makes humor central to his novel in as rich and profound a way as possible; and to do so was to achieve his full potential as a novelist.

Returning for a moment to Mardi's use of the humors however we may see that it is not quite as clear cut as I have made it seem. It is Taji, after all, who though in essence a humorless fellow, is scandalized by the Pimminees' total unfamiliarity with a genuine laugh, and it is Taji who gives us a description of the wonderful sport of surfing -- precisely the sport, the sportive sail, that the book aimed for before it was detoured by a "blast resistless." To speak of Taji as the embodiment of bitter irritability and Babbalanja as the essence of Rabelaisian play and Burtonesque humor is being neater than the book really is. If it clarifies something for us, however, surely at the same time it was clarifying something for Melville -- the best way for him to disentangle the strands of his paradoxes. The disentangling into king, poet, chronicler and philosopher is interesting, just as the satire of the contemporary world is substantial in a way that most of the book is not. What Mardi teaches Melville, however, is how to disentangle man's varying responses to his predicament, and how to create characters to embody those varying and separate responses.

Davis says that Mardi veers back and forth from humor to didacticism.¹⁹ I would say instead that it swings back and forth from irritability to humor. Something in its conception is unpleasantly hostile, just as something in the preface has a tinge of spite. The title itself creates a world, a planet, named not after Saturn or Venus or Mercury but Mars, God of War. Indeed this is a warring book, about God's creatures fighting. Ultimately what spoils it is Melville's failure to be aloof from that fighting. His tone is often simply pugitive here, but at the same time giving release to an unbridled aggressiveness, it allows him in the long run to find a deeper more expansive humor.

In White Jacket Melville begins to work through his novels being "botches." As Howard Vincent suggests, the jacket is a metaphor for the book itself as a patchwork of borrowings.²⁰ These borrowings are not just sentences, paragraphs, incidents and character names, however, but types of prose narrative, since it was in this sense that Melville must have meant the word "botches." Indeed if the novel on one level is a humorous battle between Melville's jacket and himself, in destroying the jacket as he does at the end of the book, Melville exorcises its hold over him. The outcome oddly enough is that he is free to borrow and patch as he wishes without fear of losing his identity. The narrator in this novel importantly rescues not a stereotyped embodiment of the inaccessible beautiful lady, but himself. Melville is absorbing here the problem of his past works, of not knowing clearly how to define himself in them, and rising to a new sense of identity. White-

Jacket in many respects is a tentative book, but it also rings with the triumph of self-recognition.

In this novel Melville has moved the Babbalanja character into the central role of narrator and made the entire book subservient to him. White-Jacket, like Babbalanja, is a man who lives with all his questions about him but whose ultimate instinctive response to them is to search out the comfort of human fellowship. True, White-Jacket is given no spiritual journey and no theological problems to solve, but the jacket itself deftly embodies and concretizes Babbalanja's entire predicament, of feeling himself alone in his own mind. And if White-Jacket is less confident and more vulnerable than Babbalanja, as a result he is more accessible and better realized as a character. White-Jacket need not indulge endlessly in theological speculations; his dilemma is shifted to a ludicrous battle between a man and his jacket. In the calm in Mardi, the landsman shook himself in his coat to see if he was alive; then Melville dropped the metaphor to take up the coat itself. In White-Jacket we come back to the human dilemma as it is expressed concretely in the way a man feels in his clothing--in his own skin.

Melville is not a novelist of ideas. As this shift demonstrates, Melville is interested less in ideas than in what it feels like to have ideas, to have something particular going on in your head--your attic. Ideas in Melville come from and lead to questions; they are not stable and fixed entities but animated paradoxical embodiments of what interests Melville, the experience of having a mind. Never a philosopher, just as he is never a historian, Melville tosses out to us many a philo-

sophical idea, as well as many a fine historical document. He gives us life on a cannibal island just before white civilization moved in, on a frigate just before flogging was abolished, on a whaleship at the moment whaling was an industry at its peak. Melville likes to catch philosophy and history at a critical juncture, when they are pushing man to revolutionary new sensations of what life is. Then his main character sweats it out with those fine new sensations.

So White-Jacket gets Babbalanja's role, his babbling, his irrepressible encyclopedic penchant for encompassing everything in his talk. White-Jacket utterly devotes himself to his task. He insists, as he says, on trying everything, that is, on trying to describe everything; from the first moment he is aware of himself as explicator of the world. Speaking of the opening lines, Howard Vincent warns us to pay attention because when Melville is facetious something is usually going on underneath.²¹ The playfulness, however, is no diversionary tactic. Melville is simply introducing a persona who will "in all conscience" tell us everything at every point of the way, even to begin with that the white jacket of the title is not so very white after all. The opening suggests the book's wry humor: amidst a drama of rejection and acceptance, loneliness and heady sociability, is a man trying assiduously to figure out and explain what sort of sensation life is. Here by the way ichthyology reverts to anthropology. White-Jacket busily and deferentially catalogues all the people on an American warship, their tempers, their ranks, their personalities--their humors. He longs for a directory at one point. As with Babbalanja, however, the task is inexhaustible.

White-Jacket's conscientious attempt as a documenter would nonetheless be flimsy as humor if the book had only the narrator's own fight with his jacket to depend upon for drama. It has more. Part of the triumph is in Melville's finding, in addition to an individual image, an image at large of God's creatures fighting. If Mardi, as suggested above, may be translated as a warring world -- a planet named after the God of War -- here we have, as the logical next step in the concretization of Melville's humor, the world in a man-of-war, or life in our man-of-war world. Indeed Melville could not have found for himself a more apt subject than a frigate. It gets immediately and broadly to the heart of the absurdity Melville talks around in Mardi but cannot quite enact except through talk, many fables and some histrionic gestures. That it takes Melville a while in White-Jacket to get to the topics associated with war, the flogging, the Articles of War, and the wonderful motto: Burn, Sink and Destroy, is no more a problem in this regard than is Typee's obsession with the wonders of a bread-fruit paradise to the frequent neglect of the cannibalistic menace. In both books the menace provides the dramatic tension.

As in Typee, then, the humor in White Jacket is neither jocular nor darkly oppressive. It does differ from Typee, however, in Melville's sustaining the humorous excitability of Typee's opening for a full first third of the book, as well as through various sections in the rest of the book, not necessarily with apostrophes piled one on top of another

but rather with a predisposition to think in terms of the exaggeration of desire and the fantasies of the ideal. White-Jacket takes a humorously bragging pride in his role as the loser of the mainroyal and in his achievement in being accepted into Jack Chase's mess, the Forty-Two Pounder Club, the place for life and commotion, the place to be gentlemanly and jolly. He does not merely hug his friends, however: "Yes, I fairly hugged myself and reveled in my jacket," he says having just described it in terms building from a Caledonian earnestness to a lavish extravagance:

Now, in sketching the preliminary plan, and laying out the foundation of that memorable white jacket of mine, I had had an earnest eye to all these inconveniences, and resolved to avoid them. I proposed, that not only should my jacket keep me warm, but that it should also be so constructed as to contain a shirt or two, a pair of trowsers, and divers knickknacks--sewing utensils, books, biscuits, and the like. With this object, I had accordingly provided it with a great variety of pockets, pantries, clothes-presses, and cupboards.

The principal apartments, two in number, were placed in the skirts; with a wide hospitable entrance from the inside; two more, of smaller capacity were planted in each breast, with folding-doors communicating, so that in case of emergency, to accommodate any bulky articles, the two pockets in each breast could be thrown into one. There were, also, several unseen recesses behind the arras; insomuch, that my jacket, like an old castle, was full of winding stairs and mysterious closets, crypts, and cabinets; and like a confidential writing-desk, abounded in snug little out-of-the-way lairs and hiding-places, for the storage of valuables.

That the narrator already guesses that his jacket may have failings is not the issue. The intoxication of good companionship and high ideals rubs off on every meditation. We hear of the grand democratic cookery, and of White-Jacket's ambition

to make the best of all possible duffs, of his "theory about the wondrous influence of habitual sights and sounds upon the human temper," and of days "spent among oranges and ladies." The theatricals in this sense are only a climax of what has been in progress all along, what Melville himself calls in Chapter 12, the "free broad offhand" style which has made a boisterous melodrama of everything from the construction of a garment to the swabbing of the deck. We are not surprised, then, that the theatricals may build to this height: "At length, when that heart-thrilling scene came on, where Percy Royal-Mast rescues fifteen oppressed sailors from the watch-house, in the teeth of a posse of constables, the audience leaped to their feet, overturned the capstan bars, and to a man hurled their hats on the stage in a delirium of delight."

The humor here is an absurd irrepressible game of making believe freedom is possible, and of getting drunk on one's desires. Even when the Percy Royal-Masts of the world have quite a way to go in freeing the oppressed, the complaint is rendered in lavish terms that may remind us of Melville's apostrophe to the state-room sailors in Typee: "There is no calling for a mutton chop and a pint of claret for yourself; no selecting of chambers for the night; no hanging of pantaloons over the back of a chair; nor ringing your bell of a rainy morning, to take your coffee in bed." Or it is sung out in rhapsodies:

Twelve o'clock! It is the natural centre, key-stone and very heart of the day. At that hour, the sun has arrived at the top of his hill; and as he seems to hang posed there a while, before coming

down on the other side, it is but reasonable to suppose that he is then stopping to dine; setting an eminent example to all mankind. The rest of the day is called afternoon; the very sound of which fine old Saxon word conveys a feeling of the lee bulwarks and a nap; a summer sea--soft breezes creeping over it; dreamy dolphins gliding in the distance. Afternoon! the word implies, that it is an after-piece, coming after the grand drama of the day, something to be taken leisurely and lazily. But how can this be if you dine at five?

Melville is poking fun here as much at the literal-mindedness of onomopetia as at our impossible yearnings to think of ourselves as free and easy gods.

Again and again we come back to this joking, which rises and falls like our expectations. After Melville has identified the true victor of modern mechanical and random warfare as none other than the Law of Gravitation, he nonetheless takes off again, "I have no doubt that, had I and my gun been at the battle of the Nile, we would mutually have immortalized ourselves; the ramming pole would have been hung up in Westminster Abbey; and I, ennobled by the king, besides receiving the illustrious honor of an autograph letter from his majesty through the perfumed right hand of his private secretary." The joke is not just that we cannot be kings, or even ennobled by kings, but: so what if we are? Even our glorious visions of the past, with their elaborate hierarchies, like those of Arabia that Melville is always teasing us with, are illusory. If we think we are to take seriously that war was better then, and life was finer for being more heroic, we should keep in mind that as much as King Donjololo in Mardi is a prisoner, every attempt man makes to glorify himself

falls to absurdity. We should listen to Melville's actual teasing words, for example, regarding "That Thracian who, with his compliment, sending an arrow into the King of Macedon, superscribed 'For Philip's right eye,' set a fine example to all warriors." Especially, however, because the past is not more glorious than the present, we can dream of being free as never was and never will be possible in a world with the Law of Gravitation. In such a world, Melville may well brag, in the midst of his complaining, "I would not exchange my coarse hammock for the grand state-bed, like a stately coach-and-four, in which they tuck in a king when he passes a night at Blenheim Castle."

Nonetheless the man who on the Neversink plays Percy Royal Mast--Jack Chase, of course--is the purest embodiment of the high jinks of idealism. He is frequently noted as a romantic hero but he is more than that. He is not just romantic and by no means solidly heroic, but exultant and rhapsodic, a cosmopolitan yarn-spinner and hero. It is not just that Jack Chase has deserted ship to go fight for the Peruvian rebellion, and been miraculously accepted back, or that he saves White-Jacket from a flogging and tries to save him from his fall. It is not just what he has done, but the showmanship of how he has done it, not just the stories he tells but the flair with which he tells them.

But more than all, Jack could tell of the battle of Navarino, for he had been a captain of one of the main-deck guns on board Admiral Conrington's flag-ship, the Asia. Were mine the style of stout old Chapman's Homer, even then I would scarce venture to give noble Jack's own version of this fight, wherein, on the 20th of October,

A.D. 1827, 32 sails of Englishmen, Frenchmen and Russians, attacked and vanquished in the Levant an Ottoman fleet of three ships-of-the-line, twenty-five frigates and a swarm of the fireships and hornet craft.

"Were mine the style of stout old Chapman's Homer, even then I would scarce venture to give Noble Jack's own version" is the key sentence here and the center of the hyperbole, for in an offhand way Jack is said to surpass not Achilles but Homer. As the story comes out, in any event, it has nothing to do with either Chapman's or Homer's style or stout nobility. It is instead the rhapsodic prose of Melville's opening of Typee: "We bayed to be at them, said Jack; and when we did open fire, we were like dolphin among the flying fish. Every man take his bird was the cry, when we trained our guns. And those guns all smoked like rows of Dutch-pipe bowls, my hearties!" This sort of rhapsody and showmanship is the heart of the book, sustained through the character of Jack Chase, but equally through the commotion of the ship "rolling like the world;" the prophecy of the Panama Canal, the grand state reception of the Commodore; the Auction of the White Jacket by the Purser's steward who himself is a master of both a straightfaced humor and theatricality; a Man-of-War race in which the Neversink loses all sight of its rivals and so has no idea whether it was wonderfully won--or lost; and finally the superb fall from the yard arm completed by a magnificent ascent from the realm of the water of the coiled fish, to the air, to the deck, surrounded by astounded faces, and within ten minutes aloft again to the rigging. A sailor contemporary who read White-Jacket complained, that after such a fall, White Jacket certainly could

not have returned to the rigging within ten minutes.²² That is precisely Melville's showmanship, to make a profound and breath-taking circus act of a climactic fall and ascent.

Sustaining this exultation is a vision similar to that of Typee, in which evil is taken at the slant of being sheer vacuous brutality. The vision here, however, is presented less exotically, more deliberately and forcefully. Instead of dealing with remote savages we face a tyrannical American sea captain who, however, no more than the Typees is not Evil in any grandiose way but merely swaggering, foolish--and as if in an attempt to fill his own vacuum--sadistic. Claret is certainly cruel but in an inadvertent drunken way, as if some gravitational law were operating through him. Thus typically he tumbles out of his cabin at Cape Horn looking "like a ghost in his night-dress" and stumbles on precisely the wrong order; luckily Mad Jack is on hand and sharp enough to immediately countermand the order and save the ship. Thus too, having been attacked by various flying objects, Claret decides to let his men play checkers after all. Captain Claret is only a man who looks pretty inconsequential, after all, at a cocktail party. The Commodore is even less in evidence, a scarecrow embodiment of the Articles of War and Flogging of the Fleet, a man who sticks to his cabin for nearly the entire voyage. Even Bland, well known for his serpentine Evil, should be noted for his name, for if one of the adjectives Melville affectionately uses for his jacket is "very tasty," really for all this man's evil, for his Lord Sharkish

suavity, he is only after all vacuous and bland, "even more luckless than depraved," a man whose corruption was casual, unmomentous, even rote; he "did wicked deeds as the cattle browse the herbage."

It is only incidental that, in one sense, the main targets in White-Jacket are the people in power. Melville mocks the officers of the ship not because he sat down to write a propagandistic attack on the undemocratic American navy, but because men of high rank have easiest access to the biggest whips, wear their pretensions most ostentatiously and make the biggest fools of themselves by exaggerating their own importance. White-Jacket's critical eye, then, to his superiors is essentially a comment on the absurdity of mankind.

The officers generally fight as dandies dance, namely in silk stockings, inasmuch as, in case of being wounded in the leg, the silk hose can be more easily drawn off by the surgeon . . . An economical captain, while taking care to case his legs in silk, might yet see fit to save his best suit, and fight in his old clothes. For besides that an old garment might much better be cut to pieces than a new one, it must be a mighty disagreeable thing to die in a stiff, tight-breasted coat, not yet worked easy under the arm-pits. At such times a man should feel unencumbered and perfectly at ease in points of straps and suspenders. No ill-will concerning his tailor should intrude upon his thoughts of eternity.

This nuance, by the way, is far more subtle than the famous Dr. Cuticle parody; and it is neither random nor without sympathy. Bound twice, once by slavish devotion to fashion and once again by the strictures of mortality, man quirkily diverts himself by emphasizing the most literal and immediate stricture, the pull on the underarm.

The sympathy, however, that renders this attack on the officers subtle and interesting comes from the speaker's being not just the boy who sees through the Emperor's Old Clothes, but himself a fellow in a worthless garment. The vision of the officers holds true as much for "the people" as it does of the men. Chapter X, "From Pockets to Pickpockets," early in the book, traces precisely this reality, as Melville moves from the pockets he has so lovingly built into his castle of a jacket to the reason for their ineffectuality, "the People's" pickpocketing. Of the sailors, he says, wryly,

They will covertly abstract a thing from one whom they dislike, and insist upon it that, in such cases, stealing is not robbing. . . or, where the theft involves something funny. . . they only steal for the sake of the joke; but this much is to be observed nevertheless; i.e. that they never spoil the joke by returning the stolen article. . . At other times, hearing that a sailor has something valuable secreted in his hammock, they will rip it open from underneath while he sleeps, and reduce the conjecture to a certainty.

White-Jacket, however, concludes with his usual philosophicalness,

To enumerate all the minor pilferings on board a man-of-war would be endless. With some highly commendable exceptions, they rob from one another and rob back again, till, in the matter of small things, a community of goods seems almost established; and at last, as a whole, they become relatively honest, by nearly every man becoming the reverse.

Like the officers, the people themselves achieve not the evil of cruelty or even of clever selfishness, but an outlandishness, in this case a utopia of thievery in which, after I have stolen your watch, you will steal mine, and for all our efforts

we shall each have gained nothing except an outlet for the perversity of our nature. While Melville certainly clarifies that the inhumanity of the Articles of War has had a large role in demoralizing "the people," into pickpocketings and worse, and while it is certain that Melville is on one level arguing for considerable reform of those articles, on another level Melville is simply confronting the reader with a certain intransigence of reality, the component of "God's creatures fighting."

In this book, then, Melville balances dandies and pickpockets, barbers and barbans, Captain Claret's toping and tyranny. If we laugh at the Polynesian Wooloo's mistaking snow for flour, hailstones for glass beads and raisins for bugs, we are reminded that we are all Woolloos, and the world constantly turning. This reflection may in turn go to more serious proportions:

I have dreamed of a sphere, says Pinzella. . .
 where to break a man on the wheel is held the
 most exquisite of delights you can confer upon
 him. . . where to tumble one into a pit after
 death and then throw cold clods upon his up-
 turned face is a species of contumely only
 inflicted upon the most notorious criminals.

Baldy, perversely harried in his duties aloft, finds falling to the deck where "he was picked up for dead. . . his bones. . . like those of a man broken on a wheel," far from the most exquisite of delights. If Baldy is the eternal victim, however, then turning the letters of his name around we get Bland, the eternal perpetrator. Yet again, however, while Baldy falls to the deck harried by an officer, White-Jacket (with Jack Chase calling out to him to save him) miraculously falls not to the deck but to the ocean

which receives him and sends him back up in a wonderful ascent. If the world is the sphere that man is broken on, it is also the ocean which sends him triumphantly aloft.

We should return for a moment, however, to Baldy's fall, which has been given little critical attention and which has been attributed to some actual happening, the log of Melville's ship indicating that a man, after a fall, was put into a body cast to heal.²³ It has not been noted that Melville may well have gotten the idea of it from the Mercier and Gallop book, Life in a Man-of-War, or Scenes in "Old Ironsides" during Her Cruise in the Pacific, By a Fore-top-man, to which Huntress, Vincent and others generally only attribute White-Jacket's amusing material.²⁴

Doggerel that it may be in many a chapter, this source is actually a piece of prison literature. It is true that "the Fore-top-man" says almost nothing about flogging, and generally doesn't criticize the officers, that he prides himself on his patriotism and piety and doesn't know what to do with his sense of the sailor's hardship. However, early in this book dedicated to his fellow sailors as if to fellow sufferers, the fore-top-man tells a story of a sailor who suicidally jumps overboard because he can't stand the prospect of the voyage ahead. Once in the water this fellow, deciding drowning is not so pleasant, lets himself be saved; we are told by way of a moral that "Second Thoughts Are Best." If this is just what we would expect from a tediously amusing book, the authors quickly follow it up with Bill Garnet's yarn, of Godfrey and Krants, of a man so harried by a cruel officer in his work aloft that he falls from the

yard-arm, and unlike the suicidal sailor, refuses to be rescued by the men in the boat. He shakes his fist grotesquely at them as he drowns, and that night sends his ghost up to the mate's post to hurl him to his death. The story may well have provided the source for Baldy's fall, as well as the source of another incident. After Bung's has fallen to his death and died because of his own shoddy life raft, White-Jacket is taken for the ghost of Bung on the yard-arm in the first of the two times that his jacket is almost the death of him.

Both expanding the "fore-top-man's" mirth to a resonant theatricality and absorbing the hardships which the Fore-top-man didn't know how to handle, Melville in fact is invigorating what was Mercier's and Gallop's glibly philosophical humor of defeat. Ultimately Melville devotes a character, Happy Jack, to embodying the false servile humor which that of "the Fore-top-man" must have represented to him. Indeed Melville makes it clear how different Happy Jack is from the book's other humorists, the purser's steward and Lemsford. To make up for Happy Jack also is on one side, Mad Jack, assertive, vigorous but a consummate drinker, and on the other, the solid, humorous, courageous Jack Chase. In the middle finally is a third jack, the narrator, White-Jacket, who embodies precisely--and appropriately--the humor that Melville would most want an author to have in his work.

That White-Jacket is a well balanced and designed book is not to say, however, that it is consistently bold and effective. Newton Arvin's comment still holds, that the book, rich, substantial and taut in many respects, is flawed by "the solid

and sometimes lumpish blocks of straight exposition and description" and by an overassertive moral passion.²⁵ Howard Vincent and Willard Thorp make a similar mistake regarding these chapters. Vincent finds in them the rich center of the book, Thorp one more aspect of a nicely many-sided book.²⁶

In White-Jacket Melville has temporarily lost the knack he had found so easily in Typee of sustaining his humor. White-Jacket sags heavily in the middle while the ship sits in Rio's harbor. Indeed the problem with the famous Cuticle episode is that it is contrived to relieve the boredom of the middle section of the book, and made as grotesque as it is not because Melville is fascinated with the man himself but because Melville is searching around for some extreme to gain the reader's attention in some startling way. The floggings and especially the flogging of the fleet work well, but they lack a dramatic focus that comes from sharp characterization. Claret, a drunken rerun of Taji, thinking himself master of the moon and sun, is as we've said a character in absentia like the Commodore himself. It is as if, therefore, Melville pitches upon Cuticle with all his weight, much too much for this suddenly introduced and as suddenly dropped character to bear.

White-Jacket is weak in one other respect, in the narrator's timidity. The most telling remark that White-Jacket makes about himself is that he has politely decided never to mention whaling around Jack Chase because the latter hated to hear of such a demeaning trade. As much as White-Jacket emboldens both the exultation and the brutality of the Fore-top-

man's tale, it is a bit thinly developed. Melville has got the idea of expressing his humor, but it's as if he hasn't realized that he has the idea. In Moby-Dick the reader will feel for the first time that the author is committed to his humor and sufficiently in control to make that humor viable.

Two Novels and Old Zack

Just as Melville's humor played off the manic-depressive swing of sensibility as the sort of sensation life is, so his novels themselves swung noticeably in response to the public's criticism of him and to his own feelings of what he did or didn't achieve in any one of them. For the most part this responsiveness, this lively interest in his audience, accounts for the great showmanship of his novels. Omoo and Redburn however both suffer from Melville's being distracted by what the public was demanding from him. Melville in these two novels is not at his strongest or most deliberate. Omoo it seems is Melville's response to the success of Typee, and Redburn to the pitfalls of Mardi. Still in looking briefly at these two novels--as well as at his articles on "Old Zack"--we see how Melville saw humor in relationship to his desire to please his public. Also, we may recognize the achievements here which enlarged the possibilities of Melville's humor for later works.

Omoo is primarily a rehash. It suffers from the problem of Melville's trying at once to hold onto Typee's success

and to correct all its weaknesses. Specifically, Typee seems to have taught Melville that the public likes humor, critics dislike attacks on missionaries, and publishers demand authenticity. As a result it seems Omoo first of all is too determined to be funny. Secondly it is less daring and fictional than Typee. It clings to a day-by-day authenticity rather than seeking a larger fictional design so effective in Typee, and as a result lacks the drama necessary to sustain the humor. Thirdly, rather than backing off from the attack on the missionaries, it plunges head first into it and the polemic grates.

In the first fifty chapters Omoo alternates between a forced jauntiness and a heavy axe-grinding. The fault at both extremes is the same, a finger-pointing that ridicules the ship captain, natives and missionaries but rarely parodies the self. It is as if other people in the book are humors characters, but not the narrator himself. Paul instead is a Danaesque figure, straightforwardly identifying himself with gentleman stock, trying reasonably to talk the men out of the mutiny and only writing up the round robin because he needed some way of appeasing an anarchic crew. With little spirit and no quirks, Paul is not even humorously priggish, as Redburn is intended to be, but simply pragmatic. It is as if by having a normal sort of man for a narrator Melville has sought to solve the problem of authenticity.

It may be argued that Dr. Long Ghost as the vagabond takes from the narrator the burden of being the central humors character. I think not, if only because in the mode of narrative

Melville chooses, the first person speaker cannot be put out of the way. Melville's novels are clearly as far from Henry James's kind of craft as one could go. The narrator, as in Tristram Shandy or the essays of Elia, is the magnetic center of the book. The very fact that Paul says he feels stifled by Dr. Long Ghost's continually stealing the show is the book's central problem. Paul is Melville getting swept under a bit; and because Paul is too weak a character for us to laugh at, the humor of the whole book, wonderful as its bite is at moments, turns thin. The odd thing about all the anti-civilization polemic is that it demonstrates that like Paul, Mild Tahiti is too easily stepped on. Indeed Typee is a stronger book because the Typee culture was that much more fiercely protective of itself--at a considerable price of course, but nonetheless protective. Such a question with regard to either Paul or the Tahitians would be irrelevant if the protection of selfhood--and the threat of disintegration of selfhood--did not fascinate Melville so much elsewhere and bring forth such originality and vision. Here his fascination falls through.

But in addition Dr. Long Ghost as a character in his own right is less interesting than critical opinion makes him to be. That he fails as much as Paul for instance in wooing a young lady or in gaining admission to the Queen is to his benefit as a character. That he is as happy to leave the plantation job as he was to make sure Paul got the heaviest of the work there is to his credit as a rogue. Nonetheless he is too complacent in

his roguery; he is watered down Smollett without the initial sense of hardship that makes Smollett's picaresque bracing, and Smollett's rovers rogues. Melville's very calling up of Smollett's name with reference to Long Ghost, by the way, is to associate the scamp not so much with the free-floating roguery of jumping ship as with a decided predilection for the ladies. But his dallies and flirtations are stereotyped and dull, as is Paul's infatuation with the English-woman Mrs. Bell. Humorous passion in Melville does best with the hugging of self that we get so much of, successfully in White-Jacket and later in Moby-Dick; you hug yourself, your jacket, your cannibal bedmate and all the mysteries of the Pentateuch. That the narrator here is incapable of this absurd fundamental emotion throws off every other relationship in the book.

Nonetheless and particularly beginning with Chapter 51, or for the last third of the book, Melville does find a certain wonderful vein of humor, less like Smollett actually, more like Dharma Bums. This is the happy part of the book, the Song of Indolence. In the first two hundred pages Melville's narrator is the prudent Yankee. Afterwards Zeke, the hard-working yam-planting Yankee, takes that burden from the narrator, thus illustrating a central principle in Melville's characterizations, the need to split up certain traits into separate characters. We may recall from this part of the book the contrast between the planters and our two rovers, all the walking around, Paul's inglorious adventure of being shadily offered a pair of pants, the visit with Po-Po, the marvelous unstinting hospitality, the

delusion of becoming consul to the Tahitian queen, the living off the breadfruit of the land, and most of all the encounter with the native personality where it is still free of the anxieties and mental contortions introduced by the foreigners.

Ultimately this is what Melville has fortuitously happened on here, the native temperament's being antithetical to earnest sentiment and conducive above all to amusement. The spontaneous indolent savage speaks to the unselfconscious unsanctimonious and improvisational approach to life. Melville spells out clearly why he has to go to the last frontier, the Pacific Islands, for this easy love of motley:

How different from the volatile Polynesian in this, as in all other respects, is our grave and decorous North American Indian. While the former bestows a name, in accordance with some humorous or ignoble trait, the latter seizes upon what is deemed the most exalted or warlike; and hence, among the red tribes, we have the truly patrician appellations of "White Eagles," "Young Oaks," "Fiery Eyes," and "Bended Bows."

It is as if the earnestness of America has rubbed off on its aborigines, and what Melville prefers is not noble savages but savages like the inland Tahitians, who "only tolerated your company when making merry at your expense," and laughed in your face when you looked sentimental." Indeed it is this very love of Anti-Caledonian motley which makes Melville come down so hard on the missionaries, because they are officious. This aspect of the natives, particularly as soon as Melville is able to work on it positively instead of portraying civilization negatively, is the essence of what works best in the book.

The counterpart of Omoo's humor of motley spontaneous outdoor living is the humor of the snug cottage, which Melville begins to develop in Redburn. Embodied most of all here in Redburn's priggishness, snug cottage humor forms a key element in Melville's fiction at its best. Here however Melville is only beginning to understand this sort of humor.

To detail the way it works in Redburn, however, we need to begin with another element in the book, the intelligence and power of its descriptions of nineteenth-century wretchedness, the squalor of Liverpool and the steerage. In these scenes, Melville achieves a voice of clarity and authority that makes the scenes memorable above much else in the book. The intelligence of Melville's response to this squalor lies in his recognition that even the seemingly clear response to the squalor, that it is terrible, is full of paradoxes. Of course, laws must be passed, income distributed, economies restructured. Always, however, in Melville is the awareness that one inscrutable hardship ameliorated will lead to some new one, and that the sensation of being alive is not just a matter of seeing hardship and plunging into reform, but of being ever burdened with the hard intractability of things; see, for example, Melville on slavery in Vivenza. Man quite simply does not live in a breadfruit paradise where sustenance grows on the most generous trees and he need do virtually nothing to be fed, except indulge in the pleasure of cooking and eat.

The question which arises with reference to these descriptions has to do with Redburn's connection to all this hard-

ship. We are made to think of Redburn as one who has a particularly hard time, and yet actually for all that he hovers on the brink of suffering, he really does all right for himself. He gets ribbed quite a bit at first. He certainly is poor and misses a few meals. We are never given the sense, however, that the robust boy is seriously threatened by his experience. Hard work doesn't hurt him after all, he quite frankly loves climbing the rigging, the ship doesn't go near Cape Horn, and his stay watching the wretched of Liverpool is essentially a six-week vacation with free room and board. We cannot help noticing that the poor young gentleman Redburn has had his tour after all.

The clearest sign that after all Redburn has had a nice time of things is in the history of Harry Bolton, who despite his money, is somehow much more up against the brutality of things than Redburn. We cannot be surprised that Redburn glibly suggests a copying job to Bolton, while Redburn hurries happily home to his mother, or that Bolton eventually dies crushed between a ship and a whale.

Redburn's problem as a novel, as William Gilman shows in detail,²⁷ stems from inconsistency in the portrayal of its main character. Melville solves here with a vengeance the problem of authenticity, as he does in Omoo. Redburn is clearly a gentleman's son, and we are told exactly why this son has gone to sea. These practical details clarified leave other problems, however. Primarily, how can such a priggishly naive fellow as Redburn, who is nearly idiotic regarding sea usages and the usages of rank as well, for many chapters be not only intelligent but level-headed and mature? Melville's lucid descriptions of

poverty destroy the characterization the early part of the book takes such pains to establish.

What happens actually is that Melville alternates between satire of Redburn's complacency and respect for his sagacity, between a simple interest in his adventures as a tenderfoot, and a prodding dislike. Redburn it seems often bears the brunt of Melville's anger at his audience for wanting so much to be mollified. Then again, Melville's condescension often gives way to the desire to express himself. In those moments Redburn suddenly waxes enlightened as Melville's tone becomes straightforward and respectful. It is not that Redburn begins a priggish youth and matures or that he is essentially priggish with flashes of perceptivity. It is that Melville can't decide whether to make Redburn essentially smugly naive or intelligently enlightened--a mirror of his audience at its worst or a mirror of himself at his best.

I suggest Melville's problem is not sheer indecision. Melville is beginning to be fascinated by Redburn's smugness. Had he realized it, Melville might have been more subtle about it, more sympathetic, as he will be in later books, most notably with Captain Delano in *Benito Cereno*, and the lawyer in "Bartleby." Here, however, Redburn repeats the phrase "My first voyage" in italics four times in the book like a grade-school child writing a theme, or an angry author taking shots at his audience. Then there is all that talk of mother and sisters and our sweet little cottage and street, all that reverence for "papa," and

that fine touch of the defunct guidebook drawn out twenty pages too long because Redburn is too naive to accept the reality that things change. Worst of all, however, for the first third of the book is a narrative voice that positively squeaks with naiveté and superiority. It is not just that Redburn is a member of the temperance and non-smoking societies, and that he preaches to others, but that Melville provides a sugary tone of voice for him, as if the boy were telling the story in his adoring mother's arms. "The reason why I threw my last penny away was because," Redburn typically begins with a puckering wordiness. "But I was telling about my seasickness," he begins another, or tacks on blithely to a third, that Tom Legere kept the Total Abstinence Association funds "in a little purse that his cousin knit him." These mannerisms lead up to larger false-ringing pieties about how the Holy Bible was the only timeless guide, about how he shouldn't look into things that only God could understand, but most flagrantly, how he has remained a bachelor because of his infatuation with the three pretty girls in a cottage he saw on the road to London. This last is so silly it forces us to ask what Melville means by this character.

The answer is not in this book. The amazing thing about this botched novel is most dramatically brought to light in later works where he has learned how to use cozy cottage humor so that it rings true. The mistakes of going too heavy on Redburn's smug desire to live out his life in a cute little cottage, preferably with his mother, will surface even more

painfully in Pierre. In "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno," however, with subtle and evocative studies of complacency it will provide the brilliant core of these works; and Melville will know well how to separate there the strands of response into separate characters--Redburn and Bolton in one story becoming the Lawyer and Bartleby, in another Delano and Babo. In addition to satirizing the smugness, however, Melville learns eventually how to enjoy himself the snugness of the cozy cottage. In Redburn Melville is thinking too much in terms of a cottage on land. His distinctive contribution to the humor of cottage pretensions is to move that cottage out to sea. In White-Jacket, then, for all its failings, Melville profits from his oath to keep the book at sea, even in Rio. On shipboard the Forty-two Pounder Club and the Foretop provide the cottage where man may hug himself, his illusions and his friends. When Melville is in control of cozy corner humor it does not pall because it is Melville's own Cape-Horn-weathered foretop cottage, not an English countryside cottage. In Redburn, however, very much as later in Pierre, Melville is still playing with English cottages and English girls eating muffins. Also, in the future with the exception of Pierre, Melville will always be clear about whether he is stressing satire or sympathy.

A brief look at Melville's ten "Authentic Anecdotes of Old Zack," provides a fitting conclusion for this chapter, since the anecdotes embody in small the process central to Melville's learning in his first five novels. The articles, originally

published in the summer of 1847 in the Duyckinck circle humorous periodical, Yankee Doodle, have not yet been reprinted and little has been said of them, except in some embarrassment.²⁸ The assumption seems to be that they represent an indeed embarrassing and unique experience in Melville's career, that Melville wrote them to keep himself in good favor in the Duyckinck circle, and hence associated with them a great humiliation. We have, however, no evidence of Melville feeling anything of the kind. Even if we had, were we to listen to Melville's every scruple with regard to potboiling, we would have to scrap four out of the five novels written before Moby-Dick. What is illuminating about these articles is that, on the contrary, they were written under conditions and with intentions very similar to those prompting Melville's first five novels. Written expressly to be funny, they embody in small the artistic task that Melville faced in writing his fiction, and they allow us to note how Melville characteristically handled his humor.

The fault of the anecdotes is their heavy-handedness; they use low-grade conventional jokes to an indeed embarrassing degree. The worst of these is the emphasis on Zack's oversized posterior. In general the use of such a standard clown tactic cannot fare well in print, nor can the lamely stereotyped practical joke of the tack placed upon Zack's saddle. Even so, Melville doesn't stop there. Zack doing his own washing and mending, in case we've missed the joke of the supposed rough-n-ready being a fastidious effeminate, Melville calls at one point a

"modest little miss." Besides shifting the subject thus from clown to practical joke victim to female, Melville plays with language in a standard American way:

In all cases we give the old man's very words. If they show a want of early attendance at the Grammar School, it must be born in mind that old Zack never took a college diploma . . . and rather glories in the simplicity and unostentation of his speech. "Describe me, Sir," said he to our correspondent--"describe me Sir as I am, no polysyllables, no stuff--it's time they should know me in my true light."

Melville is simply turning around the joke which shows the man of gumption and monosyllables outwitting his large-worded countryman. The reversal however is hardly ingenious; we are still left with the claustrophobic rivalry between sophisticate and backwoodsman.

Melville's problem in these articles is a discomfort with attacking publicly and directly a particular individual. Melville had not yet had the experience to any great extent of being attacked in reviews. It was only after Mardi came out that he said he would never attack any man's work again, since he understood too well the pain that critical attacks could bring.²⁹ Nonetheless this awareness doesn't seem to represent a change in Melville but only a realization of what he felt all along, and what accounts for the distinct achievement of his humor from Typee to The Confidence-Man. That is, merely converting hostility into cleverness is a tedious game as literal-minded as it is narrow. What interested Melville was the absurdity of human nature and the absurdity of the universe to

which human nature is a response. His way of dealing with what interested him was to find the right balance between ridicule and sympathy, and to see the individual as part, even if an ornery or misanthropic part, of the human condition.

In the Zack articles, however, Melville could not allow himself such a broad perspective. He was supposed to attack one man. The easiest way for him to have released the strain of his humor would have been to remove its very individual target, and with it the assumption that after all most men are better than those few God-awful ones. This is precisely what he has done in his novels, to take the heavy-handed sting out of his attack by broadening it to the entire human race, and being certain not even to put in writing to Dana the names of the prototypes of the Neversink officers. Thus it is easy to see how the awkwardness of Melville's attack on Zack's clothing³⁰ as well as the flimsiness of Melville's concluding request for citizens to send Zack jackets "large over the back and free in the arms," prefigures the subtle play and lucidity of a section quoted above in the discussion of White-Jacket. That passage, beginning "Officers generally fight as dandies dance," broadens the attack to all officers and realizes the absurdity of mankind in its ability to muddle thoughts of eternity with ill-will toward its tailors.

Even within these articles, however, and this is what is illuminating, Melville finds a manner of steering clear of the narrowness of attacking a single man. It was neither original

nor difficult for Melville to parody P. T. Barnum's enterprise and advertisements. But in allowing nearly every one of the ten articles to build from an attack on Taylor to a parody of Barnum, Melville has achieved a characteristic freshness. P. T. Barnum is not just one more fool, but as Ishmael would say, "the sign and symbol" of what utter fools we all are. Melville's repeated introduction of P. T. Barnum here is his way of deflecting the attack from Zack to ourselves, to show us that if we think we can call this backwoodsman an idiot, we should look again--to ourselves. We should look to the average person who so enjoys a Barnum spectacle or a Barnum museum cataloguing the great excitements of the age.

Beginning with the intention to be funny, Melville starts by being so in the most uncomfortably hackneyed ways. Pushing through his own discomfort, however, he finds a way not just to please his public with a new brand of humor, but to please himself by sympathetically and subtly poking fun at his own audience, himself and all of human nature in its desire to lose itself in spectacular fanfares and the idlest of curiosities. It should not be surprising that one of Melville's characteristic touches here is the letter from Barnum asking the general to allow himself to be displayed in one of Barnum's cages. In this negotiation, nicely conveyed and humorously sustained, we see again Melville's preoccupation with the delusion of power, and with the inevitable predicament of our all being mere prisoners in cages. More significantly, returning to Roland Barthes'

notes on what distinguishes great art, we see how in using Barnum Melville makes the spectacle stare back at the spectator, who is fool enough to pay his money to see what we all are, mere prisoners in cages.

In his first five novels, as in his "Anecdotes on Old Zack," Melville was teaching himself how to raise humor from a literal claustrophobic game to an artistic vision. We cannot be surprised that his learning involved some clumsy toying with conventional humor. The point is, even when it seemed that Melville was most giving in to the public, he was quietly working at finding his own humorous voice.

Notes

¹ Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne, June 1? 1851, Pittsfield, Letters, p. 128.

² George Stewart, "The Two Moby-Dicks," American Literature, 25 (1954), 417-48.

³ Charles Lamb to Thomas Manning, February 15, 1802, The Portable Charles Lamb, p. 94.

⁴ This reading is the extreme of a point of view which in its milder forms permeates nearly all Typee criticism. Most critics to be sure recognize similarities between Typee and Melville's later work but they emphasize the differences and the change in Melville's outlook and approach. See for example, Matthiessen, p. 377; Warner Berthoff, p. 8; Bowen, pp. 16 and 55; William Sedgwick, pp. 27-59; Charles Anderson, p. 178, and Rosenberry (see n. 6 below). James Miller is an exception. His comment on p. 20 does not address the question of humor but gets at related materials. "Thus we arrive at the central dilemma in the criticism of Melville's first books [Typee and Omoo]: how may we reconcile these apparently Rousseauistic works with an essentially Calvinistic temperament. We can assume, as a number of critics have, that Melville changed. But . . . it is difficult to believe that so deep a mind as Melville's could so readily and completely shift its orientation," A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville (New York: Farrar, 1962).

⁵ Herman Melville to John Murray, July 15, 1846, New York, Letters, p. 39. The context should be noted; Melville seems to be trying to justify his acceptance of the expurgations of Typee.

⁶ Although Rosenberry goes on to see the comic spirit in Melville's other novels and although he sees the hardship out of which the humor grows in Typee and Omoo, Rosenberry's thesis rests on the idea that these two books represent the first stage in Melville's comic development, the jocular-hedonic. See p. 5, 9-48.

⁷ D. H. Lawrence, pp. 131-40.

⁸ Thompson, pp. 45-55, especially pp. 53-54.

⁹ Roland Barthes, "The World as Object," in Critical Essays, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1972), pp. 3-12.

¹⁰ Charles Feidelson, Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 165.

11 Leon Howard, "Historical Note," to Herman Melville, Typee (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 279-80.

12 "Historical Note" to Herman Melville, Mardi (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970)p. 679.

13 Herman Melville, The American Men of Letters Series (1950; rpt. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), p. 95.

14 Rosenberry, p. 70.

15 Rosenberry, pp. 51-57.

16 See for example Charles Gordon Greene, "Review of Mardi," Boston Post, April 18, 1849; rpt. in The Recognition of Herman Melville, pp. 14-16: "After the arrival at 'Mardi' the book becomes mere hodgepodge, reminding us of the talk in Rabelais, divested of all its coarseness and, it may be added, of all its wit and humor. . . . In a word, Mardi greatly resembles Rabelais emasculated of everything but prosiness and puerility." Also George Ripley's "Review of Mardi" in New York Tribune, May 10, 1849; rpt. in The Recognition, p. 16.

17 Rosenberry, pp. 58-59.

18 Melville's Mardi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), pp. 160, 200.

19 Davis, p. 142.

20 The Tailoring of White-Jacket (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

21 Vincent, p. 12.

22 Vincent, pp. 201-2.

23 Willard Thorp, "Historical Note" to Herman Melville, White-Jacket (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 415.

24 Keith Huntress, "Melville's Use of a Source for White-Jacket," American Literature, 17 (1945), 66-74; Vincent, pp. 9, 108.

25 Arvin, p. 111.

26 Thorp, pp. 425-29.

27 Melville's Early Life and Redburn (New York: New York University Press, 1951).

28 Luther Mansfield, bringing their existence to light in an article in American Literature, 9 (1938), 411-18, published one of them, but spoke of the series in general as an embarrassment. Rosenberry, as if worried that knowledge of them would prejudice readers against Melville's comedy, chided Mansfield for "uncharitably" exhuming them. Chase and Davis are more interested and dispassionate, Chase for their P. T. Barnum elements and Davis for their satire of American politics, but neither critic examines the way Melville handles his humorous intention.

29 Herman Melville to Evert Duyckinck, December 14, 1849, London, Letters, p. 96.

30 "He has no violent predilection for his regimentals and seldom appears in them, which in fact, is the case with most of his officers, of whom it is even observed that they seldom appear in externals on duty."

Chapter IV

Whales and Confidence

With Moby-Dick, Melville comes into his own. True, he fumbles in the opening hundred pages with a nervous comicality, and towards the end he is heavy-handed with portents of disaster. Nonetheless here is Melville's first novel in which, from the beginning, the reader has the unmistakable sense that Melville has not only found his subject, but knows that he has. Here from the first, as he plays with the humor of extravagance, Melville has found his free-ranging voice.

Whaling as a subject is effortlessly right. It combines the modesty of describing the industry one does well with the bragging of a young nation showing off its achievement. The whaling crew, while conveniently limiting the focus to the male sex, projects a profile of the emerging democratic adventure with all America's ambitions to be egalitarian--and rich. As a hunt, whaling provides the stuff not only for robust physical action but for immediate and sustained dramatic conflict: man against whale. Only in Typee, with white man and cannibal, had Melville found such a workable dramatic tension. Moby-Dick avoids the veering of Mardi and the diffuseness of White-Jacket without being merely, however, the happy hit of Typee. From the first page Melville sees the potential of his subject, the exultation and the dread, a humor

grounded in a sense of death. And he knows from the start how to give this humor its leeway; he gives us a narrator who is as assertive as he is stable and as stable as he is affectionate. Unlike Babbalanja, Ishmael need not quote his way tediously through Seneca, try skepticism, then learn faith. Ishmael begins with a "decoction of the Stoics" under his belt, and the knowledge as well that even that wears off in time. Unlike self-effacing White-Jacket, as entrapped in the folds of his own coat as he is in admiration for Jack Chase, Ishmael does not hesitate to mention whaling. Whaling is Ishmael's subject from beginning to end, and he finds a friend who not only wants to talk whaling but to go whaling with him.

Ishmael sets out with a simple impulse. He has noticed and wishes to say that something exciting is going on. He opens his monologue with a list of words with which to name and worship the whale in thirteen languages. His collection of extracts from all over the globe and history conveys his transcendent wonder regarding whales and other prodigies. His first chapter of "Loomings" expresses his sense of forms rising before us with an appearance of great and portentous, indeed exaggerated size. Later chapters suggest that Ishmael could not have seen a more sublime painting than that in the Spouter Inn, made a better friend than Queequeg, or heard a better sermon than Father Mapple's. Ishmael's impulse is to say not that this is the best of all possible worlds, but that this is nothing less than the

most magnificent of all possible universes. His point is not simplistic optimism -- it is rhapsody. Everything bows before this impulse, everything comes to seem subservient.

What Melville has arranged, however, is that Ishmael is always losing ground to his excitability. Ishmael would like to have modestly and deferentially said that the whale is a grand and mighty creature. His superlatives, however, take on a life of their own, his invocations trip over themselves. In the midst of straightforward etymologies spring up pompous orthographical maxims; in the midst of joyful songs to the whale, pedantic irrelevancies like "The whale is a mammiferous animal without hind feet." Ishmael ever waxes warm, even in an address to a sub-sub librarian, "So far thee well, poor devil of a Sub-Sub, whose commentator I am. Thou belongest to that hopeless sallow tribe which no wine of the world will ever warm; and for whom even Pale Sherry would be too rosy-strong; but with whom one sometimes loves to sit, and feel poor-devilish too; and grow convivial upon tears; and say to them bluntly, with full eyes and empty glasses, and in not altogether unpleasant sadness -- Give it up, Sub-Subs!...Would that I could clear out Hampton Court and the Tuileries for ye!" All things in this universe become grand, all things wonderful. The more Ishmael says, the more he must say to stay on top of his remarks, but the more he says, the more he ends up submerged. Indeed, not until the very last page when he is almost actually submerged -- by water -- will Ishmael have said his full.

In the meantime we cannot be surprised that what Ishmael's peremptory commands in "Loomings" would have us look at from Corlears Hook to Coenties Slip is nothing less than a world of men bewitched, overcome by the ineffable, lost to ocean reveries. For, even while he describes what he sees, here and throughout, he is continually trying to get a footing amidst the current of his statements, until finally, "Once more. Say you are in the country; in some high land of lakes. Take almost any path you please . . . There is magic in it. Let the most absentminded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries--stand that man on his legs, set his feet agoing, and he will infallibly lead you to water, if water there be in all that region." Stand Ishmael on his legs, and he will infallibly lead you to the magnificent uncertainties of this watery world. He is like those brave and daring Nantucketers, who first caught crabs in the sand, then grown bolder, waded out for mackerel, then "at last, launching a navy of great ships on the sea, explored this watery world, put an incessant belt of circumnavigations around it; peeped in at Behring's Straits; and in all seasons and all oceans declared everlasting war with the mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood; most monstrous and most mountainous! That Himmalehan . . ."

In the first twenty chapters, however, before the Pequod sets sail, Melville had the problem of how to direct this enthusiasm gone haywire. He tries comicality; he spikes the monologue with comic bits. These are not bad; they just don't stand

up as well as the ^erst of the book. We have the landlord gulling Ishmael, Mrs. Hussey quarreling with Queequeg, Ishmael breaking down his roommate's door, Bildad and Peleg doing a nineteenth-century Laurel and Hardy routine, Aunt Charity bustling aboard her peppers and hymnals. Accompanying this standard sort of buffoonery are explanations that tell a little too much. "A good laugh is a mighty good thing, and rather too scarce a good thing; the more's the pity," Ishmael says, for example. "So, if any man in his own proper person, afford stuff for a good joke to anybody, let him not be backward, but let him cheerfully allow himself to spend and be spent in that way." Statements like these confirm for us our reading of Ishmael's attitude, but they spell out the game too clearly, just as the bits between the obviously comic characters grate by their very insistence upon being funny.

Melville's achievement in Moby-Dick has to do less with the game of little interchanges than the game of long talk. The book is full of sermons, full of "the best contradictory authorities" giving us their spiels. We have Ishmael's to Queequeg on fasting and fanaticism, Ishmael's to Bildad and Peleg on the First Congregational Church, Father Mapple's to the whalemens, Stubb's to Pip, Stubb's to Fleece, Fleece's to the sharks, and above all and beneath all, Ishmael's from start to finish on one whaling voyage with one Queequeg, one Ahab, one Moby Dick. The humor at the beginning fumbles it would seem, because the book is not yet

firmly at sea. It is not just that the water itself puts everything in a continually, reliably precarious state of rocking and motion, but that the water is also the territory that Melville has for his own. There was much land humor, and there were many sea stories, but a watery prose humor of old salts and ocean-going isolatoes Melville had to himself. Once at sea also, Ishmael may take a more comfortable working position, less at the center of the action than at the side, as narrator, observer, anatomist, stand-up-philosopher. His whole action from then on can become the talk, as it should be. He will occasionally take part in the action or talk about himself, but mostly what we have from "The Advocate" on is Ishmael as the Schoolmaster with the full "boggy, soggy, squitchy picture" before him, the picture of ultimate fascination, importance and drama.

In "The Advocate" Melville gets into the heart of his subject and sets up the novel as a prodigious long piece of talk about one of man's activities. Thereafter Ishmael never needs to hesitate to find something to describe or explain. He hardly need turn his head, from Starbuck to Stubb to Flask to Ahab, to the Whale, to a system of whales, to the whale's fin to his blubber to his organ to his tail, from the sighting of the whale to the killing of him to the boiling of him to the carving of his teeth, from one gam to the next to the next. So much to talk about! In Moby-Dick, Ishmael gets excited about many things; he invokes many Gods and kings, and gives us many visions of heaven. "This

is Charing Cross, hear ye! Good people all, the Greenland whale is deposed -- the great sperm whale reigneth." Or he invokes that "democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God Himself! The great God absolute! The center and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!" Or he dreams up a vision of a heaven of angels each with his hand in a jar of spermacetti. But truly Ishmael's image of glory is being able to talk, and from "The Advocate" on, Ishmael may go on as long as he pleases. No wonder the whale is, according to one of Ishmael's final etymological flourishes, "The macrocephalus of the long-words." Moby-Dick is not only a tall tale, but a long story, by another macrocephalus -- big-head of the long-words -- by Ishmael himself. And finally, if one notices the quiet inanity of Ishmael's description of Starbuck as a "long earnest man," one begins to see that Ishmael knows we are all long, earnest men (unless we are short, stubby ones). We all seek to defend ourselves -- or match wits with the universe -- by going on as long as we can.

Chapter 82, "The Honor and Glory of Whaling," is central to the book. Ishmael here typically takes impossible leaps of logic as if he were merely crossing the street. He conjures up for our pleasure the gallant Perseus, who in a fine and lovely act rescues and marries a maid. He conjures up St. George and with a quietly dazzling verbal legerdemain makes over the "tutelary guardian of England" and his dragon into whaleman and whale. Of Hercules we

are told, "At any rate the whale caught him, if he did not the whale. I claim him for one of our clan." And finally Vishnoo is brought gently and firmly into the fold. "If I claim demi-god, then why not the prophet," Ishmael asks, moving quickly and naturally on to the Gods themselves. "Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah and Vishnoo. There's a member-roll for you!"

Ishmael takes such liberties in the procedures of his talk that the reader's response in part is like Queequeg's, as that benevolent cannibal sits counting by fifties the pages of the incomprehensible book in his lap, "a long-drawn gurgling whistle of astonishment." Ishmael, however, has explained of man what is true of himself, "Nothing dispirits and nothing seems worthwhile disputing. He bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs and persuasions, all things visible and invisible, never mind how knobby." If Ishmael entangles the reader in the crosscrossing harpoon lines of his suggestability, he has no choice. Considering the difficulty of getting a grip on that elusive thing called reality, considering that the whale cannot be simply stared in the face because he has none, Ishmael will try anything and with consummate energy and infinite good graces. He will let himself get carried away with a redundancy of alliteration, exclamation and allusion. He will tell one part of his book as a set of Shakespearean soliloquys, one as a cetological catalogue, one as a visit to a Tropical temple surrounded by fierce but indolent natives, and the book as a whole as an anatomy of the world on a ship of fools. He will let Stubb inculcate "the religion of

rowing" amongst his men, Flask whip up his to an atheistical orgasmic fury, and he himself get caught up in the current of fifty different sects: Christian, cannibal, Moslem, Buddhist, ancient Hebrew, pragmatic American, and more. Ishmael is the predecessor of Beckett's Lucky, but when Ishmael commands himself "Think!" he has let himself in knowingly, willingly, and even happily for the foolishness he will make of himself.

At the end of Moby-Dick, the chapters fall off to what we may call tragic relief. Finally all talk gives way to the death song at its core -- as "The Hyena" chapter liberates the clean ghost with a quiet conscience sitting snugly in the family vault, the clean ghost who is Ishmael at his best. Finally at the end of Moby-Dick, everyone dies except Ishmael who swims off with the sharks, padlocks on their mouths -- and, in effect, on his. The book that begins by following funerals and ends with the death of a nation is from the beginning to end a song about what it's like to have survived your own death.

Indeed death is just a short-hand for the vulnerability that is at the core of man's sense of himself in this universe. Ishmael not only sympathizes with our plight, but slowly and lovingly revolves it before our eyes, sees it everywhere, projects it onto anything in sight. The fin-back "has a lovely tail and sentimental Indian eyes of a hazel hue. But his mealy mouth spoils all." A white man before Daggoo is a white flag come to beg truce of a fortress, as the "Cabin Table" leaves fearful Stubb "cutting his meat tenderly." In the definition and

description prefatory to the first of the nine gams strung through the novel, "The captain having no place to sit in, is pulled off to his visit all standing like a pine tree. And often you will notice that being conscious of the eyes of the whole visible world resting on him from the sides of the two ships, this standing captain is all alive to the importance of sustaining his dignity by maintaining his legs." Indeed dignity is always the catch; if we didn't insist upon it we would never be quite this vulnerable. "Nor is this any very easy matter; for in his rear is the immense projecting steering oar hitting him now and then in the small of his back, the after oar reciprocating by rapping his knees in front. He is thus completely wedged before and behind, and can only expand himself sideways by settling down on his stretched legs . . . Then again, it would never do in plain sight of the world's riveted eyes, it would never do, I say, for this straddling captain to be seen steadying himself the slightest particle by catching hold of anything with his hands; indeed as token of his entire, buoyant self-command, he generally carries his hands in his trouser's pockets." It is typical of Ishmael, by the way, that in this description he is not only busily tacking one thought to the next, but that in doing so he lets slip in new juxtapositions. It is not only how wedged in is this figure of impressive authority but how courteous the after oar is in reciprocating the raps of the steering oar.

What Ishmael calls the "universal thump" in this book in

fact goes round and round, alternating only with the kick. Poor devils on shore "that happen to know an irascible great man" only "make distant unobtrusive salutations to him in the street, lest if they pursued the acquaintance further, they might receive a summary thump for their presumption." In "Merry Christmas," Ishmael, presuming only to worry to himself about Ahab, is kicked in the rear by Peleg. Stubb, thinking he's dreaming of being kicked by Ahab, is actually dreaming of Ahab being kicked by Moby Dick; for in his dream Stubb kicks his leg off trying to get back at a mute immovable pyramid (while a seaweedy Mr. Humpback urges prudence upon him and then swims off). Ultimately it is of course Ahab, having become the "old sea-captain" himself, who is kicked and thumped by the great universe itself in the body of Moby Dick (who in turn like many another whale has been continuously thumped by mankind). The fact that Ahab, unlike "wise" Stubb, continues to kick back and loses not only his leg, but his life, his ship and all his crew but Ishmael, no more means that Ahab is a fool than that he is actually the wise one. Ahab's response simply attests to the absoluteness with which Melville understands and estimates that thump. The thump is finally the starkest revelation of our predicament as human beings. No wonder we humor ourselves. Humor is our grand consolation.

Ishmael's monologue, however, is not merely an abstract extravaganza of a consolatio. The "Love Partition" which was

Melville's first contact with The Anatomy of Melancholy¹ presented love as one of melancholy's causes and cures. Ishmael goes further. At the center of the whole book is what may be referred to as the hug. It is not just that Ishmael is affectionate and friendly, that he is inclined to rub shoulders and be sociable, that the first of his adventures is befriending the patchwork-tattooed pedlar of heads. The whole book is built upon the magnetism between the inmates of the universe. Moby-Dick is permeated with the imagery and paraphernalia of love, marriage, sex, generation and lactation; Moby-Dick is filled with gigantic phalli such as Queens worship in their secret groves, with sperm, wedding candles, wedding cakes, wedding beds, cream, sugar and strawberries. It is not just that Moby Dick is celebrated on one level as a great bull, nor that "The Cassock" ceremoniously undresses the whale's private parts upon the deck. It is not just that Queequeg throws his arm over Ishmael in the bed in which the landlord and Sal were "spliced," nor that the reader is invited with Ishmael to watch the amors of the deep. Most like Typee in this respect, Moby-Dick is saturated in a teasing sexuality which comes across as wonder at erotic bounty. Finally what we realize is most pathetic about Dough-Boy is that his father was a breadless baker, and his mother a sterile creature of a hospital nurse. Ishmael's song of triumph is an exultation in sexuality, climaxed rapturously and onanistically with his squeezing his own hands in the oleaginous tubs of "sperm."

Indeed Melville here has found his game. You hug yourself, you hug your cannibal bedmate, you lick your paws, you even hug your agony (Ahab for the latter two). In those great hugs, squeezing hands, you dream of all of nature's bounty, all the creams and milks of sperm and gold, without ever touching your precarious individual selfhood or engaging in the fruitful hence pedestrian business of sex. It is not merely fortuitous that no women were on board the Pequod. Rather it was the very fact that whaleships were all male which made them perfect touchstones for Melville's humor. There he could dwell upon the asexual hug and the asexual dream of plenty, and the very asexuality of the hug would establish and maintain the important elements of self-parody and absurdity.

Of course the biggest hug in the book is that of Ahab and Moby Dick. We have heard at length about the way young bull whales "still swelling with noble ambitions," cruised around together. Ahab, like the hunted whale himself, is no young thing but one of the older isolatoes. Melville makes fun of these for their flaunting neglect of Montaigne's good advice in "Du Repentir."² The old worn-out bulls brag of their virtue and repentance, when really all that has happened is that they have run out of hormonal drive. Moby Dick, however, is beyond that. Old and wise, he brags to no one, talks with no one, has no confidentiality or intercourse. All he wants, it would seem, is his peace, not to be hunted. It is as if the course of existence

had been boisterous and rugged enough. The requirements should be behind him and something gained, some respect due him from the universe for having endured, and for having refused the dependencies and self-delusions with which many pacify themselves in old age.

Moby Dick, of course, is not given this modicum of respect. It is fitting that the one who would know best how much Moby Dick wants it is Ahab, an old man who has also endured, refused himself every sort of illusory sentiment, and also demanded a certain bowing to his will from the nature of things. Ahab is another lone old bull in this story. Melville at one point calls him a "heart-stricken moose," at another "the lone Missouri grizzly," at a third a "mute sea-lion." Yet it is not merely ironic that the two who demand the most respect from the universe should end up in a fatal interlocking bear hug, a death embrace, Ahab's Parsee even lashed to Moby Dick's bosom as an emblem of that hug. It is the other marriage, the other splicing, of the book. It is the other side of the coin of Queequeg's and Ishmael's genial bearhug and splicing at the opening of the book.

If, in this bear hug, Ahab is more "to blame" than Moby Dick, since Ahab is the hunter and Moby Dick the hunted, that is not the issue. Nor is it that the "stricken" Moby Dick, for all we know, may live on. The point is that both are presented as creatures, grand and mighty creatures, but creatures nonetheless. Their equality is suggested not only by their mutual

exasperation and ferocity, not only in all Ishmael's playful anthropomorphic descriptions of whales--and cetopomorphic descriptions of men ("I have swum through libraries" etc.) but even further by Ishmael's fundamental love and respect for the whale. His is a love which transcends anthropomorphism to another realm where man loves fish because man and fish are fellows in a simultaneously and ceaselessly magnificent and awful universe. Ahab and Moby Dick, after all, are God's creatures fighting, just as they are man and fish in mid-ocean, in the nothingness together, God's creatures loving.

But finally also the hug leaves us recognizing, as the chapter on "The Tail" makes clear, that while Ishmael begins on the one hand a spoony-eyed romantic, in love with the transcendently wonderful universe, at the same time he begins on the other hand a flirt, a dirty old young man looking for any chance he can get to parade before us his sexual bravado. Indeed in "The Tail," Ishmael makes repeated and noisy reference to the connections between the elephant and the whale, for their respective trunk and tail. Surely while celebrating the glory of the whale, of the universe, while letting himself and his humors celebrate and engage in the most heartfelt and passionate of embraces, Ishmael is also, to use the nineteenth-century phrase that Melville knew well,³ taking his reader "to see the elephant" -- to see the whale. That is, Ishmael is skylarking his reader and skylarking himself. Moby-Dick, after all, celebrates the great

hoax we perpetrate upon ourselves. Our busy, earnest, conscientious heads celebrate ourselves, while our tails assert themselves. And finally, for an additional twist, as we learn of the whale in Ishmael's "Heads and Tails," if we cut ourselves into head and tail, as we repeatedly do, we shall find that there is nothing left.

Part of the sustained achievement of Moby-Dick is that Melville has not only found exactly the subject to talk about, but a way of talking about it. One of Melville's distractions in earlier novels was finding a form when available ones such as the travel narrative and the sentimental novel were wrong -- unresilient and constricting. Richard Chase has suggested forms and motifs which Melville found in American folklore;⁴ these indeed were instrumental in liberating Melville's humor by providing him a way to talk about his very American subject. I suggest, however, that American folklore is only one part and the final part of what Melville was absorbing and building upon. This was the whole tradition of prose humorists who, from the Renaissance on, played with the excitement of the opening of the frontier, of land and knowledge, the new man of infinite potentials. Indeed Melville is not only relieved to find available to him all the forms of the past, but even seems to enjoy the showmanship of incorporating and building upon all the male frontier monologues he knew and admired: the Renaissance tall-tale of Rabelais, the

melancholy anatomy of Burton, the humorous novel of sensibility/cock 'n bull story of Sterne, the humorous essay of sensibility of Lamb, De Quincey and Irving, and finally the periodical tall-tale or twister of popular American culture.

In his extravaganza, Rabelais gave Melville a way of spelling out the feeling of prodigiousness and bounty that is at the heart of frontier humor. Rabelais created Gargantua and Pantagruel, giants of body, mind and heart who are described in an affectionate extravagant vernacular and sprung from native folk legend. Like Pantagruel, the whale in Melville's book is a vast creature, described and admired in a spirited colloquial, one who as an infant consumes in a day thousands of gallons of milk, and as an adult, travelling whither he pleases and turning up everywhere, takes the whole world for his province. Moby Dick, in addition, as one particular whale, is sprung very consciously from native legend and, like Pantagruel, male, important and importantly dressed in white. Gargantua's enterprising love of learning and independent thinking meanwhile has encouraged Ishmael's bragging, central to Moby-Dick, of the grand sweep and scope of his research and knowledge. And so contagious is the love of learning in Rabelais' book that even Panurge, obscene practical joker that he is, first wins Pantagruel's heart in the beginning of their long friendship by saying that he is hungry in thirteen languages. Is this perhaps why Ishmael in his overture to his reader translates "whale" into thirteen languages?

For all the friendship and affection, however, neither in Rabelais nor in Melville is the bounty strictly benign. At heart also it is an aggressiveness, not just threatening women, but men and sheep too, and in this regard, Panurge's practical jokes were sources for Melville's inclusion of Stubb's in Moby-Dick.

Alcofrybas also, let us recall, is always on hand as the subservient fellow so small he could live for six months in Gargantua's throat without that giant even noticing. Indeed this important episode in Rabelais is related to the image of man being swallowed by the whale that figures so large in the mythology behind Moby-Dick. Giants, in short, are wonderful but they may swallow you, just as all the marvelous dreams of man's democratic and egalitarian potential may swallow you and leave you a pale "loaf-of-bread faced steward," tremblingly serving at the Cabin Table the voracious, superb, baronial "Gargantuan" harpooners.

The great throat swallows, the great mouth talks. Rabelais' book, like Melville's afterwards, is a teasing ventriloquistic performance. Panurge through three volumes only wishes to know whether he should marry or not as Pip later in an incident central to Moby-Dick only wants to know if he's supposed to jump from the whale boat or not. All they both get is talk, long endlessly pompous contradictory sermons. Moving from physician to poet to philosopher to lawyer to scholar in one book, and from First Congregationalist to Shakespearean soliloquizer to Poor Richard to a tale teller in Peru in the other is a sign that none of the

oracles' advice can shield us from the uncertainties, particularly because all the ventriloquism is served up with a sexual and religious teasing. Indeed Rabelais helped liberate Melville's humor in this regard. Pantagruel's buoyant sexuality, St. Victor's vast pornographic library, Panurge's making a shambles of feminine niceties and sexual pieties: these are all a great source for Melville in Moby-Dick. In Mardi, Melville had backed off into a prudish irritability. Here, however, Melville doesn't hesitate. In addition to the wide open jokes of a book about "sperm" and a tale of a tail, we get a quiet succession of teasing innuendos and one-liners about unicorns, prizes to queens, and elephants in the marketplace softly caressing ladies' "zones."

That Melville had Rabelais in mind for a many-sided teasingly heretical independence is clear from a crucial chapter that Melville borrowed from Rabelais, the Whiteness Chapter -- about Pantagruel wearing, and Moby Dick being, white.⁵ The business of these chapters, both in Rabelais and Melville afterwards, is a theatrical redefinition of the word white, Rabelais and Melville each ceremoniously rejecting meanings from the past, insisting upon his own interpretations of things, and officiously cataloguing all the evidence supporting his view. If Melville emphasizes dread to Rabelais' joy, we should keep in mind that Rabelais in that chapter tells us that the "lion, who with his only cry and roaring affrights all beasts, dreads and feareth only a white

cock," and ends by speaking of white as the color of a joy so extreme you could die from it. Similarly Melville in his milk-white steed gives us a creature of royal magnificence which, like that of the milky way itself, affrights us, but only by being the greatest of spectacles of this universe. It is certainly true that Rabelais never emphasizes the dread which haunts Melville's novel, that atheism to Rabelais never seems the truly terrifying spectre it does to Melville, that Melville in turn takes Rabelais' catalogue of the previous meanings of white up past Rabelais, through Coleridge (and Poe) to his own. We do have a contrast in tone and fable between the two books. But in some basic concept of the bounty of the universe, of the sociability of friendships like those of Pantagruel and Panurge, Gargantua and Pantagruel, in the excitement of gigantic man as a new world creature of possibilities, and the bounty of nature's gallons of milk, white and endless, Melville found a great source in Rabelais.

Robert Burton gave Moby-Dick not just the form of the anatomy,⁶ but his subject and a purpose, to cure his own melancholy by writing. "When I first took this task in hand," Democritus, Jr. writes, "this I aimed at: to ease my mind by writing, for I had a heavy heart and an ugly head, a kind of imposthume in my head, which I was very desirous to be unladen of, and could imagine no fitter evacuation than. Besides I might not well refrain, for one must needs scratch where it itches." Ishmael goes to sea for the same reason, "It is a way I have of

driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth: whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul. . . especially whenever my hypos gets such an upper hand of me. . . This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship." One for his anatomy, the other for his journey, the purpose is the same, to drive off the spleen, the ugliness in the head, the haziness around the eyes, the heaviness of the heart. Indeed in Moby-Dick, as in The Anatomy of Melancholy, the imposthume of the head is a central obsession; it is not incidental that Ishmael while he turns to other things enjoys leaving the Sperm Whale's prodigious head hanging on the Pequod's side for, as in Burton, the story begins with a prodigious head (the persona's) caught, suspended and turned into a helpless monstrosity waiting upon its master. "Too many heads," says the landlord of the Spouter Inn, and Melville loves to let us see the steam rising both from whales' heads and philosophers'. "While composing a little treatise on Eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me. . ." Ishmael writes.

Democritus, Jr., we should note, by legacy has good reason for his melancholy. The original Democritus, Burton reminds us, was nothing less than "the patriarch of those Copernical giants"; he was the radical scientist who conceived of the universe as all in perpetual atomical motion. The original Ishmael also was no mere anonymous orphan and outcast, but the father of a whole new tribe, a whole new heretical religion, Islam. Melville, in

choosing such a name, is following Burton's suit here as the later spate of humorists, by the way, will not. By legacy, then, in both Burton and Melville, it is as if at the start of their books, both men are beyond pat and hackneyed orthodoxies ranging from the Senecan to the Christian. No wonder their heads are steaming and prodigious. No wonder also in both works the speakers at once brag of being a free man born, a schoolmaster, a lording anatomist -- and a fool, a slave, a prisoner. "Who aint a slave?" Ishmael teases at one point, while Democritus, Jr., "the free man born," tells us that "we are slaves and servants, the best of us all," that he is a raving fool giving us his "confused lump," his "giddy fit," and asks "What's our life but a prison?" One needs to know a lot and one needs to be a perseveringly independent thinker in order to have achieved the full title of vulnerability to the chaos of the mind and this universe.

The cure for the imposthume in the head is much the same in both works. Ishmael, like Democritus, Jr., consoles himself with absorption in some monumental all-defying project; it hardly matters that one uses a voyage at sea and the other a voyage of the mind. Ishmael's voyage after all is only grist for his mill, and Democritus, Jr. in his anatomy also after a while, among an eventual myriad of proposed remedies, recommends voyages. Democritus, Jr. takes his readers in fact on a whirlwind tour in A Digression of Air to "Many strange places, Isthmuses, Europeuses, Chersones, creeks, havens, promontories, straits, lakes, baths, rocks,

mountains, places and fields, where Cities have been ruined or swallowed, battles fought, creatures, Sea-monsters, remora, minerals, vegetals." The important thing about the cure is that neither the wonders of travel nor the spectacles of the extravaganza anatomy are mere curatives to the disease but its cause to begin with. In a current American song, a doctor prescribes lime and cocoanut for the patient who is sick from drinking lime and cocoanut. The madness itself is a product of the original excitability. What Melville borrows from Burton is the underlying preposterousness and impossibility of the cure. Burton cites Felix Plator who went on a seven-year voyage to rid himself of the chattering Aristophanic frogs in his belly, but what are Burton's Anatomy and Melville's Moby-Dick but more frogs chanting splendid impossible "wicked" nonsense, "Breccex, Coax, coax, oop, oop," a fine promiscuity of erudition and jabber, of fancy scientific words and slang. What indeed is the whole anatomy but "never a better barrel of better herring?"

Comparing Burton's central proof that all men are mad with Melville's that whaling is noble gives us a concrete image of how all this works out through the two books. Just as Burton makes up an absurd list of exceptions to prove the rule, such as Monsieur Nobody and the Stoics who must be mad for not being so, Ishmael as the "advocate" conjures up a great melodramatic courtroom scene in which to vindicate the nobility of whaling, a hodgepodge of absurd logic, grandiose allusion and general fasttalking is thrown at the reader while the speaker works

himself into a frenzy of assertion. Burton's frenzy is quieter and more archaic in its tone, but he is doing the same thing. "No dignity in whaling? The dignity of our calling the very heavens attest. Cetus is a constellation of the South! No more! Drive down your hat in presence of the Czar, and take it off to Queequeg! No more! I know a man that, in his lifetime, has taken three hundred and fifty whales. I account that man more honorable than that great captain of antiquity who boasted of taking as many walled towns." The odd thing is that while the rowdy exaggeration would seem to undermine the argument, the more it parodies itself, the more it nonetheless convinces us. Say no more, indeed! All men are mad! Whaling is noble! Can we possibly disagree? Can we possibly not submit to the acateleptic fervor? The Burtonesque geological sandwiches of Mardi have expanded. The whole of Moby-Dick, with its perpetual Fossil Whales, cetologies, and Masthead exhaustive researches, endlessly anatomizes the whale, the whaleship, and this watery world.

Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy⁷ is a rewriting and reshaping of Burton's Anatomy which gave Melville another handle for Moby-Dick. That Tristram writes in the same vein as Democritus, Jr. is clear. "If 'tis wrote against anything," Tristram says of his book, "'tis wrote against the spleen." Sterne, however, has made several shifts. Dropping Burton's discreetness, he has revived Rabelais' open sexual and religious teasing in time to encourage Melville to do the same. In addition, Sterne

has turned Burton's dignified melancholic philosopher into the domesticated pathetic man of the Shandy household, who are as infatuated with learning as Democritus, Jr. ever was but, in addition, ceremoniously castrated and mechanized, deprived of their noses and names. Indeed, since Melville was responding as much to Sterne as to Burton, it is crucial that we do not speak of Melville's fixation about unmanning without reference to its central place in all the Sterne-based humorous male monologues of the nineteenth century.

Most importantly, however, Sterne has tightened Burton's unwieldy extravaganza consolatio to the form at its core, the novel of sensibility/cock 'n bull story, surely, by the way, the English ancestor of the American twister. It is most of all the form and shape of Sterne's novel that Melville has worked from, for Sterne's book, unlike Burton's, devotes itself to a series of plotted splenetic events. From the very opening when Walter is interrupted by his wife to every other event of irritation that follows, Tristram Shandy's plot itself is hardly more than a series of disconnections and exasperations.

It is in this conceptual sense that Melville's book is a novel of sensibility. The author is not only willing to dispel his own hypos but to expiate it, not with a plot built upon a series of frustrations, but with a plot centered on one major exasperation. Indeed the word exasperation occurs regularly in the book, like a chime, beginning with the picture of the exasperated whale impaling itself upon the dismantled masts of a

ship, like Cato upon his sword. Howard Vincent has noted a perverse skepticism in Melville's interpreting Cato's great act of courage as mere cure for the spleen.⁸ This, however, is the humorist's perspective, establishing from the start a vision of man as a creature beset by hypos and exasperations, and needing continually to get himself from one to the next. So we see other whales, later in the novel, their hunters in the midst of "the serene exasperating sunlight;" we hear of Ahab's "intellectual and spiritual exasperations," and of Radney at a crucial moment being in a "corporeally exasperated state." One may object that all this suggests tragic recognition rather than the exasperation of sensibility. We would not speak, however, of Oedipus or Antigone or Lear as being exasperated. The word connotes something unheroic and essentially melodramatic; it describes a creature made literally out of breath -- and by the extremes, not of hubris, but of hypos. We cannot be surprised when Melville turns this sensibility inside out, showing us sulking right whales with their embarrassingly limp lower jaws hanging down, or punning about grim old bull whales who will fight you "like grim fiends exasperated by a penal gout."

This is not to say that Sterne and Melville don't have their differences, and use the cock 'n bull story/novel of sensibility in different ways. Melville's humor is grounded in a way that Sterne's is never intended to be; Melville is utterly determined to take the hypos, spleen and exasperation to their

sharpest, so that we most need the humor that is the staple of the book, so that is in no way gratuitous. Nonetheless, there is a certain similarity that is important, not just incidental. The final thing we must say about Ahab is astonishing to come upon. We've seen him described as one sullen animal after another -- all comparisons that are grim jokes on man's idealization of his misery. Even further, however, what we must come to terms with is the hum. "While the mate was getting the hammer, Ahab, without speaking, was slowly rubbing the gold piece against the skirts of his jacket, as if to heighten its lustre, and without using any words was meanwhile lowly humming to himself, producing a sound so strangely muffled and inarticulate that it seemed the mechanical humming of the wheels of his vitality in him."

This is balder than the confidence man later humming to himself an "opera snatch" as he descends to gull the old miser. This is closer to Henri Bergson's mechanical man at the root of all humor.⁹ This is related to Walter Shandy's winding up the clock and his marital relations the same one night a month at the opening of Sterne's book. Ishmael too will become the mechanical man of warp and woof, the mere shuttle in "The Mat-Maker," as does the carpenter at the end of the book in a short, brilliant sketch. Finally Moby Dick also in the last moment before Ahab's death: "Suddenly the waters around them slowly

swelled in broad circles; then quickly upheaved, as if sideways sliding from a submerged berg of ice, swiftly rising to the surface. A low rumbling sound was heard; a subterraneous hum; and then all held their breaths; as bedraggled with trailing ropes, and harpoons and lances, a vast form shot lengthwise, but obliquely from the sea." Melville's mechanical exasperated creature -- man or beast -- cock 'n bull -- is a creature of sensibility and grim humor. Melville takes the joke of hypos absolutely and deliberately to its limit, but the pattern in which he does so is the novel of sensibility / cock 'n bull story.

It was in Thomas DeQuincey's book that Melville found this sensibility gone to seed. Indeed, DeQuincey often uses the word sensibility to describe his extreme hypos which pushed him to his own extreme remedy, opium addiction. The braggadocio of extremism, the determination to encounter the worst, provided a model, a novel of grim humor, which we cannot be surprised that Melville found "wondrous" in 1849. Specifically, DeQuincey's book, *Being an Extract from the Life of a Scholar* (as it was subtitled), gave Melville a monologue of a man proudly miserable in the midst of his myriad of books, a monologue of a modern worried child of Burton and Johnson. DeQuincey, much like Ishmael after him in the Spouter Inn, begins with a deliberate and clumsy attempt to produce an amusing situation, his trunk

willfully spiriting itself downstairs as he tries to steal away quietly from the house where he is staying. Buffoonery, however, gives way quickly to the mainstream of his confessional and the steadier wryness of passages like the one in which DeQuincey peremptorily asks an artist to paint a cottage in order to spell out a theory of happiness ineluctably tied to a demand for a good strong terrible winter. That Melville enjoys this approach is suggested by his taking up the same theme in very similar language, "But here is an artist. He desires to paint you the dreamiest, shadiest, quietest, most enchanting bit of romantic landscape in all the valley of the Saco. What is the chief element he employs. . .Go visit the Prairies in June, when for scores of miles you wade knee-deep among Tiger-lillies. . .what is the one charm wanting?. . .there is not a drop of water there! Were Niagara but a cataract of sand, would you travel our thousand miles to see it?"

In DeQuincey the article, the goods, is winter; in Melville, it is water. In Melville also, however, his theory of happiness resounds to cold outdoors as Ishmael and Queequeg sit up in bed together "very nice and snug, the more so since it was so chilly out of doors. . .The more so, I say, because truly to enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold. . .For the height of this sort of deliciousness is to have nothing but the blanket between you and your snugness and the cold of the outer air. Then there you lie like the one warm spark in the heart of the arctic crystal." Melville takes up DeQuincey's playful

perversity here by conscientiously reasoning upon a subject that boils down to a question of taste. Indeed it seems Melville not only had DeQuincey in mind, but deliberately enlarged upon the bit. Melville must have water nearby his cottage in the happy valley, he will tolerate no fire on his most wintry of eves, and, above all, he wants his nose cold.

It is in Melville's Chapter 35 that DeQuincey's opium is introduced. Ishmael tells us riding in the masthead produced a trance very much like that produced by opium. The trance in turn produces a giddy wry monologue with historical, philosophical and emotional commentary upon mastheads, with a mock earnestness cataloguing all possible entrants in that category, teasing pious narrators like Scoresby and above all celebrating the snugness of this cold vulnerable lonely perch which might easily throw a man to his watery death hundreds of feet below. The Masthead, indeed, with its opium-like trance, is Melville's DeQuinceyan cottage of happiness par excellence, perfectly fit out to supply the theory of happiness. Here we not only deny ourselves fire, ~~and~~ counterpane, and tea (although Ishmael chides the arctic Scoresby for omitting to mention his flask), but windows, walls, and roof.

Indeed, finally here is the difference between DeQuincey's and Melville's wry humor of vast vulnerability, of being out in the cold, that DeQuincey actually takes a drug to induce his giddy wryness, whereas Ishmael induces his own without any help

from any of the beverages which humorists have so depended upon to soothe their melancholy souls. Indeed, in Moby-Dick, Melville leaps from the standard humorists' ploy of drinking a beverage to mentally fixating on one. The liquid in Moby-Dick is water, but instead of physically drinking it, Ishmael mentally takes it in and becomes obsessed with it, as if he has taken the whole "watery world" and got drunk on it. In contrast to DeQuincey, because his trance is only opium-like, and not actually opium-induced, Melville has all the freedom of its intense vision and all the depths of its vulnerability which are the realm of the humorist, but none of the disadvantages. "That DeQuincey is a very conscious (at...moments one would say conscientious) humorist is obvious," writes Jean-Jacques Mayoux. "What seems to me much less certain is that he knows the way his humor is going, or that he guides it."¹⁰ Melville does guide his book's humor; neither Melville as author nor Ishmael as narrator-humorist is forced into the bondage produced by a chemical actually in the blood. Thus the fine wryness that is so spotty in DeQuincey, as in the footnote in which he earnestly discusses whether a druggist may "evanesce," or tosses off a thought about it being a disagreeable thing to die, is intrinsic to Melville's work and steady in it. Similarly, where disturbing childhood events such as a trance over the death of a sister may sprawl out cloyingly over pages of "Suspira Profundis," Ishmael's trance over the loss of his dinner, a very similar type of evocation of a child's utter sense

of isolation in an adult world, passes within a page or two, evoking the traumatic material from which humor is built, but never pressing it, providing a source for the humor without ever getting out of control.

Much more in control than DeQuincey, although turning the game from deliberately confronting to deliberately evading the extremes of human vulnerability, is Charles Lamb. Elia is an important source for Ishmael. Elia is male, a bachelor, melancholy, domesticated, all oddities and quirks, and pleasures and displeasures, yet overridingly sociable and amiable, with affection especially for other ornery types like his grumbling housekeeper. Elia besides is a customs house thrall, "Poor Elia," who is continuously drawing our attention to the pathetic distance between man's illusion of mental control and the actuality of dependency and slavery, between theory and practice: "My theory is to enjoy life, but the practice is against it." Elia, all sensibility, consoles himself with the joys of roast pig and plum pudding. Sympathetically he pokes fun at our Caledonian earnestness. Indulgently he lets himself out for wandering in the "twilight of dubiety" where he will "cry halves" for the bits of truth that he may find, allowing himself only "hints and glimpses," "crude essays at a system," "wanderings" in the maze of possibilities, for "Truth presents no full face," a "feature or side face at most."

Ishmael, like Elia, is male, a bachelor, in his own way on board ship domesticated, puttering about among the trypots and

all his likes and dislikes, making friends with other isolatoes-- those ornery and intimidating but ultimately most affectionate types. Ishmael, too, tells us his foibles and his loves, for whaling, chowder, forbidden seas, cannibals, following funerals, the whale as a dish, confidential chats, dipping his biscuit, holding mock debates, unraveling parodic dissertations and anatomies upon the whale who never shows his face, and turning over his endless thinking as neither infidel nor believer. Ishmael, the whaleship-thrall, takes up Lamb's crude "essay" in both its meanings. Duyckinck was one critic to notice how many of Moby-Dick's chapters read like finely worked essays;¹¹ and indeed in this perspective we may recognize them as humorous essays--monologue bits in the method of Lamb, Hazlitt, DeQuincey and Irving. In addition, however, Ishmael in all his staggering ambition, is in a constant hubbub of crude attempts--essays--at a system. "I am in earnest and I will try," he says of his cetological system, that vast array of surly mouths and seductive young bulls. "I try all things; I achieve what I can," he says while hopelessly phrenologizing the whale whose head turns out to have no face, just as whose spout turns out to be only a mist. Ishmael always busies himself with his desire "to approve myself omnisciently exhaustive," as if one could, through mere well-meaning conscientiousness, actually sort out all the chaos of the universe, and as if he had caught onto exactly the "system" of how that was to be done.

Like Elia, Ishmael is always dishing up some earnestness to respond to the absurdity. "That mortal man should feed upon the creature that feeds his lamp, and, like Stubb, eat him by his own light, as you may say; this seems so outlandish a thing that one must needs go a little into the history and philosophy of it." One must? Even if Melville were speaking of actual history, we could not assume that the history of a thing can remove its absurdity. Melville is not even speaking of actual history, however, but making up ludicrous prescriptions of blubber as nutritious for infants, and letting calves' heads, helpless upon the carving board, look up quoting Shakespeare into the face of their executors. In Melville as with Lamb, ideas are mere absurd pretentions and consolations against the darkness, until heads themselves be things to pity. "Meantime, there was a terrible tumult. Looking over the side, they saw the before lifeless head throbbing and heaving just below the surface of the sea, as if that moment seized with some momentous idea; whereas it was only the poor Indian unconsciously revealing by those struggles the perilous depth to which he had sunk." The poor Indian, the poor head, the poor essayist. The joke is that we are creatures possessed by the idea that our heads can save us, and as a result possessed by our heads, which in turn are possessed by momentous uncontrollable ideas.

The problem, however, is that man must worship something. In "The Whale as a Dish," Ishmael takes a different line from Elia

in his "Dissertation on Roast Pig." One insists upon giving us a full history and philosophy, the other a dissertation on origins. Both, however, are playing on a finger-licking-good self-indulgence, both establishing the absurdity of a lyricism -- and an erudition -- devoted to succulence. But what is this infatuation? Let us recall that Ishmael, early in Moby-Dick, in an aside on the glory of being paid, says "I never fancied broiling fowls; -- though once broiled, judiciously buttered, and judgmentally salted and peppered, there is no one who will speak more respectfully not to say reverentially of a broiled fowl than I will. It is out of the idolatrous dotings of the old Egyptians upon broiled ibis and roasted river horse, that you see the mummies of those creatures in their huge bake-houses, the pyramids." "Idolatrous dotings" is the key. Lamb's whole dissertation on roast pig builds playfully and quietly up to the image of the pig on the platter as meek and beautiful as Christ on the cross. DeQuincey told us he worshipped his druggist. We not only are what we eat; we worship what we eat. But only because in the "twilight of dubiety" what else shall man worship?

We must not omit to notice an important difference between Elia and Ishmael, which gave Melville an opening to improve upon his model. Elia says of Negroes that he is drawn to them but he "would not spend his good nights with them." Ishmael, very much as if in reply to Elia upon this exact point, immerses himself in the comic predicament of being forced to spend his good night

with the terrible apotheosis of the Negro, a tattooed shrunken-head-toting cannibal. It is crucial that Ishmael resolves this confrontation in a kind of marriage, so that his night becomes a good night indeed, but it is characteristic too of Ishmael that he takes his humorist self as far into his depths as possible. The humorously joyous denouement of Ishmael's encounter with the black cannibal prefigures, of course, the joy of Ishmael's surviving the encounter with the white whale. That the ship and all its crew descend into the maelstrom (to use Poe's phrase) or over the verge of the Descartian vortex (to use Melville's) is awesome in its horror, but then no humorist worth his salt can avoid calling upon the horrors of the deep, the vacuities beyond man's seeming mental grasp. Elia seems very much at the core of Melville's conception of Ishmael, even if Melville has consciously taken Elia a good deal further.

Washington Irving was another humorist essayist who seems to have been in Melville's mind when ^{he was} composing Moby-Dick. We may notice details that Melville lifts from Irving, such as Plato's "honey head,"¹² and Manhattan as the isle of "Manhattoes."¹³ We may notice that as Irving has written about the Neversink Indians (thus giving Melville the shipname for White-Jacket), so Irving had written at length about the Pequod Indians. More to the point, however, Irving's pathetic schoolmaster Ichabod Crane, as well as the Burtonesque bachelor Geoffrey Crayon, provided

humorous prototypes for Ishmael; and the tyrannical peg-legged Peter Stuyvesant provided one for Ahab. We must say immediately, of course, that Irving's tyrant turns out to be most kind-hearted after all, and Irving's pathetic types are often thin in their appeal, resting too much upon their settings, or rallying a bit too easily after all. Ichabod, for instance, after the headless horseman fright goes to the city and becomes, within sentences, a successful businessman. Nonetheless, Irving seems to have been in Melville's mind as a novice of an artist. It is as if Melville becomes Irving and survives him, becomes him and transcends him. In "Bartleby," we may see the relationship between the two authors more clearly. For the moment, let us simply note that it must have been important to Melville to find an American working the Democritan extravaganza vein of humor in its romantic essay form.

Considering the Americanness of Moby-Dick, it was certainly important that Melville found, in addition to Irving, a thriving American periodical humor which he could tap. Indeed no one questions the essential Americanness of Moby-Dick. That the brave, generous, and dependable Queequeg is called a "George Washington cannibalistically developed" sets the mood. All the whalemens, be they from whatever lands or tribes, are George Washington's progeny, translations of the idea of America -- just as the showmanship of "The Masthead" chapter, like all Melville's writing, takes us home to America with a final absurd masthead

of George Washington on a pedestal. The question is exactly what did Melville take from developing American humor to flesh out the Americanness of his book and to develop his own humor to its quickest, brightest level.

Richard Chase makes some important suggestions along these lines.¹⁴ He points out that Melville borrows American folk figures, Ishmael, for example, being a composite of the Yankee, a frontiersman, a comic demigod of a trickster -- a comic Prometheus -- a jack-of-all-trades like Sam Slick or Davy Crockett, and finally the soliloquizer who speaks for the American fascination with the elusive figure of the Tale-teller. Stubb is a typically American screamer, using the standard technique of the American trickster, razzing Negroes and gulling Europeans; and finally out of the comic realm, Ahab is the ultimate Screamer, an American folklore embodiment of Manifest Destiny, an American Prometheus. For both his central fable and its spinoffs, Melville also uses, Chase tells us, the American predilection for comic metamorphosis, an instantaneous transformation back and forth that makes the whale into an albino and then into a God, the story's heroes into titans, beasts and machines, men into animals and back again, as Ahab is made into a grizzly and Ishmael into a May grasshopper. It is only the beginning to recall that Crockett, for one, was half horse, half alligator and half man, or that Crockett went so far as to call himself an entire zoological institute. Chase shows that in Moby-Dick, Melville was working from a grab-bag of standard American tall tales

built upon exaggeration, sudden or eventual violation of the laws of nature, or the whimsy that shows the utter impracticality of human endeavor.

Within this typically American flight of fantasy, Chase finds a very American emphasis on and undercurrent of fact and practicality, so strong that it sometimes camouflages the fantasy, just as Ahab being above all a successful whaling captain is in good part what wins the loyal adherence of his crew. This underlying bias toward fact is as responsible for the workings of the central fable as it is for the book's whole style. This style has its roots in the showmanship and hoaxes of P. T. Barnum, American magniloquent oratory, and the stage performers of the 1830's and 1840's in which a blank mask, omnipresent from the Yankee pedlar, allows the tale-teller soliloquizer to move freely back and forth from sales pitch to scientific razzmatazz to dramatic action.

Two problems arise with the suggestions Chase made in 1949. To begin with, it was Chase's ultimate point about all this material that Melville exploits Americana to provide a fabric for his historical-tragic allegory, the comic material giving a "low enjoying power"¹⁵ to the higher stuff as Melville transmutes "the language of the screamer. . .into an apostrophe to space and freedom."¹⁶ The P. T. Barnum hoax, Chase says, Melville turns inside out. Barnum was exploiting the desire of the audience to be comforted by the destruction of any fierce emotion. Melville, on the contrary, uses his hoax to insist on that

emotion. When Melville neither transmutes nor turns inside out the Americana, Chase feels its tastelessness needs apology. For example, regarding Stubb's callous gulling of Fleece, Chase explains that unpleasant as this sort of play may be, we must accept it as cultural fact.

The main problem with Chase's analysis, however, is that most of what Chase refers to as distinctly American is simply essentially humorous. The American folk tradition, we should realize, is only one part of the background of the comic trickster Prometheus. The European literature which Melville read was full of comic Prometheuses and demigods, like Pantagruel inventing his omnipotent Pantagruelion, Panurge inventing his libertin tricks, or De Bergerac inventing his moon machine and calling himself a Prometheus as a result. The literature was full as well of pure rogues and tricksters from Lazarillo to Volpone to Mosca. For sources of Ishmael as a soliloquizing monologist we have already said much here of his literary paternity -- Alcofrybas, Democritus, Jr., Tristram Shandy, Elia, and Geoffrey Crayon. The comic metamorphosis, too, is only partially American. We have not only the tall tale of Renaissance humor to cite, but the humorist's whole game of What I Desire I Am. Humor depends upon continuous expansions and contractions, continually thrown back to back. Democritus, Jr. is a free man and a slave, Panurge a giant of desire and cowardice -- and later Alice in Wonderland will be a giant, then after a sip of "Drink Me," a mite. The

only particularly American characteristic of Melville's metamorphoses may be the predominance of animals in the transformations. Otherwise, the shuffling back and forth is simply the humorist's insistence on writing as he pleases, showing he is boss, touting to no logic or dogma, continually indulging his fantasies.

Finally to recognize that the showmanship of a literary-scientific extravaganza is not merely American, we need only mention Gargantua and Pantagruel, The Anatomy of Melancholy, and The Historical and Critical Dictionary. In each of those works of peremptory showmanship, the author is, above all, determined to outdo anything prior in scope and method, as well as to suggest continually the farce of this sort of determination. This is what makes it so important to see beyond the Barnum roots of Melville's humor; while with Chase we may condemn the ultimately shabby artistry of a P. T. Barnum, we may respect and admire the shaggy dog encyclopedias of such great writers as Rabelais, Burton and Bayle. Their hoaxes need not be turned inside out; their humor needs no "transmuting." The actually literary literary-scientific extravaganza is built upon a fundamental bleakness and the "fierce emotion" it can inspire. It is built upon the uncertainty that Panurge faces, the slippery road on which the Patriarchs walk, the whiteness of acatelepsy, the all-pervasiveness of mad melancholy, and the trance, finally, of opium. It is always there, that atheistical whiteness. In short, as Chase seems to have begun to suggest in his few pages in 1955 on Moby-Dick,¹⁷ humor need not be, and in fact is not, a stepping off point for this book. It is its center.

Still, once we have recognized that American humor only added one more element to the humor that is central to Moby-Dick, let us see what that element is. First of all, America provided the allusive materials for many of Melville's exaggerations and reversals. As a white American, Ishmael need not spell out that he is a free man born, but may jump ahead to the turn-around of "who aint a slave?" So, too, while the Squire and Lazarillo or Volpone and Mosca as master and servant types appropriate to their era gull each other by turns, it is only fitting that in America, the two parties turning tables on each other -- The Cabin Table, for one -- should be white and black, or American and European, or Lakeman and Canaller. It is fitting also that Melville's metamorphoses jump back and forth not only from erudition to slang, or from rhapsody to the thump, or from piety to phallicism, but from man to animal; America was a land in which the animals were only then in the process of being subdued, conquered, and exterminated. In addition to the incidentals, however, American humor did indeed provide a grab-bag of yarns and twisters to help Ishmael, a sort of King Midas, transform details into braggadocio. More importantly, the yarn helped Melville shape the central fable as a fish story of one man hunting down one particularly monstrous fish. Melville uses the yarn to transform and tighten the spacious voyage of Rabelais, the anatomy of Burton, the encyclopedia of Bayle, the rambling novel of Sterne; and he uses it to open up the small essay of sensibility, the melancholic sketch of DeQuincey, Lamb and Irving.

But beyond the paraphernalia for the quick allusiveness which humor always demands, and beyond the form both peripheral and central of the yarn or twister, Melville gets something which is distinctively American, a game of immediacy. The American hallmark of Moby-Dick's humor is a certain journalistic predilection that moves us from Rabelais' fantasy of the giant Pantagruel drinking two hundred thousand pails of milk a day to the actuality of a whale sucking that much from its dam, from Rabelais' fantasy of Pantagruel's Arch of Triumph to the actual six-foot long pride of the whale. Chase had hinted at this essentially American aspect when he spoke of the particularly American reliance on fact and practicality. This is too broad, because all humor depends upon the play between the lofty and the banal, the theory and the practice, the soaring desire and the menial actuality. The fact part is right, however, and crucial. In what I have called the frontier humor of Renaissance exultation about man's exploration, the new world is very much in people's minds and very strong in creating the braggadocio and self-parody of that literature, but the authors themselves are not actually in the new world. With the earlier non-American humorists, the idea of the frontier is what sets them going, but here in America, it is as if the joke has been suddenly accelerated and escalated into actuality. In American humor, it is not just the remote idea, the strong dream, the willful fantasy, but the literal physical frontier, the experience of the land, the Indians, the animals and the sea.

It is the periodical journalistic aspect which Melville borrowed most from American humor, a certain literal-mindedness, a stubbornness of the persona's insistence of having been there. "I alone have come to tell you" is part of the song: I was there and I saw it with my own eyes. That the almanac, periodical book of timely and pragmatic knowledge as well as of humor and entertainment was the standard American household book is not surprising, nor is it that the humor there is that of factual experience and deposition braggadocio. In the excerpts given above in Chapter II, Robert Thomas was in raptures that he was there, and that those "Fifty years!" which America had just lived through were surely the greatest in all history. This spirit rendered humorously gives us the "Deposition of Varmifuge," the literalness of the joker insisting he's seen the sea-serpent with his own eyes, and giving us his ostentatiously legal statement; the misspelling used in the piece even forms a sort of verbal literalness, the insistence on sticking as close to reality -- via phonetics -- as one can possibly get. And finally in the famous Crockett excerpt we get not just the practicality of how an American typically takes the impossible in hand for his survival, and not just the sense of his being present at the Creation, but of his having initiated it, of his having been the one who got the ball rolling. And indeed that Melville was responding to this spirit, we may look at central chapters like "The Affidavit," which reveal the book as the bragging

deposition that it is. Ishmael calls himself at one point "a veritable witness," at another he says that if he had to, he could get "a sworn affidavit for every snowflake." I can't help thinking that, finally, part of the fun of the title Moby-Dick was that the word "dick" in the slang of Melville's day, not yet into the explicitness of our own day, not only signaled fellow (as in Tom, Dick and Harry), and the dictionary, but declaration or affidavit.¹⁸ Moby-Dick is Ishmael's wordy bragging, in effect, "I was there, ladies and gentlemen, this man was there and saw all this with his own eyes."

Although partly as a doctor, Rabelais teases us with a lot of close-up physicality, he has a certain distance from the low life he describes. Burton, one feels, has isolated himself in his study. Even Sterne and the Romantic essayists have a certain remove. In Melville's humor, however, if only to be able to brag that you were there in the most complete fashion, you are forever "putting your hand into the tar pot"; Moby-Dick is a total immersion in universal social, economical, political and physical realities. The central conflict gives us all the innards of fish cleaning and fish stories, while it plays off a history of the peaking of one of America's first extraordinarily successful commercial enterprises. Melville's Ishmael, too, is not only directly at the masthead viewing over all the watery world, not only at the helm once with the entire survival of the ship at his hand, not only in the whaleboat privy to the inner circles of the whales copulating and giving suck, but in

chapter after chapter on board ship wresting the oil from the captured whale, at the end of the monkey rope, and with his hands, his whole body immersed in the smell and realities of the whale. Indeed the humor of "A Squeeze of the Hand" is that the exultation of the image of the felicitous brotherhood of mankind is pinned to the most physical of immersions.

Melville is never afraid of getting his hands wet or dirty. His very American humor not only anatomizes the world and presents a melancholic idiosyncratic persona, but gets "these visible hands" into the actual physicalities of the whale -- and squeezes. Yet, and this is important too, for it makes the whole difference, American as Melville was in his deposition, in his bragging journalistic immersion, Melville at the same time, by his leaning on and listening to earlier and highly literary voices, avoids the reductionism, the provinciality, the claustrophobia of American periodical and almanac humor, whose joke of literalness and insistence on unalleviated petty regionalist rivalry can quickly begin to pall.

Finally, then, Moby-Dick's giddy sense of triumph evolves out of Melville's building upon a tradition of the giddy sense of triumph. It rests upon his awareness that he is building upon other humorous literature that has gone before, Melville quickening the European fantasy with an American eye for physical and economic realities, sustaining the American quick turn of periodical humor by giving it a longer form and a substantial vision, broadening the American game of provincial literalness

with a truly literary and catholic teasing and sense of play. Besides, however, doing all of this, we may ask if Melville adds anything to the long line of developing humor, or whether his whole achievement lies simply in impersonating and stretching. To be sure, the building itself is characteristically Melville's. That Melville takes everything he looks at into the superlative of the modern, and metamorphoses all that he has read into the present, is itself the game of his humor. In addition, however, it is the intensity of the hug which brings all of Melville's book into focus and shapes distinctively his originality. Against a frame of absolute universality, Melville opens up what he calls the "spheres of fright and love" to two sustaining hugs, Ishmael and Queequeg at one end, Ahab and Moby Dick at the other. To transform the humorous male monologue of the past into his present, and impose upon them the preposterous hug: here is the achievement of Melville's humor in Moby-Dick.

Like Moby-Dick, "Bartleby" has its grimness. The scrivener's predicament exists through no fault of his own but rather through some perverse law that requires that some men be at the top and others at the bottom, and that those at the bottom submit themselves to the will of those at the top. Like Harry Bolton, Bartleby is definitely at the bottom. We may recall that in Melville's fourth novel Redburn had blithely suggested that Harry earn his living as a copyist; Harry later dies a grim death.

If we accept the seeming assumption of the story, that there is a top and a bottom, however, the first catch is that there is no top. For all his being employer, attorney and former Master of Chancery, the narrator is as lost as Bartleby, as little in control yet with the added problem of the illusion of power. The lawyer is as much a piece of flotsam in the great Atlantic as the man he feels so sorry for. That he busies himself in all earnestness, conscientiously telling us a tale that is diverting, strange, moving and comical is only a sign of how much he would like to think himself in control. Yet the more he talks, the more he reveals himself as a man of nothingness, with no faith, no emotional ties, with nothing but the barest essentials for a false sense of survival. Meanwhile the second catch is Bartleby's imperturbable self-sufficiency. Bartleby has a wry eloquence, dedication and refinement. The refrain "I would prefer not to" has all the pride of Yankee terseness and Bartleby sticks to it unto death. If we hear a long-drawn whistle of astonishment here it is for the steadfastness of Bartleby's self-sabotage.

In fact, the narrator envies Bartleby. The more the narrator talks or clowns or works at befriending the reader, the more elusive Bartleby becomes in his wry understatement and independence. Bartleby's star of nothingness is on the ascension, just out of the narrator's reach. If only the narrator could achieve such class; "The beauty of my procedure seemed to con-

sist in its perfect quietness," the narrator brags to himself one night thinking he has ousted the offender, and succeeded in adopting Bartleby's cool. "There was no vulgar bullying, no bravado of any sort, no choleric hectoring and striding to and fro across the apartment, jerking out vehement commands. . . Nothing of the kind." His interior volubility however makes hash of his goal of superb simplicity. It is simply not true that the more one explains oneself the more subtle one becomes.

Nor is it true, as the narrator attempts to console himself the morning after when he guesses he has failed after all and that Bartleby will still be there when he arrives, that the two cannot communicate because one works by "assumption," and the other by "preference." Actually we could find no greater man of preference than the narrator himself. True -- and here the word will take on its inevitable momentum -- true, the narrator would prefer to believe himself a man of assumptions rather than of preferences, but actually as we listen to his tale we see it is little more than a list of preferences: I could tell you about many a scrivener, but I prefer to tell you about this one; I would prefer for Bartleby to remove himself from my premises but I would prefer not to take the final step of having him removed by force; I would prefer not to have Bartleby angry with me. The lawyer's consolation boils down to nothing. The narrator is neither as good as, nor somehow miraculously better than his self-proclaimed prisoner. Both have nothing but their preferences, some vestige of the old great desire, What I Desire I Am.

In fact the story ceremoniously goes nowhere. The passage referred to ends with the attorney walking down town after breakfast "arguing the probabilities pro and con. One moment I thought it would prove a miserable failure, and Bartleby would be found all alive at my office as usual; the next moment it seemed certain that I should find his chair empty." If the essence of the lawyer's response is his envy of Bartleby, the humor partly grows out of the pathos of watching this elaborate veering back and forth in the mind of this "rather" elderly, most ordinary of men walking home from his office and back again. In one of Lamb's essays we are told that the once destitute show-girl Barbara has now become rich and need not engage in any more "landing-place moral dilemmas"; when she was a poor child, one day she had to debate with herself on the stairs whether to go back up to tell her employer that he had given her too large a coin by mistake.¹⁹ This moment in "Bartleby" bears something of that stamp. The lawyer's self-serious dilemma as he walks home, goes to bed and wakes up, is grossly beside the point, and yet in the very spirit of his self-deluded self-illumination, touching.

The narrator's involvement with Bartleby grows finally to climactic proportions. "'Stationary you shall be, then,' I cried, now losing all patience and, for the first time in all my exasperating connection with him, fairly flying into a passion. 'If you do not go away from these premises before night, I shall

feel bound -- indeed, I am bound -- to --to. . . ." The reader expects that, even coward that he is, he is bound to and finally can and will call the police, but the lawyer concludes

to quit the premises myself!" I rather absurdly concluded, knowing not with what possible threat to try to frighten his immobility into compliance.

Despairing of all further efforts, I was precipately leaving him, when a final thought occurred to me -- one which had not been wholly unindulged before.

"Bartleby," said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, "will you go home with me now -- not to my office, but my dwelling -- and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away.

Finally, after all the exasperation, in the manner of true comedy, the only solution to the fight is marriage. Instead of Benedick and Beatrice, instead of man and woman, however, in the manner of the humorous finale we have man and man, lawyer and scrivener. Come home with me! If the lawyer has learned anything about his partner in this adventure, it is that the "till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement" might as well be -- and turns out to be -- till death do us part. Melville has even hinted at giddy desire here, leading up to the directness of "Come, let us start now," like poet and shepherdess turned Beckett's Vivi and Gogo. Indeed if Bartleby does not go home with the lawyer, it is because he had been home with him all along, in the office between the blank walls, at one end the white blank wall "deficient in what landscape painters call 'life'," and at the other end, the "lofty" soot-blackened wall

which "required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties but, which for the benefit of all nearsighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window panes."

Between the blank walls, it is the preposterous hug again. Bartleby terse, the lawyer talky; here is our couple. If in the midst of their hug, the attorney looks to the reader for assurance, he need not worry. For all his understandable envy of Bartleby, the narrator does fine also. He is a slower death, to be sure. Also his wit is less brilliant. But he too is worthy of our sympathy; and he too has his self-sabotage.

Three short prose pieces seem at the root of Melville's "Bartleby." Indeed, it is building upon the solid foundations of Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," Hawthorne's "Wakefield," and Lamb's "South Sea-House," which gives Melville's short story the roundness of artistic mastery. The artist need not so much invent as perform; "Bartleby" is a brilliant performance.

The Washington Irving joke of American indolence was suggestive for "Bartleby." Nowhere does Irving enjoy it more than in his character Rip. Rip wants nothing more than to do nothing, to sit all day, or go out and hunt squirrels, but above all, not to do whatever it is that his wife, the "boss" in the story, demands that he do. Whether or not she is just an embodiment of Necessity, which Rip is determined at all costs to evade, in any case it is to Dame Van Winkle and her loud-mouth

berating that Rip characteristically replies with the tersest of responses: "He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, cast up his eyes, but said nothing." This sort of interchange culminates in Rip's practical joking triumph over his wife; he oversleeps by twenty years and returns to his town, bewildered, but eventually to gain the position, his life-long goal, of unmolested town patriarch. In short, he returns to his male cronies of the bench, one of whom, Nicholas Vedder, in his morning to night shifts in position to avoid the sun and keep in the shade of a large tree, informs the neighbors as accurately as a sundial the hours of the day, very much as Turkey^e in Melville's story tells the hours with the changes in his flushed facial color. And sit from morning till night, Diedrich Knickerbocker tells us that Rip could well do also. For all his aversion to profitable labor, like Bartleby after him, he had no lack of "assiduity or perseverance." Rip's story is told also by an earnest, talky man of assumption. Knickerbocker and some scholarly historical notes form the framing device for the supposed Catskill folktale. Of course Knickerbocker in no way involves himself in the story he is telling, except to pedantically assure^{us} of its authority. Yet, like Melville's lawyer, he ends by being another of this tale's humors characters.

Hawthorne's "Wakefield" tells the same story as Irving's "Rip." The target again, the ostensible target anyway, is the wife, only this time our man is, as his name suggests, awake

during his twenty-year absence. Also his act is deliberate; Wakefield knows he is gulling his wife. Confining his parting remarks and explanations to a wry, teasing smile, Wakefield leaves his London wife on a supposed few days' journey, only to take up a London residence of his own a few doors from her, and not return for twenty years. The day he comes home and passes in through his door, we have a "glimpse of his visage, and recognize the crafty smile which was the precursor of the little joke that he has ever since been playing off at his wife's expense." Of course it is not just a joke on her; as with Rip before him and Bartleby afterwards, the joke is in large part upon himself. Wakefield, we should recall, in changing his hair, his clothes and his residence, actually "banishes" himself. He "exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever."

Hawthorne's version is, of course, much more subtle and wry than Irving's. We have no termagants and no good-for-nothings. Instead of slapstick and buffooning fantasy we have wry circumlocutions and a literary air of teasing understatement. Hawthorne also uses a frame, only without creating a ridiculous narrator. Hawthorne tells us he is writing an "article" intended as "food for thought," in which he is conjuring up the details of a story that he has heard about a man who left his wife for twenty years. This narrator, while playful and teasing in his tone, in his careful articulateness does not intend to mock himself or to be mocked. Rather, he is just an embodiment of the author, a man who is giving his version of how he imagines the story,

and by the way, inviting the reader to do his own: "If the reader choose, let him do his own mediation." Melville, I suggest, was one who would do so, although Melville as usual takes his model as far as he can go. Bartleby with a wry persistence makes his "fearful risk" into a certainty.

While we have evidence that Melville found Lamb's "South Sea House" memorable,²⁰ one might question if it is relevant here. Lamb's piece is decidedly more an essay than a story, and indeed provides no central fable of an anti-hero of passive resistance playing a practical joke upon a female embodiment of Necessity. Lamb's essay is a series of portraits of the pathetic creatures working in that pathetic House. True, Lamb writes of Evans, a Cambro-Briton with a choleric complexion, that he "has a tristful visage clearing up a little over his roast neck of veal at Anderson's at two. . .but not attaining the meridian of its animation till evening brought on the hour of tea and visiting." Melville's playful description of Turkey borrows actual wording here.²¹ Irving, however, had given Melville a pathetic set of self-indulging bachelor cronies, complete with one in whose face we could read the "vedder"; Melville could have as easily worked from that.

But Melville may well have had Elia's "introductory sketch" open on his desk because Lamb was tapping something which Irving had touched on slightly and which Hawthorne had evaded, the issue of economic vulnerability, a level of perception central to

Melville's humor. Irving had strewn his tale with Rip's untended vegetable gardens, unpainted roof and poorly dressed children, but that was all; Hawthorne had protected both man and wife with an impermeable London prosperity. Lamb, alone of the three, quietly set economics at the center of his piece, and his piece at the center of finance, as Melville would set his. Lamb does not have to say much about the South Sea Bubble itself, as an emblem of economic speculation, desire, illusion or fantasy, or of the bubble bursting, a bubble by the way tied in every way to Europe's dreams of a new world paradise. He just chooses the South Sea House and lets his sketch whimsically float out beyond the economic realities it is based upon. He chooses it, however, for a specific reason. He is affectionately remembering not just the greed but what lies tucked within it, beneath the layers of dust, the long-buried mysteries of "that tremendous HOAX whose extent the petty speculators of our day look upon with the same expression of incredulous admiration, and hopeless ambition of rivalry, as would become the puny face of modern conspiracy contemplating the Titan size of Vaux's superhuman plot." Beneath the commiseration for the pathetic is sheer admiration for the hoax. In fact, Lamb is celebrating the hoax, the practical joke on the grand scale, the communal hoax.

Of course, a practical joke is nothing without a victim, and specifically what Lamb enjoys is that when the hoax is done on the grand scale, the schlemiels will line up on the grand scale, in all their paltry meagerness. Lamb's sense for this

meagerness on the grand scale, in fact, as in Barbara's "landing-place moral dilemmas," is not to be outdone. "Not that Tipp was blind to the deadness of things. . .in his beloved house, or did not sigh for a return of the old stirring days when South Sea hopes were young. . .but to a genuine accountant the difference of proceeds is as nothing. The fractional farthing is as dear to his heart as the thousands which stand before it. He is the true actor who, whether his part be a prince or a peasant, must act it with like intensity." In fact, Lamb may have given Melville this last idea also. Both Ishmael and the "Bartleby" narrator make a point of telling us that although they have received puny parts in the grand program of Providence, they insist on playing them well.

"Reader, what if I have been playing with thee all this while," Elia concludes his essay. "Peradventure the very names, which I have summoned up before thee, are fantastic -- insubstantial." Melville too says "These may seem names, the likes of which are not usually found in the Directory." The important thing, however, is that Elia is telling us here that he has made the whole thing up, and that at this point, then, we may fairly ask, made up what? What has he given us? Some homage to a hoax, and a string of portraits of ineffective old cronies? A hoax upon a hoax?

True, he says, "Be satisfied that something answering to them has had a being," but the moral lies more with the incidental fact which Elia happens on in reference to Plum who "besides his

family pretensions. . . was an engaging fellow and sang gloriously." The word "sing" takes hold. "Not so sweetly sang Plumer as thou sangest, mild childlike, pastoral M," Elia goes on and finally, "Much remains to sing. Many fantastic shapes rise up, but they must be mine in private; already I have fooled the reader to the top of his bent. . ." The essay in Lamb's hands is thoroughly literary, subtle and quiet, half a hoax, half a song. It is this tone, this sort of play, which was so suggestive to Melville. For, in addition to his focusing on the economics of man's vulnerability, and his dropping the whole game of the wife as target in order to broaden the hoax, Melville was aiming at a tone, somewhere between -- or beyond -- that of either Irving, who was out to give us entertainment, or Hawthorne, who, as if to make up for Irving's frivolousness, was intent on giving us "food for thought." R.W.B. Lewis, finding much similar between "Wakefield" and "Bartleby" in the self-willing isolatoes of the two stories, notes this difference: "Hawthorne's capital letters point to a fixed type of human situation that he is, primarily, trying to illustrate; while much of the odd charm of Bartleby is its tantalizing escape from fixity."²² If this is the case, Lamb may have helped guide Melville toward this elusive charm, to his own "rare humor."²³

Melville may well have tried to work exclusively from Irving's Rip and Hawthorne's Wakefield. Hawthorne, as we said, had invited other versions of his story. Melville may have indeed wanted to try his own version but been nervous about being

merely imitative. Such nervousness could even have spurred the whole strange group of "Agatha letters." In these, just one month after having written Hawthorne about how the latter had "most admirably employed materials which are richer than I had fancied them," Melville wrote Hawthorne not just to suggest material, but to tell Hawthorne at length how to use it.²⁴ The material specifically was a Nantucket story of a husband, Wakefield-like, as Melville noted, abandoning his wife Agatha Hatch. It is speculation of course, but Melville may have written up the whole Agatha story in his letters, in order to have Hawthorne suggest he do the story himself, and to show he had a new angle on it. Melville also, looking on enviously at the "ubiquity" of Hawthorne's fame, may have taunted himself that he too, like Hawthorne, should be able to encompass women in his fiction; for the aim of the Agatha story as Melville described it was in good part to emphasize the suffering endurance of the wife.

Then, when he had the permission, and apparently tried a novel in the Rip and Wakefield vein -- about a man attacking necessity through his wife -- the wife very likely got in the way because Melville was pulled too hard between sympathy for the husband and for the wife, whereas both Irving and Hawthorne in these stories confined themselves primarily to the husband's point of view. How much purer and simpler to deal then directly with necessity, in the form of economic ambition and economic vulnerability, to bring in Wall Street and attorneys as Lamb

did, leaving out women entirely to bring in the London financial district and its accountants and clerks. Melville later would try in several attempts to bring in women, with Hunilla, with Marianna in "The Piazza" watching the clouds for company, but these portraits all occur in merely interesting pieces, rather than in confident artistic works like "Bartleby." When Melville heard the Agatha story, it seems from his letters that what he wanted to write from it was a Mayor of Casterbridge just as he would have understood how to make his Marianna or one of the factory girls into a Tess, but he was not ready for this, nor would the American bent for sexual polarities suggest it.

"Bartleby" was a peak for Melville. The problem of "Bartleby" for Melville would only be where to go from there, how to surpass it, how to achieve the same level of artistic mastery in some other area in his next piece.

The structure which allowed for the consummate artistry of both Moby-Dick and "Bartleby" would be, I believe, his cue. What Melville had learned in the course of writing Mardi was to separate out polarities, clearly and from the beginning and to send the reader shuttling between the two. In Moby-Dick, he gave us both Ishmael and Queequeg -- and Ahab and Moby Dick. "Bartleby" achieves this same sort of impasse on a smaller scale but with a sterling evenness, the scrivener and attorney face to face, each with his own absurd response to the absurd situation

and the story's whole momentum building from the energy the two spend fighting their way out of their simple but inextricable entanglement.

After "Bartleby," it was with the diptychs, Israel Potter and later The Confidence-Man, that Melville continued with his development of a strong balanced structure on which to build his "rare humor." Indeed it seems that it was in the short two-part pieces which he apparently wrote while working on Israel Potter that he was deliberately pushing himself forward from the achievement of the anonymous "Bartleby." In the diptychs, Melville could increase both the emphasis on economic reality and the severity of the glare upon our illusions of rationality. He could also increase the visibility of the two-part structure alligning the two parts with the twin cultures of England and America at a time when this sort of comparison was both a fashionable and a fascinating game. It was helpful, too, that he had his London journal handy for recalling impressions and details and setting fantasies in motion.²⁵

With all this maneuvering, however, the diptychs turned out mechanical. In order for the balanced structure to be as strong as Melville could make it in a "Bartleby" it helped a great deal that one of the main partners in the hug was somewhat inconspicuous even if only by being the narrator. In "Bartleby;" in fact, this important person is never even named so that the shuttling one has to do between the lawyer's and Bartleby's solutions to things is something which the reader must realize he is doing,

rather than be told he is doing by a didactic author. The very form of the diptych however announces the opposition too clearly to the reader. Melville's determination to try satire instead of humor does not help either; the diptychs are flat pieces disparaging what Melville even tells us directly are the "preposterous assumptions." In "The Two Temples," the preposterous assumption is that a religious title infers holiness; in "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs," the assumption is that nature and charity are boons to the poor. We could not argue with Melville for disparaging these notions, but the choppy form of the diptych cuts Melville off just as he is getting into his subject. Even the satire is short-changed, for these pieces don't go to the other extreme of being witty, or biting. Certainly it was clever to throw England and America at each other with their competitive pride in piety, religiosity, good fellowship and belief in human dignity. Certainly, too, it was helpful that his portraits were not just modish but rooted in Melville's own experiences in London in 1849.

Resonances, however, are what the pieces want. It would be inappropriate to expect humor in pieces that are clearly offered as satire, but resonances we must have. We do get a few -- memorable touches that take us beyond the confines of mere flat statement. The image of the desolate-looking, suddenly unemployed physician in the second of the "Two Temples" has a Dickensian wryness to it. All the watery words leaking into the cold damp sketch of the Coulter cottage have a characteristic

Melvillian power in illustrating that water, so-called poor man's wine, is no boon but a curse. Finally, the Hogarthian barbarity of the Royal European charity in "Rich Man's Crumbs" is memorable.

It is in "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" alone, however, where the resonances transcend the form, where the tone transcends thin satire, and where, by the way, we get insight into why Melville stuck with the male frontier humor tradition in most of his fiction. As in "The Two Temples," Melville adds to the two polarities of rich-and-poor and English-and-American, a third, and this time not the hackneyed pious-and-impious, but male-and-female. Here Melville's subject is challenging enough to elicit his power; it involves not only human usage, but the human lot. The contact with economic reality is imposed now upon another rough texture, biological reality. Here, in fact, Melville has found a way to tap the possibilities of the Agatha story; his desire there to express sympathy for both male and female point of view may have been, as we've said, an insoluble problem because he was writing in a tradition limiting itself to the perspective of the self-aggrandizing male. Here, however, Melville tries something new. In the first sketch, Melville even directly confronts the humor tradition, insinuating into his portrait of the men a certain criticism he had never leveled at his bachelor parties before.²⁶ Melville suggests these men are not merely lovable, laughable

and melancholy, but effete; not just subject to criticism for their easy wealth and complacency, but warped, their urbanity tainted with the charges brought against the earlier, also supposedly celibate, Templars.

The economic angle of this diptych is brought out immediately in the first sketch on our way to the wealthy bachelor party, when we are given a glimpse of the sickening din and mud of Fleet Street. The full irony of juxtaposing the two sketches of bachelor men and women, however, does not emerge until near the end of "The Tartarus of Maids." After the description of the factory as unremitting economic exploitation, as well as the evocation of the human body as slave to its biological machinery, the narrator learns, paling, that all these women are "girls." To be an unmarried man in England somehow translates to all the ease of wealth; to be a virgin girl in America means that you keep all that biological machinery with you, and what's worse, must submit yourself as well to the machinery of exploitation and poverty. This awareness transcends the usual genial desperado slapdash question of Melville's narrators, "Who aint a slave?" For, if all men, Melville lets his narrator feel, are slaves to the machinery, women are taught an "unvarying docility to the autocratic cunning of the machine," thus are even less than slaves. "The girls," Melville says in "Tartarus" did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels." The shock here is at females' being so near and so subject to biological as well as economic machinery. All this

is beyond the main tradition in which Melville worked, however. Indeed there is no humor in this diptych, which leaves satire behind also to approach something much more emotionally dense such as Thomas Hardy would deal with in his novels.

Melville, however, was not Hardy, and he was either not equipped or not sufficiently interested to begin what would have amounted to a new career in another tradition of literary prose. Beginning a new career in poetry would be quite different; for one thing, after all his ambition, Melville might suffer himself to be an amateur poet, but surely could not force upon himself a whole new apprenticeship in prose. At any rate, he did not; instead he wrote one more diptych, directly and securely back in the male humor tradition. The diptych this time, however, did not consist of two sketches back to back, but two novels. Admittedly, to say this is to stretch the term, but Melville's final and masterful diptych, as I see it, is Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile and The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade.

Put the two novels back to back and it is clear that they are both about faith in an ideal; one book is about what kind of sensation it is to have faith, and the other about what kind it is to have none. Both books are so extreme as to be problems in the Melville canon, the former for being so genial and expansive, the latter for being so relentlessly wry. Critics for a long time ignored Israel Potter for being too unmetaphysical,

too sunny and easy in its humor; and for a long time critics were put off by the metaphysics-with-a-vengeance of The Confidence-Man, and by the bleakness of its humor. It is not that Melville consciously thought of the two novels as the two parts of a diptych. This seems unlikely. Rather, what seems to have happened is that his pattern of separating out the polarities of perspective had with a certain inevitability produced the greatest separation possible, along with the fullest resonances, a consciously sunny expansive book, and then a consciously wry contractive book.

Both are picaresque novels, with a clearly linear emphasis on narrative, one episode following another, in the life of an adventuring loner -- a man with no personal attachments. Israel, the eternal victim, goes from one master to the next, among whom are interspersed the famous ones, Ben Franklin, John Paul Jones, Ticonderoga Allen. The Confidence-man, eternal victimizer, goes from one subject to the next, among whom may very well be the famous ones Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau. In Israel Potter these episodes span a whole lifetime; in The Confidence-Man they span one day. Israel's story centers around the Fourth of July -- and was published on that day. The Con-man's, of course, is focused brilliantly upon the first of April and was published on that day. Along, then, with the mirroring effect of Israel and the Confidence-man, we have that of the two holidays -- one a celebration of Americans' ability to defend ourselves, the other a celebration of our ability to con others, and both celebrating Yankee ingenuity, enterprising spirit and

individual vitality. What is more, as in the shorter unsuccessful diptychs, one side keeps largely to England, and the other to America, but neither allows the blind pride of preposterous assumptions, either of chauvinism or of Tory nostalgia.

Finally, although one moves very fast and the other very slowly, they are both hinged upon the business of seeing through disguises. Indeed, the original inconsequential autobiography that Melville picked up may have sparked the whole two-sided issue of a con-man, for in that book one Israel Potter, like either a street beggar or a parlor con-man, was petitioning his readers for a pension. He was working on their emotions in order to win their sympathy and support for his claim, and sliding over touchy questions like why it took him fifty years to try to get back to America.²⁷ In Melville's Israel Potter, the speaker is given the benefit of the doubt; the disguises Melville's Israel Potter concocts are rambunctiously and happily inventive -- and innocent. He dresses as a ghost at one moment, a scarecrow at another, and he fast-talks the part of a brain-fevered, ~~thoroughly~~ amiable Peter Perkins at a third; but it is always clear that we may, in fact, trust him. The Confidence-man's disguises, on the other hand, take up the other possibility raised by the original Israel Potter's story. The Confidence-man's disguises are coldly and soberly manipulative. Their cold brilliance is, in fact, the jewel of the book.

At the same time, however, through all their eternal changes both men remain the same. As appropriate to the picaresque form,

the rogue characters are at once static and immensely energetic. They are continually, constantly, repetitiously in a position to involve themselves directly in the sheer hammering of experience that makes up one aspect of our lives. It is true that with the exception of Babbalanja, all Melville's characters, as humors characters, are static figures deflecting and reflecting the predicament of man alone in the universe, either in the inflation of his desires or in the deflation of his actualities. In the picaresque Israel Potter and The Confidence-Man, however, this staticness elongates to linear episodic narrative. The two novels proceed in parallel lines, like Melville's characteristic men-of-war which proceed companionably side by side, firing broad-sides into each other as they go.

The two central figures also have a certain stylization that we do not find in Melville's other humors characters, and that lies in part in the Biblical resonance of their characterization. It is not that Israel is the Tribe of Israel because he wanders for fifty years and ends up in the Egyptian brickyards. Or it is not that he is Christ because in "Requiescat in Pace," looking back, we hear of "that slit upon the chest...which afterwards, in the affair with the Serapis, being traversed by a cutlass wound, made him now the bescarred bearer of a cross." It is not either that the Confidence-man is Christ because in his first disguise he is lamblike, humble, meek -- or that he is the Devil because he deceives men or is continually compared to a snake.

Israel Potter and the Confidence-man are neither Angel nor Devil, but neither are they merely rogues, the footloose mainstays

of the traditional picaresque narrative. They partake of the human as they do of the godly. They are mental projections -- not so much of any concept as of a state of mind, free of the trappings of actuality. This is not to say, we should emphasize, that they are allegorical embodiments in the tradition of Spenser, Bunyan and Hawthorne.²⁸ If, in fact, Israel Potter, after his fifty years of exile, sitting on Bunker Hill marveling at the changes, and pinching himself to see if he is the same person, reminds us of Rip Van Winkle awaking at the Hudson River canyon, his beard long and white, his rifle rusty at his side, we should not be surprised. Nor should we be at the final chapter of The Confidence-Man. This shows us the central figure amongst all the sleeping bunkers, leading the Israel Potter-Rip Van Winkle old man, who is clinging in confusion to the chamber pot and the Bible (surely the nineteenth-century version of the certainties of death and taxes) into the darkness, one dream figure leading another, and the Confidence-man leaving us in darkness and sleep. Melville has taken Irving's dream mechanism and all his napping and smoking -- and his humor. Melville, however, simply lets it all happen on a deeper level. The sleeps are deeper, the dreams are deeper, the humor is deeper.

Looking more closely at the two books, Israel Potter, to begin with, is a jeu. Its humor is large, expansive and easy. Its assumption is that nature is generous, the discovery of the new world a wonderful adventure, and man, the solitary discoverer

and explorer, a figure of strength, independence and vitality. The opening chapter, "The Birthplace of Israel," immediately establishes the basic principle of generosity in the universe, and of wealth in man's sense of possibility and perfectability.

The traveller who at the present day is content to travel in the good old Asiatic style, neither rushed along by a locomotive, nor dragged by a stage-coach; who is willing to enjoy hospitality at far scattered farmhouses, instead of paying his bill at an inn; who is not frightened by any amount of loneliness, or to be deterred by the roughest roads or the highest hills; such a traveller in the eastern part of Berkshire, Massachusetts, will find ample food for poetic reflection in the singular scenery of a country, which owing to the ruggedness of the soil and its lying out of the track of all public conveyances, remains almost as unknown to the general tourist as the interior of Bohemia.

True, the road is rugged, and the loneliness is a challenge, but the emphasis here, as in the novel as a whole, is on the principle of adventure, confidence and generosity. We are carried over the rugged solitary hills by images of a traveler "who is content," one who will "enjoy hospitalities" and find "ample food." The whole first chapter continues in this quietly celebrative air, the prose easy and straight letting us admire the "crests or slopes of pastoral mountains," the "lazy columns of smoke" from campfires in the forest, the early spring "curls of vapor from the maple sugar-boilers at work," "the bloom of these mountains in fine clear June days beyond expression delightful." Indeed, if these opening pages surprise us with their exhilaration, Melville seems quite consciously to have pitched us into the joy of discovery: "Traveling northward from the township of

Otis, the road leads for twenty or thirty miles towards Windsor, lengthwise upon that long broken spur of heights which the Green Mountains of Vermont send into Massachusetts. For nearly the whole of the distance, you have the continual sensation of being upon some terrace in the moon." Indeed Melville's Israel Potter has immediately that elan and open excitement of Cyrano DeBergerac's Voyage to the Moon.

It is not, in other words, just that nature is bounty, but that man himself is a prodigy of strength and vitality. Of the walls, Melville says "The very Titans seemed to have been at work." Israel's people are a "tall, athletic and hardy race," "patient as Sisyphus, powerful as Samson," "herculean" in their undertakings. The whole novel is built upon that mood of unerring confidence and rugged ability in the creation of a new country. The very name Israel, particularly in the context of the American Puritan dream, connotes the Chosen People, and all the pride of that title -- pride in suffering as much as in achievement and belief. The character Israel spells out that pride and spirit. A man of largesse and independence, Israel ploughs his land with energy, serves his country with his whole being, and bespeaks his country's ideals simply and eloquently -- even to King George himself. In every episode in fact Israel can be depended upon to be steadfast, almost by instinct, to the ideals of dignity and equality, to the belief that no man should pay homage to another, and yet that all should to the notions of the

free man and the free country. In pluck and adaptability, Israel is simply unmatched.

The adventures of these rugged new world men do not leave out war. The American independent spirit proves itself in battle, and Israel Potter turns out to be no mere participant but the behind-the-scenes hero of the American Revolution. The important thing to recognize is how different this is from Melville's other books. In Typee, Mardi and White-Jacket, war of one kind or another is terrible and inevitable. Here, however, the expansiveness of the humor makes war something to enjoy. Finally God's creatures fighting becomes a happy episode, because the ideal they are fighting for -- independence -- is clearly universally benign, so much so that we never hear of even one Englishman who believes America should remain a colony. Even King George, entirely charmed by Israel's straightforwardness, appreciates the American desire for freedom. Indeed, England is given the benefit of the doubt here as having gone to war mistakenly, half-heartedly at most. While England and America are supposed enemies, Melville is careful to remind us that it is the Hessians who are really fighting for England. Here, finally in fact, we have the self-righteous sermon from Mardi's Vivenza sung out with good cheer; the ideals of liberty and trust seem as English here as American, although the Americans like many another young generation have to reteach them to their elders. The love between enemies or opponents, however, suffuses not only the international question; between John Paul Jones and Israel we get a replay of the

Queequeg-Ishmael marriage. Complete with confidential chats and bed-sharing, it is another relationship of savage and civilized man, the two wooing each other in scene after scene.

Indeed the climax of this book is a battle, which is the book's most explicit bear-hug of fellowship. It is also the moment when Jones and Potter work best together: the famous battle between the Bon Homme Richard and the Serapis. The two ships equally brave and vigorous Melville describes with reference to charms and apothecaries, "rapid compliments of shuttlecocks," "consorts" and "a moon bedded in vapors," the two ships "like partners in a cotillion, all the time indulging in rapid reparation." Finally,

The wind now acting on the sails of the Serapis forced her, heel and point her entire length, cheek by jowl, alongside the Richard. The projecting cannon scraped; the yards interlocked; but the hulls did not touch. A long lane of darkling water lay wedged between, like that narrow canal in Venice which dozes between two shadowy piles, and high in air is secretly crossed by the Bridge of Sighs. But where the six yard-arms reciprocally arched overhead, three bridges of sighs were both seen and heard, as the moon and wind kept rising.

Melville is nowhere more suggestive. As usual, however, the expanse of the orgasmic settles down to domesticity and finance; the two ships were also a co-partnership and a joint-stock company, the two vessels were "as two houses, through whose party-walls doors have been cut; one family (the Guelphs) occupying the whole lower story; another family (the Ghibellines) the whole upper story."

For all Israel Potter's expansiveness, for all its celebration of the new world and its possibilities, the humor of this novel does not come across as saccharine, nor the comedy of Israel's survival as mechanical. The trust that is implicit in this book is never to be taken for granted. When three Englishmen introduce themselves as friends of America and ask Israel to accept a mission to help his country, "'Tell me how I may do it,'" demanded Israel, not completely at ease. 'At that in good time,' smiled the Squire. 'The point is now -- do you repose confidence in my statements?' Israel glanced inquiringly upon the Squire, then upon his companions; and meeting the expressive, enthusiastic candid countenance of Horne Tooke -- then in the honest ardor of his political career -- turned to the Squire and said, 'Sir, I believe what you have said. Tell me now what I am to do.'" If this trust seems too easily given, Melville tempers it carefully with a realistic caution that is the reversed image of the Boon Companions scene in The Confidence-Man, complete with the hesitancy to drink. "But after his second glass, Israel declined to drink more, mild as the beverage was. For he noticed, that not only did the three gentlemen listen with the utmost interest to this story, but likewise interrupted him with questions and cross-questions in the most pertinacious manner. So this led him to be on his guard, not being absolutely certain yet, as to who they might really be, or what was their real design."

It turns out that "Squire Woodcock and his friend only sought to satisfy themselves thoroughly, before making their final disclosures, that the exile was one in whom implicit confidence might be placed." The resolution as it is fundamentally in this book, is that there is something to trust in. Israel is trustworthy because he trusts himself and his commitment to a trustworthy ideal of independence. It does not matter here then that Israel engages in one deception after another to evade his pursuers, or adopts one ingenious disguise after another, that even the heels he walks on are false, with secret papers stashed within. His gamble is based upon trust in the ideal of a young society of brave new men.

Still the grandness of the new world men would cloy if it weren't for Israel's free-wheeling skepticism. It is not just the Tories whose pomp Israel pokes fun at; it is the great revolutionaries themselves. It is typical, for instance, the way Israel regards the great John Paul Jones on their first encounter, when the imperious naval giant is in Paris to confer with Franklin and only after several hours notices and addresses Israel who has been standing quietly at the side. "'Did your shipmates talk much of me?' demanded Paul, with a look as of a parading Sioux demanding homage to his gewgaws; 'What did they say of Paul Jones?' 'I never heard the name before this evenings,' said Israel." Regarding the great statesman Benjamin Franklin, Israel's teasing is more sustained -- expanding over several

chapters--and more important. In a book celebrating the men of the new world, the sons of those Renaissance giants who pledged their all to exploration, discovery, knowledge and the vast potentials of Man, it is typical that Israel pokes fun at the very prototype of the New World humanists, Benjamin Franklin. The portrait of Franklin is famous as satire; some even go so far as to call it savage satire. It is not, really. It is just amiable affectionate ribbing of a new world Tristemegistus decked out with all his astronomical charts and pedantic pamphlets, very much as Walter Shandy was in Sterne's book, and for exactly the same reason. Indeed, if Walter Shandy as he so desired had had his Tristmegistus, instead of his poor Tristram, Ben Franklin could have been it. In Franklin the Renaissance extravagance gives way to Enlightenment pragmatics, but with the same underlying insistence upon being the complete jack-of-all-trades man of learning, wisdom and glory for the male potential. For what else was at the root of the American jack-of-all-trades but the much glorified Renaissance man?

There is one final way that Melville keeps the adventure of trust under tight rein. The final fact is that Israel has placed his confidence in American ideals and gets no reward for having done so. He cannot get a pension, nor even his name upon a plaque. Israel had continually pledged himself, his energy, his perseverance to serving the ideals of integrity and independence to the greatest extent possible. It is thoroughly in character

that he marries the Agatha Hatch type woman who cares for him when he has a serious accident in London; and then unlike the infamous unstoried Robinson does not abandon her, although staying by her in England leaves him no greater reward for his goodness than destitute poverty. He becomes a chair mender, a rag picker, within a few pages quietly evoking the painful history of the forty years of his want that are his only reward for his devotion.

However, Israel as we have said for all his suffering is no Christ, just as for all his shrewdness he is no sage. Nor does Melville's expansive humor suddenly go bitter at the end. Israel is simply a type of male endurance. Like Bartleby, he himself is another projection of the Agatha Hatch steadfastness. Finally, it does not matter that America has violated the confidence that Israel has placed in it, for the issue of the pension in the end is presented as a small final incidental matter; the lifelong cause of Israel's poverty was really his marrying an Englishwoman, not the denial of a pension when he is seventy-eight. Indeed, also, Israel's suffering is passed over quickly, not because, as Matthiessen wrote, Melville was too anguished to dwell on it,²⁹ but because the suffering is only presented as the rein of reality upon the male song of ambitiousness and ideals, and because Israel has in fact had what he would consider the most important reward, the satisfaction of having lived

a life vigorously and adventurously devoted to his own ideals. The point is, finally, as Alfred Kazin has said, that Israel Potter is Melville's "book about American men in the old, slashing style of romantic war."³⁰ It is another song of triumph, another male humorous song of itself. And here again, if the new world does not totally pan out as trustworthy, and if Israel is not recognized, still his steadfast confidence in the principle that the new world is only trying hardest of all worlds to embody -- holds true.

Israel Potter is half-humorous, half-lyrical -- a song of the endless potential of man. It is an original novel, too. For all its derivativeness, taking a few chapters for instance from the actual autobiography of Israel Potter, using the picaresque for a form, and getting something too from the humble pathetic male humorist for the main character's potter's-field anonymity, it is strikingly independent. It swings through on the principle that there is something to trust in all our best hopes, even if we can't name it, even though we know we should know better. It is broad and brightly inventive; and it touches on our pain.

In The Confidence-Man, we get the other side of the coin. The texture of the book and the experience of reading it immediately tell us so. Here the pace is slow. It is not tedious; from the first sentence when "At sunrise on a first of April" a

man in cream-colors appears "as suddenly as Manco Capac at the lake Titicaca," a certain theatricality winks at us and carries us through. Nonetheless the prose in its dense contraction puts us under immediate constraint. The reader from the first must be asking questions and be on his guard. Who is the cream-colored man, who the black cripple, are only the first of many questions. Soon we are reading closely for clues, picking them up as deftly as Guinea does an inadvertently dropped business card which he will use for his next con. After acquiring the habit of recognizing the trickster each time he appears, we learn also the slow necessity to read everything he says in reverse, until by the end of the book, it is as if whole dialogues were held up to the mirror and we had to decipher them there. The habit of reversing, however, does not quite answer either. Something continually eludes our grasp, something paradoxical having to do with the implications of the moral we seem to be in the process of being taught, that we must trust no one, trust nothing. Seeking reprieve from the paradoxes, all we have is the story, and this is a continual harping, an unrelenting turn again and again on money as coin of the realm. Every friendship resounds to the same question. Ah! we are friends! Now lend me a hundred dollars.

In The Confidence-Man, the new world illusion of man has evaporated. Like the South Sea Bubble, the whole of America is a hoax. None of its ideals is to be trusted, all talk of its ideals is mere talk. In episode after episode, our rogue

quietly gulls his victims, and in so doing doesn't merely show them as gullible, but lost, with no portion of the truth to guide them, with no viable faith beneath their nervous improvisational pieties. The story is set on the great artery of America, on the Mississippi, as the Con-man himself is an imposter from the East, a true-blooded Yankee descended from those great performers Constance Rourke describes so well.³¹ All that is grand and impressive, here, however, is what we cannot trust. "After seeing my invention duly catalogued and placed, I gave myself up to pondering the scene about me," the Confidence-man characteristically begins at one point, quietly winding himself up to full American pragmatic evangelism. "Let some world-wide good to the world-wide cause be now done.....inspired by the scene, on the fourth day I issued at the World's Fair my prospectus of the World's charity." The plan is, of course, just another sham. Indeed every one of man's great new world schemes is a sham. The expansiveness of faith is repeatedly shown a trick, and the book is a harping on wry humor and tart reversals. We are left with no brave new ideals to hold onto, no triumph to sing about, no male spirit to apotheosize.

Indeed here we get Babbalanja's, Ishmael's and the "Bartleby" lawyer's expansive, rhapsodic talk turned inside out. Talk here is compulsive hollowness.

'Ah,' says the wonderfully recalcitrant Missouri bachelor to the man with the brass breastplate, 'You are a talking man -- what I call a wordy man. You talk, talk.' 'And with submission, sir, what is the greatest judge, bishop or prophet, but a talking man? He talks, talks. It is the peculiar

vocation of a teacher to talk. What's wisdom itself but table-talk? The best wisdom in this world, and the last spoken by its teacher, did it not literally and truly come in the form of table-talk?'

Indeed the Con-man is irrepressible in his talk, a sort of P. T. Barnum spectacle of Talk, a sensational performer, different from Melville's other talkers only in that instead of gulling himself with his talk, he is gulling others. The expansiveness is turned inside out to contraction.

In this reversal Melville is not without precedent in the history of the novel of sensibility. The other side of Henry Mackenzie's mawkish novel of sensibility, The Man of Feeling, is his lesser known Man of the World, about a character Sindall, every bit as cruelly insensible to feelings as Harley in the first novel was tearfully sensible to them. Contained within the germ of the sensibility novel is a vision which looks two ways. Sensibility is a great and continual yawning, a promiscuous yearning after feeling. The flipflopping of extremes is implicit in it; either an artist makes himself ridiculous by catering to this sort of thing, or the artist gets the joke and makes the most of it.

The Confidence-Man, like Moby-Dick, is another novel of exasperated sensibility, except that here the game is, instead of encouraging the sensibilities, numbing them or finding them numb and attempting to jerk them to life. "'As to that,' said the little dried up man about a poem he has picked up off the floor, 'I think it a kind of queer thing altogether, and yet I am almost

ashamed to add, it really has set me to thinking; yes and to feeling...I am naturally numb in my sensibilities; but this ode, in its way, works on my numbness not unlike a sermon, which, by lamenting over my lying dead in trespasses and sins, thereby stirs me up to be all alive in well-doing.'" When the Confidence-man preaches to the soldier of fortune, "Charity marvels not that you should be somewhat hard of conviction, my friend, since you, doubtless, believe yourself hardly dealt by; but forget not that those who are loved are chastened,'" the soldier replies, "Mustn't chasten them too much, though and too long, because their skin and heart get hard, and feel neither pain nor tickle.'" To the Missouri bachelor we hear the Confidence-man, with the P.I.O. brass plate, "his patience more or less tasked," exclaiming, "'Yes, sir, permit me to remark that you do not sufficiently consider that, though a small man, I may have my small share of feelings.' 'Well,well,' the bachelor replies, 'I didn't mean to wound your feelings at all. And that they are small, very small, I take your word for it. Sorry, sorry. But truth is like a thrashing-machine; tender sensibilities must keep out of the way. Hope you understand me. Don't want to hurt you. All I say is, what I said in the first place, only now I swear it, that all boys are rascals.'" When Charlie Noble and the Cosmopolitan are discussing Moredock, the Cosmopolitan says in all his earnestness, "'As for this Indian-hating in general, I can only say of it what Dr. Johnson said of the alleged Lisbon earthquake: 'Sir, I don't believe it.' 'Didn't believe it? Why not? Clashed

with any little prejudice of his?' 'Doctor Johnson had no prejudice; but, like a certain other person,' with an ingenuous smile, 'he had sensibilities, and those were pained.'" And finally Charlie Noble is pushed to the essential question: "'What sort of a sensation is misanthropy?'" so the Cosmopolitan may reply, "'Might as well ask me what sort of sensation is hydrophobia. Don't know; never had it. But I have often wondered what it can be like. Can a misanthrope feel warm, I ask myself; take ease?... Has the misanthrope such a thing as an appetite? Shall a peach refresh him?'"

Here is the same basic question asked in Mardi, what sort of a sensation is life, only here Melville is making sport with the earnestness of sensibility. "Don't know. Never had it." The dropping of pronouns is the cosmopolitan's bid to be at once utterly familiar and direct in his communication, as if after all his talk, he were going for emphasis, to not wasting a word. The wording alone is not the point, however; it is just one more little game. The point is that Melville in The Confidence-Man is precisely answering Charlie Noble's question and telling what kind of sensation misanthropy is. Melville is not, we should make clear, being misanthropic or even veiling misanthropy under the reversals and word play. Rather, he is toying with the flip side of the sensibility coin, and asking, what does it feel like to be without feelings?

If this question is deliberately self-contradictory, the answer is not, for the misanthropes of the book are giants of

sensibility who in turn keep the book from being either allegory or satire. The Missouri bachelor, for example, in all his cantankerousness, is actually a mass of hope and feelings. It is not just that after thirty rascally boys, he can actually be talked into one more. It is not just that he even explains to us that he must be cantankerous just to cover up his great vulnerability, his heart. These two factors are very important, but they are secondary. The primary thing is that he talks. He expresses his feelings. He engages in colloquy. He is a Yankee talker.³²

In fact he talks so much that he is the one character in the book whom the Confidence-man may approach three times, in three different disguises, even while he is the one who notices the Confidence-man's own astounding concatenation of talk. This is because the Missouri bachelor, more than anyone else in the book, is still curious about the human condition and really listening. He is no fool either; he calls the cosmopolitan "Jeremy Diddler No. 3." Yet, as if unnerved by his dastardly inescapable conclusion about boys, he must air it, he must hear himself say what he feels; while certainly a cynic would have been coldly polite, and uninterested in any conversation. A reviewer of a recent book on Dostoyevsky said in passing of Dostoyevsky's characters that they are compulsive talkers, that the oppression they feel puts them in continual need of talking, and not just talking in the usual sense with the people in their circle of

family, friends and acquaintances, but talking to strangers, telling stories to strangers in bars.³³ Melville in an entirely different realm has caught at this same germ. Talk, talk to strangers, stems from human need, and in its resonances are vast emotions. That the reader must constantly turn inside out everything the Confidence-man says, is only Melville's way with his typically heretical insight, of revealing human need. For the other side of the great desire to commune with someone by the sacrament of talk is, at the least, selfish manipulation. This is why, by the way, the narrator of Notes from Underground, in a fine stroke, and in only one of this book's interesting parallels to Melville's Confidence-Man, interrupts his own moving confession to the compassionate prostitute, interrupts his own genuine sobbing fit, to abuse the whore, hand her a five-ruble note and push her out the door.

Melville of course is working the theme in a very different vein. He gives us the English and American veins of sensibility and monologue rather than the Russian one of spiritual melodrama. Nonetheless, the dynamics are the same. The Missouri bachelor boy-hater needs to talk, just as his apotheosis, the Indian-hater, needs to kill. Both Pitch and Moredock are lone males love-hating the solitary male principle. Both in the extreme of sensibility grab their opponents in Melville's typical bear hug of fellowship. That Melville himself was deliberately and consciously playing this love-hate hug here to its fullest is clear.

The judge "would relate instances where, after some months' lonely scoutings, the Indian-hater is suddenly seized with a sort of calenture; hurries openly towards the first smoke, though he knows it is an Indian's, announces himself as a lost hunter, gives the savage his rifle, throws himself upon his charity, embraces him with much affection, imploring the privilege of living a while in his sweet companionship." If a certain acidity of reality disturbs the embrace here -- "What is too often the sequel of so dis-tempered a procedure may be best known by those who best know the Indian" -- later there is no acid. The Judge informs us that "Moredock was an example of something apparently self-contradicting, certainly curious, but, at the same time, undeniable; namely, that nearly all Indian-haters have at bottom loving hearts; at any rate, hearts, if anything, more generous than the average."

Of course, earnest Frank Goodman, the Caledonian, will quarrel with any such paradox being possible, but then all the more reason to know Melville means it to be true. This doesn't stop Melville from sporting with Moredock finally, however, as a man of impeccable sensibility. The sentences that are Melville's finest addition to the original James Hall source³⁴ tell us that Moredock, because of the widespread fame of his benevolence, was invited finally to become candidate for governor, "but begged to be excused. And, though he declined to give his reasons for declining, yet by those who best knew him the cause was not wholly unsurmised. In his official capacity, he might be called upon to

enter into friendly treaties with Indian tribes, a thing not to be thought of." Then finally, "And even did no such contingency arise, yet he felt there would be an impropriety in the Governor of Illinois stealing out now and then, during a recess of the legislative bodies, for a few days' shooting at human beings, within the limits of his paternal chief-magistracy."

If Moredock's history is invoked to be moving, and then to be gently spoofed; if Moredock is first made an impressive passionate old loner, and then edged into being a self-deluding fool, the story and portrait of the other supposed misanthrope in the book, the Confidence-man is quite otherwise. Like Pitch, the Missouri coonskin boy-hater, but more so, the Confidence-man is unassailable in his dignity. He is also consummate in his skill and absolutely steadfast in his purpose. The critical question has always been what his purpose was, and many critics have worried over the problem of whether he isn't the devil incarnate mocking the gospel and teaching men to hate by his insidious inside-out preaching.³⁵

This is not at all the case. As R.W.B. Lewis says, "The confidence-man is not the bringer of darkness; he is the one who reveals the darkness in ourselves."³⁶ In fact, in case the reader had missed that the Confidence-man is a revealer of truth and therefore a blessed creature, Melville has the Missouri bachelor muse, after having been gulled of a few dollars by the P.I.O. man, "'Was the man a trickster, it must be more for the love than the lucre. Two or three dirty dollars the motive to so many nice wiles?'" The Yankee pedlar's "practical" jokes were not practical either.

The Confidence-man, like his Yankee forebears, loves his sport and his victims. With absolute reliability he talks nonsense to test our ability to recognize nonsense. By showing us how easy we are to fool, he shows us how tentative our grasp of things is. In fact there are no certainties to hold onto. That the con man may trick person after person into the delusion that there are certainties and benign certainties at that reveals starkly how uncertain the realities are. But the steadfast Confidence-man, with all his planning, shrewdness and loyalty to his work, should not be called a devil for his pains. If we insist upon the word devil, let us at least recognize in him actually not a devil, but a devil's advocate, the critic who picks flaws to bring out the whole truth of a situation. Indeed in the framework of the Catholic Church, the devil's advocate is called "a promoter of the faith," his job being to show the flaws in candidates for canonization. Here the item for faith is not religion, but the new world vision of man. The Confidence-man reveals the poverty of man's ideals in an era of man's extravagant claims for himself and his newly opening universe. The Confidence-Man is thus the reversal of Israel Potter. In Israel Potter, the essential expansiveness of the faith is allowed to be sung out by the careful contraction of awareness of the flaws. In The Confidence-Man the essential awareness of the flaws gets its power from an underlying expansiveness. The Confidence-man throughout his adventures is, after all, the true boon companion, in a bear hug with all his victims, gulling them ever in an act of love.

We might at this moment hear it said that Milton's Satan performed a service for mankind, and that Milton's purpose in writing Paradise Lost was to justify God's creation of Satan. It might be said then that God gave us Satan in an act of love, and thus Melville is after all also writing about the devil. The difference, aside from the vast difference in tone, is simply that Melville is not writing about God and about why God did whatever he did. Melville is writing about man, and why man does what he does -- even if Melville is this interested in man because Melville is haunted by the belief that there is no God. This same haunting is finally what makes us put aside Milton and his Satan here, and perhaps everyone knows this. It is just as important, however, that we put aside John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress and Hawthorne's "Celestial Railroad." As Melville's work is not devotional, neither is it allegorical nor allegorically satirical.³⁷ It is more paradoxical than Bunyan and to begin with feistier than Hawthorne's; it leans over into pathos, then leans back the other way. It is full of an underlying expansiveness although its main mode is contraction. Bunyan's and Hawthorne's works are neat and nicely rounded. The artistic mastery is total here, and Melville is controlling something vastly suggestive, but we have no neat moral, and we would not want one.

Indeed, if we are looking for prototypes for The Confidence-Man,³⁸ we should look to Lazarillo de Tormes and Ben Jonson's "Every Man Out of His Humor." In both of those works we get the string of repetitious practical joke episodes -- actually

more grim than Melville's -- hacking away at the same emptiness. In Lazarillo, the rogue is without ideals, is obsessed with survival, and goes from one master to the next, seeing if he can find it with them. His terrible fights with his cruel masters give way in one episode to the fine repartee between him and the Squire, between the poor rich man and the poor poor boy, between lone male and lone male, each outperforming the other in a mutual gulling exercise (excerpted in Chapter II) which rings with all the humor of the pathetic. The unspoken sympathy between the two only underscores the basic situation, however, which the author of the picaresque tale is continually harping upon, that God's house, like the Squire's, is empty. Not a stick of furniture, not a crumb of food, not the shred of an ideal, just talk.

In "Every Man Out of His Humor," we come even closer. Melville must have read this play with care; he marked it up a great deal and in general he liked Jonson a lot.³⁹ It seems what must have appealed here is the very undramaticness of the piece, its linear repetitiousness an impossible burden for a play, certainly enough of a challenge in a novel. Melville must have been interested, too, in the character who holds that long stringing play together, Asper, that "rough spirit" whose job it is to bring all the other characters back to their senses. It very likely interested him too that in the end, Asper, so roughly critical a joker throughout, takes off his mask to reveal his true underlying amiability; his critical spirit was, after all, only a mask, not that different, in other words, from the masks and affectations that all the other characters put on.

This final twist may call our attention to one final central touch in The Confidence-Man. Jonson's central joke in his play is that a humor is not just an imbalance, but an affectation of some imbalance. This is a subtle distinction. The joke no longer is that we are all off balance and hence ridiculous, but that at the great and inevitable danger of making great fools of ourselves, we all create an aura of imbalance. Jonson doesn't worry about why we do this. Perhaps it is to make ourselves interesting; or perhaps to convince ourselves that we exist. Whatever the reason, to recognize the human instinct for theatricality is to latch onto what finally renders The Confidence-Man not just an interesting and well-crafted book, but a brilliant one. It is generally agreed, I believe, that the central coup of the book is in the Confidence-man's clever pranks. The reader cannot help but be impressed at the series of ploys this man has invented, at their great variety and at his improvisational adaptability. But finally what is impressive about him is more subtle. The brilliance of this character's acting is not just in the broad strokes; it is in the continual minutiae involved in his appropriation of a personality as he moves inconspicuously from one con to the next.

"The merchant having withdrawn," for instance, we hear in Chapter 15, "the other remained seated alone for a time, with the air of one who, after having conversed with some excellent man, carefully ponders what fell from him, however intellectually inferior it may be, that none of the profit may be lost; happy if from any honest word he has heard he can derive some hint,

which, besides confirming him in the theory of virtue may, likewise, serve for a finger-post to virtuous action." The convolutions are thought out and real, the mask is interwovenly complex. There is more, however. At another moment: "Sobering down now, the herb-doctor addressed the stranger in a manly, business-like way -- a transition which though it might seem a little abrupt, did not appear constrained, and indeed, served to show that his recent levity was less the habit of a frivolous nature, than the frolic condescension of a kindly heart." It is not just the subtle convolutions of his acting, or even the way one act is imposed upon another without a moment's thought or hesitation. What holds us is that there is something oddly familiar about the naturalness of this extremely complex theatricality.

Let us look at one last moment, in *The Cabin*. "In short, left to himself...he insensibly resumes his original air, a quiescent one, blended of sad humility and demureness. Ere long he goes laggingly into the ladies' saloon, as in spiritless quest of somebody; but, after some disappointed glances about him, seats himself upon a sofa with an air of melancholy exhaustion and depression." Of course, he has in fact sighted his next target and noted instantly "From her twilight dress, neither dawn nor dark, apparently she is a widow just breaking the chrysalis of her mourning;" but how thoroughly in a second he adopts a personality. With the lady beside him, we can figure out the familiarity, however. We see immediately that the con-man's

acting is only what everyone is doing all the time. It is not just the pun on mourning, that the lady is acting quietly bereaved but is actually just as quietly brimming with the subtle excitement of being about to break out and find her wings. It is not just the subtle evocation of sympathy for her sense of dawning possibility even before our friend opens a conversation with her. It is not, in short, just the sense of humans as creatures incorrigibly on the brink of some expectation. It is the acting. It is the effortlessly natural artificiality, the continually consummate complexity of the acting, as human beings go from one act to another in their endless attempts to assert themselves over the pupal bind of nothingness.

Finally, then, we are all confidence men, and not for money, but to assert ourselves above the blandness of existence, a certain absurdity upon which we all valiantly if pathetically seek to impose a sense of ourselves, of our images, our self-importance. Of course we don't admit that this is going on. "Help? To say nothing of the friend, there is something wrong about the man who wants help. There is somewhere a defect, a want, in brief, a need, a crying need, somewhere about that man." Charlie Noble isn't being unusually cold in this statement. He is expressing the way human beings support their dignity, by saying it is the other guy who is needy. Meanwhile, like the Fidele's green sprawling emigrants, below deck each man rocks in the Procrustean cradle of his plank-bed individuality. Or, Volpone-like heads down the stairs to rob his neighbor who, also Volpone-like, is

coughing "Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" As we go downstairs, however, we do as our best confidence-man of all does, in all good spirits and with all good cheer for our immersion in the pleasure of the moment, in the joy of our simplest theatricality, we go downstairs humming "an opera snatch."

"Benito Cereno" does not belong in a chapter on Melville's great works of humor. It is not humorous; it is stark and grim. True, written between Israel Potter and The Confidence-Man, it resembles one book in working from an actual autobiographical narrative and both books in focusing immediately and throughout upon the issue of trust. Still it is quite different. It is no 4th of July song of triumph, nor April Fools' Day joke upon the New World. We have a con-man here, Babo, but instead of a string of adventuring improvisations, he is given only one disguise and that is dead serious. If nothing else, Cereno's utterly immovable fixation upon the horror of the bloodfeud⁴⁰ gives the story a steady somberness; and a leaden calm makes it unlike any other work of Melville.

From another angle, however, this novella gives us further insight into Melville's fiction and Melville's humor. "Benito Cereno" shows us Melville's characteristic achievement, the dimension which makes his novels and stories striking and memorable. In most of Melville's fiction humor provides this dimension. Here, as if Melville has simply tightened the screw one turn, the dimension is irony.

The key to Melville's artistry in "Benito Cereno" is the way the story is presented. The reader has to "get" it. It is easy enough not to, to read the story flat. The prose does not help. From the beginning the reader has to see his way through the double negatives and heavy interweavings of habitually complicated and equivocating sentences. It is satisfying finally to see that all the confusion hinges on two simple questions -- what is happening on board the San Dominick and what should Delano do -- and to recognize finally Delano's one error; he has not considered the possibility of a Negro rebellion. Once one has the gist, however, the temptation is to read the story simply also, as some critics have done, as a flat reminder to the Delano in us all that evil does exist and that the good men must be more on the alert for the bad than they ever imagined necessary.⁴¹

At best, something is lacking in this reading. At worst, this reading makes the gross error of assuming that Delano's point of view is Melville's and that the black men are intended to symbolize evil.⁴² Delano is not Melville, however. "Getting" it is seeing that the whole story is written from inside Amasa Delano's mind and is an ironic commentary on that mind. Melville does not tell us this. He even writes the book in third person as if to make it sound as if it is written from the point of view of an omniscient, fair-minded if wordy author. Once we realize what is going on, we see that what we have here is the stream of Delano's thinking. The difficulties of the style, the inveterate tendency toward circumlocution and arch elaborateness are not

quirks of Melville's writing but the habits of Delano's mind. Finally "getting" it is perceiving that the dynamics of the novella consist of Delano modestly congratulating himself upon the intricate, complex, infinitely interesting workings of his own mind.

Indeed the story from beginning to end gives us Delano charting and logging his every thought from the moment the strange ship appears on the horizon. Delano never lets us miss an intricacy in all the possibilities he prides himself on being attuned to. He likes articulating his thoughts to himself in neatly turned phrases. He likes being a good judge of character, keeping a realistic perspective, and generally knowing his way around the nautical world as well as, through education and his own life, the vast panorama of human experience. It is "no small pleasure" also, that he has the tool of a foreign language. Finally in the midst of all his sophistication, he likes his ability to appreciate "nature." If it may very well be that the presence of the "raw" Africans is what has prompted Delano to enjoy fully his vigorously sophisticated, shrewd yet simply sensible mind, it is also the sight of the Negroes -- a Negress sleeping beneath the rigging for example like a "doe in the shadow of a woodland rock" -- which allows him to enjoy "naked nature."

But Delano simply does not know what is going on. Babo is running this show. Babo has devised his own role as well as Cereno's and Atufal's. Babo directs the whole ship in a convincing and colorful drama that plays right into all Delano's delu-

sions. The black even gets Delano working for him. He puts on such a good act of being the attentive body servant that Delano will ask to buy him, so that Babo in turn can mumble, "'No, master would not sell Babo for all the money in the world.'" He gets Delano so into the spirit that in the shaving scene, seeing the Spanish flag used as a neck cloth, it is Delano who says to Babo, "'It's all one, I suppose, so the colors be gay,' which playful remark did not fail somewhat to tickle the negro."

The irony is that Delano goes through the whole experience priding himself on his civilized white mind, yet the great mind here is Babo's, the black man's, the supposed primitive's. Once we see this, it is as if the story may be read again, from Babo's point of view. It is no coincidence that when Babo is slain, and his body dragged through the streets by mules, his tormentors contrive to put his head upon a stake and let those very much open eyes stare out across the plaza, nor that his head is described as "that hive of subtlety." Delano's head deposed, Babo's head stares out at us, in all its concentration.

Although Delano is a fool, however, the story is not a satire of him. Melville uses sympathy to create as delicate a balance as that in any of his best humor. Melville has drawn Delano with singular restraint and impartiality. It is not surprising that readers have liked him. He is neither wise, nor truly idealistic nor genuinely humane. He seems charitable but we know we cannot trust him. Nonetheless, there is something, and it has to do with his perceptions. Something about Delano's willingness to gamble

his belief that he is a good charitable fellow against his ability to perceive whether he is actually in danger makes him sympathetic. Not good. Delano is not good, but there is something appealing about the pleasure he takes in taking this risk.

Indeed it is Melville's evenhanded sympathy which leaves some readers unaware that Delano is an evasive fool. Finally Melville is sympathetic not because of the perceptivity which Delano misses by such a long shot but because Delano is a type of us all. Delano's problem finally is no more that he is stupid than that he is boorishly complacent. Delano is not stupid, he is simply, like Prufrock, after all, afraid. At the core of "Benito Cereno" is Amasa Delano's fear that God does not exist and that all that does exist is nothingness. "I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard?" Delano typically banters himself. "Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean. There is someone above. Fie, fie, Jack of the Beach! you are a child indeed." No wonder throughout the story Delano titillates himself with the images and paraphernalia of monks, cloisters, and anchorites; no wonder to say "please" he likes the word "pray." His whole interior monologue is a frightened scatterbrained prayer. There is someone above, isn't there? There is something besides this awful impartiality?

In fact, Delano's fantasy of the Negro is a projection of his own great desire for himself, to trust in the universe as he dreams the Negro does. Noting to himself that Negroes are born

servants, Delano waxes rhapsodic, "There is, too, a smooth tact about them in this employment, with a marvelous, noiseless, gliding briskness, not ungraceful in its way, singularly pleasing to behold, and still more so to be the manipulated subject of. And above all is the great gift of good-humor. Not the mere grin or laugh is here meant. Those were unsuitable. But a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune." Delano admires the Negroes for exactly what he holds to be his own forte, his un-failing good humor. Poor little Jack of the Beach, trudging along with his schoolbag, is still trudging along, his humor tucked under his arm, as he chats companionably with himself and everyone else, even in the midst of his great sympathy for Cereno making small tentative jests at the Spanish captain.

Delano is a fool. It is a fine touch that he yearns to be a Negro's "manipulated subject." Babo is not the only one with his head upon a stake in this story. In all Delano's vast ignorance, wishful fantasies and schoolboy perseverance to do the best he can by a given situation, Delano also has his head upon a stake. Finally it seems a central point of "Benito Cereno" that to be human is to have your head upon a stake, your eyes staring out, even if you insist as Delano does upon seeing nothing, but making a great deal of noise about having done so. Whether one is willing to face it or not, the threat remains, of a godless universe with no pleasant tunes, with nothing but some residual horror and a mystifying ability to fascinate.

Melville then does not make Delano better than Babo or Babo better than Delano or Cereno best of all. Melville is writing about what it is like to be human. If in the end he pities human beings our self-deluding self-congratulating minds, he also cannot repress his admiration for the subtlety of which these same minds are capable. Even Delano, insistent as he is that "someone above" solves all mysteries, cannot keep his mind from the intricacies of the Gordian knot. If Melville is asking here what sort of a sensation it is to have a head, one answer is that it is painful. Another, however, is that it is miraculous. The mind in "Benito Cereno" is pitied for its self-important bustle, for the horror it must see if the eyes are truly open. But is also worshipped for its magic, for the extent of our fascination.

It is for this same reason that Melville never tells a story flat. The author writes in confidence that the reader can take leaps too. Melville tests and teases and toys with the reader. He throws a game at the reader. Through humor -- or irony -- he demands that the reader give up his conscientious literal-minded plodding, and take certain leaps, certain risks.

Also, as Delano has conscientiously distinguished between mere grins and true cheerfulness, here once again Melville distinguishes between humor as evasion and humor as revelation. Delano is one of Melville's many evasive humorists, all foils to Melville as author. For there is nothing evasive about the games that Melville throws into his stories and novels. Melville's

humor -- and Melville's irony -- shield himself and his reader from nothing. Instead they uncover the worst to us, but, and here is what has gone unrecognized, without Melville ever presenting himself as moral teacher or philosophical preacher.

In the framework of true humor and irony, there are no teachings to be taught. It is only that we are in on this together, that together we must all "get" it. We must figure out not just what is going on, but how to take it; and at the moment that we do, author and reader have shared our only consolation in the nothingness. The sociability of the fictional form is rounded out as author and reader are in on the joke together.

Notes

- 1 Sealts, Melville's Reading, p. 45.
- 2 Melville doesn't mention Montaigne by name but Montaigne's famous essay seems a likely source here.
- 3 Donald Yannella, "'Seeing the Elephant' in Mardi," in Artful Thunder, pp. 105-17. "To see the Elephant, is a South-western phrase, and means, generally, to undergo any disappointment of high-raised expectations. It is . . . quite synonymous with the ancient 'go out for wool and come back shorn,'" p. 107.
- 4 Chase, Herman Melville, pp. 64-102.
- 5 Whitney Hastings Wells, "Moby-Dick and Rabelais," Modern Language Notes, 38 (1923), 123. Wells notes the borrowing but makes no comment on it. The chapter in Rabelais is Book I, Chapter X, "Of That Which Is Signified by the Colours White and Blue."
- 6 Northrup Frye's "Theory of Genres" (Anatomy, pp. 243-341), especially pp. 312-14, helpfully classifies Moby-Dick as a romance-anatomy, pointing out that the usual critical approach to the form of such works as Moby-Dick "resembles that of the doctors in Brobdingnag, who after great wrangling finally pronounced Gulliver a lusus naturae. It is the anatomy in particular that has baffled critics, and there is hardly any fiction writer deeply influenced by it who has not been accused of disorderly conduct." It is odd that few critics have referred to Frye's useful concept; and yet at the same time we must note that Frye has confused the issue somewhat by lumping together Menippean satire and the melancholy anatomy.
- 7 We are not certain what Melville had read of Tristram Shandy before writing Moby-Dick. We know that in 1849 he first read and enjoyed immensely a few chapters of that novel, and by the time he wrote "Cock-A-Doodle-Do!" he felt familiar enough with it in any event to speak of it as a remedy for melancholy, in much the way Burton before or Irving after would traditionally speak of their beloved books as cures for hypos. We know also that America was saturated with Shandyisms--that like Samuel Johnson, Sterne was in the air. Howard Vincent even suggests that Melville may have gotten many of his stunts from an intermediary, Southey's Doctor, a popular romantic rehashing of Sterne which contains prefatory matter labeled "History and Romance Ransacked for Resemblances and Non-Resemblances to the Horse of Dr. Daniel Dove." Sealts finds no record of Melville reading

Southey, however; and Vincent sets us in the wrong direction by suggesting that Melville took up these stunts only to change them into serious mood-setting devices. Vincent is closer in his linking of Ishmael's and Queequeg's bedtime chats with Mr. and Mrs. Shandy's beds of justice.

⁸ Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent, "Explanatory Notes," Moby-Dick (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), pp. 593-94, n. line-16. "Melville seems to have perversely misinterpreted the classic Roman as l'homme fatal of romantic literature. . . . Perhaps here too, Melville experienced a skeptical failure to understand such virtuous faith and courage as the classical tradition attributed to Cato."

⁹ Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in Comedy, pp. 61-146.

¹⁰ "DeQuincey: Humor and the Drugs," in Veins of Humor, p. 123. This essay, incidentally, is one of the best on the subject of humor.

¹¹ Evert (and George?) Duyckinck, "Melville's Moby Dick; or, The Whale," New York Literary World, 9 (November 15, 1851), 381-83 and (November 22, 1851), 403-4, rpt. in The Recognition of Herman Melville, pp. 37-43.

¹² Mansfield and Vincent, p. 773. See also p. 681.

¹³ Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker, eds. Moby-Dick (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 12, n. 3.

¹⁴ Chase, Herman Melville, pp. 64-102.

¹⁵ Chase, Herman Melville, pp. 100-1, "As patriots we may enjoy with Melville his excursions into American folklore. It was for him a healthy impulse. Like Ahab, he was gifted with the high perception; without it Moby-Dick would lack the over-all structure of its universal-historical allegory. Yet underneath the high perception, supporting and nourishing it, Melville knew there must be a low enjoying power. This he sought and found in the folk spirit of his country."

¹⁶ Chase, Herman Melville, p. 91.

¹⁷ Chase, The American Novel, pp. 93-113. "The essential voice of Melville is to be heard in the half-humorous, subtly erotic lyric tone which is peculiar to Moby-Dick," p. 111.

¹⁸ See Eric Partridge, Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English, 7th Ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 218 and John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, Dictionary of Slang and Its Analogues (New York: University Books, 1965). Actually the curious thing is how several slang meanings of the word did seem to surface in print suddenly in 1860: the affidavit or declaration; the dictionary or overly fine language--and the male sexual organ. It seems fair to predate the spoken slang a few years before.

19 "Barbara S _____" London Magazine, April, 1825, rpt. in The Portable Charles Lamb, pp. 375-81.

20 In his Lecture on the South Seas, Melville comments, "Who that has read it can forget that quaint sketch, the introductory essay of Elia, where he speaks of the Balclutha-like desolation of those vaunted old offices of the once famous South Sea Company--the old oaken wainscots hung with the dusty maps of Mexico and soundings of the Bay of Panama--the vast cellarages under the whole pile where Mexican dollars and doubloons once lay heaped in huge bins for Mammon to solace his solitary heart withal?" See also Joel O. Conarroe, "Melville's 'Bartleby' and Charles Lamb," Studies in Short Fiction, 6 (1968), pp. 113-18. Conarroe point out several borrowings, such as Evans and Turkey, and the names not being in the directory. He is probably right in his suggestion too that Melville gets the name Bartleby from Bartlemy in the Lamb sketch following "The South Sea House," that is, "Oxford Vacation." Conarroe however misses the main point of Lamb's contribution to Melville, the humorous twist. Lamb had not written piously of the martyred Bartholomew, but with an affectionate wry teasing and unorthodoxy. "There hung Peter in his uneasy posture--Bartlemy in the troublesome act of flaying," Lamb had written nostalgically of two old schoolbook pictures. Who else beside Lamb--and Melville--would call a martyred saint by an affectionate diminutive and speak of his uneasy posture and the troublesome act of flaying?

21 Melville writes of Turkey, "In the morning, one might say, his face was a fine florid hue, but after twelve o'clock, meridian--his dinner hour--it blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals . . . the face which, gaining its meridian with the sun, seemed to set with it, to rise, culminate and decline."

22 "Melville After Moby-Dick," Trials of the Word (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 36-9.

23 Melville to R. H. Dana, May 1, 1850, notes that while enroute to Europe in October, 1849, Melville "had found a copy of Lamb in the ship's library--and not having previously read him much I dived into him & was delighted--as every one must be with such a rare humorist & excellent hearted man," Letters, p. 108.

24 Letters, pp. 153-61.

25 Herman Melville, Journal of a Visit to London and the Continent, 1849-1850, ed. Eleanor Melville Metcalf (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).

26 Even while this particular sketch is based upon the easily happy dining party he had in London on December 18, 1849.

27 Israel Potter, The Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter, Leonard Kriegel, ed. (New York: Corinth Books, 1962); Arnold Rampersad in Melville's Israel Potter (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1969) has commented on this aspect of the original Israel Potter story.

28 Rampersad compares Melville's Israel Potter with Piers Plowman and John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. See n. 37 for critics who emphasize Bunyan and Hawthorne as sources for The Confidence-Man.

29 Matthiessen, p. 491.

30 "Introduction" to Herman Melville, Israel Potter (New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1974), p. 8.

31 See "Corn Cobs Twist Your Hair," Rourke, pp. 3-32. Rourke failed to see in The Confidence-Man, if she knew the book at all, Melville's great descendant of the Yankee pedlar. On page 200, concluding her brief discussion of Melville, Rourke writes, "With the writing of his one great book Moby-Dick Melville's work was finished." Chase however brings to our attention the important connection between the prototype Rourke describes, and both Israel Potter and the Confidence-Man, pp. 185-202.

32 Rourke, p. 30. "A deep relish for talk had grown up throughout the country." Also, pp. 7-8, on prolonging the talk, and p. 23 on the Yankee as oracle, all of which should be applied to the Confidence-Man as well as to Pitch.

33 V. S. Pritchett, Review of Dostoyevsky: Reminiscences, New York Review of Books, 22 (Oct. 30, 1975), pp. 8ff.

34 James Hall, "Indian-hating. --Some of the Sources of this Animosity. --Brief Account of Col. Moredock," from Sketches of History, Life, and Manners in the West (Philadelphia: Harri-son Hall, 1835), II, 74-82, rpt. in Hershel Parker, ed., The Confidence-Man by Herman Melville (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 249-54. See also Elizabeth S. Foster, ed. The Confidence-Man (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1954), pp. 334-41.

35 For example, John Shroeder, "Sources and Symbols for Melville's Confidence-Man," PMLA 66 (1951), 364-80.

36 R. W. B. Lewis, "Afterword," Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man (New York: NAL, 1964), p. 276.

37 Willard Thorp in Herman Melville (New York: American Book Company, 1938), pp. xi-cxxix, sees The Confidence-Man as "an allegory . . . like Pilgrim's Progress or Hawthorne's 'Celestial Railroad.'" See also Shroeder; Foster, pp. xiii-xcv; Parker, pp. ix-xi; and Rosenberry, pp. 161-66. Note in his article, PMLA, 75 (1960), pp. 604-8, Rosenberry continues to conceive of The Confidence-Man as allegory but rejects "The Celestial Railroad" as a key source or analogue in order to emphasize the "ship of fools" tradition.

³⁸ Foster says of The Confidence-Man's sources, "the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress, Shakespeare, and Paradise Lost mingle with all varieties of picaresque fiction, from coney-catching anecdotes to Don Quixote; Hawthorne's fine-wrought allegorical stories intermix with the raw histories of frontier settlement, Indian massacre, river bandits, steamboat con men; the wisdom of the ancients, Lucian's irony and Tacitus' pessimism, flow beside the brash confidence of the Western world." Rosenberry also mentions Tristram Shandy, but advisedly drops it in his PMLA article. For comments on The Confidence-Man in relation to Jonson's "Volpone" and "Bartholomew Fair," see William Sedgwick, p. 188; Rosenberry, PMLA, p. 607; and Jay H. Hartmann, "Volpone as a Possible Source for Melville's The Confidence-Man," Susquehanna University Studies, 7 (1965), 247-60, which includes useful background material. See also, for historical context and analogue, Jay Robert Nash, An Anecdotal History of the Confidence Man and His Game (New York: M. Evans and Company, 1975).

³⁹ Wilson Walker Cowen, "Melville's Marginalia," Diss. Harvard, 1965, Section 302; Ben Jonson. See also Herman Melville, Journal, pp. 31, 84-85.

⁴⁰ Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness (New York: Random, 1958), p. 190, comments that in "Benito Cereno," "Melville, the exponent of brotherhood among races, seems ready to concede that life is a blood-feud."

⁴¹ This reading is responsible, in fact, for Arvin's dismissal of the novella. "As a parable of innocence in the toils of pure evil, however, all this is singularly unremarkable, and we are forced to feel that Don Benito has gone very little beyond the rudiments when, at the end, he enforces the lesson his terrible experiences have taught him: 'To such a degree may malign machinations and deceptions impose. So far may even the best man err in judging the conduct of one with the recesses of whose conditions he is not acquainted.' To be sure!" p. 240.

⁴² Matthiessen, p. 508. "The embodiment of good in the pale Spanish captain and of evil in the mutinied African crew, though pictorially and theatrically effective, was unfortunate in raising unanswered questions. Although the Negroes were savagely vindictive and drove a terror of blackness into Cereno's heart, the fact remains that they were slaves and that evil had thus originally been done to them. Melville's failure to reckon with this fact within the limits of his narrative makes its tragedy, for all its prolonged suspense, comparatively superficial." It is of course Delano, not Melville, who has failed to reckon with the key fact Matthiessen describes, and Delano, not Melville, who is superficial.

Chapter V

Agatha

In terms of what has been said about "Benito Cereno," Pierre would seem to be a success. It does have an extra dimension; it is a satire.¹ Indeed, without this recognition, the reader is lost. Melville the satirist in Pierre undercuts all his characters until, shorn of their shallow pretenses--their sentimentality, piety and false culture--they push the reader to demand what every satirist wants his public to demand, the ideals of simplicity and honesty. Melville satirizes the romantic idyllic setting, the smug sentimental rich, the circus of the art world. Most of all he satirizes the "Young Enthusiasts" who in trying to be horologies instead of chronometrics are trying in short to be God. Pierre is of the course the prime fool, but the ascetic Apostles are Melville's target too, as well as their guru Plimlimmon.

It would seem to speak well for Pierre also that it encompasses one of Melville's favorite motifs, the preposterous hug. In Pierre's and Isabel's hug we have the perfect subject for Melville's wry humor--or here, satire. Their hug is thoroughly impossible. At the same time it is thoroughly sentimental. Untrammelled by the mundane realities of either sibling or sexual bond, this relationship like many another in Melville's fiction is allowed full rein to soar preposterously out "of the realms

of mortalness."² What's more, it is surrounded by other such hugs, the boyhood friendship of Pierre and Glen before and after it sours, and best of all, the tenacious attraction of Lucy Tartan to the "newlyweds," Pierre and Isabel. Indeed the scene in which Lucy, the third member in Pierre's harem, arrives at The Apostles, and in which Pierre locks all three of them in a room to protect them, is near farce.

Nonetheless, something is wrong with Pierre. Melville is not in control. Instead of stinging satire the book comes across as bizarre. The satire fails because in his main character Melville was writing too close to home. In Pierre Melville seems at once to be attacking and vindicating himself. The satire comes back too baldly upon Melville himself, the man who wrote Typee and Mardi, and who in a fit of heroics wrote that he wished his books to fail.³ As Edward Rosenberry writes, "The final effect is self-mockery, a spectacle that must embarrass any but the most morbid reader."⁴ At the same time a special pleading for the writer impinges upon the book. In the midst of satirizing Pierre, Melville leans toward making him heroic after all, a man of hubris, a monumental quester for the supernal. Melville is trying at once, in fact, to be satiric and tragic. One book cannot sustain the wrenching between two such disparate artistic purposes.

The hug fails also. The problem with the hug is that it involves females. It was probably Hawthorne's influence that led Melville to attempt a plot with a woman at the center. But also, Melville had always been profoundly attuned to the condi-

tion of slavery implicit in the human condition; it was only a matter of time before he noticed that women as well as men were slaves. Indeed, in Pierre, written before the "Agatha" attempt, "The Tartarus of Maids" or "The Piazza," it is as if Melville had suddenly noticed women in their own right, and part of the intensity of the book is in this discovery, Melville's simultaneous with Pierre's: "She is my sister--my own father's daughter . . . The other day I had not so much as heard the remotest rumor of her existence; and what has since occurred to change me?" Melville's sympathy was the more profound because of women's anonymity, so far-reaching as to embrace themselves. Not only had the men not heard of them but the women themselves, Yillah and Isabel, for example, didn't know their own pasts.

Melville's sympathy was too profound, however. Melville did not know how to give women both sympathy and ridicule, the staples for his male figures. It did not help that women were sacred sentimental objects in his world; he had no models of how to knock their sacredness wryly and deftly. Although Hawthorne used humorous highlights, he never opened his female characters to the full indignity of humor's free play the way Melville might have wanted to had he known how. Also the only conventional way to tease women was to portray them as shrews and termagants. Melville had tried this sort of playfulness with Annatoo in Mardi and had found it grotesque and unwieldy.

Had Melville felt more confident about his understanding of women he might have invented his own humor; but as the

dreamy stories of his women suggest, he was vague on how women viewed themselves. Women were not quite real to him. But part of the problem also was that women were too real, too large to Melville. As Isabel becomes Pierre's copyist, her anonymity shifting from the ethereal to the mundane, we should recall that Herman Melville had his copyists too. Certainly it would have been tasteless to joke in his fiction about his wife Elizabeth and sister Augusta being his copyists. It was a strange twist, for all his anguish, that Melville was the boss in his particular copying office. No wonder Melville would have as much understanding of the narrator's point of view as of the copyist's in "Bartleby." It only must have compounded the problem too that there were so many women in Melville's household.

In short, women were at once too far from his understanding and too near him for Melville to write about them with the control necessary for consummate artistry. You could tease God easier than a woman, not just because God had a certain familiar maleness about him, but because God didn't live right there in your own house with you, flying up to set your room to rights every morning,⁵ raising your children, depending upon you to make the family living. It is true that in Pierre Melville made some progress in writing about women. He knocks Lucy's idyllic maidenliness. He tries to give us perspective on women working in the "real world," when Pierre explains to Isabel why she should not give music lessons.⁶ Eventually too he has Lucy Tartan rise to a certain sexual boldness, a stature that entails

her coming to get her man and her becoming something of a true artist as well.

But this new stature, very Hawthornesque, has no suppleness about it, none of the free play that characterizes Melville's best portraits, best monologues, best treatments of how the human mind sees itself. Rather the portrait of Lucy, like the young woman herself, has a certain stiffness, a certain impregnability. Melville couldn't really find a use for this new stature in the tradition in which he was working. In general new stature, like the New World itself, simply meant new illusion to Melville. It seemed unfair, however, for a man to have to be the one to have to say this to women. At any rate, saying so would defeat the purpose of having made women taller in the first place. In Pierre Melville made the error of thinking that women too were part of his province, but thereafter he would move with great restraint regarding women characters.

Pierre was not, as Willard Thorp has suggested,⁷ one of a trilogy of Melville's great quest novels. In my view Melville in Pierre was aiming first of all at satire. Secondly, he saw other possibilities in his material--writing a tragedy and writing about women--and found these alternatives hard to resist, although harder still to implement. But most of all, after the exhilarating experience of writing Moby-Dick, he was writing too hard and too fast, and he was tired. Pierre is a highly interesting book because of its autobiographical material about Melville the writer. It has that documentary appeal of many

books, like Doris Lessing's Golden Notebook, about the chronological travails of being a writer. Whatever we may think, however, of a novel about being a writer, Melville seems to have been embarrassed about it. Melville says of Pierre, whose writing has become more and more strained and sterile, "He seems to have directly plagiarized from his own experiences to fill out the mood of his apparent author-hero." We should recall that in White-Jacket Lemsford the poet is made a sympathetic and likable man, but Melville reflecting upon the condition of being a man and opening the channels of his energy and humor made White-Jacket and Jack Chase his two great characters there.

Pierre is a tired book in which Melville is repeatedly telling us what to think, in which Melville's own writing becomes more and more strained. Perhaps if satire and tragedy could complement each other the way humor and melodrama do in Melville's great works, Melville's energy would not have run down so in this book. In any event, it does run down. In his great fiction, energy is Melville's signature, not here.

Melville didn't have the energy or confidence either for "The Encantadas" or for a batch of short pieces that followed. In these he dabbles with ideas having to do with humor and with the issues that humor addresses itself to. In "The Happy Failure" and "Jimmy Rose," we are told what humor is, and even given some raw materials, but the pieces are thin philosophical gruel indeed. In "I and My Chimney" and the "Apple-Tree Table," the reader can't help being interested in what is going

on, but the claptrap of uninspired domestic comedy gets in the way. In these pieces Melville doesn't provide any real embodiment or enactment. They are outlines or story ideas. As Leon Howard says, Melville was writing some of his magazine fiction "without much inspiration. As the Spenserian quotation used in 'The Encantadas' show, he had been attempting to stimulate his flagging invention . . . with allegory."⁸

Indeed paper thin allegory was the stuff of such stories as that of Hunilla the enduring and Oberlus the hateful. These uncomplicated, utterly unambiguous pieces are in the sketch style of Irving, with the allegorical tendency of Hawthorne, and the geographical expertise of Melville; they were written as if Melville were toying with what he was saying rather than, as in his great work, immersing himself in it. The worst of the platitudes of "The Encantadas," because it has proved most tenacious, is Melville's preaching about the two sides of the tortoise: "Enjoy the bright, keep it turned up perpetually if you can, but be honest, and don't deny the black." This is decent enough advice, but it is also flat preaching. Who is speaking here? We are given no insight into the narrator, no commentary upon him. Indeed he is a dull presence, with no irony, no twist of self-recognition or self-ridicule. He is merely a sailor turned magazinist earning some money by writing travel sketches touched up with pathos and platitudes, even if at moments, rendered with charm. When in the Sixth Sketch Melville turns to quote a "sentimental voyager," it is not to indulge in a tone he has prohibited himself, but rather to give us more of the same. In these short

pieces, Melville fails to find his own level of engagement with what he is saying; his energy never sparks; the humor is thin.

These last pages have concentrated on works of Melville that failed, and in Chapter IV we have already spoken of Melville's works of humor that succeeded. It would seem unnecessary and out of place to say anything in conclusion about "Billy Budd." Besides the fact that thirty years intervened between The Confidence-Man and "Billy Budd," the latter is simply not a work of humor--nor of irony nor of satire. While in this his final novella, Melville is working in his familiar territory, with men at sea, it might be said that his method here is entirely different from what it was in his work of the forties and fifties and thus the novella is outside the scope of this study.

Indeed the implication has been that finally here we have a true Melville without the distraction or diversion of humor; that because there is no humor here, we actually have Melville at his best, his purest. It is because of this implication that some remarks about "Billy Budd" are germane here. The point of this study has been that Melville's humor is central to his greatness. If this is so, then "Billy Budd," being without humor, either partakes of a very different sort of greatness, establishing a whole other area of achievement for its author than I have been discussing--or actually, contrary to the

usual view, is less vigorous, less bold, less controlled than Melville was at his best. I believe the latter is true.

It is tempting to believe the former, however, to read "Billy Budd" as a consummate work of art, one in the thoroughly serious vein. Haunting and noble, it seems to impose upon us a tragic recognition of the limits of mortality. Vere in this view is neither to be blamed nor venerated. He is an agent of mortality in a postlapsarian world where mortality means not just death, but the death of innocence. He is a naval captain in an era when naval captains had to protect themselves against mutiny as much as one country had to protect itself against the attacks of another--England, for instance, against the attacks of Napoleonic France. Indeed, England and France here are a modern Greece and Troy, calling up all the heroism of Greek tragedy.

While this reading suggests the starkness at the core of the novella, it does not account for the actual method of the story. Instead of dialogue and enactment, we are given discourse and description; Melville's narrative style here is actually inappropriate to tragedy. If this is so, William York Tindall suggests a cogent alternative, which is that "Billy Budd" is about the numbness of weighing life and death variables. In this interpretation, the method of discourse is central to the story's meaning and impact. "Neither as loose, nor as tight as it once seemed, the strange sequence of precise discourse and indefinite suggestiveness corresponds to our experi-

ence of life itself . . . of facing, of choosing, of being uneasy about one's choice, of trying to know."⁹ In this sense, surprising as it may be, we might find ourselves adding "Billy Budd" to the sensibility tradition of Melville's main body of writing, which begins with Babbalanja's asking what sort of a sensation life is.

The problem with both of these interpretations is that while they hint at our sense of the nobility behind the story, neither of them takes into account one major aspect of it, and that is the characterization of Billy. If the story has a starkness to it, at the same time it has a rhapsodic quality antithetical to starkness. Indeed it is the rhapsodic absorption with Billy which has drawn so many readers to the novella. Billy is a focus for emotion in the story where all else seems numb with mature deliberation and confrontation. Finally Warner Berthoff seems most in tune with Melville's intentions when he reads the story as a paen to "certain phenomenal men."¹⁰ No starkness is intended actually, just a hush so that we may better hear the cerulean praise for the lamb-like Billy.

Who is Billy, however? If we are to sing his praises, something seems awry. The character evoked with all the imagery and sanctity of Christ does not turn the other cheek but kills a man. Do natural barbarian and beatified saint actually fit into one character? Is there not something gratuitous and forced about Melville raising up this Billy from first Adam to second, from Adam to Christ? Then, too, is Billy Budd realized here or just awkwardly evoked?

My point, finally, is that "Billy Budd" is actually very much in the same method of all the prose Melville wrote thirty and forty years before. It is not just that we have the typical Melville arena, the instability of being at sea in the nothingness of the universe, and within that arena God's creatures fighting, the French terrorizing the English, the sailors terrorizing their superiors and two individuals, Billy Budd and John Claggart, locked in the typical Melville embrace of love-hate. The method of character portrait is familiar too. The narrator, speaking in first person, takes on the bulk of the story in an unwieldily convoluted discourse. The other characters growing out of this discourse are, as in Melville's other work, largely evocations rather than fully embodied characters fully responsible for themselves. They are like humors figures, set a humming, set into motion by things bigger than themselves.

It is in fact a problem that Melville uses the method of humors characterization, yet removes the humor. Indeed we can almost see the humor evaporating out of the story. The Dansker we are told at first has a dry humor. His humor gives way quickly, however, to a querying speculation as to what will happen to Billy; and his speculation to silence, "a bitter prudence" which finally dominates the relationship between the old man and the young. The Dansker could have told Billy how to survive; certainly part of the humor of Melville's earlier books grew out of a very song of survival, from White-Jacket teaching himself not to speak of whales in front of Jack Chase

to Ishmael saving himself upon his good friend Queequeg's coffin. Here, however, we are deliberately being given something else, with no wryness, perhaps finally how not to survive.

In Billy too the humor is evaporated out. With the Aldebaran of the opening page of the novella, the black Handsome Sailor, we get a hearty bold man who conjures up everything that Jack Chase embodied in White-Jacket. From a hearty bold humor, however, we move quickly in the portrait of Billy to a certain anxiety, a certain hermaphrodital submissiveness. Billy is enshrined as the "Happy Failure," as "Jimmy Rose." Ultimately he is too much enshrined, too precious a flower, too slight.

In one other way, "Billy Budd" is very much the same as the books Melville wrote before: the exasperation. It is not just that Claggart is dominated by exasperation. Claggart can so little bear the knowledge of his helplessness that he is wasted into pure exasperation. This might be all right. Billy Budd is also, however, a figure of exasperation. Here is the irony that is outside the story, that is not controlled by Melville.

One wants to say that Melville's aim in this story was very different from what it was in his earlier work. To understand it, we should think not just of the New Testament, but of secular stories such as "A Simple Heart" and The Idiot. The essential problem remains, however. Felicité and Myshkin are both figures of profound and saintly meekness. Neither of them could strike a man dead. To understand Billy, it is better to call up Melville's own past fiction. White-Jacket, we should

recall, worried that he would strike dead the officer who tried to flog him; we may also remember Tommo with the boat hook, and of course Taji and Ahab. Billy is far less the cousin to Christ, Felicité and Myshkin than the child of all Melville's own figures of exasperation suddenly transfixed by the feeling of helplessness--and striking out at the bearer of that bad news.

Finally something is out of kilter in "Billy Budd." Melville is working in much the same way that he had in the past in his prose fiction, with the same subject and approach. Billy Budd is just another of Melville's young men who suddenly feel their helplessness and swing out at the nothingness to protest it. The problem is how Melville has wanted us to feel about this young man. Melville has always incorporated a love song in his work. He loved that Typee paradise, those magnificent whales, the sea itself. Ishmael loves Queequeg and even loved Ahab. In removing the humor from "Billy Budd," Melville has left out the tempering of his lyricism, left the rhapsody by itself. The lyricism is not unencumbered here, however; it is unmoored. Without humor, Melville veers off into unconvincing beatitude, Billy dying "God Bless Captain Vere" on his lips, the sailors' chorus echoing with their love for Billy.

Richard Chase speaks of this problem of Billy. Chase offers a helpful explanation, one which we may add to. He suggests that Melville was possibly swayed in this novella by the thoughts of his twenty-year old son Malcolm who had killed himself.¹¹ The shooting incident occurred, we should recall for a

further insight, the morning after Melville played the part of the "very strict parent,"¹² to use a relative's phrase. Melville's concern with whether he should have locked out his son that night and with whether he had been a good parent in general may have raised insoluble questions. These seemed to have disturbed Melville's artistic control, and pushed him, in the impossibility of deciding upon either self-approval or self-condemnation, to express, finally, what haunted him most and what at least was incontestable--that he loved his son, and that his son was dead.

It cannot be gainsaid, "Billy Budd" is haunting. The story is strong, the form is also. We must admit to the stardom of Billy here, however, and in that see that something has gone wrong. Melville has used his old methods, but as with treating a wife or a sister, evoking a dead son placed a serious strain on Melville's artistic control. The humor being omitted would have been no problem had Melville really had a new tradition, a different tradition, in which to work. As in Pierre, here too he seeks a model in Hawthorne's fiction; he tells us that Billy with his one blemish--his stammer--was like the beautiful woman "in one of Hawthorne's minor tales." Finally, however, Melville knew his story was headed in a direction where Hawthorne's approach would not be right either; so he clung to his own ways. But working in the same framework gave him no room for the beatitude he was intent upon. One feels Melville reaching here, as he did also in his treatment of women, for a new type of prose fiction, but I do not feel him making it.

We need to leave behind us the notion that "Billy Budd" is Melville's "purest" or most "elevated" work. Let us continue to admire "Billy Budd" for what Melville was reaching for, and for his ability to draw us in to what he is haunted and moved by. Let us not, however, tell students that we have in "Billy Budd" a noble tragedy, and then pretend that the critical problem it presents is merely incidental. With the brilliantly conceived and executed "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno," one should not attempt to use "Billy Budd" to prove something misleading about a sugary nobility of American literature.

Actually the quiet steady grim humor of "Bartleby" makes for a purer martyrdom, a more absolute beatitude than that which Melville was straining for in "Billy Budd." Melville's work was most pure when he was writing in full confidence of Adam, not of Christ, when he was in full excitement about the roundness of man's perception of himself, when his humor put him above a forced piety.

What has been said about Melville's problem in encompassing the youth, Billy, and the women, Yillah and Isabel, is not to say that working in the humor tradition was a handicap. Melville chose it because it gave him an outlet, a form, a model. It liberated his humor. The tradition also gave Melville a broad sociality, a community, so that as much as he struggled as an artist, his art was not in turn anguished. Writing in the humor tradition not only demonstrated Melville's commitment to America,

but expressed his feeling of belonging to central Western ambitions--and central Western family jokes. To say that the forms and approach Melville adopted implied certain limitations simply is to say that Melville would have needed a whole other career to have handled a whole other prose tradition--and why should we require it?

What Melville did was momentous enough, taking that tradition, apprenticing himself to it, until he saw what his humor was and how to make it work for him at its greatest depth. Melville always rode out to the edges of the possible in his humor. His range of effectiveness was determined on the one hand by the extent to which he was able to relax his fears that his humor would be misread--and on the other that he was able to come as close as possible to the brink of what humor could achieve. Humor thrives on the humorist knowing he is a humorist--finding his tone, his format, his audience. That was the learning involved in Melville's first five books. Then it thrives on the humorist being willing to take as many risks as he can with his humor, never falling into stale assertion or untempered lyricism--or corn. Melville it seems had often worried that his good humor would be taken for bad. In White-Jacket he daubed onto the story some Christian allegorizing to show he was not bad-humored, only finely attuned to the absurdity in the universe. And sometimes Melville worried that his humor would be taken for rote good cheer, Stubb's sort of unthinking merriment which cloyes in its blissful evasiveness; he worried that his humor would be read as mere subliterary entertainment. Melville

often talked about humor in his novels; he thought a lot about what he wanted from it, and how precisely he was to get it.

Melville's career in short was the discovery and mapping out of what it was to achieve the greatness possible of a humorist. Part of the tension in speaking in a foreign language is that you have trouble getting your humor across, and without it your meaning is flat and lifeless. This is something of the tension of Melville's writing career, for the public was a sort of foreign country to Melville where he had somehow to overcome barriers to present himself fully. In this connection, however, we have Melville not just satisfied with any joke to relieve the strain of communication--but set on finding precisely the joke he most needed to tell and his public most needed to hear. This finally is what is most impressive about Melville's humor. He was able to build upon models which since the Renaissance were developing a tradition of the male monologue of free-wheeling bravado on the frontier. In addition, however, he was like any great performer able to experiment with those forms, to express his own humor--to make the tradition his.

Why did he stop? Why did he never really try another mode of prose fiction? Why did he persist--and then stop? Perhaps Heinrich Boll's *Clown* provides a fitting analogy. The truly brilliant clown can only go on as long as he continues to amuse himself with his own antics. Boll's clown becomes a beggar singer--so did Melville, a lyricist, a poet. Poetry was not, however, Melville's metier. Alfred Kazin reminds us that as great as Melville's poetry was in certain respects, he was

surely an amateur as a poet.¹³ As a humorist, Melville was no amateur. He was a consummate artist, once he had the trick. And perhaps like Boll's clown, once he had it all to well, he didn't need it because he had done it to its limits, and it no longer amused him.

Then too, a humorist needs not only to be amused by his antics--and perhaps he goes on being so when he has taken the greatest risks possible; he needs a steady interaction with an audience, to egg on his teasing of them. The risks, the teasing, the interaction all combine to keep up the performer's energy. In fact, after all, perhaps the problem with "Billy Budd" is that by the time he wrote that novella, Melville had lost the flirtation with the audience.

It is difficult not to wish that Melville had had a career more like Henry James's, longer, more sustained, to be sorry that Melville could not afford like James to carry on his writing over many years, but instead had to go to work in a customs house. We should keep in mind, however, that Melville was not merely a victim of circumstances. He chose to keep his vulnerability, just as, unlike James, he chose to have a family. He never actively sought the kind of economic security that would have put him in an entirely different position from the bulk of the human race.¹⁴ Finally the genius of his humor was that it was the outlet of this same absolutely fundamental egalitarian democratic vision. Who else besides Melville, a hundred years before our time, conveys what it is like to ride Manhattan's Seventh Avenue Subway at eleven o'clock on a weekday night when

it is packed with people of every possible color, costume, and hold on reality? Melville's humor was the outlet for a far-ranging democratic vision. Perhaps the point is that democracy is no glory, no salvation. That is why here too we need the humor, or need it most of all. Democracy is only a place where man's generous notions grow to abundance side by side with the absurd and with a stubborn ineluctable pain of existence. Melville's humor releases the tension of man's predicament in an ideal, democratic culture.

In a letter to a young poet, in 1903, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "With nothing can one approach a work of art so little as with critical words; they always come down to more or less happy misunderstandings. Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered, and more inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures."¹⁵

If there could be any final word on Melville, we would not need to continue to read his work. If his art did not finally elude our grasp in some way we would lose interest in it. Without attempting to say a final word here, the point of this study has been simply to add a recognition of what his humor is to our reading of Melville. In the watery world to which Melville takes us, and in which he rides out with us, humor is the human fluidity, the quickening moisture, with which we meet halfway the continual ambiguity and difficulty of existence.

Notes

¹ For discussion of Pierre as satire, see William Braswell, "The Satirical Temper of Melville's Pierre," American Literature, 7 (1936), 424-38; "Melville's Opinion of Pierre," American Literature, 23 (1951); and "The Early Love Scenes in Melville's Pierre," American Literature, 22 (1950), 283-89.

² "Sisters shrink not from their brother's kisses. And Pierre felt that never, never would he be able to embrace Isabel with the mere brotherly embrace; while the thought of any other caress, which took hold of any domesticness, was entirely vacant from his uncontaminated soul, for it had never consciously intruded there. Therefore, forever unsistered for him by the stroke of Fate, and apparently forever, and twice removed from the remotest possibility of that love which had drawn him to his Lucy; yet still the object of the ardentest and deepest emotions of his soul, therefore, to him, Isabel wholly soared out of the realms of mortalness, and for him became transfigured in the highest heaven of uncorrupted love."

³ Herman Melville to Lemuel Shaw, October 6, 1849, Letters, p. 92.

⁴ Rosenberry, p. 149 and p. 196, n. 16. See also, p. 151, "Years later Melville wrote his own remorseful commentary on the unwholesome humor of Pierre . . . 'In elf-caprice of bitter tone/ I too would pelt the pelted one;/ At my shadow I cast a stone.' --'Shelley's Vision' in Timoleon."

⁵ Elizabeth Shaw Melville, letter to Mrs. Lemuel Shaw, December 23, 1847 in Leyda, The Melville Log, I, 266.

⁶ "'My poor, poor, Isabel!' cried Pierre. 'Thou art the mistress of the natural sweetness of the guitar, not of its invented regulated artifices and these are all that the silly pupil will pay for learning.'"

⁷ Thorp, Herman Melville, "Introduction."

⁸ Leon Howard, Herman Melville, A Biography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 212. In reaction to overly complicated interpretations of Melville's work and career, Howard tends to err in the opposite direction. In some instances, however, his straightforwardness gets right to the point.

⁹ William York Tindall, "The Form of Billy Budd," in Billy Budd and the Critics, 2nd Ed., ed. William T. Stafford (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1968), pp. 186-93.

10 "Chapter Eight: 'Certain Phenomenal Men': The Example of Billy Budd," pp. 183-203.

11 Richard Chase, "Billy Budd, Antigone and The Winter's Tale," in Billy Budd and The Critics, pp. 203-6. "In some ways at least Billy Budd strikes us as not quite believable. There are contradictory elements in his character; he is, for example, 'innocent,' yet he has had 'experience,' . . . I would suggest that the relative failure of Billy Budd as a fictional character can be accounted for in a very simple manner. Melville was too personally involved with Billy Budd. Whether he was picturing his own son Malcolm (who shot and killed himself at the age of twenty) or speaking of his own youth or of Christ or making a general statement of the perpetual sacrifice of innocence to law and society, the idea of Billy Budd appeared so overwhelmingly moving to the aged Melville that he was not able to express it in artistically cogent language," p. 203.

12 Catherine Gansevoort to Henry Gansevoort, September 16, 1867, Albany, in The Melville Log, II, 691. "Cousin Herman is I think a very strict parent & Cousin Lizzie thoroughly good but inefficient. She feels so thankful she did not scold him or remonstrate as she intended so she cannot blame herself for having induced him from despair at her fault-finding to put an end to his life."

13 Alfred Kazin, seminar on American poetry, The Graduate School, City University of New York, May 1, 1975.

14 For example, see Howard, p. 205, "How much Melville really knew about the campaign in his behalf /to get him a job/ is uncertain. It seems highly improbable that his uncle Peter . . . would have confined his efforts to the two days following Maria's first appeal if his favorite nephew had really 'earnestly wished for' the office; and it is inconceivable that Judge Shaw should have been so casual and uninformed in his efforts at assistance if either Herman or Elizabeth had been actively interested."

15 Rainer Maria Rilke, February 17, 1903, Paris, Letters to a Young Poet, trans. M. D. Herter Norton, Rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1954).

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