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MELVILLE'S COURSE

AFTER NEARLY HALF A CENTURY of intense interest in Melville, we still find the history of his artistic successes and failures—and, for that matter, the history of his very choices of mode and medium—an enigma. He does not seem to fit any of the familiar patterns. He did not possess the sort of sensibility that burns itself out early: his first pieces are not his best; he wrote some fine things in mid-career, and a masterpiece in his advanced old age. There have been novelists who improved almost steadily with age—and because of age, among other things: for example, Dickens and Dostoevski. But the wretched *Pierre* and the turgid *Confidence Man* belong to Melville's maturity and as works of art are inferior to most of the earlier prose. Peril in art increases in direct proportion to ambition and experiment, both of which are characteristic of Melville; yet the miraculous *Moby Dick* is at once Melville's largest canvas (if we exclude *Clarel*, a poem, and *Israel Potter*, a re-working of a traditional tale) and boldest innovation. Sometimes we can see that a novelist produced altogether too many bad or mediocre books because it was only rarely that he was free enough from exigencies to write at his own speed in his own way: Balzac (who managed to become a great novelist anyway) is the classic example. Melville, though not infrequently pressed for money, was also no stranger to successful farming, subsidy, sinecure, and vacation. No doubt the most typical pattern of all is the alternation of mediocrity and inspiration. A serious writer's career is a continual search for the genres, themes, and techniques (and, if he be a poet, verse forms) most congenial to his own gifts and experience. When he strays he is almost certainly doomed to a mediocre—or worse—performance; and even if he stays within his bounds, he may, like Conrad, become jaded there, and begin to turn out undistinguished work. But the puzzling fact is that with Melville we do not have an alternation of excellence and mediocrity: when Melville goes bad he often goes incredibly bad. It is not that in those inferior books the master-touch is not quite present; it

is that crudity or turgidity pervades the work; ruin extends even to the most fundamental aspects of structure and prose style. Greatness may be expected to level off, now and then, to an indifferent achievement; but one hardly expects it to dip, with some frequency, and sometimes without the excuse of mundane pressures, all the way to bathos and incoherence.

No doubt Melville's purely stylistic troubles are generated, to some extent, by the same principle that produces his most successful manner: he is no euphonist or builder of the delicate tone, but a robust artist, one who "cares more for ideas than for words"; and effective ruggedness easily passes over into awkwardness and ineptness.¹ But we still want to find out, if we can, what it is that so often lowers Melville's resistance to this encrypted germ, and why the attacks are so severe. And we wonder why a man thus susceptible should have at last hitched his wagon to the constellation Orpheus. To go from prose to poetry in itself reverses the usual direction, since "One's feelings lose poetic flow / Soon after twenty-seven or so." Of course, there is nothing wondrous strange about unevenness and irregularity. A Jane Austen is the exception, not the rule. Yet Melville's unpredictableness is so very pronounced as to elicit unusual curiosity.

What is the rationale? If we can define it, we may be able to see a little farther into that still largely opaque figure whose failures interest and disturb us so much because he is one of our few indisputable geniuses.

Let us review the history. After the first two books (*Typee* and *Omoo*, South Sea romances, and among the first of the genre), both of which are structurally and stylistically successful though not intellectually ambitious, comes *Mardi*, a work which, despite some charming—even lovely—description and various brilliant touches, fails generally in both structure and rhetoric. Its commercial failure at a time when Melville was dependent on his writing forced him to return to a more conventional and more salable manner in his next books, *Redburn* and *White Jacket*. One point that has never been sufficiently emphasized is that these two books do not represent a mere surrender to popular taste. For all their adventure, they are not so distinctly adventure stories as are *Typee* and *Omoo*. Symbolism asserts itself, particularly in *White Jacket*: the heroes' coats, the ship as the world, the voyage as the journey of the spirit. The writing of *Mardi* changed Melville: he was henceforth to know at all times the fascination of what is difficult and emblematic. Nevertheless, although *White Jacket* is more ethical than romantic in its inspiration, both books are essentially realistic and certainly not profoundly intellectual; Melville was hoping to repeat his earlier sales and regain his popularity. Then, once more he

decides to write exactly his own kind of book; as in *Mardi*, he pulls out all stops, but this time produces *Moby Dick*. In *Mardi* the central allegory—the sailor Taji's pursuit of Yillah and his flight from Hautia—and much of the minor symbolism remain lamentably obscure. In *Moby Dick* the allegory is eminently clear in the main outlines and even in most of the details. In 1851, then, Melville seemed to be a master of structure and style; he could send language on its deepest purposes and succeed in being lucid as well as evocative. But what followed such clarity and control? *Pierre* and, a few years later, *The Confidence Man*, books which, though not without the usual marks of Melville's vigorous mind, are failures that have not gained, and will never gain, intelligent popularity. And yet there is no possibility of explaining these failures in terms of a general flagging of Melville's powers. He was, as a matter of fact, prolific in these years. This is the period of most of the short stories later collected in the *Piazza Tales*, and of *Benito Cereno* and *The Encantadas*, two of Melville's best pieces. Uncongeniality of genre no doubt has something to do with the fiasco of *Pierre*: every one of Melville's successful novels and novellas is a sea story, and domestic issues are of no importance in any of them. Yet something more than lack of practice in and feeling for a landlocked and familial plot may be involved here. And one can hardly say that such causes as these have any bearing on *Mardi* or on *The Confidence Man*: both are, in important ways, right in Melville's line—they are allegorical, and they are framed as voyages.

It is clearly fruitless, I think, to look to Melville's mental or physical health to explain this odd history. In the first place, we do not know nearly as much as we might about Melville's life (outer or inner), so that it is for that reason alone a poor basis for speculation (a fact which has rarely, of course, discouraged the biographical critic). We may be fairly certain (but notice the adverb) that Melville was creatively exhausted after the completion of *Moby Dick* (July, 1851). *Pierre* was started in December of the same year. Is *Pierre* a wretched thing simply—or mainly, or even significantly—because Melville's energy was temporarily discharged? One is obliged to remember the man's tremendous physical and imaginative vitality; and for such a man, a five-months breather may do a lot. But even this line of reasoning is simplistic. We also know that Melville was acutely ill (with rheumatism and perhaps with other ailments as well) during much of the writing of *Benito Cereno*, but here is a book not far below Melville's best. And if we are going to make much of physiology, we are going to have no easy time explaining the existence of the remarkable *Billy Budd*, written in Melville's eightieth year. Some of the

conciliatory stories later reprinted in the *Piazza Tales* belong to the same period as the unhealthy *Pierre*.

In trying to make sense of the history of Melville's choices and performances, the safer course, it seems to me, is to look not to biography (or rather to our re-creation of biography—too much of which we are likely to extract from the books themselves) but to the art itself. There is, I believe, a clearly definable relationship between the themes (I use the term in the loosest sense) of the various books and the structural and rhetorical effectiveness with which Melville renders those themes. At this point I shall state directly, but for the moment very briefly, the nature of that relationship as I see it.

Melville begins his career as a writer more obsessed by certain images and patterns of experience—the sea, the voyage, isolation, and various images that he associated with innocence—than sure about how to employ them in fiction to establish a relatively lucid—not mistily evocative—symbolism or allegory. Though often obscure, Melville was no obscurantist and was in fact old-fashioned enough to believe that it was a writer's responsibility, no matter how emblematic his technique, to limn and explore a relatively definite area or quality of experience in such a way as to develop a communicable attitude (or attitudes) toward it. The art of being merely evocative is not a difficult one; a symbol, if in using it one is aiming at the greatest and most permanent type of art, as Melville often was, must have a core or main channel. The white whale, considered as a symbol, is too richly connotative to be circumscribed by a simple equivalence (= "innocence" or "evil" or "actuality"). It suggests, to every intelligent reader, a cluster of meanings, and this is all to the good, since one feels that Melville intended such an effect, and since the mind delights in concentration and magnitude and a measure of imaginative freedom (let Wordsworth and Bridges not grieve, it can also delight in a clean simplicity). Yet the leviathan would not succeed if it could bear every meaning, or even a great many meanings. At the risk of belabouring the obvious, I should point out that *Moby Dick* cannot be made to mean, for example, *carpe diem* or beatitude or cloistered virtue. Melville's progress, I have come to believe, is in essence this: he is a writer to whom symbolism and allegory are particularly congenial modes; still, he has to perfect the manner, and does not perfect it in any of his first five books. His progress is complicated by two conditions: he both needed and sought popularity (especially in his earlier years), and so he often held his intellectual and emblematic powers in abeyance, and wrote entertainments. Moreover, his wide and prolonged experience of the rough world of shipboard and menacing shore naturally developed in him a realism which was in some

ways at cross-purposes with his concurrently developing emblematic vein. He has trouble deciding whether to stake his claim on the realistic romance or on a markedly thematic or symbolic manner. For these reasons, his mastery of a highly emblematic art is delayed. He tends to achieve or come near greatness the closer he comes to a distinctly thematic or allegorical technique. Conversely, he tends to fail (or to be minor) in the period before his sensibility becomes thoroughly attuned to the emblematic manner, and even afterward if he happens to choose for his allegory a theme (or cluster of related themes) which saps his yea-saying. Thus, *The Confidence Man* is less realistic, and more allegorical, than *Moby Dick*, but its moral is too dark for Melville to handle.

Before I develop this interpretation further, I want to emphasize one important point. I say that symbolism and allegory—we lack suitable terms (and I am no neologist) to indicate that there are many points on a spectrum that ranges from bare reportorialism and naturalism at one extreme to bare-boned, unparticularized allegory at the other—are very congenial to Melville, despite the literal-mindedness and hard-nosed respect for actuality and particularity encouraged by a thorough immersion in the more turbid seas of life. Life on the abounding main worked on Melville in no single or simple way. In encouraging a certain realism, it at the same time opened the door to symbol and archetype. For one thing, the most powerful and successful symbols are likely to be those that come from nature—sun, moon, stars, ice, ocean—or at least from the areas of our most familiar and most vital experiences. Furthermore, repeated experience of patterns and particularities of a certain type—say, the exigencies and rituals of seamanship—are likely to foster in a sensitive mind a keen feeling for *pattern*, a feeling which lends itself readily to the structuring of symbolism. This feeling or acquired sense would have been strengthened in Melville by enforced close contact with the patterns of day and night and the rhythms of tides and swells and stars. Also, the development of a passion for the concrete is the development of a habit of mind in which ideas will not remain abstract or expository (thinning the blood, as Yeats says) but will undergo poetic, metaphoric, symbolic rooting, or incarnation. Everything else, too, conspired to head Melville on an emblematic or at least heavily thematic course. His imagination was too strong to allow him to settle for a narrow realism (even the documentary *White Jacket* must undergo the sea-change). Nor could his temperamental and financial insecurity, his Calvinist background, or his apparently ingrained high seriousness act to bring him towards naturalism or towards *l'art pour l'art*. Finally, he met and was befriended by

the master allegorist of Salem, and was at once confirmed in the bent which had already shown itself.

The Melville of the early books—of *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, and to some extent, of *Mardi*—is an artist who is in the process of finding, but who is not yet able to handle deftly or powerfully, images and structures congenial to him for emblematic as well as for surface narrative purposes. In these books, image and incident are for the most part those of his own early experiences at sea. Gradually Melville develops into a writer who comes to the planning and composition of his work with what he feels may be values inherent in reality, or at least with recurring themes in human experience, and then manipulates image and situation so that they illustrate these values or themes. And, in general, Melville's control of theme and structure and language improves as he becomes more markedly allegorical, or at least as he achieves—if only for the purposes of his art—a vision which, however tragic, is not bitter or nihilistic but which sees certain values and tendencies clearly, espousing some and deploring others, with little or no ambiguity.

Conversely, style and form begin to deteriorate, and sometimes meaning itself becomes beclouded, whenever Melville begins to lose faith in the existence of discoverable truths, or in life as something at least partly and potentially dignified and admirable. He could not make Pyrrhonism eloquent. He was not the sort of writer who could "laugh idly at the universe." Of course, and for quite obvious reasons, hypersceptical philosophies are perilous to any artist who flirts with them. In the first place, they are not so likely to lead the artist to a persuasive bitterness, to a clearly negative and negating *weltanschauung* capable of lucid allegorical or other presentation, as they are to lead him into the regions of that unhealthy imagination which Keats so memorably described in the preface to *Endymion* as a "space of life in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceeds mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters . . ." In the second place, the role of a Pyrrho or of a Thersites is more comfortable for a philosopher than for an artist: the latter must engage and satisfy much more than the ratiocinative faculty. More importantly, relativism and scepticism, at and near their extremes, undermine the ground of artistic discipline. In such troughs of the spirit there is no longer any compelling motive for the disciplining of meaning and expression. Why bother? The control of tone, the proportioning of incident and description, the manipulation of symbol, the adjustment of emotion to motive—the whole constructive and refining activity required in artistic creation—are likely to be vitiated, if only

unconsciously, by any philosophy that holds taking pains to be pointless if not ludicrous. And Pyrrhonism, even when well done, is aesthetically unsatisfying: the despair and passivity are, like Shelleyan self-pity, incongruous, at odds with the very existence of the artifact, which, as artifact, connotes and was brought into being by achieved order and self-clarification and self-control. Melville was especially unsuited to negativisms. Any relativism or satanism or nihilism to be found in him is there because of his candour, but it is there against his will and deepest yearning. A temperament farther removed from insouciance or libertinism or shallow iconoclasm is difficult to imagine. If his biographers have made anything clear, it is that Melville was profoundly depressed and unsettled by the family relationships of his childhood (his later domestic troubles could only have re-irritated the old wounds). He was also profoundly in search of a philosophy—one should say, of a religion. He was a passionate voyager: security and commitment were the destinations. Everything else was more or less uncongenial. The "deep power of joy" which one of his contemporaries claimed to be the fountainhead of all sane imaginative art did, at last, come to Melville: not from devotional faith, or from a plateau of transcendent response to nature, but from the excitement of looking on evil bare and defying it. I am trying to say, simply, that the great source of Melville's staying joy is the same as that of every mortal who comes to the tragic view of life.

But before I pursue this interpretation further, I feel obliged to defend my own division of the six major novels into three successes and three failures. It is, in fact, the orthodox evaluation. Yet Richard Chase² thinks *The Confidence Man* second only to *Moby Dick*, and Ronald Mason³ has a fairly high opinion of it. John Brooks Moore⁴ makes a case for *Pierre*. And on the other side, it is possible to be troubled by the peculiar two-part structure of *Benito Cereno* and by the alternation of story and world history in the opening chapters of *Billy Budd*.

Mardi, despite its daring scope and occasional great felicities of description, has been consistently recognized as an ambitious failure. It begins as a conventional romance with the usual realistic details and clear background. After about a hundred pages, it turns into a highly imaginative and poetic allegory, and then again changes, this time to a satiric and philosophic allegory in which many of the chapters are only loosely related to one another. It is for this great failure in structure that the book is usually considered to be at fault, but in many places the style is equally disappointing. The story begins, in fact, on a false note. The opening pages are extremely lyrical and high-flown.

Yet, as it turns out, there is nothing to motivate such rhapsody; Taji, the narrator, is singing the prose without discernible reason. As a matter of fact, we later find that he was rather disgruntled at the time, having been told by the ship's captain that the voyage is to continue beyond the terms of the original agreement; furthermore, the ship is headed towards cold and foggy northern oceans, bane to Taji. In retrospect, then, the rhapsody seems to bear no relation to the story itself; it represents nothing more than irrelevant lyric indulgence on Melville's part. Later on in the book there are numerous amateurish puns and shoddy attempts at purple passages. The following is typical of the occasional iambic passages (the line arrangement is my own):

... sweet Yillah called me from the sea;—still must I on!
 but gazing whence that music seemed to come,
 I thought I saw the green corse drifting by:
 and striking 'gainst our prow, as if to hinder.
 Then, then! my heart grew hard, like flint; and black, like night;
 and sounded hollow to the hand I clenched . . .⁵

These will not compare with the prose iambs in *Moby Dick*. They have nothing to recommend them except the metre itself, and the intensity sought is blocked by the triteness of the language. The effect of this, as of many other passages in *Mardi*, is pseudo-poetic.

The dry, reserved prose of *The Confidence Man* is not enough to save it. Granting the clean rhetoric, we may glance very rapidly at the shortcomings of this novel. Yvor Winters' judgment seems a succinct statement of the case against it: "*The Confidence Man* is unsatisfactory as philosophy and is tediously repetitious as narrative."⁶ It has elicited multiple conflicting and about equally plausible interpretations. And it fails structurally in at least three ways: conversation almost completely replaces action, but in itself is too repetitious to maintain consistent interest; three whole chapters are devoted to ratiocinative digression, quite arbitrarily interrupting an already tensionless, ponderous movement; and the book stops abruptly, like something abandoned. It may be that the closing chapter does, in some arcane way, draw the thematic threads together and bring the book ultimate clarity. Critical ingenuity is a match for *any* puzzle these days. But the question as to how far a writer may go in depending on late and ingenious reasoning to justify his text is a vexing one. Unfortunately, as readers we need to feel the presence of such a saving interpretation as if it were generated by the text itself, and Melville's final chapter is so tight-packed with orphic symbolism that it has proved meaningful and moving to very few readers.

Pierre's weaknesses are so obvious that it would be a work of supererogation to dwell on them. One of the first reviews capsulated its comment as follows: "incoherencies of thought, infelicities of language." That is to dismiss *Pierre* too summarily, but it is not so very far from right. It is hard to say whether the book's greatest disappointment is the improbable and melodramatic plot or the execution. The style is unquestionably Melville at his worst. And the formula seems to be this: one page of action and three pages of philosophical speculation. The early foreshadowing of the bright and aspiring boy's downfall is performed with utter insensitivity:

Now *Pierre* stands on this noble pedestal; we shall see if he keeps that fine footing; we shall see if Fate hath not just a little bit of a small word or two to say in this world.⁷

This is bad enough. The playful redundancy and the coy diminutives set the tone of a sly fox looking to his certain victim, not the tone that is needed to foreshadow tragedy and the deep agonies of *Pierre's* experience. Only two pages later, the authorial warning is repeated in almost the same language and in the very same tone. And so, where impetus should be gained, there is nothing but a repetition of this heavy-handed, absurd half-sneer. The book abounds with the tritest, most vapid similes. Melville can do no better than this in describing Lucy Tartan:

Her cheeks were tinted with the most delicate white and red, the white predominating. Her eyes some god brought down from heaven; her hair was Danae's, spangled with Jove's shower; her teeth were dived for in the Persian Sea.⁸

Space permits only a sketch by way of justifying the structural peculiarities of the three splendid novels.

There are two major oddities about *Moby Dick*, but both are master-strokes. The first of these violations of conventional novel form is the repeated interruption of the account of the voyage by the famous "digressions" on cetology and on the aboard-ship processing of the whales. But these interspersions are well placed. Beginning only after the action has got well under way, and disappearing as it gathers momentum toward its climax and denouement, they are not felt as intrusions upon the narrative. And all this attention given the whale and whaling is necessary to bring the reader galvanically into a vision of images and patterns and callings all unfamiliar to him; to open up vividly to the imagination the mystery and magnitude of the leviathan; and, very pragmatically, to explain the ways of whales so that the reader can understand why they and their hunters behave as they do in the encounters. The other major

violation of "good form" is the employment of techniques belonging properly to drama. But these are simply intensifying devices and are almost universally felt to be successful. Melville pulls out all the stops without becoming magniloquent or undisciplined.

In *Benito Cereno* the unexpected structural development is the switch, in the last section of the story, from straight narration to the prose of a legal deposition. This oddity apparently, though not certainly, came about because Melville, suffering from an acute attack of rheumatism and from despondency over his recent estrangement from Harper's publishing house, sent the MS. of the story too hastily to *Putnam's* magazine (whose reader objected that Melville had failed to "work it up into a connected tale"). Whatever the truth of the matter, and however much Melville might eventually have improved the story if he had kept it on hand, the fact is that many good readers have not felt any disjuncture or any effect of non-integration in *Benito Cereno*. On the contrary, whether intentionally or inadvertently, Melville gains at least one not inconsiderable advantage from the two-part division. The legal deposition (a modification of the original documents) narrates in highly condensed form what happened aboard the *San Dominick* before Captain Delano boarded her. Had Melville given the full narration earlier, in the conventional order and manner, he would have written merely an adventure story with allegorical overtones. But he secured, instead, a simple and profound allegory, and he could have made it only by isolating that part of the the story which was most relevant to his theme, and by focussing on it intently. The deposition clears up all the mysteries of the story's background and conclusion without changing the narrow focus that gives the allegory both intensity and suspense. And the condensed, abstract nature of the legalistic language allows Melville to explain a great deal in a short space. Perhaps he was more finished with the book than most of the critics would have us believe.⁹

In the first part of *Billy Budd* Melville decided to alternate chapters of history and authorial comment with chapters of narrative—another sound decision. The "digressive" material slows down the narrative pace at once, and thus prepares for the serene, dignified atmosphere to follow. Truly absorbed history, such as his discussion of mutiny and revolution, is compelling in itself and creates the tense and concrete note that the allegory needs. Through this discussion, too, we learn more about Billy by seeing him aboard the *Rights-of-Man*; and by giving us a parallel to Claggart, in the figure of "Red Whiskers", it strengthens the theme of struggle between good and evil.

I have proposed that the rationale of Melville's artistic successes and failures is basically this: in his ambitious books he is a better artist all the way around when he has the sense of being reconciled—not necessarily completely—to the world, and when he is writing allegory. Let us look at Melville as an allegorist.

He was not of those who, born with an immanent certainty about things or soon bred to such a certainty, set out singlemindedly to impart their wisdom through allegory. As an allegorist, he was made, like Tolstoi, not born, like Bunyan or Hawthorne. From the first, his mind seems to have been divided against itself. It was the opposite of Hawthorne's: not placid and assured, but restive and uncertain. Undoubtedly the unsettled family life of his youth, together with a certain bewilderment that may have come out of his early years as a seaman (when he was discovering vastly different temperaments and cultures) further unsuited him for an allegorical role. Yet, at the same time, his temperament was profoundly searching and philosophical, and as early as *Mardi* he was plainly trying to separate essence from accident, to see the scheme of things. And there was something else that turned him toward allegory and countered those forces that would carry him recurrently back to doubt and restlessness: the sea itself. It may have carried him to strange places and peoples whose variety set his mind spinning, but its own unchanging qualities and repeated patterns of mass and colour and sounds and silences must have wakened in him a sense of the existence of permanent truths and suggested the parallel between a sea journey and the larger one of life. His career is a movement from romance and patches of misty symbolism to the carefully and thoroughly figurative story. It is really, of course, the most familiar pattern in letters: the maturing mind growing toward conviction.

Typee and *Omoo* may contain symbols, but there is no allegory. They are romances aimed at a kind of authenticity and at popularity. *Mardi*, the next book, again begins as a romance, but suddenly turns into allegory, or rather into a disappointing attempt at allegory. One explanation (and I think it a sound one) for this sudden leap into the symbolic has been offered by Ronald Mason,¹⁰ among others: Melville's popularity, stemming from the success of *Typee* and *Omoo*, had suddenly brought him into New York literary circles, where he found the air charged with stimulating literary and philosophical speculation. The next books, *Redburn* and *White Jacket*, show a more figurative manner than the two early adventures, though they are not distinctly allegorical. Aiming at revived popularity, and disappointed at the cold recep-

tion given *Mardi*, Melville reverted to "straighter" modes, but could not altogether resist the emblematic impulses that had streamed out in *Mardi*.

Then, well along in the writing of *Moby Dick*, he met Hawthorne,¹¹ and it is reasonably safe to believe that whatever the book may have been before the meeting, it became more allegorical afterward. In any event, here we have Melville's allegorical powers—as well, of course, as all his others—completely sure, completely realized. And from *Moby Dick* on, all the books (except *Israel Potter*) and nearly all the short stories are heavily allegorical.

But they are not all allegorical in the same way. In *Billy Budd* and *Benito Cereno*, as in *Moby Dick*, the allegory is generated out of live tissue: the themes are incarnated in particulars that have a vitality of their own. In these three books, the essence draws us in through the bright appeal of the accident in which it lives. *The Confidence Man*, on the other hand, gives us little more than the bare bones of allegory. Characterization is sketchy, the plot static, the sequence of confrontations neither dramatic nor inevitable. And yet little fault can be found with the prose style itself. *Pierre* seems to be the bastard result of Melville's wanting to write an acceptable romance and being at the same time unable to resist his by now confirmed philosophical and allegorical direction. It fails as allegory if for no other reason than that it is too sprawling and complicated to satisfy the demands of the genre.

Of these six books, then, four are allegories; one, *Mardi*, is mistily and inconsistently allegorical, and one, *Pierre*, is a philosophical melodrama with allegorical implications. In all four of the fully allegorical pieces, the prose style is generally excellent and often superb, and in three of them Melville achieved greatness. The structural and stylistic weaknesses of the allegorical four-fifths of *Mardi* are explained in part by the fact that it was Melville's first attempt at the genre. *White Jacket*, too, should be noticed. Here is the best of Melville's early books, and although *analogical* might be a better term than *allegorical* to describe its mode (since Melville is only too explicit in drawing the parallels between the ship and its voyage and life and its journey), it is *lucidly* analogical, and of course, in setting out to elicit legislation to reform the navy, it is Melville's one consistently didactic book.

The conclusion seems inescapable. Successful allegory demands a relatively high degree of consciousness and, besides that, conviction about the truth of its theme. All six stories are allegorical in one degree or another, and the more allegorical the better the prose style; and, with the exception of *The Confidence Man*, the better the book as a whole.

The difference between Melville's successful and unsuccessful prose styles

may be seen most immediately, perhaps, in the dialogue of the books and in their rhapsodic passages. It is sometimes difficult to remember that the same man who wrote the dialogue and rhapsodies of *White Jacket* and of *Moby Dick* also wrote those to be encountered in *Mardi* and *Pierre*. The dialogue in *White Jacket* (there is not a great deal of it, since so much of the book is given over to authorial commentary) is always dramatically effective and "natural" (Melville's dialogue almost never aims at reportorialism). In the final three chapters, the prose rises to magnificence. The end of *White Jacket* and the opening of *Moby Dick* are linked by a buoyant power. The crackling life of the prose of *Moby Dick* rises into rhapsodic passages—and even into blank verse—as naturally as the lively, word-loving Elizabethan colloquial speech rose, under the shaping spirit of distinct and powerful vision and feeling, into the blank verse of Kyd and Marlowe and Shakespeare. The book has a "meter-making argument", to use Emerson's phrase: the metrical language strikes one as being the inevitable outward manifestation and complement of intellectual order and of intense feeling and imagination. This is why the dialogue of *Moby Dick*, even at its most exalted, is as effective as it is frequently unbearable in *Mardi* and *Pierre*. In the latter book, Melville is simply unable to treat particulars in such a way as to suggest and reveal the archetypes of experience. The plot itself takes on too many complications and spreads out into too many philosophical discussions and detailed accounts of Pierre's literary aspirations and frustrations. The result is that the allegorical implications the book undoubtedly possesses are blurred; the mode is equally remote, of course, from the spirit of drama. And yet, much of the time, Melville insists on a dramatic and rhapsodic dialogue that can be accommodated only by the unreportorial, moulding genius of drama or of distinct allegory. And so when we encounter, as we constantly do, a false soliloquy like this one by Pierre's mother—

"A noble boy, and docile"—she murmured—"he has all the frolicsomeness of youth, with little of its giddiness. And he does not grow vain-glorious in sophomorean wisdom. I thank heaven I sent him not to college. A noble boy and docile. A fine, proud, loving, docile, vigorous boy. Pray God, he never becomes otherwise to me. . . ."12

or a flight of rhetoric such as this one by Lucy Tartan—

"Let us hie homeward, Pierre. Some nameless sadness, faintness, strangely comes to me. Foretaste I feel of endless dreariness. Tell me once more the story of that face, Pierre—that mysterious, haunting face, which thou once told'st me, thou didst thrice vainly try to shun. Blue is the sky, oh, bland the air, Pierre . . ."13

we can only feel them to be extravagant and absurd. Why Melville chose to

cast this first specimen in the form of a dramatic aside is completely inexplicable. And how anyone could "murmur" such a long and involved passage (it goes on for three-fourths of a page) defies all speculation. As for Lucy's speech, here as frequently elsewhere it outdoes anything in *Mardi* for an intolerable pseudo-poeticism of diction and for a precocity of involved and inverted syntax.

Pierre is the last book that shows a rhapsodic style. After it, all of the prose becomes restrained; at the same time Melville, now in late maturity, takes up poetry. But there is no real paradox in this development. After *Pierre*, the rhapsody is gone for good, except for a brief passage here and there. *Clarel* is a philosophical narrative, not a rhapsodic poem, and the short poems of the three books of lyrics (*Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War, John Marr and Other Sailors, Timoleon*) are more often contemplative and commemorative than dithyrambic. The sobering of the prose style undoubtedly reflects not only Melville's growing realization of the difficulty of restraining a rhapsodic style and of adjusting it to changes in focus and emphasis, but also a general chastening of youthful exuberance, and the particular chastening induced by the critical and commercial failure of his books. His turn to poetry, as many writers have observed, strongly parallels Hardy's: discouraged, even embittered, by the reception of his later novels, he turns to an art where all his hopes need not be staked on a single work. Melville's lack of early training in verse techniques may be a less important reason for the failure of most of his lyric poems than the fact that his allegorical habit of mind, confirmed by now, unsuited him to the nature of the lyric.

I have said that the *themes* of these books, as well as their proximity to allegory, have a bearing on their success. While Melville was becoming more and more allegorical he was also, from *White Jacket* onward, gradually though not uninterruptedly becoming reconciled to the world and accepting a quasi-Christian view. Those who, out of pride or bitterness, isolate themselves from society, or who in some way seek a private perfection or purity, are, he says (along with the stream of Catholic Christian thought), damned—the Tajs, Pierres, and Ahabs are driven towards madness and suicide. *Moby Dick* is in part the story of Ishmael's moving away from self-absorption and aloofness, and towards comradeship and intense interest in the life around him—a Christian direction. In *Billy Budd*, the warmth and pathos of Melville's tone and the change brought about in the sailors who see Billy hang are unaccountable except in terms of Melville's realization, and partial acceptance, of the Christ in

Billy. In *Clarel* Melville reveals a more than superficial attraction to Roman Catholicism; in *The Spirit Above the Dust* Ronald Mason has demonstrated this sympathy persuasively.¹⁴ *Moby Dick*, *Benito Cereno*, and *Billy Budd* alike seem to me to reject Taji's increasingly desperate and finally suicidal search for answers beyond those advanced by Christianity and the conventional wisdom. The same theme runs through all three of them. Ahab, like Taji, surrenders to an obsession. First he exalts the white whale into a godlike power of malignity; then in his *hubris* he imagines himself god enough to rid the universe of such a power. He will *not* see the actual. He smashes the quadrant—no doubt Melville's figure for the abandonment of reason. He will not listen to Starbuck's entreaties to give up the chase. The result is total destruction. Melville gives Ahab such great intellect and élan not only because no dull or petty spirit could undertake such an enterprise, but also because he was impressed by the horror of great qualities consumed by fanaticism and isolation. Of course, Ahab remains something of a tragic hero. But Melville's sympathy for him is like Shakespeare's for Macbeth. Melville would have us admire the strength of Ahab's resolution and self-discipline, and the magnitude of spirit that could conceive such a titanic, if insane, pursuit; and there is a note of pity in the delineation of the unfortunate captain. But this is not to say that Melville does not condemn a course which leads to the destruction of sane values—indeed, of life itself. The unambiguous recognition of values that stabilize life (values represented largely through Ishmael, Starbuck, and Queequeg) and of the unbounded will and monomania that destroy it, gives Melville command of style and form, gives his expression resonance and strength at every point.

The same firm hold on values informs *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd*, and in these stories acceptance of life and clarity of vision again order and clarify style and structure. The main theme of *Benito Cereno* is not, I think, what Ronald Mason takes it to be: a preoccupation with "the illusory nature of experience."¹⁵ That, I would say, is only a part of the larger theme, which seems to have two aspects. Experience may be dominated by illusions, especially with a foolishly optimistic and spiritually undeveloped person like Captain Delano. A man remains in constant peril as long as he is unable, or as long as he wilfully refuses, to scrutinize the actual conditions of experience. The folly of Don Alexandro, the captain of the Spanish ship, is much the same as Delano's: the initial cause of the tragedy aboard the *San Dominick* was the Spaniard's foolish, optimistic trust, in permitting the slave-savages free run of the ship. The emblematic meaning here is that man puts himself—and civilization—in danger

when he voluntarily relinquishes his control over the irrational, anarchic forces in experience. In short, the main theme of this story is an insistence, first, on the necessity of developing a strong grasp of the actual, with an accompanying awareness of the extent and resourcefulness of illusion; secondly, on the necessity of maintaining firm control of destructive irrational pressures.

A similarly clear vision of the nature and necessity of moral order informs *Billy Budd*. There Melville's sympathy is notoriously divided between Billy and Captain Vere; thus the story is doubly tragic. But, torn between the heart and the head, he chooses the latter, whatever the cost in personal agony: "the heart sometimes the feminine in man . . . must be here ruled out." To waver in sentencing and executing Billy would, first of all, debase law, which, even when it is harsh, holds society together; secondly, it would invite physical disaster by encouraging mutiny and anarchy. Whereas Captain Delano and Don Alexandro were blind, Vere sees straight into the heart of things and takes action. The thematic ties between *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd* have not been sufficiently noticed.

In the three weaker books, Melville's whole approach to the problems of experience is darker, more negative. *Pierre* and *The Confidence Man* are ambiguous and bitterly pessimistic. There is no redeeming quality in Pierre's death as there is in Billy's. There is no tragic joy; the book ends in unenlightening failure for all the protagonists. And throughout *Pierre*, Melville shows, as in *The Confidence Man*, a belief in the ambiguous nature of experience.

In those Hyperborean regions, to which enthusiastic Truth, and Earnestness, and Independence, will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought, all objects are seen in a dubious, uncertain and refracting light. Viewed through that rarified atmosphere the most immemorally admitted maxims of men begin to slide and fluctuate. . . .¹⁶

This is Melville himself speaking, not Plinlimmon or some other character.

In none of these inferior works is there any indication that Melville was free from the most profound uncertainty about values or from a thoroughgoing scepticism about the worth of existence. They were conceived in turmoil and pessimism—in Timonism, to use Melville's own *mot juste*—a condition which, in a restless and easily troubled temperament like Melville's, can at any moment displace brightness and affirmativeness and even a stoic or tragic view of life. The lack of confident impetus acted viciously on almost every aspect of the writing. Bitterness, confusion, and desperation dominate theme and tone in these three books; and the writing is imbalanced or crude or ambiguous or

enervated. In the other three—each of them a classic not only of American but of world literature—a subtly but unmistakably didactic writer moves us with a clear vision of some aspect of the evil in the universe, and with a vision of rationality and love somehow unextinguished. We possess these masterpieces because Melville was now and then able to escape from modern relativism and paralysis, and rise to the tragic view of life, the view that animated Shakespeare and Sophocles. Considering that it was not his lot to drink often from that fountain of joy which nourishes truly great achievement in the arts—considering his perhaps inherited instability, his immensely troubled childhood and domestic life, and his fall from the favour of critics and public—the wonder is that he could rise once so high.

NOTES

1. The question sometimes arises: was Melville conscious of his own predilection for gnarled and sinewy prose, or was he merely uncritical? There can be no doubt that he consciously preferred to err on the side of roughness. There is a passage in *Moby Dick* which might be taken as his own motto: "Real strength never impairs beauty or harmony, but often bestows it; and in everything imposingly beautiful, strength has much to do with magic."
2. Richard Chase, *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1949).
3. See Chapter XIV in Ronald Mason's *The Spirit Above the Dust* (London: John Lehmann, 1951).
4. In the Introduction to *Pierre* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1929).
5. From *Mardi*, Chapter CLXXXIX (Boston: L. C. Page, 1923).
6. Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason* (New York: The Swallow Press & William Morrow, 1947).
7. *Pierre*, p. 14.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
9. I am aware that Newton Arvin despises *Benito Cereno*, but he is practically alone in his disparagement. Against his invective the traditional opinion stands firm; for most of us, as for Lewis Mumford (*Herman Melville*, 1929, p. 245), "there is not a feeble touch in the whole narrative."
10. See Chapter V in *The Spirit Above the Dust*.
11. Melville met Hawthorne in early August, 1850.
12. *Pierre*, p. 25.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
14. Chapter XVI, *The Spirit Above the Dust*.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
16. *Pierre*, p. 231.