

HERMAN MELVILLE'S ATTITUDE  
TOWARD MAN

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CONTENTS

| CHAPTER  | PAGE |
|--|------|
| I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .                        | 1    |
| II. A BELIEF IN MAN'S NATURAL GOODNESS . . . . . | 8    |
| III. PERSISTANCE IN A BELIEF IN MAN . . . . .    | 19   |
| IV. MAN IN PERSPECTIVE . . . . .                 | 33   |
| V. DISILLUSIONMENT AND DESPAIR . . . . .         | 54   |
| VI. CYNICISM . . . . .                           | 67   |
| VII. UNEASY ACCEPTANCE . . . . .                 | 80   |
| VIII. A SUMMING UP . . . . .                     | 95   |
| A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .                | 104  |

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to explore Herman Melville's attitude toward man. The problem is threefold: (1) to analyze Melville's attitude toward man as it is found in his works, (2) to point out both the constancy and the variation in this theme at different stages of Melville's literary career, and (3) to indicate the importance of this theme in Melville's writing.

Much criticism and many explications of Herman Melville's writings have been forthcoming since his "revival" in 1919. In fact, scholars have found Melville an inexhaustible source for critical interpretation. As Leon Howard puts it in his biography of Herman Melville: ". . . the devious-cruising critic, retracing his search through the past for some missing children could always find in him 'another orphan.'<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that the complexity and depth of Melville's works sustain intensive research, and certainly his exalted status in American literature merits such attention. But for any new attempt at explication these past studies of Melville increase the danger of treading too much in another's footsteps. Yet there does seem to be one aspect of Melville's work, his attitude toward man, that has not been considered in very full context. Preliminary research indicates that this theme has nowhere been followed through the different stages of Melville's literary development. Rather, as the following discussion of Melville criticism suggests, Melville's attitude toward man has been introduced as an interesting sidelight to another line of attack (e.g. Melville's metaphysical search for reality)

or as an especial illumination of a specific aspect of his work. It is the intent of the writer to explore, specifically, Melville's attitude toward man, tracing this theme through various of his writings which seem to represent a sampling of differing stages of his literary career. Dealing with major works chronologically through Melville's career allows us to recognize both continuity and variation in the approach and the intensity of Melville's attitude toward man.

At least one critic recognizes, however obliquely, that Melville's writing is very much anchored in his interest in man. Surveying Melville's creative process, F. Barron Freeman (Melville's Billy Budd) states that Melville "created from character and incident out."<sup>2</sup> That is, Melville starts first with the concreteness of actual people and events and then branches out into the abstracts of good and evil, appearance and reality, in a metaphysical striving after the cause of earthly actions. Creatively, then, it may be argued that a strong interest in man and man's actions forms a core to Melville's writing, and therefore his attitude toward man should permeate his work. But Freeman does not concern himself with Melville's complete works and draws his inferences about Melville's creative method from Billy Budd alone.

As with all creative artists, many forces were at play influencing Melville's thinking and shaping his ideas about man. Not the least of these was his understanding of the individual man's position in the over-all scheme of creation. Merlin Bowen (The Long Encounter) has written a book on Melville from this point of view.<sup>3</sup> Bowen sees

Melville's works "as so many dramatic representations of the self and the not-self, of the single human person and all that is set over against him."<sup>4</sup> And breaking each work down, Bowen considers each of Melville's important characters as varying ways Melville has the individual human being probe the universe in an attempt to find the solution to the enigma of his existence.

Bowen draws conclusions as to which are preferable to Melville. Ahab, of course, represents defiance.<sup>5</sup> He embodies the grandeur which the individual may achieve when "set over against . . . nature, mankind and God."<sup>6</sup> But this defiance, Bowen says, can only lead to a tragic heroism. Starbuck submits, accepts his fate, whatever it is to be, and Bowen proffers this as the "way of weakness."<sup>7</sup> Ishmael, on the other hand, offers "resistance without defiance, and acceptance without surrender, of an indifference that is not apathy and an affirmation free of all illusion."<sup>8</sup> This is "armed neutrality" which, according to Bowen's interpretation, is Melville's representation of the self's "way of wisdom."<sup>9</sup> Whether or not Melville's concept of the individual self's relation to "nature, mankind and God" is just what Bowen says it is, there is no doubt, as Bowen's book emphasizes, that Melville is very much concerned with the fittest way for man to conduct himself in this world. Part of the task of this paper is to explore this concern as one aspect of Melville's over-all attitude toward man.

James E. Miller Jr. in "Redburn and White Jacket: Initiation and Baptism" shows that even at the early stages of Melville's development a

definite attitude toward man forms a strong theme in his writing.<sup>10</sup>

Miller discusses the novels Redburn and White Jacket, written just before Moby Dick, as an initiation and baptism which the chief characters undergo in losing their innocence and yet at the same time renouncing their aloofness from mankind. Redburn and White Jacket not only come to recognize the evil in man, but they are able to accept it, for they acknowledge their "place in the sinful brotherhood of mankind."<sup>11</sup> In these early novels, Miller finds a common bond with humanity as being Melville's idea of a saving grace: ". . . man, though idealizing Christ, makes allowances for humanity's imperfections . . . individuals though abhorring sin, save their souls by accepting their share of the world's burden of guilt."<sup>12</sup>

William Braswell, in Melville's Religious Thought, utilizes numerous illustrations of Melville's attitude toward man.<sup>13</sup> However Braswell tends to ignore the early novels and touches only lightly on Moby Dick with regard to this theme. Braswell does set out a general pattern which he sees in Melville's work from The Confidence-Man to Billy Budd in which a deep pessimism about man is "often tempered by sympathy."<sup>14</sup> But, as the title indicates, Braswell considers Melville's attitude toward man only for the additional light it throws on Melville's religious thought.

Other critics have suggested Melville's attitude toward man as being an important theme in his work. Edwin T. Bowden in The Dungeon of the Heart concludes that Ishmael is a stronger man than Ahab because of Ishmael's full acceptance of "being simply a man among dependent men."<sup>15</sup> To D. E. S. Maxwell (American Fiction: The Intellectual Background), the

recognition of man's state in this world gives rise to Melville's tragic sense.<sup>16</sup> F. O. Matthiessen in his American Renaissance goes so far as to say that "Melville's main concern was . . . with human suffering wherever he found it"<sup>17</sup> and yet "notwithstanding the depth of his feeling for the 'kingly commons', Melville knew the strength of the contrast between the great individual and the inert mass."<sup>18</sup>

Biographers have also had their say on this subject. For example, Leon Howard states that Melville's reading of Hawthorne's Mosses from an Old Manse confirmed Melville's suspicion "that man is not innately good but may have the source of the world's evil in his own nature."<sup>19</sup> And Newton Arvin decides that around the time of the writing of Pierre, Melville suffered "the loss of the last fragments of confidence in mankind."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to searching books which discuss American literature generally, and Melville specifically, I also searched Melville's letters<sup>21</sup> for information as to his attitude toward man. Certain excerpts from his letters I found extremely valuable, supplementing and substantiating many of the findings of this paper. But finally, my chief source had to be Melville's own writing. It is upon his handling of characters and situations, and the inclusion of his own thought as narrator and author within his works, that I base any final judgements on Melville's attitude toward man. In all instances, I attempt to verify the findings of this paper by direct reference to what Melville has actually written. It is Melville, the author, more than Melville the man, with whom this paper is primarily concerned.

The limitations imposed by a paper of this kind preclude a consideration of all of Melville's writing. As a result, I by-passed his shorter prose works, his poems, and certain of his novels. However, I do discuss most of Melville's novels, and since Melville did the major part of his writing in this art form probably all of his important opinions and ideas about man are found here. To avoid repetition and redundancy I eliminated two of Melville's early novels. Omoo I do not discuss because of its close resemblance to Typee, and Redburn because of its close association to White Jacket. I excepted a third novel, Mardi, a dream-like voyage into the mind, because of its seeming lack of additional material with which to forward the topic of this paper. However, the difficulty in arriving at a satisfactory interpretation of this novel was also a deciding factor in its rejection. Very briefly then, the area of study for this thesis is Melville's attitude toward man as it is found in the novels Typee, White Jacket, Moby Dick, Pierre, The Confidence-Man, and the novelette Billy Budd.



NOTES - CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>Leon Howard, Herman Melville (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), p. 342.

<sup>2</sup>F. Barron Freeman, Melville's Billy Budd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 71.

<sup>3</sup>Merlin Bowen, The Long Encounter (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 143-57.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 201-03.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 234-80.

<sup>10</sup>James E. Miller Jr., "Redburn and White Jacket: Initiation and Baptism," Nineteenth Century Fiction, 4: 273-92, March, 1959.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>13</sup>William Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought (New York: Pageant Books Inc., 1959).

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>15</sup>Edwin T. Bowden, The Dungeon of the Heart (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 172.

<sup>16</sup>D. E. S. Maxwell, American Fiction: The Intellectual Background (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1963).

<sup>17</sup>F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, New York, Inc., 1941), p. 401.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 445.

<sup>19</sup>Leon Howard, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>20</sup>Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited, 1950), p. 210.

<sup>21</sup>Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman, The Letters of Herman Melville (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

## CHAPTER II

### A BELIEF IN MAN'S NATURAL GOODNESS

In his first novel, Typee, Melville manifests an attitude toward man in two principal ways. First, Melville displays a high regard for the innocent and unsophisticated Typees. His many and favorable descriptions of these natives and their way of life give ample evidence of an exuberant good feeling toward man—at least with regard to natural man untouched by civilization.

The second principal way in which Melville manifests an attitude toward man is through a comparison of native and civilized life. In a number of digressions Melville contrasts the happy and innocent life of the isolated Typees with the miserable and corrupt existence of the more European-influenced natives of the South Seas. By doing so, Melville builds a strong indictment against man's injustice to man, revealing at one and the same time both his sense of humanity and his awareness of evil in man. At this early stage of his writing, Melville places most of the blame for man's undesirable conduct on civilization. He seems to suggest that if man could resort to a natural environment, and let his natural qualities take over, then the road to perfectibility would lie open.

Melville's representation of the valley of the Typees as Eden prepares the reader for the kind of man which will be found there. Seen from a great height the valley is pictured as being protected on three sides by a semi-circular range of mountains, the open end bounded by the sea. Everywhere there is rich and luxuriant greenness, even to the top of the mountains. This "universal verdure" is broken only by the

numerous cascades which spill out of the mountains and "leap down the steep cliffs," losing themselves "amidst the rich herbage of the valley."<sup>1</sup> The sight of this landscape creates in Melville such astonishment that "had a glimpse of the gardens of Paradise been revealed to me I could scarcely have been more ravished with the sight." (p. 51)

Certainly the description of the valley suggests that Melville brought an idealistic approach with him in this his first novel. And this idealism is borne out in his treatment of the inhabitants of this earthly Eden. Melville describes the Typees as being innocent, happy, healthy and friendly. (pp. 133, 136) It is the romanticists' dream realized—natural man in a natural setting, not fettered by the artificialities of civilization. Melville's more or less accurate description of this life, colored as it is with idealism, gives us a clue as to what he thinks are not only the better, but also the natural qualities of mankind. The Typees that Melville recalls are almost man before the Fall, embodying a dream and a hope which Melville seems to very much wish could be realized with all of mankind.

The physical beauty of the natives is unsurpassed. Melville says that he saw no one with a natural deformity, although he had noticed an occasional scar caused by a wound received in battle. In fact, "nearly every individual of their number might have been taken for a sculptor's model." (p. 194) The men are well-built and not often less than six feet in height. Appearing "in all the naked simplicity of nature," these natives need none of the artifices of civilized men — "the stuffed

calves, padded breasts, and scientifically cut pantaloons." (p. 194) As for the women, throughout Typee Melville sprinkles many passages of praise on their delightful good looks and charm. (e.g. pp. 136, 141 ff.)

Added to this is a continual happiness which, so far as Melville is able to judge, prevails throughout the valley. One wonders how much the "noble savage" genre influenced Melville when he claims Rousseau accounted for this type of happiness as springing from "an all-pervading sensation [caused by] the mere bouyant sense of a healthful physical existence." (p. 137) C. R. Anderson (Melville in the South Seas) in discussing Typee feels that "although there is no external proof of any earlier [than 1849] acquaintance with the great apologist of the Noble Savage, the internal evidence suggests a long and ardent discipleship."<sup>2</sup> Such speculation may hit quite true, but romanticized or not, Typee is Melville's celebration of man's natural goodness, and clearly indicates his early optimistic attitude toward man.

The treatment that Melville receives at the hands of the natives is nothing but good (if one forgets that he is being forcedly detained by them) and only reinforces Melville's feeling that naturally good qualities predominate in the natives. Honesty and charity, virtue and honor, in fact a "harmony unparalleled" belong to the Typees and elicit from Melville the most optimistic of all his statements about man. Rejecting his Calvinistic upbringing with its emphasis on original sin Melville declares: "They [the Typees] seemed to be governed by that sort of tacit common-sense law which, say what they will of the inborn lawlessness of

the human race, has its precepts graven on every breast." (p. 216)

Never again will Melville utter such a confident platitude about the general characteristic of man's innate being. But it may well have been his association with the wonderful people of Typee that never let him remain the complete pessimist, no matter how dark his views on man were to become.

Melville suspects, however, that the pleasant characteristics of the Typees may have been shaped at least somewhat by the ease with which they can maintain life. Everyday necessities are easily come by in a land where food grows naturally and in abundance. In contrast to this, a highly advanced scientific civilization often affords a man a harsh struggle for existence, and consequently may warp some of his fine natural qualities. This seems to be what Melville is at least partially implying in a comparison of native and civilized life from Typee:

A gentleman of Typee can bring up a numerous family of children and give them all a highly respectable cannibal education, with infinitely less toil and anxiety than he expends in the simple process of striking a light by rubbing two sticks together; whilst a poor European artisan, who through the instrumentality of a lucifer performs the same operation in one second, is put to his wits' end to provide for his starving offspring that food which the children of a Polynesian father, without troubling their parent, pluck from the branches of every tree around them.  
(p. 121)

In this statement Melville indicates that he is ready to take into account the influence of environment on man. At the same time, he leaves no doubt that he thinks little of advanced technology which does not help man toward a more favourable existence.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Melville should be critical

of certain elements of civilization which he saw making inroads into the life of the South Sea natives. This criticism, interspersed as it is in an exuberant record of the life of the happy Typees, points out what proves always to be typical of Melville. At all times, even when carried away in optimistic praise of man, Melville is aware of an ever-present capability in man for evil.

Living the idyllic life of the isolated Typees, Melville sees only too clearly the corrupting influence that western civilization has had on the more accessible native tribes. In Omoo, Melville is to deal more fully with the semi-civilized areas of the South Seas, but even in Typee we are left with no doubt as to where he stands. Christian dogma and civilization, if not conducive to a better life than the natives now have, should not be foisted upon them. (p. 196) Involved in this stance may have been an idealistic young man's disgust with the incongruities between the uttered precepts and actual practices of civilized life, combined with a fairly standard romantic conception of the "noble savage". However, C. R. Anderson produces corroborative statements by other visitors to the South Seas confirming much of what Melville says about evil effects of Westernizing the natives.<sup>3</sup> Even in his first novel, it is indicative of Melville not to accept blindly standard beliefs. Where others might consider the natives naturally lazy, licentious and corrupt, Melville asks why they are so. His youthful romanticism and acute observation combine to give a simple and clear answer--evil in man is a product of civilization.

In Typee, Melville begins his denouncement of civilization by recording his first visit to the Marquesan Islands of the South Pacific. The whaler on which Melville has shipped moves into the harbour and a swimming shoal of young girls meet it, clambouring aboard as a welcoming party. The ship is soon given over to "every species of riot and debauchery." (p. 15) And Melville declaims that the polluting effect of such a depraved crew on the unsophisticated 'whinhenies' is a cause for humanity to weep. (p. 15)

But this is only the first of many digressions in Typee in which Melville indicts western influence in the South Seas. The civilized countries of the world send missionaries and traders to the South Sea Islands, ostensibly to improve the natives' conditions both spiritually and materially. Yet both advance groups exploit rather than cultivate this virgin territory. The native is deprived of his land and his religion. He is converted to nominal Christianity and made to work to earn his food where before there had been a plentiful natural supply. "Disease, vice and premature death make their appearance" with the white man. (p. 211) The result is physical and moral corruption and depopulation of the natives themselves. The effect was most apparent in Honolulu, where Melville tells us he had visited. There "the small remnant of the natives had been civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden." (p. 212)

No wonder, then, that Melville feels it is better for the Typees to remain uncontaminated by Christianity. It is better for them to enjoy

their own good life and "for ever to remain the happy and innocent heathens and barbarians that they now are, than . . . to enjoy the mere name of Christians without experiencing any of the vital operations of true religion, whilst, at the same time, they are made the victims of the worst vices and evils of civilized life." (p. 196)

But as much as Melville deplores the evil effects of Christianity, he is not for a complete rejection of it. Rather he states that "as these disclosures will by their very nature attract attention, so they will lead to something which will not be without ultimate benefit to the cause of Christianity in the Sandwich Islands." (p. 215) This might be pap with which to feed the righteously inclined of his reading public, but one suspects that Melville probably means it. His main quarrel is not with Christianity per se, but with the inhumanity he sees practiced under its banner:

. . . against the cause of missions in the abstract no Christian can possibly be opposed; it is in truth a just and holy cause. But if the great end proposed by it be spiritual, the agency employed to accomplish that end is purely earthly; and, although the object in view be the achievement of much good, that agency may nevertheless be productive of evil. (p. 213)

Elaborating, Melville offers an added bit of information, left undeveloped in Typee, which was certainly to have a great effect on his later attitude toward man. It is a recognition of the inherent human weakness of man's character: ". . . missionary undertaking, however it may be blessed of Heaven is in itself but human; and subject, like everything else, to errors and abuses." (p. 214) The attempt by man to do what he thinks is good is no assurance of it actually turning out that way, and may even have the



opposite result. This disturbing bit of knowledge Melville holds more or less in check until it becomes the major theme of that darkest of all his books, Pierre.

The Typees, themselves, very close to the romantic ideal which Melville would have liked man to be, do not completely escape censure. Later novels demonstrate that Melville attributes some imperfection, symbolically representative of man's flawed or earthly nature, to even his most innocent characters.<sup>4</sup> In the same manner, the ideal character of the Typees is also tarnished by what is something more than a hint of cannibalism.

Melville never sees definite evidence of cannibalism. But he does catch a brief glimpse of the remains of a repast which appears very much like "the disordered members of a human skeleton, the bones still fresh with moisture, and with particles of flesh clinging to them here and there!" (p. 257) The natives, however, claim it was a pig. Nevertheless, to Melville it is at least a frightening thought that he might be the next main course at a "feast of calabashes," and this adds to his determination to escape the valley. Writing later, he can take a detached view and say that cannibalism is only one of many characteristics and therefore no one should be judged on that point alone. His attitude is that, after all, "a more humane, gentlemanly, and amiable set of epicures do not probably exist in the Pacific." (p. 104) Yet the recognition that even these amiable people may have some evil about them signifies that Melville at no time is ready to see man as completely innocent.

As I believe this discussion of Typee indicates, Melville is well aware of both good and evil in mankind. No doubt most of the better human traits he attributes only to the natives. But Melville also acknowledges that the foreign visitors and inhabitants of these islands are predominantly the dregs of civilization, and in this back-handed manner implies that civilization does have a better side. (p. 215) However, it is in his treatment of the Typees that we arrive at Melville's prevalent attitude toward man. In this first novel, it is optimism. Melville sees natural man as being, in the main, naturally good. This idea carries with it a great hope for mankind, suggesting as it does that man's perfection may be attainable.

And finally, Typee perhaps should be considered in the light of some advice which Melville is later to give in the second sketch of "The Encantadas". Describing the tortoises which inhabit the bleak Encantadas islands, Melville says that "dark and melancholy" as they appear, they do have an underside which is bright. Turn one of these turtles on its back and this brightness is exposed to view. Melville adds:

But after you have done this, and because you have done this, you should not swear that the tortoise has no dark side. Enjoy the bright, keep it turned up perpetually if you can, but be honest, and don't deny the black.<sup>5</sup>

Thus it is in Typee. Melville keeps the bright side of man turned up, yet does not deny the black. His celebration of man predominates over not a few rueful recognitions of man's failings. However, the natural position of the tortoise is with the dark side up and Melville, in

White Jacket, shows man in what seems to be Melville's idea of man's more natural position. In White Jacket, the second half of Melville's admonition about the bright and dark sides of the tortoise seems to fit more closely his attitude toward man:

Neither should he, who cannot turn the tortoise from its natural position so as to hide the darker and expose his livelier aspect . . . for that cause declare the creature to be one total inky blot. The tortoise [man] is both black and bright.<sup>6</sup>

NOTES - CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>Herman Melville, Typee (New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1964), p. 51. Further references to this volume in this chapter will be by textual notation.

<sup>2</sup>C. R. Anderson, Melville in the South Seas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), p. 178.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. pp. 237-83.

<sup>4</sup>Jack Chase of White Jacket has a missing finger. Billy Budd stutters.

<sup>5</sup>Herman Melville, "The Encantadas", Selected Tales and Poems by Herman Melville, ed. Richard Chase (New York: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1958), p. 236.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

### CHAPTER III

#### PERSISTANCE IN A BELIEF IN MAN

The sub-title of White Jacket, "The World in a Man-of-War", indicates for the first time Melville's use of a ship as a symbol for the world. That Melville names this ship the Neversink may be attributed to the same hopeful optimism that permeates Typee. Evil as man is painted in this last novel before Moby Dick, Melville still entertains a vague general feeling that all will be right in the end. This optimism is based on at least three beliefs that Melville sets out in White Jacket. The first is that each man has within him an innate dignity which nothing can destroy. The second is that there is a common bond of humanity which in the final analysis unites man into one vast brotherhood. The third is that democracy and America are leading mankind toward the millenium.

As in Typee, Melville shapes this story out of everyday life and activities. In this instance it is the regimented life of a man-of-war. A more corrupt life it would be hard to imagine. Looking again for the cause, not just the effect of evil in man, Melville's continually unfolding mind<sup>1</sup> reaches a somewhat different conclusion about man than that "a tacit common-sense law . . . has its precepts graven on every breast."<sup>2</sup>

The almost ideal human nature which Melville finds in the Typees contrasts sharply with the flagrantly corrupt human nature which he finds in the crew of a man-of-war. Melville tells us that he left the Marquesas with "a higher estimate of human nature than [he] had ever before entertained."<sup>3</sup> But his impression of man did not long stay in that

rarefied atmosphere: " . . . since then I have been one of a crew of a man-of-war, and the pent-up wickedness of five hundred men has nearly overturned all my previous theories."<sup>4</sup> White Jacket indicates that Melville was finding it harder to believe in the general goodness of man, and the recalling of the depraved frigate crew with whom he served must have only added to this realignment of his thought. Optimism is the final note on which this book ends, but one feels it is the last thrust of a youthful idealism. A more balanced perspective emerges from Moby Dick.

Melville-White Jacket<sup>5</sup> catalogues evil after evil that takes place on the Neversink but his attitude varies distinctly depending on whether a member of the crew is guilty of the transgression or whether the grievance may be attributed to needlessly harsh laws of the naval system. Melville often gives the benefit of the doubt to the crew despite its debased acts, whereas he brings forth few extenuating circumstances in defence of naval regulations.

White Jacket states that there is "almost incredible corruption pervading nearly all ranks in some men-of-war" and the evidence he offers for this statement is prodigious.<sup>6</sup> Minor crime is taken to be a natural occurrence of everyday life. Pick-pockets and common thieves are considered not more than a nuisance on a man-of-war. They are so common, robbing one another and back again that "they become relatively honest, by nearly every man becoming the reverse." (p. 50) Whenever possible the men become drunk. (p. 63) White Jacket also hints at what can only

be sodomy. In a chapter indicting midshipmen, he relates that one of the "waisters," the most ignoble of the crew members, was flogged through the mere wanton spite of one of these young officers—"a youth who was apt to indulge at times in undignified familiarities with some of the men." (p. 210) And White Jacket tells us that some of the sins which the sailors commit can hardly be imagined by landsmen. In this latter instance White Jacket is less vague and evasive. The sins which he refers to are the same as those "for which the cities of the plain were overthrown," and they "still linger in some of these wooden-walled Gomorrahs of the deep." (p. 353) But the separation from shore indulgences and the close confinement of the large crew ("800 or 1000 men") account for much of this degeneracy, White Jacket says, and although he never condones these practices, neither does he take an overly righteous attitude toward them.

Melville's sympathetic understanding of evil in man, without condoning this evil he sees, is set out in White Jacket's attitude toward Bland, the master-at-arms. Bland is deprived of his office after he is found guilty of smuggling liquor aboard ship and letting it out to the crew members at exorbitant prices. Before his exposure he has exercised a harsh tyranny over the men. In fact, in his capacity as master-at-arms, he has been the one who officially seizes the sailors who are intoxicated with the very liquor which he has smuggled aboard. Bland has also taken a conspicuous part in the automatic scourging which is meted out to inebriated crew members. Nevertheless, unprotected by his office, Bland

moves fearlessly among the crew. White Jacket "could not but abominate him", and yet at the same time feel pity and admiration for him. (p. 185) This mixed reaction with regard to Bland arouses in White Jacket a speculation on evil and its cause:

Besides, a studied observation of Bland convinced me that he was an organic and irreclaimable scoundrel, who did wicked deeds as the cattle browse the herbage, because wicked deeds seemed the legitimate operation of his whole infernal organisation. Phrenologically, he was without a soul. Is it to be wondered at that the devils are irreligious? What, then, thought I, who is to blame in this matter? (p. 185)

White Jacket carries the questioning no further. And as much as he may sympathize with Bland, White Jacket would not (if he had the say) set Bland loose to prey again upon the crew of the Neversink. A man may be evil through little or no fault of his own, but this is no argument for a privileged protection which allows him to wreak his malice upon his fellow man.

A more terrible evil, Melville seems to say, is embodied in one of the least appealing characters that Melville is ever to create--Caddwaller Cuticle, the Surgeon of the Fleet. Cuticle does not have the low vices of a common sailor, for which he could be flogged, or a meanness which could be detected and therefore protected against. Instead he has what Melville in all his work gives the lowest rung in his ladder of human failings, an imperviousness to "the ordinary emotions of humanity". (p. 241) As William Ellery Sedgwick states in Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind, Cuticle "is cut off from the common heart of man."<sup>7</sup> Demonstrating his heartlessness, Cuticle carries out, over various



degrees of nay-saying by three other surgeons, an operation for which there is no need. He does so in order to flaunt his skill as a surgeon. So callous is he that he allows an incompetent assistant first chance at sawing through the bone. Operation concluded, and a short lecture given, Cuticle calls for a meeting the next day at which time the amputated leg will be inspected. A steward enters with the news that the patient is dead, and without a qualm Cuticle says: "The body, also, gentlemen, at ten precisely." (p. 254)

But if this is Melville's conception of a despicable person, there is also aboard the Neversink a man whom Melville describes with great admiration. This is Jack Chase, captain of the fore-top. Tall and well-built, with clean-cut and pleasant features, Chase might easily stand comparison with a healthy savage of Typee. Added to his physical qualities is a heart of which no man has a "better or bolder." (p. 25) He has an "abounding air of good sense and good feeling" about him and is a sort of father-confessor for many of the crew. (p. 26) He also knows all there is to know about the workings of a man-of-war (Melville always admires competency in one's line of work). But the crowning glory is Chase's ability to talk of "Rob Roy, Don Juan and Pelham; Macbeth and Ulysses," and, as an admirer of the Portugese poet, Camoens, to recite "parts of 'The Lusiad' . . . in the original." (p. 26) No longer it seems, are sterling physical characteristics and a pleasant nature enough when Melville wants to picture for us an ideal man (as they had been in Typee). A development of the intellect is also a necessary ingredient. Jack Chase, of the sound body,

good heart and developed mind would be a very fitting person to whom to dedicate the novelette, Billy Budd. Melville must have looked hard for Jack Chase's one flaw, a missing finger on his left hand.

However, few on board the Neversink escape Melville's censure at one time or another. The crew generally, the midshipmen, the surgeon, even, and especially, the higher officers and the captain fall in the way of Melville's fire. But the latter, the officers, Melville censures more because they are agents of the dire Articles of War than because of any personal characteristic. Enforcing this code, in which the words "shall suffer death" boom in White Jacket's ears as a dirge-like refrain (p. 279), can only cause them to act often in inhumane ways. White Jacket recognizes this and states that Captain Claret would have been a kindhearted landsman if fate had not directed him to his present position.<sup>8</sup> But what White Jacket will not abide is the utter unfairness of officers observing or not observing for themselves as they please, the same articles which are scrupulously enforced with regard to the sailors. Again, Melville, through White Jacket, takes up the cause of oppressed humanity:

Or has a sailor no mark of humanity, no attribute of manhood, that, bound hand and foot, he is cast into an American frigate shorn of all rights and defences, while the notorious lawlessness of the commander has passed into a proverb, familiar to man-of-war's men, The law was not made for the captain! (p. 286)

Here White Jacket acts as a spokesman on behalf of "the people" or crew against the injustice of the despotic Articles of War. These Articles are of man's creation and therefore can be changed. And as

C. R. Anderson states, reform is what Melville is after.<sup>9</sup> In his next book, Melville is to carry on this argument at a higher level. Ahab, mutilated in both body and mind by the unfair "articles" of life is to attempt an airing of his grievances in the highest court of the universe.

But as much as White Jacket denounces the Articles of War, he directs most of his anger against the cruel scourging an erring member of the crew can receive. Flogging, to White Jacket, lowers man to the level of a beast. White Jacket can find no justification for this most barbarian of all punishments. He argues that flogging is evil, unlawful and unnecessary. As mentioned above, White Jacket is more than aware of the corruption that pervades a man-of-war. He also knows that a frigate is often "an asylum for the perverse, the home of the unfortunate." (p. 82) Yet he cannot condone such an inhumane method of punishment. All the evil that a man may be capable of is not enough to justify his being "stripped like a slave; scourged worse than a hound." (p. 139) In fact, "depravity in the oppressed is no apology for the oppressor; but rather an additional stigma to him, as being, in a large degree, the effect, and not the cause and justification of oppression." (p. 143) Melville's basic humanity is nowhere more explicit. Recalling Melville's attitude toward the corrupting of the natives of the Marquesas islands, one could very well begin to agree with F. O. Matthiessen that "Melville's main concern was with human suffering wherever he found it."<sup>10</sup>

Yet to White Jacket the fact that the last outward semblance of pride is stripped from a man when he undergoes this most degrading of all

punishments is not necessarily an indication that the man is inwardly beaten. To man's credit, his true dignity is often untouchable:

But this feeling of the innate dignity remaining untouched, though outwardly the body be scarred for the whole term of the natural life, is one of the hushed things, buried among the holiest privacies of the soul; a thing between a man's God and himself; and forever undiscernible by our fellow-men, who account that a degradation which seems so to the corporal eye. (p. 142)

There is a glow about this description of man's "innate dignity" that suggests much about Melville's overall attitude to man. Essentially, as Melville will say explicitly in Moby Dick, it is an awareness that each individual man has within him a divine spark. And this touch of divinity will remain, no matter what indignity the world may force upon him or how outwardly abject a creature he appears to be.

But, under the threat of flogging, there is another way in which man can retain his status as a human being. It is not by the preserving of an inward dignity, but rather by the refusal to accept the insult of flogging, though it be at the cost of one's own life. Melville himself would seem to prefer this latter way since he relates an incident about White Jacket involving just such a defiance. Arraigned at the mast on an unjust charge, White Jacket is denied an attempt to defend himself. Since he is certain to be flogged, rebellion flares within him and he determines to carry the captain and himself overboard to almost certain death rather than be subjected to the scourge. In accounting for this decision White Jacket explains:

Nature has not implanted any power in man that was not meant to be exercised at times, though too often our powers have been abused. The privilege, inborn and inalienable, that every man has, of dying himself, and inflicting death upon another, was not given to us without a purpose. These are the last resources of an insulted and unendurable existence. (p. 269)

So it is defiance rather than acceptance that man may also use when he feels that his existence is "insulted and unendurable." This rebellious spirit in man, Melville seems to say, adds to man's stature rather than detracts from it. Man may be a stoic and accept outward insults still keeping intact his "innate dignity." But he also may rebel. In this refusal to accept injustice, even though rebellion means his own destruction, man acquires nobility. Melville recognizes these two divergent trends in man's way of looking at life, and can understand how both are inherent in man's nature. One would probably maintain mortal life, while the other would perhaps destroy it. Nevertheless, both illuminate a certain splendor in man.

On this evidence it seems clear that Melville really means it when in writing to Hawthorne he declares: ". . . a thief in jail is as honorable a personage as General George Washington."<sup>11</sup> The innate dignity of a degenerate crew member, the glorious Jack Chase, the noble Typees—all support Melville's contention that each man, no matter how lowly, has about him a sublimity.

However, the characters of men do differ. And White Jacket claims that this difference is "in a great degree attributable to their particular stations and duties" aboard this man-of-war world. (p. 54) For instance,

the top men riding high above the deck on the fore, main, and mizen masts, lead the most wholesome lives. In fact, they at times seem to be completely separated from the rest of the ship and tend to forget about "the petty tumults, carping cares, and paltrinesses of the deck below." (p. 57) No wonder then, that the top men are most good-hearted men. In the same way, the gunners take on the menacing unpleasantness of the guns which they care for. (p. 55) And the more mundane a crew member's duty, the more apt he is to be narrow-minded and have what Melville calls a "contracted soul". (p. 58) Although Melville is having some fun here, relating the temper of a crew member to the position he holds on the ship, there is enough seriousness in what he says that his later speculation about the shaping of a man's character by the circumstances of life follows naturally. Melville recognizes that man's soul may be mean or exalted, but he also suspects that fortunate or unfortunate treatment from the environment often is the determining factor in the shaping of man.

But this novel, in the main, is permeated with optimism. Iniquity exists, to be sure, but the future holds "hope and fruition." (p. 150) Even the chapters indicting flogging end with a Whitmanesque rhetoric which praises democracy and America. America is the new Israel, White Jacket says, and "Americans are the peculiar, chosen people . . . . God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls." (p. 151) Although one believes that Melville is knowingly overstating his case (in Mardi, he had found much in a democracy with which to be dissatisfied)<sup>12</sup> one does not doubt that he

is very much identified emotionally with such a line of thought.

Giving support to this optimism is Melville's feeling of a common bond with humanity, no matter how depraved humanity may seem to be. Incidents mentioned before in this paper should indicate that this feeling is strongly imbued through the fabric of White Jacket. And White Jacket sums up his feelings for his fellow man thus: "It is quite impossible . . . to live with five hundred of your fellow-beings, be they who they may, without feeling a common sympathy with them at the time, and ever after cherishing some sort of interest in their welfare." (p. 171) White Jacket, himself, can be taken for a symbol of Melville's own baptism into the evil of the world. As James E. Miller Jr. points out, White Jacket "makes allowances for humanity's imperfections, . . . though abhorring sin, saves [his] soul by accepting [his] share of the world's burden of guilt."<sup>13</sup>

Newton Arvin sees the symbolic representation of White Jacket's decision to accept his humanity illustrated in his fall from the mast and the subsequent casting away of his jacket.<sup>14</sup> The jacket will drag him down to a certain death by drowning if he does not cut it off. And, in a manner, he has to destroy his old self to take on the new: "I . . . ripped my jacket straight up and down, as if I were ripping open myself. With a violent struggle I then burst out of it, and was free . . . . Sink! sink! oh shroud! thought I; sink forever! accursed jacket that thou art!" (p. 371) Thus White Jacket casts aside this symbol of both his innocence and his separation from the crew. In doing so, he willingly

acknowledges his humanity.

The widening of this "common humanity" for fellow crew members to include the whole of mankind is expressed in the last chapter. Returning to the symbol of the world as a man-of-war, (which is not consistently followed through-out the novel),<sup>15</sup> White Jacket compares the world to a frigate sailing under sealed orders. The world need not be "charged to the combings of her hatchways with the spirit of Belial and all unrighteousness" if each man would only realize a sense of a common destiny. (p. 368) This man-of-war world sails toward a destination secret to man (even to the commodore, chaplain, and professor),<sup>16</sup> but "our final haven was predestinated ere we slipped from the stocks at Creation." (p. 375) A destination there is. The voyage is not just "an endless circumnavigation of space." (p. 375) And on this voyage, White Jacket would have us remember while waiting for "our Lord High Admiral" to interpose and redress grievances, that most of man's evils are blindly inflicted upon himself. (p. 376)

As I have tried to show in the above discussion, Melville's attitude toward man is somewhat more complicated in White Jacket than it is in Typee. No longer is he taking a whole section of mankind and declaring quite simply that this one group is good. If anything, he has a tendency toward arriving at the opposite conclusion--that mankind in the mass is depraved.<sup>17</sup> Where in Typee the natives as a whole are quite good-hearted, representative of the nineteenth century "noble savage" genre, in White Jacket, Melville finds a worthiness in man only when he



considers man in the abstract. Yet there is an acceptance of man, noble or ignoble, which is at least partially explained by Melville's tentative suggestion about the complex inter-relationship between man's innate characteristics and the environmental influences which shape these characteristics. However, in White Jacket, Melville settles for an optimistic hope in the future betterment of mankind. This hope is based on a strong but intangible belief in the innate dignity of each individual man, and anticipation of the universal acceptance by man of both brotherhood and democracy. In White Jacket, it appears that Melville's enthusiasm for these abstract ideals are the "costliest robes" with which he runs to cover the concrete realities of man's many "ignominious blemishes."<sup>18</sup> Leon Howard is probably very right when he states:

When [Melville] indulged in abstract thought, he was capable of positive belief in an ideal which may not have been entirely satisfactory but which was nevertheless genuinely attractive because of the feeling of serenity it gave to his restless mind. On the other hand, when he looked at the everyday realities of the world, he was inclined toward criticism, skepticism, and even cynicism.<sup>19</sup>

NOTES - CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup>Davis and Gilman, op. cit., p. 130. Melville writes to Hawthorne: "Until I was twenty-five I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself."

<sup>2</sup>Supra, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Melville, Typee, p. 218.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 218-19.

<sup>5</sup>White Jacket is at least partially autobiographical. Scholars tend to agree that Melville, through White Jacket, is voicing his own opinion and thought.

<sup>6</sup>Herman Melville, White Jacket (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1956), p. 178. Further references to this volume in this chapter will be by textual notation.

<sup>7</sup>William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945), p. 79.

<sup>8</sup>Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 402.

<sup>9</sup>Anderson, op. cit., pp. 420-34.

<sup>10</sup>Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 401.

<sup>11</sup>Davis and Gilman, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>12</sup>Herman Melville, Mardi (Toronto: The New American Library of Canada Limited, 1964), pp. 431-39.

<sup>13</sup>Miller, loc. cit., p. 292.

<sup>14</sup>Arvin, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>16</sup>King, priest, and scientist.

<sup>17</sup>Davis and Gilman, loc. cit. "It seems an inconsistency to assert unconditional democracy in all things, and yet confess a dislike to all mankind---in the mass. But not so."

<sup>18</sup>Herman Melville, Moby Dick (New York: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1959), p. 113.

<sup>19</sup>Howard, op. cit., p. 126.

## CHAPTER IV

### MAN IN PERSPECTIVE

Melville, in most of White Jacket, builds up a damning indictment of man's inhumanity to man. Yet with a few strokes here and there, especially in the last chapters, Melville glosses over the evils he records and White Jacket ends on a note of optimism. Melville did not allow himself such a shallow out in Moby Dick. Instead, he gives us a searching look at man. Following the lesson of White Jacket, Melville completely accepts man for what he is, while yet reserving admiration for special qualities of mind and heart. The result is an open-minded and balanced view of man in which Melville demonstrates neither an optimism nor a pessimism. Again, he sees man as having many limitations but also as having some fine qualities. And again, it is the individual man rather than the mass man who conjures Melville's sense of the marvelous:

. . . take high abstracted man alone; and he seems a wonder, a grandeur, and a woe . . . . take mankind in mass, and for the most part, they seem a mob of unnecessary duplicates, both contemporary and hereditary.<sup>1</sup>

Melville's own humanity must be one of the strongest impressions which Moby Dick leaves with a reader. The judgements of man (which are necessarily inherent in Melville's descriptions of the individual characters) are never bitter, as they are later to become. Yet he does not pass over man's failings. "Mean and meagre" men there are. (p. 113) But Melville also demonstrates that he knows well how man is in many ways a creation of the chance happenings of birth and life, and such a knowledge can only have a softening influence on any tendency to judge.

In the same letter to Hawthorne quoted before in this thesis, Melville writes: "I stand for the heart."<sup>2</sup> Yet his review of Hawthorne's Mosses From An Old Manse indicates clearly his respect for the "great, deep intellect, which drops down into the universe like a plummet."<sup>3</sup> The ideal would be a meeting of fine brain and open heart. And in Moby Dick, Melville's attitude toward man is very much dependent on how man incorporates the "head" and the "heart". Where in Typee and White Jacket the emphasis is on the "heart", in Moby Dick a more balanced perspective is struck. Now Melville seems to give or to withhold his admiration depending on the degree to which a man has, in Melville's own words, "the tragicalness of human thought in its own unbiassed, native, and profounder workings . . . the intense feeling of the visible truth . . . the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him."<sup>4</sup> But if to the head were added an open heart, then so much better. Melville keeps a deeper and yet somehow more reserved admiration for the man who recognizes his humanity, the man who knows his fellow man in all his failings and limitations and yet acknowledges his own place in this fallible brotherhood. Such an acknowledgement, Melville seems to suggest, is the most redeeming grace in man's character.

In Moby Dick, Melville is still capable of letting his ideal of man carry him away in rhetorical passages. Probably the most far-reaching of these passages is where he restates his belief that man has a right to dignity. After discussing Starbuck's cautious courage, Melville says it

is not his intention to utterly debase any man:

But were the coming narrative to reveal, in any instance, the complete abasement of poor Starbuck's fortitude, scarce might I have the heart to write it; for it is a thing most sorrowful, nay shocking, to expose the fall of valour in the soul. Men may seem detestable as joint stock-companies and nations; knaves, fools, and murderers there may be; men may have mean and meagre faces; but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes. (p. 113)

As I have indicated in my discussion of White Jacket, Melville, himself, is tempted very much to cover (but not ignore) the ignominious blemishes he sees in man. In Moby Dick, Melville persists in this approach to man.

The same innate dignity of the soul about which Melville feels so strongly in White Jacket is part of this feeling that man must join with man in protecting the ideal as much as possible:

That immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves, so far within us, that it remains intact though all the outer character seem gone; bleeds with keenest anguish at the undraped spectacle of a valor-ruined man. (p. 113)

Indeed, to Melville, each and every man has, stripped of worldly trappings, a divine equality:

But this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The Great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality. (p. 113)

Thus it is from this spark of the divine that man retains his innate and indestructible dignity, and leads Melville to utter again his hopeful belief in an ultimate democracy.

As noted above, Melville still realizes that there are many "knaves, fools and murderers." And he can equate the voraciousness of man with that of the shark. In a sermon to the sharks, Fleece, the cook, probably utters Melville's own feeling when he says that the sharks' voraciousness is natural. Howard suggests that Melville had begun to suspect that much of the evil in man may be natural.<sup>5</sup> But as Melville has Fleece say, the point is to govern this evil nature, for ". . . if you govern de shark in you, why den you be angel; for all angel is not'ing more dan de shark well governed." (p. 293) If man, like the shark, finds he cannot do this, then perhaps Fleece's damning of the sharks should be visited upon man: "Cussed fellow-critters! Kick up de damndest row as ever you can; fill your dam' bellies 'till dey bust--and den die." (p. 293)

The belief in an innate dignity in every man and a refusal to blame man for a "natural" voraciousness are only two of many suggestions Melville offers in Moby Dick as to why he does not condemn man ultimately or presently. Melville, in other instances, gives an increased recognition to strong forces outside the individual man's control. In the "Mat-Maker" chapter, Melville has Ishmael, while weaving a sword-mat, dreamily envision himself at work on the "Loom of Time", himself the shuttle "mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates." (p. 211) Involved are the three abstracts of necessity, free will, and chance, and I suspect emphasis is placed very much where Melville himself would place it. The warp, the fixed threads, is necessity. The woof is free will, Ishmael's own hand plying the shuttle and weaving his own destiny into "the unalterable threads" of the warp. And chance is Queequeg, who "ever and anon slid his

heavy, oaken sword between the threads, and idly looking off upon the water, carelessly and unthinkingly drove home every yarn." (p. 211) Thus man himself is formed and limited:

[the] impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric; this . . . sword . . . which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance--aye, chance, free will, and necessity--no wise incompatible--all interweavably working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course--its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turn rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events. (p. 211-12)

Ishmael's "necessity" can be looked at in two ways. First, man comes into this world of necessity (as the weaving first starts with the warp) burdened or blessed with certain characteristics of body and mind which carry with him through life. Or secondly, this necessity of which Ishmael speaks may be the more or less predetermined course in life which man's free will can do but little to change. Either way, and with the final word ever to be written by chance's haphazard strokes, man cannot be too harshly called to account for either his character or his actions.

Supporting the philosophy of the "Mat-Maker" chapter is Melville's ready recognition that life itself very much shapes man and his thought. Certainly Ahab's life, from the beginning, has conspired to point him irresistibly to the violent and destructive end to which he comes. Even his name signifies evil. (p. 79) Yet his naming was the "whim of his

crazy widowed mother, who died when he was only a twelvemonth old." (p. 79) With a start like that, a man would almost certainly be expected to have a more than ordinary role to play in this world. As it happens, Ahab also is "gifted with the high perception [and lacking] the low enjoying power [is] damned, most subtly and most malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise!" (p. 165) Thus life influences combine with Ahab's inherent qualities to control Ahab very much more than he controls them.

In the same manner, Melville portrays each of the crew members of the Pegud as being extremely limited by his character, which in turn is a product of inheritance and experience. Perhaps this is most clearly set out in "The Doubloon" chapter. In discussing this chapter, Daniel Hoffman (Form and Fable in American Fiction) states: "Eight principal characters . . . Each sees the 'image of the ungraspable phantom of life', and reads it in the light of his own character."<sup>6</sup> Reading from the same symbols on the doubloon, members of the crew offer many diverse interpretations of life. For example:

Born in throes, 'tis fit that man should live in pains and die in pangs! (Ahab) (p. 427)

So in this vale of Death, God girds us round; and over all our gloom, the sun of Righteousness still shines a beacon and a hope. (Starbuck) (p. 427)

Jollily he [the sun], aloft there, wheels through toil and trouble; and so, a low here, does jolly Stubb. (Stubb) (p. 429)

I see nothing here, but a round thing made of gold, and whoever raises a certain whale, this round thing belongs to him. (Flask) (p. 429)

In each instance, it is the individual character, formed by particular life



circumstances, that governs the interpretation. As Melville says elsewhere in Moby Dick: "All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks . . ." (p. 280)

Indeed, Melville's attitude toward man is most clearly shown through the characters he creates. More than in White Jacket or Typee, individuals stand out among the crew members. The comparatively superficial creation of a Jack Chase, of whom little firsthand testing of his mettle is given to the reader, is replaced by more well-rounded characters. And through these characters, why and how they react to life, Melville offers a great variety of men (especially in intellectual traits), portraying for us men as he knows they are, and as he both hopes and fears they might be. Melville still believes that man can achieve grandeur, and Ahab and Ishmael embody this belief. But in the main, man is not noble, nor ignoble if one considers the conditions under which he labours. As I shall try to indicate in the following discussion of some of the crew members of the Pequod, Melville's attitude toward man in Moby Dick may be reached through a bringing together of his attitudes toward his individual creations.

The carpenter of the Pequod has brought with him to life only "a sort of unintelligence," (p. 463) and therefore he has become just an extension of the work he does. The world has influenced him without any reciprocal influence on his part. He becomes as one of the tools he works with, "a pure manipulator; his brain, if he ever had one, must have early oozed along into the muscles of his fingers." (p. 463) Unreasoning but

still useful, "living without premeditated reference to this world or the next," (p. 463) the carpenter lacks any of the higher qualities of man. He has only a "cunning life-principle." (p. 463) Man could be little less, and still be man, Melville seems to suggest.

As for Melville's perfect man, he is described early in Moby Dick. It is Bulkington, the handsome sailor, who contrasts sharply with the carpenter. Bulkington, tall and well-built, has about him a pensive air, seemingly caused by "reminiscences that did not give him much joy." (p.15) Newly landed, he spends little time on shore. Instead he pushes off again on another "four years' dangerous voyage." (p. 104) The succor of the port is not for him. His intellect seems to have caught glimpses of "that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore." (p. 105) Added to his intellectual qualities is the comradeship which every crew member feels for him, and which Bulkington returns. Bulkington, in searching for truth, has found that he must maintain an independence of thought, not be swayed by dogmas and ideas of another's making. Still, he is a willing companion to other men. Intellect and heart have a happy meeting. Although mentioned only twice, (because Melville could not really believe in him?), the apotheosized Bulkington is a crew-member aboard the Pequod. Melville relegates him to a background position, a "sleeping-partner." (p. 14)

Between the high and the low, the Bulkingtons and carpenters, are

innumerable mediocre men. And Melville gives us his attitude toward mediocre man in portraying Flask, the third mate. The "pervading mediocrity in Flask" (p. 183) allows for only the shallowest insight into life. The whale is no more to him than a sort of water-rat. "All sense of reverence for the many marvels of their majestic bulk and mystic ways" is lost on him. (p. 115) Moby Dick, himself, is just a "certain whale" whose value may be ascertained in dollars and cents. (p. 429) This lack of awareness of anything mystical about life or man's existence, gives rise to no mental torment. Deep thought is alien to this type of person. Flask never really lives life. Neither is he subjected to a hell on earth which may afflict a deep-thinking man (such as Ahab). Flask, and the mediocre of this world, may well be as Melville suggests—" . . . radiating side timbers inserted [into this world] to brace [it] against the icy concussions of . . . battering seas." (p. 116)

As I have mentioned earlier, Melville's attitude toward an individual is often based on the depth at which that individual perceives the world. Where Flask is just unaware, Stubb consciously makes himself see only the jolly side of the world. "Think not" is his eleventh commandment. (p. 125) And the strict following of this commandment allows him cheerily to trudge off "with the burden of life in a world full of grave peddlers, all bowed to the ground with their packs." (p. 115) Stubb meets all the toils and troubles of this world with a smile and a laugh. This refusal to do any deep-thinking, combined with a conscious effort to see only a happy side to life, leads, Melville says, only to an "invulnerable



jollity of indifference and recklessness." (p. 183) The buoyant Stubb as contrasted to the subdued Bulkington supports Melville's contention: ". . . that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true--not true, or undeveloped." (p. 420) Stubb is rated not much higher than Flask.

Starbuck, the first mate, rises a level or two above Flask and Stubb in recognition of what life is and in interpretation of the world, and Melville's attitude rises correspondingly. But Starbuck also is lacking. He has, Melville says, "the incompetence of mere unaided virtue, or right-mindedness." (p. 183) For Starbuck, religion is the safe harbour for his soul. A faith to which he can retreat from the buffetings of a cruel world is Starbuck's protection from the soul-ravaging that an Ahab experiences. Starbuck recognizes the "dark vale" and midnight cheerlessness of this life but will not dwell on it. He will not allow "Truth [to] shake [him] falsely." (p. 427) At one time, gazing over the side of the ship and not wishing to dwell on the "teeth-tiered sharks" and "kidnapping cannibal ways" of the depths of a surface smooth "golden sea", Starbuck sums up in a few words his philosophy toward life: "Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory; I look deep down and do believe." (p. 485) He will look past the dark truth of this world, day-dreaming pleasantly in place of remembering any past ugly realities,<sup>7</sup> taking refuge from the unknown in a prefabricated religion: "Starbuck was no crusader after perils." (p. 112)

However, Melville knows that man is very limited when it comes to attempting an explanation of the mystery and meaning of existence, and

this tempers his judgement of man. Perhaps this knowledge is forever to escape man (at least until death). Nevertheless, Melville feels a great admiration for a man who strives mightily for an explanation and in the process "declares himself a sovereign nature (in himself) amid the powers of heaven, hell, and earth. He may perish; but so long as he exists he insists upon treating with all Powers upon an equal basis."<sup>8</sup> To a man such as this (and Ahab, himself might have uttered such words), Howard believes Melville is very emotionally sympathetic.<sup>9</sup> In such an individual Melville sees a grandeur that can be man's. And Melville recreates much of this grandeur in Ahab--that "grand, ungodly, Godlike man." (p. 79)

Captain Ahab, who Howard claims is intellectually (and naturally) superior to the other crew members of the Pequod,<sup>10</sup> dives deep into the profundity of the universe but never returns from these depths. Instead of a sane wisdom through knowledge, Ahab takes on a demonic madness. Applying his gift of reason in an attempt to fathom the universe, and therefore to understand the meaning of man's existence, Ahab seems the epitome of White Jacket's statement--"Nature has not implanted any power in man that was not meant to be exercised at times, though too often our powers have been abused."<sup>11</sup> Ahab insists on using his superior, but still human, powers in a search that he knows will end in failure--"Great pains, small gains for those who ask the world to solve them; it cannot solve itself." (p. 427) Ahab's spirit refuses to accept this that his intellect tells him. Everything in him cries out to know why he (and man) must suffer an existence. Shattered in body and twisted in mind by the chance happenings

of life, Ahab asks for enlightenment (see his prayer below) and receives none. Thereupon he summons all the magnificent insignificance of his one man's spirit, challenging the "inscrutable malice" of the universe. To Ahab, Moby Dick is at least the earthly representative of this malice, for it is the whale that has torn away his leg. And "be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal", (p. 161) Ahab will wreak his hate upon it. Fettered as he is by human limitations, Ahab's superb defiance seems to carry with it Melville's sympathetic admiration for the human condition.

Faults Ahab may have, and his crazed mind may be off-balance enough to drag to destruction with him the whole crew of the Pequod, but he is a direct descendant of White Jacket who would rather destroy himself than suffer "an insulted and unendurable existence."<sup>12</sup> The sparks of the Prometheus fire, struck in White Jacket, come to a full blaze in Moby Dick. Ahab has been scarred from head to foot; his leg has been reaped away by a white whale; and by what appears to be a particularly malicious stroke of fate, his groin almost pierced (and, according to Newton Arvin perhaps even his manhood destroyed<sup>13</sup>) by the ivory leg with which he has replaced his real one. During a feverish delirium on the homeward trip after the losing of his leg, Ahab transfers all his suffering to Moby Dick. His hatred and madness combine and "the White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung". (p. 180) Ahab, "insulted" as he has been, his existence

never happy, but now unendurable unless he can avenge himself by destroying Moby Dick, takes the way of Promethean defiance. Before an almost supernatural "tri-pointed trinity of flames" in the riggings, Ahab admits his comparative weakness, but insists on maintaining his "sovereign nature". Nevertheless, he would also bow down to this power if it came in the form of love:

. . . I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best; whencesoe'er I came; wheresoe'er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. But war is pain, and hate is woe. Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee; but at thy highest, come as mere supernal power; and though thou launchest navies of full-freighted worlds, there's that in here that still remains indifferent. Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee. (p. 498-99)

But in spite of his superb defiance it is clear that Ahab, though having the name of an Old Testament king, can only finally gain his tragic nobility through his actions as a man. He is not a God, nor a demigod, just a somewhat exceptional man. Yet through his challenge to what he knows is unconquerable, the specter rises of all the past and present human rebellion against the injustice that man has so often felt in the universe. If Ahab were right in Moby Dick being the incarnation of evil, and the important thing is that Ahab is firm in this conviction, then Ahab could perhaps have been a new saviour for mankind. But Melville

does not carry it that far. What Melville does demonstrate is that there is much to admire and to wonder at in a man who unhesitatingly uses all his human ingenuity and resources for one fleeting glimpse under the hood of that "grand phantom"--life.

Nevertheless, during the writing of Moby Dick, Melville is still firm in his attitude that man should have feeling for his fellow man. Much of Ahab's rebellion against the "frozen heavens" is based on such a feeling, as his sympathy for the idiot boy Pip should indicate. Taking Pip under his special care, Ahab again finds reason to rail against the heartless necessities of the world:

Lo! ye believers in gods all goodness, and in man all ill,  
 lo! you! see the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering  
 man; and man, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does,  
 yet full of the sweet things of love and gratitude. Come!  
 I feel prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though  
 I grasped an Emperor's.

But the paradox is that Ahab will not allow himself his humanity, his "love and gratitude" for his fellow man, except on a cosmic scale. John Halverson in "The Shadow in Moby Dick" suggests that "Pip is Ahab's answer to 'come in thy lowest form of love.'"<sup>14</sup> But Ahab's monomania overrides his humanities and the result is destruction not only for himself but for the Pequod and all its crew, including Pip. Although Melville admires greatly the deep-thinking man, he also seems to feel that more than a brain should be brought with man to this world. Man must also have what Ahab lacks, a heart which opens out to other men, and accepts them. Ahab's indomitable spirit gives him a tragic nobility, but he lacks the final perception which only an open heart could bring to him--an acceptance of his own and (man's) mortalities.



The humanity that Ahab negates is, as White Jacket demonstrates, the saving grace with which man faces a world that Melville suggests is about two-thirds dark and only one-third bright. (p. 420) Humanity is especially needed by the unbelieving or open-minded man. Faced with what seems a hostile environment peopled by a depraved humanity, the soul that keeps "the open independence of her sea" can often only despair. For others, faith, especially something like a Calvinistic belief in the natural depravity of man, can explain and protect against the ravages of mind which beset a non-believer who allows himself to dwell too long on the inscrutable workings of the universe. But for those who do not have such a haven to which to retreat, Melville offers another and simpler way for man to exist in this world--love rather than hate, and recognize one's common bond of humanity. This is the lesson that Ishmael learns, and seems most nearly to correspond to what Melville himself takes as an attitude toward man. As Marius Bewley states emphatically: ". . . it is Ishmael with whom we must identify Melville's viewpoint in the end."<sup>15</sup>

Melville knows that within man there is a capacity for hatred and evil. At some time or other a seemingly uncaused meanness, often coupled with a feeling of almost total isolation from humanity, has paid visits to the minds of many men. And in the first words that Ishmael utters, there is a recognition of this mood within himself. "Call me Ishmael", the opening sentence of Moby Dick, points immediately to this isolation from humanity. (p. 1) (In the Bible, Genesis 16, Ishmael is the son of Abraham and Hagar. At Sarah's insistence, he and his mother are made outcasts.)

Ishmael, himself, says: "whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul . . . it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off." (p. 1) It is to sea he must go to escape this futile mood which leads to self-destruction. The sea is his "substitute for pistol and ball." (p. 1)

The catalyst for Ishmael's movement back into humanity is Queequeg, a South Sea island savage. Their first meeting takes place when lack of lodging forces them to share the same bed. Ishmael is startled by the appearance of this wildly tattooed savage and somewhat revolted by the discovery that Queequeg is a cannibal. However, Ishmael concludes what will be for him his own saving grace: ". . . the man's a human being just as I am." (p. 24) Even at an early stage, this budding friendship causes a melting within Ishmael, with a corresponding feeling of acceptance, if not condonation, of the world: "No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it." (p. 50) Stronger even than any bigoted bias toward religion is this relationship. For the cementing of this friendship Ishmael agrees to unite with Queequeg in the worship of his little black idol. Ishmael comes to perceive "how elastic our stiff prejudices grow when love once comes to bend them." (p. 52)

But Melville sees this relationship between men as having its responsibilities, as well as its healing benefits. In the "monkey-rope" episode, Ishmael comes to realize something of these responsibilities, gaining an insight into the continuing interdependence of all men. Ishmael, on the deck of the Pequod, is tied to Queequeg by a rope. Queequeg, in

turn, is over the side, scrambling around on the slippery back of a whale which is almost submerged. He is constantly in danger of slipping into the water never to appear again, or of being crushed between the whale and the side of the ship. Custom and honour demand that the rope never be cut. Whatever happens to Queequeg, Ishmael must accept the same fate. Ishmael perceives that his "own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two," that his "free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge [him, innocent as he is,] into unmerited disaster and death." (p. 317) But he also sees that every mortal is in the same position: ". . . I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals." (p. 317)

This bond of love between Ishmael and Queequeg is important, for Melville seems to say that the world offers not much else to man to make existence worthwhile. To Ishmael, Queequeg's situation while working on the whale signifies life. Added to the precariousness of his position on the whale are the perils of both friends and foes. Sharks, tearing at the whale, swarm about Queequeg's legs. The other harpooners, disinterestedly benevolent (and safely out of reach on a stage projected from the side of the ship), keep up a continuous slaughter of the sharks by whipping sharp whale-spades among them. But the bloodied water, and Queequeg at times half-submerged in it, often makes it seem doubtful as to which is the target—the sharks, or Queequeg. So Ishmael sees man's existence:

Well, well, my dear comrade and twin-brother, thought I, as I drew in and then slacked off the rope to every swell of the sea--what matters it, after all? Are you not the precious image of each and all of us men in this whaling world? That unsounded ocean you gasp in, is Life; those sharks, your foes; those spades, your friends; and what between sharks and spades you are in a sad pickle and peril, poor lad. (p. 319)

The only saving grace with which to endure such an existence is the tie between men--the metaphysical monkey-rope made from the strands of man's love for his fellow man.

Out of his friendship with Queequeg, Ishmael comes to terms with all of humanity. The felicity that he feels for the rest of mankind is readily apparent in the chapter "A Squeeze of the Hand". (pp. 412-15) It is the job of Ishmael and some of the crew to sit around a tub of cooled and crystallized sperm, squeezing it back into its liquid form. While doing this, Ishmael feels a "strange sort of insanity" come over him. He finds himself squeezing the hands of the other crew-members, and has the desire to squeeze and be squeezed until a fusion takes place and all are joined together in a form of pantheistic brotherhood. It is perhaps the same thing that Melville describes at another time in one of his letters: "I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling."<sup>16</sup> For Ishmael, a very individual friendship with Queequeg has healed his "splintered heart and maddened hand." The result is a gradual extension outward of this feeling of friendship until he attains a universal acceptance of man, indeed, wishing at times for an ideal of utopian brotherhood. And it is through this "discovery . . . of the organic unity of man with fellow man," Hoffman states,

that "Ishmael wins his right to the 'sole survivor.'" 17

But these moments of ideality are quickly replaced by a return to the reality of the world. Ishmael (and Melville) is well aware of what is attainable. He knows that an all-pervading feeling of common fellowship with a complete lack of ill-feeling generating through the whole of mankind is impossible. Instead, "by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country." (p. 413) The fancy or intellect may give visions of "angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermacetti," but the reality of life decrees that the attainable felicity lies in the more common enjoyments. (p. 413)

Thus Melville seems to say that it is through willingness to accept friendship, and in turn to give of oneself to another, in Ishmael's case even to follow Queequeg into death by drowning, that man achieves the right to at least a not too-tormented existence in this world. Friendship saves Ishmael from his destructive tendencies and it also, symbolically, accounts for his being the sole survivor of the "god-bullied" Pequod. Queequeg's coffin rising to the surface acts as a life buoy for Ishmael, supporting him until he is picked up by the Rachel, the ship which Ahab had refused help in its search for lost crew members. In finding "another orphan", the Rachel becomes a symbol of man's interdependence, signifying both the necessity of man's concern for man and the limitations of individual man

which must ever make it so.

Ishmael, able through his relationship with Queequeg to accept man (and himself) for what he is, can once more return to the shore and its humanities. His is a soft, glowing grandeur of manhood. He sees the virtue and the vice, the fortunate and the unfortunate, the free will and the predetermination, and finds salvation through a sympathy for his fellow man and through a recognition of his own humanity. He is the man who looks with a discerning eye at the world, and tries to understand it; not a Starbuck who uses faith to block out truth. He is also the man who can accept what he cannot understand and is able through love to find a fulfillment in life; not an Ahab whose "sultanism" of the brain drives him to rebel destructively in a foredoomed cause, his life consumed by scorching hatred. Rather, Ishmael stands forth as Melville's realistic representation of what man can be in this world of limitations. Above all, Ishmael embodies the one truth of Moby Dick, Melville's belief that love of man for man holds both fulfillment and redemption for humankind.

NOTES - CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>Melville, Moby Dick, p. 461. Further references to this volume in this chapter will be by textual notation.

<sup>2</sup>Davis and Gilman, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>3</sup>Herman Melville, Hawthorne and His Mosses, in Masters of American Literature, ed. Henry A. Pochmann and Gay William Allen (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1949), 2:182.

<sup>4</sup>Davis and Gilman, op. cit., p. 124.

<sup>5</sup>Howard, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>6</sup>Daniel Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 254.

<sup>7</sup>Starbuck's father and brother were killed by whales. See p. 112, Moby Dick.

<sup>8</sup>Davis and Gilman, loc. cit.

<sup>9</sup>Howard, op. cit., p. 178.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>11</sup>Melville, White Jacket, p. 269.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Arvin, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>14</sup>John Halverson, "The Shadow in Moby Dick," American Quarterly, 15:443, Fall, 1963.

<sup>15</sup>Marius Bewley, "Melville and the Democratic Experience", Melville, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Richard Chase (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 106.

<sup>16</sup>Davis and Gilman, op. cit., p. 142.

<sup>17</sup>Hoffman, op. cit., p. 235.

## CHAPTER V

### DISILLUSIONMENT AND DESPAIR

Near the end of Moby Dick, Melville states that "whatever is truly wondrous and fearful in man, never yet was put into words or books."<sup>1</sup> And this is after the reader has already been awed by the mighty Ahab, after the reader has seen Ishmael squeezed into the "very milk and sperm of human kindness."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Melville's speculations on the powers and limitations of man had stirred within him some questions and doubts. And just perhaps, he, himself, had begun to feel the "intense feeling of the visible truth, . . . the apprehension of the absolute conditions of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him."<sup>3</sup> However it was, Melville's next book, Pierre Or, The Ambiguities, moves into depths of mind and heart before only hinted at. In a deep probing search for the real causes of man's actions in this world, Melville strips layer from layer of seeming outward appearances in an attempt to fathom man's innermost motives. The result is a despairing exposure of darkness at the core of man's nature. As Harry Levin says in discussing the "power of blackness" in Melville's works: "Blackness advances her banner in Pierre beyond all previous limits."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Melville even refers to his writing as "this book of sacred truth" in which nothing is to be concealed about man's nature.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Melville warns that his slashing dissection of the hero, Pierre Glendenning, should not be used as the means by which the righteous reader can sit in judgement on man's indignities. All are susceptible "to the inevitable nature and lot of common men." (p. 151) Melville states that



any man, if he were to look into the innermost regions of his heart and mind, would find little which he could show forth with pride to the world.

Pierre is just Melville's chosen vehicle for displaying this truth:

I am more frank with Pierre than the best men are with themselves. I am all unguarded and magnanimous with Pierre; therefore you see his weakness, and therefore only. In reserves men build imposing characters; not in revelations. He who shall be wholly honest, though nobler than Ethan Allen; that man shall stand in danger of the meanest mortal's scorn. (pp. 151-52)

The sub-title, The Ambiguities, is a significant indication of what this novel contains. In this story of an idealistic young man's growing consciousness of his (and man's) earthly limitations Melville offers the conclusion that all of man's motives and actions are ambiguous. And this is especially true of virtuous actions, which Melville traces in Pierre backward to subconscious evil motives, and forward to more evil. In fact, Melville has Pierre say that the delineation of virtue and vice is one point on which "the gods are dumb." (p. 382) And since "pigmy" man is limited by fate, environment, and probably his own evil nature, it is doubtful that man can separate virtue and vice into separate distinct values. (pp. 381-82) In fact, all values and truths come into question. In this book, Melville sees man as floundering in a morass of ambiguity.

Making this novel even more pessimistic is Melville's purposeful rejection of the "heart" as an infallible guide on which man can always rely. White Jacket and Ishmael, although keen surveyors of man's nature, let their final relationship with their fellow man be dictated by the heart. But for Pierre this leads only to disaster. He bases proof of Isabel's

kinship to him on superficial evidence, because in his heart "one single, untestified memory's spark [suffices] to enkindle such a blaze of evidence, that all the corners of conviction are as suddenly lighted up as a midnight city by a burning building, which on every side whirls its reddened brands." (p. 98) And his love goes out to this woe-begone creature who has been so cruelly bandied about by the world. Pierre will try to make up to Isabel all that she has been deprived of, in the process sacrificing his own almost assured future happiness and fortune. Compassion, to Pierre, is the foremost virtue: "The heart! the heart! 'tis God's anointed; let me pursue the heart!" (p. 127)

But in pursuance of the heart's dictates, Pierre creates havoc and destruction. And through Pierre's incestuous thought, (see below), Melville suggests that the heart may be governed by subconsciously evil motives. Awaiting death, one of Pierre's final thoughts is that life is filled with ambiguity, and "had I been heartless now, disowned, and spurningly portioned off [Isabel], then had I been happy through a long life on earth and perchance through a long eternity in heaven! Now 'tis merely hell in both worlds." (p. 502) In this book, Melville denies what he has heretofore celebrated as the best and most trustworthy guide for man--a compassionate heart.

But Melville is interested in showing the ambiguity of man's actions and, as Bertoff states, he does so by describing the "development in natural consciousness and insight" of this idealistic young man.<sup>6</sup> Pierre's attempt at living by uncompromised virtue undergoes questioning

doubts. First, Pierre himself wonders if he perhaps would have been so willing to help his illegitimate sister if she had been "humped and crippled" instead of beautiful and "bewilderingly alluring." (p. 151). Further, he begins to suspect that his own feelings toward Isabel may be more than just fraternal love. (p. 286) The world already cast aside, Pierre's dawning realization that his own pure motives and actions may have evil origins can only cause him to doubt all things. (p. 381)

A lesser mind might have avoided or rejected such thoughts, but Pierre does not. Instead, he rushes into what Melville calls "those Hyperborean regions, to which enthusiastic Truth, and Earnestness, and Independence, will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought." (p. 231) But once in these far regions, Melville says, "all objects are seen in a dubious, uncertain, and refracting light." (p.231) Everything, including "the most immemorially admitted maxims of men" becomes ambiguous. (p. 231) And this effort by man to reach ultimate truth may even result in a disintegration of the human mind. Melville states explicitly: that "it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by doing so he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike." (p. 231) Through Pierre's progressive introspection, through his search for ultimate truths, comes a realization that there is no truth, at least as man can understand it. And Pierre does come to lose the "directing compass" of his mind.

A partial explanation of Pierre's failure to come to terms with life

is given in Melville's description of Pierre's childhood. (pp. 1-26) What warps Pierre with regard to life might never happen to one differently raised. Melville sets out Pierre's early life as idyllic. He is a scion of an aristocratic family which professes to believe in virtue and honor above all else. Dwelling in a rural estate, Pierre has had little contact with the city, and hence, the "darker though truer" aspect of humanity with which he might have become associated. (p. 94) Pierre was also a youth who took to daydreaming of accomplishing heroic and self-sacrificing deeds. The result is a life-formed, romantically naive and idealistic young man.

Thus Pierre is totally unprepared for the entrance of evil into his life. This evil comes in the form of a letter purporting to be written by an illegitimate sister. Up to this moment, Pierre had looked upon his dead father as a "personification of perfect human goodness and virtue." (p. 93) This strong belief shattered, other blows follow which destroy Pierre's view of an ideal world. He comes to realize that his mother, fashioned by the "Infinite Haughtiness", could never consent to acknowledge Isabel. Neither could Pierre expect sympathetic help from the church, since the chief benefactress to which the church looks for financial support is Pierre's own mother. He sees that this "profession is unavoidably entangled by all fleshly alliances, and cannot move with godly freedom in a world of benefices." (p. 230) But if his illusions of ideality about the world are destroyed, Pierre feels that he, himself, must still act in accordance with the highest Christian virtues. In what he

feels is a Christ-like move, (p. 150) he accepts Isabel as his sister, putting faith in the values of the heart rather than the values of the world around him. The forming influence of Pierre's early life have made such a choice almost inevitable. In Pierre, Melville still reads man's character in terms of the conditioning influences of life.

But there is one way Pierre (and man) can achieve a reasonable, perhaps even a happy existence. It is through virtuous expediency. Melville does not claim this as his own philosophy, but offers it as a possibility through a pamphlet written by one Plotinus Plinlimmon. Through Pierre's eyes we read that there are two types of virtue, a terrestrial (horological) virtue which makes allowances for an odd failing in man, and a heavenly (chronometrical) virtue which is God-like and allows for no failing in man. Plinlimmon states that a man is not an angel and therefore should not attempt to be one: ". . . in things terrestrial (horological) a man must not be governed by ideas celestial (chronometrical)." (p. 298) By this same token, man must not sacrifice himself completely for "any other being, or any cause, or any conceit." (p. 299) Evil should be checked and charity practiced, but not to self-destructive fanaticism. God created man a man, not another God. For these reasons, Plinlimmon sets forth the statement: "A virtuous expediency, then, seems the highest desirable or attainable earthly excellence for the mass of men, and is the only earthly excellence that their Creator intended for them." (p. 299)

However, one cannot take this pamphlet as Melville's final word on how man should conduct himself in this world. The conclusion to this

dissertation is missing, and Melville only goes so far as to say that it is more "the excellently illustrated re-statement of a problem, than the solution of the problem itself. But as such mere illustrations are almost universally taken for solutions (and perhaps they are the only possible human solutions) . . . it may help to the temporary quiet of some inquiring mind." (p. 293) As a means of explaining man's conduct in this world, the pamphlet does not give Melville much satisfaction.

Melville, as pessimistic as he is in Pierre about man's abilities, still holds some small hope in man's relation to man. As with Pip holding out to Ahab a means by which to return to the worldly peace of a common humanity, so Lucy is the means by which Pierre can save himself. She leaves position and family to come to Pierre and to be with him, though, to her, his marriage eliminates all chance at reconciliation. But her self-sacrifice is not (as Pierre's) a seeking after an abstract ideal virtue. Rather, her actions are grounded in love for and belief in another human being, Pierre. Out of this love, she offers to help Pierre in the writing of his book, not only in the copying, but also "in the original writing." (p. 486) Pierre's answer is that this is impossible. His pride of independence makes him think that he fights "a duel in which all seconds are forbid." (p. 486) In rejecting help from a fellow being, Pierre refuses to see the interdependence of all men. Misdirected and misunderstood ideals lead Pierre to complete isolation. He has become separated from humanity:

"On either hand clung to by a girl who would have laid down her life for him; Pierre, nevertheless in his deepest, highest part, was utterly without sympathy from anything divine, human, brute, or vegetable. One in a city of hundreds of thousands of human beings, Pierre was solitary as at the Pole." (p. 471)

In much the same way as the isolation of Captain Claret and the isolation of Captain Ahab, Pierre's isolation from man breeds in him an inhumanity. The world becomes that which only "merits stagnant scorn". (p. 498) For Isabel and Lucy he holds only a negative hope: ". . . my most undiluted prayer is now, that from your here unseen and frozen chairs ye may never stir alive." (p. 499) It is even "speechless sweet" to murder his cousin, Glendenning Stanly, (p. 502) and hence wipe out all the house of Glendenning. "The fool of Truth, the fool of Virtue, the fool of Fate" (p. 499) begins with high humanitarian ideals, but, paralleling Ahab, he never learns that true humanity lies in a recognition and acceptance of the human, both in himself and others.

Melville gives few concessions to man's finer qualities in this black novel, but it seems that he still carries with him a mystical notion of man having something of the divine about him. Lucy, although over-etherealized, is one indication of this. Lucy is purity personified, the object of Pierre's youthful idealistic love. She is referred to as "celestial", "angelical", and as being "without the shadow of flaw or vein". (pp. 432-33,441) Melville even goes so far as to compare her body to the "temple of God." (p. 456) Her letter to Pierre (setting out her intention to leave her comfortable life and join Pierre in his poverty) has the effect of momentarily obliterating his disdain for man. It is as if Pierre "suddenly is brushed by some angelical plume of humanity, and the human accents of superhuman love, and the human eyes of superhuman beauty and glory, suddenly burst on his being." (p. 433) Her love and trust are

whole-hearted and unequivocal. Yet Melville's doubt that man necessarily derives good from well-intentioned actions does not allow Lucy to be the agent of Pierre's reconciliation with humanity and the world. Rather, as Matthiessen points out, she is the catalyst which precipitates the final crisis.<sup>7</sup> It is on her behalf that her brother and Glendenning Stanly formally impugn Pierre's honour. In retribution, Pierre kills Stanly, and in quick and direct consequence come the deaths of Pierre, Isabel, and Lucy, herself. In this fallen world, the angelic actions of a Lucy may bring about catastrophe instead of conciliation and harmony. As contrasted to all his previous novels, Melville does not let the abstract ideal of man's divinity sweep aside the "reality" of man's abject and circumscribed existence. Such is the pessimism of Pierre.

However, the creation of the angelic Lucy, in a novel which dwells heavily on man's potential for evil, points up Melville's own ambiguity in his attitude toward man. And an attempt at an explanation of man's limitations and indefinite powers is given in Pierre's semi-conscious vision of the Mount of Titans. Growing on the mountain are two flowers, the catnip and the amaranth. The "farm-house herb", catnip, is only sporadically placed close by "old foundation stones and rotting timbers of log houses." (p. 480) The amaranth grows in profusion. The difference is that the catnip dies every autumn while the "celestial," the "aspiring," the "immortal" amaranth does not, gradually moving upward and crowding out the catnip. (p. 477) Melville says this clash in nature is analogous to what takes place within Pierre (and man): "The catnip and the amaranth!--



man's earthly household peace, and the ever-encroaching appetite for God."  
(p. 480)

In a continuation of this vision, Melville's views on the duality of man's divinity and earthly limitations are brought together in picturing Pierre as Enceladus, the Titan. In the midst of a field on the mountain are a number of "sphinx-like shapes thrown off from the rocky steep," chief of which was "a form defiant, a form of awfulness." (p. 480) Pierre sees this form as Enceladus "writhing from out the imprisoning earth . . . still, though armless, resisting with his whole striving trunk . . . turning his unconquerable front toward that majestic mount eternally in vain assailed by him." (p. 480) Mirrored back to Pierre from the face of this Enceladus is Pierre's "own duplicated face and features" filled "with prophetic discomfiture and woe." (p. 482) To Pierre, this vision is "repulsively fateful and foreboding." (p. 483) It should be, Melville says, a source of comfort.

In an examination of the fable of Enceladus, Melville explains that the comfort which Pierre does not come to lies in a realization of man's divinity.<sup>8</sup> Pierre is an Enceladus striving to attain a position with the gods. Out of the "organic blended heavenliness and earthliness of Pierre" springs a conscious effort to act according to the highest virtue, to be Christ-like in his actions. (p. 483) This is a "heaven-aspiring but still not wholly earth-emancipated mood." (p. 483) Tainted by its "terrestrial mother," it is doomed to failure. Arising out of this failure is a "reckless sky-assaulting mood" (now doubly incestuous because of

its, again, earthly taint), in which Pierre challenges blindly the gods who will not bless his virtuous intentions. What should have given Pierre some consolation, Melville says, is that on at least one side Enceladus was the grandson of heaven. And if Pierre is an Enceladus, then this touch of the divinity gives him the right to attempt "to regain his paternal birth-right even by fierce escalade". (p. 483)

And for Melville, this striving of man after ideals still holds a great appeal. The proof of man's divineness rests in this struggle:

Wherefore whoso storms the sky gives best proof he came from thither! But whatso crawls contented in the moat before that crystal fort, shows it was born within that slime, and there forever will abide. (p. 483)

But even though man's attempt to "storm the sky" indicates to Melville that man may have something of the divine in him, it is still a world of ambiguities. If man persists in his "ever-encroaching appetite for God", worldly pleasure will be crowded out. No longer will man have "earthly household peace." As Melville says of man elsewhere in this novel--"Ah, muskets the gods have made to carry infinite combustions, and yet made them of clay!" (p. 150) In Pierre's case, and Melville would seem to say in the case of most men, the triggering of this divineness leads only to human destruction.

As I believe this discussion of Pierre, or The Ambiguities indicates, Melville's view of man has darkened. Earlier novels such as Typee, White Jacket and Moby Dick, contain elements of hope with regard to man, and a certain admiration for the nobility to which man may rise. But Melville, in Pierre, takes away these props which he uses to support a wish to believe

in man. Melville seems to conclude that man is indeed capable of little or nothing by himself. Fate, environmental conditioning, and man's own nature combine to limit man. Man conducting his life as a free agent able to make decisions of right and wrong and then following through these decisions to a preconceived goal is only an appearance. The reality is that man is incapable of actually knowing why he makes certain decisions, or where his choice of action will lead him. Ambiguity piled on ambiguity surrounds every aspect of man's life in this world. Certainly, man is no longer "a grand and glowing creature."<sup>9</sup>

NOTES - CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup>Melville, Moby Dick, p. 472.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 413.

<sup>3</sup>Davis and Gilman, loc. cit., p. 124.

<sup>4</sup>Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1958), p. 184.

<sup>5</sup>Herman Melville, Pierre (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1957), p. 151. Further references to this volume in this chapter will be by textual notation.

<sup>6</sup>Warner Berthoff, The Example of Melville (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup>Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 482.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 483.

<sup>9</sup>Melville, Moby Dick, p. 113.

## CHAPTER VI

### CYNICISM

To give his last novel The Confidence-Man the largest significance Melville reverts to his customary symbol for the world--a ship. In this instance the ship is the Fidele, a steamer cruising down the Mississippi picking up and letting off passengers. All manner of persons are aboard representing the different nations of the world, while the Mississippi would appear to be the stream of life down which man travels. The coming and going of passengers may be taken for birth and death. But now Melville, in contrast to White Jacket, does not conclude that man has a destination, and the novel ends with the steamer still in mid-voyage. It may be, since this novel begins and ends on April 1, that Melville now considers the world and man a macabre joke. Certainly the pessimistic tone of this novel supports such a conclusion.

The Fidele, which means faith, and the title of the book, The Confidence-Man, are both early indicators of the theme of confidence, or the lack of it, around which Melville weaves many shadowy nuances and ambiguities. But from this complicated maze Melville's attitude toward man can be read. Without question, it is pessimistic and cynical. Man is surrounded by, and seems to have little defense against, confidence-men. And this is because man is greedy, hard-hearted, and gullible, with an additional special weakness for deluding himself.

If one recalls that Melville requires both a head and a heart in his ideal man, the blackness of The Confidence-Man becomes more apparent.

Firstly, few on board the Fidele look searchingly at life, not caring to see the "absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not."<sup>1</sup> Because of this glossing over of the reality of the world, life is not really "lived." Instead, life passes away (the river of time) while man involves himself with the material and spiritual facades of which the world has so many. Man puts his confidence in superficialities, what he wishes things to be, not what they actually are. Secondly, Melville denigrates the precious relationship between man and man. No one person aboard the Fidele (except perhaps the Confidence-Man) has the ability to see man for what he is and to accept him, to see man as the despicable creature of this novel, and yet is able to rise above this knowledge with a compassion which Melville in Moby Dick seems to feel is the final goal of true wisdom. Instead, as Melville makes only too clear, the world is "always full of strangers."<sup>2</sup> True faith between man and man just does not exist. Thirdly, Melville has man appear as a schemer and a conniver, selfishly trying to promote his own interests at the expense of others. In this book, Melville seems to say that life is one large confidence game, played by many little confidence-men.

The Confidence-Man, himself, is an enigma. Just which character is the Confidence-Man in one of his disguises is sometimes difficult to discover. But in his probable first appearance, he is dressed in white and quotes from the Bible. In his second appearance, he is a Negro. The contrast of black and white, and the continuing allusions which seem to point to this individual as being Christ or Satan, have led scholars to believe: one, he is

Christ; two, he is Satan; three, he is Christ and Satan; or four, he is the many avatars of Brahma, especially at one and the same time Siva (the Destroyer) and Vishnu (the Preserver). For instance, Daniel Hoffman in referring to the Confidence-Man says that "Satan is at large on the Fidele."<sup>3</sup> H. Bruce Franklin in The Wake of the Gods claims: "Christ and Satan are the shape-shifting joker known as the Confidence-Man."<sup>4</sup> Even more, Franklin states: "In this universe man's Savior--Manco Capac, Vishnu, Christ, Apollo, the Buddhists' Buddha--is embodied by the Confidence-Man, who is also man's Destroyer--Satan, Siva, the Hindus' Buddha. Melville's mythology converts all gods into the Confidence-Man."<sup>5</sup>

However one may interpret him, it is certain that the Confidence-Man exposes many of the false confidences which man uses in an attempt to advance himself materially and to superficially explain away his existence in this world. And finally, Melville may be suggesting that Christ and Satan are both delusions of mankind, used to explain away the good and the evil which is inherent in man's own nature. Certainly it is only a superior knowledge of human nature which allows the Confidence-Man to exploit the passengers of the Fidele.

This exploitation of the passengers is made easy very much because of the extreme isolation of each individual man. In White Jacket, Melville creates an individual who saves his soul by recognizing his fallible humanity. The Pequod is full of "isolatoes," not the least of which is Ahab; and the lone survivor of the crew is one who learns to see man for what man is, and both because of and in spite of this insight lets his

heart open out to all of mankind. However, Ishmael's mind and heart are closely attuned and balanced and for him reality lies in "attainable felicity". Pierre on the other hand, follows his heart to excess and becomes a "tyrant of virtue,"<sup>6</sup> refusing to recognize the common fallibility of both heart and head which is every man's inheritance. His path leads to isolation and self-destruction. In The Confidence-Man, Melville again turns to man's relationship to man for a major theme. This novel is a sad commentary not only on man's fallibility but on man's inability to form a common bond of true faith with his fellow man. The one saving grace Melville allows man, as Ishmael demonstrates, is the love of man for his fellow beings. Yet, in The Confidence-Man, Melville says that man seems not capable of coming to this understanding. No one passenger on the Fidele has the necessary qualities, especially of the heart, which can lead to a selfless relationship with another human being. "Isolatoos" people the Fidele, with Melville seeming to say that this estrangement between men will last in perpetuity.

Very early in the novel, the passengers on board the Fidele are shown to have defects of "heart" and "head," and these defects make it quite easy for the Confidence-Man, under a variety of disguises, to move among the passengers, gaining their confidence by playing skillfully upon their hopes, their weaknesses and their fears. For instance, the Confidence-Man uses the avarice of the passengers to bilk them of their money. Or, in much the same manner, he takes great delight in exposing false philosophies, the true character of individuals (versus their outward appearances) and the



reason why some men have become as they are. In a series of parables in which he is the central figure, the Confidence-Man exposes many of man's follies.

Most of the passengers of the Fidele are lacking in both perception and compassion. Early in the novel, Melville portrays the general character of the passengers as a whole. A "wooden-legged, gimlet-eyed, and sour-faced" man is introduced. (p. 20) This wooden-legged man is the only one who sees through the Confidence-Man's (second) disguise as a crippled Negro soliciting alms. He would expose the "Negro" but is stopped from doing so by the crowd. To a plea for charity he answers: "Charity is one thing, and truth another, . . . . To where it belongs with your charity! to heaven with it! . . . here on earth true charity dotes and false charity plots." (pp. 23-24) His statements are proven out after he shambles off, for the previously piously charitable crowd now begins to look upon the Negro with distrustful severity. And the splenetic man's parting words accurately describe the passengers on the Fidele: "You fools! . . . you flock of fools, under this captain of fools, in this ship of fools!" (p. 25) Being easily deceived does make the passengers fools, and yet the perceptive power of the wooden-legged man does not make him much better. Lacking compassion, which would complement his intellect, he is an extremely miserable person. He is not ready, in this "April Fool" world, to accept the foolishness of his fellow man. Perhaps it is Melville himself talking when a later avatar of the Confidence-Man, the Cosmopolitan, states: ". . . one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool." (p. 161)

Fools the passengers may be, but making them even more contemptible is a complete lack of compassion for other men. Previous to the above incident with the wooden-legged man, the crippled Negro, Black Guinea (the Confidence-Man), had cheerily shuffled among the crowd, playing upon a tambourine. Melville tells us that from the Negro's "very deformity, indigence, and houselessness" some are made gay who previously had not been made happy by their "own purses, hearths, hearts, all their possessions, sound limbs included." (p. 19) Such an inverted derivation of pleasure is bad enough, but Melville goes on from there to describe a further incident which delineates the type of person who is aboard the Fidele. Guinea, whose head is only at the level of an ordinary person's waist, pauses now and then, throws back his head and opens his mouth. Various people then attempt to pitch pennies into his mouth. Throughout this morbid game Guinea retains his cheerfulness "and only once or twice did he wince, which was when certain coins, tossed by more playful almoners, came inconveniently nigh to his teeth, an accident whose unwelcomeness was not unedged by the circumstance that the pennies thus thrown proved buttons." (p. 20) This demonstration of utter lack of feeling for a fellow man, the exact reverse of Ishmael's pantheistic brotherhood, is the most damning criticism that Melville can use. An almost complete absence of heart in any of the passengers is what gives the deep flavor of pessimism to The Confidence-Man.

The Confidence-Man is not a book about the goodness of men, and Melville is at his most ironical when he does describe a "good" man. An

imposing stranger boards the Fidele and what makes him "look like a kind of foreigner among the crowd" is a general aura of goodness about him. (p. 48) In fact, he appears never to "have known ill, physical or moral." (p. 48) Melville surmises that this man's nature is probably such that it offsets and nullifies any knowledge or suspicion of evil which he may happen upon. As for attire, this stranger dresses in the finest elegance, with clean white gloves as a finishing touch. Soot-streaked as the Fidele (world) is, the gloves are spotless. Careful observation reveals that this is so because the good man avoids touching anything. Instead a Negro servant does everything which might entail a dirtying of the hands. It appears that never in his life has this man even been brushed by the dirt of the world.

Thus Melville sets out his formula for what passes for goodness in this world. If one has wealth enough to stay above the "dirt" in the world, if one has a nature which is not speculative, and if one has had sufficient good fortune so as not to have known the personal experience of evil, then one may be "good". The good man, Melville concludes ironically, is one "whose very good luck it is to be a very good man." (p. 49)

Melville shows man as having many petty weaknesses, not the least of which is greed. The avarice of the passengers is exposed in a number of incidents, but nowhere more bitterly than in the Confidence-Man's bilking of a sick, old miser. (pp. 88-93) Fittingly, the Confidence-Man is helped in his scheme by the victim's greedy desire to acquire even more money, though he will not spend what he has. The Confidence-Man offers this miser the rare chance of trebling, through investment, the hundred dollars which

he hoards under the pillow of what is probably his death bed. Momentarily, the greed of the miser overcomes his hoarding instincts and he hands over the money. He does this without receipts, or witnesses, just as a matter of confidence between the two men. Of course, the miser never sees his money again. The miser, as representative man, demonstrates Melville's attitude toward the coarseness and stupidity of mankind who still will try to turn a few dollars while only hours away from the impenetrable unknown.

Melville cynically portrays other ways in which man lacks perception. But if a man shows some feeling for other men, then Melville mitigates his criticism. For instance, the idea is advanced that a misanthropical Missouri bachelor may very well be as he is because of a too-generous nature. This seeming paradox is explained away in an incident involving the bachelor and the Confidence-Man. The bachelor, because of past betrayals by mankind in general and his thirty-five hired boys in particular, violently distrusts all men. His man-hating philosophy is a result of and protection against advantage being taken of him. Yet through subtle argument, the Confidence-Man brings the Missouri bachelor around to a qualified belief in mankind. At least the bachelor will try one more boy, hired (of course) for the pre-paid price of three dollars through the Confidence-Man's "Philosophical Intelligence Office." Thus the outwardly gruff and misanthropical bachelor is betrayed again, a victim of his deep inner desire to believe in his fellow man. His protective shield of misanthropy pierced, "his too indulgent, too artless and companionable nature betrayed him," Melville says. (p. 156) All the bachelor can do is decide to be

"a little [more] splenetic in his intercourse henceforth." (p. 156) The Missouri bachelor, lacking perception and understanding, has an untutored heart. A counterpart of the wooden-legged man, the bachelor can only withdraw from man and the world, eking out his existence continually railing at the falseness of man.

The Missouri Bachelor is gullible, lacking the qualities of intellect which Melville admires. Yet this backwoodsman comes off better than Mark Winsome and his disciple, Egbert, two hard-hearted practitioners of an idealistic philosophy. The Cosmopolitan-Confidence-Man finds that this idealistic philosophy allows no sacrifice of oneself in order to alleviate the misfortune of a close friend. Very simply, a friend no longer will be a friend if he desires, say, a loan of money. As Egbert puts it: ". . . platonic love [does not] demand love-rites." (p. 240) The abstract ideal should not be sullied by the mundane realities of the world. Very likely, the parting words of the Confidence-Man to Egbert are Melville's own: ". . . here, take this shilling, and at the first wood-landing buy yourself a few chips to warm the frozen natures of you and your philosopher by." (p. 261)

Through Melville's debunking of Winsome's philosophy we arrive at a somewhat clearer understanding of Melville's attitude toward the "heart" and the "head" governing man's conduct. Pierre follows his heart and in doing so drives himself to destruction. But this does not mean that Melville thinks a man should live according to the rationale of a cool intellect. On the contrary, as both Braswell and Hoffman point out,

Melville holds this type of person in contempt.<sup>7</sup> The harsh treatment which the Confidence-Man affords the coldly cautious philosophy of Mark Winsome surely demonstrates this.

In two other stories, the "Gentleman-madman" and "China Aster," Melville sets out what, from the general portrait of man painted in The Confidence-Man, must be taken as his realistic view of the superficial nature of friendship in the faithless world of the Fidele. Charlemont, the gentleman-madman, recognizes that friends (and fellow man) can only be relied upon to a very limited extent. Therefore, impending bankruptcy causes him to forego his pleasant ways, and he intentionally alienates all his friends. The reason for his actions, he later explains, is that, understanding mankind, he knows the friendship-splitting powers of adversity. Accordingly, he resolved "to be beforehand with the world, and save it from a sin by prospectively taking that sin to himself." (p. 219) Yet fortune recouped he can return, again "a man devoted henceforth to genial friendship." (p. 219) So it is with the rest of mankind aboard the Fidele. Any relationship between man and man is possible on only a superficial level. But adding an ironic twist to Charlemont's story is the Cosmopolitan-narrator stating that this story of Charlemont is not a true tale. In The Confidence-Man, Melville does not allow even one person to arrive at the depth of understanding and acceptance of man demonstrated by Charlemont.

China Aster, a candle-maker, is another who experiences the dubious privilege of friendship. A friend, Orchis, who has won a lottery prize, forces China Aster to accept, against his better judgement and "scrupulous

morality", a loan for which payment will never be demanded. But of course, the interest on the note and the note itself are called, ruining China Aster. And this may be how man himself is ruined, since Melville's narrator says of honest Aster that his craft "effectively or otherwise [sheds] some light through the darkness of a planet benighted", while Orchis' calling (a shoemaker) defends "the understandings of men from naked contact with the substance of things." (p. 242) Aster, or the man who practices honesty and morality, does give at least some brightness to this fallen world. But too often this honest and morality is seduced by the false Orchises, who make their appearance under the guise of confidence and friendship. In fact, there is one short sentence lacking on Aster's epitaph, the last portion of which reads:

FOR HE WAS RUINED BY ALLOWING HIMSELF TO BE PERSUADED,

AGAINST HIS BETTER SENSE,

INTO THE FREE INDULGENCE OF CONFIDENCE,

AND

AN ARDENTLY BRIGHT VIEW OF LIFE,

TO THE EXCLUSION

OF

THAT COUNSEL WHICH COMES BY HEEDING

THE

OPPOSITE VIEW. (p. 257)

The sentence lacking is: "The root of all was a friendly loan." (p. 258) Friendship, Melville seems to say, is only on loan in this world. It is

not irrevocable, based as it is on "false confidence."

So it is with all the various stories which together make up The Confidence-Man. Allowing man no redeeming qualities, Melville exposes man in all his littleness. Man is a wretched creature. This attitude of Melville toward man is implicit in the final scene where the Confidence-Man-Cosmopolitan kindly leads away the old man (who probably represents all of mankind). The old man cannot "see" in the dark, as many of those aboard the Fidele cannot "see," or do not wish to "see". But with confidence, be it false or not, man can come to a hopefulness. And these crutches of confidence and hopefulness are what man seems to need. As Melville has the Confidence-Man say to the very unfortunate soldier of fortune: "Stick to confidence and hopefulness, then, since how mad for the cripple to throw his crutches away." (p. 122) And lacking in both compassion and perception, man, Melville seems to say, is a cripple in this world. With false hope and false confidence, this cripple, man, dreams away his life in "the soothed mood of his revery." (p. 122)



NOTES - CHAPTER VI

<sup>1</sup>Davis and Gilman, loc. cit., p. 124.

<sup>2</sup>Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1955), p. 17. Further references to this volume in this chapter will be by textual notation.

<sup>3</sup>Hoffman, op. cit., p. 293.

<sup>4</sup>H. Bruce Franklin, The Wake of the Gods, Melville's Mythology (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1963), p. 177.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>6</sup>Miller, loc. cit., p. 292.

<sup>7</sup>Braswell, op. cit., p. 117; Hoffman, op. cit., p. 297.

## CHAPTER VII

### UNEASY ACCEPTANCE

The Confidence-Man is the last of Melville's prose works until he writes Billy Budd, Foretopman, more than thirty years later. Somewhere in the intervening time Melville has tempered his views. No longer is he hopelessly pessimistic or cynical about man. Cynicism has changed to sympathy and understanding. Acceptance of the evil in man and even the necessity of man being expedient in this world pervade Billy Budd. Melville, Leon Howard writes, has come to understand in Billy Budd that "human beings are what they are, and the object of wisdom is not to change but to understand them."<sup>1</sup>

In Billy Budd, Melville creates three characters who would seem to represent his final attitude toward man. Melville in his early novels (including Moby Dick) finds much in man to admire, but in his later novels (Pierre and The Confidence-Man) he shows man as an inept and despicable creature. However, with Billy Budd, Melville squarely recognizes both the good and the evil aspects of man and dramatizes their meeting. Billy himself is the personification of innocence and nobility, and Claggart embodies evil. Billy the good destroys Claggart the depraved, but this act gives rise to proceedings which bring about Billy's own downfall. Melville seems to yearn for the innocence he pictures in Billy, but he indicates also that Christ-like qualities are not for this world. Nor is total depravity. Compromise is both necessary and factual. And compromise Melville offers through the worldly Captain Vere, who strikes a human balance

between the almost inhuman Billy and Claggart. Neither completely virtuous nor totally evil, Vere appears to be the one most suited for this imperfect world. It may even be that Vere is Melville's representative man.

Melville shows admiration for Billy's Christ-like innocence and indicates what a powerful force innocence can be in the relation of man to man. Impressed from the merchant ship The Rights of Man, to serve on the man-of-war Indomitable, Billy makes no protest. Such easy compliance would have been unusual in another sailor, but Billy exudes peace. The ship-master on the Rights credits him with being the peacemaker on a ship which before Billy's time was "a rat-pit of quarrels."<sup>2</sup> In fact, "a virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones." (p. 294) But this peace-making is not all passive, since, fore-shadowing his later face-down with Claggart, Billy "let fly his arm", drubbing one particularly antagonistic crew-member of the Rights. (p. 294) As a result of this fight, the last of the crew members is won over to Billy, and the men carry on their work in harmony. With Billy gone, there is little doubt that the Rights will slip back into its former quarrelsome ways. For Melville, his ideal of an harmonious brotherhood of man has come to require a complete innocence. But, as the development of this novelette demonstrates, Melville recognizes too well that Billy's innocence is more Christ-like than human.

Along with love and virtue, Billy has additional characteristics which show why he is never able to understand the guile and malice of a Claggart. During the transfer from the Rights to the Indomitable Billy jumps up and waves a "genial good-bye" to his shipmates, adding "and

good-bye to you too, old Rights of Man." (p. 296) This energetic farewell could be a satirical sally against his impressment, but it is not. Instead, Melville informs us that Billy, "though happily endowed with the gaiety of high health, youth and a free heart, was yet by no means of a satirical turn. The will to it and the sinister dexterity were alike wanting. To deal in double meanings and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his nature." (p. 296) Guile utterly alien to his own mind, Billy little suspects it in others. Thus the kind words which Claggart always has for Billy easily dissipate any suspicions aroused in Billy's mind by Claggart's actions or by the Danzker's warning that Claggart is "down" on him. (p. 317) Because of his innocence, Billy is defenseless against Claggart's malice.

In explaining Billy's innocence, Melville leans heavily toward innate and inherited characteristics. Billy's appearance, a mixture of manliness combined with feminine features, suggests a "mother eminently favored by Love and Graces." (p. 298) His being found in a silk-lined basket only adds to what has already been perceived--that "noble descent was as evident in him as in a blood horse." (p. 298)

And this nobility has not been corrupted by the world. Freeman claims Billy "is not so much a child of nature as a man of the prelapsarian world."<sup>3</sup> Billy, as noted in his farewell to the Rights, has "little or no sharpness of faculty or any trace of the wisdom of the serpent." (p. 299) Instead, "he has a degree of intelligence going along with the unconventional rectitude of a sound human creature, one to whom not yet had been

proffered the questionable apple of knowledge." (p. 299) A simple nature that has remained unsophisticated, Billy "was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company". (p. 299)

Nevertheless, Billy is not quite a totally innocent figure. His fighting prowess is one indication of this. Another is a speech defect, a stutter, which blocks Billy's attempt to articulate under emotional stress. This is an instance, Melville says, where one can see that "the envious marplot of Eden still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet of earth." (p. 300) As the missing finger of Jack Chase, to whom Melville dedicates this novelette, Billy's stutter is at least one outward indication of man's imperfection.

Billy, however, is exceptionally innocent. And Melville relates this innocence directly to innate qualities, in direct contrast to values derived from a man-made society and civilization. In a number of instances Billy is referred to as a barbarian, recalling the high estimate Melville had of the natives of the Marquesas. Melville states:

. . . it is observable that where certain virtues pristine and unadulterate peculiarly characterize anybody in the external uniform of civilization, they will upon scrutiny seem not to be derived from custom or convention but rather to be out of keeping with these, as if indeed exceptionally transmitted from a period prior to Cain's city and citified man. (p. 299)

But this innocence of Billy's is placed in the world and society, and Melville's story is about how this innocence and the world are not made for each other. Melville can once more recognize and admire innocence and

nobility in man, but his intellect still holds doubts of the fitness of such innocence for this world.

A further development of this theme is carried forward through the thoughts of one Dansker, a wizened, old, life-scarred man. Through him two hypotheses are proffered about Billy's fitness for this world (man-of-war frigate as in White Jacket). The Dansker sees or thinks he sees in Billy "something which in contrast with the war-ship's environment looked oddly incongruous in the handsome sailor." (p. 316) And this incongruity leads the Dansker to speculate:

. . . as to what might eventually befall a nature like Billy's dropped into a world not without some man-traps and against whose subtleties simple courage lacking experience and address and without any touch of defensive ugliness, is of little avail, and where such innocence as man is capable of does yet in a moral emergency not always sharpen the faculties or enlighten the will. (p. 316)

It is the subtleness of evil that Billy is not able to handle, not the forwardness of outright manifestations of evil or dislike (as in his fight). His innocence hinders rather than helps when he is falsely accused by Claggart. His "faculties" or "will" are hampered by a lack of any previous experience of evil. The shocked recognition of evil strikes directly at Billy's emotional level and therefore instigates the stutter. Unable to express himself, Billy reacts in the only other way he knows how. Perhaps, as Bowen believes, symbolizing the "heart" defeating the "head", Billy destroys Claggart with a blow to the forehead.<sup>4</sup>

And it is for this blow against evil that the innocent Billy Budd, the "angel of God", must hang.<sup>5</sup> The articles of war, or the man-made laws

of this world, prescribe that even "the blow itself [constitutes] a capital crime," (p. 355) let alone being the cause of Claggart's death. Vere insists on the letter of the law, since he feels that to maintain order this law must be upheld. Through Vere, Melville seems to argue that man-made laws are not infallible and cannot be adjusted to take into consideration all contingent factors of this world. For even though at the "Last Assizes" Billy may be acquitted, (p. 356) his innocence is not of a kind that may be judged so by a court of martial law. This world treats of its own, and the appropriate action may be completely opposite to that which would take place in a higher sphere. Billy's angelicalness will have to be adjudged by angels, not by men.

But the important point for this paper is that Melville can again attribute to man many fine qualities, even a form of divinity. And what Melville sees this divinity doing is creating a peaceful brotherhood among men. Forty years later, the youthful dream of White Jacket has come alive once more. Billy not only creates a peaceful and happy atmosphere among both of the crews with which he serves, but he also draws forth the humanity of all those with whom he comes in contact (even Claggart to a certain extent). Vere and the officers are clearly affected by him, and the Chaplain is struck so emotionally by Billy's calmness in the face of death that he "kissed on the fair cheek his fellow man, a felon in martial law, one who though in the confines of death he felt he could never convert to a dogma; nor for all that did he fear for his future." (p. 365) The final words of Billy—"God bless Captain Vere" call forth a sympathetic response

from the crew, echoing Billy's words. (p. 367) The unifying strength of virtue, Melville seems to say, can be the common bond with which to tie together humanity. In this his last work, Melville still feels his heart pulled toward this ideal, even though he has probably lost all real hope of it. Perhaps through a universal innocence such as Billy's it could be achieved. If it were, one suspects that Melville would send every man to meet his Maker surrounded by the same radiance with which Billy is accompanied at his death:<sup>6</sup>

. . . the vapory fleece hanging low in the East, was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in a mystical vision and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and ascending, took the full rose of the dawn. (p. 367)

The hope, the ideal is embodied in Billy Budd. Melville knows that in the long history of mankind there is recorded only one man who surpasses Billy in innocence. Perhaps there will never be such again. But in the creation of Billy Budd, in this dream of what man can be, Melville finds a healing balm for the ravages of his own soul.

The reason why Billy can only come to grief in this world is that not everyone possesses his open-hearted views toward life. On the contrary, as Melville recognizes in many of his earlier writings, there is a strong element of evil running through much of mankind. For the personification of this evil in Billy Budd, Melville creates Claggart, the master-at-arms. Again, Claggart's evil, as Billy's innocence, seems to be due to innate characteristics. Outwardly cold, with "silken jet curls" and with a paleness of skin that contrasts with the ruddy complexions of the



crew, Claggart's appearance seems "to hint of something defective or abnormal in [his] constitution and blood." (p. 311) Melville attributes to him better than average intellect and education, and an obscure background which hints at some great evil in his past. This man, Claggart, takes an immediate dislike to the innocent Billy Budd and Melville unravels the cause of this hatred.

In this interpretation of Claggart's hatred for Billy lies Melville's explanation of evil in man and how this evil operates. "An antipathy spontaneous and profound" toward such a harmless person as Billy, Melville says, can only be "called forth by the very harmlessness itself." (p. 319) Claggart, "the direct reverse of a saint", can only be aggravated by the sterling qualities of Billy. (p. 320) But the enigma is why Claggart is so evil. The answer Melville offers is that there is a "'Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature.'" (p. 321) Differing from Calvin's dogma of original sin which pertains to total mankind, Melville ascribes this natural depravity only to individuals. And he delineates the character of such a person. It is a good description of the "closed heart"—dominated by the intellect, civilized, respectable, aided by negative virtues such as abstinence, without vices or small sins, neither mercenary nor avaricious, serious, free from any harshness of temper. (p. 321) In all instances maintaining an outward appearance of mind clearly subservient to reason, this type of person inwardly could be, and probably would be, working "toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of malignity would seem to partake of the insane." (p. 322) Indeed, "something such was Claggart, in

whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short 'a depravity according to nature.'" (p. 322) And this depravity cannot finally be accounted for by human knowledge. Why Claggart should so maliciously lie about Billy, accusing him of mutiny, cannot be answered by anyone at the trial. Perhaps Claggart himself does not really know why. For Melville, the answer lies hidden. The "mysteries of iniquity" can not be fathomed.

Thus Melville delineates Claggart. But present in this "natural depravity" is an approach to compassion even for the likes of Claggart. If Claggart is not finally to blame for his evil nature, then one cannot utterly condemn him. Even more, it is out of envy for Billy's goodness that Claggart's antipathy has sprung. Claggart (as well as Vere) has the intellectual capability to perceive "the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd." (p. 324) Claggart sees that never has Billy "willed malice or experienced the reactionary bite of that serpent." (p. 324) This insight only intensifies Claggart's passion for he "fain would have shared it, but he despaired of it." (p. 324) His natural depravity excludes him from innocence, and from happiness.

As further evidence of Melville's compassion for Claggart there is the description of Claggart watching the cheerful Handsome Sailor. The scene is one of sorrow. Claggart's eyes brim with tears, and in his melancholy expression appears "a touch of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban." (p. 333) The infinite gulf between

Claggart and Billy is not something about which Melville rejoices.

Melville sums up Claggart's predicament, at the same time shifting much of the blame to the "heartless necessities" of life:

With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, though readily enough he could hide it; apprehending the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart's surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are, what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted it. (p. 324)

And this is what Claggart does.

Nevertheless, like Billy's complete innocence, the total depravity of a Claggart is not fit and able to flourish in this world. Claggart's own malice is the cause of his destruction. He hates Billy so violently that common standards of thought and action are whisked away. Every attempt is made to trap Billy into misdemeanors for which he can be punished. When this fails, Claggart's twisted mind finds confirmation of an answering antipathy in such an insignificant incident as Billy's spilling his soup in the presence of Claggart. This, combined with certain false reports of Billy speaking ill of the master-at-arms justifies for Claggart his animosity and turns it into "a sort of retributive righteousness."

(p. 326) It is this unreasoning malice that drives Claggart to go before Vere with what the Captain recognizes as being a very flimsy story about Billy's mutinous activities. The repetition of this accusation to Billy's face seals Claggart's doom. Obsessed with hate, Claggart has let his monomania override his superior intellect. If Billy had not struck and killed him, then Vere would surely have had him hanged at the

yard-arm-end. (p. 341) One way or another, such all-encompassing evil finds the means for its own destruction.

Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere, with a mixture of admirable and not-so-admirable qualities, would seem to be Melville's representative of the best that limited man can be in this world. Billy and Claggart are the bright and dark sides of man, given innate qualities which are almost untouched by any contact with the world. Vere, also, has innate qualities. But in a truer representation of how the world works on man, Melville presents Vere in a much more human light than the other two main characters. The necessary conclusion one draws is that Vere is Melville's idea of a somewhat superior man who has adapted to this world.

Vere, Melville tells us, has that "ascendancy of character" which, with a Captain, sets the "general bearing and conduct" for the commissioned officers. (p. 306) Contributing to this superiority in character are a number of traits which fit him extremely well for the captaincy of a man-of-war. True to the common ideal of what is best in an officer, Vere has conducted himself well in various engagements, at all times being "mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline." (p. 306) Although related to nobility, he has advanced to his present position on his own merit. He is serious, undemonstrative, and unobtrusive. Melville states that "this unobtrusiveness of demeanor may have proceeded from a certain unaffected modesty of manhood sometimes accompanying a resolute nature . . . which . . . suggests a virtue aristocratic in kind." (p. 307) However, Melville says explicitly that as much as Vere has many

"sterling qualities," he has no "brilliant ones." (p. 307) Vere, after all, is a man, a human being, embodying many of the good qualities of mankind, but subject, too, to limitations. It is only the extremely exceptional man (such as Admiral Horatio Nelson whom Melville perhaps interjects for purpose of contrast) who has the brilliancy to formulate and carry out successfully radical methods of procedure. For others, such as Vere, it may very well be that "forms, measured forms" are the proper and best framework within which to work. (p. 371)

Melville sets out more of Vere's characteristics, indicating the interplay which takes place between this man and the world around him and how he arrives at certain ideas. Vere has "a marked leaning towards everything intellectual." (p. 308) And the books he reads confirm many of his own thoughts. Thus he comes to have certain settled convictions, conservative in outlook. His opposition to innovation is based on his own intellectual discoveries culminating in the thought that the new ideas (of the French Revolution) are "incapable of embodiment in lasting institutions." (p. 309) Vere feels that these innovations only make "war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind." (p. 309) Thus, as Howard suggests, Melville depicts an honest intellectual arriving at attitudes toward life that are finally grounded in a long-range view of what is best for humanity.<sup>7</sup> If Vere's conclusion about "forms, measured forms" is wrong (and Melville does not indicate that he himself thinks so) then the fault will have to be attributed not to Vere, the individual, but to the quite limited human characteristics which he possesses.

Even though at the trial Vere steps out of his role as witness and takes on the role of a pedant who demands that the rule of the law be followed, all but forcing the court to arrive at the verdict of guilty, there should be little doubt that Melville considers Vere in a sympathetic light. Vere's characteristics and the influences which have affected him are such that his conduct is not at all unnatural. Evidence of Melville's acceptance of Vere and his limitations is implicit both in the fatherly attitude Vere is allowed to take toward Billy, and in Billy's forgiveness of Vere. In addition, Vere is described as undergoing a twofold anguish in pressing forward the charge against Billy. Vere recognizes all too well the admirable innocence of Billy, and the depravity of Claggart. It is this knowledge that makes it appear that "the condemned one suffered less than he who mainly had effected the condemnation." (p. 359) However, Vere's philosophy and sense of duty say Billy must hang.

And lest the reader has not decided on Vere's nobility, Melville himself declares that in the private communication of the sentence which Vere carries to Billy, two characters meet "each radically sharing in the rarer qualities of our nature." (p. 359) This statement has led Berthoff to declare that "in their essential being Vere and Billy are as one."<sup>8</sup> Melville also speculates on what might have taken place at this meeting, and all of it is in favor of Vere. It is possible, Melville says, that Vere might have disclosed his own very important part in the sentencing of Billy. Indeed, Vere may even have abandoned his outward austerity and the "devotee of military duty letting himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity may in the end have caught

Billy to his heart even as Abraham may have caught young Isaac on the brink of resolutely offering him up in obedience to the exacting behest." (p. 359) Melville even puts Vere on the same high plane as Billy, labelling them both as "two of great Nature's nobler order." (p. 359) In addition, Billy's agony at the sudden knowledge of evil in man "survived not the something healing in the closeted interview with Captain Vere." (p. 363)

Because of temperament and intellect Vere has concluded that "forms, measured forms" are necessary above all else for the over-all betterment of mankind. This honest and perhaps even true philosophy negates the heart. And although Melville's own heart is definitely against such a philosophy, his intellect seems to favor it. Perhaps, after all, it is the most adequate way for man to deal with this fallen world.

Billy Budd demonstrates once again Melville's deep interest in man. But whereas in other works Melville lets himself be carried away by his optimism or his pessimism with regard to man, in this last of his works he takes a more detached view. Both innocence and evil are attributed to innate characteristics, and Melville shows them as being tempered very little by life. But such extremes are not meant for this world, Melville seems to say. Rather, it is the limited but good man, Captain Vere, who demonstrates that to live in this world one must be of it, and that this at times necessitates expediency. Certainly, for Melville, innocence and good heart promote the brotherhood he wants so much to be man's fate. But Melville also recognizes that evil must be accepted as a very real part of man's character. Either extreme innocence or extreme evil makes man unfit for this world.

NOTES - CHAPTER VII

<sup>1</sup>Howard, op. cit., p. 326.

<sup>2</sup>Herman Melville, Billy Budd, Foretopman, in Selected Tales and Poems by Herman Melville, ed. Richard Chase (Toronto: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1958), p. 292. Further references to this volume in this chapter will be by textual notation.

<sup>3</sup>Freeman, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>4</sup>Bowen, op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>5</sup>Levin, op. cit., p. 196. " . . . the good man has no retaliation which will keep his goodness intact; he cannot fight the world's evils without becoming entrammled in them himself; whether he resists or suffers them, he is overwhelmed."

<sup>6</sup>Freeman, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>7</sup>Howard, op. cit., p. 327.

<sup>8</sup>Berthoff, op. cit., p. 192.



## CHAPTER VIII

### A SUMMING UP

Melville's attitude toward man can be generally set out as a movement from optimism to pessimism to a final sense of uneasy balance between these two extremes. It is almost as if in the end Melville takes a position with regard to man which in one of his poems he proffers as God's position to the world:

YEA AND NAY -  
EACH HATH HIS SAY;  
BUT GOD HE KEEPS THE MIDDLE WAY.  
NONE WAS BY  
WHEN HE SPREAD THE SKY;  
WISDOM IS VAIN, AND PROPHECY.<sup>1</sup>

But if this were the over-all view of Melville's attitude toward man, the reason why he took his various stances is not so easily come by. However, a notation in Hawthorne's notebook dealing with Melville's religious sense may also be an adequate description of his inner conflict about man. Hawthorne says of Melville that ". . . of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond the human ken . . . .

[Melville] can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other."<sup>2</sup> Melville seems to have faced much the same struggle with man--at times finding man a noble creature, and at other times doubting that man has any traits which can redeem his many despicable acts.<sup>3</sup>

It is almost certain that Melville's attitude toward man is influenced by his increasing penetration of man's character, his insistent attempt to arrive at an understanding of man's real capabilities and

potential (or lack of same). Melville, in his writing, makes man subject to a continually more searching examination. And what Melville finds as a result of this examination tends, at least until Billy Budd, to deteriorate and to finally destroy his initial optimism about man.

In his first novel, Typee, an exuberant optimism about man sweeps all before it. The natives of Typee are innocent and noble and Melville accounts for this by proclaiming the natural goodness of man (given a natural setting). Melville does recognize human fallibility, such as the Typees' cannibalism, the corrupting influence of the white-man, and the erring factor present in human efforts (i.e. the missionary work), but a general aura of wish-fulfillment permeates this book.

And until Pierre, Melville keeps at least some of his optimism about man. Yet it seems at times as if he forces his abstract ideals and mystical notions about man to obliterate the concrete realities of human evil and pettiness which he so multifariously records. In White Jacket the meanness of the sailors is traced to their position aboard the man-of-war, and the cruelty of the officers to the "articles" of the naval institution. The true evil of a Bland is attributed to an inborn (and hence uncontrollable) quality. At the same time, Melville claims all crew members and officers of the Neversink have an "innate dignity" which finally makes the basest man a noble person. Thus through appeal to both innate characteristics and environmental circumstances, Melville mitigates man's responsibility for the depravity which is so prevalent on the Neversink.

Melville's mystical notion that each man has within him a piece of

the Godhead is carried over to Moby Dick. It is probably this sense of each man's individual worth that keeps the crew of the Pequod from Melville's censure. Few, if any, aboard the Pequod can be labelled as innocent or evil. Some, such as the carpenter, may not be as worthy as others, but Melville does not allow that man can be other than what he is. Ahab, for instance, seems to have an innate bent toward rebellion and destruction, but a great part of his rebellion is fired by the "heartless necessities" of the world. Each character, formed by an indecipherable combination of innate and environmental factors, maintains Melville's sympathy.

In much the same way, Pierre's conduct is attributed to innate characteristics and life-forming influences. But in this novel Melville is less inclined to see a "natural" goodness in man, or to let some abstract ideal obliterate the pathetic weaknesses of limited man. Early life experiences ingrain in Pierre the exalted status of compassion and honor and a Christian gentleman's obligation to put these virtues before all. But this is an outward manifestation of the "learned" personality. Pierre's innate drives, Melville says, correspond not at all to his conceived self. Thus a clash of acquired and innate characteristics takes place, driving this man mad. And for all men, Melville seems to have set up Pierre as an example of the pitiful impotence of man in a world of ambiguity.

However, through these influences which Pierre cannot control Melville indicates a sympathy for Pierre's (and man's) human condition.

This is not so in The Confidence-Man, where Melville puts forward few extenuating circumstances to alleviate his cynical commentary on man. Here, Melville has man subservient to the innate qualities of gross stupidity and cruelty; and the gullibility and hard-heartedness of those aboard the Fidele reflect the extreme pessimism of Melville's attitude toward man.

The bleakness of The Confidence-Man is due, no doubt to Melville's insistent attempt to depict man's littleness. But in Billy Budd, Melville achieves a more balanced view. And the sympathetic understanding of man which Melville displays is based largely on a return to an acceptance of the strength of innate characteristics and life forces which shape man. Billy is innocent because he is innately so. For the same reason, Claggart is evil. Melville says neither is much influenced by the world. Vere, on the other hand, is very much a product of worldly forces, his innately noble characteristics compromised and adjusted by the necessities of this world. Thus, in his last work, Melville suggests that man may be evil, or good, but it is through no choice of his own. This same incapacity to choose belongs to the compromised or "worldly" man, Vere. And with this renewed recognition of the influence of heredity and environment, Melville again gives his sympathy to man.

Moreover, Melville's optimism or pessimism about man is directly proportional to the nobility he sees in man. In Typee, Melville is exuberantly optimistic about man, largely because of the noble qualities he sees in natural man. But this good feeling about man takes on a deeper tone in White Jacket. Here, where depravity runs rampant, Melville cuts

a little deeper into the mysterious soul of man, and bases his still strong belief in the nobility of man on the abstracts of "innate dignity", defiant opposition in the face of an "insulted and unendurable existence", and fellowship among men. In addition, a suggestion of the need for intellectual development is given through the description of the literary Jack Chase.

The "innate dignity" of every man gives Melville an ideological base (no doubt emotionally instigated) for the full acceptance of his fellow man, no matter how depraved. And White Jacket, himself, rises to a nobility both in accepting his share in humanity and in choosing death rather than a suffered existence.

All of these aspects of nobility in man Melville brought with him to Moby Dick, setting them out in clearer perspective. Where in White Jacket man's nobility at times appears contrived, in Moby Dick man comes to nobility on his merit. No one is despicable, but few gain Melville's ultimate admiration. Melville's abstract ideals meet on equal footing with concrete realities, and neither optimism nor pessimism reigns.

Again, "innate dignity" gives a certain nobility to each of the "mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals" which make up the crew of the Pequod.<sup>4</sup> But grandeur of nobility is reserved for Ahab and Ishmael. Ahab has, in vaster quantities, the intellect of Chase and the defiance of White Jacket (in this case against the unfair "articles" of life). But through a negation of the heart, Ahab denies his bond with his fellow man. He is in the Hotspur tradition of tragic heroes, clothing himself

with a personal nobility disregarding of those he must carry to destruction (or victory) with him. Melville finds an admiration for Ahab, but he gives it with a tragic sense of this man's blindness to his common humanity. Rather, it is Ishmael who incorporates Melville's ideal balance of "heart" and "head". With an intellect that can, and does, look searchingly at life, and a heart that learns to open out and accept all of mankind, Ishmael gives outward expression to the "innate dignity" of his human soul. Such may be the nobility of man.

Nevertheless, Ishmael is the only person aboard the Pequod who realizes man's potential, and he is the only one who survives. Therefore, Melville's turn in Pierre to pessimism with regard to man seems in retrospect, to be a natural sequence. Surprising, though, is the depth of this pessimism. The "heart" and the "head" are completely rejected by Melville as being of any help to ambiguous man in an ambiguous world. Melville seems to give up hope that man can form selfless relationships with other men. Pierre, with regard to Isabel, acts in a supposedly completely selfless manner, but later comes to doubt his altruistic action and trembles at the horror of his real motives. He fares no better in searching after ultimate truths, for he arrives at a state of mind where everything appears ambiguous.

Some hint of Melville's concept of man's innate dignity is still present in this novel. The ethereal Lucy is one sign of this. Pierre as Enceladus the god-defier, is another. But the hapless actions of both indicate Melville has lost all real relief in this ideal. And, as much

as Pierre is an Ahab in concept, he is not so in performance. The gods he defiantly challenges seem to be ignorant of his very existence. The sense of the tragic is lacking. Melville's pessimism is such that he strips all nobility from man, not even allowing him honor in defeat.

Melville is even more pessimistic in The Confidence-Man. The people on board the Fidele are the very antithesis of Melville's earlier creations of noble men. Falseness, stupidity, and cruelty are the most prevalent of many despicable traits which the passengers demonstrate. All lack "heart" and "head". All lack the gift of selflessness. All are "strangers" and will forever remain so. All use the crutches of false confidence and false hope as a support for their meager souls' blank voyage through this world. All represent Melville's most stinging rejection of man's capacity for nobility.

Many years pass, as does Melville's extreme pessimism about man, before Billy Budd is written. In this novelette, Melville again sees man in innocence and nobility. Billy has a Christ-like innocence, the virtue of which spreads peace and brotherhood among the sailors with whom he comes in contact. And Billy has a completely open heart, accepting every man as his brother. Nevertheless, he lacks a worldly wisdom, and this lack makes him unfit for this fallen world. Vere, too, has a nobility, albeit compromised by the affairs of the world. But Melville seems to suggest that Vere's worldly nobility is all that man is capable of, is all that nobility necessarily can be in a man-of-war world.

As the creation of Vere indicates, Melville has not given over to

optimism about man. Even more, Melville still can create the antithesis of innocence and nobility—Claggart—who has an innate depravity and a closed heart which rejects his fellow man. Nevertheless, Melville's sympathetic treatment of Claggart demonstrates that Melville sees evil as a real but regrettable fact of man's existence.

Thus the long struggle between on the one hand Melville's wish to believe in man's innocence and nobility, and on the other hand his rueful recognition of man's depravity and pettiness, comes to an end. Less hopeful about man than he is in Typee, White Jacket or Moby Dick, Melville in Billy Budd is also less disillusioned about man than he is in Pierre or The Confidence-Man. The "yea" and the "nay" have indeed each had its say, and Melville's final attitude toward man is a very uneasy acceptance, a discomfited "middle way."



NOTES -- CHAPTER VIII

<sup>1</sup>Herman Melville, "The Conflict of Convictions", in Selected Tales and Poems by Herman Melville, ed. Richard Chase (Toronto: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1958), p. 382.

<sup>2</sup>Jay Leyda, The Melville Log (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), 2:529.

<sup>3</sup>Howard, op. cit., p. 179.

<sup>4</sup>Melville, Moby Dick, p. 183.

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