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HERMAN MELVILLE RECONSIDERED

by

Vivian Whitted

HERMAN MELVILLE RECONSIDERED

Herman Melville, often acclaimed as one of America's greatest writers, first achieved fame in 1846 with the publication of his first book, Typee. Typee, a fictionalized account of his stay with the cannibal Taipis on the Marquesas Islands, was followed in the next year by Omoo, another tale of South Seas adventures. Melville's audience welcomed these romantic adventure narratives. Since his first two narratives based on real experience had been so successful, Melville decided to attempt "a romance of Polynesian adventure.... to see whether the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity ..."¹ The result was Mardi, a romance in which the last half became a philosophical allegory. The reading public rejected Mardi, and Melville again turned to writing from experience with books such as Redburn and White Jacket. Then in 1851 Moby Dick was published. Although this book is usually considered a masterpiece today, Melville's contemporaries failed to receive it as warmly as they had his tales of adventure. Moby Dick, like Mardi, went beyond the mere romance to deeper philosophical, symbolic meanings. In his next book, Pierre, published in 1852, Melville turned entirely from the sea and wrote an extremely pessimistic story about a young man whose attempts to do the right and virtuous thing destroyed him. As Melville's works became increasingly philosophical and pessimistic, his renown as a writer increasingly diminished. After The Confidence Man, published in 1857, he turned from prose to write poetry. He passed so much from the public eye that at his death in 1891, he was remembered

mainly as the man who had lived with the cannibals. Although he was not completely forgotten, there was no major revival of interest in him until his centenary in 1919 and the publication in 1921 of Raymond Weaver's biography, Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic.² However, since that revival, Melville's reputation has increased more than it had previously declined. In the twentieth century enthusiasm for Melville, the author's reputation has exceeded that which is merited by his works. Perhaps Melville is neither as bad as his reputation between 1850 and 1919 indicates, nor as good as his fame from 1919 until today indicates. It will be the purpose of this paper to reconsider Herman Melville in ^{an} effort to place him into proper perspective. In order to do so, I shall examine four of his works: Typee, Mardi, Moby Dick, and Pierre. I have chosen these four because each represents a particular phase in Melville's development as a writer. Typee is typical of the romantic narratives which first brought him fame. Mardi is the first of his philosophical attempts and serves as a bridge to Moby Dick. Moby Dick will naturally be considered since it is generally known as Melville's masterpiece. Finally, I have chosen Pierre because it represents Melville's style and extreme pessimism after the publication of Moby Dick.

In his review of Typee, D. H. Lawrence states, "The greatest seer and poet of the sea for me is Melville."³ Melville does demonstrate his talents as a writer of the sea in his first book, Typee. Typee can almost be classified as a travelogue because in it Melville describes his sojourn with the Taipis. While telling his story, he presents a complete picture of the way of life of the cannibals. He partially

fictionalizes his account to make his tale more interesting. For example, he increases an actual period of four weeks to four months.⁴ Because of the "hearty and full-blooded exuberance"⁵ of Typee, Matthiessen states that Melville brings a new quality to American literature. As an example, he offers the scene in which Melville describes the encounter between the French sailors and the native queen who wants to display the tattooing on her body.⁶ Although there are places in the book in which Melville exhibits a certain exuberance, there are other places in which his style becomes so cumbersome as to detract from what he is saying. In some of his descriptions, his sentences become too complex to present a vivid picture. Describing the Typee valley, he writes, "On each side it appeared hemmed in by steep and green acclivities, which, uniting near the spot where I lay, formed an abrupt and semicircular termination of grassy cliffs and precipices hundreds of feet in height, over which flowed numberless small cascades."⁷ In order to visualize whatever he is describing, it becomes necessary to wade through his sentences one phrase at a time. Wanting to avoid such work may seem lazy on the reader's part, but in a book of this sort, a travelogue or romantic narrative, it should not be necessary.

One weakness of Typee is Melville's constant digressions. He launches into tirades against the corruptive influences of missionaries and the rest of civilization on the poor, noble savages. At times he sounds very much like Rousseau championing the innate goodness of the savage and the benefits of life in nature away from the evils of civilized man. At one point he exclaims that his vindictiveness in war is enough to

distinguish "the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth."⁸ At another point, while describing the many charms of the beautiful Fayaway, he sounds even more like Rousseau:

The easy unstudied graces of a child of nature like this, breathing from infancy an atmosphere of perpetual summer, and nurtured by the simple fruits of the earth; enjoying a perfect freedom from care and anxiety, and removed effectually from all injurious tendencies, strike the eye in a manner which cannot be portrayed.⁹

Melville is describing a paradise; yet he constantly seeks escape. Two alternative reasons for this are offered by Miller and Lawrence. Miller suggests that Melville recognizes "the horror that exists not far beneath the placid surface"¹⁰ of his Polynesian paradise. He cannot forget that these are cannibals with whom he is staying. Decayed fruit on a tree seems to indicate that the island life "still falls far short of the original Garden."¹¹ Lawrence suggests that though Melville hates civilized humanity and wants to go back to the life of a savage, he knows that he cannot. "As a matter of fact, a long thin chain was round Melville's ankle all the time, binding him to America, to civilization, to democracy, to the ideal world. It was a long chain: and it never broke. It pulled him back."¹² Thus Melville is unable to remain in the earthly paradise he describes.

Not only is Melville guilty of lengthy digressions, but he is also unable to portray convincing female characters. Fayaway is the first of Melville's women. Like her successors, she is too beautiful, too sympathetic, too perfect to be a credible human being. Perhaps she has her place in a strictly romantic, idealized novel, but in a travelogue which attempts to be realistic, she is incredible.

Melville further weakens Typee by attaching the "Appendix," which is totally unconnected with the rest of the narrative. This account of the English actions on the Sandwich Islands is a continuation of Melville's other digressions. It seems to be extra material tacked on at the end of the book because the author did not know what else to do with it.

"Typee is not a great book."¹³ It is an interesting book as an adventure tale, a travelogue, but it is not one of the most outstanding books in our literature. If Melville had written nothing besides Typee and its sequel Omoo, or even Redburn and White Jacket, his reputation probably would never have recovered from its decline after 1850. He would be remembered as a good writer of adventure tales, but would never be considered as one of America's greatest writers. Admittedly, Typee has merit as a sea narrative, but it is not all that important in considering the rest of Melville's works. Because of the different nature of the book, it contains only the beginnings of certain characteristics Melville later develops. It contains on a minor scale Melville's later weaknesses, but he has not yet gotten into his philosophical writing.

As Melville stated in the preface to Mardi, his third book was to be different from its two predecessors. Whereas his first two books had been narratives based on real experience and believed by some to be fiction, his third book was going to be fiction, which the author hoped would be accepted as true. However, the public reaction to this Polynesian romance was generally unfavorable. In a review of Mardi in 1849, W. A. Jones attempted to account for this reaction to the book by comparing Typee

and Omoo to the music of a flute and Mardi to that of a full orchestra. He explained that Melville's readers were expecting loaf sugar, as they had found in the first two books, and were not "satisfied with marble, though it be built into a palace,"¹⁴ as in Mardi. This description of Mardi as an unappreciated work of art is not entirely valid. It is true, perhaps, that Melville's audience was not capable of comprehending allegory, but in the case of Mardi, they had ample reason for their lack of understanding.

Mardi begins^{ed} like Melville's two earlier books. It opens^{ed} with the same sort of interest-catching phrase, "We are off!"¹⁵ The reader immediately thinks he is off on another exciting sea adventure. He remains under this impression during the first third of the book. He reads about the narrator and his silent companion, Jarl, deserting the whaling ship, the Arcturion. He follows their adventures up to the point where they rescue the strange and beautiful maiden, Yillah, from an elderly priest and his three sons, who are preparing to sacrifice the girl to their god. The reader next learns of the love which develops between the narrator and Yillah and of their brief idyllic existence on the island of Odo. But suddenly the narrative changes. Evil appears; Yillah disappears; Taji (the narrator's island name) is off on a quest to find his lost love. From this point on the reader who has been enjoying the simple narrative finds himself wondering whatever happened to the story. It seems to be lost in the midst of unending digressions as Taji and his companions travel about the archipelago of Mardi. If one reads carefully enough and looks hard enough, he will discover occasional references to the

original tale.. Periodically he will be informed that Yillah is not to be found on a particular island. After several hundred pages of digressions and the disappearance of the story he was reading, it is no wonder that the reader does not appreciate the orchestra or the marble palace of Mardi.

One of Melville's greatest problems in Mardi is his own uncertainty as to what he wants to do in the book. He begins with a narrative and suddenly shifts to an allegory. The result of shifting purposes is that neither the original narrative nor the allegory is strong enough to withstand the strain.

As pure narrative Mardi fails because, as has already been indicated, the narrative thread virtually disappears once the allegory begins. It is only through a few awkward references to Taji's quest for Yillah that the story ever reappears. Taji himself nearly disappears. Henry Popkin suggests Taji's similarity to Ishmael in this respect. Both Taji and Ishmael are introduced and developed as the most important characters in the book, only to be overshadowed later. Just as Ishmael is dwarfed by Ahab, so is Taji forgotten as Media and Babbalanja pursue their philosophical discussions. Taji functions only occasionally "to assert that the search for Yillah must continue, and when necessary, to receive the flower messages from the mysterious Hautia."¹⁶

Again in the narrative portion of Mardi as in Typee, Melville demonstrates his inability to portray female characters. Neither Yillah nor Hautia even vaguely resembles a real live woman. Richard Chase, remarking on this inability, defends the portrayal of Yillah and Hautia by stating

that one should not expect them to be real "since they are frankly presented as figures in an allegory."¹⁷ However, even before the actual allegory begins, Yillah is unreal. Melville uses the same kind of elevated language to describe her as he had used earlier to describe Fayaway: "Of her beauty I say nothing. It was that of a crystal lake in a fathomless wood, all light and shade; full of fleeting revealings; now shadowed in depths, now sunny in dimples, but all sparkling and shifting and blending together."¹⁸ Yillah, like Fayaway, is too beautiful to be real. In addition, she is too much of a supernatural being. She does not believe herself to be earthly, and Melville does not do much to convince the reader that she is, indeed, human. The love between Yillah and Taji is nothing like the love which usually develops between a man and a woman. It is more like the perfect blending of two spirits, especially since they do not even speak the same language. By the time Melville completes the narrative of Yillah's previous existence, Taji is describing his relationship with Yillah: "... no happiness in the universe like ours. We lived and we loved; life and love were united; in gladness glided our days."¹⁹ All of this occurs before the allegory begins. This is the story Melville hoped would be "received for a verity." Perhaps he yet could have been successful had the allegory been a good one, but it, too, was a failure.

As the allegory begins, Taji is pursuing his lost Yillah, who represents innocence and purity. In his article, "Puritans Preferred Blondes," F. I. Carpenter interprets the golden-haired Yillah as "the very embodiment of that innocence and purity which dreads the contamination of worldly experience."²⁰ Hautia is "worldly experience, which cannot be attained

without pain and the loss of innocence."²¹ Yillah, as a blonde, is innocent, good, and pure, while Hautia, as the dark lady, is impetuous ardent, and passionate.²² Possibly Melville could have adequately developed this theme into an allegory, but just as he loses the thread of his narrative, so did he lose sight of the purpose of the allegory. The digressions, which were a minor weakness in Typee, become a fatal flaw in Mardi. The original allegory is lost in all the religious, political, and philosophical digressions of Media the king, Babbalanja the philosopher, Yoomy the poet, and Mohi the historian. Taji's quest falls into the background and does not reappear in full force until the end of the book. When it does reappear, its meaning has become so ambiguous that the ending is nearly impossible to interpret. Tyrus Hillway suggests that "as an act of supreme self-assertion he [Taji] takes his own life in order to pursue the search for his Yillah into the 'outer ocean' of the afterworld."²³ On the other hand, Chase interprets it as meaning that Taji sails off alone in search of other worlds.²⁴ What Melville actually means cannot be definitely discerned. His rhetoric has become impenetrable.

One possible explanation for Melville's losing sight of the purpose of the quest is that the allegory is not unified. Matthiessen states that "Mardi could serve as a source book for reconstructing the conflicting faiths and doubts that were sweeping this country at the end of the eighteen-forties."²⁵ Because of this very quality, it lacks the necessary unity to make it good either as a narrative or as an allegory. In his discussions of politics, religion, art, philosophy, Melville is attempting

to head in too many directions at once. Furthermore, he is unable to mix philosophy and narrative. Popkin describes his efforts well when he explains the "when the narrative is effective, ... philosophy is forgotten, and that when the philosophical conversations strike a spark the narrative has died out."²⁶ Melville is not able to blend his work into a unified whole.

Still another downfall of the allegory is Melville's use of such awkward, artificial symbols and devices. He uses flower symbolism to convey Hautia's messages to Taji. Popkin suggests that this might have been due to the influence of his new bride, whom he had married in 1847 and who followed the popular fad of flower symbolism.²⁷ Regardless of his reasons for using the flower symbolism, it is a poor choice. These symbols are never developed enough to be memorable. They are simply a contrived device. Another example of an awkward device is the use of Azageddi to reveal a certain aspect of Babbalanja's mind. Matthiessen suggests that Melville uses Azageddi to express conflicts he feels within his own mind.²⁸ Nevertheless, the use of an individual demon present within a man's mind is not a very convincing method of revealing complexity of character. In connection with Melville's inability to use symbols well, Matthiessen defines the author's problem: "He knew how to write effective surface narrative, and was to prove it again in Redburn and White Jacket. But he now wanted to produce more complex effects; yet when he tried to surpass the techniques of the simplest realist, he had nothing at hand but the stagey trappings of romance."²⁹ Melville needed to learn to combine the abstract and the concrete.

The style of Mardi is also a hindrance to its understanding.

Melville tends to be extremely wordy and often ambiguous. His sentence structure is usually complex and many times too involved to be comprehended. His language often borders on poetry, but even though some of it may be beautiful, it is "not a medium that could possibly be sustained; nor is it very effective even for a short rhapsody."³⁰ In Matthiessen's words Melville "is hypnotized by his own rhythm into images that are anything but exact."³¹ As an example, he quotes from Mardi, "In Nora-Bamma, whispers are as shouts; and at a zephyr's breath, from the woodlands shake the leaves, as of humming-birds, a flight." He points out the inconsistency of the images of the stirring of leaves in the slightest air and the whirr of a humming-bird.³²

In addition to his complexity of style, Melville is frequently careless about such things as shifting tenses or point of view. He is constantly moving from present tense to past tense, often while describing just one event. Also, his point of view is inconsistent because through most of the book, he writes from Taji's viewpoint but occasionally slips into the mind of another character. These may seem to be minor points, but they illustrate Melville's carelessness as a craftsman.

Popkin describes Mardi as the bridge between Melville's earlier books, Typee and Omoo, and Moby Dick.³³ It is only in this dimension that Mardi seems to have any merit. It is a poor narrative and a poor allegory. Its chief value seems to be in preparing Melville for his masterpiece.

From some of the early reviews of Moby Dick, one would never guess that it would ever become known as Melville's masterpiece. Early critics

remarked that Melville's previous works had demonstrated his talent as a writer, but Moby Dick seemed to have been written by another person. W. H. Ainsworth, in a review published in 1853, described the style as "maniacal - mad as a March hare - mowing, gibbering, screaming, like an incurable Bedlamite, reckless of keeper or strait-waistcoat ..." ³⁴

Another critic wrote that all the portions of the book which related directly to the whale were interesting enough, but that in all other respects, the book was "sad stuff, dull and dreary, or ridiculous." ³⁵

However, by 1923 D. H. Lawrence was writing of the same book, "... it is a great book, a very great book, the greatest book of the sea ever written. It moves awe in the soul." ³⁶ Today most critics rank Melville as one of America's greatest writers and Moby Dick as his masterpiece.

Perhaps one reason for the changing attitudes toward Moby Dick is that its form is different from most other novels. Its nineteenth century audience had never known anything like it and was not prepared for its form, content, or style. On the other hand, twentieth century readers have had the opportunity to become familiar with all types of literature and can more readily accept Moby Dick as it is. Thus one of Melville's contemporaries, Evert Duyckinck, described it as "... a most remarkable sea-dish - an intellectual chowder of romance, philosophy, natural history, fine writing, good feeling, bad sayings ..." ³⁷ It is such an "intellectual chowder" that Wagenknecht writes that it is not a novel in the conventional sense; instead, its mood is that of an epic, and its method, that of Elizabethan drama. He urges the acceptance of Moby Dick as great enough to create its own category. ³⁸

Like Mardi, Moby Dick begins as another adventure tale and shifts purposes in midstream. However, the major difference between this book and Mardi is that the altered purpose here is not as obvious and as distracting as in the earlier book. When Melville changes his mind in the middle of Mardi, he fails to produce either a successful narrative or successful allegory. In Moby Dick he manages to blend the two aspects of the story so that neither is totally lost. As Frank J. Mather states, Moby Dick is "a magnificent interweaving of the two Melvilles - the colorful and robust narrator, and the mystic and symbolist."³⁹ The reader can pursue the book on any of several different levels without losing sight of what the author is talking about.

On its most elementary and basic level, Moby Dick is a whaling narrative. Melville incorporates all of his knowledge of whaling into the narrative of a young sailor, Ishmael, who ships out to sea on the Pequod. Ishmael soon discovers that the captain of the Pequod, Ahab, is a monomaniac whose sole purpose is to destroy Moby Dick, the great white whale who had maimed him by tearing off one of his legs. The climax comes when Moby Dick is finally sighted, and a three day chase begins. By the end of the third day, Ahab is dead, the Pequod has been destroyed, and Ishmael is the only survivor. Thus ends "the greatest book of the sea ever written."

On a higher level, Moby Dick is an allegory because characters and events take on symbolic meanings. The greatest symbol in the book is Moby Dick himself, who assumes different meanings for different characters. To Ahab, the whale is evil personified. He piles "on the whale's white hump

all the resentment and rage felt by his race from Adam down against the divinely permitted suffering in the world."⁴⁰ He wants to strike through the mask of the whale's whiteness. In his defiance of the "inscrutable malice" and "outrageous strength" of Moby Dick, Ahab cries out, "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me."⁴¹ Indeed, Ahab would strike the sun. He is the supreme individualist, relying on himself alone and on his own power. Later, while addressing the carpenter who is preparing a new leg for him, Ahab orders him to build a complete man, a man with "no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains..."⁴² Ahab, through his extreme pride and his defiance of all the powers of the universe, isolates himself from the rest of humanity. His quest for the white whale symbolizes his refusal to submit to the will of nature or to any power other than himself.

To Ishmael, Moby Dick symbolizes something quite different. The whiteness of the whale is an elusive quality, evoking a sense of something beautiful and at the same time horrifying. As a symbol of power in the universe, it is beyond human comprehension. Unlike Ahab, however, Ishmael does not seek to defy this power. He does not cut himself off from humanity. Instead, while squeezing the sperm of a whale to prepare it for the try works, he realizes the importance of men to each other. Accidentally at first and then purposely later, he squeezes the hands of his co-workers and thinks, "Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness."⁴³ Ishmael's view of the universe is, therefore, quite different from Ahab's. Ahab

sees the evil and defies all power. Adopting a more Christian view, Ishmael recognizes the benevolence in the universe and accepts the necessity of man's interdependence.

To Starbuck, the first mate of the Pequod, Moby Dick has yet another meaning. He sees the whale as merely a dumb brute, who is not consciously malignant. He declares that Ahab seeks the whale, but the whale does not seek Ahab. He does not seek to inflict malice at all. Starbuck warns his captain, "...let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware of thyself, old man."⁴⁴

Moby Dick is so full of symbolism that several volumes could be written to explain it. Yet there are also other levels of the story in addition to the narrative and allegorical levels. There is a philosophical level in which Ishmael, Ahab, and Melville himself contemplate the nature of the universe, the nature of God, God's relation to man, man's place in the cosmos. There is also a psychological level. Newton Arvin offers a detailed psychological explanation for Moby Dick. He suggests, among other things, that the whale represents parental authority and "is the object of an excessive and an eventually crippling love, as Maria Melville was for her son."⁴⁵ Still another aspect of Moby Dick is found in its mythic qualities. Arvin explains that "the personages of the fable, ordinary as they begin by seeming, very soon take on the large outlines and the poetic typicality of figures in legend."⁴⁶ One can discover in Moby Dick nearly any level of meaning he wishes to find. The purpose of this paper, however, is to consider this book in relation to Melville's rank as a writer.

As already has been stated, Moby Dick surpasses Melville's other

attempt at transcending the simple narrative level because on this occasion he manages to fuse all the aspects of his work. In discussing the structure of Moby Dick and the method Melville uses to integrate his work, F. O. Matthiessen explains that the accumulation of whaling lore "prevents the drama from gliding off into a world to which we would feel no normal tie whatever."⁴⁷ Melville connects his symbols to reality so that they can be interpreted on several levels without losing their original meanings. He interrelates the different levels by beginning with an account of Ishmael's actions before launching on the Pequod. He sets the background so that his characters can assume heroic proportions. He heightens the drama by delaying Ahab's appearance. He moves back and forth between sections of drama and chapters containing only factual information. He moves into philosophical discussions, as when he attempts to explain the whiteness of the whale. He adds more variety and inserts more meaning by describing the Pequod's encounters with nine other ships. Although he continually intensifies the drama, he never separates it from reality.⁴⁸ When he finally arrives at the three days of the final chase, it is "the longest and most sustained episode of the book; the finest piece of dramatic writing in American literature, though shaped with no reference to a stage."⁴⁹ Throughout the book he has presented "a succession of levels of experience, distinct and yet skillfully integrated."⁵⁰

However, even though Melville is more successful in Moby Dick than in Mardi, his shifting purposes leave their mark on this work, too. In the first section of the book he introduces a character named Bulkington, who promises to play an important role in the narrative. Yet, after the

initial build-up, he is mentioned only briefly once more. Also, in the first part of the tale, so much attention is devoted to the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg that one expects this relationship to be one of the major themes of the story. Yet this, too, passes into near oblivion. Once aboard the ship, Queequeg assumes the position of just another harpooner. The narrator, Ishmael himself, practically disappears from sight after Ahab appears on the scene. "To a degree even beyond what Melville may have intended, all other personalities, all other human relations became dwarfed before Ahab's purpose."⁵¹ In his early review Evert Duyckinck complains that the characterization of Ahab is too drawn out; Ahab dominates the novel.⁵²

Because of this emphasis, Melville is forced to alter his point of view. He opens with the famous line, "Call me Ishmael,"⁵³ but as he develops the theme and the characters, especially Ahab, Ishmael's point of view becomes inadequate. In order to delve into the minds of others, Melville has to become an omniscient author. This shifting point of view makes it difficult at times to distinguish between Ishmael speaking as the narrator and Ishmael serving as an alter ego for Melville.⁵⁴ As in Mardi, he has not developed technical control over point of view.

Moby Dick resembles Mardi in another of its defects as well as point of view. In this book, too, Melville is guilty of resorting to awkward devices. One instance is in the construction of the crew of the Pequod. Although the whaling crews may have consisted of a large variety of nationalities, it is doubtful that there was ever such a perfect distribution. Each of the three harpooners represents a particular race:

Queequeg is a cannibal; Tashtego is an Indian; Dago is a Negro. In addition, there are also on board the Pequod sailors from Nantucket, the Netherlands, France, Iceland, Sicily, Long Island, the Azores, China, Tahitia, Lascar, and several other remote and romantic lands. Perhaps Melville is attempting to broaden the scope of his narrative by representing all nationalities, but it is an incredible collection. Another awkward device is the presence of Fedallah and Ahab's own crew. These characters are so darkly mysterious that they seem to come from the pages of a Gothic novel. They are inextricably associated with the evil surrounding Ahab. Like the international crew, they are somewhat unbelievable.

Melville's style in Moby Dick is similar to his earlier writing but is more fully developed. Matthiessen explains that because of the genteel tradition, Melville's earlier writings are sometimes evasive and "stiff but honest."⁵⁶ By the time he reaches Moby Dick, he is freer in his language. Attempting to show Carlyle's influence on Melville, Hillway compares the clothes philosophy presented in Sartor Resartus to Ahab's speech about striking through the pasteboard masks. He then compares the styles of the two writers by explaining that like Carlyle, Melville uses a style which is "manly and powerful rather than liquidly flowing."⁵⁷ He uses inversions and elaborately wrought sentences.⁵⁸

Matthiessen discusses Melville's style in greater detail.⁵⁹ He identifies several different levels of style - romantic, Biblical, Homeric, and Shakespearean. The romantic level is often the worst level because it is here that the book has overtones of a Gothic novel. The Biblical level

can be found throughout, but perhaps most obviously in the two sermons contained in the book. The elaborate similes and lengthy digressions resemble the style of Homer in his great epics. Shakespeare's influence is one of the most obvious on the book. According to Matthiessen, Melville seems to have reproduced Shakespeare's phrases almost involuntarily: "The most important effect of Shakespeare's use of language was to give Melville a range of vocabulary for expressing passion far beyond any that he had previously possessed."⁶⁰ In addition to the range of vocabulary offered by Shakespeare, his influence can be seen in the poetic quality of Melville's work. Often, sections of Moby Dick can be rewritten so that they become blank verse form. Matthiessen illustrates this with the following lines from Ahab's first soliloquy:

I leave a white and turbid wake;
 Pale waters, paler cheeks, where'er I sail.
 The envious billows sidelong swell to overwhelm
 My track; let them; but first I pass.

Melville's prose is "based on a sense of speech rhythm, and not on anybody else's verse."⁶² It is elaborate diction combined in a "vital rhetoric" to build the "splendor of the single personality."⁶³ By the time of his writing of Moby Dick, Melville has learned to make language dramatic; he employs verbs of action which "lend their dynamic pressure to both movement and meaning."⁶⁴ He has also gained the "Shakespearean energy of verbal compounds ('full-freighted worlds')."⁶⁵ Using one part of speech as another, as when he uses "earthquake" as an adjective in "earthquake life," he creates a "quicken sense of life."⁶⁶

However, in spite of Matthiessen's account of the improved quality of Melville's style, he still has not attained perfection. D. H. Lawrence's

comment is most apt: "At first you are put off by the style. It reads like journalism. It seems spurious.. You feel Melville is trying to put something over you. It won't do."⁶⁷ Although in Moby Dick Melville often reaches the very peak of his style, he still becomes quite tiresome in places. As Lawrence complains, it becomes like reading journalism. His digressions and his technical chapters about the whale are often difficult to read because they become boring. Several critics defend Melville's use of these chapters on cetology, asserting that they provide the realistic basis for the book and make everything else credible. However, he could have achieved realism in a more subtle way. He is realistic enough in his straight narrative without the additional technical chapters. It is an awkward device to resort to inserting entire chapters of nothing but technical information in order to create a realistic effect.

Matthiessen continues his discussion of Shakespeare's influence on Melville by comparing several scenes in Moby Dick with similar scenes in Shakespeare's work. He writes that Melville is indebted to Shakespeare "for his insistence that outer and inner facts correspond."⁶⁸ As an example, he offers the typhoon which corresponds to the madness, the violence and turmoil within Ahab himself. He also recognizes the similarity between Ahab and King Lear in their relationships with their fools. Ahab's "fool" is Pip, the Negro boy who has gone mad as a result of being temporarily deserted in the ocean. It is only with this mad boy that Ahab exhibits any touch of tenderness or human compassion. However, he never allows this compassion to interfere with his one controlling purpose, to destroy Moby Dick. The difference between Ahab and Lear

is that Ahab is never purged of his madness through his relationship with Pip, whereas Lear is purged through his relationship with his fool.⁶⁹

Melville's concept of tragedy is similar to Shakespeare's because he presents the downfall of a powerful character. There is a grandness in Ahab's character, but his tragic flaw is his extreme pride and self-reliance. His refusal to accept any power above himself leads to his destruction. However, unlike Shakespeare's tragedies, there is no catharsis in Moby Dick. Ahab's "tragedy admits no adequate moral recognition."⁷⁰ He recognizes what he is, but he does not change. He suffers but is not purified through suffering. Matthiessen suggests that the catharsis in Moby Dick comes for Melville as he wrote, so that he is purged even though Ahab is not.⁷¹

The only way in which Shakespeare's influence on Melville is not beneficial is in the comic-relief scenes. In these scenes Melville's humor wears thin. He is better at serious scenes because they are more in his own vein.⁷²

The book which followed Moby Dick in 1852 was Pierre. Pierre was rejected by Melville's audience and is still rejected today. If Typee contains the beginnings of Melville's characteristic weaknesses, Pierre contains each weakness in its most extreme version. In this book Melville does not shift his purpose, so there are no problems of that nature. However, even with one theme constant throughout the book, it is a failure. Although he seems to be attempting to present life as it actually is, Melville relates an utterly incredible tale. He describes the misfortunes of an aristocratic young man, Pierre Glendinning, who is engaged to the

most beautiful and perfect Lucy Tartan. At the height of his happiness, Pierre discovers the existence of a previously unknown half-sister, Isabel. He learns that his father, who had died when Pierre was just a boy, had had an illegitimate daughter. His image of his idolized father is shattered, and Pierre, the virtuous young man that he is, takes it upon himself to right his father's wrong. However, he is faced with a dilemma, because if he reveals his discovery to his mother, the shock might destroy her. Therefore, the only solution left is for him to pretend to marry Isabel. Naturally, the news of his marriage sends Lucy into a nearly fatal illness and causes his own mother to disown him. Pierre's attempt to perform the most virtuous act eventually leads to his own destruction and the destruction of everyone around him.

Melville's purpose in this tale of woe, as indicated in the subtitle of the book, is to reveal the ambiguities of life. This is best expressed near the end of the novel in Pierre's dream about Enceladus and the Delectable Mountain. From a distance the mountain appears to be beautiful, thus its name, Delectable Mountain. On closer view it is a most treacherous, terrifying place. Melville seems to be indicating the difference in life between anticipation and the actual event itself.⁷³ In this same dream Pierre sees Enceladus, the son of an incestuous relationship between Titan and Terra, battling against encircling forces. He recognizes Enceladus' face as his own, and Enceladus' futile battle as his own. Enceladus is assaulting the sky in order to regain his paternal birthright. Pierre does much the same thing. He strikes out against the sky, attempting to free himself of earthly ties. In the end, his

battle proves useless because the only result he obtains is death for himself, Lucy, Isabel, his mother, and his cousin. Matthiessen compares the tragedy of Pierre to that of Hamlet, but it is Hamlet in reverse. Whereas Hamlet hesitates to act, Pierre acts impulsively.⁷⁴ Yet, even though one could parallel Pierre and Hamlet, Melville's work contains none of the power or force which characterizes Shakespeare's work.

Wagenknecht describes Pierre as a "cross between the Elizabethan tragedy of blood and the Gothic novel."⁷⁵ It is more like a Gothic novel than a tragedy because it is so melodramatic that one finds it nearly impossible to read seriously. The excesses of melodrama are evidenced throughout the novel from the very first page till the very last, sometimes causing scenes to be ludicrous. In the opening scene Pierre, passing by Lucy's house, pauses beneath her window. Immediately Melville gushes forth:

Why now this impassioned, youthful pause? Why this enkindled cheek and eye? Upon the sill of the casement, a snow-white glossy pillow reposes, and a trailing shrub has softly rested a rich, crimson flower against it.

Well mayst thou seek that pillow, thou odoriferous flower, thought Pierre; not an hour ago, her own cheek must have rested there. 'Lucy!'⁷⁶

Instead of thrilling the reader with Pierre's overwhelming love, Melville only causes him to wonder how anyone could be expected to accept such a scene.

Melville is so effusive in everything he writes in Pierre that there are no clear and simple images. The images he does use are often so inappropriate that they become absurd. For example, to describe Lucy's death, Melville writes, "... Lucy shrunk up like a scroll, and noiselessly fell at the feet of Pierre."⁷⁷ After presenting her as a near angel

throughout the novel, he compares her at death to a shrunken scroll!

Again as in Typee and Mardi, Melville lacks the ability to portray women. Lucy and Isabel, like Yillah and Hautia, are the blonde and the dark ladies. Lucy is all goodness and light, innocence and purity. Isabel is dark and passionate; she is the temptress. Lucy's goodness is beyond belief. Once she has recovered from the blow of Pierre's "marriage," she decides to live with him and Isabel. She has such perfect love for him that she believes in him in spite of all the outward evidence against him. Isabel, on the other hand, is mysterious. She seems to tempt Pierre into an incestuous relationship; yet she is so shrouded in mystery that one cannot penetrate her character. Neither she nor Lucy could ever be real women. The portrait of Mrs. Glendinning provides another example of Melville's failure to create living female characters. Richard Chase offers an accurate description of Pierre's mother as "a kind of presiding magisterial presence, rather than a character."⁷⁸ In her aristocratic pride, she, too, is artificial.

Spiller suggests that Melville's greatest failure in Pierre is "his inability to bring his symbols together into a harmony of tone and to use them so that one can move through them deeper and deeper into his characters and the profundities of his theme."⁷⁹ As an example, he cites Isabel's guitar. Throughout the novel there seems to be something extremely significant about the mysterious guitar, but it remains unintelligible. As Matthiessen states, Melville's symbols "are not created into living characters, but are dispersed in metaphysical clouds."⁸⁰ In Mardi Melville's problem is that he cannot connect his symbols to reality.

In Moby Dick he manages to overcome this problem, but in Pierre, his failure is greater than ever.

After a careful consideration of a representative sample of Melville's work, one is forced to reach the conclusion that the only one which stands out at all is Moby Dick. Typee is an ordinary sea narrative, which may have been exciting when it was first published, but it is no longer as interesting as when it first appeared. Mardi is a failure both as an allegory and as a narrative. Pierre is nearly unreadable because of its style, its characters, and its theme. Moby Dick is different because it possesses a kind of overwhelming power in Ahab and his quest for the great white whale. As Lawrence writes, "It moves awe in the soul." Moby Dick contains Melville's only memorable characters. Yet even at his best, Melville exhibits certain weaknesses. He never develops technical control over his point of view. His style is never entirely free of its tiresomeness. The only time he is able to handle his theme and keep it in control is in this one book. One book, and that not even without serious flaws, should not be enough to rank Melville as a literary giant. His position must lie somewhere between what it was after 1851 and what it is now.

Footnotes

- ¹ Herman Melville, "Preface," Mardi (New York, 1964), p. xiii.
- ² James E. Miller, Jr., A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville (New York, 1962), p. xi.
- ³ D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (Garden City, New York, 1955), p. 142.
- ⁴ Robert E. Spiller, et. al., eds., Literary History of the United States (New York, 1949), p. 443.
- ⁵ F. O. Matthiessen, "Book Three: Melville," American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York, 1941), p. 377.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Herman Melville, Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life (New York, 1965), p. 52.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 120.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 86.
- ¹⁰ Miller, p. 33.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 30.
- ¹² Lawrence, p. 153.
- ¹³ Richard Chase, "Herman Melville," Major Writers of America, ed. Perry Miller (New York, 1962), p. 884.
- ¹⁴ William A. Jones, "From Melville's Mardi," The Recognition of Herman Melville, ed. Hershel Parker (Ann Arbor, 1967), p. 19.
- ¹⁵ Melville, Mardi, p. 15.
- ¹⁶ Henry Popkin, "Afterword," Mardi, Herman Melville (New York, 1964), p. 548.
- ¹⁷ Chase, p. 885.
- ¹⁸ Melville, Mardi, p. 137.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 143.
- ²⁰ Frederic I. Carpenter, "Furitans Preferred Blondes: The Heroines

of Melville and Hawthorne," The New England Quarterly, IX (June, 1936), 255.

²¹Ibid., 256.

²²Ibid., 254.

²³Tyrus Hillway, Herman Melville (New York, 1963), p. 80.

²⁴Chase, p. 885.

²⁵Matthiessen, p. 378.

²⁶Popkin, p. 547.

²⁷Ibid., p. 553.

²⁸Matthiessen, p. 380.

²⁹Ibid., p. 388.

³⁰Ibid., p. 386.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., pp. 385-386.

³³Popkin, p. 545.

³⁴William Harrison Ainsworth, "Maniacal Style and Furibund Story," Moby Dick, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York, 1967), p. 620.

³⁵Anonymous, "Cause for a Writ de Lunatico," Moby Dick, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York, 1967), p. 619.

³⁶Lawrence, p. 173.

³⁷Evert Duyckinck, "Melville's Moby Dick; or, The Whale," The Recognition of Herman Melville, ed. Hershel Parker (Ann Arbor, 1967), p. 40.

³⁸Edward Wagenknecht, "Our Contemporary, Herman Melville," College English, XI (March, 1950), 303.

³⁹Frank J. Mather, "Herman Melville," The Saturday Review of Literature, V (April 27, 1929), 946.

⁴⁰Spiller, p. 454.

⁴¹Herman Melville, Moby Dick, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York, 1967), p. 144.

⁴²Ibid., p. 390.

⁴³Ibid., p. 349.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 394.

⁴⁵Newton Arvin, Herman Melville (New York, 1950), p. 174.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 184.

⁴⁷Matthiessen, p. 416.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 417-420.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 421.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 412.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 447.

⁵²Duyckinck, p. 41.

⁵³Melville, Moby Dick, p. 12.

⁵⁴Hillway, p. 87.

⁵⁶Matthiessen, p. 422.

⁵⁷Hillway, p. 86.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹The following discussion of Melville's style is condensed from F. O. Matthiessen's discussion. However, the criticism of Melville's style, beginning with Lawrence's comment, is my own.

⁶⁰Matthiessen, p. 425.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 426.

⁶²Ibid., p. 430.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 431.

⁶⁶Ibid.

- 67 Lawrence, p. 157.
- 68 Matthiessen, p. 417.
- 69 Ibid., pp. 449-452.
- 70 Ibid., p. 456.
- 71 Ibid., p. 458.
- 72 Ibid., p. 432.
- 73 Ibid., p. 483.
- 74 Ibid., p. 467.
- 75 Wagenknecht, 304.
- 76 Herman Melville, Pierre (New York, 1957), pp. 1-2.
- 77 Ibid., p. 503.
- 78 Chase, p. 885.
- 79 Spiller, p. 459.
- 80 Matthiessen, p. 481.

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