Melville: Sceptic

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MELVILLE: SCEPTIC

by

Sister Mary Dominic Stevens, O.P.

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

February

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Melville was an artist, not a philosopher. But he was an artist with a persistent interest in philosophy, and this interest colored all the themes and many of the images of his major works. In connection with Melville, the term "philosophy" is used in its widest connotations as a broad pattern of interrelated and queried concepts.

It is not necessary to prove that Melville was a sceptic. His scepticism has been recognized for a century. Several of Melville’s fundamentally metaphysical problems have received extended treatment alone and in small related groups; nevertheless, little attempt has been made to define what his scepticism entails as scepticism, that is, as a fairly coherent, related and sequential set of philosophical attitudes and questions.

One or another of Melville’s sceptic sources has received attention in relation to his scepticism, but scholarship has yet to bring together the rather surprising number of eminent sceptic writers that contributed to the aggregate scepticism that was his. The amount of emphasis given each sceptic writer in this study does not depend on his prestige in the field of philosophy but on the proportion of his discernable or probable influence on Melville. Montaigne is therefore considered in some detail, because Melville purchased his works, showed evidence of having read him carefully, incorporated his thought into his works, maintained an abiding interest in him, and Montaigne served as mentor to many philosophers who likewise influenced Melville,
particularly Pierre Bayle, probably Hume. The inclusion of Descartes and Kant under Melville's sceptic sources by no means implies they were intentionally sceptics. On the contrary, they labored to solve doubts raised by scepticism. In a restricted sense, however, they may be included under a consideration of scepticism, since, for many, the questions they raised, and the problems they treated, proved more powerful than any answers given.

No two problems, nor attitudes toward them, are precisely the same in any two philosophers; nevertheless, a certain amoeboid core of common elements and underlying questions emerges from the writings of these sceptically philosophic writers who represent a common heritage of influence and philosophical inbreeding. This is not a study in minute, direct borrowings. The selected quotations from these sceptic writers offered at the beginning of sections of this study suggest the sources from which Melville derived the terms and direction of his own arguments and questions and his sceptic attitude toward them. It is said of the Petrarchan ideal man that he may be indebted to others for ideas but never for style. In like manner, this study suggests that many of Melville's sceptic ideas are derivative but clothed in his own artistic rhetoric.

The present approach to Melville may be neither philosophic enough for the philosopher nor literary enough for the literati, but its intended value lies in showing the bearing of the former upon the latter. This is one approach to Melville among many and should be recognized as such, but it is an important one.

In their introduction to History of Political Philosophy (Chicago,
1963), editors Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey observe: "The great intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century which brought to light modern natural science was a revolution of a new philosophy or science against traditional (chiefly Aristotelian) philosophy or science." Much of modern thought, in fact, had its stimulus as a reaction to "traditional (chiefly Aristotelian)" thought. Because positions are often better seen in juxtaposition, certain passages from Aristotle and a pre-Renaissance Aristotelian philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas, have been introduced as a representative type of the thought against which much of scepticism militated.

I have not specifically entered into the debate over Melville's spokesman. When views from Melville's works are offered as Melville's own, they are generally based on accumulative evidence, tone, or substantiation in more directly personal sources such as journals or letters.

The format of the study follows Kate L. Turabian's manual for writers. I have not standardized spellings: my own preference is "sceptic," but the spelling "skeptic" has been left in sources which use it. A variation for "Pyrrhonian"—"Pyrrhonean"—also occurs.

I once heard Vernon Louis Parrington praised for announcing his own personal stance before offering his thought; this he did so that any bias, however unintentional, might not be insinuated into his audience but honestly appraised. Such honesty deserves imitation, and I shall try to follow his good example by declaring that I am a Christian writing of a non-Christian. I do not always agree with the direction or stress of Melville's arguments, but I have endeavored to present his arguments, not my own. It is not necessary
to be in full agreement with Melville, however, to feel a deep empathy with the struggle that was his.
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PART I

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEM
CHAPTER I

BACKGROUNDS OF SCEPTICISM: A SKELETAL HISTORY

"The skeleton of the whale furnishes but little clue to the shape of his fully invested body"
-Moby-Dick.

Reasons for a skeletal history

In his discussion of the whale's skeleton in Moby-Dick, Herman Melville declares:

I could not but be struck anew with the circumstance, so variously repeated in this book, that the skeleton of the whale is by no means the mould of his invested form...

How vain and foolish, then, thought I, for timid untravelled man to try to comprehend aright this wondrous whale, by merely poring over his dead attenuated skeleton.

The skeleton of the whale furnishes but little clue to the shape of his fully invested body.1

Although the preceding extracts might well stand as epigraphs for the present study in its entirety, they are offered—with an admittedly bounding synaptic

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1. The Works of Herman Melville (16 vols.; London: Constable & Co., Ltd., 1922-1924), II, chap. ciii, 217, 218; chap. civ, 221. The project leading toward a definitive edition of Melville's works under the general editorship of Professor Harrison Hayford of Northwestern University began official operation July 1, 1965; therefore, no volumes were yet available for the present study. The Hendricks House edition, which was to have superseded the Constable edition, remains, as yet, incomplete. The Standard Edition, at this time, is the Constable edition, and, unless otherwise stated, in all references to and citations from Melville's writings the Constable edition will be used. Notes will include the commonly used short titles, the volume number of the novel (not the novel's number in the set) only if the work occupies two volumes of the Constable edition, the chapter number (to facilitate the location of citations in other editions), and page; in addition, Pierre will also be cited by book.
application—as a point of reference for the more immediate concerns of this, the beginning, chapter, because it may likewise be maintained, perhaps complained, that neither, of course, can the "monstrous whale" of scepticism be comprehended in an attenuated skeletal history; yet, even as Melville found it eminently useful for his purpose to devote two chapters to a particular discussion of his whale's skeleton, so an initial chapter will be ventured here on a "skeleton of scepticism" on the grounds that it, too, is useful to the present purpose—that of placing Melville in his epistemological context and providing a background and basis for understanding the significance of the reading, much of it early, which mixed with mind to form the matrix of his philosophical writings. But this history, highly selective as it is and emphasizing names found in Melville's reading or works, does incorporate a surprising number of outstanding names in the annals of sceptical thought and demonstrates a development of implication and intensity which had reached a certain degree of culmination by the time of Melville in the nineteenth century.

The kinds of scepticism

Scepticism has become something of a generic term comprehending many kinds of scepticisms. In its broadest context scepticism denotes doubt as opposed to dogmatism. However, with its revival during the renaissance, particularly during the reformation, scepticism was employed to bolster faith: the efficacy of the senses and of the reason was depreciated in an effort to establish faith as the sole trustworthy repository of confidence. In this sense, scepticism was not opposed to but subservient to the interests of belief—but it was belief, not knowledge: this is, generally, the fideist position.
In the kaleidoscopic confusion that accompanied the reformation, man was no longer faced with a faith but the faiths. Reactions differed: some chose one of "the faiths"; some chose not to choose and turned the batteries of scepticism on faith itself and became unbelievers, so that another scepticism arose synonymous with unbelief. Finally, since man as ethical and moral agent acts according to his criterions of belief or knowledge, and since these props of morality had buckled for many sceptics, scepticism, for some, devolved to libertinism and depravity. Scepticism, then, affects the spheres of religion and philosophy—epistemology and ethics—man's believing, knowing, and doing: a man can profess to have faith and morality without (demonstrable) knowledge; or a man can be sans faith and knowledge but maintain a blind drive for morality—often based on feeling; or he can be void of any definitively professed stand on faith, knowledge, and morality, which is, unfortunately, the malaise of modern man and a prime symptom of the decline of western civilization—man's commitment to nothingness.

Origins in Greek thought

Scepticism as a philosophical position, or, paradoxically, the profession of a lack of one, orginated in ancient Greek thought. In the "Apology for Raimond Sebond" in Hazlitt's edition of Montaigne's works, which Melville owned, a footnote offers the following comment on a particular passage: "There are three general methods of philosophis[i]ng, the one dogmatic, the other academic, and the other sceptic. The first affirm they have found the truth, the next declare it to be above our comprehension, and the others are still in quest of it."¹ The academic position, although one of

¹The Complete Works of Michael De Montaigne; Comprising; The Essays
the two types of classical scepticism, is also a type of negative dogmatism, since it knows that it does not know:¹ negative dogmatism or academic scepticism, "formulated in the Platonic Academy in the third century, b.c., developed from the Socratic observation, 'All I know is that I know nothing.' Its theoretical formulation is attributed to Arcesilas, c. 315-241 b.c., and Carneades, c. 213-129 b.c."² The arguments of academic scepticism have come down to us through Cicero's Academica and De Natura Deorum, through their refutation in St. Augustine's Contra Academicos, and in the summary given by Diogenes Laertius, who also summarizes Pyrrhonistic scepticism.

Sceptical thought moved from the Academy to the school of the Pyrrhonian sceptics, so-called because, as a movement, it supposedly began with the legendary figure of Pyrrho of Elis, c. 360-275 B.C. The Pyrrhonist questions the reliability of sense knowledge and hence of the reason and disciplines which depend upon that knowledge; because of the deceptive and limited nature of his knowledge, he consequently holds suspect the common, everyday belief in the phenomenal world. Again, because of his cognitive limitations, the Pyrrhonist does not feel justified in proclaiming impregnable conclusions;

(Translated by Cotton); The Letters; The Journey into Germany and Italy; Now First Translated; A Life, by the Editor; Notes from All the Commentators; The Critical Opinions of Eminent Authors on Montaigne; The Eloge of MM. Jay and Villemain; A Bibliographical Notice of All the Editions; and Copious Indexes, ed. William Hazlitt (London: John Templeman, 1842), Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 231, n. 1. Hereafter cited as Montaigne. The three methods of philosophizing, as Hazlitt rightly states in the footnote, Montaigne borrows from the opening remarks of Sextus Empiricus and may be seen in his Outlines of Pyrrhonism, trans. Rev. R. G. Bury (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1933), I, 3.

¹Sextus Empiricus, I, xxxviii.

rather, he considers, weighs, evaluates, questions, and doubts. Of necessity, the Pyrrhonist must make some proximate, if still doubtful, judgments, but he suspends ultimate judgment: he is sensitive to antinomies, to the pros and cons of a question, and what sometimes appears to be a categorical conclusion or judgment, when traced far enough, reveals itself as one of an opposing pair of "conclusions," for Pyrrhonistic scepticism is dialectical, the argument often being a self-argument rather than that between two opponents. Frequently, it is this self-argument of an active, probing mind that accounts for apparent contradictions, though neither contra-diction of the argument is completely and finally sanctioned: hence, the sceptical element in Emerson—by no means negligible—caused him to say, in his essay on self-reliance, that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, and Melville's Babbalanja finds his consistency in the sum of his inconsistencies. The final abnegation of both extreme positions results in a neutral or "neuter" position—relative to the suspension of judgment and conducive to an aura of ambiguity—with the eye of the intellect still open to regard both; further, the sceptical problem may be compounded by the presence of out-and-out diversity rather than two nicely juxtaposed polarities.

Pyrrhonistic scepticism is an open mental attitude rather than a closed philosophical system: although a purpose of this study will be to show that a certain philosophical pattern, a logical and sequential drive toward nihilism, can be traced in Melville, it nevertheless remains more the reasoning toward a possibility, perhaps the catharsis of a fear, rather than an irrefragable conclusion, for, without in any way obliterating the far

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1 Mardi, II, chap. xxxix, 160.
heavier element of negation, the affirmative side has a way of bobbing up like a persistent though wave-swamped buoy in a heavy storm—it's simply there, and, though sometimes, like the buoy, it's not more prominent than a dot on an oceanic vastness, it can't be ignored without ignoring the total Melville. The procedure and final emphasis of this study will be more clearly perceived if it is remembered that, while the main current of the argument seems to be following an unimpeded path toward nihilism, the injection of contradictions and questions is intentional, because they are Melville's and show that in the end, despite a sharp veering into darker waters, final questions are left open, and Melville's position more closely approximates that of the Pyrrhonistic sceptic. One senses Melville's courageous effort to comprehend, to accept, if need be, the direst possible view of reality if this is what is, but the if remains as well as an always pendent question mark.

As the previously cited footnote in the Hazlitt edition of Montaigne claims, borrowing from Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonistic scepticism is a quest: truth, like a beautiful woman, often aloof and elusive, surrenders itself little by little only on the condition of being continuously courted, may then become incomprehensively withdrawn, is often desirable in proportion to the very degree of its mysteriousness and, alas, is never completely possessed in this mundane sphere. This unending while earthbound process that is scepticism is called, in Margaret Wiley's study, the "spirit of inquiry" and the sceptic the "philosophical inquirer."¹

Because Pyrrhonism searches, doubts, and questions everything, it neither claims something can be known (positive dogmatism) or cannot be known (negative dogmatism or academic scepticism) but suspends judgment on this issue as well and is not even sure if something can be known. Pyrrhonism is therefore the more severe type of scepticism: it doubts even its own doubt.

The Pyrrhonian movement continued to the time of Sextus Empiricus (c. A.D. 160-210), whose writings, the Hypotyposes (Outlines of Pyrrhonism) and Adversus Mathematicos, are the only extant works of a Greek Pyrrhonian and, therefore, provide the principal source of information. Pyrrhonism gradually receded into the shadows of antiquity; occasional outcroppings in certain anti-rational theologians kept it from suffering a complete demise, but it was not well known in the west until its reappearance in the sixteenth century.

Renaissance rediscovery

The rediscovery of Pyrrhonism, as professor Popkin demonstrates in his thesis, could not have occurred at a more propitious moment in history for effecting the greatest impact, since it reappeared during the intellectual crisis of the reformation. The central quarrel of the reformation was over "the rule of faith" or the proper standard of religious knowledge, which, consequently, raised one of the classical problems of the Greek Pyrrhonists, "the problem of the criterion of truth":

With the rediscovery in the sixteenth century of writings of the Greek Pyrrhonist, Sextus Empiricus, the arguments and views of the Greek sceptics became part of the philosophical core of the religious struggles then taking place. The problem of finding a criterion of truth, first philosophy has and is a "spirit of inquiry," but scepticism is such in a more limited sense, because it never rests in stable truths, conclusions, or dogmas.
raised in theological disputes, was then later raised with regard to natural knowledge, leading to the crise pyrrhonienne of the early seventeenth century.¹

Popkin goes on to explain that against the standard of truth authorized by Church tradition, Pope and Councils, Luther asserted another criterion—the individual conscience. The sceptical argument asserts that in order to determine which alternative criterion is now correct, a third criterion against which each must be measured is required. But what about the correctness of the third criterion?—against what is its correctness to be measured?—and so the problem goes ad infinitum. As Popkin observes, Luther opened a Pandora's box in the intellectual realm.²

Rabelais

The most famous presentation of Pyrrhonism in the early sixteenth century occurs in the characterization of the Pyrrhonian philosopher Trouillogan in Rabelais's Gargantua and Pantagruel, Book III, chapter xxxvi: "A Continuation of the Answer of the Ephectic and Pyrrhonian Philosopher Trouillogan."

Rabelais's source, however, is apparently Diogenes Laertius rather than Sextus Empiricus.³ Rabelais's comic satire of this sceptic Pyrrhonian philosopher, a satire which he directs at the whole human situation, might cause some

¹Popkin, p. 1.
²Ibid., p. 15.
³Popkin writes: "The terminology, however, seems to come from Diogenes Laertius's discussion of Pyrrho," and he comments in a footnote: "Pyrrhonian scepticism is briefly described by the humanist, Guillaume Budé, (with whom Rabelais corresponded), in his De Asse, (Paris 1541), p. cxxii, apparently based on Diogenes Laertius" (ibid., p. 22). Popkin might have added the textual evidence of the occurrence of Diogenes Laertius's name in Rabelais's work: see, e.g., Bk. III, chap. x and Bk. V, chap. xix.
readers, because of the apparent ridicule, to miss the pervading and final scepticism of his own work, a scepticism which seems to have had a notable influence on Melville's writing in conjunction with other sources, like Montaigne, who were more indebted to Sextus Empiricus than to Diogenes Laertius.

Calvin

There appears, however, between Rabelais (1494?-1553) and the 1562 publication of Sextus Empiricus's works a major figure whose doctrines had an abrasive and lifetime influence on Melville because of his childhood indoctrination in the tenets of the Dutch Reform Church; this figure is the French Protestant John Calvin (1509-1564). Scepticism is inherent in the Augustinian bias of his teaching, which stresses the fallen nature of man and the consequent darkness of the intellect: in his Dictionary, Pierre Bayle sees such implications in a quotation from Calvin concerning the liturgy of baptism, in which Calvin asserts that regeneration consists in "DENYING to follow OUR OWN REASON."\(^1\) Calvin would not have admitted to scepticism, however, and he attempts to establish a criterion of truth on inner persuasion—a certain compelling illumination through the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, he is caught in a vicious circle which merely further substantiates the sceptical position: "The guarantee of the authenticity of inner persuasion is that it is caused by God, and this we are assured of by our inner persuasion."\(^2\)

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\(^2\)Popkin, p. 9.
Montaigne

When Calvin died in 1564, Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) was approaching the height of his powers. Two years earlier, in 1562, Henri Estienne translated into Latin and first published Sextus's Hypotyposes or Outlines of Pyrrhonism; Gentian Hervet later translated the Adversus Mathematicos and the complete works were published in 1569. Diogenes Laertius had summarized the Pyrrhonian position, but Sextus offered an extended and formulated presentation whose percussive effects upon Montaigne are still broadening and reverberating in our own day. After studying the writings of Sextus, Montaigne composed his most philosophical essay, the "Apology for Raimond Sebond," an essay which gives evidence of his own meditations on Pyrrhonism.

In the "Critical Opinions" section of the Hazlitt-Cotton edition of Montaigne, the Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart complains: "To Montaigne's merits, indeed, as a lively and amusing essayist, ample justice has been done; but his influence on the subsequent habits of thinking, among his countrymen, remains still to be illustrated."¹ In the same edition, in Hazlitt's short "Life of Montaigne" he writes of the essays that "edition after edition was called for, and the Essays of Montaigne were to be found on the table of every gentleman in France that could read aught beyond his other breviary, and, ere long, became known, by the medium of translations, in Italy, England, and other countries."² Montaigne, then, whose Essais were widely read and frequently reprinted, was the great popularizer of scepticism, and Popkin argues

¹Montaigne, p. xxxviii.

²Ibid., p. xv.
that it was through Montaigne that "Renaissance scepticism became crucial in the formation of modern philosophy, contrary to the view that it was only a transitional moment in the history of thought."\(^1\) The importance of Montaigne in the dissemination of Pyrrhonistic scepticism can hardly be exaggerated. Scepticism became a leading philosophical movement only after the publication of Sextus's works and their adaptation by Montaigne, his disciples, and the thinkers he influenced.

**Descartes**

A leading figure in modern philosophy's quest for certainty who was influenced by Montaigne and by Montaigne's disciple Pierre Charron is René Descartes (1596-1650). Montaigne presented the problem, Descartes proposed an answer. Descartes did not doubt in order to suspend judgment; he doubted in order to achieve certainty. Ironically, the very propositions Descartes set forth to refute scepticism have been interpreted by some as offering the most irrefutable substantiation of it, and the greatest opponent of scepticism has been called *sceptique malgré lui*.

Descartes proposed a method of universal doubt—doubt of everything until everything was stripped away but that which could not be doubted, his *cogito ergo sum*. Many of his doubts were but a reiteration of former ones, doubt of the reliability of the senses, difficulty of distinguishing real experience from dream experience (previously suggested by Montaigne), but his original and, as some view it, \(^2\) his most disastrous hypothesis was the demon

\[^1\] Popkin, p. 43.

\[^2\] Ibid., see p. 190 f.
hypothesis found in the first Meditation:

I will suppose, then, not that Deity, who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity.¹

Descartes' method, if not Descartes, does, however, question the notion of a benevolent or "sovereignly good" God, a question that Melville was to turn into a tenacious inquisition. Descartes writes:

If . . . it were repugnant to the goodness of Deity to have created me subject to constant deception, it would seem likewise to be contrary to his goodness to allow me to be occasionally deceived; and yet it is clear that this is permitted.²

And in Meditation IV Descartes discusses the possibility of God being the deceiver. The created knowing subject and the created knowable object had been questioned previously, but in challenging the Creator Himself by asking, in effect, "Is God the Devil?" the ultimate sceptical query had been put. Descartes seems to have answered these difficulties to his own satisfaction, but whatever his intentions were, he bequeathed to a great part of posterity only a legacy of irrevocable doubt in everything but his cogito ergo sum, the basis for modern traumas of alienation and isolation, the lonely, solipsistic realization of only one's own existence—and this existence without apparent meaning. Hume, however, was to cast serious doubts even on the cogito ergo sum. Actually, Descartes doubted less than his theoretical universal doubt would imply: he trusted and used reason. If his own theory is used against

²Ibid., p. 101.
him, however, it may be asserted that this universal doubt should embrace reason, and, therefore, he can no longer reason to anything, for to do so would be to beg the question by assuming the validity of reason before proving it and being unable to prove it without reasoning. Further, Descartes' theory of clear and distinct ideas cannot help him to truth: because meaning lies in relationship, Descartes' ideas remain meaningless, since he cannot relate them to actually existing external objects. Although resolved personally, Descartes' most devastating question, reiterated by Pierre Bayle and seriously considered by Melville, was that concerning a deceptive Deity. The acceptance of the idea of a deceiving Deity leaves the epistemological case of the universe in a complete cosmic bind.

Sir Thomas Browne

Before considering two additional French sceptics, chronology demands a departure from the first four—Rabelais, Calvin, Montaigne, and Descartes—for a trip across the channel to England and the English Anglican doctor Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682), whose fideistic and sceptic writings emit a strange mixture of certitude and doubt. Although anti-rationalistic scepticism led many Frenchmen into a position of fideism, the English Anglican Church, as Louis I. Bredvold observes, was not easily given to this position, since it was, in fact, becoming more and more rationalistic at this time: to find Browne writing on the subject of Christian scepticism is therefore an occasion for surprise.1

For some time, there was thought to be a direct indebtedness to Montaigne in Browne's writings; Simon Wilkin, Browne's editor, quotes Mr. Keck's comment on a passage from "Religio Medici": "I cannot think but, in this expression, the author had respect to that of that excellent French writer, Monsieur Montaigne, in whom I often trace him." Wilkin, however, offers evidence to the contrary in a statement written by Browne himself.

If we waive the possibility of mendacity on the part of the good doctor, the parallels may be explained by a common source: Browne, like Montaigne, knew his Sextus Empiricus, whose works he owned in the 1621 folio. As scattered entries in the catalogue show, Browne owned several other books connected with sceptical thought, works by Diogenes Laertius, Cicero, Descartes (several volumes), Hobbes, Herbert of Cherbury, and Pascal. There is also the possibility of indirect indebtedness to Montaigne through his disciple Pierre Charron (1541-1603), since one of the Brownes, father or son, owned the English translation by Samson Lennard of Charron's Of Wisdom; unfortunately, no date is given for this entry in the catalogue, so it is not possible to tell if it might have been an early influence on Browne's writing. The works of


2Ibid., II, 10.

3Catalogue of the Libraries of the Learned Sir Thomas Brown and Dr. Edward Brown, His Son (Film copy, negative, from the original in the British Museum, of the sales catalogue for the auction of the Brownes' libraries; London: Thomas Ballard, 1710), p. 7, No. 62.
Browne give evidence of the growing cosmopolitan dimensions of scepticism.

Pascal

In France, at this time, a new element in sceptical thought may be traced: in place of the suave scepticism of Montaigne and the undaunted quest for certainty in Descartes, there appears the chafed and agitated scepticism of Pascal. Montaigne worked upon Pascal as a powerful provocative; in fact, Montaigne must be credited for inspiring—perhaps "inciting"—many of the Penseés. Besides some fifteen direct mentions of Montaigne in the Penseés, close to seventy borrowings or close parallels have been traced.  

E. W. Patchett has remarked that "the sceptical arguments taken over from Montaigne . . . [are] so numerous that a running commentary on the Penseés reads almost like a re-edition of the Essais in many parts." Pascal reacted strongly against what he called Montaigne's "rather free and licentious opinions on some relations of life" and his suggested "indifference about salvation," but he shared the realization of the quandary of doubt. In an anguished consideration of man's uncertain state, Pascal wrote of the misery of man without God and, accordingly, found his own greatest consolation in his faith.

Bayle

The scepticism that had been a "soft pillow of doubt" for Montaigne

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1 See, e.g., notes to the Penseés, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1931). This edition is the reference for those Penseés noted by number throughout this study.


3 Penseés, 63.
became a bed of briars for Pascal and finally agitated the almost militant reaction of Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) and the Scottish philosopher whom he profoundly influenced—David Hume (1711-1776). Bayle's scepticism owes much to Montaigne: in the "Preface to the first French Edition" of his *Dictionary*, Bayle felt obliged to prepare his more "Grave and Severe" readers for his citations from Montaigne. In Bayle and Hume, scepticism began to be drawn out to its full implications; although both Bayle and Hume were reacting against Calvinism, their scepticism was not so much aimed, as it was in the earlier reformation dispute, at one or the other sect of Christianity, but, at least through implication, at Christianity itself with its claims of rational proof for the existence of God, its concepts of revelation, providence, and a benevolent God. Many of the earlier sceptics, in their doubt, were willing to give God the benefit of the doubt, but Bayle and Hume in their sceptical arguments, admittedly probable though they were, because of the presence of the power of evil in the world, came to have a less exalted image of God and moved from the negatively insinuative arguments of Bayle to the philosophically structured indifference of Hume.

Pierre Bayle remains a slippery writer: even philosophers like James Collins, who predominantly tend to regard Bayle as a sceptical fideist, make note that Bayle is sometimes otherwise interpreted. Collins explains that:

To a Voltaire and a Diderot, fideism could not be a seriously held position; it was only a convenient dodge in the game with the censor

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and the consistory. Hence they took a purely ironical view of Bayle's frequent juxtaposition of the critical findings of reason and the non-rational certitudes of faith.

Collins goes on to explain, however, that "to a man nourished on Montaigne, Charron, and the Calvinistic divines, supernatural faith could well remain intact amidst the destructions wrought by a critical reason"; if Bayle was a fideist, and, because of his final sceptical position of not knowing, he could sustain his fideism against a conflicting— but limited— reason, the point still to be made is that the "destructions wrought by a critical reason" became more virulent. Bayle's faith was, indeed, Bayle's faith: a subjective faith, it stood, if such it did, without his acceptance of any objectively organized philosophical or theological structure; rather, Bayle encouraged the antagonistic combat between faith and reason. Bayle, in fact, seemed to nourish the prospective undertakers of his own faith; by placing faith in an anti-rationalistic position and divorcing ethics, as he does, from religion, there is precious little left for faith: man's manner of knowing and acting are peculiarly his own, springing from his human nature, a nature that strives toward ultimate unity through the perception of relationships and therefore meaning, but by making faith not only unrelated to but unreconcilable with, disparate, and antagonistic to reason, Bayle, in a certain sense, renders faith not only above our nature, super-natural, but

1 Howard Robinson in Bayle the Sceptic (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), p. 200, shows that Bayle was arraigned before the Walloon Consistory at Rotterdam where it was insisted that he not weaken the value "of believing in a God, in Providence, and in the future life."

2 Collins, p. 128.

3 Ibid.
contranatural.

Disturbed by the problems of predestination, Bayle, reacting against Calvinism like Hume—and like Melville—does not argue in a Christian context that man has sinned and needs a redeemer—Christ, but that man is sinned against by God (whether Bayle's Manichean God of Evil or a unique supreme God is not altogether clear), a God who has placed man in his impossible human predicament. Bayle asks: "Why then does he [St. Basil] say so coldly, That we must not search for Evil but in the Soul of Man? But who put it there?"1

A few pages later Bayle recalls the statement that "Men are wicked, and that God is Good; which gave Occasion to this other Question, How comes it that God being Good, Men are wicked?"2

Bayle was not satisfied with the solution offered of the "gift" of free will:

> For if a Goodness so bounded as that of Earthly Fathers does necessarily require, that they should prevent as much as is possible, the bad use their Children might make of the good Things they give them; much more will an Infinite and Almighty Goodness prevent the ill Effects of his Gifts. 3

In his article on the "Paulicians," Bayle again argues:

> Those who say that God permitted Sin, because he could not hinder it without destroying Free-will, which he had given to Man, and which was the best Present he had made him, expose themselves very much. . . . There is no good Mother who having given leave [freedom] to her Daughters to go to a Ball, but would revoke that leave, if she were sure that they would yield to Enticement, and leave their Virginity behind them. 4

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1 Bayle, 1710 ed., IV, 2487.
2 Ibid., p. 2498.
3 Ibid., III, 1152.
4 Ibid., IV, 2488.
To the argument that Adam's fall and the subsequent sins of man were permitted and give occasion for God's justice and mercy to become manifest, Bayle counters that "this is to compare the Deity to a Father who should suffer his Children to break their Legs on purpose to show to all the City his great Art in setting their Broken Bones."¹

At the nub of Bayle's problem is the question of evil, physical as well as moral: as the Dictionary gives ample evidence, Bayle is at times obsessed with "the Difficulties about the Origin of Evil."² Because evil seems incompatible with the notion of a benevolent God, Bayle argues, at least ostensibly, for the Manichean position of two necessary principles, one good and one evil—he asks: "If that only Principle be Good, whence comes Evil? If it be Bad, whence comes Good?"³ Bayle seemingly endorses the idea of this duality of principles in his argument against orthodox belief in one God; he challenges the orthodox:

You must therefore say that God is the Author of the Devil's Malice, that he himself produced it such as it is, or sowed the Seeds of it in the Soil that he created; which is a thousand times more dishonourable to God, than to say that he is not the only necessary and independent Being.⁴

On the question of evil, the likelihood that Bayle is an ironist and is obliquely posing the possibility of a non-benevolent (one) God is, of course, a probability and will be developed further in the next chapter on Melville's knowledge of sceptic sources. Further, writing on the mixture of life's

¹Ibid.
²Ibid., III, 1167.
³Ibid., IV, 2794.
⁴Ibid., p. 2493.
adversity and prosperity, Bayle says of the Manichean hypothesis of a good and evil principle: "These are things which lead us to suppose, that the two Principles made an Agreement which reciprocally limits their Operation." In these two last citations may be seen the grounds for what Collins calls "Bayle's famous dilemma that, in the face of evil, we must conclude either that God is omnipotent and hence malevolent or else that He is benevolent and hence limited in power." Either concept of God is far removed from the traditional Christian view, and a subsequent question arises concerning the sincerity of Bayle's positive claims for revelation—for what is the degree of dependability, or how much credence should be placed in the revelation of either a malevolent or a limited God? In Bayle the Sceptic, Howard Robinson shows in his eighth chapter, "The Dictionary—Miracles and the Bible," how Bayle takes delight in covert gibes at discrepancies in the Biblical text, and he claims that with Bayle only "lip service was paid to an inspired Bible." When Bayle claims in "Explanation III," which follows the Dictionary, that "the most precious faith is that which, on the divine testimony, embraces the truths most opposed to reason," Collins comments:

Whether this declaration be taken ironically or fideistically, the upshot is that on the problem of evil and all other natural issues involving God, the probabilities of rational argumentation will always lean in the favor of unbelievers.

1Ibid., p. 2487. Underlining mine.
2Collins, pp. 292-293.
3Robinson, p. 156.
The point might be made that Bayle's rational dilemmas do not matter in the long run anyway, given Bayle's fideistic position; they merely show to what impossible ends the inextricable entanglements of reason lead and spotlight the fact that man should place his final confidence in faith alone.

Such an answer would seem fairly simple if Bayle himself did not confuse the issue by the tone, stress, and example of his writings—he writes:

You must necessarily make an Option betwixt Philosophy and the Gospel: If you will believe nothing but what is evident and agreeable to common Notions, choose Philosophy: If you'll believe the incomprehensible Mysteries of Religion, take Christianity and leave Philosophy; for to possess Evidence and Incomprehensibility together is a thing impossible.¹

For one who advocates choosing either evidence (philosophy and reason) or incomprehensibility (the gospel and faith), the professedly fideistic Bayle's example offers a strong case for the side of evidence as against Christianity: his Dictionary piles authority upon authority for different questions; he laments the fact that certain great philosophers did not argue on a certain side of a question, but without hesitation, he, Bayle, hastens to supply the deficiency and argues at length "as they would have argued."--But, then again, evidence, for Bayle, was a relative quality. In the conundrum that is Bayle, perhaps the safest conclusion, if not the most accurate, is that of Ludwig Feuerbach who states that Bayle is "in contradiction with himself" for accepting both subjective faith and an antagonistic critical reason.² This critical reason and speculative scepticism challenged established norms and views of Christianity and was apparently more widely adopted by Bayle's disciples than

¹Bayle, 1710 ed., in "Explanation III" following Dictionary. IV, lxxi.

²Collins is quoting, on p. 425, from Feuerbach's Pierre Bayle (Sammtliche Werke [10 vols.; Leipzig: Wigand, 1844-1866], VI, 158-159).
his questionably-intentioned claims for revelation.

For those who see Bayle as a fideist—though still inimical to any rationally supported faith—his manner of arguing in the same style as the Calvinist divines, though to far different conclusions, merely exemplifies his efforts to show the futility of such argumentation in establishing any philosophical and theological defense of religious faith and the necessity of accepting faith as faith. For those who see Bayle as an ironist saying one thing and showing another and giving only feigned deference to faith (perhaps because of pressures from the consistory), while, at the same time, placing faith in a ridiculous and untenable position, his arguments become particularly barbed and inimical to Christianity. The present purpose is not to solve the problem of Bayle's intentions, but to exemplify the fact that his intentions are hard to solve; because they are, there is the possibility of more than one reading; Collins and Robinson have been cited since they divergently stress the two—fideistic and ironistic—views of Bayle respectively. More important to our purpose is the fact that, whether right or wrong in his reading, Melville, from the evidence of his works, and probably from a literary man's sensitiveness to nuances of rhetoric, most likely interpreted Bayle in the ironist view.

Hume

Though Bayle revelled in philosophizing, he was not a systematic philosopher; many of his suggestive questionings, however, found their way into a system when they were incorporated by David Hume. Logically, Hume was an ultra sceptic: however, though Hume thought Pyrrhonism irrefutable, he reasoned that man was psychologically unable to sustain such a complete
scepticism—neither was it practical. He therefore advocated a mitigated scepticism in which men could believe, reason, and act, even though they could never discover foundations for these actions. He questioned the certitude of the cognitive faculties and, failing to find a bridge from mental to extra-mental reality, he questioned the existence of the latter, and, by this doubting of the existence of the external world, cancelled (according to his own limited system) the possibility of reasoning a posteriori to God's existence or attributes. Hume not only questioned the possibility of making any existential demonstration (demonstrative reasoning, for Hume, is nonexistential), but he further questioned causal relationships, upon which proofs for the existence of God are based: Hume claims that because events are contiguous a habit of association is set up, so that the mind has a compulsion when it sees one thing to expect the other; nevertheless, necessitation is not in things or events but in the habituated mind. God becomes an unimportant vague possibility; in his reaction to Calvinism and religious practices and controls over reason and ethics, Hume not only removes God from the field of demonstrable knowledge but, consequently, from the field of practical ethics as well, since moral decisions can scarcely be influenced by a remote and incomprehensible deity that might or might not exist.

Further, Hume—raising serious problems of personal identity—claims that the mind is not a substance or organ that has ideas: ideas, memories, etc., are actually separate or occur in a series—they are the mind in so much as there is one, but there is no entity of "mind" or soul sub-standing them. The existence of an immaterial mind and, hence, of free will (matter is determined—only the immaterial or spiritual can be "free") and an immortal
soul are held in doubt. Hume goes beyond questioning God's ways to man—the very concepts of "God" and "man" come under scrutiny.

Kant

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), like Descartes, rejected scepticism. He endeavored to describe the bounds of valid knowledge. Kant's failure to provide the grounds for valid knowledge, however, inspired some readers to see his philosophy as containing an implicit if wholly unintentional scepticism. Émile Saisset, a contemporary of Melville's, has written of Kant:

Ce serait se former de Kant une idée fausse que de le confondre avec les interprètes consacrés du scepticisme, les Pyrrhon, les Montaigne, les Bayle. Si sa philosophie, prise à la rigueur, recèle le scepticisme, sa grande âme en fut toujours exempte. Comme le dix-huitième siècle, Kant a une foi.¹

Kant had faith; for some, unfortunately, he could not reconcile it with fact nor could he prove a powerful enough antidote for the objections of a Bayle and Hume. It may be argued that Kant simply assumed in the second Critique what he had shown to be undemonstrable in the first, i.e., any valid knowledge on the three great problems of metaphysics: God, freedom, and immortality. Such a brief consideration of Kant as this, of course, does not give an adequate idea of his intention nor of the complexity of his philosophy. It is all that seems justified in the present study, however, since Melville is numbered among those who did not find a solution to their sceptical quandaries in the system proposed by Kant. In fact, contrary to Kant's intention, his answers, susceptible to rejection as they are, were capable, through their

failure, of nurturing rather than alleviating the very problems they attempted to solve—such seems to be Melville’s case.

Melville’s general affiliation with sceptic figures

Melville shared in all the accumulated intensity of the tide of scepticism. Though he rejected the carefree scepticism of Rabelais and admired, but never quite attained, the serene scepticism of Montaigne, he shared their doubt. With Pascal, he felt the excoriating impact of scepticism and the misery of man without God: "Without a God, 'tis woel" But Pascal, through faith, was not "without God": Melville could place faith in no orthodox creed. Melville was torn between the beauty of part of the Christian message and what he felt to be Christianity’s impracticability and even deception and came to argue against Christianity and Christianity’s God with the same inimical scepticism as that of Bayle and Hume. Finally, he numbered with those who glimpsed the possibilities of a deeper despair following a ruptured hope in the period’s last formidable contender against scepticism, Immanuel Kant. Melville’s despair, however, was not unremitting; he willed—as he wrote of Hunilla in "The Encantadas"—a "hope against hope."

1 Melville’s admiration for the self-poised sceptic emanates from his portrait of Rolfe in Clarel and from his praise for the attitude of such minor but unforgettable figures as "the easy, indifferent Hautboy" in "The Fiddler": "It was plain that while Hautboy saw the world pretty much as it was, yet he did not theoretically espouse its bright side nor its dark side. Rejecting all solutions, he but acknowledged facts"—quoted from Billy Budd and Other Prose Pieces, pp. 222-223, of the Standard Edition.


3 The Piazza Tales, p. 226; from Rom. 4:18.
Without in any way claiming to exhaust the question of sources and influences, it is, nevertheless, significant to this brief history of scepticism to point out that Montaigne knew the works of Rabelais;¹ Descartes had read Montaigne and his disciple Charron; Browne shared a common source with Montaigne in Sextus Empiricus and may have been indirectly influenced by Montaigne through Charron; Pascal knew Descartes and was profoundly influenced by Montaigne; Bayle is familiar with Charron, Descartes, and Pascal and has been called "the mouthpiece of Montaigne";² Hume, in turn, was deeply influenced by Bayle and Montaigne: in most matters "Hume was congenially minded with Bayle, as with their common master, Montaigne";³ Kant's debt to Hume can hardly be exaggerated—though he discovered the critical problem of epistemology, the problem of the conformity of thought and things, independently, his later reading in Hume confirmed and strengthened the development of his own thesis. These relations are significant because they show the great amount of philosophical inbreeding with a fairly consistent and common strain being, in many cases, Montaigne. Melville, too, was greatly influenced by Montaigne, particularly Montaigne's Pyrrhonistic "Apology for Raimond Sebond" where most of the major critical problems that became those of subsequent modern philosophers, and Melville’s, are present, particularly the ontological problem—the problem of the nature of reality, and questions on God, freedom, and immortality—all of which depend upon the fulcrum, for whatever


³Ibid., p. 285.
it proves to be, of the epistemological, critical problem of the conformity between thought and things, man's ability, therefore, to know with certainty things as they are, since man must reason from the known to the unknown.

This skeletal survey, cursory as it is, nevertheless provides a coherent backdrop against which to investigate Melville's knowledge of sceptic sources.
CHAPTER II

MELVILLE'S KNOWLEDGE OF SCEPTIC SOURCES

"The truth is that we are all sons, grandsons, or nephews or great-nephews of those who go before us. No one is his own sire.--"
Letter to Duyckinck,
3 March 1849.

"Shakespeare had his fathers too"
Pierre.

Statement of problem

Certain strands of information about Melville's sceptic sources are clearly defined; other facts, e.g., particular editions of books, remain elusive, and in some cases it is not known whether Melville made the acquaintance of certain authors through primary or secondary sources, though textual evidence establishes the acquaintance.

Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus

At some time during the year 1846 Melville's uncle Herman gave his namesake a copy of Ephraim Chambers' two-volume Cyclopaedia: Or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences. ¹ If Melville cared to investigate, he could have found articles on "Academicks," "Pyrrhonians," "Scepticism," and "Scepticks"—articles in which the names of Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus are in evidence. Melville met both Pyrrhonists and their philosophical tendencies

¹(London: Printed for James and John Knapton, [etc.], 1728).

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again with his 1848 acquisition of the works of Montaigne and in Bayle's Dictionary, which he purchased in 1849. After mid-February 1848, Melville borrowed the volume of François Rabelais's works which contained the sceptic meanderings of the "Ephectic and Pyrrhonian Philosopher Trouillogan," and he later found a sympathetic treatment of Pyrrho in the 1853 edition of Diogenes Laertius' The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers.

Pyrrho's name appears in proximity to Montaigne's in Mardi, where Melville mentions "the sneer of Pyrrho" and names Plato as being of his counsel. As the over-all and final evidence of Mardi attests, Melville's rejection of the "sneer" of Pyrrho, did not necessarily include a rejection of Pyrrhonic doubt: in Clarel, he also rejects those who, vaunting their doubt, sneer, "mock," and "scorn" the Holy Sepulcher, but he adds:

But how of some which still deplore
Yet share the doubt?

Further, Plato may not have been introduced to cancel the element of sceptic doubt, since Chambers' Cyclopaedia, though leaning toward the dogmatic interpretation of Plato, explains that "a great Controversy" raged among the ancients themselves whether Plato was a sceptic or a dogmatist, and Montaigne,

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1 Merton M. Sealts, Jr., personal letter of 8 November 1965.


4 Mardi, II, chap. xv, 54.

5 Clarel, Pt. I, canto iii, 11. 153-166. The writings of Melville's middle, darker period are not without their gibes, however.

6 Chambers, II, 31.
in his "Apology," says: "Some have looked upon Plato as a dogmatist, others as a doubter, others in some things the one, and in other things the other. . . . 'Tis said that ten several sects sprung from Plato."¹ Melville owned both Chambers' Cyclopaedia and the works of Montaigne at the time he was writing Mardi.

A few paragraphs beyond the reference to "the sneer of Pyrrho," and probably with the thought still in mind, Melville has Media warn against the "brutality of indiscriminate scepticism":² The term "scepticism," as briefly explained in the opening chapter of this study, included several kinds of scepticisms, and it had acquired pejorative overtones because of its association not only with disbelief but with depravity. Because of his intense moral preoccupation, Melville would have objected to the suggestion of depravity, but he would not have objected so much to the connotations of disbelief, since he himself felt he could not accept the Christian credenda—in a large measure, in fact, he rejected organized Christianity because he personally failed to see that it offered a realistic and practicable moral code, more, that it could actually be a responsible cause leading toward depravity. Like some sceptics before him, including Bayle, Melville questioned Christianity on the compatibility of its moral creed with a moral life.

Literature of the period, while often predominantly defending religion, pointed up the "corrupting" influences of scepticism. The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge in the glowing article on "Locke and Newton" felt obliged in its peroration to admonish "the young to

¹Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 213.
²Mardi, II, chap. xvi, 57.
avoid the corrupting speculations of illiterate skeptics . . ." who "would deserve some credit, if they would inquire, with candid minds . . . into the nature, character, and doctrines of our holy religion [which one is not stated]; instead of perverting its obvious meaning."¹ As a tangential observation, it may be wondered if such superficially hortative and unsubstantiated writing of the period did not repel the masculinely robust and probing mind of Melville and perhaps inadvertently increase his sceptical and argumentative attitude.

There had also occurred between 1828-1831 a heated debate between the editors (particularly Robert Dale Owen) of a New York weekly bearing the sceptic title The Free Enquirer and their opponent William Gibbons. In the first number of The Free Enquirer, in an article called "Our Title," the editors claim: "It speaks of doubts and changes; it savors of infidelity and independence. It prognosticates hard questions and unwelcome discoveries; and the orthodox and the loyal like it not."² The weekly ran favorable articles on such topics as "Atheism" and "The Advantages of Scepticism" and wrote an eloquent defense of the Devil; the article "On the Existence and Character of Jesus of Nazareth" ends by questioning both, and the weekly includes such

¹(Boston: John L. Sibley and Benjamin H. Greene, 1837), I, 366. For other passages indicating period concepts of scepticism as anti-religious see in this same source "Infidel Philosophers," I, 464 and "Skepticism," II, 127. Although Hawthorne was editor of and contributed articles to the American Magazine for six numbers beginning with the March, 1836 issue, none of the articles opposed to scepticism are his.

deceptively entitled articles as "Of the Coldness and Heartlessness of Scepticism," which is actually a defense of scepticism and an accusation of Christianity as cold and heartless. In "Bible Selections," Robert Dale Owen points to the "cruel, obscene and immoral stories in the Bible," and in an article on "Byron's Cain" that would have interested Melville, if it ever came to his attention, Owen sanctions the assertion that "the arguments against orthodoxy are frankly acknowledged to be unanswerable," and ridicules "implicit faith." The weekly dips into "moral heresy," as the editors call it, with their attacks on religion and articles advocating divorce and free love--an article on "Bonaparte and Josephine" appeared that was enough to set any Victorian's teeth on edge, since alliances of mere affection (also changes of alliance based on something of the psychology behind a Russian treaty) were condoned. William Gibbons wrote a rebuttal, An Exposition of Modern Scepticism, in a Letter, Addressed to the Editors of the Free Enquirer, in which he connects sceptics with those who curse and deny God, and he shows the sceptic as a "subverter of morals" and one who exalts "profligacy . . . and vice."¹ Gibbons further accuses the weekly of saying that God is full of malice, envy, and hatred.² The issue of The Free Enquirer for 16 January 1830 contains a rebuttal to the rebuttal and the argument continues for several issues. Questions that arose during the weekly's publication and debate include the problems of doubt, reliability of sense perceptions, possibility of an "unjust Deity," supposed failures of revelation and orthodoxy, the nature of Providence,

¹(3rd ed. corrected and enlarged; Wilmington, Del.: Printed and Sold by R. Porter and Son, 1829), pp. 4-5, 7, 25.
²Ibid., p. 27.
questions of chance or design, freedom or necessity, immortality of the soul or annihilation, problems of morality—all issues which later found a forum in Melville's works.

By the end of its first volume, The Free Enquirer had agents in nineteen states and six agents in New York itself, and Gibbon's Exposition of Modern Scepticism had gone into a third "corrected and enlarged" edition in 1829, all of which seems to indicate that the problems of scepticism, as well as contemporary associations of scepticism with depravity, were not strictly esoteric or relegated to the philosophy text of a verging Victorian and vestigially Puritanic America, but found their way to a certain segment of the popular, contemporary audience—especially in New York in the case of The Free Enquirer. On the question of scepticism leading to corruption, Melville conversely showed the possibility of Christianity becoming a vehicle for corruption, particularly in the cases of the often self-aggrandizing and hypocritical missionaries and ministers.

Melville, like Emerson, rejected that type of scepticism found "where there is depravity" and "a slaughter-house style of thinking,"¹ but like Emerson in his appraisal of Montaigne, only tending to a darker view of existence than Emerson (the two compressed into one, in fact, might have made the ideal sceptic), Melville was also deeply impressed by the cogency of the sceptic's pendulous position in a consciously cultivated state of equipollence.

By the time of Moby-Dick, Pyrrho is even forgiven his sneer, or

perhaps it recedes to the background in favor of his ponderous and "deep thoughts":

And I am convinced that from the heads of all ponderous profound beings, such as Plato, Pyrrho, the Devil, Jupiter, Dante, and so on, there always goes up a certain semi-visible steam, while in the act of thinking deep thoughts.¹

Finally, in *Clarel*, for what weight of significance it may have, Rolfe, whom Bezanson calls the "best-rounded temperament of the group" and in whom he sees a general parallel to Melville, even a "self-projection,"² is called a "Pyrrhonist."³

But Melville, in all probability, did not resort to the stark, bare bones of the Greek Hypotyposes or Outlines of Scepticism, but obtained his classic scepticism fleshed out in the "roast-beef done rare" adaptation of the French sceptics, Rabelais, Montaigne, and Bayle, and swigged it down in the subtle English ale of the sonorous Sir Thomas Browne, Knight.

Rabelais

Melville may well have approached Rabelais in a spirit of social self-defense, in an effort to be as knowledgeable as the literary "in-groups," the Knickerbocker set and their ilk: Perry Miller takes as much delight in explaining New York's mid-nineteenth-century contemporary notions of "Rabelaisian"—"an adjective which they [New Yorkers] took particular pride

² *Clarel*, pp. 545, lxxvii, lxxxiv respectively.
³ Ibid., Pt. II, canto xxii, 1. 32.
in applying to themselves, in order to prove (most of all when they had come originally from New England) that they were not Bostonian prudes—"as New Yorkers did in appraising themselves such. Whatever his reasons, Melville borrowed from Evert Duyckinck in January or February of 1848, volume II of Rabelais's *Works*, and sometime after mid-February 1848 he returned for volumes III and IV. The exact edition is not known, although Sealts gives as a queried entry the London edition of 1844 which is being used in this study. If Whitney Hastings Wells is correct in his assumption that Melville knew Book I, chapter x of the *Works*, "Of That Which is Signified by the Colours White and Blue," then Melville was familiar with the first volume as well. Rabelais seems to have functioned in complicity with other sources of the late 1840's to help Melville toward some kind of "artistic liberation," and Merrell R. Davis has shown how Melville turned to Rabelais for the framework of his travelogue-satire in *Mardi* as well as for devices of burlesque of legal documents and gatherings of odd curios, books, and manuscripts of a misplaced antiquarianism. Mr. Davis also suggests that the numerous references to devils in Rabelais may have inspired the invisible spirits described

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3 "Moby Dick and Rabelais," *MLN*, XXXVIII (February, 1923), 123.
Most often, it is the jovial, wine-advocating, "Drink-with-unbuttoned-bellies" Rabelais that comes to Melville's mind: in heaven, Dante will 
"shake sides with fat Rabelais"; in his full-moon madness Babbalanja declares: 
"All sages have laughed,—let us; Bardianna laughed,—let us; Demorkriti 
laughed,—let us; Amoree laughed,—let us; Rabeelee roared,—let us"; in 
addition to borrowing one of the extracts in Moby-Dick from Rabelais's Book 
IV, chapter xxxiii, Melville mentions him again when he later rejects the 
passing wisdom of "jolly" Rabelais for that of solemn and "unchristian Solo-
mon's wisdom"; again from Rabelais, the inscription "In wine, truth" on 
the portal of the temple of the holy bottle appears in the confidence-man's 
"In vino veritas," --the Latin version being given in the notes to the 1844 
edition --and the bachelor later affirms that "Rabelais's pro-wine Koran [is] 
no more trustworthy than Mahomet's anti-wine one." Finally trustworthy or 
not, however, wine becomes symbolically connected with truth throughout The 
Confidence-Man: when the merchant gives his dictum on the "cold cave of

1 Merrell R. Davis, Melville's Mardi: A Chartless Voyage (New Haven: 

2 Mardi, I, chap. iii, 14.

3 Ibid., II, chap. lxxix, 350.

4 Moby-Dick, II, chap. xcvi, 182.

5 The Confidence-Man, chap. xiii, p. 87.

6 Rabelais, III, 166. The "Explanatory Remarks" in IV, 122 likewise 
maintain that "the Greek text of the New Testament . . . gives the name of 
wine to truth."

7 The Confidence-Man, chap. xxiv, p. 181.
truth,\textquoteleft{} it is only after several glasses of "wine seemed to shoot to his heart, and begin sooth-saying there";\textsuperscript{1} and as long as the two confidence-men, the boon companions "Frank" and "Charlie," abstain from drinking their wine, they are able to maintain their reciprocated prevarication.\textsuperscript{2}

Even more significant than examples of form and literary device was Rabelais's presentation, through the pilgrimage to the oracle, of an ineffectual search for final and absolute truth. Despite some slighting allusions, Melville never completely rejected the lusty humor of Rabelais, and the Frenchman's racy bawdiness is present in his own covert "Rabelaisianisms,"--and his not so covert ones over a glass of good port with a friend\textsuperscript{3}--but such humor was outweighed when he came to consider seriously man's existential dilemma, and Melville's predominant, if not sole, attitude toward life was tragic: "Man, 'poor player,' succeeds better in life's tragedy than comedy."\textsuperscript{4}

**Montaigne**

**Defense of the importance of Montaigne's sceptical influence.**--

Melville's reading was of a "varied scope . . . randomly acquired";\textsuperscript{5} as this study attempts to show by the inclusion of several names connected with his

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., chap. xiii, p. 87.
\item Ibid., chap. xxix, p. 214ff.
\item In *The Raven and the Whale*, p. 18, e.g., Miller quotes a New Orleans reporter who describes an evening at the home of Dr. Francis in 1850: after paying proper attention to the Doctor, Tuckerman, Griswold, and Duyckinck, in that order, he remarks: "Melville (when in town) is taciturn, but genial, and when warmed-up, capitally racy and pungent."
\item *Israel Potter*, chap. xxv, p. 212.
\item As Melville says of his hero in *Pierre*, Bk. XXI, chap. i, p. 394.
\end{enumerate}
penchant for sceptical thought, it would be a narrow and falsifying perspec-
tive to isolate a sole source; nevertheless, if it is a question of stress,
Michel de Montaigne, whose works Melville valued enough to purchase for him-
self, may well be one of the most significant sources of influence both
directly and indirectly (certainly through Bayle) on Melville's sceptical
thought. This influence began early and is evident in the scepticism of
Mardi, where Montaigne is first mentioned. In the index to Mr. Lawrance
Thompson's Melville's Quarrel with God there appears an entry referring to
"HM's Changing Responses To" Montaigne, which reads: "In Mardi, St. Paul
represented as overcoming doubts raised in HM's mind by Montaigne."¹ This
interpretation is, however, an apparent misreading of the brief statement in
Mardi: "I list to St. Paul who argues the doubts of Montaigne."² Thompson
evidently interprets the meaning as "argues against"; a reading of the
"Apology," however, reveals the meaning as "argues for" or "along with." Of
the some fourteen references from St. Paul throughout the Essays, ten are in
the "Apology"; of the remaining four, only one pertains to doubt and it sub-
stantiates a sceptical position: "The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise,
that they are vain."³ In the "Apology," which Melville seems certainly to have
been reading during the writing of Mardi, there appears the Pauline text which,
as Popkin observes,⁴ was to be the favorite Scriptural text of the nouveaux

²Mardi, II, chap. xv, 54.
³I Cor. 3:20 as quoted in Montaigne, Bk. III, chap. ix, p. 458.
⁴Popkin, p. 48.
Pyrrhoniens:

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that, in the wisdom of God, the world knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.¹

Mr. Thompson recognizes Montaigne's presiding element of doubt but seemingly misinterprets the use of Pauline texts to confirm that scepticism and, therefore, downplays its probable impact on Melville, who was exquisitely sensitive to darkly ambiguous passages from Scripture.

Another work, however, seems to have completely missed the prevalence of Montaigne's Pyrrhonistic scepticism, much of which was transmitted to Melville: the Mansfield-Vincent edition of Moby-Dick offers selected quotations to show that Montaigne "made numerous disparaging comments on him [Pyrrho] and his followers, particularly in Book 2, chap. 12, 'An Apologie of Raymond Sebond."² In the Mansfield-Vincent note preceding the above citation Pyrrho is described as a "Greek philosopher . . . who maintained the impossibility of knowing things in their own nature"—this is, however, the

¹I Cor. 1:19 as quoted in Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 230. Other anti-rational texts in the "Apology" borrowed by Montaigne from Paul are Col. 2:8:
'That our wisdom is but folly in the sight of God: that the vainest of all vanities is man: that the man who presumes upon his wisdom does not yet know what wisdom is; and that man, who is nothing, if he thinks himself to be anything, does seduce and deceive himself" (Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 205).
Rom. 1:22 "Men . . . professing themselves to be wise, they become fools" (Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 245). Col. 2:8 and I Cor. 1:19 are again quoted in the essay (Bk. II, chap. xii, pp. 224 and 257-258).

crux of the argument in the "Apology," the limitation of man's reason, man's inability to "know what things truly are in themselves,"¹ his inability to communicate with being,² his incertitude about the congruity of "resemblances" conveyed to the soul by the senses and the thing "resembled."³ This argument, in turn, becomes the spinal column upon which all the "business" of the great leviathan Moby-Dick converges—that the nature of the universe is problematic.

One of the so-called "disparaging comments" quoted in the Hendricks House edition is the following:

The Philosopher Pyrrho being at Sea, and by reason of a violent storme in great danger of being cast away, presented nothing to those that were with him in the ship, to imitate but the securitie of an Hog which was aboard, who nothing at all dismayed, seemed to behold and outstare the tempest.⁴

The word "nothing" may be the misleading word in the above quotation; however, sceptics advocated suspension of judgment, which was supposed to result in serenity, imperturbability, or indifference and repose called by the sceptics ataraxia: when Pyrrho points out the calmness of the pig during a raging storm, he is, in effect, giving the pig credit for having more wisdom and dignity than man exhibits in his uncontrolled perturbation—an example of animal sagacity which would have pleased Montaigne mightily, especially since his lengthy comparison of man and animals, much to the detriment of mankind, occurs in the same essay.

It is true, as Mansfield and Vincent quote, that Montaigne writes of

¹Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 281.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Hendricks House Moby-Dick, pp. 783-784.
the Pyrrhonians: "The profession of the Phyrronians [sic] is ever to waver, to doubt and to enquire, never to be assured of any thing, not to take any warrant of himself";¹ taken out of context, this description may be read as a disparaging one; read in context, however, it implies something far different for it is sanctioned by Montaigne and is a preparation for his condemnation of an unwarranted dogmatic position. Montaigne goes on to explain this wavering and doubting as leading to a suspension of judgment and writes:

> Is it not much better to suspend one's persuasion than to intermeddle with these wrangling and seditious divisions: "What shall I choose?" "What you please, provided you will choose." A very foolish answer; but such a one, nevertheless, as all dogmatism seems to point at, and by which we are not permitted to be ignorant of what we are ignorant of.²

With that wonderful candor for which Melville praises Montaigne in *Billy Budd*,³ the Gascon argues against the arbitrary assumption of an "assured" position when we are, in fact, ignorant.

Montaigne's Pyrrhonism is widely recognized and it may seem to be laboring the obvious to argue further; yet, because this misunderstanding occurs in a very significant piece of Melville scholarship,⁴ it may not be out

² Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 232.
⁴ The one difference treated here is not meant to detract from the over–all value of the Mansfield–Vincent edition—neither, of course, is it meant to depreciate in toto Mr. Lawrence Thompson's study. Mr. Thompson's rhetoric has sparked some combative reactions because of its note of condescension to the reader of Melville; nevertheless, with a daring thesis, he had the courage to lay his brains on the line.
of place to offer these more obvious affirmative passages on Pyrrho and Pyrrhonism from the "Apology." Montaigne writes of Pyrrho:

He would never make himself a stock or a stone, he would show himself a living man, discoursing, reasoning, enjoying all reasonable conveniences and pleasures, employing and making use of all his corporal and spiritual faculties in rule and reason. The fantastic, imaginary, and false privileges that man had usurped of lording it, ordaining, and establishing, he has utterly quitted and renounced.1

Montaigne says of Pyrrhonism: "There is nothing in human invention that carries so great a show of likelihood and utility as this,"2 and in a comparison of the Academics and Pyrrhonians, he writes that "the Pyrrhonian opinion is more bold, and also somewhat more likely"3—he then continues his description of the human situation in Pyrrhonian terms. Earlier in the essay, Montaigne asserts that the idea of the Pyrrhonians is "more certainly understood by interrogation: 'What do I know?' as I bear it, with the emblem of a balance"4—by declaring that the question "What do I know," Montaigne's famous Que sçay-je?, is the motto that he bears inscribed over a pair of scales, Montaigne reveals his own Pyrrhonistic position. Numerous other Pyrrhonian expressions were inscribed on the ceiling of his library. Although recent scholarship seeks psychological and moral convictions in the last book of Montaigne's essays, centuries of readers found the epitome of Montaigne's thought in the question which forms the heart of the "Apology," his Que

1Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 232.
2Ibid., p. 233.
3Ibid., p. 262.
4Ibid., p. 244.
"What do I know?" Melville asks: "What may man know?" Montaigne claims that the idea of the Pyrrhonian position is best understood by interrogation, and the question becomes a pervasive form for Melville's consideration of terminal realities.

Possible factors contributing to Melville's interest in Montaigne.

It is probably not possible to pinpoint the exact circumstances that instigated Melville's interest in acquiring and studying the works of Montaigne, although several possibilities present themselves. In Boston, 1 January 1846, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave the first reading of his lecture "Montaigne; Or, The Skeptic." Montaigne was an early and persistent favorite with Emerson and received mention in his sceptically influenced essay "Experience," published in Essays, Second Series on October 19, 1844. There is only a doubtful but provocative possibility that Emerson might have led Melville to Montaigne, for just how early and, if early, how deeply Melville was influenced by Emerson remains a moot question. In the often quoted letter to Evert Duyckinck, 3 March 1849, Melville remarks: "I had only glanced at a book of his [Emerson's] once in Putnam's store—that was all I knew of him, till I heard him lecture." The ingenuousness of Melville's choice of "glanced" may enjoy the latitude of his South Sea adventure claims, or, as he wrote to Hawthorne of Solomon, he may have "a little managed the truth," or, again, the remark

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1Clarel, Pt. IV, canto iii, 1. 109.

2The Letters of Herman Melville, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (3rd printing; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 79. Hereafter cited as Letters. Melville attended Freeman Place Chapel on Beacon Street on 5 February 1849 to hear one of Emerson's five lectures on "Mind and Manners in the Nineteenth Century."

3Ibid., p. 130.
may be one of simple truth. Sealts' check-list of Melville's reading shows the acquisition of Emerson's *The Conduct of Life* in 1870, the *Essays*, first and second series, in 1862, and the *Poems* in 1859.\(^1\) Internal evidence in *The Confidence-Man* (1857) and in *Pierre* (1852) and in some of the short stories places the acquaintance even earlier, and Eleanor Melville Metcalf establishes, through a letter of Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne, that Melville read Emerson's essays in 1850;\(^2\) finally, Perry Miller pushes the relationship even further back by seeing evidences of transcendentalism in *Mardi* (1849)--Miller says: "Clearly Melville must have read much of Emerson, if only in Putnam's store, during these crucial years."\(^3\) The tendencies of transcendentalism were not unknown to New York literary circles, however, and Melville could have easily gleaned second hand accounts of Emerson's lectures and essays. Further, similarities between Emerson and Melville might well hinge on the fact that both had many sources in common.

In his lecture on Montaigne, Emerson said: "I heard with pleasure that one of the newly-discovered autographs of William Shakespeare was in a copy of Florio's translation of Montaigne."\(^4\) While visiting the library of

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\(^1\) Sealts, NOS. 203, 204, 205, 206.


\(^4\) *Works*, IV, 163.
the British Museum in London in 1849, Melville saw this autograph and records the fact in his Journal. Whether Melville knew Emerson's lecture or not, the statement is important in establishing contemporary awareness of the connection between Montaigne and Shakespeare and a question arises concerning the importance of Melville's own association of the two—is it, for example, mere coincidence that Melville bought his Shakespeare and Montaigne at the same time? Melville's cognizance of the connection became particularized when he marked, in Hamlet II: ii, the prince's speech, "Why, then 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so; to me it is a prison," and comments: "Here is forcibly shown the great Montaignism of Hamlet." Sceptical implications, the subjective relationalness and variability of human opinion, are evident in the passage. The scepticism of Hamlet, with its darkly doubting, questioning, Renaissance prince, had a profound effect on Melville, and it usually heads his list of tragic characters and plays that show Shakespeare in his "grandest conceits" and as "the profoundest of thinkers." It is Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago who say what is "so terrifically true"; it is the "deeper significances of its pervading indefiniteness" that


2 Sealts, No. 366.


4 The quotations are from p. 126 of the first installment of Melville's "Hawthorne and His Mosses," The Literary World, VII (August 17, 1850), 125-127; (August 24, 1850), 145-147.

5 Ibid.
makes the narrator apply Hamlet to Pierre's situation;¹ and when Melville writes in "The Coming Storm,"

No utter surprise can come to him
Who reaches Shakespeare's core;
That which we seek and shun is there--
Man's final lore--

the one who is not surprised is described as the one who has "Hamlet in his heart."²

A selection from the Westminster Review in the "Critical Opinions" section of the edition of Montaigne's works which Melville purchased discusses the Shakespeare-Montaigne relationship; though the review calls attention to the chronological problem in the question of the possible influence of Montaigne on Hamlet, analogies are drawn:

On the whole, the celebrated soliloquy in "Hamlet" presents a more characteristic and expressive resemblance to much of Montaigne's writings than any other portion of the plays of the great dramatist which we at present remember; though it would doubtless be easy to trace many apparent transferences from the Frenchman into the Englishman's works, as both were keen and many-sided observers in the same age, and neighbouring countries. But "Hamlet" was in these days no popular type of character; nor were Montaigne's views and tone familiar to men till he had himself made them so. Now the Prince of Denmark is very nearly a Montaigne, lifted to a higher eminence, and agitated by more striking circumstances and a severer destiny, and altogether a somewhat more passionate structure of man.³

In Pierre, the narrator relates the tragic story of the Egyptian Memnon (who serves as an analogue for Pierre himself) and the story is called the "Hamletism of the antique world"; in a following observation, Melville shows

¹Pierre, Bk. IX, chap. iii, p. 236.
³Montaigne, p. xli.
how important he felt the connection to be between Shakespeare and Montaigne: "The English tragedy [Hamlet] is but Egyptian Memnon, Montaignised and modernised; for being but a mortal man Shakespeare had his fathers too."  

Melville was probably led to a more serious study of Montaigne because of his affinities to and probable influence on the works of Shakespeare, which Melville so much admired, particularly Hamlet, and the element of scepticism in this, the greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies, was to find its way into all of Melville's tragedies as something more than a literary device to be objectively manipulated with undisturbed detachment—rather, because of Melville's own probing, there is a growing and perceptible integrity between the artist and his artifact in the realization of the tragedy that William Ellery Sedgwick came so aptly to title The Tragedy of Mind.

In addition to the possibility, direct or indirect, of Emerson leading Melville to Montaigne, there is the conjectural possibility of a latent interest sown by the presence of "long rows of old books, . . . [some] printed in Paris," which formed part of Allan Melville's library during Herman's childhood. Though Melville's father "spoke French like a native," his son did not know foreign languages, but the presence of these books may have engendered a curiosity that would later burgeon into an active investigation of a number of French writers, Montaigne among them.

2 Redburn, chap. i, p. 6.
In New York, Melville also had contact with a number of leading Francophiles, artists who probably could have spoken of the works of Montaigne with familiarity. Anne C. Lynch, the later Mrs. Botta, conducted one of New York's leading salons—perhaps the leading salon—frequented by a motley group of literati; in Charles Frederick Briggs' roman a clef, The Trippings of Tom Pepper, which began serialization in the Mirror 14 November 1846, Melville's friend Evert Duyckinck as Tibbings shares with Anne Lynch, euphoniously named "Lizzy Gil," and certain other of the elect, including Poe, the honor of special and, particularly in Duyckinck's case, satirical characterization: at one point in the narrative Duyckinck is shown in shadow-like attendance on Cornelius Mathews at one of "Lizzy Gil's" soirées. Another obvious connection between Duyckinck and Miss Lynch is her inclusion in the Duyckincks' Cyclopaedia of American Literature. Melville owned a copy of Tom Pepper and, while Mardi was in the making, recorded evidence shows him in attendance at least once at "Lizzy Gil's," the occasion being a Valentine party 14 February 1848 at which Bayard Taylor—another Francophile—read a verse honoring Melville. Without belaboring the fact of numerous social interconnections of Francophiles relating to Melville during his residence in New York,

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2 See Miller's chapter on "Tom Pepper" in The Raven and the Whale, pp. 168-185.

3 "Anne Charlotte Botta" in Duyckincks' Cyclopaedia, II, 627-628.

4 Sealts, No. 86a.

5 Log, I, 272.
1845-1850, suffice it to say that the suddenly sceptical current of Melville's thought, which made its debut in *Mardi*, may owe a great deal to an unwritten but social source which could well have directed both the choice and interpretation of his reading, including Montaigne, at this time.

As a corroborative clue to the type of coterie mentality which may have influenced Melville's interpretation of a predominantly French core of sceptic writers, perhaps not enough attention has been given to Anne C. Lynch Botta's *Hand-Book of Universal Literature*, which first appeared in 1860 and which, by 1867, was in its seventh edition. Melville and Duyckinck both receive at least a passing nod in the *Hand-Book*. In her "Preface," Mrs. Botta declares: "This work was begun many years ago," that is, during those years when, in addition to the compilation and summation of numerous earlier literary sources, she was acquiring through a peculiarly keen feminine impressionability the various idealities, including those of a number of leading Francophiles, which came to a confluence within the precincts of her own parlor, and it is revealing to discover as a note of coherence among the various entries in her section devoted to French literature in the *Hand-Book* a marked preoccupation with scepticism. Certain passages of the *Hand-Book* are relevant not only to the present consideration of Melville's reading of Montaigne but point back to Rabelais and forward to Bayle. After a cursory treatment of Rabelais, Mrs. Botta continues:

Intellect continued to struggle with its fetters. Many, like Rabelais, mistrusted the whole system of ecclesiastical polity established by law,

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and yet did not pin their faith on the dictates of the austere Calvin. The almost inevitable consequence was a wide and universal skepticism, replacing the former implicit subjection to Romanism.

The most eminent type of this school was Montaigne [whom Botta declares is considered the earliest philosophical writer in French prose] (1533–1592), who, in his Essays, shook the foundations of all the creeds of his day, without offering anything to replace them.¹

Mrs. Botta includes Rabelais and Montaigne, as well as Descartes and Pascal, under "PERIOD SECOND," or the renaissance and golden age of French literature (1500-1700), and in "PERIOD THIRD," the literature of the age of the revolution and of the nineteenth century (1700-1859), after having already designated the beginnings of scepticism in the second period, she labels the first part of the third period "THE DAWN OF SKEPTICISM" and begins with a discussion of Pierre Bayle. Her explanatory remarks indicate a distinction made earlier between scepticism as a philosophical or epistemological stance still not incongruous with but substantiating fideism—i.e., distrust of reason strengthening reliance on faith—and the later scepticism which Mrs. Botta, following the more contemporary concept, identifies with disbelief:

On the other hand, the dominant influences of the 18th century were a skeptical philosophy [etc.] . . . . The transition, however, was not sudden nor immediate, and we come now to the consideration of those works which occupy the midway position between the submissive age of Louis XIV., and the daring infidelity and republicanism of the 18th century.²

A description follows of the "new generation," which includes Bayle:

A certain indifference to principle began to prevail; men ventured to doubt opinions once unquestioned; the habit of jesting with everything, and unblushing cynicism appeared almost under the eyes of aged Louis. . . . The Protestants, [were] exiled by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. . . .

Among these refugees was Bayle (1647-1706), the coolest and boldest of doubters. He wrote boldly against the intolerance of Louis XIV.,

¹Ibid., pp. 267-268.
²Ibid., p. 285.
and he affords the first announcement of the characteristics of the century. His "Historical and Critical Dictionary," a vast magazine of knowledge and incredulity, was calculated to supersede the necessity of study to a lively and thoughtless age. His skepticism is learned and philosophical, and he ridicules those who reject without examination still more than those who believe with docile credulity.¹

Mrs. Botta then proceeds to "THE PROGRESS OF SKEPTICISM," which includes a discussion of Voltaire.

Melville's view of French sources may also have received direction from Wiley and Putnam. Melville's American publishers for Typee, of which Evert Duyckinck oversaw the American edition, and joint financers with Appleton for the journal The Literary World, with Evert Duyckinck as first editor, Wiley and Putnam imported for those with Gallic reading interests a large selection of French authors both in the original and in translation. Among the names appearing on the advertising pages of The Literary World, some frequently, are Rabelais, Montaigne, Descartes, Pascal, Bayle, Voltaire and Volney (a sceptic of the Enlightenment mentioned in Clarel, Part II, canto xvi, ll. 38-39). Among influences leading Melville to the sources which profoundly changed his course of thought and, consequently, of his writing, Evert A. Duyckinck, editor for Wiley and Putnam's "Library of Choice Reading," is probably one of the strongest but also one of the most difficult to define, since his influence was, to a great degree, social and oral. Even before his only recorded attendance at Anne Lynch's, Melville was foraging in Duyckinck's basement library and borrowing volumes of Rabelais in which he found not only the coarse, vigorous humor that Duyckinck with other New Yorkers so vastly enjoyed, but, of more significance, the artistic presentation of an abortive

¹Ibid., p. 286.
search for truth. During this time Melville purchased his copy of Montaigne and, a little over a year later, wrote to Duyckinck about his purchase of Bayle's Dictionary in a tone which seems to denote a common familiarity with the work—Duyckinck owned a set of Bayle's Dictionary which Melville probably used before his own purchase.

Though Thomas Browne, whose works Melville also borrowed from Duyckinck in 1848 before he bought his own folio in 1849, is an English sceptic, it is significant that he joins the triumvirate of Frenchmen at this important period of Melville's reading, a relatively short period from 1848 through 1849: the inherent scepticism of these works, probably pointed out though not necessarily sanctioned by Duyckinck, may have been reinforced the following year, 1850-1851, in the quickening conversations between Melville and Hawthorne—as Marion L. Kesselring observes:

Throughout 1829, 1830 and 1831, Hawthorne apparently planned a course in French literature for himself. The names of Montaigne [etc.] recur in the Charge-Books, volumes from sets of their works usually being taken in numerical order even though several days intervened between entries. Among the entries in Hawthorne's reading list are Montaigne's Essais (4 volumes; Paris, 1802), of which all four volumes were checked out one at a time; Pascal's Oeuvres (5 volumes; La Haye, 1779)—volumes I and II checked out; Bayle's Dictionary (5 volumes; London, 1734)—all five volumes of this work, in translation, were checked out over a period of time; and the sceptical Voltaire's Oeuvres complètes (92 volumes; Kehl, 1785-1789), of which

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1 As Miller points out in The Raven and the Whale, Richard H. Dana senior "felt he was talking to a kindred spirit [in Duyckinck] as he denounced ... '[those] who were spreading Godless skepticism'" (p. 73).

forty-nine volumes were checked out. When Montaigne asked during his explanation of Pyrrhonism: "Can any thing be proposed to us to grant, or deny, which it shall not be permitted to consider as ambiguous?"—he could not yet know that Nathaniel Hawthorne would be one of his most apt pupils: questioning and ambiguity are the hallmarks of Hawthorne's prose. Melville and Hawthorne had much reading background in common to discuss, and their mutual concern with the Cimmerian side of reality probably owes more to Montaigne's sceptical descendant Pierre Bayle than has yet been properly assessed.

Melville's edition of Montaigne. -- An extant statement of Melville's account with John Wiley shows that Melville purchased through Wiley, his publisher, "1 Montagne [sic]" on 18 January 1848. Melville's personal copy of the works of Montaigne has not been located, and a measure of uncertainty has remained concerning the particular edition he purchased. The present study endeavors to offer a few more degrees of practical certainty.

Merton M. Sealts, Jr. recorded Melville's purchase of Montaigne in his extremely useful contribution to Melville scholarship, "Melville's Reading: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed" (previously cited in this chapter); the section of the check-list which contains the Montaigne entry was published in the Autumn 1949 issue of the Harvard Library Bulletin, and it was noted at that time: "Title and edition unidentified." The 1952 Hendricks House edition of Moby-Dick, edited by Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent,

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1Ibid., pp. 57, 58, 44, 63.
2Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 231.
3Sealts, No. 366.
4Ibid.
although using the Florio translation,¹ identified the extract from Montaigne as "probably in William Hazlitt translation."² Hazlitt, however, translated only the "Journal" and "Letters"; he edited the Cotton translation of the essays,³ and, since the extract for Moby-Dick is borrowed from the essays, theoretically, the question remained whether Hazlitt's Cotton or another editor's Cotton is the source.

The last English edition to precede Hazlitt's is, from all present evidence, the London 1811 edition of the Essays "with very considerable amendments and improvements from the most accurate French edition of Peter Coste." This is the last edition mentioned by Hazlitt (he refers to it as a "reprint") in his own edition of 1842.⁴ The 1811 English text of the Essays is also the last listed before Hazlitt's in Samuel A. Tannenbaum's bibliography of Montaigne.⁵ No intermediate editions appear in the usual places of reference, e.g., the British Museum Catalogue and National Union Catalog. Further, Charles Dévéyan, in his Montaigne chez ses amis Anglo-Saxons speaks of "un arrêt dans les éditions anglaises de Montaigne de 1811 à 1840," as something that "nous avons dû constater." Dévéyan's designation of the year 1840 is probably an approximation, since he goes on from this statement to

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¹ Hendricks House Moby-Dick, pp. 593, 599, 784.
² Ibid., p. 582.
³ The title page of the first impression (see Appendix) reads: "The Complete Works of Michael de Montaigne; Comprising; The Essays (Translated by Cotton). . . ."
⁴ Montaigne, 3rd page of "Preface."
discuss the 1842 Hazlitt-Cotton text. The 1811 Essays was possibly still available to Melville through Wiley, since it was advertised by Wiley and Putnam in volume I of the Literary World for 18 September 1847 (see Appendix).

An examination of both the 1811 and 1842 editions, however, reveals, through textual evidence, that the extract follows the later Hazlitt edition (the editor, Hazlitt, is William Hazlitt the Younger [1811-1893], son of the famous romantic essayist of the same name [1778-1830]). It is fortunate for those interested in Melville's sources that Hazlitt did not feel bound to a slavish presentation of Cotton's translation. Hazlitt speaks of an unnamed later editor of Cotton's translation and remarks that "he has altered Mr. Cotton's prose in above three thousand places." Hazlitt apparently offers this editor as a precedent, because he goes on to declare: "The departures which I have made from his [Cotton's] translation... are frequent." Emendations and other changes made by Hazlitt in the section chosen by Melville as an extract for Moby-Dick are adequate to establish Hazlitt as his source. If allowance is made for Melville's insertion ("whale's") and his replacement of a general term by a more specific antecedent designation ("the sea-gudgeon"), which he used to clarify the extract and render it more pertinent to his book, the closeness with which he followed the Hazlitt text is evident (see the Appendix for the passages corresponding to the Moby-Dick extract as they appear in the 1811 Essays and in Hazlitt's edition; finally,

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1 Charles Dédéyan, Montaigne chez ses amis Anglo-Saxons (2 vols.; Paris: Boivin & Cie, [1943]), I, 257. I am grateful to Professor Donald M. Frame of Columbia University for bringing this reference to my attention.

2 Montaigne, 3rd page of "Preface."

3 Ibid., 4th page of "Preface."
the extract itself is given as it appears in the first American edition of *Moby-Dick* [1851]). In addition to correspondence of word and punctuation, Melville follows the orthography of Hazlitt's "Raimond Sebond" rather than the frequently variant earlier spellings of the name.

There is corroborative, if circuitous, evidence that John Wiley stocked and sold the Hazlitt edition. When Melville bought Montaigne's works in January 1848, Wiley and Putnam were in the process of a dissolution of partnership; George Haven Putnam in his memoir of his father recalls: "The capital that my father was to secure from the firm of Wiley & Putnam came to him almost entirely in the form of books."¹ A few weeks after Melville's purchase, the newly independent Putnam advertised in the *Literary World* for March 11, 1848, a list of books entitled "Selections from recent Importations of Books," which included the following item:

Montaigne's Works, edited by Hazlitt. R. 8vo. half morocco, $5 50. [See Appendix.]

The price of the Hazlitt edition also makes it the eligible source, since Melville purchased "I Shakespear" together with his copy of Montaigne at the price of $9.25 for both, ² whereas the 1811 edition of the *Essays* alone is priced $9.50—an amount which, even with Melville's possible discount, leaves it an unlikely candidate.

Recently, Robert Shulman, evidently working independently and remaining unaware of the earlier suggestion of Hazlitt's "translation" of the


² *Sealts*, No. 366.
essays, concludes "there is every reason to think that this [Hazlitt's edition] is the one."¹ Shulman reasons that Melville bought the text which first appeared in 1842.² There is, however, a second possibility, since the second impression of the Hazlitt-Cotton edition was brought out in 1845 (later printings appeared only after Melville's purchasing date), and the proximity of this date to the purchasing date may make it more likely the one Melville owned. Judging from the account of Melville's purchase of "1 Montaigne," Shulman states that "Melville's copy of Montaigne was apparently a one-volume edition" and continues to describe correctly the Hazlitt-Cotton text as just such a one-volume edition,³ whereas the 1811 Essays is a three-volume set. For his study, however, Shulman uses what he terms a "reprint"⁴ of the Hazlitt-Cotton text (New York, 1889), a text which, if the transcribing and printing of the direct quotations from Montaigne in Mr. Shulman's article are correct, contains a number of discrepancies in spelling and punctuation.

Although possibilities may be narrowed to two, unless Melville's copy of Montaigne's works is located, it may not be possible to determine definitively which of the two impressions he owned; however, for purposes of source study, with serious reservations concerning some forty-eight leaves, there is

¹"Montaigne and the Techniques and Tragedy of Melville's Billy Budd," CL, XVI (fall, 1964), 322, n. 1; in the same note, Shulman observes that "the Florio translation had been out of print for over two hundred years and did not receive renewed attention until late in the nineteenth century."

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.
no pressing need to do so for the remainder and greater portion of the two impressions. The two most noticeable differences between impressions are the border design (see note 1 below) and the title page, which has been reset for the second impression: in addition to the change of date, the title is modified and the name of the publisher changes from John Templeman to C. Templeman (see Appendix). Other than these two divergent points, a collation made by the "Hinman Collator" machine of the 1842 and 1845 impressions of Hazlitt's edition ¹ reveals, with the exception of forty-eight questionable leaves, that

¹This collation, though made between all the pages of the first impression and second impression (the so-called "Second Edition"—see title page for second impression in Appendix), cannot, as yet, claim to be a complete collation. Of the so-called "Second Editions" of Hazlitt's Montaigne listed in the National Union Catalog—and there are six such listings, for the American Antiquarian Society (Worcester, Mass.), The Free Library of Philadelphia, Harvard, The New York Public Library, The Ohio Wesleyan University Library, and Yale—and the one listed in the British Museum Catalogue, Ohio Wesleyan claims not to have the "Second Edition" in its holdings, and the other six copies are all composed of what appear to be mixed sheets. Aside from the title page, the most noticeable difference between the first and second impressions occurs in the simple border design of double rules broken at each corner by an equally simple circular design: the design of the first impression is a circle within a circle © and that of the second is a circle with a dot at center ⊙. Plates were evidently made of the type but not of the rules and corner designs. Of the three 1842 (first) impressions examined—the two listed in the NUC for Harvard and Johns Hopkins and a personal copy—all pages (except four without borders) have the first impression border throughout. Of the second impressions, all but the American Antiquarian Society copy have pages 1-192 (beginning with the Essays) with the first impression border and the remaining bordered pages with that of the second impression. These 192 pages of the octavo comprise a dozen sheets, signatures B-N. In the Harvard and Yale 1845 (second impression) copies that were examined, pages 1-192 also seem slightly more yellowed, which may indicate that these sheets were left over from the first printing. The AAS second impression has only pages 97-192 or six sheets, signatures H-N, with the first impression border: although 664 pages have been collated between impressions with diverse borders, until it is known whether or not all the "Second Editions" were composed of mixed sheets, it is not possible to claim a complete collation of the two impressions, and these ninety-six pages (pp. 97-192) remain questionable. If the policy for the printing of these so far undiscovered ninety-six pages with second impression border remained the same, it would be safe to say there were no intentional changes; however,
not only do no significant textual variants occur, but the plates, stereotypes, uncorrected despite errors, remain the same for text and notes in the first and second impression (loosely called a "Second Edition" on the title page of the 1845 printing). In addition to differing title pages and border design, existing differences, apparently due to battered type, do not substantially affect the text: on page 490 the first \textit{invention} is present in the first impression and missing in the second; page 519 of the first impression has END OF THE ESSAYS.--this is missing in the second; page lxxxix is numbered in the first impression and left unnumbered in the second. In addition to the not unusual amount of broken type, all of the compositorial errors that were noted have been left standing from the first to the second impression.

In summary: textual and corroborative evidence point to the Hazlitt

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Compositorial errors corresponding in both impressions include transposed letters (p. 235, \textit{cubred} for \textit{curbed}); reversed letters (e.g., p. 378, \textit{without}; p. 470, \textit{fraud} for \textit{fraud}; p. 586, \textit{soiciety}); faulty spacing (e.g., p. xiv, \textit{wasvery}; p. 41, \textit{toimpose}; p. 284, \textit{be ingtaken}); repetition (p. 470, do \textit{do not follow the common run}); incorrect type (e.g., p. 486, \textit{nuaste} for \textit{nestle}; p. 574, \textit{faees} for \textit{faces}; p. 588, \textit{considered}). Other errors, such as missing punctuation marks (e.g., missing periods on pp. 68, 199, n. 12, and 328) and missing letters (e.g., p. 84, n. 1, \textit{h[a]d}; p. 304, n. 1, \textit{absol}lutely; p. 490, \textit{reletio[n]}. may be due, in some cases, to battered type; however, some instances seem certainly to be compositorial faults: e.g., on p. 328, the period is missing at a point that is simultaneously the end of a quotation, sentence, and paragraph; the quotation marks follow immediately in the printing and no space was ever allowed for a period, and no plate damage seems evident. In both impressions, p. 341 has been mis-numbered as 141.
edition of Montaigne's works as the one Melville most likely owned. Between the two impressions of this edition printed before Melville's purchasing date there are no resettings (title page excepted), substantives, or minor, intentional changes which affect the text. The later 1845 impression may be the more likely source because of the proximity of its publishing date to Melville's purchasing date, but for practical purposes, with forty-eight leaves in question (though not in copies examined and collated), either impression is safely eligible for source study. Both impressions are being used in this paper, and quotations with their locations correspond in both.

"Critical Opinions" section of Melville's Montaigne.—Aside from the three Books of "Essays," and with the exception of opinions written in French, the section that exerted the greatest influence on Melville in his reading of Hazlitt's Montaigne was probably the section entitled "Critical Opinions upon Montaigne and His Works." George, Marquis of Halifax, suggested that Montaigne's freedom of style was intentional, an encouraging precedent for the contemporary American search for freer forms of literature from Emerson through Melville and Whitman and on. The Westminster Review connects Montaigne with Shakespeare, particularly with Hamlet. Throughout the opinions, various conflicting comments raise the question of whether Montaigne was detrimental to or a supporter of religion; according to Dugald Stewart, Montaigne indulged in wily rhetorical devices; Stewart writes of the "Apology":

The principal aim of Sebond's book, according to Montaigne, is to

1Montaigne, p. xxxiv.

2Ibid., p. xli.
show that "Christians are in the wrong to make human reasoning the basis of their belief, since the object of it is only conceived by faith, and by a special inspiration of the divine grace." To this doctrine Montaigne professes to yield an implicit assent; and, under the shelter of it, contrives to give free vent to all the extravagancies of scepticism.¹

Stewart further calls attention to Montaigne's puncturing of human pride in intellectual prerogatives by his elimination of the essential distinction between the reason of man and the cognitive abilities of lower animals.²

Stewart also says: "The only study which seems ever to have engaged his attention was that of man";³ a number of other references are made to Montaigne's observations on human nature—Hazlitt (the romantic essayist) stresses the "richness, truth, and force of his [Montaigne's] ... observations on ... men."⁴ In Billy Budd, Melville's praise of Montaigne's honesty and freedom from cant may have been prompted by Hazlitt's remarks on Montaigne's "inexpressible frankness and sincerity" and "honesty of mind."⁵

An encomium appearing in the Retrospective Review would have endeared the "old confabulator" Montaigne to Hawthorne and Melville:

It is the author who gives utterance to the promptings of the heart, who mingles human feelings with all his knowledge, that lays fast hold of our affection, and whom, above all, we love and venerate. And such a one is the lively old Gascon, Montaigne.⁶

It is Stewart, again, who points out at a time that Melville was

¹Ibid., p. xxxvii.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., p. xxxvi.
⁴Ibid., p. xxxviii.
⁵Ibid., pp. xxxviii-xxxix.
⁶Ibid., p. xxxix.
newly aware of the "wonder" of "the world of mind,"¹ that it is Montaigne who is "at the head of the French writers who contributed . . . to turn the thoughts of their countrymen to subjects connected with the Philosophy of Mind" and who holds distinguished rank "in the history of modern philosophy."² Montaigne, it is declared, has done more than any other author to introduce the new Philosophy,³ and it is a philosophy of Pyrrhonian scepticism. The Westminster Review points to Montaigne's "Apology" as the "chief document on the subject of his philosophical opinions, or rather of his opinions about philosophy,"⁴ and Stewart finds that "an universal Pyrrhonism is recommended" in the "Apology," the most "serious" of the essays.⁵ Stewart speaks of Montaigne's "unlimited scepticism,"⁶ the Westminster Review of his "fundamental scepticism,"⁷ and Hallam of his "bias towards Pyrrhonism"⁸ and sees the "Apology" as a "long defence of moral Pyrrhonism."⁹

Particular aspects of scepticism are latched upon by various commentators. Dugald Stewart notices the tendency toward self-argumentation and the element of contradiction; speaking of "the scepticism of Montaigne," Stewart

¹_Mardi, II, chap. lxx, 277.
²_Montaigne, p. xxxvi.
³_Ibid., p. xxxviii.
⁴_Ibid., p. xlv.
⁵_Ibid., p. xxxvii.
⁶_Ibid.
⁷_Ibid., p. xlv.
⁸_Ibid., p. xlix.
⁹_Ibid., p. xlvi.ii.
says that Montaigne, depending on "the current of his reflections and feelings, 
argues, at different times, according to the varying state of his impressions 
and temper, on opposite sides of the same question," and he remarks that 
Montaigne does not resolve his doubts.¹ The Retrospective Review also finds 
Montaigne "at once, . . . philosophical and inconclusive"²—the observation 
parallels that of the New York Daily Tribune's reviewer (Stedman?) who was 
bothered by the lack of "distinct conclusions" in Clarel.³ Melville's aware-
ness of the variableness and moodiness of man—"it is all in all what mood 
you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of 
Isaiah, the archangels"⁴—was probably strengthened by such comments as that 
of Stewart, above, and of the Retrospective Review in their paraphrase of 
Montaigne:

Human nature is a wayward and variable thing, and . . . we must expect to 
find that his [man's] mind has undergone changes similar to those of his 
body, and that what he thinks today he will not think to-morrow. The 
opinions of a mutable nature cannot be immutable. Doubts will arise, 
contradictions will occur, and one opinion displace another, in its turn 
to be deposed.⁵

The ontological problem, the problem of cracking the veneer of appearances 
to get at the hardwood of reality, is posed by Stewart:

In the mind of Montaigne the same paradoxes may be easily traced to those 
deceitful appearances which, in order to stimulate our faculties to their 
best exertions, nature seems purposely to have thrown in our way,

¹Ibid., p. xxvii.
²Ibid., p. xli.
³Quoted in Bezanson's "Introduction" to Clarel, x1.
⁴Moby-Dick, II, chap. lxxxvi, 122.
⁵Montaigne, p. xli.
as stumbling blocks in the pursuit of truth. ¹

Hallam concerns himself with the moral implications of Pyrrhonism and finds that Montaigne "was at a loss to discover a general rule of moral law, as an implanted instinct, a necessary deduction of common reason, in the varying usages and opinions of mankind." ² Finally, Melville's musings on the question of immortality may have been moved by the rhetorically appealing article from the Westminster Review, where it is asked: "For what else are we but a breath, and our lives but sparks of fire in a vault of darkness?" ³

### Descartes

All that may be known with certainty about Melville's knowledge of Descartes is that he knew of him. The two references to Descartes, one in Moby-Dick and one in Pierre, ⁴ are to the Descartian vortices; unfortunately, as Howard P. Vincent has observed: "It is not easy to be certain of precisely what Melville meant by the 'Descartian vortices.'" ⁵ It may even be wondered if these vortices somehow relate to the vortex imagery of Mardi and the presence of the great vortex at the end of Moby-Dick.

It is not known if Melville was aware of Descartes' method of antecedent scepticism, his universal doubt, or of his questioning of the innerrancy of sense-knowledge, the "dream" meditation and the demon hypothesis

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¹Ibid., p. xxxvi.
²Ibid., p. xlix.
³Ibid., p. xlii.
⁴Moby-Dick, I chap. xxxv, 198; Pierre, Bk. XIX, chap. 1, p. 372.
directly from Descartes. It would be strange, considering Melville's continued interest in philosophy, if he did not know this, one of philosophy's most controversial and pivotal figures. Regardless, however, the sceptic quandaries found in Descartes (quandaries many scholars consider to be answered inadequately) are found prior to Descartes in Montaigne and after Descartes in Bayle (where the demon hypothesis is subsumed in his own questioning of the cause of evil) and in Hume. Melville met many references to and from Descartes in the Dictionary of Pierre Bayle, who became acquainted with Cartesianism in Geneva. Also, by the time of Melville, Cartesianism had been absorbed into the main stream of sceptical thought, and the general contours of the philosophy were evident and available in many forms—through conversation, periodical literature, histories of philosophy, encyclopedias, to name only the more obvious.

Sir Thomas Browne

Melville borrowed at least three of the four volumes of Sir Thomas' Browne's Works¹ from Duyckinck after mid-February 1848, and he purchased on 19 December 1849, while in London, the 1686 folio of Browne's Works² in one volume at Stibbs' the bookseller for sixteen shillings.³ The 1686 folio is divided into four sections: the first contains "Vulgar Errors," the second


³Journal—London and the Continent, pp. 76, 85.
"Religio Medici," the third "Hydriotaphia; or, Urn-Burial: Together with The Garden of CYRUS," and the fourth section is composed of "Certain MISCELLANY TRACTS."

Besides the example of Browne's exquisite prose, the mine of rich allusions Melville discovered in him, and the sheer pleasure Browne's uninhibited and daring play with words gave the etymologically-minded Melville--Browne contrived such wonders as digladiation, "fighting with swords," and writes of man's "deceptible condition" and of how the devil does "empuzzle" our conceptions (he probably inspired Melville's own concoctions in Mardi, e.g., unconsubsistent and Quadammodotatives--there were passages to be found which give evidence of Browne's philosophical scepticism: the whole compendium of popular or "Vulgar Errors," in fact, points out the facility with which man's mind stumbles into mistaken judgments; the first chapter is devoted to a discussion of a fundamental cause of man's errors, his weak or deceived nature. Adam and Eve are shown as deceived by Satan, by one another, from themselves, and through the conduct of their senses--Browne adds in the second chapter: "Being thus deluded before the fall, it is no wonder if their conceptions were deceitful, and could scarce speak without an error after."

The most forthright statement on scepticism occurs in Browne's

Religio Medici:

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1 See, e.g., the entry on Sir Thomas Browne in index to Hendricks House Moby-Dick, p. 842.

2 Mardi, II, chap. lxxii, 308.

3 Browne, II, 188.
I cannot think that Homer pined away upon the riddle of the fishermen, or that Aristotle, who understood the uncertainty of knowledge, and confessed so often the reason of man too weak for the works of nature, did ever drown himself upon the flux and reflux of Euripus. We do but learn, today, what our better advanced judgements will unteach, to-morrow; and Aristotle doth but instruct us, as Plato did him, that is, to confute himself. I have run through all sorts, yet find no rest in any: though our first studies and junior endeavours may style us Peripateticks, Stoicks, or Academicks, yet I perceive the wisest heads prove, at last, almost all Scepticks, and stand like Janus in the field of knowledge.¹

In a letter to Evert A. Duyckinck, 3 March 1849, Melville connects Browne with Emerson: "Lay it down that had not Sir Thomas Browne lived, Emerson would not have mystified."² Browne's name first appears in connection with his "Vulgar Errors" in Mardi, where Melville's statement may well indicate that he recognized him as a sceptic fideist. Melville writes (with irony?³):

¹Ibid., p. 104.
²Letters, p. 78.
³Leon Howard has written in his biography Herman Melville (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), p. 113, that "some of the early chapters were later revised" in Mardi "or even written and inserted in their entirety." A new element in some of these chapters certainly seems to be that of irony, the saying of one thing and showing of another; e.g., in Mardi, I, chap. iii, 14, the narrator says with a rather sanctimonious transcendentalism: "All things form but one whole; the universe a Judea, and God Jehovah its head. Then no more let us start with affright. In a theocracy, what is to fear?" Melville soon shows "what is to fear"—Taji describes his "sense of peril" in the open boat, the "terror" struck at the sight of the Bone Shark. The harmonious world forming but "one whole" becomes, instead, a discordant world in which creatures prey, war, and feed upon each other. The invitation to see Jehovah as a benevolent and providential God ("In a theocracy, what is to fear?") is countermanded by the statement: "As well hate a seraph as a shark. Both were made by the same hand" (Mardi, I, chap. xii, 43; chap. xiii, 46-47). The growing influence of sceptical writings on Melville during the writing of Mardi not only helps account for the change from romance to philosophical quest, but for the wide divergence of outlook that, like oil and water, kept the work from ever coming together as a whole. The irony of the first chapters—probably the last to be written or rewritten—prepares for the somber finale, but it is questionable if Melville reworked passages so assiduously for a coherent tone and direction of material in the central chapters.
"Be Sir Thomas Brown our ensample; who, while exploding 'Vulgar Errors,'
heartily hugged all the mysteries in the Pentateuch."¹ Duyckinck seems to
have recognized the influence of Browne's scepticism, if not his fideism; in
his Cyclopaedia, Duyckinck mentions Melville's reading in Sir Thomas Browne
for Mardi and in his continued observations remarks: "In the latter portions,
embarrassed by his spiritual allegories, he wanders without chart or compass
in the wildest regions of doubt and scepticism"²—Duyckinck's observation on
Mardi gathers weight when it is recalled that he possessed firsthand knowledge
of Melville's reading and possible reactions during the composition of the
novel and, in fact, lent Melville many of the books from his own library, in-
cluding Browne. Shortly after the publication of Mardi (in London, 17 March
1849), Melville wrote Duyckinck of his purchase of Bayle's Dictionary and an-
ounced that he intended to "lay the great old folios side by side & go to
sleep on them thro' the summer, with the Phaedon in one hand & Tom Brown in
the other."³

Melville drew on Browne's "Vulgar Errors" for an extract in Moby-Dick:

'What spermacetti is, men might justly doubt, since the learned
Hosmannus [sic] in his work of thirty years, saith plainly, Nescio
quid sit.'⁴

The phrasing of the extract most closely follows the 1686 folio,⁵ which Mel-
ville owned at the time of the writing of Moby-Dick; also, Melville mistook

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¹ Mardi, I, chap. xiii, 45.
² Duyckincks' Cyclopaedia, II, 673.
⁴ Moby-Dick, I, xv.
⁵ Bk. III, chap. xxvi, p. 139.
the f in "Hofmannus" for the old elongated s. More to the purpose, the extract offered Melville an example of how philosophical scepticism could be concretized into an artistic device integral to the philosophical framework of the novel and contributive to the primary theme of a problematic universe. The "Nescio quid sit"--"I don't know what it is"--in reference to spermaceti, becomes the commentary, in different forms, on each member as Melville catalogs the anatomy of the whale, his surrogate, in different though sometimes interdependent instances, for nature and God: the skin--"The question is, what and where is the skin of the whale?" and even if it is conceded that the blubber should properly be considered the skin the mystery still remains, since the body is crossed and recrossed with markings "hieroglyphical"; the spout--"And as for this whale-spout, you might almost stand in it, and yet be undecided as to what it is precisely"; the tail and head--

The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it. At times there are gestures in it, which . . . remain wholly inexplicable. . . . Nor are there wanting other motions of the whale in his general body, full of strangeness, and unaccountable to his most experienced assailant. Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none?

the brain--"If the sperm whale be physiognomically a sphinx, to the phrenologist his brain seems that geometrical circle which it is impossible to square;".

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1 Moby-Dick, II, chap. lxviii, 30, 31.
2 Ibid., chap. lxxxv, 115.
3 Ibid., chap. lxxxvi, 123.
4 Ibid., chap. lxxx, 84.
the forehead is a forehead "plaited with riddles";\textsuperscript{1} ambergris—"By some, ambergris is supposed to be the cause, and by others the effect, of the dyspepsia in the whale";\textsuperscript{2} "the digestive organs of the whale are . . . inscrutably constructed";\textsuperscript{3} the skeleton—after relating the story of a whale's skeleton being mistaken for that of a reptile, the narrator comments: "A significant illustration of the fact, again and again repeated in this book, that the skeleton of the whale furnishes but little clue to the shape of his fully invested body."\textsuperscript{4} Melville's examples are, in fact, "again and again repeated in this book." Finally, again borrowing from Browne's chapter "Of Many Things Questionable as They are Commonly Described in Pictures" from "Vulgar Errors,"\textsuperscript{5} Melville, in his chapter "Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales," concludes that the whale's appearance cannot even be known with exactitude:

Any way you may look at it, you must needs conclude that the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness. So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like.\textsuperscript{6}

\begin{flushright}
\textbf{Pascal}
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Our awareness of Melville's knowledge of Pascal rests on textual

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1}\textit{Ibid.}, chap. lxxix, 83.
\item \textsuperscript{2}\textit{Ibid.}, chap. xcii, 161.
\item \textsuperscript{3}\textit{Ibid.}, chap. c, 203.
\item \textsuperscript{4}\textit{Ibid.}, chap. civ, 221.
\item \textsuperscript{5}See note 261.7 in Hendricks House \textit{Moby-Dick}, p. 746.
\item \textsuperscript{6}\textit{Moby-Dick}, I, chap. lv, 336.
\end{itemize}
evidence, particularly a well-known passage in Moby-Dick. English transla-
tions of the Pensées were numerous¹ and Pascal's works were sold by Melville's
publishers Wiley and Putnam; because of Melville's interest in and personal
purchase of the works of two other great French sceptics, Montaigne and Bayle,
it would be strange, though not impossible, if Melville ignored this great
intermediary figure.

Melville had access to the article on Pascal in Bayle's Dictionary,
where Pascal is called "one of the sublimest Wits in the World";² however,
none of the Dictionary accounts in the editions of 1710, 1734-1738, or 1734-
1741 include the aspect of Pascal's biography that attracted Melville—in
Moby-Dick, Pascal receives an accolade as a man of woe:

The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books
is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. 'All
is vanity.' ALL. This wilful world hath not got hold of unchristian
Solomon's wisdom yet. But he who dodges hospitals and jails, and walks
fast crossing graveyards, and would rather talk of operas than hell; calls
Cowper, Young, Pascal, Rousseau, poor devils all of sick men; and through-
out a care-free lifetime swears by Rabelais as passing wise, and therefore
jolly;--not that man is fitted to sit down on tombstones, and break the
green damp mould with unfathomably wondrous Solomon.³

Almost forty years later, on Melville's seventieth birthday, 1 August 1889,
Elizabeth presented to Herman the two volumes of The Correspondence of Honoré
de Balzac translated by C. Lamb Kenny (London, 1878).⁴ In the second volume,
in a letter of Balzac to Madame Hanska, October, 1836, Melville scored:

1The British Museum Catalogue, e.g., shows a holding of twelve ed-
tions of "Thoughts . . ." published between 1688-1851. I have used an
American edition of 1835 not mentioned in the Catalogue.

²Bayle, 1710 ed., IV, 2464.

³Moby-Dick, II, chap. xcvi, 181-182.

⁴Sealts, No. 23.
I can understand how the absolute asceticism of Pascal, and his immense labours, brought him to the pass that he saw constantly an abyss on both sides of him, and was obliged to have two chairs on each side of the one in which he sat.¹

The inclusion in Moby-Dick of Pascal's name with other so-called "sick men," and the scoring of the passage referring to Pascal's visions of the abyss point to a particular incident in Pascal's life: because of a seriously declining state of health, Pascal's physicians recommended that he take excursions in the open air. Accordingly, he went for an outing one day in a coach and four; the two lead horses became frightened in an area where there was no parapet, and they fell into the Seine—the traces gave way, however, and the carriage remained on the brink of a precipice. Because of the exhausted condition of an already highly sensitive constitution, the shock of the accident threw Pascal into a fit and he afterwards suffered from recurring traumatic visions of an abyss—visions which sometimes earned for him the reputation of being deranged. Melville would have sympathized with Pascal's deep realization of physical evil. The concept of the abyss had other connotations in relation to Pascal, too, since he so deeply realized the abyss of man's misery without God; also, thoughts of annihilation were not entirely foreign to Pascal's mind.

Henry A. Murray is willing to be rather decisive about Melville's knowledge of Pascal; in the explanatory notes to his edition of Pierre he writes: "Having recently read Pascal, including no doubt the Provincial Letters, Melville was especially alert to instances of theological

¹ Log, II, 815.
From internal evidence, Murray points to five of the Penseés as possible sources of parallel thoughts occurring in Pierre. 2

From Bayle's presentation of Pascal Melville would have recognized the element of scepticism, although it is muted and almost lost in the biographical details. A more overt statement occurs in Bayle's article on Pyrrho, where he writes that "Pascal . . . declared . . . reason ought to be degraded as much as possible, and represented as a faculty that ought not to be much relied on." 3

Melville, knowingly or unknowingly, shared with Pascal an appreciation of Solomon; his continued interest in Solomon and Job at least partially stemmed from their sceptical affinities—Ephraim Chambers' article on "Scepticism" states that "some have even charged Job and Solomon with

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2 See notes in Hendricks House Pierre for 232.23, 250.1, 407.33: in Melville's statement, "Death . . . the last act of man's play . . . begin how it may, in farce or comedy, ever hath its tragic end," Murray sees a rendering of Penseés, 210: "The last act is tragic, however happy all the rest of the play is; at the last a little earth is thrown upon our head, and that is the end for ever." Murray also quotes Penseés, 397, 398 as probable influences in Melville's conception of Ahab and Pierre—the Penseés read: "The greatness of man is great in that he knows himself to be miserable . . . All these same miseries prove man's greatness. They are the miseries of a great lord, of a deposed king." In this conjunction of misery and greatness, Mr. Murray might have quoted Pierre, Bk. IX, chap. iii, p. 237: "Wherefore is it, that not to know Gloom and Grief is not to know aught that an heroic man should learn?"—or, Ahab's "I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief" (Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxxxv, 366). Although not mentioned by Murray, another possible borrowing from Pascal's biography may have found its way into Pierre. Pascal professed to have had a unique, personal, and spiritual revelation, an account of which he wrote and kept between the cloth and the lining of his coat for the remainder of his life. This action may have suggested to Melville the business of Plinlimmon's pamphlet becoming obscured in the lining of Pierre's coat to be found only after his death.

3 Bayle, 1734–1741 ed., VIII, 598.
Scepticism; from their proposing a great Number of Questions, without deciding any of them";\(^1\) Pascal, too, may have been one of the sources influencing Melville in his appreciation of Ecclesiastes, which Melville, following traditional belief, thought to be the work of Solomon, and which he praised as the "truest of all books" and the "fine hammered steel of woe," for Pascal declared that "Solomon and Job knew best, and exhibited most accurately the misery of man,"\(^2\) and Pascal shows that much of man's misery is his inability to "know"--he writes in *Pensées*, 389:

Ecclesiastes shows that man without God is in total ignorance and inevitable misery. For it is wretched to have the wish, but not the power. Now he would be happy and assured of some truth, and yet he can neither know, nor desire not to know.

**Pierre Bayle**

Melville wrote to Evert Duyckinck 5 April 1849: "I bought a set of Bayle's Dictionary the other day, & on my return to New York intend to lay the great old folios side by side & go to sleep on them thro' the summer."\(^3\) The edition of the Dictionary purchased is unknown.\(^4\) Melville was probably acquainted with the Dictionary before his own purchase, since Duyckinck, whose library Melville periodically invaded, owned the set in five volumes. Melville must have done a great deal more than sleep on his folios of Bayle during the ensuing two years, however, for, as Millicent Bell has shown, Bayle

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\(^1\)Chambers, II, 31.


\(^3\)Letters, p. 83.

\(^4\)Sealts, No. 51. Sealts lists three possibilities.
exerted a notable influence on Melville's masterpiece, Moby-Dick.¹

Melville met another Pyrrhonist with his reading of Pierre Bayle. In sceptic fashion, Bayle questioned the trustworthiness of sense knowledge and also questioned accepted truths including rationalistically established truths of Christianity—God's unity, benevolence, providence, and justice. These attributes of God came under question as Bayle established a view of reality involving a greater sceptical equipoise between the two polarities of good and evil.

Melville, like Bayle, and, perhaps, largely because of Bayle, profoundly questioned the presence of evil in the world; he seems to have regarded evil, again like Bayle, not simply as the negation or absence of goodness, but as something excruciatingly positive in its own realm. He apparently considered, at least for literary purposes, the Manichean pseudo-solution, discussed at length by Bayle, that, in order not to have to conclude to a malevolent God (it is argued that if God is only one and omnipotent and could prevent all evils if He so chooses—but doesn't—then He must be malevolent), it would be preferrable to posit two necessary Principles, one responsible for good, the other for evil. Pushed further, however, Melville again fuses the two elements in one Principle, and does, therefore, question the possibility of a malevolent one God—this is the Cartesian question rephrased by Bayle and adopted by Melville: "Is God the Devil?", is God responsible for evil? In Chapter I of this study, the point was made that Bayle apparently sanctions the idea of two conflicting coeternal Principles of good and evil. Mr.

¹Millicent Bell, "Pierre Bayle and Moby Dick," PMLA, CXVI (September, 1951), 626-648.
Lawrence Thompson opines that Melville's predominant presentation of good and evil as coalesced into one principle may be due to a misinterpretation of Bayle. This may be so. It may be contended, however, that Melville found sufficient grounds for such a reading of Bayle: it may be argued, though not concluded, that Bayle's arguments for two Principles may have been a ruse, for it seems Bayle was surely astute enough to realize that, in his questioning of evil, his rational arguments for Manichean dualism would be rejected, but that the very rejection would leave his contenders confronted with the problem of a malevolent God. Evidence of his subsequent influence seems to point to the preponderance of this view. The Enlightenment tried to circumvent the problem by rejecting a personal providence and removing God further and further away, so that He had very little to do with the affairs of men and could not, therefore, be malevolent since He wasn't even involved; He was left was a sort of nebulous beginning and end of the affair as Creator and Judge—not all, of course, were even this remotely reverent. Bayle offers some provocative examples that are insinuative of an ambivalent first principle—as ambivalent as the father figure in one of Melville's novels, the father of Melville's dewy boy Pierre; Bayle writes of the Roman gods:

And though there was one Vejovis much more inclin'd to do Evil than to do Good; nevertheless it was beli[e]ved that Dijovis or Diespiter, i.e. the good Jupiter darted the Thunderbolt. 2

The "good Jupiter" is, therefore, not all good, but wields a vast threatening power toward man. Melville's God, a primal power common to all creeds, races,

1Thompson, pp. 30, 187.

2Bayle, 1710 ed., III, 1150 [pagination erratic in this volume, but see the article "Manicheans"].
and times, whether the Christian "God," the pagan "Jupiter," or a "Pictish storm-king," is often a God connected with storms and prodigal of thunderbolts; there is, e.g., the God of "The Candles" in Moby-Dick: "Sky and sea roared and split with the thunder, and blazed with the lightning," for "God's burning finger . . . [was] laid on the ship";¹ the "Jupiter Tonans" of "The Lightning-Rod Man" whose eyes "played with an innocuous sort of lightning" tries to intimidate and drive "a brave trade with the fears of man," while "scattered bolts" of "irregular thunder" boom overhead:² the "storm-admiral" of Pierre is an antagonist to man,³ and the grim "Pictish storm-king" of Clarel is heard "scoffing" about the gables as Arculf and Adamnan tell their simple tales of faith.⁴ Bayle notes that--

Plutarch is also mistaken, when he thinks that the Philosophers and Poets are agreed in the Doctrine of two Principles. Did not he remember that Homer the Prince of Poets, their Pattern, their common Original, that Homer, I say, set only one God over the two Tuns of Good and Evil?⁵

The suggestion of a common dispenser behind the sources of good and evil would have been evident to Melville. Bayle continues: "The Apology of Costar being scarce in foreign Countries, I shall make no scruple to cite a long Passage out of it," and he offers the following passage on "the two Tuns of Good and Evil":

"Jupiter at all times
Has at the Threshold of his House,

¹Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxix, 276, 279.
²The Piazza Tales, pp. 171-173, 180.
³Pierre, Bk. XXV, chap. iii, p. 474.
⁵Bayle, 1710 ed., III, 1150.
"As Homer says, two full Tuns;
And there is neither old Man, nor young,
Neither Woman nor Maid,
Whether she be old or young, handsome or ugly,
Who receives Life in this World,
But drinks of these two Tuns.
'Tis a full Tavern,
Whereof Fortune is the Vintner,
And mingles Pots and Cups,
To make all the World Soups;
She gives all Drink with her own Hands,
But to some more, to others less:
There is none but every Day drinks
Out of these Tuns, either a Quart or a Pint,
Or a Tierce, or a Gallon, or a Chopin,
As it pleases Fortune,
To give either with a full Hand or a few Drops,
Which she puts into their Mouth:
And pours out Good or Evil upon every one,
According as she is in a good or bad Humour."¹

God ("Jupiter") is seen dispensing evil as well as good and this in a fortuitous or indifferent manner. The preceding poem probably influenced Melville's chapters on "The Great Heidelberg Tun," that "famous great tierce,"² and "Cistern and Buckets" in Moby-Dick. The Sperm Whale's head becomes the analogue for the mind of God in the novel as Melville questions that mind and its possible malign intentions toward man. His more subtle connections seem to align it with the evil Tun: Tashtego is standing "on the summit of the head" and "the place where he stood was ... treacherous and oozy"; he falls into the Tun and the narrator wonders "whether the Evil One himself would have it to fall out so, without stating his particular reasons"; finally, the narrator remarks that the

¹Ibid.
²Moby-Dick, II, chap. lxxvii, 72v
incident will seem less incredible to "landsmen" (often Melville's figure for security seeking individuals who do not ask more ultimate contemplative questions, who do not "push off to sea") if they recall having heard of some one's falling into a cistern ashore, an accident that happens "with much less reason" than Tashtego's, "considering the exceeding slipperiness of the curb of the sperm whale's well"—Melville's statement recalls Montaigne's in the "Apology": "In a slippery and sliding place let us suspend our belief." 

Millicent Bell suggests that Ahab's words, "be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal" may be an echo of Bayle in that Ahab does not know if the whale's malicious strength "is the [direct] expression of the Christian God or some delegated source of evil." A passage from Bayle's article on Zoroaster substantiates the tendency to push past a duality of Principles to a common source; Bayle quotes Dr. Hyde at length and concludes: "These words clearly express that in Zoroaster's Hypothesis, the two Principles, one Good and the other Evil, . . . or Light and Darkness were, properly speaking, no more than Second Causes, and did not strictly deserve the Name of Principles: they were the Effects of another Cause, and the productions of God." Bayle argues against this view, but not nearly so well as he argues for it: the weakness of his rebuttal renders his intentions highly questionable. Without, however, entering into an argument ad hominem, it does

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1Ibid., chap. lxxviii, 75-76, 79.
2Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 235.
3Bell, p. 646.
4Bayle, 1710 ed., IV, 3102.
seem relevant to state that Melville would not be completely unjustified in an ironical reading of Bayle. The line of reasoning which sees secondary causes as productions of another Cause, "God," may apply in "The Candles" chapter of Moby-Dick, where there is the suggestion of a power behind the power that Ahab defies:

There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical. Through thee, thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it.1

Whatever the final responsible power is, the attributes of both Good and Evil, God and the devil, become integrated in it as it is symbolized through Moby-Dick: the White Whale is not only described as "ubiquitous," "immortal," a "grand god," one who moves "divinely" and is compared to "Jupiter" and "Jove,"2 but he is also full of "cunning . . . and malice," marked by "intelligent malignity"; "all evil . . . [is] made practically assailable in Moby Dick"; he evinces a "demoniac indifference," is "devilish," suspected of a "latent deceitfulness" and exhibits "eternal malice."3

The presence of evil in the world led Melville, like Bayle, to question God's benevolence. In his article "Diogenes the Cynick" Bayle writes that "the number of those who perish notwithstanding their Vows, does far exceed the Number of those whose Prayers are heard."4 Melville, in effect, says the same: in Moby-Dick Pip prays, "Oh, thou big white God aloft there

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1 Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxix, 282-283.
2 Ibid., I, chap. xli, 226, 227; II, chap. cxxxiii, 334, 335.
3 Ibid., I, chap. xli, 223, 228, 229-230; II, chap. cxxx, 318; chap. cxxxiii, 336; chap. cxxxv, 362, 365.
4 Bayle, 1710 ed., II, 1104.
somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here," \textsuperscript{1} but his prayer goes unheeded; as Moby Dick bears down upon the fated Pequod, Starbuck asks: "Is this the end of all my bursting prayers?" \textsuperscript{2} Even Ahab's prayer, for Pip, "God forever bless thee; and if it come to that,--God forever save thee, let what will befall," \textsuperscript{3} goes unanswered in this world and, according to Melville's terms, remains dubious in the next. The darkest example occurs in "Benito Cereno," where, on the dead body of Don Joaquin, Marques de Aramboalaza

was found secreted a jewel, which, by papers that were discovered, proved to have been meant for the shrine of our Lady of Mercy in Lima; a votive offering, beforehand prepared and guarded, to attest his gratitude, when he should have landed in Peru, his last destination, for the safe conclusion of his entire voyage from Spain. \textsuperscript{4}

Don Joaquin is killed through a mistake of the Americans: the Negroes force him onto the bulwarks and tie a hatchet "edge out and upright to his hand"; seen in this "questionable attitude," the Americans shoot him, believing him to be a renegade seaman. \textsuperscript{5} Melville's probing of the divine nature, not only its benevolence, but claims for its providence and justice, have a direct bearing on the subsequent problems of this study.

David Hume

Melville's references, en passant, to David Hume, though few, exhibit

\textsuperscript{1}Moby-Dick, I, chap. xl, 221.  
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., II, chap. cxxxv, 364.  
\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., chap. cxxix, 317.  
\textsuperscript{4}The Piazza Tales, p. 165.  
\textsuperscript{5}Ibid.
a marked esteem: it is possible that a more than normal national pride in his Scotch ancestry contributed toward this respect. Melville probably had Hume in mind, among others, when, in Mardi, he describes Kaleedoni, that is, Caledonia, an ancient name for Scotland and remarks that the people of Kaleedoni are known for "their penetration in philosophy," their "metaphysicians." A short time later in Redburn (1849), published the same year as Mardi, Melville describes Hume's death in terms that, in some respects, seem applicable to Melville as well:

Though the Christian era had not then begun, Socrates died the death of the Christian; and though Hume was not a Christian in theory, yet he,

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1. William H. Gilman in Melville's Early Life and Redburn (New York: New York University Press, 1951), p. 12, prints a letter of Melville's father, Allan, to his father, which shows his pride in "discovering links that bound him to [Scotch] aristocracy":

"Your greatgrandfather was a grandson of Sir John Melvill of Carnbee, who was knighted by James the 6th & made baron of Granton 28th July 1580, on which you may depend as a well-authenticated historical fact, confirmed by living testimony--I have also traced you back in direct lineal descent to Sir Richard de Melville, Knight in the reign of Alexander the 3d in the year 1268, & have discovered that the branch at Boston, & my great Uncle John then at Grenada, are expressly recognised in Douglas Baronage of Scotland, of which I shall purchase if possible a cheap edition, as belonging to the Melvilles of Carnbee & termed an ancient & illustrious House of the founders of which Crawford & Douglas Peerage of Scotland both say, were related to Queen Margaret consort of Malcolm Canmere & came with her from Hungary. . . ."

Melville seems to have come by his own pride naturally, and he had the added impetus of his romantic literary trends, trends which had depended, to a large measure, on the presence of aristocracy and class distinctions. In his article on Melville in the Cyclopaedia, II, 672, Duyckinck states immediately following the date and place of birth: "On his father's side he is of Scotch extraction," and Melville must have impressed Mrs. Hawthorne with the same information, since she wrote in early autumn of 1850 to her mother of Melville: "He is of Scotch descent—of noble lineage—of the Lords of Melville & Leven, & Malcolm is a family name" (quoted in Metcalf, Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle, p. 92).

too, died the death of the Christian—humble, composed, without bravado;
and though the most sceptical of philosophical sceptics, yet full of
that firm, creedless faith that embraces the spheres.¹

The passage calls attention to Hume's scepticism and may also be a reflection
of Melville's reading at this time in Montaigne, who devotes essays to the
subject of death and the manner of dying.

The source of Melville's knowledge of Hume remains unknown;² he knew
Hume's essay on suicide and makes explicit reference to it in The Confidence-
Man.³ Since the essay "Of Suicide" was printed with "On the Immortality of
the Soul," the subject of which was of deep concern to Melville, it may be
conjectured that Melville was acquainted with it also, and, given Melville's
interest in theological works,⁴ a further strong surmise may be made for his
direct knowledge of the "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion." Whether he
knew the remainder of Hume's works through primary or secondary sources is
anybody's guess. Near the end of his life, as noted by William Braswell,
Melville marked heavily a passage in Schopenhauer saying that "from every
page of David Hume there is more to be learned than from the collected

¹Redburn, chap. liviii, 377.

²Melville knew Hume's essay on suicide: a 1777 octavo printed the two
essays, "Of Suicide" and "On the immortality of the Soul"; an 1824 octodecimo
(The Philosophical Works of David Hume [London: G. Fenton]) printed the same
two essays and the "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," finally, in 1826,
the complete essays were brought out in a four volume octavo set with the
same title as the preceding (Edinburgh: Printed for Adam Black [etc.] ... London)—citations are from this 1826 four volume edition.


⁴Sealts notes in the first article on "Melville's Reading," p. 143,
that New York book dealers declined purchasing the lot of books which Mrs.
Melville offered for sale after her husband's death, because of the "pre-
ponderance of these theological books."
philosophical works of Hegel, Herbart, and Schleiermacher together."¹

In his "The Design of the Argument in Moby-Dick," Howard C. Horsford singles out in particular the "desperate implications of Hume's skeptical epistemology"² and speaks of "the consequences of the new epistemology";³ it must be submitted, however, that the epistemology, as this study endeavors to show, is not entirely "new," and, though Hume undoubtedly influenced Melville, probably early as Thorp suggests,⁴ he is by no means a unique source. In addition to his awareness of Hume's scepticism and unchristian Christianity, Melville offers more evidence of a knowledge of the general outlines of Hume's philosophy than of particulars, though he may have known them; a search for "direct" allusions may be misleading.⁵ Although a number of parallels may be drawn between Melville and Hume, for the purposes of this study four are of primary concern: the epistemological, ontological, ethical, and retributive; these will be amplified in the following chapters. Suffice it to say here

²MFS, VIII (Autumn, 1962), 234.
³Ibid., p. 235.
⁵For example, Starbuck's argument, "Vengeance on a dumb brute! . . . that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous" (Moby-Dick, I, chap. xxxvi, 204), seems to point to Hume's "The only proper object of hatred or vengeance, is a person or creature endowed with thought and consciousness" (Hume, IV, 117). But the core of this concept is also present in Montaigne, a mentor to both Melville and Hume--Montaigne says: "This is the reason why we do not fall upon a beast or a stone when it hurts us, because they are not capable of being sensible of our revenge" (Bk. II, chap. xxvii, p. 321).
that Melville, like Hume (though not exclusively), questioned the certitude of knowledge and the actual existence and nature of reality; he would have balked at the utilitarian and pragmatic bent of Hume's ethics and been much less sanguine about a man-made ethical code, but he would have understood the difficulty that underlay this expedient in lieu of stabler forms; with Hume, he questioned the immortality of the soul and pending annihilation.

**Immanuel Kant**

Recognition of Melville's knowledge of Kant rests not only on textual evidence in the novels, but on the testimony of Melville's *Journal* of 1849-1850. Kant's name, as well as Rabelais's, Montaigne's, and Browne's, first appears in the great intellectual ragout of *Mardi,* where Melville also makes reference to "Abstract Noumenons"—whether Melville has Kant's concept of noumenon in mind in this particular reference is not clear, however, since it appears without comment. That Melville understood the essence of the problem that was to become, in Kantian terms, the phenomenal-noumenal problem, i.e., man's limited ability to perceive mere sensible impressions, the superficial appearances of things—phenomena, but his inability to penetrate this unyielding wall of appearances to seize the essence of the thing-in-itself—noumenon, the terms of the novel give ample evidence, particularly through the dialogue of Babbalanja who seeks the "pearl" beneath the shell, "the mystery that lieth beyond" mere appearance, "things infinite in the finite." The problem, however, is common to the phalanx of sceptic writers.

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1 *Mardi,* I, chap. iii, 14.

Kant's name again appears in Redburn in a passage that gives evidence of Melville's recent reading in Montaigne's "Apology," especially the section on the rationality of animals:

There are unknown worlds of knowledge in brutes; and whenever you mark a horse, or a dog, with a peculiarly mild, calm, deep-seated eye, be sure he is an Aristotle or a Kant, tranquilly speculating upon the mysteries in man. No philosophers so thoroughly comprehend us as dogs and horses. They see through us at a glance.¹

Melville's most serious apprenticeship to Kant probably occurred on his journey to London and the continent in 1849-1850. He enjoyed lengthy discussions with Franklin Taylor, who was well versed in German philosophy, and his travelling companion for a good part of the trip and visit was George J. Adler, professor of German at New York University; Melville's journal entry for October 12th reads: "There are some very pleasant passengers on board with whom to converse. Chief among these is a Mr. Adler, a German scholar, to whom Duyckinck introduced me. . . . He is full of the German metaphysics, & discourses of Kant, Swedenborg, &c."² Ten days later, October 22nd, Melville records:

I forgot to mention, that last night about 9 ¹⁄₂ P.M. Adler & Taylor came into my room, & it was proposed to have whisky punches, which we did have, accordingly. Adler drank about three tablespoons full--Taylor 4 or five tumblers &c. We had an extraordinary time & did not break up till after two in the morning. We talked metaphysics continually, & Hegel, Schlegel, Kant &c were discussed under the influence of the whiskey.³

--Faced with the melancholy reflection that facts are in absentia to prove that Melville mentally masticated the ponderous prose of the Critiques at

¹Redburn, chap. x1, p. 254.
²Journal—London and the Continent, p. 4.
³Ibid., p. 12.
first hand, regret may be alleviated by recalling these conducively "trans- 
cendential" and elucidating circumstances in which he imbibed his knowledge of 
the philosopher of Königsberg. As several successive journal entries show, 
the subject of metaphysics, particularly German metaphysics, was never left 
very far astern.

In Moby-Dick, Melville uses Kant opposite Locke to set up a situation 
of sceptical polarity. A Right Whale's head is hoisted up on the side of the 
ship Pequod opposite a Sperm Whale's head, and the narrator comments:

So, when on one side you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; 
but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again; but 
in very poor plight. Thus, some minds forever keep trimming boat. Oh, 
ye foolish! throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will 
float light and right.

Though his juxtaposition of the two philosophers is not further clarified in 
the passage, Melville probably had in mind the epistemological view of Locke, 
where the mind is fundamentally passive and affected, a "tabula rasa" in-
scribed by sense impressions of external nature, as opposed to the idealistic 
epistemological view of Kant, where the mind, not purely passive and receptive, 
is also active and effecting knowledge by providing, through the categories 
constituent to internal human nature, forms for the matter received through 
sense impressions. Melville finally rejects both extremes of systematized

1 Friday, November 2: "In the evening played chess, & talked metaphysics [with] my learned friend till midnight"; Thursday, November 15: 
"Went with Adler to the 'Edinburgh Castle', a noted place for its fine Scotch ale, the best I ever drank. Had a glorious chop & a pancake, a pint & a half of ale, a cigar & a pipe, & talked high German metaphysics meanwhile"; 
Tuesday, December 4: "Thence to his [Adler's] room and talked high German metaphysics till ten o'clock"; Friday, December 7: "Sat up conversing with Adler till pretty late,--(Topic--as usual--metaphysics)" (Ibid., pp. 16-17, 32, 57, 59).

2 Moby-Dick, II, chap. lxxiii, 59.
philosophy; though, despite his own advice, he did a great deal of "trimming boat" himself on the underlying problem of matter and mind.

Describing the transcendental Apostles in *Pierre*, Melville employs Kant's name for the sake of a pun, but also, perhaps, for the idealistic affinities appropriate to transcendentalism, where truth is made to conform to the mind rather than vice versa:

Often groping in vain in their pockets, they cannot but give in to the Descartian vortices; while the abundance of leisure in their attics (physical and figurative), unite with the leisure in their stomachs, to fit them in an eminent degree for that undivided attention indispensable to the proper digesting of the sublimated Categories of Kant; especially as Kant (can't) is the one great palpable fact in their pervadingly impalpable lives.¹

Henry A. Pochmann sees Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* as parallels of Kant's first and second Critiques respectively: according to Pochmann, Melville, like Kant, examines the problem of knowledge on identical levels, the metaphysical and the moral.² It may be, however, that Melville is primarily questioning the three large areas of inquiry: God, nature, and man--man being particularly the self, the man best known if known at all. In a passage of a letter to Hawthorne on the "last stages of metaphysics," Melville speaks of the "Me, a God, a Nature."³ Although the "self" is an important element in *Moby-Dick*,⁴ the accent is often on God and nature as seen through

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¹ *Pierre*, Bk. XIX, chap. 1, p. 372.


³ *Letters*, p. 125.

⁴ Emerson's Over-Soul, the Divine Reality that stands behind phenomenon and emanates through it and infuses it, is at some furthest recess of man's soul identified with it. Emerson pushes Renaissance Protestant humanism to ultimate proportions by deifying mankind. "The Divinity School Address" is a
the proteanly symbolic whale. In *Pierre*, Melville stresses self: phrases such as "in his soul," "into his soul," "through thy soul," "within ourselves," "interior," "the heart," the spells "evoked in me" become more prevalent.

God and nature are not forgotten, but, almost, as it were, assuming the darkly inconclusive conclusions of *Moby-Dick*, they are summarily reviewed near the beginning of *Pierre* in order to concentrate on the self; God, through the father figure, has failed: "Thy sacred father is no more a saint"; nature has failed: "The before undistrusted moral beauty of the world is forever fled"; but--at this early juncture--self remains: "Myself am left, at least."¹

The final tragedy comes with the failure of self. In *The Confidence-Man*, too, as Miss Foster perceptively shows, Melville divides his allegory into the logical consequent of the premise of the Over-Soul: if every man at the marrow of his being is identified with the divine principle, then, *de facto*, every man is divine. The hypostatic union is no longer unique. The notion of Self-Reliance is an outcropping of romantic individualism, but Emerson baptized it. As the divinity-of-all-men premise is a logical consequent of the postulate of the Over-Soul, so is Self-Reliance the logical consequent of both of these: if the real self is divine because of its identification with the Over-Soul, then self-reliance becomes synonymous with reliance on God: "Self-reliance, the height and perfection of man, is reliance on God" (Emerson, *Works*, XI, 236). Melville was as enamoured with the idea of self-reliance and the dignity of the individual as Emerson—he would "cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet-bag,—that is to say, the Ego" (*Letters*, p. 125)—but he repudiates transcendental optimism in the outcome of this reliance. In "The American Scholar," Emerson, that great spiritual entrepreneur, asserts, in the cause of self-reliance: "That if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him" (Emerson, *Works*, I, 115). Melville's Ahab "indomitably" takes his stand, there abides, and the whole world, represented by the Pequod, comes round to him—and goes down. As Melville writes in *Pierre* (Bk. XVIII, chap. ii, p. 364); "Our God is a jealous God; he wills not that any man should permanently possess the least shadow of his own self-sufficient attributes."

¹ *Pierre*, Bk. III, chap. vi, pp. 89-90.
consideration of God, Nature, and Man, as he methodically punctures trust in each of them. ¹ This three-fold division, in fact, seems to offer the larger dimensions of form for each of his more philosophical novels. Though not specifically Kantian, the division of Kant's Critiques, of course, may have been an inspiration for Melville's own considerations.

The consideration allotted to each sceptic writer included in this chapter on Melville's sources will be augmented in following chapters. Melville had met, some more, some less, in his reading or conversation, all of the sceptics here included—Pyrrho, Sextus Empiricus, Rabelais, Montaigne, Descartes, Browne, Pascal, Bayle, Hume, and Kant—by the time of his most perfect work of art as well as record of sceptical enquiry, Moby-Dick. Attention turns now to a closer study of Melville's works; selected passages from the works of these authors, beginning with Rabelais, will accompany the following investigation of the philosophical problems inherent to scepticism as they are found in the texts of Melville's writings. The fundamental thesis of this study is that Melville's basic problem (logically) is epistemological, a lack of noetic certitude which gave rise to an ontological difficulty concerning the nature of a consequently uncertain reality, which, in turn, engendered an ethical question, since ethics depends on one's view of being or reality, and, finally, the ethical inconsequence which Melville envisioned rendered the retributive rationale—immortality and sanctions—meaningless, until nothing was left but nothing. This course of reasoning is Melville's predominant one. While the element of nihilism is evident, in the

end, Melville no more trusted the powers of a fallible and limited reason to reach negative dogmatic conclusions than to reach more positively sanguine ones, and, for Melville the sceptic, the case of the universe ends with a question mark.
CHAPTER III

SCEPTICISM IN MELVILLE'S WRITINGS: EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEM

"But deign, some little sign be given—"
"Timoleon."

The fact of inquiry

All literature is comprised of the res and the verba, the sense and the style, the matter and the manner—in short, what is said and how it is said. Every writer writes from a premise: the more universal, profound, and ultimate the premise, if the writer is also imbued with a unique gift of rhetoric to articulate it, the greater is his chance of reaching the highest echelon of artistic achievement. Herman Melville, in his greatest works, wrote from such a universal premise and probed it to profound and ultimate proportions. Because his premise is universal, it appears in different guises in works of contemporaneity as well as those of antiquity; a modern philosopher writes:

Deep within us all, emergent when the noise of other appetites is stilled, there is a drive to know, to understand, to see why, to discover the reason, to find the cause, to explain. Just what is wanted has many names. In what precisely it consists, is a matter of dispute. But the fact of inquiry is beyond all doubt. It can absorb a man. It can keep him for hours, day after day, year after year, in the narrow prison of his study or his laboratory.¹

The "fact of inquiry"—Melville's titanic struggle might be summarized in

these brief words. Like all men, only more than most men, he wanted to know. Perhaps this assertion may be questioned in view of the fact that Melville wrote to Hawthorne: "I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head!"¹

But he also wrote that

in those men who have fine brains and work them well, the heart extends down to hams. And though you smoke them with the fire of tribulation, yet, like veritable hams, the head only gives the richer and the better flavor.²

Man needs more love than knowledge:

My fellow-creature, do you know
That what most satisfies the head
Least solaces the heart? Less light
Than warmth needs earthly wight.³

Though love is first in the priority of importance, however, knowledge is first in the order of precedence: we cannot love what we do not know. In the end, in any true humanism that encompasses the whole man, the head and heart stand united. In the final part of Clarel, Melville calls the heart the "Spouse of the brain,"⁴ and in his paean of praise for Hawthorne, he reaches the vertex of his acclaim when he applies to Hawthorne Hawthorne's own words from the "Select Party": "A great heart burns as the household fire of a grand intellect."⁵ The present study concentrates on the problem of knowledge and dependent problems: epistemology and scepticism are bloodless words on paper, but as their problems actually occur existentially in the individual, as they

¹Letters, p. 129.
²Ibid.
³Clarel, Pt. III, canto xxii, 11. 244-247.
⁴Ibid., Pt. IV, canto xviii, l. 82.
⁵The Literary World, VII (August 24, 1850), 147.
did in Melville, they are vital and personal, problems that may significantly affect the "heart."

What is the object of man's inquiry? what does he want to know? Melville once wrote that "truth is in things, and not in words." Many philosophers would credit him with only a half score, since there is a kind of truth in both, but Melville touched a fundamental fact: the object of the mind is being. Before man employs "words" to speak, write, or read, he is confronted with beings, and when he finally does speak, write, and read, these human actions are radically affected by the nature and degree of his perception of ontological truth, of being. Man seeks to know being, whatever is, as it is in itself. Like Melville's Pierre, man wants to "know what is."  

How much of being does man desire to know? Man's very metaphysical make-up seems to be penetrated with an insatiable desire to know what will satisfy all his questions once and for all because it is the All. Melville's Babbalanja is concerned with "things infinite in the finite." Melville's most memorable protagonists, as well as Melville himself, seek to reach the final and ultimate heart of truth. They want to enucleate the core of reality, to probe the interiority of being, to reach the omega point in each datum of existence—and of existence itself. Babbalanja, in Mardi, wants what is "beneath the seeming," the "precious pearl within the shaggy oyster," the "circle's centre," or—in the terms of Melville's felicitous contruct—the

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1 Mardi, I, chap. xciii, 329.
3 Mardi, II, chap. lxxvi, 328.
"idea-immanens," the immanent or indwelling idea. Melville praises Shakespeare for his "short, quick probings at the . . . axis of reality." Ahab, too, wants to "touch the axis," to "strike through the mask," Pierre, to strike through the helm of the Black Knight and see the "face" of Truth.

The next question is the epistemological poser: how much is man able to know—or, in Melville's terms: "What may man know?" Because knowledge is the progeny of a union between a knowing subject and a knowable object, it will be curtailed by the limitations of either. It is the intention of the present chapter to investigate Melville's deliberations on the knowing subject—Man. Because Melville is primarily an artist rather than a philosopher, it will not be surprising to find in this investigation that his works do not offer any schematic arrangement of abstract philosophical tenets; instead, his views are manifested through themes, characters, dialogue, situation, and imagery. Melville opts for no particular process of ideogenesis in the question of truth, certitude, knowledge, of the origin and accuracy of ideas: in the question of whether knowledge precedes experience or experience knowledge, he never completely rejects the first, the Platonic concept, e.g., of innate ideas, though he obliquely challenges their final validity on the grounds of

1 _Ibid._, II, chap. x, 36; chap. lxxii, 308.
2 _The Literary World_, VII (August 17, 1850), 126.
3 _Moby-Dick_, I, chap. xxxvi, 206, 204.
5 _Clarel_, Pt. IV, canto iii, 1. 109.
6 See _Mardi_ (II, chap. lxxvi, 326): "The essence of all ideas is infused," and _Pierre_ (Bk. XXI, chap. 1, p. 395): "All the great books in the world are but the mutilated shadowings-forth of invisible and eternally
the possibility of a deceptive or nonbenevolent first cause, but he more frequently works in terms of the faculties and acquired knowledge,\(^1\) and he increasingly emphasizes the importance of experience.\(^2\) His treatment of the cognitive faculties, though fairly inclusive, is, like Montaigne's, at random.

Most of Melville's sceptical sources from Rabelais and Montaigne on are in the Renaissance tradition or heavily influenced by that tradition: renaissance thought, particularly that of the Protestant reformation, questioned, along with the "rule of faith," the grounds of epistemological certitude; the renaissance revival of the often glorious and just as often complex conglomeration of Greek and Roman thought—Montaigne's numerous quotations are apt testimony—offered a welter of confusing and conflicting concepts; a polymorphic society began to replace the great medieval monolithic structure and challenged that structure in both its predominantly Catholic theology and its supporting scholastic philosophy, a philosophy heavily indebted to Aristotelianism. An epistemological assumption of this traditional philosophy is the fundamental position of the senses in the acquisition of knowledge; the Dominican theologian and scholastic philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas, e.g., in his *Summa Theologica*, cites Aristotle: "The Philosopher [Aristotle] says

\[\text{unembodied images in the soul.}\]

\(^1\)In addition to numerous forthcoming quotations, see, e.g., such passages as Taji's observation on King Yoky talking with his hands and a servitor interpreting: "Very curious to note the rapidity with which motion was translated into sound; and the simultaneousness with which meaning made its way through four successive channels to the mind—hand, sight, voice, and tympanum" (*Mardi*, II, chap. lxx, 293).

\(^2\)In *The Confidence-Man*, e.g., some eighteen references are made to experience.
(Metaph. i. 1; Post. ii. 15) that the principle of knowledge is in the senses."¹ Further, emphasis is on a positive guarantee of certainty in sense perception; distinguishing sense from intellect, Aristotle, in Bk. III, chap. iii of De Anima, writes: "For perception of the special objects of sense is always free from error, . . . while it is possible to think falsely as well as truly," and, again, "sensations are always true."² In "Lectio Four" of his commentary on Aristotle's De Anima, Aquinas writes:

Understanding may be 'correct' or 'incorrect'. . . . Sensation, on the other hand, can only be 'correct', for the senses are infallible with respect to their proper objects.³

¹Summa Theologica (3 vols.; Chicago: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), I, 428—Pt. 1, Q. 84, Art. 6. In fairness to both Aristotle and Aquinas, however, the quotation should be qualified. Aquinas continues:

"But Aristotle held that the intellect has an operation which is independent of the body's cooperation. Now nothing corporeal can make an impression on the incorporeal. And therefore in order to cause the intellectual operation, according to Aristotle, the impression caused by the sensible does not suffice, but something more noble is required, for the agent is more noble than the patient, as he says [De Gener. i. 5]. . . . Not, indeed, in the sense that the intellectual operation is effected in us by the mere impression of some superior beings, as Plato held; but that the higher and more noble agent which he calls the active intellect, of which we have spoken above (Q. 79, AA. 3, 4), causes the phantasms received from the senses to be actually intelligible, by a process of abstraction.

According to this opinion, then, on the part of the phantasms, intellectual knowledge is caused by the senses. But since the phantasms cannot of themselves affect the passive intellect, and require to be made actually intelligible by the active intellect, it cannot be said that sensible knowledge is the total and perfect cause of intellectual knowledge, but rather that it is in a way the material cause."

Some interpretations of the Aristotelian theory of knowledge maintain that there is nothing in the intellect that is not first in the senses—this concept is important in the sceptical procedure of arguing first against the senses and consequently against reason.


³Aristotle's De Anima in the Version of William of Moerbeke and the
Scholasticism, as exemplified, e.g., in Aquinas, does not deny mistakes of sense perception through some discernible reason: e.g., the taste of a fever-stricken person might judge "a sweet thing to be bitter, through his tongue being vitiated by ill humors"; or,--and Aquinas is here borrowing an example from Aristotle's De Anima—one might judge "the sun to be only a foot in diameter, whereas in reality it exceeds the earth in size"; again, "much more is sense deceived concerning accidental sensible objects, as when it judges that vinegar is honey by reason of the color being the same"—but, Aquinas continues:

The reason of this is evident; for every faculty, as such, is per se directed to its proper object; and things of this kind are always the same. Hence, so long as the faculty exists, its judgment concerning its own proper object does not fail.

Earlier in the same article, Aquinas maintains stoutly: "Sense is not deceived in its proper object."¹

Renaissance sceptical and contending reaction, therefore, questioned Aristotelianism² with its positive emphasis on the validity of sense knowledge; by stressing the inefficacy of the senses, reason is automatically subverted, since it depends for its principle and material cause on sense knowledge; subsequently, the various fields of knowledge, sciences and disciplines, which depend upon both the senses and reason, were undermined. Melville is not so


¹ Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I, 438—Pt. 1, Q. 85, Art. 6.

² Montaigne writes: "The god of scholastic knowledge is Aristotle; 'tis irreligion to question any of his decrees, as it was those of Lycurgus of Sparta; his doctrine is a magisterial law, which, peradventure, is as false as another" (Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 250).
logically tidy; nevertheless—and probably because he inherited the aggregate problem of this sceptical tradition through those spokesmen who became, through reading, his mentors—Melville's thought easily falls within the order of the above sequence, i.e., a rejection of the final trustworthiness of the senses, of reason which depends on the senses, and of the various disciplines which depend on both. Though Melville, as artist, does not present this schematic order, its various elements are assumed and incorporated in the themes, dialogue, and imagery of his works. While inflicting some initial distortion to Melville's art by subordinating it to this schema, this approach does clarify the implications of his scepticism, show how he employed these implications and thereby help bring to his predominantly sceptic themes and imagery a fuller understanding of their significance and suggestiveness.

**Sense knowledge**

**The external senses.**—The uncertainty of sense knowledge is one of the chief staples of the sceptic writers. Rabelais writes:

> The soul is seldom able to report those things in such sincerity as it hath seen them, by reason of the imperfection and frailty of the corporeal senses, which obstruct the effectuating of that office; even as the moon doth not communicate unto this earth of ours that light which she receiveth from the sun with so much splendor . . . and liveliness as it was given her.¹

Descartes, too, has serious reservations concerning sense knowledge:

> All that I have, up to this moment, accepted as possessed of the highest truth and certainty, I received either from or through the senses. I observed, however, that these sometimes mislead us; and it is the part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in that by which we have even once been deceived.²

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¹ Rabelais, II, Bk. III, chap. xiii, 273.
² Descartes, p. 98.
Sir Thomas Browne's "Vulgar Errors" appropriately begins with a tautly organized chapter on the causes of errors or deception; using Adam and Eve as exemplars of the human condition Browne says: "They were deceived through the conduct of their senses."¹ Browne mentions the "fallacies of sense" and writes of "those wayes, which have most reference unto sense, and wherein there lyeth most notable and popular delusion."² Pascal claims:

Man is only a subject full of error, natural and ineffaceable, without grace. Nothing shows him the truth. Everything deceives him. These two sources of truth, reason and the senses, besides being both wanting in sincerity, deceive each other in turn. The senses mislead the reason with false appearances.³

Pierre Bayle asserts that the "senses always impose upon us"—and his use of impose with upon gives the meaning "to practice tricks or deception."⁴ Hume remarks on "the imperfect judgments of our senses and imagination" and our "fallible and uncertain faculties."⁵

Montaigne postpones his discussion of the senses until near the end of the "Apology" and gives it something of a climactic and capping position in the essay—he declares: "Now all knowledge is conveyed to us by the senses," and "upon the consideration of the senses . . . lies the greatest foundation and proof of our ignorance."⁶ Montaigne employs a number of

¹Browne, II, 185.
²Ibid., 193, 194.
³Pensées, 83.
⁵Hume, I, 101, 236.
⁶Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, pp. 275, 274 respectively. Underlining mine.
arguments against the five external senses, arguments which Melville eventually appropriates in his writings. Montaigne first questions the adequacy of the existing number of the senses; he writes: "I make a doubt whether or no man be furnished with all natural senses,"\(^1\) and he later observes: "We have formed a truth by the consultation and concurrence of our five senses; but perhaps we should have the consent and contribution of eight or ten to make a certain discovery of it in its essence."\(^2\) In Mardi, the first of Melville's novels to mention Montaigne, Mohi the historian asks Babbalanja: "Philosopher, our great reef is surrounded by an ocean; what think you lies beyond?"

Babbalanja answers that the appearance of certain strangers proves the existence of "isles afar," and then continues:

Nor is it at all impossible, Braid-Beard, that beyond their land may exist other regions, of which those strangers know not; peopled with races something like us Mardians [earth-dwellers]; but perhaps with more exalted faculties, and organs that we lack. They may have some better seeing sense than ours.\(^3\)

Melville uses this thought again later in the novel: Babbalanja, in his mystical vision of heaven, is endowed with the use of an additional sense. When he later relates his vision to the other members of the quest, he cannot find words to tell of all the unsearchable things about which his guide discoursed, for as Babbalanja explains: "My sixth sense which he opened, sleeps again, with all the wisdom that it gained," and, as he fell back to earth, he was left with only his "five senses."\(^4\) It may also have been Montaigne's

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 275.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 276.
\(^3\)Mardi, II, chap. xxix, 115-116.
\(^4\)Ibid., chap. lxxxiv, 376, 378.
discussion on the want of additional faculties that inspired a passage in Babbalanja's soliloquy over the bones of the dead king Marjora:

Art thou? or art thou not? I see thee not; I hear thee not; I feel thee not; eyes, ears, hands, are worthless to test thy being; and if thou art, thou art something beyond all human thought to compass. We must have other faculties to know thee by.¹

In his discussion of the possible deficiency of the sense faculties, Montaigne turns to the example of animals who apparently possess senses that humans lack—e.g., the cock who crows when day is near and animals who know what herbs will help cure their illnesses. Melville employs the argument but constructs his own examples:

Belike, the eagles, from their eyries look down upon us Mardians, in our hives, even as upon the beavers in their dams, marvelling at our incomprehensible ways. And cunning though we be, some things hidden from us may not be mysteries to them. Having five keys [five senses], hold we all that open to knowledge? Deaf, blind, and deprived of the power of scent, the bat will steer its way unerringly:—could we?²

Montaigne further questions the validity of sense knowledge because of the possibility of error and uncertainty in the operation of the senses due to illusions; e.g., an anchored ship may seem moving, or, from a distance, separate rocks may seem to form one island.³ Melville, in "The Encantadas," uses a like argument but, as usual, creates his own examples. He quotes a statement of Cowley, that "excellent bucanier":—"My fancy led me to call it Cowley's Enchanted Isle, for, we having had a sight of it upon several points of the compass, it appeared always in so many different forms; sometimes like a ruined fortification; upon another point like a great city"; Melville adds:

¹Ibid., I, chap. lxxviii, 276.
²Mardi, II, chap. lxxi, 298-299.
³Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 277.
"No wonder, though, that among the Encantadas [Melville's microcosm] all sorts of ocular deceptions and mirages should be met."¹ In the third sketch, "Rock Rodondo," Melville describes the illusory effect of the Rock, which had a "sail-like look" from the "long bird-lime streaks of a ghostly white":

It is visible at the distance of thirty miles; and, fully participating in that enchantment which pervades the group, when first seen afar invariably is mistaken for a sail. Four leagues away, of a golden, hazy noon, it seems some Spanish admiral's ship, stacked up with glittering canvas. Sail ho! Sail ho! Sail ho! from all three masts. But coming nigh, the enchanted frigate is transformed apace into a craggy keep.²

At the end of the sketch, Melville circles back to the illusion with his usual ontological anticlimax:

Its bird-lime gleams in the golden rays like the whitewash of a tall lighthouse, or the lofty sails of a cruiser. This moment, doubtless, while we know it to be a dead desert rock, other voyagers are taking oaths it is a glad populous ship.³

In this case, the illusion is uncovered, but the question remains: do we always discover the deceptions of our senses? As Melville sublimated the act of seeing to symbolize the intellectual act of knowing, so he also symbolically elevated the concrete connection of mirage with sight to insight—in this passage which takes a thrust at ultimate responsibility for the lack of a criterion, the ensuing state of fluctuating uncertainty is likened to a mirage:

In those Hyperborean regions, to which enthusiastic Truth, and Earnestness, and Independence, will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought, all objects are seen in a dubious, uncertain, and refracting light. Viewed through that rarefied atmosphere the most immemorially admitted maxims of men begin to slide and fluctuate, and finally become wholly inverted; the very heavens themselves being not innocent of producing this confounding effect, since it is mostly in the

¹The Piazza Tales, p. 206.
²Ibid., p. 194.
³Ibid., p. 198.
heavens themselves that these wonderful mirages are exhibited.\(^1\) In addition to the possibility of a deficient number of senses and of deception by illusion or mirage, Montaigne shows that the senses may be altered by the passions of the soul: "Our senses are . . . very often stupefied by the passions of the soul."\(^2\) In Melville's "Benito Cereno," Captain Delano becomes disturbed and suspicious when Babo and Don Benito withdraw to the opposite bulwarks and begin whispering, so the Captain fears, about himself; he believes he sees a certain "secret sign" passed between Don Benito and a "suspicious" member of the crew and remarks: "If I could only be certain that, in my uneasiness, my senses did not deceive me."\(^3\)

Montaigne's next problem is the problem of the dream—he writes: "They who have compared our lives to a dream were, perhaps, more in the right than they were aware of."\(^4\) Although logically subsidiary to the epistemological problem, the dream hypothesis, in certain respects, is more directly an ontological problem and will be treated as such in the next chapter, but at this point it will be examined in its relationship to illusion and sense knowledge. Briefly, the problem is that sense experience and dream experience can be so much alike that one can hardly be distinguished from the other—in fact, the very grounds for such a distinction is questioned. The example that comes most forcibly to mind is Melville's character Nehemiah in *Clarel*. As the next chapter endeavors to show, Melville questions whether all men

\(^1\) *Pierre*, Bk. IX, chap. i, p. 231.  
\(^2\) *Montaigne*, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 279.  
\(^3\) *The Piazza Tales*, p. 97.  
\(^4\) *Montaigne*, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 279.
might not live in a dream world, since reality itself might be no more than
dream; nevertheless, as Melville writes in Clarel, this is "the world we know /
(Sole know, and reason from)," and the dream is not solved or challenged by
withdrawing into a greater dream. Nehemiah's greater dream is his unquestioning
faith, a faith not reconciled with fact and maintained only by becoming
impervious to evil and experience—

His soul pre-occupied and freed
From actual objects through the sway
Of visionary scenes intense—

a dream that, finally, may differ only in degree rather than in kind. Melville
ironically describes Nehemiah's knowledge—he knows the words of the
"seers," can "cipher out / The mystic days and dates sublime"—but he has
frequently to ask "the hour of day." Nehemiah is described as having absent,
"dreamy" eyes; he has a "dreamy" interest in the young Turk with his fiery
steed; meditating on Christ's visits to the peaceful and pastoral Bethany,
which the pilgrims are passing, Clarel questioningly muses, "can one dream
the dream[?]"—Nehemiah can: he is riding along "dreaming of his fairyland."

His dream becomes identified with illusion:

By Olivet in waning day
The saint in fond illusion went,

1Clarel, Pt. III, canto iii, ll. 13-14.
2Ibid., Pt. I, canto xxvi, ll. 20-22.
3Ibid., canto viii, ll. 44-52.
4Ibid., canto ix, l. 3.
5Ibid., canto xi, l. 79.
6Ibid., Pt. II, canto vi, ll. 23, 39.
Finally, Nehemiah's waking and sleeping states become inextricable. He is frequently shown sleeping or dozing: he is able to "close" his pious accounts only after "half told / The theme he'd leave, then nod, droop, doze--";\(^2\) Clarel visits Nehemiah in his hermitage but presently steals forth, "leaving Nehemiah in slumber caught";\(^3\) Nehemiah falls asleep under the olive trees in Gethsemane and Vine gestures to "let this poor dreamer take his rest";\(^4\) again, on route, "Released from travel, in good hour / Nehemiah dozed within the tower";\(^5\) in the canto "Of Petra," Nehemiah, like Pierre, places himself beneath a huge rock, but, with none of Pierre's challenge, Nehemiah evinces simple trust and is "slumbering low."\(^6\)

Finally, "dream mixed with . . . event" and led Nehemiah to his death in the Dead Sea. Montaigne says:

> We wake sleeping, and sleep waking. . . . Our reason and soul receiving those fancies and opinions that come in dreams, and authorizing the actions of our dreams with the like approbation that they do those of the day.\(^7\)

In a canto significantly entitled "The Sleep-Walker," Nehemiah, "with throbbing brain / O'erwrought by travel," falls into a vision or "ecstasy"

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\(^1\)Ibid., Pt. I, canto x, 11. 67-69.

\(^2\)Ibid., 11. 102-103.

\(^3\)Ibid., canto xxii, 1. 114.

\(^4\)Ibid., canto xxx, 1. 99.


\(^6\)Ibid., canto xxx, 1. 70.

\(^7\)Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 279.
that soon blends with sleep:

Then, by that sleight each dreamer knows,
Dream merged in dream: the city rose--
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Appeared the New Jerusalem.¹

Nehemiah gives a like credence to his dream fancies as he would to his senses:

The visions changed and counterchanged--
Blended and parted--distant ranged,
And beckoned, beckoned him away.
In sleep he rose; and none did wist
When vanished this somnambulist.²

If the sense of touch or feeling is considered under the aspect of pain, Montaigne, with Pascal and Melville following suit, is willing to credit it with quite positive proximate effects. In the "Apology," Montaigne discusses the fact that the senses sometimes impose upon our reason but adds:

I set aside the sense of feeling, that has its functions nearer, more lively, and substantial, that so often, by the effects of the pains it helps the body to, subverts and overthrows all those fine Stoical resolutions and compels him to cry out of his belly who has resolutely established this doctrine in his soul--"that the colic, and all other pains and diseases, are indifferent things, not having the power to abate anything of the sovereign felicity wherein the wise man is seated by his virtue."³

Earlier, Montaigne writes in the same vein about the philosophy of Varro and Aristotle and asks: "Did they extract from their logic any consolation for the gout?"⁴ Pascal affirms that "all the philosophy in the world does not

¹Clarel, Pt. II, canto xxxviii, 11. 7-8, 14-15, 42.
²Ibid., 11. 46-50.
³Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 277.
⁴Ibid., p. 223.
avail against an hour of suffering."¹ A similar idea of the inadequacy of philosophy in the face of pain is present in Melville's letter to Hawthorne, June 1851—Melville criticizes Goethe's pantheistic philosophy:

> What nonsense! Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. "My dear boy," Goethe says to him, "you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must live in the all, and then you will be happy."²

Despite positive proximate effects, Melville still questions the substantiality of even that which causes pain, and the sense of feeling or touch is finally left in a state of dubiety: "What object sensible to touch / . . . may faith rely on[?]"³

The final coup de grace to the possibility of sense knowledge offering any absolute and ultimate veridity occurs in Clarel. Margoth, the scientific materialist, and Rolfe, the seeking sceptic, are debating whether the Jordan valley was struck by natural or supernatural forces; Margoth is quite sure it was through natural forces: "One here perceives the sign—of course; / All's mere geology, you know." Rolfe counters: "Nay, how should one know that?" Margoth:

> By sight,
> Touch, taste—all senses in assent
> Of common sense their parliament.⁴

When Margoth finishes speaking, the ass brays out a "hideous hee-haw."⁵


²Letters, p. 131.


⁴Ibid., Pt. II, canto xxxiii, 11. 50-55.

⁵Ibid., 1. 76.
The internal senses.--Melville also undercuts the possibility of attaining any final verity aided by the operations of the four internal senses: common sense, imagination, instinct, and memory. The common sense as the first of the internal senses is here used, again, in the framework of the traditional philosophy against which much of the renaissance movement militated: it is not exactly considered in the context of the colloquial Americanism of "horse sense" or the like widely used term of "common sense," both of which in popular parlance have the meaning of good practical judgment, although there remains a dependence of meaning of the newer form on the older; rather, it is used in the sense of the NED first definition of common sense as "an 'internal' sense which was regarded as the common bond or centre of the five senses, in which the various impressions received were reduced to the unity of a common consciousness." Melville's use of the term in Clarel\textsuperscript{1} approximates this meaning. The reference, with its rejection of common sense, is, again, the one just previously cited in which Margoth claims he knows the Jordan valley was struck by natural forces, and he knows this--

By sight,

Touch, taste--all senses in assent
Of common sense their parliament--

and Melville allows the ass to become suddenly voluble.

In Mardi, Babbalanja dispatches the validity of the imagination:

"Things visible are but conceits of the eye: things imaginative, conceits of the fancy. If duped by one, we are equally duped by the other."\textsuperscript{2}

Although instinct does not enable the hunters to reach Babbalanja's

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., 11. 53-55.

\textsuperscript{2}Mardi, I, chap. xciii, 329.
"ultimate" in Mardi, Melville does, at one point, give it great praise; however, he employs the term with generic scope and does not present it in any clear context. In chapter xxxi Melville barely finishes referring to the instincts of brutes when he uses "instinct" as a synonym for reason: "Is not reason subtle as quicksilver—live as lightning[?] . . . Can we starve that noble instinct in us, and hope that it will survive?"1 The old man of Serenia, in his explanation of the nature of the Serenians' love for Alma [Christ], uses the word apposite to feeling: "We love him from an instinct in us;—a fond, filial, reverential feeling."2 The highest encomium of instinct—whatever it means to Melville—occurs in Babbalanja's praise of Lombardo the poet: "For though Lombardo abandoned all monitors from without; he retained one autocrat within—his crowned and sceptred instinct."3 Instinct is not considered infallible, however, even in Mardi; Babbalanja quotes from one of his old authors: "Our very instincts are prejudices."4 By the time of Clarel, the limitations of instinct are clearly expressed:

Such counter natures in mankind—
Mole, bird, not more unlike we find:
Instincts adverse, nor less how true
Each to itself, What clew, what clew?5

Montaigne writes of the internal sense of memory: "Memory is a faculty of wonderful use, and without which the judgment can very hardly perform

1Ibid., II, chap. xxxi, 123.
2Ibid., chap. lxxxiii, 368.
3Ibid., chap. lxxvi, 328.
4Ibid., chap. lxxi, 298.
5Clarel, Pt. III, canto xx, ll. 39-42.
its office."¹ Pascal may take his cue from Montaigne when he writes: "Memory is necessary for all the operations of reason."² Melville's most trenchant attack on memory occurs in that epistemological mare's-nest The Confidence-Man. The con-man John Ringman (but one avatar of a Confidence-Man of divine proportions) feigns acquaintance with the merchant:

"How do you do, Mr. Roberts?"
"Eh?"
"Don't you know me?"
"No, certainly."

The merchant's certainty, however, gradually crumbles under the onslaught of the con-man:

"I see you have a faithless memory, Mr. Roberts. But trust in the faithfulness of mine."
"Well, to tell the truth, in some things my memory ain't of the very best..."
"Oh, sir, suffice it that it is as I say. Doubt not that we are all well acquainted."
"But--but I don't like this going dead against my own memory; I--"
"But didn't you admit, my dear sir, that in some things this memory of yours is a little faithless? Now, those who have faithless memories, should they not have some little confidence in the less faithless memories of others?"

When the merchant still hesitates, the con-man continues in Lockean terms:

I see, I see; quite erased from the tablet.

He renews his attack by asking the merchant if he ever received a head injury, so that the events registered in his memory were "afterwards bruised out by the injury." The merchant is now listening with more than ordinary interest, and the con-man presses his advantage by relating a fictitious accident that happened to him as a child and which brought about the oblivion of events in

¹ Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xvii, p. 303.
² Penseés, 369.
his memory. He rounds off by asserting:

You see, sir, the mind is ductile, ... images, ductilely received into it, need a certain time to harden and bake in their impressions, otherwise such a casualty as I speak of will in an instant obliterate them, as though they had never been.

The merchant finally admits not to an injury but to a sickness, a brain fever which caused him to lose his mind completely for an interval. The con-man concludes: "That brain fever accounts for it all."¹

Intellectual knowledge

Montaigne was inexorable in his deflation of esteem for the faculty of intellect or "reason." He devotes a large section of his "Apology" to a demonstration that man's exalted reason is a faculty that he shares in common with brute nature.² Melville seems to have given Montaigne's argument on the rationality of animals some consideration as his statement in Redburn, previously cited, shows: "There are unknown worlds of knowledge in brutes."³ In Moby-Dick the narrator affirms that the "sperm whale is in some cases sufficiently powerful, knowing, and judiciously malicious, as with direct aforethought to stave in, utterly destroy, and sink a large ship." He documents his assertion on the knowingness of the whale with an excerpt from Owen Chace's account of the sinking of the Whale-ship Essex: the selection contains such passages as "it was anything but chance which directed his operations."

¹The Confidence-Man, chap. iv, pp. 21-24.

²See, e.g., Montaigne's discussion of bees and their activities: "Can we imagine that such, and so regular, a distribution of employments can be carried on without reasoning and deliberation?" (Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 207).

³Redburn, chap. xI, p. 254.
the whale's attacks "were calculated" and marked by "decided, calculating mischief." In the climax of the chase, when Moby Dick turns to rend the Pequod, knowledge becomes Omniscience—it is with a "predestinating head" that the whale advances and with "retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice." Montaigne, in this same section on the rationality of animals, declares: "When I play with my cat who knows whether I do not make her more sport than she makes me?" Melville develops this query in his poem "Montaigne and His Kitten"; he has Montaigne say to the kitten: "We, you know, in mind are one," and

Pish! what fops we humans here,  
Won't admit within our sphere  
The whitest doe, nor even thee—  
We, the spotless humans, we!  

Montaigne's most devastating argument against the intellect is founded on the fallibility of sense knowledge; stated simply, the argument runs: man's knowledge comes through the senses and depends upon them for its certainty; but the senses are uncertain in operation; therefore, man's dependent reason and knowledge are subsequently uncertain. Montaigne writes: "The uncertainty of our senses renders everything uncertain that they produce"; earlier in his essay he is even more explicit:

The sects that controvert the knowledge of man do it principally by the uncertainty and weakness of our senses: for since all knowledge is

1 Moby-Dick, I, chap. xlv, 258, 259.  
2 Ibid., II, chap. cxxxv, 365. "Eternal" suggests a divinity.  
3 Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 206.  
4 Collected Poems, pp. 381-382.  
5 Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 281.
by their means and mediation conveyed unto us, if they fail in their report, if they corrupt or alter what they bring us from without, if the light which by them creeps into the soul be obscured in the passage, we have nothing else to hold by.¹

On the question of the dependence of reason on the senses, Melville does not develop Montaigne's argument qua argument, but it is everywhere implicit in his works: man must work with his perceptions of "the world we know / (Sole know, and reason from),"² and, as he endeavors to do so, the question arises: "Whose the eye that sees aright, / If any?"³ and he is left with the consequent agonizing doubt of possible intellectual deception based on the errancy of sense knowledge—"if I could only be certain that . . . my senses did not deceive me."⁴

The direction of Montaigne's argument against reason that activated both the most sublime disquisition on Christianity⁵ and, yet, the most strenuous defiance from Melville was voiced early in the "Apology":

The means that I shall use [in the argument against reason] . . . is to crush and spurn under foot pride and human arrogance; to make them sensible of the inanity, vanity, and vileness of man; to wrest the wretched arms of their reason out of their hands; to make them bow down and bite the ground under the authority and reverence of the Divine Majesty. 'Tis to that [the Divinity] alone that knowledge and wisdom appertain; that alone that can make a true estimate of itself, and from which we purloin whatever we value ourselves upon . . . "God permits not any being but himself to be truly wise." . . . "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." "Understanding is in the gods," says Platô, "not

¹Ibid., p. 276.
²Clarel, Pt. III, canto iii, ll. 13-14.
⁴The Piazza Tales, p. 97.
⁵Mardi, II, chap. lxxxiii.
at all, or very little, in men."¹

Closely connected with this argument is the idea that man is not much worth the serious consideration of the gods: in *Pierre*, Melville writes of man that "in his infinite comparative minuteness and abjectness, the gods do likewise despise him, and own him not of their clan";² Montaigne quotes Ennius:

I ever thought that gods above there were, ³
But do not think they care what men do here.

In Book III of the *Essays*, Montaigne writes the following about the physical act of love, but his general thought is applicable here also: "I believe it to be true that, as Plato says, the gods made man for their sport... 'What a strange sporting cruelty is this?'"⁴ and in the same Book, he writes: "The gods play at tennis with us, and bandy us every way."⁵ The indifference of the "gods" becomes a constantly recurring theme in Melville.

Melville is willing to concede that "God permits not any being but himself to be truly wise": Babbalanja's celestial guide declares that "no mind but Oro's [God's] can know all... perfect wisdom can be only Oro's."⁶ Melville is even willing to concede that "God... gives grace to the humble": Babbalanja's guide tells him, "since humility is thine, thou art one apt to learn. That which they own wisdom could not find, thy ignorance confessed

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¹ Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 204.
² *Pierre*, Bk. XXII, chap. i, p. 413.
³ Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 238.
⁶ *Mardi*, II, chap. lxxxiv, 375.
shall gain. Come, and see new things"; later, a more exalted angel hears them
discoursing and is drawn to Babbalanja's angelic guide, because, as he says,
"thy humility was manifest; no arrogance of knowing. Come thou and learn new
things."¹ Melville could admit that it was so: that it should be so was
another matter.

The episode of the "willful boy" in Mardi seems significant in view
of the fact that Melville was probably reading the "Apology" for the first
time during his composition of Mardi. In the above cited passage from the
"Apology" in which Montaigne relates his efforts to crush human arrogance by
leaving reason unreconciled with and subservient to faith, he speaks of the
"vileness of man" and assays through his argument to make man "bow down and
bite the ground under the authority and reverence of the Divine Majesty":
Melville's "willful boy" tries to see the image of Oro [God] and exclaims aloud
when he cannot; the censor-bearers cry, "let him speak no more; but bow down,
and grind the dust where he stands; and declare himself the vilest creature
that crawls. So Oro and Alma command." The boy's answer may well be close to
Melville's mind at this time:

I feel nothing in me so utterly vile, . . . and I cringe to none.
But I would as lief adore your image, as that in my heart, for both mean
the same; but more, how can I? I love great Oro, though I comprehend him
not. I marvel at his works, and feel as nothing in his sight; but be-
cause he is thus omnipotent, and I a mortal, it follows not that I am
vile. Nor so doth he regard me. We do ourselves degrade ourselves, not
Oro us. Hath not Oro made me? And therefore am I not worthy to stand
erect before him? Oro is almighty, but no despot. I wonder; I hope; I
love; I weep; I have in me a feeling nigh to fear, that is not fear; but
wholly vile I am not; nor can we love and cringe.²

¹Ibid., 374, 377.
²Ibid., chap. viii, 29-30.
As Melville's scepticism deepened, he came to question the despotism of God, but the terms of his worship remained unchanged—"I cringe to none. . . . nor can we love and cringe." Ahab, too, would respond to love, but he will not fear or be abased: "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." Because Ahab has come to a realization of evil and feels that he has been struck out at, he reasons to an element not of love but of warfare in the "supernal power" and concludes that the "right worship is defiance."¹

Melville looked for a greater coition of reason and faith than was offered by Christianity as he personally understood it: he was not about to have the "wretched arms of his reason wrested out of his hands." He poignantly questioned the limitations of the human intellect, but he held the "grand intellect" in high esteem. In Mardi, Babbalanja says to Yoomy:

Nor is there any impiety in the right use of our reason, whatever the issue. Smote with superstition, shall we let it wither and die out, a dead limb to a live trunk, as the mad devotee's arm held up motionless for years? Or shall we employ it but for a paw, to help us to our bodily needs, as the brutes use their instinct? Is not reason subtle as quicksilver—live as lightning—a neighing charger to advance, but a snail to recede? Can we starve that noble instinct in us, and hope that it will survive? Better slay the body than the soul; and if it be the direst of sins to be the murderers of our own bodies, how much more to be a soul-suicide. Yoomy, we are men, we are angels. And in his faculties, high Oro is but what a man would be, infinitely magnified. Let us aspire to all things. Are we babes in the woods, to be scared by the shadows of the trees? What shall appal us? If eagles gaze at the sun, may not men at the gods?²

¹Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxix, 282, 281.
²Mardi, II, chap. xxxi, 122-123.
Babbalanja's reason, finally, does not enable him to gaze at the gods nor attain for him his much desired "ultimate"; in Serenia, he settles for the "penultimate": "My voyage is ended. Not because what we sought is found; but that I now possess all which may be had of what I sought in Mardi."¹

In Mardi, the maiden Yillah, through multiple associations, becomes the symbolic embodiment of all that man desires, the omnicomplete, the summum bonum, the sovereign good.² Melville may have been struck by Montaigne's discussion of what philosopher's have propounded as the "sovereign good of man."³

Among the other desiderata of human yearning is knowledge or the possession of truth, and it receives a lion's share of attention in Mardi: man's desire for knowledge is frustrated along with his other desires—"And in all this tour of Mardi, how little have we found to fill the heart . . . : how much to slaughter all our yearnings,"⁴ but, unlike the search for other goods, Melville carries the search for knowledge beyond the pales of earth, and the Christian neophyte Babbalanja records in his narration of a celestial vision what may well have been the dilemma of his author. Babbalanja inquires about

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¹Ibid., chap. lxxxv, 380.

²Not only is Yillah the love and beauty and felicity that Taji seeks, but she comes to represent such desiderata as the dignity of the individual—when the willful boy is sacrificed for refusing to admit to viliness, Babbalanja declares that Yillah "must have fled" these shores long since (Mardi, II, chap. viii, 30); she is liberty—after observing slavery in Vivenza [America], it is concluded that "Yillah harboured not" in Vivenza (Mardi, II, chap. lviii, 252); she is peace: "Yillah still eludes us. And in all this tour of Mardi how little have we found to fill the heart with peace" (Mardi, II, chap. lxxx, 358). Examples could be multiplied, since Yillah is usually associated with the positive element that is found wanting at each stage of the journey of quest.

³Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 270.

⁴Mardi, II, chap. lxxx, 358.
the blest souls: "Is theirs, oh guide! no happiness supreme? their state still mixed? Sigh these yet to know?" The guide answers: "No mind but Oro's can know all; no mind that knows not all can be content; content alone approximates to happiness."¹ The idea of heaven without consummate knowledge is not Melville's idea of heaven. Happiness becomes mixed with "sadness"; in the second angel's eyes "swam tears unshed"; the spirits have "weeping halos," and around the one Shekinah, the "air was flaked with fire;—deep in which fell showers of silvery globes, tears magnified."² Melville condemned "nominal" Christianity in his first two novels³ and in Mardi.⁴ Later in Mardi⁵ his portrait of a real Christian community is sympathetically drawn, and it is not at variance with reason: Babbalanja addresses the old man: "Methinks, that in your faith must be much that jars with reason." The old man answers: "No, brother! Right reason, and Alma, are the same; else Alma, not reason, would we reject," and when the philosopher accepts Christianity he says, "Reason no longer domineers; but still doth speak."⁶ Reason has its place, but, for Taji—apparently Melville—Taji—it just doesn't go far enough.—There might be a way to obtain supreme knowledge, but Melville questions it on the grounds of the price demanded: with Emersonian echoes of the pervading

¹Ibid., chap. lxxxiv, 375.
²Ibid., 375, 376, 377, 378.
³See, e.g., Typee, chap. xxv, p. 244;  chap. xxvi, p. 263; Omoo, chap. xvii, p. 74.
⁴Mardi, II, chap. ix, 32.
⁵Ibid., chap. lxxxiii.
⁶Ibid., 370, 371.
Over-Soul, Babbalanja speaks of the soul that

intent upon itself, ... pierces in upon its own essence, and is resolved into its pervading original; becoming a thing constituent of the all-embracing deific; whereby we mortals become part and parcel of the gods; our souls to them as thoughts, and we privy to all things occult, ineffable, and sublime.¹

If only God knows all, then man can know all only if he is "part and parcel" of God. But, like his fellow contemporary writers, ² Melville could not adequately solve the problem of the One and the Many: it was simple and at least pseudo-sublime to reduce everything to One—the pantheism of being resolved back into the "pervading original," but it could be ultimately achieved only at the cost of the Many—the loss of each separate and distinct individual

¹ Ibid., chap. lxvi, 281.

² Both Emerson and Whitman try to solve the problem of the One and the Many by somehow dissolving the Many back into the One, by positing some underlying, fundamental identity of man (multiple) and God or the Over-Soul (one). Emerson writes: "I am part or parcel of God" (Works, I, 10). In his essay "The Over-Soul," Emerson applies numerous images of water: "stream," "flowing river," "ebb," "sea," "tide of being," "floats," "surges" (Works, II, 268, 281, 284, 294, 296). Whitman, too, in writing of the "general soul" utilizes images of water: "The universal and fluid soul impounds within itself not only all good characters ... but ... distorted characters" (Emory Holloway [ed.], The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1921], II, 65–66; underlining mine). Whitman speaks of God as "fountain" and "reservoir," and his images of the sea, of "float," and solution are bound up with his concept of the universal soul; water is implied in such lines as "lave me all over, / Bathe me O God in thee" (Emory Holloway [ed.], Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman [The Inclusive Edition; Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1926], p. 348). In Leaves of Grass (Ed. Holloway, pp. 134, 192, 4, 349, 373 respectively), Whitman sees man created—"struck from the float forever held in solution"—only, at last, to return to this same "float forever," "the partial to the permanent flowing," so there is a "merge at last" or a soul that "melts" back into God; however, Whitman is not able completely to reconcile or submerge the Many (individual personal identities) into the One, nor as a singer of the "Self" does he wish to, so he refers to "actual faces" within this "merge," and, consequently, the whole idea becomes rather vague and glutinous and comes close to conjuring up a phantasm of the One and the Many as a vast vat of hot chocolate full of partially melted marshmallows—not quite One and not quite Many.
identity. Melville would not pay that price; he cherished what he called his "sovereignty in myself" and would not be even so much as "tributary": he sought parity rather than identity with the One—he would treat "with all Powers upon an equal basis"¹ and even be a "democrat to all above."²

In some respects, Babbalanja's character does not fulfill its promise. Whatever else it is, Mardi is also a record of Melville's growing realization of the implications of scepticism, and he did not accept all of these implications without some struggle; he tries, e.g., to retain some proximate, if limited, reliability of reason: in an argument on reason that seems to attempt to mitigate Montaigne's efforts to "humble" the "arrogance" of human reason (as shown in the previously cited passage, a passage that Melville probably found offensive in tone), Melville has Babbalanja say, citing Bardianna,

> it [reason] is not so arrogant as some think. Nay, far too humble, at times it submits to the grossest indignities. Though in its best estate, not infallible; so far as it goes, for us, it is reliable. When at fault, it stands still. . . . But if this our first revelation [with transcendental overtones, Melville sees reason coming directly from God and calls it the "first revelation"] stops short of the uttermost, so with all others. If, often, it only perplexes: much more the rest. They leave much unexpounded; and disclosing new mysteries, add to the enigma. Fellow-men! the ocean we would sound is unfathomable; and however much we add to our line, when it is out, we feel not the bottom³—

although these lines somewhat prepare us for Babbalanja's later acceptance of Christian faith, their static wisdom and passive acquiescence seem a far cry from the Babbalanja who seeks the "ultimate," who wishes to use reason to

¹Letters, p. 125.
²Moby-Dick, I, chap. xxxviii, 211.
³Mardi, II, chap. lxxi, 301.
"gaze at the gods," and who is driven almost to madness by a philosophic demon. The structure of the novel may be responsible: Montaigne, in his "Apology," writes that "Plato seems to have affected this method of philosophizing in dialogues; to the end that he might with greater decency, from several mouths, deliver the diversity and variety of his own fancies"; Melville the sceptic, a man arguing with himself, does something akin to this by assuming in different instances various personae of his novel Mardi. What gives evidence of having been but one line of thinking in Melville becomes bifurcated into two characters in Mardi. In the relationship of character to the intensity and thrust of the search, the traits of the early Babbalanja seem to be transferred in the denouement to Taji: having newly discovered the world of mind after the novel was under way, Melville may have felt he would strain artistic plausibility by having his young, romantic hero Taji philosophizing to the depth that Babbalanja would, and when Babbalanja comes front stage, Taji recedes only to come forward again as primary protagonist, after Babbalanja submits his reason to Christian faith, to become a hunter and challenger of an intensity that logically results, in Melville's terms, from a depth of involvement and perception comparable to Babbalanja's. The split results in neither character reaching tragic heroic proportions. Melville was eminently successful when he channelled this side of his thought in the one character of Ahab.

In this early novel of Mardi, Melville, the growing sceptic, can still say of reason, at one point, that, though limited, "it is reliable," until his increasing awareness of the possibility of deception, not only through the

1 Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 235.
senses but by some responsible first cause or power renders even this reliability uncertain, and, even at this early juncture, he sees reason as "reliable only "so far as it goes," which, for Melville isn't far enough. Babbalanja finds reason or knowledge limited even in heaven and Melville finally rejects the possibility of being "privy to all things occult, ineffable, and sublime" by being resolved into the "pervading original" because of the implied price demanded of one's sovereign individuality. As Melville became more deeply cognizant through his reading and writing of the problems of scepticism and realized more fully its pervading intellectual frustration, his tone becomes more militant, his defiance more marked: Moby-Dick becomes a battle of wits.

In his colossal quest "over all sides of earth,"¹ the "calculating" Ahab seeks an encounter unto death with the "calculating" sperm whale Moby Dick, whose significance spills over from that of a particular white whale to become a symbol for all of Nature and, finally, a surrogate for God. In this great battle of wits, the "grand intellect" of Ahab is able to subdue lesser intellects, even that of his most formidable human opponent Starbuck:

My soul is more than matched; she's overmanned; and by a madman! Insufferable sting, that sanity should ground arms on such a field! But he drilled deep down, and blasted all my reason out of me!²

Ahab speaks of his "brain-battering fight,"³ and "The Battering-Ram" becomes "the sperm whale's head"⁴—the locus of the intellect. Head imagery plays an important role in the novel. Ahab's obsession is to thrust "through

¹Moby-Dick, I, chap. xxxvi, 203.
²Ibid., chap. xxxviii, 211.
³Ibid., chap. xxxvii, [209].
⁴Ibid., II, chap. lxxvi, 69.
the wall," and, to him, "the White Whale is that wall," particularly the head, which is described as a "dead, blind wall" and a "dead, impregnable, uninjurable wall."\(^2\)

Parts of the Sperm Whale's head that receive special attention are the spout or spiracle, which "is on the top of his head,"\(^3\) and the forehead or brow. The jetting of the whale spout becomes symbolic of what is "ponderous and profound" and of the "act of thinking deep thoughts."\(^4\) In a sentence replete with sceptical implications, Melville writes of the spout (as he has of all the other "inexplicable" parts of the whale): "And as for this whale-spout, you might almost stand in it, and yet be undecided as to what it is precisely."\(^5\) Further, a warning is given:

Nor is it at all prudent for the hunter to be over-curious touching the precise nature of the whale-spout. It will not do for him to be peering into it, and putting his face in it. You cannot go with your pitcher to this fountain and fill it, and bring it away. . . . I have heard it said, and I do not much doubt it, that if the jet is fairly spouted into your eyes, it will blind you. The wisest thing the investigator can do then, it seems to me, is to let this deadly spout alone.\(^6\)

Ahab, however, is not the prudent hunter but, like Taji, a "hunter that never rests,"\(^7\) and on the third and last day of the chase, in his groping for the axis of reality, Ahab comes "fairly within the smoky mountain mist . . .

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1. Ibid., I, chap. xxxvi, 204.
2. Ibid., II, chap. lxxvi, 69, 71.
3. Ibid., chap. lxxxv, 112.
4. Ibid., 116.
5. Ibid., 115.
thrown off from the whale's spout"; he "staggered; his hand smote his forehead. 'I grow blind; hands! stretch out before me that I may yet grope my way."  

The whale's forehead, the "Battering-Ram," is a hieroglyphically "wrinkled brow"; the whale has no "features"—"nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, plaited with riddles." In the climactic three-day chase and actual encounters with the "grand god" Moby-Dick, the head of both man and Sperm Whale assume near allegorical proportions in the epic struggle of Man to "conquer," to comprehend the Divine Mind, to "clutch God's secret," the key to the "problem of the universe." But the "secret" remains elusive: man's best efforts are seemingly met by the disdainful indifference of the gods, or, if man persists so as to demand attention, he is faced with possible powers of malign destruction, a destruction which, given the earnestness of man's quest and aspirations and the seriousness of his plight, but bespeaks an even greater indifference.

In an episode reminiscent of Montaigne's remark on Plato—"I believe it to be true that, as Plato says, the gods made man for their sport....

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2Ibid., I, chap. xxxvi, 201.
3Ibid., II, chap. lxxix, 83.
4Ibid., chap. cxxxiii, 335.
6Moby-Dick, I, chap. xxxv, 197.
7For further consideration of the qualities of active malignity and indifference as being not exclusive see the section on "An indifferent deity" in chapter V.
'What a strange sporting cruelty is this?"—the White Whale takes Ahab's boat in his mouth and plays with it "as a mildly cruel cat her mouse," and the bluish pearl-white lining of the jaw is "within six inches of Ahab's head." Finally, in an effort to extricate himself from the Whale's mouth, Ahab is dumped "flat-faced upon the sea," and the "regal," dignified, and indomitable old man bobs ludicrously in the waves—and "helpless Ahab's head was seen, like a tossed bubble." The Whale then literally—and figuratively—swims circles around Ahab, and the center of the circle "had now become the old man's head."  

This disdainful indifference of the "gods" to the intellectual aspirations of man had been prepared for three chapters earlier in "The Hat." In seeming anticipation of his intellectual parity, Ahab doffs his hat and stands bareheaded to no one. As a further assertion of his individuality, he wears the hat "slouched," and keeps it on even while he sleeps. While Ahab is perched aloft keeping watch for Moby Dick, a sea-hawk (birds, in Melville, are often connotative of heavenly agents) swiftly circles Ahab's head, then snatches his hat and darts away with it. Melville's narrator records: "An eagle flew thrice round Tarquin's head, removing his cap to replace it, and

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2Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxxiii, 336.

3Ibid., 337-338.

4Ibid., 338.

5Ibid., I, chap. xxx, 160; II, chap. cxxx, 319; chap. cxxiii, 340, 342

6Ibid., I, chap. LI, 297.

7Ibid., II, chap. cxxxv, 367.
thereupon Tanaquil, his wife, declared that Tarquin would be king of Rome."¹

But Ahab's efforts will not be crowned: the wild hawk drops his hat into the sea. A quarter of a century later, the apparent futility of the search is still a question for Melville, and, in *Clarel*, Mortmain is victim to the same action of a "great bird":

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Oh, the hag,
That from the very brow could pluck
The cap of a philosopher
So near the sky, then, with a mock,
Disdain and drop it.²
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Undaunted by disdain, the Pequod's single-purposed, monomaniacal captain of the hunt, by the very degree of his defiance, demands destruction. As the hunters approach the Whale on the first day of the chase, they are able to see "the vast, involved wrinkles of the slightly projecting head beyond."³ After sounding, the Sperm Whale rises, his great mouth yawning beneath the boat. Ahab whirs the boat away: "Now, by reason of this timely spinning round the boat upon its axis, its bow, by anticipation, was made to face the whale's head while yet under water."⁴ Bested on the first day, Ahab returns to the chase the second day, "and cheering his men, he told them he would take the whale head-and-head,—that is, pull straight up to his forehead."⁵

The Whale offers "appalling battle" and "dashed his broad forehead" against

¹Ibid., chap. cxxx, 323.
³*Moby-Dick*, II, chap. cxxxiii, 333.
⁴Ibid., 336.
⁵Ibid., chap. cxxxiv, 347.
the bottom of Ahab's boat, spilling him out once more;\(^1\) then, satisfied that
his work for that day is done, the Whale departs, pushing "his plaited fore-
head through the ocean."\(^2\) On the fatal third day Ahab declares: "Forehead to
forehead I meet thee, this third time, Moby-Dick!"\(^3\) Accepting the challenge,
Moby Dick comes "head on" among the boats,\(^4\) and, later in the fray, wheels
round on Ahab's boat "to present his blank forehead at bay."\(^5\)

By his designations for the Whale's forehead in earlier chapters (e.g.,
as a "dead, blind wall"\(^6\)), Melville slowly invests his concrete symbolism with
abstract connotations, until he is able to pronounce his dictum on the apparent
futility of man's quest for truth in a later, apparently isolated, metaphorical
sentence, the terms of which, through accretion, have become packed with
significance: "The dead, blind wall butts all inquiring heads at last"\(^7\)--a
significance that is powerfully translated into the accelerated action of the
denouement when the questing world-ship is irrevocably sundered by the Sperm
Whale--smote by "the solid white buttress of his forehead."\(^8\)

Though Melville never lost his appreciation of the intellect and never
personally or through his protagonists gave up the quest, he clearly saw the

\(^1\)Ibid., 347, 349.  
\(^2\)Ibid., 349.  
\(^3\)Ibid., chap. cxxxv, 356.  
\(^4\)Ibid., 360.  
\(^5\)Ibid., 363.  
\(^6\)Ibid., chap. lxxvi, 69.  
\(^7\)Ibid., chap. cxxv, 300.  
\(^8\)Ibid., chap. cxxv, 365.
limitations of reason—the battle of wits, "reason's endless battle," would continue but not avail to find the secret to the problem of the universe, not avail to "solve the world":

let him [man] rule—
Pull down, build up, creed, system, school,
And reason's endless battle wage,
Make and remake his verbiage—
But solve the world! Scarce that he'll do:
Too wild it is, too wonderful.¹

Intuition

Of all the means whereby man comes to knowledge, intuition is apparently the last one Melville is willing to abandon. Writing of Hawthorne's genius, Melville implies some connection between the "heart" and intuition:

For it is not the brain that can test such a man; it is only the heart. You cannot come to know greatness by inspecting it; there is no glimpse to be caught of it, except by intuition; you need not ring it, you but touch it, and you find it is gold.²

Further, Melville writes with approbation of the "intuitive Truth" in Shakespeare:

But it is those deep, far-away things in him; those occasional flashings—forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality,—these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare.³

In Moby-Dick, published one year after the Mosses review, the narrator remarks:

rainbows do not visit the clear air; they only irradiate vapour. And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for

¹Clarel, Pt. IV, canto iii, 11. 110-115.
²The Literary World, VII (August 17, 1850), 126.
³Ibid.
this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye.

The quotation ends in sceptical suspension between two polarities.

Intuition gives no final and incontestable assurance, however. Pierre, in the novel of the same name, ponders on "the intuitively certain, however literally unproven fact of Isabel's sisterhood to him"; yet, later, his doubts return: "How did he know that Isabel was his sister?" Just before Pierre knocks on the door of the low, red farm-house that shelters Isabel, the young enthusiast is musing and

his sublime intuitiveness also paints to him the sun-like glories of god-like truth and virtue; which though ever obscured by the dense fogs of earth, still shall shine eventually in unclouded radiance, casting illustrative light upon the sapphire throne of God.

Pierre's "sublime intuitiveness" about the "glories of god-like truth and virtue" becomes suspect, however, when Pierre becomes "the fool of Truth, the fool of Virtue."

In what is probably the most inexorably dark novel of Melville's dark period, the "intuitions of some things heavenly" come under fire: in The Confidence-Man, the merchant relates the calamities of an unfortunate man, and in the shattering piece of satire that follows, Melville reveals a Calvinistic, Old-Testament penchant for expecting merited recompense here in this temporary

1 Moby-Dick, II, chap. lxxxv, 116-117.
3 Ibid., Bk. XXVI, chap. ii, p. 492.
4 Ibid., Bk. VI, chap. i, p. 156.
5 Ibid., Bk. XXVI, chap. iv, p. 499.
and mundane sphere. He indicates that it is a gullible faith that overlooks the "unjust" imposition of calamity in this life, and he concludes with a devastating blow at intuition: the confidence-man, with tongue in cheek, warns against admitting the existence of "unmerited misery," especially if "brought about by unhindered arts of the wicked," since to do so might affect one's "conviction of a Providence," and, having pointed up directly through narration and obliquely through satire that such "unmerited misery" does, in fact, exist in experience, Melville, who places great emphasis on experience throughout the novel, plants his last and most lethal bit of irony in the mouth of the confidence-man:

It was of the essence of a right conviction of the divine nature, as with a right conviction of the human, that, based less on experience than intuition, it rose above the zones of weather.¹

If Melville viewed intuition as somehow related to the heart, and, judging from his Mosses review, he seems so to have viewed it, then, despite his regard for the "heart," the dependability of intuition is still not beyond question, since Melville did not view the dependability of the heart of man as beyond question: in Clarel the piercing query is made:

Hast proved thy heart?²

The disciplines

Even as the whole ascending structure collapses if the foundations of the building are undermined, so the authority of the various disciplines is automatically toppled when the intellectual and sense knowledge upon which it

¹ The Confidence-Man, chap. xiii, p. 84.
² Clarel, Pt. III, canto vi, l. 71.
is based are found to be infirm. At various junctures in the Works of Rabelais, which Melville read, religion, philosophy, medicine and law come in for a sound drubbing, and the arts and sciences—poetry, painting, music, astrology, mathematics, scientific projects, all are shown as subject to Queen Whims.

Montaigne, in the "Apology," shows that the claims of astrology, logic, geometry, physics, metaphysics, rhetoric, grammar, mathematics, the liberal arts and sciences have all been questioned,¹ and, throughout the essays, nothing is too sacred to escape Montaigne's own inquiries. Pascal notes this tendency of Montaigne in his essay "On Epictetus and Montaigne":

Then Montaigne examines very deeply the sciences:—Geometry, the uncertainty of which he points out in its axioms, and its terms which it does not define, as extension, motion, &c.; physics and medicine, which he depresses in a variety of ways; history, politics, morals, jurisprudence, &c. So that, without revelation, we might believe according to him, that life is a dream, from which we do not wake till death, and during which, we have as few principles of truth as in natural sleep.²

Melville, in turn, though he makes no exhaustive attempt to bring all the various fields of knowledge under indictment, does include a representative group and deflates the pretensions of several kinds of disciplines. In Mardi, Yoomy the poet challenges the historian Mohi: "In all your chapters, you yourself grope in the dark. Much truth is not in thee, historian."³ Mohi later avenges himself by questioning the veridity of the creations of art and retorts after Yoomy's poetic tale: "He has not spoken the truth," and Babbalanja adds that "things visible are but conceits of the eye: things

¹Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 234.
²Pascal, 1835 ed., p. 581.
³Mardi, I, chap. xciii, 324.
imaginative, conceits of the fancy. If duped by one, we are equally duped by the other.\textsuperscript{1} The inadequacy of the arts, even their possible danger if placed in the wrong hands, is brought forward in \textit{Clarel}. Rolfe requests of Ungar:

\begin{quote}
Tell us if for earth may be
In ripening arts, no guarantee
Of happy sequel.
\end{quote}

Ungar answers:

\begin{quote}
Arts are tools;
But tools, they say are to the strong:
Is Satan weak? weak is the Wrong?
No blessed augury overrules.\textsuperscript{2}
\end{quote}

The foibles of law are lampooned in the account of the "lawyer"-sorcerers in the isle of Minda, who construe the law to serve their own advantage and will not give over their clients until such clients are "financially or physically defunct."\textsuperscript{3} Government and politics come under scrutiny in the description of the wine-bibbing congressmen and of their government, whose "federal temple of freedom ... was the handiwork of slaves";\textsuperscript{4} the rise and fall of kingdoms is rehearsed and the precariously anarchically-inclined populace of the democratic republic is warned: "Better be secure under one king, than exposed to violence from twenty millions of monarchs, though oneself be of the number"—the contemporary example of France, for Melville, was a timely example: "Better be the subject of a king, upright and just; than a

\textsuperscript{1}\textit{Ibid.}, 329.
\textsuperscript{2}\textit{Clarel}, Pt. IV, canto xxn, 11. 12-18.
\textsuperscript{3}\textit{Mardi}, II, chap. x1, 163.
\textsuperscript{4}\textit{Ibid.}, chap. lvii, 243.
freeman in Franko, with the executioner's axe at every corner."¹ In Clarel, Melville is still warning against the latent dangers of democracy:

One demagogue can trouble much:
How of a hundred thousand such?²

Although the complaint is more immediately of a moral nature in some of these instances, the lack of a criterion is tacitly understood.

In Moby-Dick, Ahab decries the uncertainty of science before trampling on his quadrant: "Thou canst not tell where one drop of water or one grain of sand will be to-morrow noon; and yet with thy impotence thou insultest the sun! Science! Curse thee, thou vain toy."³ In Clarel, the materialistic scientist Margoth is called a "vain wight" and "kangaroo of science";⁴ "the ray / Of Science' beacon" gives but "dreary" light and a "shallow knowledge."⁵ "No umpire" to render judgments in the "battle of the star and clod, "Science the feud can only aggravate."⁶

Philosophy, too, is unable to withstand critical inspection. Media tells Babbalanja: "The free, airy robe of your philosophy is but a dream, which seems true while it lasts; but waking again into the orthodox world, straightway you resume the old habit."⁷ Babbalanja, a philosopher himself,

¹Ibid., 244, 242.
²Clarel, Pt. IV, canto xxi, 11. 115-116.
³Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxviii, 274.
⁴Clarel, Pt. II, canto xx, 1. 108; canto xxi, 1. 11.
⁵Ibid., canto xxi, 11. 97-101.
⁶Ibid., Pt. IV, canto xxxv, 11. 14-16.
⁷Mardi, II, chap. xvi, 57.
shows, through the symbol of the short-lived light of the slough-inhabiting glow-worm by which the philosopher Midni reads, the limitations of this ontologist who must go "forever . . . halting and stumbling through his studies, and plunging through his quagmires after a glim."¹ Pierre, too, recognizes the unreliability of the "so conveniently adjustable drapery of all-stretchable Philosophy."²

Because it concerns the problem of philosophy, the question of Melville's scepticism arises: by labelling Melville a sceptic, is there an attempt to confine him within some philosophical school or system all of which he rejected as uncertain and relative? The tagging on of labels is usually fraught with the danger of a certain amount of misrepresentation: no man's philosophy is precisely that of another; however, through the study of sceptical sources which profoundly shaped his mental attitude toward reality, and supported by the uncertainties of national and familial background and personal reverses, Melville was caught up in the current of sceptical thought stemming particularly from the Renaissance, and Melvillean scepticism most closely approximates the questing attitude of the Pyrrhonian sceptics. To align Melville with the Pyrrhonians is not to align him with a schematized philosophical system—a claim to comprehend reality which Melville did not profess. Pyrrhonian scepticism is a doubting, questioning, questing attitude rather than a circumscribed school of philosophy: as Diogenes Laertius says, writing of the various sects or schools of philosophy,

¹Ibid., chap. 11, 213.
²Pierre, Bk. XXV, chap. iii, p. 472.
if by the name sect we understand those who incline to rules which are consistent with the principles which they profess, then the Pyrrhonean cannot be called a sect, for they have no rules or principles.¹

Doubt and the quest form the prevalent intellectual atmosphere of Clarel. Although the degree of Melville's self-projection through his mask or persona Rolfe in Clarel remains questionable, if Melville does intend some autobiographical equation in the canto in which Derwent labels the "Poised at self-center and mature" Rolfe a "Pyrrhonist,"² there would be no essential incompatibility with Melville's later statement in Billy Budd in what, considering Melville's esteem for "honesty" and lack of cant, may be a personal view issued under the alias of an "honest scholar": "You are aware that I am the adherent of no organized religion, much less of any philosophy built into a system."³

The pretensions of scholarship in general, moreover, were punctured early when, in Mardi, the renowned erudition of the scholar Doxodox is discovered to be nothing more than occult gibberish.⁴

The "divine sciences" do not fare any better. In Mardi, Media attacks both the divine and natural sciences; Yoomy, Mohi, and Babbalanja debate on the nature of amber and ambergris, and Media laughs to himself: "It's pleasant to sit by, a demi-god, and hear the surmisings of mortals, upon things they know nothing about; theology, or amber, or ambergris, it's all

¹Diogenes Laertius, p. 12.
²Clarel, Pt. IV, canto iii, l. 127; Pt. II, canto xxi, l. 32.
³Billy-Budd, ed. Hayford-Sealts, leaf 127, p. [74].
⁴Mardi, II, chap. lxvi, 286.
the same."¹ Pascal, as seen in the last cited passage from his thoughts, had, at least, the comfort of faith in revelation, but science and the scientific method had raised new questions about Scripture or revelation. After Babbalanja’s geological "sandwich System" account of creation, Media remarks:

"Mohi tells us that Mardi [earth] was made in six days; but you, Babbalanja, have built it up from the bottom in less than six minutes."

"Nothing for us geologists, my lord. At a word we turn you out whole systems, suns, satellites, and asteroids included. Why, my good lord, my friend Annonimo is laying out a new Milky Way, to intersect with the old one, and facilitate cross-cuts among the comets."²

Melville probably alludes in this chapter to the friction between the literalist interpretation of Genesis ("six days" of creation) and the long periods of time requisite to the geological explanation (the "six minutes" mentioned by Media merely mean the time required for Babbalanja’s telling—not the time he implies the actual process required). Although Melville ridicules geology by ironically attributing to it the power of creation, the questions raised by science did not leave Melville entirely unmoved.

Further, if Scripture is God’s revelation to man, how is it to be interpreted? Melville himself found what he personally felt was substantiation for many of his darkest views: the Old Testament wilderness and Ishmael themes he saw as analogues for man’s predicament upon earth—sons arbitrarily cast off, orphans grappling with the primeval, chaotic forces of nature; he questioned the possible nonbenevolence of God as the instigator of evil as well as good—Melville marked in his Bible Isa. 45:7: "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these

¹Ibid., chap. xvi, 63.
²Ibid., chap. xxviii, 113.
things." Melville brooded on the possible insignificance and annihilation of man—as an epigraph to his poem "Buddha" and in an allusion concluding chapter xxxi of White Jacket, Melville used James 4:14: "For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away."

What is, for Melville, the ambiguity of Scripture, is dramatized situationally in Clarel: the prodigal Lyonese youth gives a predictably sensual rendering of the Song of Solomon. Between ramblings on wine and women he recites:

Thy white neck is like ivory;  
I feed among thy lilies, dear:  
Stay me with flagons, comfort me  
With apples; thee would I enclose!  
Thy twin breasts are as two young roes.

Clarel protests:

Nay, pardon me,  
But you misdeem it: Solomon's Song  
Is allegoric—needs must be.

But the youth retorts: "Proof, proof, pray, if 'tis not too long." Clarel, like Melville, has no "proof."

Self-knowledge and the variable subject

If man turns, in his quest for criterions, to the subject he supposedly knows best, himself, and tries to elicit constants from the structure of his own nature, he still seems, according to Melville, foredoomed to failure. Man can no more comprehend himself than any other thing. Montaigne asks: "Those people ... that are ignorant of nothing ... have they not sometimes in their writings sounded the difficulties they have met with of knowing their

1 Clarel, Pt. IV, canto xxvi, ll. 179-189.
own being?"¹ and, after listing an impressive array of conflicting opinions, he adds:

Man is no better instructed in the knowledge of himself, in his corporal than in his spiritual part. We have proposed himself to himself, and his reason to his reason, to see what she could say. I think I have sufficiently demonstrated how little she understands herself in herself; and who understands not himself in himself, in what can he?²

Montaigne extends the argument in a more comprehensive sceptical thrust by quoting from Pliny, Nat. Hist. ii.1: "As if he could understand the measure of any other thing, that knows not his own."³ A parallel thought occurs in Browne's Religio Medici: "No man can judge another, because no man knows himself."⁴

In Melville's Mardi, Taji asks: "Oh stars! oh eyes, that see me, wheresoe'er I roam: serene, intent, inscrutable for aye, tell me, Sybils, what I am."⁵ Babbalanja, too, suffers the conundrum of defining his own identity:

Though I have now been upon terms of close companionship with myself for nigh five hundred moons, I have not yet been able to decide who or what I am. To you, perhaps, I seem Babbalanja; but to myself, I seem not myself. All I am sure of is a sort of prickly sensation all over me, which they call life; and, occasionally, a headache or a queer conceit admonishes me, that there is something astir in my attic. But how know I, that these sensations are identical with myself? For aught I know, I may be somebody else. At any rate, I keep an eye on myself, as I would on a stranger.⁶

In Moby-Dick, the self that is mirrored back in the golden doubloon is a

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¹ Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 250.
² Ibid., pp. 259-260.
³ Ibid., p. 260.
⁴ Browne, II, 95.
⁵ Mardi, I, chap. lviii, 208.
⁶ Ibid., II, chap. xxxix, 155.
"mysterious self,"¹ and the narrator in Pierre says, "'Explain ye my deeper mystery,' said the shepherd Chaldean king, smiting his breast, lying on his back upon the plain; 'and then, I will bestow all my wonderings upon ye, ye stately stars!'"² In The Confidence-Man, the merchant becomes indignant when the confidence-man questions his identity:

"I hope I know myself."
"And yet self-knowledge is thought by some not so easy. Who knows, my dear sir, but for a time you may have taken yourself for somebody else? Stranger things have happened."³

Linked with the inability to know self is the inability to know God. In his "Apology" Montaigne quotes St. Bernard: "'I know by myself,' says St. Bernard, 'how incomprehensible God is, seeing I cannot comprehend the parts of my own being.'"⁴ Melville has Clarel entertain a corresponding thought:

But if in vain  
One tries to comprehend a man,  
How think to sound God's deeper heart?⁵

A primary reason for man's inability to know even himself is his varbleneness and mutability. The inconstancy of man is an ever recurring theme in Montaigne: "Man, in sooth, is a marvellous, vain, fickle, and unstable subject, and on whom it is very hard to form any certain or uniform judgment,"⁶ and he quotes Herod. 1. 86 on "the uncertainty and mutability of

¹Moby-Dick, II, chap. xcix, 190.  
²Pierre, Bk. III, chap. 11, p. 70.  
³The Confidence-Man, chap. iv, p. 22.  
⁴Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 252.  
⁵Clarel, Pt. II, canto xxxii, 11. 117-119.  
⁶Montaigne, Bk. I, chap. i, p. 2.
human things, which in an instant are subject to be totally changed into a quite contrary condition."\(^1\)

The "Apology" contains an extended argument against the whole man in both his intellectual and corporal stability:

Besides this infinite diversity and division, through the trouble that our judgment gives ourselves, and the incertitude that every one is sensible of in himself, 'tis easy to perceive that its seat is very unstable and insecure. How variously do we judge of things?—How often do we alter our opinions? What I hold and believe to-day I hold and believe with my whole belief; ... but has it not befallen me, not only once, but a hundred, a thousand times, every day, to have embraced some other thing with all the same instruments, and in the same condition, which I have since judged to be false? ... It is certain that our apprehensions, our judgment, and the faculties of the soul in general, suffer according to the movements and alterations of the body, which alterations are continual. Are not our minds more sprightly, our memories more prompt and quick, and our thoughts more lively in health than in sickness?\(^2\)

Montaigne also quotes Plutarch's Cleomenes: "Neither am I the same man now as when I am in health: being now another person, my opinions and fancies are also other than they were before."\(^3\)

Melville, too, influenced by the fluidity of his own temperament, saw the "self" as a complex of changing states and mercurial moods: "For man is heir / To complex moods."\(^4\) Writing to Hawthorne in November 1851, Melville says:

This is a long letter, but you are not at all bound to answer it. Possibly, if you do answer it, and direct it to Herman Melville, you will missend it—for the very fingers that now guide this pen are not precisely the same that just took it up and put it on this paper.

\(^1\)Ibid., chap. xviii, p. 25.

\(^2\)Ibid., Bk. II, chap. xii, pp. 262-263.

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 291.

Lord, when shall we be done changing?¹

For Montaigne, man was part of a more universal flux:

Finally, there is no constant existence, neither of the objects' being nor our own; both we, and our judgments, and all mortal things, are evermore incessantly running and rolling; and consequently nothing certain can be established from the one to the other, both the judging and the judged being in a continual motion and mutation.²

In Mardi, Babbalanja, too, questions man's place in a universe of change:

Nothing abideth; the river of yesterday floweth not to-day; the sun's rising is a setting; living is dying; the very mountains melt; and all revolve:—systems and asteroids; the sun wheels through the zodiac, and the zodiac is a revolution. Ah gods! in all this universal stir, am I to prove one stable thing?³

Earlier in the November 1851 letter to Hawthorne, cited above, Melville writes:

In me divine maganimities [sic] are spontaneous and instantaneous—catch them while you can. The world goes round, and the other side comes up. So now I can't write what I felt.⁴

In Pierre, the narrator remarks:

As a statue, planted on a revolving pedestal, shows now this limb, now that; now front, now back, now side; continually changing, too, its general profile; so does the pivoted, statued soul of man; ... look for no invariableness in Pierre. Nor does any canting showman here stand by to announce his phases as he revolves. Catch his phases as your insight may.⁵

Melville, in The Confidence-Man, shows the influence of Montaigne's essay "Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions"; Montaigne writes:

I have often thought even the best authors a little mistaken in so

¹Letters, p. 143.
²Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 281.
³Mardi, I, chap. lxxviii, 277.
⁴Letters, p. 142.
⁵Pierre, Bk. XXV, chap. iii, p. 469.
obstinately endeavouring to mould us into any consistent and solid contexture.¹

Melville defends the inconsistency of one of his characters against what he calls the usual demand made upon the writer of fiction that "in the depiction of any character, its consistency should be preserved" by arguing that a requirement equally insisted upon is that "fiction based on fact should never be contradictory to it," and that, in fact, or, "in real life, a consistent character is a rara avis." Rather, the self is "at different periods, as much at variance with itself as the butterfly is with the caterpillar into which it changes."²

Lack of a universal consensus

A multiplication of variables does not produce one constant, and the effort to reach a universal criterion through the common consensus of many men, each variable in his own entity, but produces the contrary condition of increased diversity. In a statement that also further confirms the previous section, Montaigne writes: "Never did two men make the same judgment of the same thing; and 'tis impossible to find two opinions exactly alike, not only in several men, but in the same men, at different times."³

Again, it is the "Apology" that offers the most trenchant argument. After a few scattered assertions on "the rash and fortuitous change of our

¹ Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. 1, p. 152.

² The Confidence-Man, chap. xiv, pp. 89-90.

³ Montaigne, Bk. III, chap. xiii, p. 494.
opinions,\(^1\) and the "infinite variety of our reasons and opinions,"\(^2\) the essay zeros in on the heart of the argument:

Now if on our part we received any thing without alteration, if human grasp were capable and strong enough to seize on truth by our own means, these means being common to all men, this truth would be conveyed from hand to hand, from one to another; and at least there would be some one thing to be found in the world, amongst so many as there are, that would be believed by men with an *universal consent*: but this, that there is no one proposition that is not debated and controverted amongst us, or that may not be, makes it very manifest that our natural judgment does not very clearly discern what it embraces; for my judgment cannot make my companions approve of what it approves; which is a sign that I seized it by some other means than by a natural power that is in me and in all other men.\(^3\)

The apparent diffusiveness of the "Apology" itself, with its hodgepodge of quotations and observations, becomes, in effect, integral to Montaigne's purpose: the variegated amalgam of his materials is a montage illustrating his variegated and unstable subject—man. Montaigne thus offers, e.g., the various and conflicting opinions on what constitutes physical beauty;\(^4\) in a section on the notions of the Supreme Being, God becomes everything from sun and air, serpents, dogs and oxen to our own souls;\(^5\) the soul is opined to be anything from blood to an area between the eyebrows.\(^6\) Montaigne concludes tersely that "men . . . are not agreed about any one thing."\(^7\) Later

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in Book II of the *Essays* there occurs his wonderfully paradoxical statement the "there never was in the world two opinions alike, no more than two hairs or two grains: the most universal quality is diversity." The same thought is echoed in Book III: "There is no quality so universal, in this image of things, as diversity and variety."

In addition to his reading of Montaigne, Melville was confronted with the same conclusion—or lack of one—in his other reading at this period. An artistic projection of the problem of diversity and disagreement characterizes Rabelais's works. To Panurge's "doubt" and "problematic theme"—namely, "Whether he should marry, or not marry?"—as many various opinions are proffered as there are those in the different professions. In Book III, chapter xii, no agreement is reached on the reading of the Virgilian Lottery; in Book III, chapter xiv, there is no agreement on the interpretation of Panurge's dream of the felicity of his future married state; Book III, chapter xviii is entitled: "HOW PANTAGRUEL AND PANURGE DID DIVERSELY [sic] EXPOUND THE VERSES OF THE SYBYL OF PANZOUST," Book III, chapter xlv, "HOW PANTAGRUEL RELATETH A STRANGE HISTORY OF THE PERPLEXITY OF HUMAN JUDGMENT"; and chapter xlvi of the same Book is entitled, "HOW PANTAGRUEL AND PANURGE DIVERSELY INTERPRET THE WORDS OF TRIBOULET" (Triboulet is the fool, and each man reads into his words

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3 Rabelais, III, Bk. III, chap. xxx, 22.
and inane actions what he wishes and finds diverse significances in the empty wine bottle Triboulet returns to them).

Finally, in an effort to obtain a definitive answer, Pantagruel and Panurge resolve to make a visit to the oracle of the holy bottle. Significant for the problem of Melville's scepticism is the development of this pilgrimage in Rabelais's Book IV. The "Explanatory Remarks" on Book IV, chapter i state that "By Pantagruel and his attendants, who embarked for the Oracle of the Holy Bottle, we may understand" the "search after truth; which Rabelais places in the bottle." In their search for the oracle of the bottle, the travellers visit many countries, and "all the countries in this voyage are islands"--a device which, in addition to the idea of the quest, Melville adopts in Mardi. In the explanatory remarks to chapters xxxii and xxxiii of Book V, there is again mention of the "Oracle of the Bottle, or rather ... the knowledge of truth." The travellers at last reach the temple of the holy bottle. On the portal of the temple are the words: "In wine, truth," and the doors of the gates are "wrought with little vine-branches." When the bottle speaks, it orders Panurge to "TRINC," i.e., to drink. The oracle but speaks in confirmation of an action already performed. Bacbuc, the priest at the oracle, returns Panurge to the "fantastic fountain" from which the

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1 Ibid., chap. xlvii, 101.
2 Ibid., 166.
3 Ibid., 167--in "Explanatory Remarks" for Bk. IV, chap. ii.
4 Ibid., IV, 119-120.
5 Ibid., Bk. V, chap. xxxvii, 248.
6 Ibid.
travellers have already drunk: "Bacbuc asked us then, how we liked our tiff. We answered, that it seemed to us good harmless sober Adam's liquor, . . . mere element." But Bacbuc then explains: "Drinking of this miraculous liquor, you will find its taste like any wine that you shall fancy to drink. Come then, fancy and drink"; "drink once, twice, or thrice more, said Bacbuc, still changing your imagination, and you shall find its taste and flavour to be exactly that on which you shall have pitched." Through his artistic finale emerges Rabelais's message of the relativity and subjectivity of Truth — each one who drinks the water of the fountain finds it a different wine. Melville writes in Mardi: "Truth dwells in her fountains; where every one must drink for himself." Bacbuc says: "If you observe what is written in Ionian letters on the temple gate, you may have understood that truth is in wine. The Goddess Bottle therefore directs you to the divine liquor; be yourself the expounder of your undertaking."

The present problem of the absence of a universal consensus, a criterion, marks a profound change of stress in Melville's thought. He is not beyond questioning the constancy of man even in Typee (1846)—he asks: "What dependence could be placed upon the fickle passions which sway the bosom of the savage? His inconstancy and treachery are proverbial." In this early romance, however, it is the concept of universality that is accented:

1. Ibid., chap. xlii, 263.
2. Ibid., 264.
4. Ibid., chap. xlv, 270.
They [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. The grand principles of virtue and honour, however they may be distorted by arbitrary codes, are the same all the world over; and where these principles are concerned, the right or wrong of any action appears the same to the uncultivated as to the enlightened mind. It is to this indwelling, this universally diffused perception of what is just and noble, that the integrity of the Marquesans in their intercourse with each other is to be attributed.  

Six years later, the title hero of *Pierre* will follow his "indwelling, ... universally diffused perception of what is just and noble and be duped into becoming the "fool of Virtue." Between the publication of the two works, Melville was deeply affected by personal reverses as well as by his further reading in sceptic sources. That Melville had become well aware of the problem of the universal and the particular is evinced in his June 1851 letter to Hawthorne: "What plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion."  

The positive position of Melville’s sceptical self-argument is not lacking in *Mardi*—as, of course, it never is, completely, in Melville’s works—and a statement appears that endorses the notion of a common core of criteria: "The catalogue of true thoughts is but small; they are ubiquitous; no man’s property; and unspoken, or bruited, are the same," but the negative side of Melville’s argument begins to take precedence in the same novel, and the preoccupation with diversity, relativity, and subjectivity occurs in the majority of his major works thereafter. In volume II, chapter xi of *Mardi*, Babbalanja tells of the enigma of the banian tree. The episode is, finally,

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2 *Letters*, p. 131.  
3 *Mardi*, II, chap. xxii, 90.
an allusion to the evasiveness of truth, but more immediately, coming, as it does, in the discussion of Maramma with its many religious references--"altars," "idols or images," "gods," "his Holiness" the "Pontiff," "abbey," "pagoda," "eremite," "hermit"--the search for the "original and true" banian trunk among all the maze of "rooted branches" seems relevant to the proliferation of religious beliefs and the consequent confusion. The lack of consensus is illustrated when each of the nine blind men grasps a different branch and believes he has found the "one," original and true trunk.

The best known example occurs in Moby-Dick. In "The Doubloon," each man who reads the markings on the coin projects his own subjective state--the coin, "the image of the rounder globe," "but mirrors back his own mysterious self"—rather than discovering any uniform and objective validity. The "crazy-witty" Pip points up the subjective diversity in his thrice repeated paradigmatic litany: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look." Stubb eavesdrops on the various "interpreters" and observes: "There's another rendering now; but still one text. All sorts of men in one kind of world, you see." This philosophic exemplum is given overt expression in Pierre: "Nature is not so much her own ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood."2

In The Confidence-Man, perhaps taking his cue from Rabelais's Book V, chapter xxix, where it says, "so many Men, so many Minds," or from Bayle, who

1Moby-Dick, II, chap. xcix, 188-195.
2Pierre, Bk. XXV, chap. iv, p. 476.
writes: "We commonly say, *quod capit, tot sensus*, as many Men so many Minds."\(^1\) Melville entitles the novel's second chapter "Showing that Many Men Have Many Minds." The contents of the chapter show the varying responses to the presence on board the Mississippi steamer Fidèle of a deaf-mute: comments range from "Odd fish!" and "Humbug!" to "Singular innocence" and "Jacob dreaming at Luz." The narrator remarks: "Such the epitaphic comments, conflictingly spoken or thought, of a miscellaneous company."\(^2\) Because of the many conflicting variants in human nature, Melville, later in *The Confidence-Man*, suggests that upon the whole, it might rather be thought, that he, who, in view of its inconsistencies, says of human nature the same that, in view of its contrasts, is said of the divine nature, that it is past finding out, thereby evinces a better appreciation of it than he who, by always representing it in a clear light, leaves it to be inferred that he clearly knows all about it.\(^3\)

In the searching doubt of Melville's self-argument "the other side comes up" for a moment, and, later in the same chapter, he stresses the universal aspect of a common human nature:

The grand points of human nature are the same to-day they were a thousand years ago. The only variability in them is in expression, not in feature.\(^4\)

The stress, if not the conclusion, of his argument, however, returns to the concept of multiplicity.

Almost twenty years later, in *Clarel* (1876), Melville is still creating situations to exemplify the predicament of man's manifold reactions to

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reality. At the monastery of Mar Saba is a palm tree reportedly planted by St. Saba himself. Derwent, Vine, Mortmain, Rolfe, and Clarel all react to the palm, each in a diverse manner.¹

In Melville's sceptical argument with himself, he seems to argue, in Clarel, through a debate between Ungar and Rolfe, that it may well be that man's nature is uniform, but that it is truly so, or, if it is, what it is, is seemingly impossible to discern through the undulating proscenium of shifting circumstances and transient phenomena. Ungar argues:

The human nature, the divine--
Have both been proved by many a sign.
... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
For man, like God, abides the same
Always, through all variety
Of woven garments to the frame.

Rolfe replies:

Yes, God is God, and men are men,
Forever and for aye. What then?
There's Circumstance—there's Time; and these
Are charged with store of latencies
Still working in to modify.²

Finally, in his last and posthumously published work, Billy Budd, Melville is still pursuing the same problem. The apparently tangential concluding chapters following the death of Billy are, by their presentation of the variety of adversely contending human impressions of Billy Budd and his actions on board the Bellipotent, actually integral to the final expression of

¹For the varying reactions to the palm tree see Clarel, Part III: canto xxv, ll. 67-70 for Derwent; canto xxvi, ll. 26-64 for Vine; canto xxviii, ll. 51-98 for Mortmain; canto xxix, ll. 31-82 for Rolfe; canto xxx for Clarel.

²Ibid., Pt. IV, canto xxi, ll. 67-82.
Melville's question.\(^1\) As an antinomy to the often prevalently presumed and complacent concept of the commonality of human nature, Melville stresses plurality—each man \textit{sui generis}—and a consequent condition which renders it questionable whether man can elicit from such heterogeneity any homogeneous, universal and absolute standards, standards which would, in fact, show that man understood himself:

Such counter natures in mankind—
Mole, bird, not more unlike we find:
Instincts adverse, nor less how true
Each to itself. What clew, what clew?\(^2\)

\(^1\)See \textit{Billy Budd,} ed. Hayford-Sealts, pp. 192-193, first note for leaf 321.

\(^2\)\textit{Clarel,} Pt. III, canto xx, ll. 39-42.
PART II

PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS CONSEQUENT

TO THE PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION
CHAPTER IV

THE ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEM

"Is all but dream?"

Clarel.

A consequent problem

For Melville, the knowing subject is limited by the possible deficiency and definite weakness of his faculties, his variability, and, it must be added, the limitation of his experience. But what of the knowable object? The lack of noetic certitude in the knowing subject gives rise to an ontological difficulty concerning the nature of a consequently uncertain reality, and the inability to get behind appearances engenders the suspicion that perhaps there is not anything behind to "get at." Finally, even appearance itself comes under suspicion, until life and reality are questioned as being

1Montaigne, in a quotation from Cicero's Acad. 1. 12, draws attention to man's limited experience due to the very brevity of his life:

Almost all the ancients have declared that there is nothing to be known, nothing to be perceived or understood: the senses are too limited, men's minds too weak, and the course of life too short (Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 230).

Melville takes issue with this last point of the quotation, however:

But years attain not truth,
Nor length of life avails at all

(Clarel, Pt. I, canto xvii, ll. 172-173).

The reason "length of life" does not avail is because "the more we learn, the more we unlearn; we accumulate not, but substitute; and take away more than we add. We dwindle while we grow" (Mardi, II, chap. xx, 80). For Melville, "you know nothing till you know all; which is the reason we never know anything" (Redburn, chap. xxvi, p. 154). Neither is it possible for one man to be "coextensive with what is" (The Confidence-Man, chap. xiv, p. 90).
merely illusion or dream.

The phenomenal-noumenal problem

Although Kant gave the phenomenal-noumenal problem a more recent terminology and philosophical elaboration in the Critique of Pure Reason and personally found it not an insuperable problem, the problem as problem is much older and for Melville, at least, traces back among the moderns to his readings in Montaigne. For Kant, *Ding an sich*, a thing-in-itself, is called noumenon. But noumenon can be known only by intellectual intuition, which Kant denies to man; according to Kant, man has only sensible intuition and knows only phenomenon: in the "Preface" to the second edition of the Critick of Pure Reason Kant writes that "we can have no cognition of an object, as a thing in itself, but only so far as it is an object of sensible intuition, that is, as phenomenon."¹ Kant himself did not deny the existence of noumenon:

We must be enabled, at least, to think these objects as things in themselves, even though not to cognize them. For, otherwise, the absurd proposition would thence result, that there would be appearance (phenomenon) without anything which then appeared.²

Unfortunately, "thinking does not make it so," and Kant obliterates the possibility of any kind of speculative proof and, for many, leaves the existence of noumenon problematical—man may not know what is, only what appears.

Kant himself was content to accept phenomenon or appearance as reality


²Ibid.
for scientific knowledge. As Norman Kemp Smith points out, Kant posited an "important distinction between appearance (Erscheinung) and illusion (Schein)."¹

Erscheinung is the appearance of a given object: Schein "signifies a representation, such as may occur in a dream, to which nothing real corresponds."²

But the question remains whether Kant, despite his intentions, actually succeeded in proving the grounds for such a distinction. Smith continues to explain Kant's view of appearance: "The further qualification must be added, that the predicates of appearance are constant and are inseparable from its representation";³ Smith later challenges this view: "That certain perceptions are more constant than others does not prove that all alike [extended objects] may not be classed as illusory."⁴ Smith's reason for challenging Kant derives from Kant's epistemology or theory of knowledge, which is heavily subjective: matter that is received is chaotic, confused, unformed; it is Kant's categories of the mind which help constitute and create, "form," what is actually known. Smith points out that Kant's critics (Lambert, Mendelssohn, and Garve) rightly objected that if bodies in space are representations existing, as he [Kant] so often asserts, only 'within us,' their appearing to exist 'outside us' is a complete illusion."⁵ Kant observed that it is an "absurd proposition" to have appearance without anything which appears: Melville questioned whether

² Ibid.
³ Ibid., p. 149.
⁴ Ibid., pp. 150-151.
⁵ Ibid., p. 150.
reality was not, in fact, an "absurd proposition" and no more than dream or illusion.

Prior to Kant, Hume enunciated the same problem of man's inability to know beings in themselves and, unlike Kant, made no assertions about their actual existence but rather stressed the impossibility of any absolute knowledge in this regard. In his Treatise of Human Nature in a section entitled "Of Scepticism with regard to the Senses," Hume writes:

But as no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions, it follows, that we may observe a conjunction or a relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects. 'Tis impossible, therefore, that from the existence or any of the qualities of the former, we can ever form any conclusion concerning the existence of the latter, or ever satisfy our reason in this particular.

A few pages later Hume adds:

We suppose external objects to resemble internal perceptions. I have already shown, that the relation of cause and effect can never afford us any just conclusion from the existence or qualities of our perceptions to the existence of external continued objects: and I shall further add, that even though they could afford such a conclusion, we should never have any reason to infer that our objects resemble our perceptions.2

In An Inquiry Concerning the Human Understanding, in his section on "Sceptical Doubts concerning the Operations of the Understanding," Hume concludes briefly: "Nature has kept us at a great distance from all her secrets, and has afforded us only the knowledge of a few superficial qualities of objects."—Melville, too, pondered the problem of nature's "secret" and came close to concluding there wasn't any; in his 16? April? 1851 letter to Hawthorne, with whom he enjoyed talking "ontological heroics," Melville wrote:

1Hume, I, 274.

2Ibid., 279.

3Ibid., IV, 41.
And perhaps, after all, there is no secret. We incline to think that the Problem of the Universe is like the Freemason's mighty secret, so terrible to all children. It turns out, at last, to consist in a triangle, a mallet, and an apron,—nothing more!¹

Perhaps there is no secret—already latently suggested in this passage is Melville's great ontological anticlimax, his suspicion that perhaps "being" is really "nothing."

The problem confronting Hume and Kant (though divergently resolved), the problem of the bridge between mental and extramental reality, is anticipated by Montaigne; i.e., how do we know that the form of an object we are perceiving—that is, the form supposedly received by the material senses to be refined in the alembic of the mind—is actually a truly representative form of an actually existing object perceived? Montaigne asks (using "foreign subjects" in the present sense of "object"): ²

And to say that . . . the senses convey to the soul the quality of foreign subjects by resemblance, how can the soul and understanding be assured of this resemblance, having of itself no commerce with foreign subjects? As they who never knew Socrates cannot, when they see his picture, say it is like him. ³

He asserts simply: "We have no communication with being." ⁴ This inability to communicate with being, the impasse of phenomena, appearances, becomes the "wall" symbol in Melville's writings: Ahab wants to thrust "through the wall";⁴ Pierre-Enceladus is foremost in hurling himself against the precipice's

3. Ibid.
4. Moby-Dick, I, chap. xxxvi, 204.
"unresounding wall"; Bartleby dies "at the base of the wall" with "his head touching the cold stones"; the questing world ship of "The Berg" strikes the berg's "dead indifference of walls" and without budging it goes down "in bafflement." The wall symbol finally, and more importantly, expands to connote the cause itself of the frustration of man's desire to communicate with Being—the indifference and unresponsiveness of the First Cause, or God, who becomes concretized and embodied in the White Whale, and "the White Whale in that wall," a "dead, impregnable, uninjurable wall."

Melville first mentions Kant in Mardi, where he also refers to "Abstract Noumenons": that he understood the Kantian use of noumenon at the time of the writing of Mardi, as previously noted, is questionable though possible, but it is highly probable that, a year and half later, he came to understand the phenomenal-noumenal problem in a Kantian context because of his prolonged discussions with the German scholar Adler. If he understood the problem, he apparently did not accept Kant's solution. It must be stressed again, however, that his understanding of the problem was, in all likelihood, conglomerate, derived from collected sceptical sources.

If man's best efforts are incapable of penetrating appearances in order to comprehend what Babbalanga calls "the essence of things; . . . that

1 Pierre, Bk. XXV, chap. iv, p. 482.
2 The Piazza Tales, p. 64.
3 Collected Poems, pp. 203-204.
4 Moby-Dick, I, chap. xxxvi, 204; II, chap. lxxvi, 71.
5 Mardi, I, chap. iii, 14.
6 Ibid., II, chap. lxvi, 282.
which is beneath the seeming,¹ a resulting problem arises which questions
the very existence of anything beyond appearance, and of appearance itself,
and engenders a fear of possible deception.

Question of deception

The idea of deception is prevalent in a number of the quotations al-
ready cited from Melville's sceptical philosophical sources. It is Descartes
who posed what Pascal and Hume saw as "the highest point in sceptical doubt":²

If . . . it were repugnant to the goodness of Deity to have created me
subject to constant deception, it would seem likewise to be contrary to
his goodness to allow me to be occasionally deceived; and yet it is
clear that this is permitted.³

Browne, as already seen, begins his "Vulgar Errors" with the problem of decep-
tion and discusses the "deceptible condition" of men who are deceived by
Satan, one another, themselves, and the conduct of their senses. The devout
Pascal says of the man without grace: "Everything deceives him."⁴ Bayle
offers the argument of the "new Philosophers" that color is a modification of
the soul rather than something existing externally in substances of objects
of the senses,⁵ and he writes:

Ever since the beginning of the World all Men, except, perhaps, one in
two hundred Millions, do firmly believe that Bodies are coloured, and
yet 'tis a Mistake. I ask, whether God deceives Men with respect to

¹Ibid., chap. x, 36.
²Popkin, pp. 181-182.
³Descartes, p. 101.
⁴Penseées, 83.
⁵See Moby-Dick, I, chap. xlii, 244.
those Colours? If he deceives them in that respect, what hinders but
he may deceive them with respect to Extension[?]--\(^1\)

and the problem keeps broadening.

The theme of deception is of fairly constant recurrence in Melville:
not only is there the possibility of self-deception--"if I could only be cer­
tain that . . . my senses did not deceive me"\(^2\)--but there is the question of
interpersonal deception: "Do we then mutually deceive? Off masks, mankind,
that I may know what warranty of fellowship with others my own thoughts
possess,"\(^3\) and, at a more pragmatic level, a senile old miser has enough of a
lucid moment to suspect he has been deceived out of his gold by the Confidence-
Man: "Somehow, can't trust my senses any more, since trusting him."\(^4\)

Reality itself is delusive; in The Confidence-Man, the etymologically-minded
Melville has the Sophomore (Greek sophos and moros, the "wise-fool") remark:
"No appearances can deceive me."\(^5\) The universe itself, Ishmael says earlier,
in Moby-Dick, is at times taken "for a vast practical joke," and God Himself
is the "unseen and unaccountable old joker"\(^6\)--here, in this statement, is
seen the tendency, which occurs in both Melville's sources and in Melville
himself, to push beyond the immediate and intermediate to the extremity of
responsibility. Melville considered this terminal responsibility, this "god,"

\(^1\) Bayle, 1710 ed., IV, 2620.
\(^2\) The Piazza Tales, p. 97.
\(^3\) Mardi, II, chap. v, 20-21.
\(^4\) The Confidence-Man, chap. xx, p. 134.
\(^5\) Ibid., chap. ix, p. 62.
\(^6\) Moby-Dick, I, chap. xlix, 286.
whether under the Christian appellation of "God" or under other aliases--Fate, Jove, Jupiter, Jehovah, Confidence-Man, etc.--as the ultimate deceiver. Ahab wonders "what cozening, hidden lord" commands him;\(^1\) Pierre accosts Fate: "Thou art a palterer and a cheat; thou hast lured me on through gay gardens to a gulf,"\(^2\) and the "purple promise" of the Delectable Mountains (connected, in Bunyan, with paradisaical promise) becomes a "cunning purpleness" curtain­ing "stark desolation" and "ruin";\(^3\) in \textit{Israel Potter}, the "Bunker" Hill Monument assumes remarkable affinities to the Deity, and the devil-God Confidence-Man ("Jehovah shall be thy confidence")\(^4\) is the master deceiver--in \textit{The Confidence-Man}, Melville seams his satire with such terms as "fleece," "fool," "goose," "bluff," "joke," "gull," "bogus," "dupe," "sham," "false," "humbug," "imposture," "spurious," "decoy," "deception," "deviltry," "sharpers," "delusion," "charlatan," until the whole context of the novel, Melville's world picture, becomes a maze of deception with "Jehovah" the supreme Confidence-Man and deceiver.

The fear of deception is one of man's most common fears, because it is a frustration of one of his most fundamental drives, the drive to know. In \textit{Mardi}, Melville's island king Donjalolo must renounce his right to rove

\(^1\) \textit{Ibid.}, II, chap. cxxxii, 330.
\(^3\) \textit{Ibid.}, Bk. XXV, chap. iv, pp. 478-479.
\(^4\) \textit{The Confidence-Man}, chap. xlv, p. 334. Throughout this study, the term "devil-God" is used \textit{not} in the Manichean sense of two gods, one of which is evil--an evil-god or devil-god as opposed to a good-god; rather, it implies more the Christian concept of God and the devil as ambiguously combined in one Being, a devil-God--this is how indifferent Melville sees the primal power may be.
beyond his own circumscribed glen, and, for Melville, every man is, in a certain analogous sense, a Donjalolo unable to communicate with the "outside" world, with extramental reality, and, like Donjalolo, may conclude: "Better know nothing, than be deceived."¹

Question of a nonbenevolent deity

It would seem that only a final power or deity that is malign, rather than benign, could be responsible for man's "deceitful condition." As abundant Melville scholarship has shown, Melville seriously questioned the notion of a benevolent deity. In Mardi, Yillah, as the summum bonum, becomes inextricably submerged in the evil Hautia, "the vortex that draws all in"²--"in some mysterious way seemed Hautia and Yillah connected":³ the situation of "goodness," as seen in Yillah with her "blue, firmament eyes,"⁴ is questioned through the parallel case of Ady who is "transformed" into one of the evil Hautia's maidens, so that, seeking her, one sees "blue eye within black."⁵ Melville poses his question through a like situation at the end of Pierre where the blue-eyed Lucy, representing light or goodness, becomes engulfed or overshadowed by the dark, evil-influenced, poison-bearing Isabel; Melville almost thumpingly identifies his symbol: Lucy's brother cries "Lucy! A light!

¹Mardi, I, chap. lxxxii, 290.
²Ibid., II, chap. xc, 395.
³Ibid., chap. lxxvii, 386.
⁴Ibid., I, chap. xliii, 158.
⁵Ibid., II, chap. lxxxix, 392.
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a light!—Lucy!"¹ as he stumbles through the darkness of the prison cell. Melville restates the same question of ambiguity in Pierre through the two portraits of the "father" that somehow, though one is noble in air and the other of shadowy significance, become ambiguously one: "Consider in thy mind, Pierre, whether we two paintings may not make only one"²—the present instance provides an apt example of Melville's tendency, mentioned in the section which discusses his possible debt to Pierre Bayle, to push beyond any definite duality, as, e.g., that of Manicheism, or instrumental causation to a single principle, a tendency which Bayle himself gives occasional evidence of possessing. Further, it is the portrait with the darker connotations that seems the truer likeness.

Like the white-robed Moor in Clarel,³ the whiteness of Moby Dick is but a deceptive covering for the blackness of "eternal malignity." The shark is one of Melville's symbols for evil, and his oft quoted references to sharks are illustrative of his view of the ambiguous conjunction of good and evil in the Primal Power: the narrator in Mardi remarks, "As well hate a seraph as a shark. Both were made by the same hand";⁴ a like thought occurs in Clarel: "The shark thou mad'st, yet claim'st the dove";⁵ and Queequeg gives pronouncement that "de god wat made shark must be one dam Ingin."⁶ Timoleon arraigns

¹Pierre, Bk. XXVI, chap. vii, p. 504.
²Ibid., Bk. IV, chap. v, p. 115.
³Clarel, Pt. III, canto xii, 11. 65-130.
⁴Mardi, I, chap. xiii, 47.
⁵Clarel, Pt. I, canto xiii, 1. 71.
"heaven as compromised in wrong,"\(^1\) and, in *Clarel*, the Syrian monk sees the devil as fair, Christ as pale and dim,\(^2\) "but as the shade of Him."\(^3\) When the devil and Syrian monk join in colloquy the devil asserts of God:

\[
\text{Yea, yea, and He is everywhere--}
\text{Now and for aye, Evil and He.}^4
\]

Rolfe later remarks:

\[
\text{No, disproportionate is evil}
\text{In influence. Evil do I say?}
\text{But speak not evil of the evil:}
\text{Evil and good they braided play}
\text{Into one cord.}^5
\]

Melville does not deny the presence of goodness, but he often sees it as resolving back into evil or else vitiated by its very copresence with evil—Rolfe asks: "Need'st foul all sweets, thou Beelzebub?"\(^6\) Primarily and finally, however, Melville seems to view the apparent conjunction of good and

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\(^1\) *Collected Poems*, p. 214.

\(^2\) This concept of the preponderance of the dark side of reality is also present in *Pierre* where the dark Isabel is portrayed as provocatively substantial, as Pierre comes to realize to his own harassment, whereas Lucy—connected with traditional concepts of light, heaven and God (Isabel describes Lucy's eyes as "heaven[']s own blue," and Lucy is connected with Plinlimmon in that both are Welsh ["foreign" or alien], "pale"-complexed, and Plinlimmon's eyes are "blue, bright," Lucy's are blue and "vivid")—is rather unsubstantial: she has "delicate feet," "two thin white hands," a "slight, airy, almost unearthly figure"; "one husbandly embrace would break her airy zone, and she exhale upward to that heaven whence she hath hither come, condensed to mortal sight"; she is "fragile" and faints easily; she is described by the "slightness of her person"; she is compared to "the highest, and purest, and thinnest ether."

\(^3\) *Clarel*, Pt. II, canto xviii, l. 83.


evil as one of questionable ambiguity; it may be wondered if he was reminded of this conjunction through the connotations of the names of Phoebe and Maule as light and darkness respectively when he wrote to Hawthorne that "the marriage of Phoebe with the daguerreotypist is a fine stroke, because of his turning out to be a Maule."\(^1\)

In the quotation from Isa. 45:7, marked by Melville in his Bible and formerly cited—"I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things," Melville found biblical justification for his questionings of the ambiguity of the first cause. Melville's Lightning-Rod Man, in the short story of the same name, is thus called Jupiter Tonans because he so stood "in the Greek statue of old, grasping the lightning-bolt"; the lightning-bolt is, however, a lightning-rod shaped into "three keen tines." The ambiguous combination of good and evil is, therefore, projected through the sceptre of the likewise ambiguously named "dark lightning-king"—a sceptre which is both trident, devil's fork, and bolt of lightning, the god Jupiter's ensignia.\(^2\) When Melville dives below the undergirdings that support the superstructure of reality, he seems to find a fulcral point that is schizophrenic in nature. With such a power at the fundament of reality, it becomes not inconceivable that that reality is deceptive, delusive, dream.

**The dream tradition**

The epistemological problems articulated by Montaigne lead him

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\(^1\) *Letters*, p. 125.

\(^2\) *The Piazza Tales*, pp. 172, 180.
logically to a consideration of a questionable reality. Near the end of the "Apology," Montaigne writes: "They who have compared our lives to a dream were, perhaps, more in the right than they were aware of."¹ Montaigne distinguishes between a waking and sleeping state, but he intimates that the distinction is, perhaps, more one of degree than of kind:

When we dream, the soul lives, works, and exercises all its faculties, neither more nor less than when awake; but more largely and obscurely, yet not so much, neither, that the difference should be as great as betwixt night and the meridian brightness of the sun, but as betwixt night and shade; there she sleeps, here she slumbers: but, whether more or less, 'tis still dark, and Cimmerian darkness. We wake sleeping, and sleep waking. I do not see so clearly in my sleep; but as to my being awake, I never found it clear enough and free from clouds: moreover, sleep, when it is profound, sometimes rocks even dreams themselves asleep; but our waking is never so sprightly that it rightly purges and dissipates those whimsies, which are waking dreams, and worse than dreams. Our reason and soul receiving those fancies and opinions that come in dreams, and authorizing the actions of our dreams with the like approbation that they do those of the day, wherefore do we not doubt whether our thought, our action, is not another sort of dreaming, and our waking a certain kind of sleep?²

One of the most famous formulations of the dream-reality problem occurs in the first meditation of Descartes, who met the problem with his reading of Montaigne. Descartes first describes his locale, then remarks:

How often have I dreamt that I was dressed, and occupied this place by the fire, when I was lying undressed in bed? At the present moment, however, I certainly look upon this paper with eyes wide awake; the head which I now move is not asleep; I extend this hand consciously and with express purpose, and I perceive it; the occurrences in sleep are not so distinct as all this. But I cannot forget that, at other times, I have been deceived in sleep by similar illusions; and, attentively considering those cases, I perceive so clearly that there exist no certain marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished from sleep, that I feel greatly astonished; and in amazement I almost persuade myself that I am now dreaming.³

¹Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 279.
²Ibid.
³Descartes, p. 99.
Although important, the basic question seems not so much to be that of differentiating between ordinary dreaming and waking states, but to define precisely what it means to be awake in a conscious relational encounter with "reality"—is that which we are encountering substantial, "really real," or is it perhaps just hallucinatory, the deceptions and illusions, however sharp and more keen at times, of a higher degree or layer of dream existence: is life, indeed, only an "ungraspable phantom"\(^1\) and Being Nothing? That Melville sometimes thought so seems evident.

Sir Thomas Browne, often called "The English Montaigne," remarks: "The world to me is but a dream or mock-show."\(^2\) Later, in the same volume, the following passage appears:

I am happy in a dream. ... There is surely a nearer apprehension of any thing that delights us, in our dreams, than in our waked senses. ... And surely it is not a melancholy conceit to think we are all asleep in this world, and that the conceits of this life are as mere dreams, to those of the next, as the phantasms of the night, to the conceit of the day. There is an equal delusion in both.\(^3\)

A few pages later Browne again comments:

Let us call to assize the loves of our parents, the affections of our wives and children, and they are all dumb shews and dreams, without reality, truth, or constancy.\(^4\)

Pascal, who was also familiar with Montaigne and with Descartes, presents the dream argument of the Pyrrhonists and the refutation offered by the Dogmatists. The Pyrrhonistic dream-argument is first given:

\(^1\)Moby-Dick, I, chap. 1, 4.
\(^2\)Browne, II, 60.
\(^3\)Ibid., 111.
\(^4\)Ibid., 116.
A man has no assurance whether he sleeps or wakes; seeing that in his sleep he does not the less firmly believe that he is awake, than when he really is so. He sees spaces, figures, movements; he is sensible of the lapse of time; he measures it; he acts, in short, as if he were awake. So that as one half of life is admitted by us to be passed in sleep, in which, however it may appear otherwise, we have no perception of truth, and all our feelings are delusions; who knows but the other half of life, in which we think we are awake, is a sleep also, but in some respects different from the other, and from which we wake, when we, as we call it, sleep. As a man dreams often that he is dreaming, crowding one dreamy delusion on another.1

Pascal next gives the Dogmatists' refutation:

The only strong point of the Dogmatists is, that we cannot, consistently with honesty and sincerity, doubt our own intuitive principles. We know the truth, they say, not only by reasoning, but by feeling, and by a quick and luminous power of direct comprehension; and it is by this last faculty that we discern first principles. It is in vain for reasoning, which has no share in discovering these principles, to attempt subverting them. The Pyrrhonists who attempt this, must try in vain. However unable we may be by reasoning to prove the fact, yet we know that we do not dream. And this inability may prove the feebleness of our reason, but not as they pretend, the want of reality and substance in the subjects of our knowledge.2

Pascal, however, commits himself wholly to neither view and asks simply: "Who shall clear up this perplexity?"3

Bayle declares: "I therefore have not any good proof of the existence of bodies."4 Kant, on the other hand, clearly attempts to distinguish his idealism from so-called Empirical Idealism, which, in effect, maintains that the existence of extended beings is no more true than the existence of dreams:

It would be doing us an injustice, if it were wished to attribute to us the Empirical Idealism fallen into discredit long ago, which, whilst

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1Pascal, 1835 ed., p. 529.
2Ibid.
3Ibid.
4Bayle, 1734-1741 ed., VIII, 596.
it admits the proper reality of space, denies, or at least considers therein as doubtful, the existence of extended beings, and allows between dreaming and truth in this point, of no sufficiently demonstrable difference.  

Kant continues:

Our transcendental Idealism on the contrary admits, that the objects of external intuition are also really just so as they are envisaged in space, and all changes in time such as the internal sense represents them.

Kant's assertion is, however, as many philosophers have hastened to point out, a reasonable assumption rather than a proven conclusion.

The American dream


When Carpenter lists his "four answers to the problem of this dream," the four separate attitudes all concern the possibility of a perfect democracy. Carpenter designates that there are those who respond to the "dream" in a negative way—seeing a perfect democracy as nonrealizable, and this includes Melville, but the discussion of democracy proceeds on the level of a "way" of existence rather than of existence itself. It is at this deeper, more radical level that Melville's search carries him, and in this substratum of inquiry, the phrase "The American Dream" begins to assume darkly ironic

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1 Kant, p. 344.
2 Ibid., pp. 344-345.
4 Ibid., p. 7.
signification.

Richard P. Adams has titled one of his periodical articles "American Renaissance: An Epistemological Problem": 1 Professor Adams accordingly confines his remarks to the outstanding writers of the period known as the "American Renaissance"—to Emerson, Poe, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman. The epistemological problem and its accompanying ontological problem is, however, concomitant with American belles-lettres. Lulu Rumsey Wiley says of our early American novelist Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810) that "he was essentially a philosopher"; 2 he learned French so that he might study French sources, and he "had read and assimilated so much of European philosophy . . . that unconsciously he garnered from that material without once reflecting that it was not originally his own." 3 An early biographer of Brown, William Dunlap, noted his tendency toward scepticism:

Ever fond of analysis, Charles, even in very early life, would take no opinion upon trust. He found in his own mind abundant reason to reject many of the received opinions of mankind, and to doubt the reality of many facts upon which those opinions are founded. Much of his reading at this time tended to bewilder rather than enlighten and to confirm his predisposition to scepticism. 4

On a number of issues, Professor David Lee Clark writes of Brown, "he reflects the skepticism of David Hume and other eighteenth-century English and French

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3 Ibid., p. 113.

Brown's novels are marked by a sense of uncertainty, mystery, and secrecy. Fraud and deception occur frequently. On the first page of the first chapter of *Arthur Mervyn*, Dr. Stevens sees Arthur for the first time and remarks: "My sight was imperfectly assisted by a far-off lamp"—a vague medium of perception, the questionable situation, the difficulty of knowing is immediately established. There is a prevalence of the interrogative form throughout Brown's novels; an early question, "What should I infer from this incident?", is indicative of the mood of the book. The structure of Brown's novels approaches a dream form, particularly in the case of *Edgar Huntly; or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*. The novel is replete with sleepwalking, gothic nightmarish qualities, descriptions of a darkness that produces an obscurity and uncertainty that is underscored in the characters' speeches. Many important scenes occur at night, and characters appear and disappear as in a dream. Brown's world, too, is problematic.

In his perceptively edited organic anthology, *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Stephen E. Wicher states that Emerson "made his own final


3 Ibid., I, 34.

4 For observations on *Edgar Huntly*, I am indebted to Mr. Phillip Northman and to Dr. Harrison Hayford for whom Mr. Northman prepared his paper on the novel.
This rejection, however, was directed against a complete acceptance rather than a partial consideration, for, as Whicher explains, Emerson had to work to "rescue his old hope from his new skepticism"; the naive optimism of Nature was gone—he came to assume the enigmatic nature of the world, and "to marry faith and skepticism... [became] his settled aim as an author." Whicher reasons that it is the resulting shock of opposites that makes "Experience" probably Emerson's strongest essay. The skeptical element of the essay is evident; in the poem which prefaces it, and in the essay itself, "Dream" or illusion is one of the "lords of life." In the essay Emerson writes: "Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion."

The dream and nightmare quality found in Brown's early novels also found its way into the works of Poe and Hawthorne (Hawthorne will be briefly considered in conjunction with Melville). W. H. Auden, in the "Introduction" to his edition of Selected Prose and Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, observes that Poe's characters somehow live outside our normal concepts of space and time, and, in what Auden calls stories of pure adventure such as Gordon Pym (though his designation of such a story as "pure adventure" is questionable), he finds that the "hero is as purely passive as the I in dreams." Also

2Ibid.
3Emerson, Works, III, 43.
4Ibid., 50.
noticeable in some of Poe's stories is a "vagueness of description" that brings a sense of illusion. Poe makes an overt statement of the ontological dream problem in his poem "A Dream Within A Dream":

You are not wrong, who deem
That my days have been a dream;
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.

Poe's categorical assertion is, however, changed to a sceptical query at the end of the poem:

Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?

In 1916, a quarter of a century after Melville's death (1891), Mark Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger" was posthumously published in Harper's Magazine (May-November, 1916). The stranger, Satan, goes by the name of Philip Traum, i.e., Dream. The Twain scholar Walter Blair has pointed out that the story was never really finished and that "one cannot know how Twain might have managed revisions--always important in his writing." Nevertheless, the fact that Twain wrote the particular type of ending he did at all is significant. In the final chapter, Traum and the narrator, Theodor Fischer, meet for the last time. Traum announces:

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1 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
5 A. B. Paine, Twain's literary executor, found the final chapter
Life itself is only a vision, a dream.

Nothing exists; all is a dream. God—man—the world—the sun, the moon, the wilderness of stars—a dream, all a dream; they have no existence.  

Although Traum's final explanation is lengthy, it has been elected to cite the major part of it here because of its relevance to the line of thought and questioning that characterizes much of Melville's work:

Strange! that you should not have suspected years ago—centuries ago, eons, ago!—for you have existed, companionless, through all the eternities. Strange, indeed, that you should not have suspected that your universe and its contents were only dreams, visions, fiction! Strange, because they are so frankly and hysterically insane—like all dreams: a God who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one; who made them prize their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave his angels eternal happiness unearned, yet required his other children to earn it; who gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body; who mouths justice and invented hell—mouths mercy and invented hell—mouths Golden Rules, and forgiveness multiplied by seventy times seven, and invented hell; who mouths morals to other people and has none himself; who frowns upon crimes, yet commits them all; who created man without invitation, then tries to shuffle the responsibility for man's acts upon man, instead of honorably placing it where it belongs, upon himself; and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites this poor, abused slave to worship him!...

You perceive, now, that these things are all impossible except in a dream. You perceive that they are pure and puerile insanities, the silly creations of an imagination that is not conscious of its freaks—in a word, that they are a dream, and you the maker of it. The dream-marks are all present; you should have recognized them earlier.

It is true, that which I have revealed to you; there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream—a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but you. And you are but a thought—a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!  

separated from the others and added it (Ibid.).

1Ibid., p. 387.

2Ibid., p. 388. The ellipsis marks at the end of the first quoted paragraph are present in the text.
The final sentence is Fischer's concluding remark: "He vanished, and left me appalled; for I knew, and realized, that all he had said was true."¹

Not only was the ontological problem in American literature concomitant and immediately peripheral with Melville's writing, but it has continued with ever broadening scope into our contemporary era: in a 1955 postscript to a later edition of On Native Grounds, first published in 1942, author Alfred Kazin announces that alienation is dead: "The tension between writer and outside world has vanished because the contemporary writer no longer believes in an objective reality outside himself."²

Melville and a dream reality

The lack of a stable, universal criterion and the consequent state of nondirectional drifting, the inability to penetrate elusive and shifting appearances to grasp a core of reality, the impossibility of proving, without doubt, the actual existence of an external world, the possibility of deception even in the final court of appeals, all lead to the fear that appearance, perhaps, is all there is and life and reality are merely an illusion and dream. The idea is incipient in Mardi, where Babbalanja, true to form, is rhapsodizing:

Says old Bardianna, "Did I not so often feel an appetite for my yams, I should think everything a dream";—so puzzling to him seemed the things of this Mardi. But Alla-Malolla goes further. Says he, "Let us club together, fellow-riddles: . . . we are air, wind, breath, bubbles; our being is told in a tick."³

¹Ibid.


³Mardi, II, chap. xxxix, 160-161.
In *Redburn*, Melville mentions a dream-like fascination caused by shifting ambiances of reality,

a certain wonderful rising and falling of the sea; I do not mean the waves themselves, but a sort of wide heaving and swelling and sinking all over the ocean. . . .

I felt as if in a dream all the time. \(^1\)

By the time of *Moby-Dick*, the passing and concluding observation of the passage from *Redburn* becomes integral to the over-all structure of the novel. Melville did some of his most serious reading in sceptic sources prior to and during his composition of *Moby-Dick* as allusions in the novel from sections of Montaigne, particularly the "Apology," and from Browne and Bayle show. Further, Melville's reading of and meetings with Hawthorne seem to have deeply influenced the crystallization of his own sceptical form, including the corollary dream form. Melville saw Hawthorne as a sceptic in the best sense of the word: in his review of *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Melville cites the passage from "The Intelligence Office" ending with the bit of dialogue, "I seek for Truth,"\(^2\) to which he prefaxes:

I submit it, then, to those best acquainted with the man personally, whether the following is not Nathaniel Hawthorne; and to himself, whether something involved in it does not express the temper of his mind—that lasting temper of all true, candid men—a seeker, not a finder yet.\(^3\)

The observation is reminiscent of the note, already cited, in Melville's copy of Montaigne where the dogmatists, those who claim to have found truth, are

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\(^1\) *Redburn*, chap. xiii, p. 81.


\(^3\) *The Literary World*, VII (August 24, 1850), 146.
distinguished from the sceptics, those who are still seeking it.  

Melville's first reaction to his reading of Hawthorne's *Mosses* was one of dream-like quality:

The soft ravishments of the man spun me round about in a web of dreams, and when the book was closed, when the spell was over, this wizard "dismissed me with but misty reminiscences, as if I had been dreaming of him." The dream-like texture of Hawthorne's writing is easily seen in the nightmarish quality of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux." Even more to the purpose is "Young Goodman Brown" to which Melville makes explicit and extended reference in his review; Seymour Gross calls attention to the "dream logic" of the story, and Hawthorne himself asks if Goodman Brown had "only dreamed a wild dream"; if so, it was "a dream of evil omen" and a distrustful man did he become "from the night of that fearful dream." Whatever the combination of influences, by the time of *Moby-Dick*, a dream tissue envelops and impregnates the novel.

Although, in his discussion of *Moby-Dick* as a work of art, Mr. Bezanson does not relate the dream texture of the work to Melville's philosophic structure, his discerning comments on the dream form of the novel are particularly relevant and summary to the present ontological problem. Mr. Bezanson writes:

1Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 231, n. 1.

2The Literary World, VII (August 17, 1850), 125.


4Hawthorne, Pt. I, p. 83.
Ishmael's predilection for keying his narrative in the symbolic mode suggests another aspect of structure. Moby-Dick lies close to the world of dreams. We find the narrator recalling at length a remembered dream of his childhood. Stubb attempts a long dream-analysis to Flask after he has been kicked by Ahab. It is not strange, then, that young Ishmael's moment of greatest crisis, the night of the tryworks when he is at the helm, should be of a traumatic order. More subtly, numerous incidents of the narrative are bathed in a dream aura: the trancelike idyll of young Ishmael at the masthead, the hallucinatory vision of the spirit spout, the incredible appearance on board of the devil himself accompanied by "five dusky phantoms," and many others. The narrator's whole effort to communicate the timeless, spaceless concept of "The Whiteness of the Whale" is an act of dream analysis. "Whether it was a reality or a dream, I never could entirely settle," says the narrator of his childhood dream; and so it was with much of what occurred aboard the Pequod. Ishmael's tale is to be listened to in terms of a tradition that runs from Revelation to Finnegans Wake. Dream sense is an important mood in Moby-Dick; and dream form, to the extent there is such a verbal form, is an incipient structural device of the book. At regular intervals the narrator, in his intense effort to explain himself, resorts to a brief passage in which there is a flashing concentration of symbols that hold for a moment and then disappear. It is a night device for rendering day-experience, and in Moby-Dick it happens again and again.¹

In an important sense, however, the dream form of Melville's novels differs from that of the book of Revelation in which the insight is so great, so inexpressible in any ordinary context, that only a vision or dream-setting can divorce it from ordinary reality and begin to approximate its sublimity and intensity: for Melville, the dream is not a means of conveying an illuminating perception of a greater reality but a designation for the bewildering, unsequential, "ungraspable phantom of life," for an absence of insight and knowledge about reality that leaves its very existence problematic. The dream structure that Professor Bezanson finds so pervasive in Moby-Dick may likewise be found in equal force in Clare with its many references to and situations involving dreams and sleep.

The erasure of the line between dream and reality occurs in Pierre's assertion: "It is all a dream—we dream that we dreamed we dream"¹—there will be occasion to elaborate on this statement in the following chapter on ethics. Dream and reality merge into each other and are interchangeable in significance as Pierre has his "remarkable dream" of Enceladus. In his "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," Hume had written of a universe of "hostile" and "insufficient" beings:

The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind Nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children.²

Melville compares his "American Enceladus" with Balthazar Marsy's Bassin d'Encelade with its sculptured leaden Titan and remarks in a similar vein as Hume:

Marsy gave arms to the eternally defenseless; but Nature, more truthful, performed an amputation, and left the impotent Titan without one serviceable ball-and-socket above the thigh.³

When the "phantom" faces him, Pierre no longer sees Enceladus, but on the Titan's armless trunk Pierre sees "his own duplicate face and features," and all the dream horror is his actual grief.⁴ The fact that reality might be no more than illusion or dream does not mean that man is less vulnerable to it or suffers less; he may but know the highest suffering of seeing all other suffering as purposeless. Among Melville's miscellaneous poems appears a short verse entitled simply "To---------"; in it, Melville witnesses to the

¹Pierre, Bk. XIX, chap. ii, p. 382.
²Hume, II, 526.
³Pierre, Bk. XXV, chap. iv, p. 482.
⁴Ibid.
impact of a dream reality:

Ah, wherefore, lonely, to and fro
Flittest like the shades that go
Pale wandering by the weedy stream?
We, like they, are but a dream:
Then dreams, and less, our miseries be;
Yea, fear and sorrow, pain, despair
Are but phantoms. But what plea
Avails here? phantoms having power
To make the heart quake and the spirit cower.\(^1\)

It is, in fact, the painful and unreasonable aspect of "reality" that often argues for its nightmarish, dream quality. In "The Encantadas" Hunilla, seated on a high cliff, watches her husband and brother die, "when dashed by broad-chested swells between their broken logs and the sharp teeth of the reef, both adventurers perished before Hunilla's eyes,"\(^2\) and the unexpected and uncontrollable horror of the scene becomes dream-like:

And there, the invisible painter painted to her view the wave-tossed and disjointed raft, its once level logs slantingly upheaved, as raking masts, and the four struggling arms indistinguishable among them; and then all subsided into smooth-flowing creamy waters, slowly drifting the splintered wreck; while first and last, no sound of any sort was heard. Death in a silent picture; a dream of the eye; such vanishing shapes as the mirage shows.\(^3\)

Chapter xvi of The Confidence-Man begins:

The sky slides into blue, the bluffs into bloom; the rapid Mississippi expands; runs sparkling and gurgling, all over in eddies; one magnified wake of a seventy-four. The sun comes out, a golden hussar, from his tent, flashing his helm on the world. All things warmed in the landscape, leap. Speeds the daedal boat as a dream.\(^4\)

\(^1\)Collected Poems, p. 392.

\(^2\)The Piazza Tales, p. 223.

\(^3\)Ibid., pp. 223-224.

\(^4\)The Confidence-Man, chap. xvi, p. 100.
This passage has been called "idyllic"\(^1\) and praised for its poetic quality;\(^2\) the style, however, is appropriately deceptive. The world is a shifty, unsubstantial, bluff of a one: the "sky slides into blue, the bluffs into bloom [double entendre]." The river runs "all over in eddies" or small whirlpools and seems to be lacking a main current of direction and suggests man's similar plight; it is "one magnified wake of a seventy-four"--a "seventy-four" is a type of warship and suggests Melville's view of a world in constant warfare. The sun is probably a god image (a symbol used frequently in Scripture and used in this sense at the beginning of The Confidence-Man)--a god in warrior's garb and suggestive of a state of warfare with earth. Melville's microcosmic world, his ship, is a "daedal" boat; again, as many times elsewhere in the novel, the term may be used with a double entendre: "daedal" may mean "variegated," but also a "cunningly" formed boat speeding "as a dream"--the elusiveness and illusiveness of reality.

In Clarel, in the midst of Bacchic carousings at Mar Saba, during which a number of participants openly violate or mock precepts of their respective creeds, a pensive Clarel stands by a lattice overlooking the Kedron gulf:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{With what sweep} \\
\text{Doubt plunges, and from maw to maw;} \\
\text{Traditions none the nations keep--} \\
\text{Old ties dissolve in one wide thaw;}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^1\)John D. Seelye, "Timothy Flint's 'Wicked River' and The Confidence-Man," PMLA, LXXVIII (March, 1963), 77.

\(^2\)Elizabeth Foster writes: "The herb-doctor is ushered onto the stage by an extraordinary description of natural scenery, extraordinary for its heightened poetic tone and lushness of poetic ornament unmatched anywhere else in this novel" (Hendricks House The Confidence-Man, p. lx).
The Frank, the Turk, and e'en the Jew
Share it; perchance the Brahmin too.

Deeply impressed by Nehemiah's recent death and jarred by the contrasting boisterous scene he asks:

Are these the pilgrims late that heard
The wheeling desert vultures scream
Above the Man and Book interred[?]

The whole bizarre incongruity of the human scene, the apparent lack of all rational sequence, leads him to ask:

Is life indeed a dream?\(^1\)

A few cantos later the significantly named Wandering Jew asks in his perplexity: "Is all but dream?"\(^2\) Melville persisted in this query until the time of his death; in his last work, Melville has Billy Budd ask:

But aren't it all sham?
. . . it is dreaming that I am.\(^3\)

Melville's epistemological quandary brings him to question not only the nature of existents but existence itself.

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\(^1\) *Clarel*, Pt. III, canto xiv, ll. 103-121.


\(^3\) *Billy Budd*, ed. Hayford-Sealts, leaf 349, p. [132].
CHAPTER V

THE ETHICAL PROBLEM

"How can one sin in a dream?"

Pierre.

Ethics and the epistemological view

Montaigne conjectures that because of the lack of certainty, man has no fixed rule for morals. Prior to Montaigne and the renaissance, general traditional views saw divine law as eternal, immutable, and good: as divine law became manifest to man through his reason, a natural endowment, it became known as natural law, and this was man's general criterion of ethics as well as a basis for law; when natural reason acted to reach a particular practical judgment about personal duty, this judgment became conscience—conscience was not considered as a separate faculty but as an act of the faculty of intellect as reason. Montaigne, again, reacts against this traditional view: "The laws of conscience, which we pretend to be derived from nature, proceed from custom."¹

Pascal writes poignantly of the lack of a criterion, a "fixed point":

The licentious tell men of orderly lives that they stray from nature's path, while they themselves follow it; as people in a ship think those move who are on the shore. On all sides the language is similar. We must have a fixed point in order to judge. The harbour decides for those who are in a ship; but where shall we find a harbour in morality.?²

¹Montaigne, Bk. I, chap. xxii, p. 44.

²Pensées, 383.
Pascal suggests that perspective determines a fixed point of measurement in a painting and then asks: "But who shall determine it in truth and morality?" Hume, too, rejects a morality based on natural law and decides instead that "the experienced train of events is the great standard by which we all regulate our conduct."

In Melville's works, a principal example of the fatal realization of the lack of a moral criterion occurs in the character Pierre, who, in his enthusiasm, prays: "May I, in all my least shapeful thoughts, still square myself by the inflexible rule of holy right." The tragedy of Pierre is conceived in the very strength of his belief in and enthusiasm for this criterion or standard, this "inflexible rule." Like the "immemorially admitted maxims of men" that "slide and fluctuate, and finally become wholly inverted," Pierre's "inflexible" rule, too, fluctuates and inverts and leads him into the "monstrousest vice." Early in the novel, Pierre crawls under the Terror Stone, emblematic of an indifferent deity, and invokes the Stone to fall on him and crush him if virtue is "unmeaning." Later, Melville has Pierre rephrase the same invocation to the "stony" walls: "If ... the uttermost virtue, after all, prove but a betraying pander to the monstrousest vice,--then close in and crush me, ye stony walls" --in the novel's penultimate

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1 Ibid., 381.
2 Hume, IV, 166.
3 Pierre, Bk. V, chap. vi, p. 150.
4 Ibid., Bk. IX, chap. i, p. 231.
5 Ibid., Bk. XIX, chap. ii, p. 381.
6 Ibid., Bk. VII, chap. v, p. 189.
7 Ibid., Bk. XIX, chap. ii, pp. 380-381.
chapter, Melville's imagery suggests that the stony walls of Pierre's situation have closed in to crush him, for Pierre is seen standing "in a low dungeon of the city prison. The cumbersome stone ceiling almost rested on his brow; so that the long tiers of massive cell-galleries above seemed partly piled on him."  

Ethics and the ontological view

Ethics and ontology are reciprocally interdependent: because of certain psychological factors, a person's view of reality may often depend upon his ethical code—or lack of one; logically, however, the ontological problem, the view of reality, precedes and forms one's ethical perspective of the right and wrong of human action. Emerson, with his transcendental type of idealism exhorts men to "build therefore your own world." Reality becomes comformable to man as ethical agent, as a being possessing the power to will—for the early Emerson, man wills reality:

He can reduce under his will not only particular events but great classes, nay, the whole series of events, and so conform all facts to his character. . . . the world becomes at last only a realized will.  

In such a view, the only "sin" is limitation. For the man who views reality as a strictly monistic materialist there should logically be no ethical question, since man, for him, is amoral. Such a view may be seen in adherents to the materialistic Marxist ideology existing in the Soviet Union today.

1Ibid., Bk. XXVI, chap. vi, p. 502.
2Emerson, Works, I, 76.
3Ibid., 39-40.
4See Emerson's essay "Fate," Works, VI, particularly p. 20: "Fate . . . is known to us as limitation. Whatever limits us we call Fate."
Melville, too, was profoundly influenced in his view of ethics by his more fundamental epistemological and ontological views: from an epistemological standpoint, it may be asked how one conforms to or transgresses against norms and criterions that are not perceptible or that, at best, remain highly questionable and doubtful; viewed against the ontological problem, human actions are inconsequential in a world where there are, perhaps, no criterions, where Being may be Nothing and reality only a dream. Melville succinctly places this problem through the question posed by Pierre: "From nothing proceeds nothing... How can one sin in a dream?" If nihilism is considered as a doctrine which denies any objective ground of moral principles, the nihilistic element of Melville's moral probing becomes evident, since he questions the presence of any objective reality at all. Again, however, Melville offers a question, not a conclusion. If Being is Nothing, then "Virtue and Vice" become but "two shadows cast from one nothing"—so it "seems" to Pierre. The question is again raised in "Timoleon":

What basis then? O, tell at last,
Are earnest natures staggering here
But fatherless shadows from no substance cast?

An indifferent deity

The lack of clear-cut distinctions, more, a suggested ambiguous connection in the question of truth-falsehood, light-darkness, dream-reality, being-

1Pierre, Bk. XIX, chap. 11, p. 382.
2Ibid.
3Ibid.
nothing, goodness-evil, and especially, virtue-vice, led Melville to attack the apparent indifference of the "gods." The insouciance of the gods is suggested in Montaigne's "Apology" in the quotation from Ennius:

I ever thought that gods above there were; But do not think they care what men do here.  

The concept of indifference is openly stated in Hume's "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion": Philo is allotted the final and extended portion of the dialogue, and Hume, who had read Bayle, has him question the Manichean system as a possible explanation for the "strange mixture of good and ill which appears in life." Philo, however, sees no particular combat between a malevolent and benevolent being and finally rejects the Manichean hypothesis. He decides instead: "The true conclusion is, that the original Source of all things is entirely indifferent . . . and has no more regard to good above ill, than to heat above cold." In Book I, chapter iii of Sartor Resartus, which Melville borrowed from Duyckinck in 1850, Carlyle, too, mentions a "god-like indifference."

For man, vested with inefficient faculties, truth becomes undiscernible from falsehood, if, indeed, it is discernible; light appears to be swallowed up in darkness or forms an ambiguous liaison—as in the "dark lightning—

1 Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 238.
2 Hume, II, 526.
3 Ibid., 526-527.
4 Sealts, No. 123.
king; reality gives evidence of being no more than dream, Being Nothing. The quality of indifference does not necessarily contradict earlier Melvillean designations of the deity as malign, even when that malignity is active: one can, in general, be quite indifferent to flies and yet swat or crush one if it is annoying. Again, a not incongruous combination of malignity and indifference may be seen in the parental figure who strikes out at a child fortuitously or unjustly, showing, by the very action, a lack of genuine personal concern and the presence of an underlying indifference—perhaps the final malignity of them all.

In probing the question inadvertently raised by Descartes and many ways rephrased by Bayle—"Is God the Devil?"—Melville sought the utmost example and foundation for the mysterious connection of contradictories, and he shows a special concern for the question of goodness—evil, particularly moral goodness and evil or virtue and vice. In Mardi, there are moral overtones in the mysterious connection of Yillah and Hautia: Yillah is singularly guileless—Taji remarks, "Often I thought that Paradise had overtaken me on earth, and that Yillah was verily an angel, and hence the mysteries that hallowed her"; Hautia, conversely, entices, "Come! let us sin, and be merry." The question of an indifferent deity becomes full-blown in Moby-Dick. Several terms come into play as Melville develops this theme of indifference: again, the wall image is used, particularly a "dead" wall—connoting unresponsiveness on the part of an indifferent deity, effecting, for man, a

1 The Piazza Tales, p. 180.

2 Mardi, I, chap. lxiv, 226.

3 Ibid., II, chap. xc, 395.
lack of communication not simply with participating beings (if such do exist) but with Being Itself. The term "stolidity" is used synonymously: in his personal copy of the poem "The Berg," Melville cancelled the words in the last line, "dead indifference" of walls, and substituted "dense stolidity" of walls.\(^1\) Earlier in the poem, Melville describes the iceberg as "stolid."\(^2\)

A synonym for "stolid" is "impassive," which means "showing indifference" or being "insensible," i.e., bereft of emotion or sensation—the narrator says of the "dead" wall of the Whale's head: "I do not think that any sensation lurks in it."\(^3\) Also connected with the concept of indifference is that of the impersonal; Ahab addresses the "supernal power": "In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here."\(^4\)

The terms "indifferent," "stolidity," and "impersonal" are used to describe the carpenter through whom Melville has Ahab question the nature of the "gods." Melville invests the carpenter with god-like qualities; he is called both a "man-maker"\(^5\) and an "undertaker."\(^6\) Because he is "one day making legs, and the next day coffins to clap them in,"\(^7\) Ahab tells him:

"Thou art as unprincipled as the gods, and as much of a jack-of-all-trades."

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\(^2\) Collected Poems, p. 203.

\(^3\) Moby-Dick, II, chap. lxxvi, 70.

\(^4\) Ibid., chap. cxix, 281.

\(^5\) Ibid., chap. cviii, 237.

\(^6\) Ibid., chap. cxxvii, 308.

\(^7\) Ibid.
"But I do not mean anything, sir. I do as I do."
"The gods again."

Ahab then asks him if he ever sings while working on a coffin, and the carpenter answers, "Oh, I'm indifferent enough, sir, for that." It is said of the carpenter that he "was prepared at all points, and alike indifferent and without respect in all," and he is described by the "indifferent promptitude of his character." Further, for nothing was the carpenter more remarkable than for a certain "impersonal stolidity as it were; impersonal, I say; for it so shaded off into the surrounding infinite of things, that it seemed one with the general stolidity discernible in the whole visible world."

Justice, in simple terms, means to give everyone his due. The presence of injustice, the lack of any discriminative recognition for virtue and vice, made Melville question the indifference of the deity—Melville has Ahab say:

"To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed." And so it is. Starbuck asks, "Is this the end of all my bursting prayers? all my life-long fidelities?", and is killed. Ahab darts his iron and "his far fiercer curse, into the hated whale" and

1 Ibid., 309.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., chap. cvii, 233.
4 Ibid., chap. cx, 248.
5 Ibid., chap. cvii, 234.
6 Ibid., chap. cxix, 281.
7 Ibid., chap. cxxxv, 364.
8 Ibid., 363.
declares, "From hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee," and Ahab is killed. It may be wondered if Melville is pursuing something of the same question in *Billy Budd*, for both the depraved Claggart and innocent Budd are killed and dropped into the sea. In *Moby-Dick*, the narrator describes "the demoniac indifference with which the White Whale tore his hunters, whether sinning or sinned against": here, the not incongruous connection of malignity and indifference is evident in the description of the actively malign actions of the White Whale as "demoniac indifference."

In *Pierre*, the father figure, who shades into a symbol of the deity, is himself responsible for the presence of evil. In the unreasonable world depicted in the novel, whether reality is more than dream or not, for all practical purposes it might as well be only dream. In such a world, ethics become meaningless; there exists no objective ground for moral principles, and the only apparent moral is "that there is no moral."

Pierre's attempted heroic virtue but leads him into vice, and the theme of indifference is again sounded:

We learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by so doing 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.

The narrator in *Pierre* observes: "Eternally inexorable and unconcerned is

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3 Editor Murray's observation in Hendricks House *Pierre*, p. xvi.

4 *Pierre*, Bk. IX, chap. 1, p. 231.
Fate, a mere heartless trader in men's joys and woes,\(^1\) and Pierre, as he hears Isabel's story, remarks: "My heart was only dark with ill-restrained upbraidings against heaven that could unrelentingly see such innocence as thine so suffer."\(^2\) In *Moby-Dick*, Melville writes of the little negro Pip, another instance of suffering innocence, that his insanity is like heaven's wisdom, in which, weal or woe, he feels "indifferent as his God."\(^3\) The primary symbol for the indifferent deity in *Pierre* is stone.

Further, indifference may be a disdainful indifference. As Enceladus, representative man, confronts the "majestic mount," an analogue for divine nature, his "stark naked" and "indignant chest" is exposed to the defilements of the birds (whose significance, in Melville, usually transcends that of mere natural objects\(^4\) to represent heavenly agents or powers), birds "which


\(^3\) *Moby-Dick*, II, chap. xciii, 170.

\(^4\) Melville, however, sees nature, too, as indifferent: in *Mardi* (I, chap. lxix, 244), Babbalanja quotes Bardianna on the fact that "if not against us, nature is not for us"; in *Clarel* (Pt. I, canto xxxvii, 1. 48), Rolfe speaks of "nature with her neutral mind." Melville often describes the indifference of nature after cataclysmic events—the rippest moment for man's eternal "Why?": after the sinking of the Pequod, the "sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (*Moby-Dick*, II, chap. cxxxv, 367); in their edition of *Billy Budd* (pp. 196-198, note for leaf 334), Professors Hayford and Seals offer a protracted, because significant, note on the indifference of nature after Billy's execution.

At a little lower layer, Melville, like Bayle, seems to be obliquely demonstrating that contrary to Christian tradition, which sees nature as ordered, harmonious, and beautiful and then argues a posteriori from effects to cause, from creation to Creator, to posit like positive attributes in the Godhead, it is possible to sceptically tilt the scale and argue a posteriori to far different conclusions because of the existence of evil and indifference in the world. Melville writes of the "indifferent" carpenter that his "im-personal stolidity" shaded off and "seemed one with the general stolidity discernible in the whole visible world" (*Moby-Dick*, II, chap. cvii, 234. Underlining mine).
for untold ages had cast their foulness on his vanquished crest."

In *The Confidence-Man*, the supposition that virtue and vice are "two shadows cast from one nothing" is pushed, with almost Swiftian logic, to its inexorable conclusion. The good (e.g., the young Episcopal clergyman and the charitable lady) and the bad (e.g., the egoistic, greedy Sophomore and stingy old miser) are both duped—all are duped by the devil-god Confidence-Man who regards all with "indifferent eyes." Those seeking a path of virtuous conduct, as the purported husband of Goneril and the honest China Aster, are reduced to nothing; like Pierre, each is simply the "fool of virtue."

The theme of indifference is also sounded in Melville’s short stories and poems. A passage from "The Encantadas" implies an indifferent deity because of the random outcome and inconsequence of man’s efforts:

> But in all things man sows upon the wind, which bloweth just there whither it listeth; for ill or good, man cannot know. Often ill comes from the good, as good from ill."

In his poem "Off Cape Colonna," Melville says of the columns of the Sunium temple:

> Over much like gods! Serene they saw  
> The wolf-waves board the deck,  
> And headlong hull of Falconer,  
> And many a deadlier wreck.

As Hume’s Philo understands it, "the original Source of all things is entirely

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indifferent . . . and has no more regard to good above ill, than to heat above cold."¹

Melville, merit, and the Protestant ethic

Melville was probably helped to his view of an indifferent deity through his animadversions on success and merit. In his book The Organization Man, William H. Whyte, Jr. describes the Protestant ethic as "pursuit of individual salvation through hard work, thrift, and competitive struggle."² The industrious man was the virtuous man; if a man grew rich it was because he deserved to, and "what for centuries had been looked on as the meanest greed, a rising middle class would interpret as the earthly manifestation of God's will."³ The ethic included a good deal of Old Testament mentality according to which the ebb or flux of one's success and prosperity was often held to be indicative of the degree of amity existing, in the particular case, between God and man. "Success was moral as well as practical"⁴—success meant merit.

Melville, too, believed in the ethic of "hard work"—"Toil is man's allotment; toil of brain, or toil of hands, or a grief that's more than either, the grief and sin of idleness"⁵—but long before many young and deserving businessmen at the turn of the century came to the realization that success

¹Hume, II, 526-527.

²(New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 4. Mr. Whyte's use of the term "Protestant," is, of course, a not entirely warranted generalization.

³Ibid., p. 16.

⁴Ibid., p. 15.

⁵Mardi, I, chap. lxiii, 223-224.
did not necessarily mean merit but only the right personal connections. Melville recognized the dichotomy between success and merit. Perhaps because of his training in the tenets of the Dutch Reform Church, Melville was imbued with a Calvinistic, Old Testament-generated belief that merit should be synonymous with success—the fact that it was not Melville seemed to find a part of the general injustice of man's existential plight and but one more clue to the indifference of the gods. The concept of success, just previously described, appears to be, predominantly, one of financial success; Melville, too, would have welcomed financial success—he had written to Hawthorne, "Dollars damn me"—but, for Melville, success meant much more: it meant recognition of good done, sanctions here and now for virtue performed.

In "Timoleon" Melville asks in the tenor of the Protestant ethic: "[Is] God's will avouched in each successful man?" In the poem, Melville has just shown that the "successful man," Timoleon's brother Timophanes, is not the meritorious man but an "egotist." Melville gives a two line résumé of the events of the poem, Timoleon's eclipse and belated glory, and then asks:

Is that high Providence, or Chance?
And proved it which with thee, Timoleon?

Timoleon's choice, seen at the end of the poem, seems to rule out the

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1 *Letters*, p. 128.

2 Melville, personally, wanted recognition, including financial recognition, for what he recognized as his best writing. He wrote to Hawthorne: "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay" (*Ibid*.).

3 *Collected Poems*, p. 209.

4 *Ibid*.

5 *Ibid*.
possibility of "Providence" being avouched in the successful man and leaves, through implication, "Chance" or indifference, for after Corinth condemns Timoleon the city again acclaims him, but on no more sound reasons than that "men's moods" again have changed and the world turns "in fickle ways." The Corinthians assure Timoleon, "Justice in long arrears is thine," and eagerly recall him to Corinth. That Timoleon recognizes the chance-like, fortuitous, and untrustworthy nature of this "Justice" is evinced in the simple assertion of the closing line, since Timoleon, in exile, never for Corinth left the adopted shore.

Melville's tendency to identify Chance with indifference will be considered further in the following section on fate and free will.

Melville's recognition of the division existing between success and merit is evident in *Mardi*. Babbalanja remarks: "Fame is an accident; merit a thing absolute." Later, he again asserts: "Truth and Merit have other symbols than success." Melville was not so completely unrealistic as to deny all merit to the successful man, but he saw that it was not commensurate with success, that it could, in fact, be an insignificant entity in the random formula that culminated in success; he writes of Pierre:

The brightest success, now seemed intolerable to him, since he so plainly saw, that the brightest success could not be the sole offspring of Merit; but of Merit for the one thousandth part, and nine hundred and ninety-nine

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2 *Ibid*.
3 *Ibid*.
combining and dovetailing accidents for the rest.¹

Fate and free will

Although Melville was undoubtedly moved toward his view of fate and free will by his Calvinistic religious background, this predominantly fatalistic view was corroborated by his subsequent philosophical reading. In Rabelais, Melville would have read the description of the loadstones which open the gates to the temple of the holy bottle. Engraven on the loadstone on the right side are the words: "Fate leads the willing, and the unwilling draws." Cut into the left loadstone is: "ALL THINGS TEND TO THEIR END."² Speaking of men's actions, Montaigne says that it is "the gods . . . themselves that put them [men] in the way and mind to do them."³ In the "Apology," Montaigne quotes from Manilius:

One mad in love may cross the raging main,  
To level lofty Ilium with the plain;  
Another's fate inclines him more by far  
To study laws and statutes for the bar.  
Sons kill their fathers, fathers kill their sons,  
And one arm'd brother 'gainst another runs.  
This war's not their's, but fate's, that spurs them on  
To shed the blood which, shed, they must bemoan;  
And I ascribe it to the will of fate  
That on this theme I now expatiate.⁴

Further, Melville's stress on the predominance of fate is a logical corollary to his conception of reality as possible dream or illusion. In the

¹Pierre, Bk. XXV, chap. iii, p. 472.  
²Rabelais, IV, Bk. V, chap. xxxvii, 249.  
³Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 240.  
⁴Ibid., pp. 205-206.
preceding chapter, a line from Auden was quoted concerning the hero who "is
as purely passive as the I in dreams"; this passivity, this sense of being
maneuvered and controlled rather than of being "in control" strengthens the
sense of being fated rather than of being in possession of free will.

In Mardi, Vee-Vee, the little bugler, falls from the shoulders of a
paddler and nearly breaks his arm. Babbalanja reasons:

Minus human inducement from without, and minus volition from within, Vee­
Vee has met with an accident which has almost maimed him for life. . . .
Are not all mortals exposed to similar, nay, worse calamities, ineffably
unavoidable? 

The incident leads to a discussion of fatalism. Babbalanja defines "Fatalism"
as that which "presumes express and irrevocable edicts of heaven concerning
particular events." Babbalanja argues that if events prophesied of nations
have irrevocably come to pass, this fact bespeaks foreordination, and, moving
from the social aggregate to the individual, he likewise argues: "Wherefore
our own future is foreknown and foreordained." The argument continues and
reasons that even as these nations were given previous knowledge of the forth­
coming events and could not forestall them, so neither can man.

Mohi the historian responds to Babbalanja's argument: "This whole
discourse seems to have grown out of the subject of Necessity and Free Will.

Now, when a boy, I recollect hearing a sage say that these things were

1Poe, Selected Prose and Poetry, p. vii.
2Mardi, II, chap. xxxi, 120-121.
3Ibid., 121.
4Ibid., 123.
This remark sparks in Babbalanja the following anecdote of King Normo and his fool, significantly named Willi:

Now, though Willi ever obeyed his lord, by the very instinct of his servitude, he flattered himself that he was free; and this conceit it was that made the fool so entertaining to the king. One day, said Normo to his fool,—"Go, Willi, to yonder tree, and wait there till I come." "Your majesty, I will," said Willi, bowing beneath his jingling bells; "but I presume your majesty has no objections to my walking on my hands:—I am free, I hope." "Perfectly," said Normo, "hands or feet, it's all the same to me; only do my bidding." "I thought as much," said Willi; so, swinging his limber legs into the air, Willi, thumb after thumb, essayed progression. But soon, his bottled blood so rushed downward through his neck, that he was fain to turn a somerset and regain his feet. Said he, "Though I am free to do it, it's not so easy turning digits into toes; I'll walk, by gad! which is my other option." So he went straight forward, and did King Normo's bidding in the natural way.  

It may be that Melville, through Babbalanja's anecdote, is leaving a bare vestige of option working within necessity, but it may also be that, given Melville's persistent emphasis on fate, the passage is to be read as an anecdote supporting the view of necessity and demonstrating that the man who thinks himself free is, like Willi, a fool. To hazard a contradiction, the fact that Willi is, as it were, necessarily forced to choose to proceed in the "natural way," because of the physical contingency of the blood rushing to his head, may point ahead to Babbalanja's considerations on man as being necessitated through the very structure of his nature.  

Mohi's point is not forgotten, however, and Melville continued to question the reconciliation of fate and freedom; even when he does not entirely rule out the possibility of free will, it is seen, if not as effectually


nil, as barely minimal at best and as subservient to and, as it were, playing into the hands of fate or necessity. In chapter xlvii of Moby-Dick, "The Mat-Maker," Melville gives a concise presentation of fate and free will, reconciling them with each other and with indifference in a tour de force on the metaphor of a loom that would be worthy of the metaphysical poets. The presentation is set in a dream atmosphere: at the beginning of the chapter Ishmael describes the strange "dreaminess" that reigns "all over the ship and all over the sea."¹ A minimal freedom is seen working within necessity. In the weaving of the mat on the "Loom of Time," the "unalterable," "straight," "fixed threads of the warp"² represent fate or necessity. Ishmael, in an action representing free will, weaves in the woof, but only as the "unchanging" vibration of the warp admits these threads to interblend.³ On an actual loom, a movable bar, called a batten, strikes home the threads of a woof, i.e., slides them snuggly into place. Melville's batten is Queequeg's oaken sword, which "drove home every yarn."⁴ Idly looking off, Queequeg, with his "impulsive," "indifferent" sword, plays god "carelessly and unthinkingly" hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly.⁵ This indifferent sword "finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof"⁶—both fate and free will. It is further maintained that the "indifferent sword must be

¹Moby-Dick, I, chap. xlvii, 269.
²Ibid., 269-270.
³Ibid., 269.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid., 269-270.
⁶Ibid., 270.
Melville offers a concluding summary:

The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course --its very 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 turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events.

Ishmael asserts: "Ay, chance, free will, and necessity--no wise incompatible --all interweavingly working together." Melville concludes, however, by giving even greater precedence to Fate in the heavily fated tragedy of Moby-Dick: the "ball of free will" drops from Ishmael's hand, and, as he describes the Indian Tashtego standing aloft in the cross-trees and crying out for whales, his terms recall Babbalanja's discussion of "prophets," "seers," and "Fatalism" in Mardi: "You would have thought him some prophet or seer beholding the shadows of Fate, and by those wild cries announcing their coming."

The idea of free will working within or playing into the hands of fate,

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1Ibid. Melville's thought approximates Hume's: "A perfect and total indifference is essential to chance" (Hume, I, 171). Melville's alignment of indifference with chance is suggested in "Timoleon," cited, in part, in the preceding section. Timoleon addresses his "quarrel" to the gods and, in language that is reminiscent of the stone imagery of Pierre, challenges them on their indifference:

Your marbles in the temple stand--
Yourselves as stony and invoked in vain?
(Collected Poems, p. 214).

To the question of Providence or Chance presiding in the events of Timoleon's life, the terms of the poem tend to lean heavily toward Chance.

2Ibid.

3Ibid.

4Ibid.

weaving and "interblending" with the "given threads" of necessity,\(^1\) seems, in a certain sense, exemplified in the person of Ahab. Ahab's purpose to dismember his dismemberer is, finally, unsuccessful, but his attempt to assail Moby Dick is a will act: "I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do!"\(^2\) Yet, even as he pursues his own "determinate, unsurrenderable wilfulness,"\(^3\) he is fulfilling the part of "the Fates' lieutenant."\(^4\) It may be argued that Melville is showing that, in the end, the whole business just resolves to fatalism anyway. But there is evidence that something more complex is occurring. Melville may be endeavoring to reconcile two disparate views, both of which he needs in the epic struggle of Moby-Dick. Like Shakespeare's use, in Othello, of two different time sequences, which, though inconsistent with each other, add to the effectiveness of the drama, so, too, does Melville, consciously or unconsciously, seem to allow two inconsistent views, one of fate and one of free will, which add to the dramatic tension and impact of the novel: first, Ahab's "quarrel with God" (to borrow Thompson's phrase) largely owes to the fact that God or "Fate is the handspike" which turns man around in this world;\(^5\) Ahab reasons that it is God who does the "thinking" and "living" in him, like a "cozening, . . . cruel, remorseless emperor" making him do what he would not dare do in his "own proper, natural heart."\(^6\) On the other hand, Ahab is free

\(^1\)Ibid., 269-270.
\(^2\)Ibid., chap. xxxvii, 210.
\(^3\)Ibid., chap. xxviii, 154.
\(^4\)Ibid., II, chap. cxxxiv, 352.
\(^5\)Ibid., chap. cxxxii, 330.
\(^6\)Ibid.
to fight. A robust element of free will seems to be present in the "defiance" exhibited by both Ahab and Pierre: both possess an "unsurrenderable wilfulness." The impression comes through that Ahab is destroyed but not conquered, Pierre crushed but unyielding. Ahab, like the great burnt pine mentioned in Clarel, remains "Gigantic—killed, not overthrown." Even after Ahab declares that all is "immutably decreed" and he is the "Fates' lieutenant," he announces to the crew that it is "Ahab's hawser [that] tows his purpose yet." Melville uses the concept of fate to offer a motive of defiance, and the concept of freedom for the quality of defiance, a freedom that allows the old man to remain, in spirit, the indomitable hero that he is.

In Pierre, fate and free will are no longer spoken of as interblending or weaving together, but as of being in debate. It is said that Pierre was not arguing Fixed Fate and Free Will; rather, "Fixed Fate and Free Will were arguing him, and Fixed Fate got the better in the debate." Some inconsistency remains, however, for even as Pierre becomes the "fool of Fate," he remains "immovable" and wilfully defiant.

In Clarel, it is, again, the predominance of fate that is stressed in Rolfe's story of a mariner, the master of a ship, whose night-watch conversation...

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3 Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxxxiv, 352.
5 Ibid., Bk. XXVI, chap. iv, p. 499.
6 Ibid., chap. vi, p. 502.
with a subaltern are described:

The master ever spurned at fate,
Calvin's or Zeno's. Always still
Man-like he stood by man's free will
And power to effect each thing he would,
Did reason but pronounce it good.
The subaltern held in humble way
That still heaven's overrulings sway
Will and event.  

When the master is the sole survivor from an ensuing wreck, he declares, "I willed it." But on his next venture "a whale / Of purpose aiming, stove the bow." After this event, reminiscent of the action of Moby Dick, the mariner is a marked man: Jonah-like, he is thought to be ill-omened and cannot secure a place on another ship. He becomes a night patrolman on the quay, works in every kind of weather and is grateful for a crust. No longer "Man-like," he meekly puts his trust in Calvin's deterministic creed: the mariner

Praised heaven, and said that God was good,
And his calamity but just.  

Ironically, Melville's point is that it is unjust; he resents the fact that man must feel compelled to recognize the preponderance of fate and that "God" will not allow the new American religion of individualism—of an actively willed self-reliance spiritually subsidized by the deity.

Melville seriously considered the question of man's being fated in and by his individual nature, his particular metaphysical make-up. In Mardi,

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1 Clarel, Pt. I, canto xxxvii, 11. 30-37.
2 Ibid., 1. 74.
3 Ibid., 11. 83-84.
4 Ibid., 11. 104-105.
Babbalanja declares that men "are governed by their very natures" and are saints or sinners according as they are "constitutionally" constructed.\(^1\)

Professors Hayford and Sealts have treated this question in the "Notes & Commentary" section of their edition of *Billy Budd* and have brought together the following examples.\(^2\) In addition to the above example from *Mardi*, which Hayford and Sealts also include, they mention, from *White Jacket*, the ship Neversink's master-at-arms, Bland, who is by nature "an organic and irreclaimable scoundrel";\(^3\) in his copy of Arnold's *Essays in Criticism* Melville wrote that men are "influenced . . . by the very fibre of the flesh, & chalk of the bones. We are what we are made";\(^4\) Mortmain, in *Clarel*, considers whether human wickedness may lie

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nearer the core than man can go} \\
\text{Or Science get—nearer the slime} \\
\text{Of nature's rudiments and lime} \\
\text{In chyle before the bone. Thee, thee,} \\
\text{In thee the filmy cell is spun—} \\
\text{The mould thou art of what men be:} \\
\text{Events are all in thee begun—} \\
\text{By thee, through thee!} \(^5\)
\end{align*}
\]

Claggart, in *Billy Budd*, is said to be possessed of "an evil nature . . . born with him and innate, in short 'a depravity according to nature.'"\(^6\) In such a view as the foregoing, if strictly adhered to, moral accountability, sin,

\[^1\text{Mardi, II, chap. xxxix, 156.}\]
\[^2\text{Billy Budd, ed. Hayford-Sealts, pp. [162-163], note for leaf 130.}\]
\[^3\text{White Jacket, chap. xliiv, p. 234.}\]
\[^4\text{Sealts, No. 17.}\]
\[^5\text{Clarel, Pt. II, canto xxxvi, 11. 96-103.}\]
\[^6\text{Billy Budd, ed. Hayford-Sealts, p. [76], leaf 134.}\]
virtue and vice, and consequent retributive justice become, in effect, meaningless, although antecedent Justice may come under serious attack.

Melville and the sense of sin

Melville's attitude toward sin in the sense of a culpable wrong action against right reason (and ultimately against God, whose divine law is manifested through right reason), not just as wrong action performed unwittingly, is particularly difficult of precise definition. The question turns partly on Melville's view of free will, since, for a man to be culpable or guilty of sin, he must possess a power rendering him responsible for the sinful action. Inversely, a sense of personal responsibility might point to a concept of free will. It may be objected that free will, as Melville sees it, is so negligible as to be effectually non-existent—even as it plays into the plans, or weaves into the warp, of fate. Melville's notion of merit, however, would seem to be incompatible with a rigid view of fate in which man, pawn-like, would not be capable of individually earned merit: this may be an incompatibility, however, which simply exists, reasonable or not.

There is limited and questionable evidence of a possible sense of sin. In Mardi, Taji kills Aleema, Yillah's priest-custodian. Early descriptions of the act extenuate the element of guilt: Taji does not realize what he is doing—"Ere I knew it, my cutlass made a quick lunge," and neither are his

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1 This concept of sin is, again, the traditional, Christian one: divine law manifested through right reason is natural law; therefore, to act contrary to right reason is to act contrary to natural law and the divine law which it manifests. As evidenced in Montaigne, the sceptic challenges the notion of "right reason" and natural law.

2 Mardi, I, chap. xli, 154.
motives clearly defined:

Remorse smote me hard; and like lightning I asked myself, whether the death-deed I had done was sprung of a virtuous motive, the rescuing a captive from thrall; or whether beneath that pretence, I had engaged in this fatal affray for some other, and selfish purpose; the companionship of a beautiful maid.¹

Later, however, a sense of wrong is evident. Taji says of his soul:

At bottom guilt brooded. Sifted out, my motives to this enterprise justified not the mad deed, which, in a moment of rage, I had done: though, those motives had been covered with a gracious pretence; concealing myself from myself. But I beat down the thought.²

In the end, the matter is left with a question mark; Taji asks, as he contemplates the stars: "But how your mild effulgence stings the boding heart. Am I a murderer, stars?"³ Possible culpability is, however, lessened even more when, later in the novel, Babbalanja challenges the presence of responsibility in the fated man.⁴

There is a sense of sin in Pierre's observation that "his father must have become insane from a sin-grief irreparable."⁵ The quotation, again, offers only tenuous evidence, since the "father" image in Pierre merges into that of the deity, and the epithet of "insane" may not be completely implausible as applied to the deity, since Melville questioned the source of an unreasonable world.

In Clarel, it is Mortmain who considers that events are begun in the

¹Ibid., chap. xlii, 157.
²Ibid., chap. xliv, 162.
³Ibid., chap. lviii, 208.
⁴Ibid., II, chap. xxxi, 124.
⁵Pierre, Bk. XXI, chap. ii, p. 400.
very "mould" of man, but it is also Mortmain who questions the "sins refined" of the malefactors who brought down destruction upon the cities of the plain. He follows the traditional view, exemplified in Dante's Inferno, that sins of the spirit are more deadly than sins of the flesh. The ghosts of the malefactors seem to be crying out, "Conjuring yet to spare, but spare!" Mortmain's answering reflections are accusatory, seemingly denoting responsibility:

Fie, fie, that didst in formal will
Plot piously the posthumous snare.

Melville's use of "formal" in the above quotation is questionable: if Melville means, by "formal," that an action is done according to the nature of the inner form or essence of a thing, it may be wondered if he has in mind a sort of fatalism by the metaphysical make-up of a person's inner nature, a point discussed in the preceding section. The accusatorial tone of the passage, however, seems incongruous with such a view. There is a possibility that Melville used "formal" in the sense of "done in due form, ceremonial," i.e., an action done as something carefully planned and voluntarily performed with deliberation: the ghosts are said to have plotted their own posthumous snare.

Two spirits debate over Mortmain's deliberations. The first spirit asks:

Be it far from me to impute a sin,
But may a sinless nature win
Those deeps he knows?

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1 Clarel, Pt. II, canto xxxvi, l. 101.

2 Melville owned Dante's work—see Sealts, No. 174.

3 Clarel, Pt. II, canto xxxvi, l. 58.

4 Ibid., Il. 59-60.

5 Ibid., Il. 121-123.
The second spirit demurs:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sin shuns that way;} \\
\text{Sin acts the sin, but flees the thought} \\
\text{That sweeps the abyss that sin has wrought.}
\end{align*}
\]

Mortmain's heart is declared to be innocent and true.\(^1\) The necessity for the sinner to "flee the thought" points back to the guilt-ridden Taji's admission: "But I beat down the thought."

The sense of sin in Melville's works is, however, more often blended with his sense of fatalism and necessity. Melville, reinforced by his readings in scepticism, is apparently reacting against the seeming inanity of the Calvinist paradox in which God ordains man's nature, state, and actions, but in which, nevertheless, man is held responsible for God's fortuity. Speaking of men's actions, Montaigne says that it is "the gods . . . themselves that put them [men] in the way and mind to do them."\(^3\) By making God the author of sin, He becomes guilty of the sin: this thought is many ways rephrased in Bayle, who uses it to argue, at least ostensibly, for two principles, one good and one evil. Hume's argument for necessity is as follows:

The ultimate Author of all our volitions is the Creator of the world, who first bestowed motion on this immense machine, and placed all beings in that particular position, whence every subsequent event, by an inevitable necessity, must result.\(^4\)

Hume continues from this hypothesis to question the nature of the "ultimate Author" and the source of moral evil:

\(^1\)Ibid., I. 123-125.

\(^2\)Ibid., I. 126.

\(^3\)Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 240.

\(^4\)Hume, IV, 116.
Human actions, therefore, either can have no moral turpitude at all, as proceeding from so good a cause; or if they have any turpitude, they must involve our Creator in the same guilt, while he is acknowledged to be their ultimate cause and author.\(^1\)

Because of his greater tendency toward a fatalistic view, Melville, too, was inclined to impute guilt where, in such a view, it ultimately resides. Melville had fairly well formed the core of his argument in *Mardi*. After arguing, with an eye on Old Testament history, that prophecies made about certain nations have come to pass, he has Babbalanja reason: "Now, if things foreordained concerning nations have in times past been revealed to them previous to their taking place, then something similar may be presumable concerning individual men now living."\(^2\) Babbalanja asks if a foreordained event, namely suicide, in some way supernaturally revealed to him could by any means be avoided and concludes:

If not possible, then that suicide would not be mine, but Oro's [God's]. And, by consequence, not only that act, but all my acts, are Oro's. In sum, . . . he who believes that in times past, prophets have prophesied, and their prophecies have been fulfilled; when put to it, inevitably must allow that every man now living is an irresponsible being.\(^3\)

In *Moby-Dick*, Ahab, who is pondering the question of fate, addresses Starbuck:

Look! see yon albicore! who put it into him to chase and fang that flying-fish? Where do murderers go, man? Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?\(^4\)

Melville again reasons, through Ahab's analogy of the albicore, that beings

\(^1\)Ibid.  
\(^2\) *Mardi*, II, chap. xxxi, 123.  
\(^3\) Ibid., 124.  
\(^4\) *Moby-Dick*, II, chap. xxxii, 330.
act according as they are constituted and asks how the judge (the final judge) can doom a murderer when he is guilty for making him one. The argument points back to Babbalanja's like argument in Mardi:

Tell a good man that he is free to commit murder,—will he murder? Tell a murderer that at the peril of his soul he indulges in murderous thoughts,—will that make him a saint?¹

Media warns Babbalanja that he is "on the verge" of relieving man of "moral accountability" with his theory.² Pierre, tempted to commit incest, declares: "Let the gods look after their own combustibles. If they have put powder-casks in me—let them look to it!"³ Melville's use of the victim, his portrayal, for example, of two leading protagonists, Ahab and Pierre-Enceladus, as mutilated, truncated, ultimately impotent individuals, shows man as a victim more sinned against than sinning.

Law

Traditional pre-Renaissance and also some versions of contemporary Scholastic philosophy⁴ bases ethics, ultimately, on the Divine Law: law is an ordinance of reason, and, because the divine reason is eternal, its ordinances are eternal laws. The eternal law may be seen in the objective order of essences. Government or direction to an end is the effect of law.

¹Mardi, II, chap. xxxix, 158.
²Ibid.
³Pierre, Bk. XIX, chap. ii, p. 381.
is in the mind of God. God is the perfect Governor. The divine law directs all things to their proper ends, and all movements in the universe are subject to the eternal law working through divine providence and divine government, but man is directed in a special way since he is rational and can become aware of the order of things and his own purpose for existing, his own proper end. Eternal law manifest to man through right reason is natural law: natural law is promulgated through the growth and development of right reason. Eternal law manifest to this individual man through his particular reason is his natural law or ethical criterion. Although the exact line of natural law cannot be drawn, its basic principles are evident—the first moral principle is "Do good, avoid evil." Human, temporal, or positive law is formed when human reason interprets and applies natural law in particular cases. Positive law declares natural law but does not establish it. Human laws are formed to control differences in individuals (e.g., to restrain evil men) and to supplement the natural law. Because just human laws derive, through the natural law, from the eternal law, they bind a man in conscience. Finally, because the mind's grasp of the precepts of the natural law is not dependable beyond first common principles, revelation, i.e., divine revealed law, is necessary to insure against human deficiency.

Sceptical objections to the foregoing traditional view are manifold. First, there may or may not be a divine law, and, if there is such a law, it might not be reasonable. Secondly, how can the divine law be seen in the nature of objective reality when this reality may not even exist. In view of the physical and moral evil in the world, is there a divine providence? Again, the fallibility of reason would be appealed to: if reason is as weak
and variable as sceptics claim it is, how much confidence can be placed in an eternal law manifested through that reason? Man is supposed to do good and avoid evil, but is it really possible to clearly discern what is good, and what is evil? If eternal law and reason and, therefore, natural law remain in such a questionable state, how sound is human positive law that is formed around particulars and circumstances of greater relativity? How can revelation insure against human deficiency when revelation itself is subject to contrary interpretation?

Among sceptical sources with which Melville was familiar, Rabelais and Montaigne, in particular, soundly berate the law. A generous portion of Rabelais's satire is directed against law, lawyers, and justice, and the element of scepticism is in evidence.¹ Book III, chapter xxxix is entitled "HOW PANTAGRUEL WAS PRESENT AT THE TRIAL OF JUDGE BRIDLEGOOSE, WHO DECIDED CAUSES AND CONTROVERSIES IN LAW BY THE CHANCE AND FORTUNE OF THE DICE." Most legal cases are thought to be too "ambiguous, intricate, abstruse, perplexed, and obscure."² Any judgment turns out to be all right because some kind of reason can be argued on either side: the uncertainty of judicial judgments is everywhere attested to.

Montaigne, who frequently commented on the capricious nature of ethical codes, was also quick to see the corresponding imperfection of law:

Since the Ethic laws, that concern the particular duty of every one in himself, are so hard to be taught and observed, as we see they are, 'tis no wonder if those which govern so many particular men are much more so. Do but consider the form of this justice that governs us; 'tis a true

¹ See, e.g., Rabelais, III, Bk. III, chaps. xxxix-xliii.
² Ibid., chap. xliii, 89.
testimony of human weakness, so full is it of error and contradiction!\textsuperscript{1}

If one cannot find a criterion for ethics, much less can one expect to find one for law. Montaigne, reacting as usual to traditional concepts, challenges the concept of a natural law foundation for human or positive law; the inconstancy of reason is a prime factor in his argument:

But they are pleasant, when, to give some certainty to the laws, they say that there are some firm, perpetual, and immovable, which they call natural, that are imprinted in human kind by the condition of their own proper being; and of these some reckon three, some four, some more, some less: a sign that is a mark as doubtful as the rest. . . .

It is credible that there are natural laws for us, as we see them in other creatures; but they are lost in us, this fine human reason everywhere so insinuating itself to govern and command, as to shuffle and confound the face of things, according to its own vanity and inconstancy.\textsuperscript{2}

On the foundation of the justice of laws, Montaigne makes reference to Protagoras and Aristo, who "gave no other essence to the justice of laws than the authority and opinion of the legislator."\textsuperscript{3} Montaigne also sees the authority of law supported only by a mystique:

Now the laws keep up their credit, not because they are just, but because they are laws; that is the mystic foundation of their authority; they have no other of any service. They are often made by fools; more often by men that, out of hatred to equality, fail in equity; but always by men who are vain and irresolute authors. There is nothing so much, nor so grossly, nor so ordinarily faulty, as the laws.\textsuperscript{4}

Montaigne further emphasizes the element of relativity in law as in ethics (which he sees primarily as custom):

Truth ought to have a like and universal visage: if man could know equity and justice that had a body and a true being, he would not fetter it to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1} Montaigne, Bk. III, chap. xiii, p. 496.
  \item \textsuperscript{2} Ibid., Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 271.
  \item \textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{4} Ibid., Bk. III, chap. xiii, p. 497.
\end{itemize}
the conditions of this country or that; it would not be from the whimsies
of the Persians or Indians that virtue would receive its form. There is
nothing more subject to perpetual agitation than the laws. . . . There is
not any thing wherein the world is so various as in laws and customs.¹

In his later essay entitled "Of Experience," Montaigne writes of law that
"there is as much liberty and stretch in the interpretation of laws, as in
their fashion."²

In *Omoo*, Melville's comic presentation of the law in the farcical en-
counters between Wilson and the seamen after the *Lucy Ann* revolt suggest that
his mind was probably well attuned and susceptible to such sceptical treat-
ments of the law as he was soon to meet in Rabelais and Montaigne. In *Mardi*,
when a group of islanders petition Media, who is sitting in judgment, and
ask for a jury of twelve men to decide alleged offenses, Media retorts in a
sceptical vein: "If upon a thing dubious, there be little unanimity in the
conflicting opinions of one man's mind, how expect it in the uproar of twelve
puzzled brains?"³ Melville also satirizes the lawyers of isle of Minda who
are masters of extortion rather than justice.⁴

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville treats the vagrancy of law in his chapter called
"Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish":⁵ justice, so-called, becomes aligned with the
power of possession. It is also in *Moby-Dick* that Melville most noticeably

¹Ibid., Bk. II, chap. xii, pp. 270-271.
²Ibid., Bk. III, chap. xiii, p. 493.
⁴Ibid., II, chap. xl.
⁵*Moby-Dick*, II, chap. lxxxix.
begins to plough up to the "primary rock of the matter,"¹ i.e., to question
the very foundation of law, of justice. If human, temporal, or positive law
derives through natural law from divine or eternal law, Melville questions
the nature of this law by questioning the nature of the Lawgiver. Although
the passage has been cited which questions the guilt of a murderer "when the
judge himself is dragged to the bar,"² it is again relevant because of its
legal phrasing; the question is, in fact, a logical consequent of the thesis
of fatalism or determinism. The idea of a governing benevolent providence
with God Himself as the Supreme Governor is questioned by Stubb, who, like
Timoleon, sees this governing power as "compromised in wrong":

Damn the devil, Flask; do you suppose I'm afraid of the devil? Who's
afraid of him except the old governor who daren't catch him and put him
in double-darbies, as he deserves, but let's him go about kidnapping
people; ay, and signed a bond with him, that all the people the devil
kidnapped, he'd roast for him? There's a governor!³

Justice, or—properly—injustice, is a major theme of Israel Potter.
Israel works for two hundred acres of land in New Hampshire, but his employer
proved "false to his contract."⁴ Israel's sweetheart—the "dear, false girl"
—becomes another's.⁵ He does not receive the "compensation" for his dangerous
mission to France: "The Brentford gentleman had flattered him with the pros-
pect of receiving something very handsome for his services as courier. That

¹Ibid., 146.
²Ibid., chap. cxxxii, 330.
³Ibid., chap. lxxiii, 58.
⁴Israel Potter, chap. 11, p. 9.
⁵Ibid., p. 12.
hope was no more."\(^1\) Unlike Paul Jones, Israel receives no glory, no swords or medals for his efforts: "His scars proved his only medals."\(^2\) Finally, in old age, Israel "was repulsed in efforts after a pension by certain caprices of law."\(^3\) In the "Dedication" to Israel Potter, Melville somewhat snidely intimates that he is unable to conclude Israel's tale with poetical justice because of Providential injustice:

I forebore anywhere to mitigate the hard fortunes of my hero; and particularly toward the end, though sorely tempted, durst not substitute for the allotment of Providence any artistic recompense of poetical justice; so that no one can complain of the gloom of my closing chapters more profoundly than myself.\(^4\)

Although Melville recognizes the fallibility and relativity of human, positive law--his "caprices of law"--his remarks on the "allotment of Providence" show that his thrust at inequity goes much deeper.

In "Bartleby the Scrivener," another image joins the phalanx of Melville's terms and images for the impasse of encounter, for the cold, solid, and unresponsive--terms and images such as "indifferent," "impersonal," "stolidity," "iceberg," "stone," "marble," "dead walls." The additional image, "Tombs," is closely related in suggestiveness. The entire short story is, in fact, intricately connected and interwoven with the word "dead" and its implications.

The story, whatever its other implications, is concerned with justice and law: Bartleby is a law-copyist working for a lawyer, and the setting is

\(^1\)Ibid., chap. xiii, p. 110.  
\(^2\)Ibid., chap. xxvii, p. 225.  
\(^3\)Ibid.  
\(^4\)Ibid., p. vi.
a law-office and the Halls of Justice. That Melville again goes beyond the proximate expression of law to test its foundation is first intimated by the lawyer-narrator’s foreshadowing remark that he knew very little of Bartleby beyond what he saw with his own eyes "except, indeed, one vague report, which will appear in the sequel."\(^1\) In the sequel, the vague report is revealed to be that Bartleby had worked in the Dead Letter Office where he had seen man’s missives of love, pardon, and hope come to nothing.\(^2\) Against this larger background of injustice, Bartleby’s vision of futility in the endless copying of foundationless and meaningless laws is comprehensible as are, also, his "dead-wall" reveries\(^3\) in the law-office on "Wall Street"\(^4\) with its commanding view of two walls.\(^5\) In his search for a criterion of conduct, for an objectively founded and benign system of justice and law, man, in his universal stymie, is again balked by the unresponsive walls of apparent insignificance. When Bartleby himself becomes the subject of justice, he is conveyed to the "Halls of Justice," significantly named "the Tombs."\(^6\) He is found in a yard surrounded with walls so thick that they "kept off all sounds behind them."\(^7\) Bartleby finally dies "at the base of the wall, . . . his head touching the

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2. Ibid., p. 65.

3. Ibid., pp. 41, 45, 53.

4. Ibid., p. 20.

5. Ibid., p. 21.

6. Ibid., p. 61.

7. Ibid., p. 64.
cold stones" of "the Tombs" or the "Halls of Justice."

"Bartleby" first appeared in the latter part of 1853. Among the many incursions into the question of justice in The Confidence-Man, published in 1857, the image of the "Tombs" again appears in the account of "A Soldier of Fortune." The soldier, when asked at what battle he had been crippled—"Resaca de la Palma?"—answers, "Resaca de la Tombs," thereby giving the credit for his lameness to the Halls of Justice. The soldier explains that, in a case of law, he, the innocent party, had been imprisoned in a wet, damp cell of the "Tombs," while the murderer went free. The story recalls Bayle's counterargument to the reasoning which sees Adam's fall and the subsequent sins of man as permitted in order to give occasion for God's justice and mercy—Bayle replies:

This is to compare the Deity to a Father who should suffer his children to break their legs on purpose to show to all the City his great Art in setting their Broken Bones.4

Melville goes one better: his "Natural Bone-setter" or "Happy Bone-setter," as the devil-god Confidence-Man calls himself, leaves the duped Soldier of Fortune with his disabled legs—another of Melville's victim figures. Melville again challenges the justice of Providence or "divine" government and the "human government" or system of laws which is "subordinate" to the divine— the Confidence-Man addresses the crippled Soldier:

1Ibid.
2The Confidence-Man, chap. xix, p. 122.
3Ibid.
4Bayle, 1710 ed., IV, 2488.
5The Confidence-Man, chap. xix, pp. 123, 124.
Grant, for the moment, that your experiences are as you give them; in which case I would admit that government might be thought to have more or less to do with what seems undesirable in them. But it is never to be forgotten that human government, being subordinate to the divine, must needs, therefore, in its degree, partake of the characteristics of the divine. That is, while in general efficacious to happiness, the world's law may yet, in some cases, have, to the eye of reason, an unequal operation, just as, in the same imperfect view, some inequalities may appear in the operations of heaven's law;¹ there immediately follows the Confidence-Man's unctious and ironic statement, "nevertheless, to one who has a right confidence, final benignity is, in every instance, as sure with the one law as the other."² The lack of final benignity in human law, particularly in the concrete case of injustice rendered the soldier, makes clear the conclusion about the "other" law.

The relativity of law is also evident in Melville's later works. In Clarel (1876), Rolfe speaks of "laws scribbled by law-breakers."³ Timoleon begins:

If more than once, as annals tell,
Through blood without compunction spilt,
An egotist arch rule has snatched
And stamped the seizure with his sabre's hilt,
And, legalized by lawyers, stood...⁴

A "central question" of Billy Budd (1924), as Rayford and Sealts have noted, is that of "military expediency versus justice."⁵ Several prominent questions already seen in Melville's writing, including the question of justice, are present in Billy Budd. The capability of the Creator for evil is suggested

¹Ibid., p. 129.
²Ibid., pp. 129-130.
³Clarel, Pt. II, canto xxvi, 1. 130.
⁴Collected Poems, p. 209.
⁵Billy Budd, ed. Hayford-Sealts, p. [28].
in the consideration of "the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible." The idea of an indifferent deity is suggested when the "topmen" are compared to "lazy gods" who are frequently "amused with what was going on in the busy world of the decks below." The question of fate and determinism threads its way through the novella. When "elected" by the boarding officer, "Billy made no demur. But, indeed, any demur would have been as idle as the protest of a goldfinch popped into a cage." Billy is "impressed" into service. His is an "enforced enlistment." Billy is called a "Fated boy." After being condemned, Billy lies between two guns, "as nipped in the vice of fate." Sometimes Claggart's expression showed that he "could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban."

Man seems to be fated not only from without but from within (though the responsibility lies without): Melville again investigates man's individual metaphysical make-up as a determinant of his actions. Early in the story the narrator remarks: "The moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make." Billy's endowments are presented as being constitutional.

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1 Ibid., leaf 142, p. [78].
2 Ibid., leaf 104, p. [68].
3 Ibid., leaf 12, p. [45].
4 Ibid., leaf 31, p. [49].
5 Ibid., leaf 226, p. [99].
6 Ibid., leaf 303, p. [119].
7 Ibid., leaf 178, p. [88].
8 Ibid., leaf 9, p. [44].
or according to nature. Billy has no "sinister dexterity. . . . To deal in
double meanings and insinuations of any sort was quite foreign to his nature";¹
there is no "conceit or vanity in his composition";² further, "by his original
constitution aided by the cooperating influences of his lot, Billy in many
respects was . . . much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere
the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company";³ Billy is "essentially
honest"⁴ and his nature is marked by "innocence."⁵ Claggart, too, acts as he
predeterminately is. Claggart's is a "depravity according to nature."⁶ Clag-
gart has "no power to annul the elemental evil in him": the narrator asks
what recourse is left to a nature like Claggart's, but "like the scorpion for
which the Creator alone is responsible, [to] act out to the end the part
allotted it."⁷ That Melville probably sees Vere under a similar consideration
of fixed nature is revealed in such sentences as the following: "But con-
siderateness in such matters is not easy to natures constituted like Captain
Vere's."⁸

Further, Melville's image of a man-of-war world seems to be conjoined
with his idea of fate: Billy is transferred from the merchantman Rights-of-

¹Ibid., leaf 30, p. [49]. Underlining added.
²Ibid., leaf 35, p. [50]. Underlining added.
³Ibid., leaf 44, p. [52]. Underlining added.
⁴Ibid., leaf 220, p. [98]. Underlining added.
⁵Ibid., leaf 111, p. [70].
⁶Ibid., leaf 130, p. [75].
⁷Ibid., leaf 142, p. [78].
⁸Ibid., leaf 87, p. [63].
Man to a seventy-four, a warship named Bellipotent, "Warpower," with its accompanying concept of martial power and law in which man is controlled, fated, rather than controlling, free. Vere asks: "But in natural justice is nothing but the prisoner's overt act to be considered?"\(^1\) The answer, in the case of natural justice which recognizes moral accountability, is, of course, no—but, Vere claims, their allegiance is not to natural justice (that which man ought to have) but, in this man-of-war world (the world as Melville most frequently sees it), to a martial "justice" which seems closely aligned to fate: Vere says that in receiving their commissions they "ceased to be natural free agents."\(^2\) In place of personal responsibility and recognition of the rights of man, Vere sees "martial law operating through us... For that law and the rigor of it, we are not responsible."\(^3\)

In a fated world—to reason in reverse from the usual sequence of this study—man does not, in fact, need a criterion: fated, he needs no standard against which to measure his nonexistent responsible actions. The lack of clear criterions is evident in the judicial proceedings against Billy, proceedings which, in a certain sense, are marked by uncertainty. Like Rabelais's law cases, the situation is too "ambiguous, intricate, abstruse, perplexed, and obscure."\(^4\) The nub of this ambiguity is, as Vere says, a "mystery of iniquity"\(^5\) which is embodied in the person of Claggart; the narrator, in fact,

\(^1\) Ibid., leaf 267, p. [110].
\(^2\) Ibid., leaf 268, p. [110].
\(^3\) Ibid., leaf 269, pp. [110-111]. Underlining added.
\(^4\) Rabelais, III, Bk. III, chap. xliii, 89.
\(^5\) Billy Budd, ed. Hayford-Sealts, leaf 259, p. [108].
claims that "the point of the present story . . . [turns] on the hidden nature of the master-at-arms"\textsuperscript{1}--and since Melville, by comparing Claggart to the scorpion for which the Creator is responsible, questions the Creator as being responsible for Claggart's evil nature, he questions, because of this presence of evil in creation, the ultimate foundation of justice and law. If good and evil, including moral and legal good and evil, are in God indifferently, then it is perhaps even more accurate to speak of nonjustice rather than of injustice. The immediate element of uncertainty includes the question of the captain's sanity: "Was he unhinged?"\textsuperscript{2} The manner of conducting the proceedings is questionable and "criticized by some officers."\textsuperscript{3} The members of the drumhead court are marked by a questionable ability to cope with the case\textsuperscript{4} and they are filled with "troubled indecision."\textsuperscript{5} But the core of uncertainty lies in the fact that proximate law seems to have no foundation in ultimate justice.

The transactions of the trial are marked by a singular dichotomy between morality and legality. Conventionally, as based on the same natural and divine law, the two should ideally be fused, but, in actual historical practice, they were becoming more and more irrelevant to each other. Law, too, gave strong evidence of the inroads of scepticism, and the uncertainty of previously unquestioned criterions turned lawmakers to the expediencies of pragmatism. Oliver Wendell Holmes, jurist son of Melville's physician and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1}Ibid., leaf 135, pp. [76-77].
  \item \textsuperscript{2}Ibid., leaf 235, p. [102].
  \item \textsuperscript{3}Ibid., leaf 241, p. [103].
  \item \textsuperscript{4}Ibid., leaves 246-247, pp. [104-105].
  \item \textsuperscript{5}Ibid., leaf 261, p. [109].
\end{itemize}
friend the elder Oliver Wendell Holmes, wrote in his The Common Law (1881) that law is based on the necessities of the time, that the substance of law is what is "convenient."¹ On the conjunction of morality and legality Holmes writes:

So far from its being true, as is often assumed, that the condition of a man's heart or conscience ought to be more considered in determining criminal than civil liability, it might almost be said that it is the very opposite of truth.²

And later:

Law only works within the sphere of the senses. If the external phenomena, the manifest acts and omissions, are such as it requires, it is wholly indifferent to the internal phenomena of conscience. A man may have as bad a heart as he chooses, if his conduct is within the rules. In other words, the standards of the law are external standards, and, however much it may take moral considerations into account, it does so only for the purpose of drawing a line between such bodily motions and rests as it permits, and such as it does not. What the law really forbids, and the only thing it forbids, is the act on the wrong side of the line, be that act blameworthy or otherwise.³

With an almost ruthless intensity of logicality Melville pushes a similar line of thinking to its conclusion in the trial scene of Billy Budd. Vere judges quite logically within the novel's proposed terms for the human situation: if man is indeed fated, any consideration of personal morality is superfluous. Man's motives flow from his individual nature which is predetermined; therefore, how can he be responsible for his motives? Vere subsequently divorces legality from morality. The narrator sets the stage:

The essential right and wrong involved in the matter, the clearer that


² Ibid., p. [42].

³ Ibid., p. [48].
might be, so much the worse for the responsibility of a loyal sea commander, inasmuch as he was not authorized to determine the matter on that primitive basis.  

Vere insists: "Quite aside from any conceivable motive, . . . a martial court must . . . confine its attention to the blow's consequence." As for the "mystery of iniquity," Vere says it is a problem for psychologic theologians, the court is to be concerned only with the "prisoner's deed—with that alone we have to do." As in the rising element of pragmatism in contemporary law, Budd is not to be judged by his individual conscience; neither is he given his rights as man—that is, independent, unfated man (it is significant that Budd is initially removed from the ship Rights-of-Man). Only Budd's manifest act is to be judged. Vere says: "But for us here, acting not as casuists or moralists, it is a case practical," and he maintains that "Budd's intent or non-intent is nothing to the purpose." Law becomes connected with the necessities of the time and, in a broad sense, with what is, in Holmes' term, convenient: if Billy is given a clement sentence, "Will they [the sailors] not revert to the recent outbreak at the Nore?" That sentence must be

1Billy Budd, ed. Hayford-Sealts, leaf 240, p. [103]. However Melville sees this "primitive" order, whether within the context of "primitivism," some Golden Age or prelapsarian state, it seems to include some notion of pristine justice, the rights of man (individual man, the "self") and the notion of independence—Ahab speaks of the "man born in once independent Man, and now unmanned of Man" (Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxxv, 300).

2Ibid., leaf 256, p. [107].

3Ibid., leaf 259, p. [108].

4Ibid., leaf 266, p. [110].

5Ibid., leaf 274, p. [112].

6Ibid., leaf 277, p. [112].
avoided which might "provoke new troubles" and be "deadly to discipline."\textsuperscript{1} To the question, "Is nothing but the prisoner's overt act to be considered?",\textsuperscript{2} Vere, in effect, answers "yes."

The inexorableness of Vere's path toward Billy's destruction has the cauterizing power of a Swift's "Modest Proposal." It seems difficult to read the story as any sort of testament of acceptance. If the "point of the present story" turns "on the hidden nature of the master-at-arms,"\textsuperscript{3} who is responsible for this nature? and who is responsible for the individual conflict between Budd and Claggart arising from these conflicting natures—a particular conflict that concretizes the larger conflict of a whole warring world that would not be possible without the presence of evil. Many men like the obtuse purser and surgeon argue about proximate physical laws (whether or not Billy's hung body should have twitched) when they would do better to question the ultimate metaphysical foundation of law—so Melville subtly suggests. Vere actually points the direction of Melville's question when he assigns the "mystery of iniquity" to the realm of the "theologians,"\textsuperscript{4} Melville's earlier "clerical proficients" in his superseded chapter, "Lawyers, Experts, Clergy," a chapter he later chose to suppress in favor of dramatizing its material.\textsuperscript{5}

The only character who comes near being a hero in 	extit{Billy Budd} is Nelson, and, in the heavily fated atmosphere of this story, there is, again, the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1}\textit{Ibid.}, leaves 277, 278, p. [113].
\item \textsuperscript{2}\textit{Ibid.}, leaf 267, p. [110].
\item \textsuperscript{3}\textit{Ibid.}, leaf 135, pp. [76-77].
\item \textsuperscript{4}\textit{Ibid.}, leaf 259, p. [108].
\item \textsuperscript{5}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. [36-37].
\end{itemize}
contradictory suggestion of free will. Like Ahab, who claims to the "im-
personal" that a "personality" stands before him, Nelson, too, is a "declarer
of his person."¹ In a man-of-war world Nelson is the great fighter. Nelson,
too, like Ahab, is a victim: he is "adorned . . . for the altar and the sacri-
fice"²—but he is his own priest.³ His is an "heroic personality";⁴ he has
"jewelled vouchers of his own shining deeds"⁵—Melville's selection of matter
and rhetoric are significant: he sounds the note of the independent, free
man capable of accountability and personally ascribable merit. Nelson is a
man, like Ahab, who is capable of standing up for the "Rights-of-Man," for
justice, in a world that is apparently void of justice.

To the end, Melville questioned the universe around and within him.
The narrator in Billy Budd claims that Billy is no "conventional hero,"
neither is the story a "romance"⁶—this is for real. Later in the story it
is again claimed that this story is "a narration essentially having less to
do with fable than with fact."⁷ Vere says of Budd's motive: "At the Last
Assizes it shall acquit. But how here?"⁸ As we shall investigate in the next

¹Ibid., leaf 65, p. [58].
²Ibid., leaf 67, p. [58].
³Ibid., leaf 66, p. [58].
⁴Ibid., leaf 72, p. [59].
⁵Ibid., leaf 67, p. [58]. Underlining added.
⁶Ibid., leaf 48, p. [53].
⁷Ibid., leaf 335, p. [128].
⁸Ibid., leaf 273, p. [111].
chapter, this is precisely what Melville questions—if man, including his motives, is fated, how shall these motives acquit or not acquit? and, if man cannot expect justice in this world, what can he expect in the next?
CHAPTER VI

THE PROBLEM OF IMMORTALITY AND THE RETRIBUTIVE RATIONALE

"And life once over, who shall tell the rest? Life is, of all we know, God's best"

Battle-Pieces.

Melville's sceptic sources and the problem of immortality

Melville's presiding view of ethics, his predominant fatalism, caused him to doubt seriously the possibility of sanctions, i.e., rewards and punishments, in a state of immortality in an eternal afterlife. Again, his thought closely follows that of Montaigne: Montaigne says of "the immortality of the soul" that "'tis the part of human science that is treated of with the greatest doubt and reservation."¹ For Melville, as for Montaigne, if life is only illusion or dream, an unreasonable maze of unsubstantiality, an "ungraspable phantom" through which man is moved by an indifferent, fortuitous force outside himself (and is, therefore, neither responsible for virtue nor for vice), then rewards and punishments, retributive sanctions are meaningless. In a section entitled "The foundation of rewards and punishments in another life," Montaigne argues from the premise of fatalism:

Moreover, upon what foundation of their justice can the gods take notice of or reward man after his death for his good and virtuous actions, since it was themselves that put them in the way and mind to do them? And why should they be offended at or punish him for wicked onces, since themselves have created in him so frail a condition, and when, with one

¹Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 257.
glance of their will, they might prevent him from falling?¹

As Montaigne's statement shows, the idea of justice, including final justice and recompense, is related to and consequent upon the concept of ethics—the possible right or wrong of freely performed human actions. Montaigne thrusts even deeper and questions the nature of justice in the "gods," showing at the same time his own inclination for a secular ethics: "How [can] justice, which distributes to every one what appertains to him, a thing begot by the society and community of men, how is that in God?"²

Given his sceptical outlook on epistemology, ontology, and ethics, the inconsequence of a retributive rationale led Montaigne to argue, rationally, against the possibility of immortality. He argues further from the premises of man's weakness and transiency—he asks:

Can we believe that Plato . . . believed that the weak holds we are able to take were capable, or the force of our understanding sufficient, to participate of beatitude or eternal pains?³

Of the transiency of man, Montaigne remarks: "It were an unreasonable disproportion . . . to assign an eternal recompense in consequence of so short a life."⁴ In what is perhaps an echo of this thought, Melville has Babbalanja quote Bardianna (through whom some of Montaigne's thought is distilled) on the presumptuous fact that "we demand eternity for a lifetime."⁵

Montaigne had already concluded in Book I of the essays that "the

¹Ibid., p. 240.
²Ibid., p. 229.
³Ibid., p. 239.
⁴Ibid., p. 255.
⁵Mardi, II, chap. lxxi, 299.
deadest deaths are the best.¹ Perhaps even more significant for Melville was Hazlitt's observation in a footnote to the foregoing statement: "Death is here considered as the introduction and actual passage to a state of insensibility which puts a period to our life."² Montaigne quotes from the ancients who speak of the death of the soul as well as the body and image death as sleep in a sense that is close to Melville's use of the metaphor, i.e., in a more restricted, negative sense, with implications of annihilation, rather than in the more common, general and loose application of the metaphor of "sleep" for death:

Moreover, they [philosophers] perceived the soul tending towards death, as well as the body . . . which, according to Zeno, the image of sleep does sufficiently demonstrate to us; for he looks upon it "as a fainting and fall of the soul, as well as of the body."³

Later, in Book III, Montaigne presents Socrates' thoughts on death as they are contained in his plea before his judges:

If it [death] be an annihilation of our being, 'tis yet a bettering of one's condition, to enter into a long and peaceable night; we find nothing more sweet in life than a quiet and profound sleep without dreams.⁴

After showing the variety of opinion and the uncertainty and inconclusiveness of human reasoning on immortality, Montaigne offers a fideistic solution to the problem in a section of the "Apology" entitled "It is by revelation we are assured of the soul's immortality." Montaigne writes:

It was truly very good reason that we should be beholden to God only, and

¹Montaigne, Bk. I, chap. xix, p. 30. This statement may have inspired Melville's: "Death . . . is the deadest of all things" (Mardi, II, chap. lix, 255).
²Ibid., n. 2.
³Ibid., Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 257.
⁴Ibid., Bk. III, chap. xiii, p. 488.
to the favour of his grace, for the truth of so noble a belief, since from his sole bounty we receive the fruit of immortality, which consists in the enjoyment of eternal beatitude.\(^1\)

The seriousness of Montaigne's fideistic statements—often lurching up, as they do, incongruously—is a debated question, and it is likely that Melville did not take them seriously, particularly since these statements do little to diminish the force of his negative arguments.

Sir Thomas Browne, too, relies on a fideistic answer and maintains that "faith, not philosophy, hath yet thoroughly disproved" the mortality of the soul.\(^2\) Browne explains how the devil tries to establish that there is no God by "extinguishing in minds the compensation of virtue and vice, the hope and fear of heaven and hell."\(^3\)

The impressionable Pascal wrote with an anguished passion on the subject of immortality:

This is not a question about the petty interests of some stranger. Ourselves and our all are involved in it.

The immortality of the soul is a matter of such main importance, so profoundly interesting to us, that we must be utterly dead to every good feeling, if we could be indifferent about it. And all our actions and thoughts would take so different a course, according as we keep this point ever in view, as our main and ultimate object.

It requires but little elevation of soul to discover, that here, there is no substantial delight; that our pleasures are but vanity, that the ills of life are innumerable; and that, after all, death, which threatens us every moment, must, in a few years, perhaps in a few days, place us in the eternal condition of happiness, or misery, or nothingness. Between us and heaven, hell or annihilation, no barrier is interposed but life, which is of all things the most fragile; and as they who doubt the immortality of the soul, can have no hope of heaven, they can have no prospect but hell or nonentity.

\(^{1}\)Ibid., Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 258.

\(^{2}\)Browne, II, 11.

\(^{3}\)Ibid., 248.
It is vain for men to turn aside from this coming eternity, as if a bold indifference could destroy its being. It subsists notwithstanding. It hastens on; and death, which must soon unveil it, will, in a short time, infallibly reduce them to the dreadful necessity of being annihilated for ever, or for ever wretched.

Here then is a doubt of the most alarming importance; to feel this doubt is already, in itself, a serious evil. But that doubt imposes on us, the indispensible duty of inquiry.

He, then, who doubts, and yet neglects inquiry, is both uncandid and unhappy.1

The rankling element of doubt in the foregoing presentation would not have escaped Melville if he was acquainted with this section of Pascal's Thoughts. Melville's doubt and consequent "inquiry" concerning man's condition after death developed into a lifelong inquiry.

Bayle, like Montaigne, and probably influenced by him, shows the logical inconsequence of the concept of retribution issuing from a theory of fatalism:

The Ancient Poets . . . ascribed . . . all sorts of Crimes to Jupiter and the other Gods, and even . . . that of inducing Men to Evil, yet without saying that the same God who moved them to it punished them for it.2

Hume, in his essay "On the Immortality of the Soul," offers several arguments against the soul's immortality. It is highly probable that Melville knew this essay. He did know Hume's essay "On Suicide";3 the essay "On the Immortality of the Soul" accompanied the essay "On Suicide" in print, and Melville's continued interest in the problem of immortality would seem surely to have led him to read it. Following Montaigne and Bayle, Hume also argues

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1Pascal, 1835 ed., pp. 530-531.
from foreordination to the rationally inconsequential theory of rewards and punishments:

As every effect implies a cause, and that another, till we reach the first cause of all, which is the Deity; every thing that happens is ordained by him, and nothing can be the object of his punishment or vengeance.—By what rule are punishments and rewards distributed?¹

Melville and the retributive rationale

A passage in Mardi gives evidence that Melville was overtly aware that a theory of sanctions does not logically issue from a fatalistic position in ethics. The passage comes from the section of Mardi, previously discussed, in which Babbalanja reasons that man is fated and hence an irresponsible being. Melville has Media remark: "Do you take me, then, for a fool, and a Fatalist? Pardie! a bad creed for a monarch, the distributor of rewards and punishments."²

It is also in Mardi that Melville first mentions annihilation. William Braswell has shown how Melville, in Mardi, makes use of Seneca's Morals by Way of Abstract.³ After reading from this antique pagan, Melville's Babbalanja comments:

And is it not more divine in this philosopher, to love righteousness for its own sake, and in view of annihilation, than for pious sages to extol it as the means of everlasting felicity?⁴

Babbalanja, however, is not "content" with Seneca's way of life—or death.⁵

Melville's growing interest in the problem of immortality may be traced in

¹Hume, IV, 572.
²Mardi, II, chap. xxxi, 121.
³"Melville's Use of Seneca," AL, XII (March, 1940), 98-104.
⁴Mardi, II, chap. xx, 79.
⁵Ibid., 80.
the numerous references to it in *Mardi*, and his interest is probably indebted, in significant measure, to his readings in sceptic sources.

Calvinistic influence on Melville's view of immortality.—In his view of immortality, Melville was, again, probably affected by his Calvinistic background. Although Melville reacted against his Calvinistic childhood training, his thought was greatly shaped by it. His views on merit and success have been discussed previously in the light of the "Protestant ethic," as it is called: with a Calvinistic, Old Testament mentality, Melville believed that the meritorious man should be the successful man, should receive his sanctions *here and now* in this present world almost, as it were, as a sign of his election. Because he felt that these sanctions were not given, he questioned the justice of God and sometimes argued that if justice were not rendered in this world, a fortiori, one should not look for it in the next. Babbalanja seriously questions the often presented contrary argument that the injustices of this world will all be rectified in the world to come. The oblique but basic thrust is, again, at God's justice:

Yet vain our surmises. Still vainer to say, that all Mardi [earth] is but a means to an end; that this life is a state of probation; that evil is but permitted for a term; that for specified ages a rebel angel is viceroy.—Nay, nay. Oro delegates his sceptre to none; in his everlasting reign there are no interregnums; and Time is Eternity; and we live in Eternity now. Yet, some tell of a hereafter, where all the mysteries of life will be over; and the sufferings of the virtuous recompensed. Oro is just, they say.—Then always,—now, and evermore. But to make

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1In addition to references given in the text of this chapter, see, e.g., *Mardi*, I, chap. lxiii, 224-225; chap. lxix, 243-245; chap. lxxvii, 272; chap. lxxviii, 275-277; chap. xciv, 335-336; chap. xcv, 337-338; chap. xcix, 348-353; II, chap. ix, 32-34; chap. xxiii, 93; chap. li, 214; chap. lxxi, 299-300, 302; chap. lxxiv, 314-315; chap. lxxx, 353-354; chap. lxxxi, 356-358.
restitution implies a wrong; and Oro can do no wrong. 1

A passage, in Mardi, on merit and immortality has a general relevance to the preceding chapter and the present one in their considerations of free will, fate, merit, and immortality. Babbalanja reads from his favorite, Bar-dianna: "And if, after all, we should be no more forever;—far better to perish meriting immortality than to enjoy it unmeritorious." 2 Ever since Adam, when accused by God of having eaten from the forbidden tree, blamed Eve for having given him the fruit, part of human frailty—-from which Melville was not exempt—-has been to lay guilt at someone else's door but to claim merit as one's own, advantageously, if not logically, dividing the theory of responsibility. Impressed by, but reacting against, Calvinistic determinism, Melville was quite willing to trace guilt and culpability back to "Oro," i.e., God, but while impressed with the Calvinist ethic that saw immediate, proximate sanctions in this world as the hallmark of the "elect" or the meritorious, and apparently piqued at God's injustice when these sanctions were not forthcoming, he was not so willing to credit "Oro" with the "determining" of merit but claims it as man's own.

The fear of annihilation.—Running through a number of Melville's works is a persistent and dark strain of negativism concerning the prospect of immortality. In Moby-Dick, Ahab looks into the vacant eyes of the deranged Pip and exclaims: "Oh God! that man should be a thing for immortal souls to

1Ibid., II, chap. lxxxii, 359.

2Ibid., chap. lxxi, 303.
sieve through!"¹ The word "immortal" is the significant word. Even this brief concession to the prospect of eternal survival is deflated but a few pages later as Ahab contemplates the unused coffin which has been converted to a lifebuoy:

A life-buoy of a coffin! Does it go further? Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver! I'll think of that. But no. So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me.²

In Pierre, the hero's invocation to the Stone to fall on him—an action which emblematically occurs—includes the condition that he wishes the Stone to crush him if there are no subsequent sanctions, if virtue is "meaningless and unsequelled with any blessing . . . and all things . . . allowable and unpunishable to man."³ In Melville's next novel, Israel Potter, his tendency is, again, to argue from the premise of the lack of justice in this world to the lack of justice in the next. In view of the many inequities doled out to Israel during his lifetime (see the section on "Law" in the previous chapter), the narrator, in his dedication to the Bunker Hill Monument, comments that Israel, now dead, "may never have received other requital than the solid reward of your granite."⁴ Granite is associated with Melville's images of "stone" and "marble," the "primary rock of the matter," and carries with it all the previous connotations of indifference and unresponsiveness on the part of the deity.

¹Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxxv, 301.
²Ibid., chap. cxxvii, 310.
⁴Israel Potter, vi.
The Confidence-Man, written from the depths of Melville's darkest period and thick with lacerating irony, contains several barbed references to immortality and the afterlife. The Sophomore, the "wise-fool," says: "We shall all be happy after we are no more."¹ The Confidence-Man calls the husband of Goneril a "Lucky Dog."

To which the merchant replied, that he earnestly hoped it might be so, and at any rate he tried his best to comfort himself with the persuasion that, if the unfortunate man was not happy in this world, he would, at least, be so in another.

His companion [the deceiving devil-god Confidence-Man] made no question of the unfortunate man's happiness in both worlds.²

The stock that the Con-Man offers for sale in The Black Rapids Coal Co. (hell) and the New Jerusalem (heaven) are both hoaxes. Finally, in the closing chapter,³ an "old man," who is Simeon-like, is reading a Bible. Simeon, the New Testament priest, waited for the coming of the Savior that he might die. At this juncture, it is the Con-Man who enters. The gospels, which the old man is reading, contain the promise of eternal life and reward; The Con-Man remarks to the old man that he is reading "good news" (the etymological meaning of gospel), and a voice from a "curtained berth" (suggestive of death) calls out, "Too good to be true."⁴ The narrator remarks that those in the berths already only want to sleep, not see. The Con-Man learns (if he needs to "learn") that the old man has his savings on him, and he offers to show him to his "berth." He turns out the light having the symbols of the Old and New

¹The Confidence-Man, chap. ix, p. 63.
²Ibid., chap. xiii, p. 86.
³Ibid., chap. xlv.
⁴Ibid., p. 322.
Testament on it—this action and the remark that the gospels are "too good to be true" show that, unlike Montaigne, Browne, and Bayle, who, at least, paid lip service to revelation, Melville, in the present novel, rejects it, and, with it, its promise of immortality. The Con-Man then leads the "old man" away. Melville ends by saying that something more may come of this masquerade—but the impetus of deception of the entire novel hurries the picture along, and the "old man" is seen left in the dark with nothing. Some critics have questioned whether the novel ends, but it may have one of the most final of all endings, an ending in which nothing is left but nothing. In "The Conflict of Convictions," one of Melville's civil war poems published in the 1866 volume *Battle-Pieces*, he writes:

And death [shall] be busy with all who strive—
Death, with silent negative.  

Because of his somber considerations on man's mortality, Melville seriously considered the possibility of annihilation. During his 1856 visit to Hawthorne in England, he confided that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated," although he did not seem able to "rest in that anticipation." In the sceptical self-argument that Melville conducted with himself, when he was not considering man as a fatherless shadow "from no

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substance cast,"¹ his variant speculations often brought no added reassurance. Melville saw a certain kind of immortality granted to life in general as contained in Time, but he seriously doubted the preservation of the individual in Eternity. In Mardi, he writes: "Through all her provinces, nature seems to promise immortality to life, but destruction to beings."² In Moby-Dick, Melville says of the whale: "We account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality."³ But it is precisely individual, personal survival with which Melville is concerned.

Somewhere in his philosophical wanderings or delvings into physics, Melville seems to have met the argument on the eternity or indestructibility of matter. He writes of the force of leviathan's tail: "Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it."⁴ But Melville is not so concerned with man's material "stuff"—if man is so composed and is not merely a fatherless shadow "from no substance cast"—as he is with the survival of personal consciousness. His fear of annihilation after death, probably in the sense of this loss of personal consciousness, seems to be contained in the metaphor of sleep which he frequently uses when writing of death. Media, in Mardi, claims that mortals are too apt to talk in the dark. Babbalanja answers "Ay, my lord, and we mortals may prate still more in the dark when we are dead; for methinks, that if we then prate at all, 'twill be in our sleep."⁵

¹Collected Poems, p. 215.
²Mardi, I, chap. lxix, 244.
³Moby-Dick, II, chap. cv, 228.
⁴Ibid., chap. lxxxvi, 119.
⁵Mardi, II, chap. xxxi, 128.
In *Moby-Dick*, Stubb interprets the zodiac on the Doubloon as "one round chapter" on man's life; in Aquarius the Water-bearer he sees symbolized death, i.e., drowning, and winding up "with Pisces, or the Fishes, we sleep."¹ In "The Haglets," the ship is wrecked and the Admiral of the White is drowned:

Imbedded deep with shells
And drifted treasure deep,
Forever he sinks deeper in
Unfathomable sleep.²

In both *Moby-Dick* and "The Haglets," the imagery of sinking to sleep in the sea, suggestive as it is of a "state of insensibility which puts a period to our life"—to borrow Hazlitt's note—seems to point ahead to the closing lines of "Billy in the Darbies" in *Billy Budd*:

Fathoms down, fathoms down, how I'll dream fast asleep.
I feel it stealing now. Sentry, are you there?
Just ease these darbies at the wrist,
And roll me over fair!
I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist.³

The imaging of death followed by annihilation as a sinking in the sea "forever and aye" is prepared for in one of Melville's early poems in *Mardi*; although Melville does not specifically mention the metaphor "sleep," night imagery is employed and the absence of personal awareness is suggested in the line "The dead reck not of aught":

We drop our dead in the sea,
The bottomless, bottomless sea;
Each bubble a hollow sigh,
As it sinks forever and aye.

We drop our dead in the sea,—

¹ *Moby-Dick*, II, chap. xcix, 192.
³ *Billy Budd*, ed. Hayford-Sealts, leaf 351, p. [132].
The dead reck not of aught;
We drop our dead in the sea,—
The sea ne'er gives it a thought.

Sink, sink, oh corpse, still sink,
Far down in the bottomless sea,
Where the unknown forms do prowl,
Down, down in the bottomless sea.

'Tis night above, and night all round,
And night will it be with thee;
As thou sinkest, and sinkest for aye,
Deeper down in the bottomless sea.

Death is not seen as a sleep from which man may be again recalled; Clarel, in
dream, sees Greek pilgrims shipwrecked on their return home, and he describes
them as

Asleep upon beach Tyrian!
Or is it sleep? no, rest—that rest
Which naught shall ruffle or molest.

In some of his later poems, e.g. "Buddha," Melville may have been endeavoring
to gild the pill of possible extinction by enfolding the fear with the more
positive ambiances of oriental nirvana. Buddha is again mentioned in the
unfinished poem "Rammon." The prince Rammon, who desires the "cessation of
being," and the importer Tardi discuss death: this general background gave
rise to the only finished segment of the poem published in Melville's life-
time, "The Enviable Isles." Melville's concern over the possible loss of
consciousness may be reflected in the image of sleep in the poem, for it is

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1 Mardi, I, chap. xcix, 352.

2 Clarel, Pt. I, canto v, 11. 130-133.

3 Collected Poems, p. 411.

said that in these enviable isles myriads lie "unconscious slumberers mere."¹

The "hope against hope."—Melville's dark meditations on mortality were, again, but one side of his expression, albeit the weightier side. Two lines from Clarel provide a point of transition. Like the Greek pilgrims to the Holy Land, the pilgrims from India also die,

Arrested, with the locusts sleep,
Or pass to muster where no man may peep.²

In the first line, the image of sleep, though a fairly common image for death, is probably used with Melville's more specifically limited and dark connotations of annihilation. But, because he simply does not know with certainty, an alternative is offered ("Or pass to muster") though still shrouded with uncertainty ("where no man may peep"). Melville was capable of positive statements and hope, a hope that, if not always active, was at least latent. He wrote in a letter to Sophia Hawthorne, 8 January 1852:

Life is a long Dardanelles, . . . the shores whereof are bright with flowers, which we want to pluck, but the bank is too high; & so we float on & on, hoping to come to a landing-place at last--but swoop! we launch into the great sea! Yet the geographers say, even then we must not despair, because across the great sea, however desolate & vacant it may look, lie all Persia & the delicious lands roundabout Damascus.³

In the poem "The Battle For the Mississippi" Melville declares:

There must be other, nobler worlds for them
Who nobly yield their lives in this.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 204.
²Clarel, Pt. I, canto v, ll. 197-198.
³Letters, p. 147.
⁴Collected Poems, p. 44.
Concerning the hope of a future life, Melville speculates, possibly with the help of Montaigne's observations on animals, that there is no "creature, fish, flesh, or fowl, so little in love with life, as not to cherish hopes of a future state."¹ In Mardi, Babbalanja contemplates the account of Lazarus's resurrection from the tomb and concludes: "At best, 'tis but a hope," but goes on to declare that such an instinct is not necessarily a guaranteed "preservative."²

Unlike the endings of Moby-Dick, Pierre, and The Confidence-Man, the closing lines of Clarel, positive and hopeful in tone as they are, may seem like something of a non sequitur to the ponderous doubt and gloom of the poem itself; nevertheless, beautifully hopeful they are:

But through such strange illusions have they passed
Who in life's pilgrimage have baffled striven--
Even death may prove unreal at the last,
And stoics be astounded into heaven.

Then keep thy heart, though yet but ill-resigned--
Clarel, thy heart, the issues there but mind;
That like the crocus budding through the snow--
That like a swimmer rising from the deep--
That like a burning secret which doth go
Even from the bosom that would hoard and keep;
Emerge thou mayest from the last whelming sea,
And prove that death but routs life into victory. ³

Melville, however, sometimes saw even hope as a harrowing thing, particularly the Christian hope of immortality. Before the dominance of Christianity, man could accept or steel himself against the prospect of mortality, but with the yearning caused by an alluring hope of immortality

¹Mardi, I, chap. xciv, 335.
²Ibid., chap. lxxviii, 276-277.
³Clarel, Pt. IV, canto xxxv, 11. 23-34.
came the accompanying unsettling fear of its unfulfillment. In "The Age of the Antonines" Melville writes

> The sting was not dreamed to be taken from death,
> No Paradise pledged or sought.¹

In *Clarel*, Celio thinks of Christ—

> Even he who in the pastoral hours,
> Abroad in fields, and cheered by flowers,
> Announced a heaven's unclouded days;
> And, ah, with such persuasive lips—
> Those lips now sealed while doom delays—
> Won men to look for solace there;
> But, crying out in death's eclipse,
> When rainbow none his eyes might see,
> Enlarged the margin for despair—
> My God, my God, forsakest me?
> Upbraid! we upbraid again;
> Thee we upbraid; our pangs constrain
> Pathos itself to cruelty.
> Ere yet thy day no pledge was given
> Of homes and mansions in the heaven—
> Paternal homes reserved for us;
> Heart hoped it not, but lived content—
> Content with life's own discontent.²

The hope and the fear.—In a final appraisal, the problem of immortality, as in other areas of Melville's inquiry, ends with a question mark. If the present world is so little known, how

> dare
> To pledge indemnifying good
> In worlds not known[?]³

Because of attending uncertainty, neither fear of annihilation nor hope of heaven can be precluded from Melville's query about man's condition after

¹ *Collected Poems*, p. 235
death. He asks in Clarel:

If Luther's day expand to Darwin's year,
Shall that exclude the hope—foreclose the fear?¹

After the burial of Nehemiah two opposing natural signs, one of fear and one of hope, suggest an ambiguous aftermath: an avalanche of rock falls "horribly," but a "counter object" and "thing of heaven" is revealed, a "frail" rainbow—symbol of hope.² At Mar Saba, crowning a crag and surrounded by a desert "waste whose king is Fear," stands an isolated palm, symbol of hope.³ Though hope is frail and solitary, it does, nevertheless, remain.

The element of uncertainty surrounding immortality exhibits itself in the form of questions. In his poem "At the Canon's Mouth" Melville asks,

And life once over, who shall tell the rest?
Life is, of all we know, God's best.⁴

In Clarel is asked

How then? Is death the book's fly-page?
Is no hereafter?⁵

In one of the more extended considerations of immortality, also in Clarel, Melville employs a series of six questions. Of comparative significance in the same section is the fact that, whereas, in Mardi, the proposal of a "hereafter, where all the mysteries of life will be over" is, in effect, negated, in Clarel it is couched in a question:

¹Ibid., Pt. IV, canto xxxv, ll. 1-2.
²Ibid., Pt. II, canto xxxix, ll. 139, 151-152.
³Ibid., Pt. III, canto x, ll. 26.
⁴Collected Poems, p. 83.
⁵Clarel, Pt. I, canto xviii, ll. 36-37.
What reveries be in yonder heaven
Whither, if yet faith rule it so,
The tried and ransomed natures flow?
If there peace after strife be given
Shall hearts remember yet and know?
Thy vista, Lord, of havens dear,
May that in such entanglement bind
That never starts a wandering tear
For wail and willow left behind?
Then wherefore, chaplet, quivering throw
A dusk e'en on the martyr's brow
You crown? Do seraphim shed balm
At last on all of earnest mind,
Unworldly yearners, nor the palm
Awarded St. Teresa, ban
To Leopardi, Obermann?
Translated where the anthem's sung
Beyond the thunder, in a strain
Whose harmony unwinds and solves
Each mystery that life involves;
There shall the Tree whereon He hung,
The olive wood, leaf out again--
Again leaf out, and endless reign
Type of the peace that buds from sinless pain? ¹

It seems somewhat misleading to speak in senatorial tones of Billy Budd as Melville's final statement, a label which almost unwittingly begins to infer that the work is a summation, culmination, and conclusion of all Melville's thought and there would simply be no more to say if he had lived another hundred years. It is the last work he wrote before he died, but one wonders what he would have written a year later, or, given Melville's mercurial moods, an hour later. It has been observed that the many separate works written in an author's lifetime are so interconnected as actually to form one great work: if not pushed to extremes, this observation contains much wisdom. While certainly having its own individuality as a work of art, Billy Budd is, in many respects, a continuation of Melville's life's work; it asks

many of the same questions, including that on immortality, that Melville pursued in earlier works and, while typically tending toward the darker side, leaves as many questions, finally, unanswered.

The closing lines of "Billy in the Darbies," discussed earlier in this chapter, use imagery that is suggestive of annihilation. Conversely, the dedication to Jack Chase mentions that he may be "harbored in Paradise."\(^1\) Without necessarily evincing belief or disbelief in such a state, Melville sometimes uses the term "Paradise" rhetorically as he does in his "The Paradise of Bachelors and Tartarus of Maids," a story in which he subtly considers woman's difficult role under the burden of gestation. Such a rhetorical use is also present in *Pierre* in the description of Isabel's face as "hovering between Tartarean misery and Paradisaic beauty."\(^2\) Melville does, however, use the term in the sense of a state of reward or happiness after death—as in the "Paradise pledged" of "The Age of the Antonines."\(^3\) His manner of using the term in the dedication is at least a moot question.

Writing to James Billson as late as 20 December 1885, about the time of the inception of *Billy Budd*,\(^4\) Melville says of James Thomson: "It is good for me

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4. In their edition of *Billy Budd* Hayford and Sealts write: "The 'unfinished work' of 1885 may have included the short poem of three or four leaves on which he was working early in 1886, the poem that ultimately became the ballad "Billy in the Darbies" with which the novel concludes. The novel itself developed out of a brief prose headnote setting the scene and introducing the speaker of this poem"—p. [1].
to think of such a mind—to know that such a brave intelligence has been—and may yet be, for aught anyone can **demonstrate** to the contrary."¹

As in earlier works, the signs of nature after a death, in this case Billy's, are significant: Professors Hayford and Sealts have devoted a long note to an investigation of possible meanings, and their findings lean toward a dark view of possible survival.² As an added observation, the serene air is compared to "smooth white marble," an image which may be another in Melville's long line of images utilizing stone, rock, marble, and granite to connote a cold, impenetrable, and indifferent deity—perhaps Melville's "marble-dealer" in the same paragraph.³ Possibilities seem negative, but Melville does not leap from appearance to conclusion. Appearance is often deceptive, and deception works both ways; another part of his total sceptical self-argument was stated earlier in Clarel—of deception and illusions he writes:

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But through such strange illusions have they passed
Who in life's pilgrimage have baffled striven—
Even death may prove unreal at the last,
And stoics be astounded into heaven.⁴
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Such a statement is rare, but, like the bobbing buoy on the dark oceanic vastness, it's there and cannot be ignored without ignoring the total Melville.

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¹*Letters*, p. 281.

²*Billy Budd*, ed. Hayford-Sealts, pp. [196-198].


PART III

MELVILLE: SCEPTIC
CHAPTER VII

MELVILLE: SCEPTIC

"Faith is to the thoughtless, doubts to the thinker"

_Mardi._

Melville's sceptic sources correspond in varying degrees to some of the most outstanding figures in the history of scepticism. Thought stated in various ways and with various intentions, the ingredients of common metaphysical problems, beginning with the epistemological problem, emerge from the pages of these writers. The problems undergo a process of augmentation even in those philosophers, like Descartes and Kant, who endeavor rather to answer scepticism but whose answers, for some, are not intellectually convincing. These problems became Melville's own. Melville's scepticism does not seem to derive from any single philosopher but from the aggregate of his sources, although Montaigne and Montaigne's disciple Pierre Bayle give evidence of effecting a more pronounced influence on him. Special emphasis has been given to Montaigne because of his influence, direct or indirect, on almost all of the sceptic writers considered as Melville's sources in the present study and, more importantly, because of his direct and abiding influence on Melville, who owned Hazlitt's edition of Montaigne.

Melville probably read much of Montaigne and Bayle ironically, and it would be highly questionable that he considered them fideists. Melville made it sufficiently clear that his own scepticism did not lead to fideism.
Like the "willful boy" of Mardi, he would "climb high Ofo with hope, not faith,"¹ that is, not an anti-rationalistically structured and externally imposed creed. In Mardi, when Melville writes the dictum used as an epigraph to the present chapter, "Faith is to the thoughtless" it is probably this anti-rationalistic, organized and imposed faith that he is considering.² For Melville, who so sought a faith unmistakably and integrally substantiated by reason and experience, a faith so demonstrably certain that it merged into knowledge rather than faith, such a position was untenable. With his great regard for reason, limited as it was, to be a fideist, for Melville, would be equivalent to making reason the thrall of faith. But to say that Melville did not have faith in the sense of an established creed is not to imply that he was void of all faith: he admired Hume's faith, a "firm, creedless faith that embraces the spheres."³ William Braswell writes that "when Melville read in his New Testament St. Paul's counsel to the Romans, 'Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself before God,' he annotated, 'The only kind of faith—one's own.'"⁴ Hume had taught that the basis for religion was fear,⁵ and, in "The Lightning-Rod Man," Melville rejects the dark lightning-king who tries to drive "a brave trade with the fears of man" and insists upon standing on his own hearth.⁶ Melville's scepticism did not devolve to libertinism: many of his questions,

¹Mardi, II, chap. v, 19.
²Ibid., II, chap. xxxi, 126.
³Redburn, chap. lviii, p. 377.
⁴Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought, p. 19.
⁵Hume, IV, 449, 498.
⁶The Piazza Tales, pp. 180, 173.
in fact, arose from his great moral preoccupation, and his own keen sense of justice caused him to question an apparently unjustly governed universe.

The basic problem of scepticism is epistemological. In the treatment of Melville's sceptic epistemological problem in Chapter III of this study some distortion is admittedly inflicted on Melville as artist by subordinating his themes, dialogue, and images to a predominantly philosophical schema (although this concluding chapter endeavors to resolve this difficulty). This approach has the advantage, however, of enabling one to see, with some facility, what the implications of scepticism are in order to see Melville's works in relation to them, and since the present thesis concerns Melville as sceptic, it is necessary to see scepticism in more detail than is usually offered in the broad designation of scepticism as simply doubt. It may be asserted that this approach does, finally, effect greater appreciation of Melville as artist by enabling the reader to bring to Melville's often predominantly sceptical themes and imagery a richer understanding of their implications and connotations. Some of these themes and images will be discussed in the conclusion of this concluding chapter on Melville as sceptic, since they offer some of the most consistent and compelling clues to his scepticism. Melville briefly touches then vaults over many of the particular arguments of scepticism to subsume scepticism's more general tendencies and attitudes in his own works. Nevertheless, as the third chapter endeavors to show, Melville's works give evidence that he did explicitly reject the final trustworthiness of all man's faculties, the senses, reason, and intuition. Because of their dependence on a fallible sense knowledge and reason, the disciplines are also undermined. Man himself is shown to be an inconstant and variable subject, and from this
fallibility and variability no universal consensus, no criterions or stable truths can be elicited. Melville's world is wrapped in doubt.

The epistemological problem gave rise to an ontological problem. Because ultimately and transcendentally Truth and Being are convertible, if the very existence of Truth is doubted, it is but one step further to doubt the existence of Being—even one's own being. Pierre comes to the point where he declares: "I am a nothing."¹ In his effort to know, Ahab wants to strike through the wall of phenomenon or appearance and voices his suspicion: "Sometimes I think there's naught beyond."² Pierre, looking for "substance," begins to see the whole world as

nothing but surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies. By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and no body is there!—appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man!³

"Surface" or appearance, for Melville, is not "substance," and he suspects that unsubstantial appearance itself is delusory. Melville probably knew

Bayle's question quoted previously:

Ever since the beginning of the World all Men, except, perhaps, one in two hundred Millions, do firmly believe that Bodies are coloured, and yet 'tis a Mistake. I ask, whether God deceives Men with respect to those Colours? If he deceives them in that respect, what hinders but he may deceive them with respect to Extension.⁴

In Moby-Dick, Melville considers this theory of the natural philosophers and

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¹Pierre, Bk. XIX, chap. ii, p. 382.
²Moby-Dick, I, chap. xxxvi, 204.
³Pierre, Bk. XXI, chap. i, p. 397.
⁴Bayle, 1710 ed., IV, 2620.
remarks that earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without.\(^1\)

In the above quotation from *Moby-Dick*, "surface" or appearance is found to be deceptive, and the last given quotation from *Pierre* shows Melville doubting the existence of substance. In *The Confidence-Man*, subtitled *His Masquerade*, appearances are shown to be deceptive due to the machinations of the devil-god Confidence-Man. Melville's metaphor of the "dream" became a vehicle through which he concretized and projected his abstract, metaphysical query on the possible nonexistence of objective reality, of being. His epistemological difficulties contributed toward this dream query: the sceptic does not find the permanent beneath the transient, the ultimate beyond the proximate and without criterions, the world seems to be drifting and shifting directionlessly as in dream; it is a world that, like the dream-world, is precarious, incalculable, unreasonable, and unsequential; phantasm (Melville's "phantoms") simply appear and then as inexplicably disappear. In *Clarel*, Melville writes of illusions that they are "void . . . / As phantoms which accost in dream."\(^2\)

The average man of the street judges the inconsequence of his subjective dream-reality by measuring it against objective reality. But what is the man to do who seriously questions objective reality itself as being void? Against what is he to measure his fears?

The epistemological and ontological problems, in Melville, gave rise

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\(^1\) *Moby-Dick*, I, chap. xlii, 244.

\(^2\) *Clarel*, Pt. IV, canto xvi, 11. 135–136.
to an ethical problem. Man must perceive truths, standards, guides, or criterions with which to measure his actions and in order to be self-directive, to act freely. Ontologically, man is not responsible in a dream world—it is not really meaningful. Man becomes anchorless, suspended and passive in dreams and feels fated or controlled rather than free and controlling. When Melville has Pierre speak out on how the world and self "seem" to him, he says: "It is all a dream—we dream that we dreamed we dream."¹ His next question is: "From nothing proceeds nothing. . . . How can one sin in a dream?"² A sense of sin, if it exists at all, is rare in Melville's works; he returns again and again to the idea of man as fated, both within and without. A certain incongruent dichotomy exists in Melville's view of fate or determinism, however. Influenced by, but reacting against, Calvinism, he lays man's "sin" at God's door as having determined man; conversely, he blames God for not recognizing and rewarding man's merit here and now, a merit which he frequently implies is freely man's own. Both sides of the issue therefore provide cause for him to find fault with God's justice, a justice and Providence that is further questioned because of the presence of evil in the world.

Melville's doubts concerning survival and sanctions in an afterlife are consequent to his view of ethics. Since ethics are meaningless without criterions and objective reality (man is not responsible for "sins" committed in dreams), ethical sanctions also become meaningless. Because of his predominant fatalism, Melville questioned why the gods should reward or punish man for

¹Pierre, Bk. XIX, chap. ii, p. 382.
²Ibid.
acts they determined him to? Also, because Melville did not see justice being rendered in this world, he argued a fortiori not to expect it in the next.

In the end, however, immortality remains an open question; as Melville wrote to James Billson 20 December 1885,¹ it cannot be demonstrated that immortality is not any more than it can be demonstrated that it is.

The preceding sequence of problems—epistemological, ontological, ethical, and retributive—is not only a logical sequence, but it is suggested by Melville himself. In *Pierre*, where truth is elusive² and criterions and maxims fluctuate and invert,³ Pierre asks "if Life be a cheating dream, and virtue . . . unmeaning and unsequelled with any blessing . . . and all things . . . allowable and unpunishable to man."⁴ Earlier in this study a skeletal sequence of these problems was presented, and it may again serve as a recapitulation here: the fundamental thesis of this study is that Melville's basic problem (logically) is epistemological, a lack of noetic certitude which gave rise to an ontological difficulty concerning the nature of a consequently uncertain reality, which, in turn, engendered an ethical question, since ethics depends on one's view of being or reality, and finally, the ethical consequence which Melville envisioned rendered the retributive rationale—immortality and sanctions—meaningless, until nothing was left but nothing. This course of reasoning is Melville's predominant one. While the element of

¹*Letters*, p. 281.
²*Pierre*, Bk. XXV, chap. iii, p. 472.
nihilism (also the existential Angst over meaninglessness) is evident, in the end, Melville no more trusted the powers of a fallible and limited reason to reach negative dogmatic conclusions than to reach more positively sanguine ones, and, for Melville the sceptic, the case of the universe ends with a question mark.

Some of the most compelling clues to Melville's scepticism are to be found in his artistic imagery. Pyrrhonistic scepticism is a quest for truth. All philosophy is, of course, a quest for truth. Scepticism differs in the area stressed—in a certain sense, the "quest" is more emphasized than the "truth." Doubt is cultivated: the adequacy of man's cognitive faculties is questioned, and a system of polarities is set up. Impregnated with doubt, scepticism's quest is unceasing and never rests in truths or dogmas positive or negative. Thus Ahab, though blinded, continues to grope. Each apparent "truth" is seen to be countered by an equally apparent truth. Sceptic doubt with its quest has affinities to and is one of the progenitors of existentialism: like Sisyphus rolling his rock, the sceptic pushes his quest toward an immovable position on the pinnacle of truth or significance. Though always checkmated and never reaching the apex, the quest is not abandoned. Early Greek Pyrrhonistic sceptics attempted to achieve a median position between opposites and find rest in an indifference to both extremes. As Pyrrhonistic scepticism was adapted by later writers such as Bayle, it was often used to construct a position of sceptical polarity against an opposite position which was, it was felt, receiving too much unwarranted adherence. In writers such as Bayle, scepticism became the devil's advocate in the canonization process of established and assumed truths—as such, it often apparently lost sceptical
balance by overemphasizing the opposing position. Actually, however, it assumed the already existing strength of the position being opposed. Some hint may be given of Melville's own efforts to provide a counterpoise to existing attitudes by his remarks to James Billson, in a letter of 22 January 1885, on the poet James Thomson:

As to his pessimism, altho' neither pessimist nor optimist [sic] myself, nevertheless I relish it in the verse if for nothing else than as a counterpoise to the exorbitant hopefulness, juvenile and shallow, that makes such a bluster in these days—at least, in some quarters.¹

It is highly probable that Melville, as his observation of Thomson suggests, purposely cultivated the darker questions of existence to balance Victorian complacency. This constant delving into darkness, however, took its psychological toll. Nevertheless, his efforts toward a counterpoise and suspension of judgment are evident not only in his remark to Billson, but in such statements as that in his poem "Pontoosuce":

Light and shade are equal set
And all revolves, nor more ye know.²

The theme and symbol of the constant quest are of significant recurrence in Melville's works. The action and significance of Mardi are, finally, dominated by the quest or hunt. Taji, the hero, becomes "the hunter that never rests! the hunter without a home."³ The business of Moby-Dick might be described as a colossal hunt: "Ahab had purposely sailed upon the present voyage with the one only and all-engrossing object of hunting the White

¹Letters, p. 277.
²Collected Poems, p. 398.
³Mardi, II, chap. lxxxv, 382.
Ahab is described as "the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the White Whale."\(^2\) The action of *Moby-Dick* is climaxed by the three days of the chase or hunt. Ahab dies still engaged in the hunt. Among the many different kinds of "hunters" aboard the *Fidèle* in *The Confidence-Man* are the "truth-hunters."\(^3\) Much of the action of *Clarel* occurs during a pilgrimage or spiritual quest for truth. A "major pattern of the poem," according to Bezanson, is "the lost hero in search of a guide."\(^4\)

The sceptic quest for truth or knowledge is beset with doubt. Melville sublimates the physical act of seeing to symbolize the intellectual act of knowing, and he frequently uses the symbol of mist, fog, cloud, or haze to connote uncertainty and doubt, the difficulty of knowing without criterions and directives. In *Moby-Dick*, during the first lowering for the "hunted sperm whale" the boat runs through a "suffusing wide veil of mist."\(^5\) Melville launches into universal dimensions: as the night grows darker with "driving scud, rack, and mist," Queequeg holds a lantern stretched on a significantly named "waif-pole"—"There, then, he sat, the sign and symbol of a man without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair."\(^6\) Half stupefied after discovering that he has an illegitimate half-sister, Pierre watches

\(^1\) *Moby-Dick*, I, chap. xli, 232.
\(^3\) *The Confidence-Man*, chap. 11, p. 8.
\(^4\) *Clarel*, p. liv.
\(^5\) *Moby-Dick*, I, chap. xlviii, 283.
while the "morning dawned in mist."\(^1\) After resolving to help his half-sister Isabel, Pierre remains in uncertainty concerning his future relationship with Lucy:

Standing half befogged upon the mountain of his Fate, all that part of the wide panorama was wrapped in clouds to him; but anon those concealings slid aside, or rather, a quick rent was made in them; disclosing far below, half veiled in the lower mist, the winding tranquil vale and stream of Lucy's previous happy life; through the swift cloud-rent he caught one glimpse of her expectant and angelic face peeping from the honeysuckled window of her cottage; and the next instant the stormy pinions of the clouds locked themselves over it again; and all was hidden as before; and all went confused in whirling rack and vapour as before.\(^2\)

It is predicted of Israel Potter that he will end by "wandering forlorn in the coal-fogs of London."\(^3\) Israel drifts directionlessly through life and, as an old man, is, in fact, seen wandering in "fog so dense" that "the dimmed and massed blocks of houses, exaggerated by the loom, seemed shadowy ranges on ranges of midnight hills."\(^4\) "Benito Cereno," published in 1855,\(^5\) is close in time and tenor to The Confidence-Man, which Melville finished writing in 1856. In both works, Melville's concentration upon the epistemological problem is so intense as to seem, at times, verging on an obsession.\(^6\) The aura of ambiguity

\(^1\) *Pierre*, Bk. V, chap. iii, p. 129.


\(^3\) *Israel Potter*, chap. i, p. 6.


\(^6\) The vocabulary of "Benito Cereno" is almost surfeited with such terms as "suspicion" (pp. 79, 85, 92, 104, 114—pagination given here and throughout this note is that of the Hendricks House edition of *Piazza Tales*), "secret" (pp. 80, 89, 90), "mysterious" (p. 80), "seem" (and forms of "seem"—pp. 56, 57, 85, 86, 87, 89, 93, 99, 103, 107), "trust" (pp. 79, 80), "distrustful" and
and uncertainty, the fear of deception, is prepared for in the initial paragraphs of "Benito Cereno" with Melville's images of mist: again, the difficulty of seeing symbolizes the difficulty of knowing. Gray fowl are mixed with "troubled gray vapours"; Captain Delano has difficulty studying the approaching ship because of the "vapours partly mantling the hull, through which the far matin light from her cabin streamed equivocally enough," and "fog here and there [was] raggedly furring her." In Clarel, the riders begin another day of their pilgrimage in

The gray of dawn. A tremor slight:  
The trouble of imperfect light  
A new begins. In floating cloud  
Midway suspended down the gorge,  
A long mist trails white shreds of shroud.

"distrusts" (pp. 81, 114), "mistrust" (p. 77), "certain" (p. 80), "deceive" (pp. 80, 116), "enigmas" and "enigmatical" (pp. 81, 115, 83), "delusive" (p. 81), "equivocally" (p. 56), "illusory" (p. 77), "subterfuge" (p. 82), "duplicity" (p. 77), "apparent" (and forms of "apparent"—pp. 56, 82, 104, 112, 116, 117), "appearance" (and forms of "appearance"—pp. 56, 57, 83, 113, 121), "obscure" (p. 85), "inquisitively" (p. 85), "thought" (pp. 85, 93, 105), "confidence" (pp. 87, 88, 92, 111), "images" (p. 88), "puzzled" (p. 90), "comprehend" (p. 90), "meaning" (p. 90), "manifest" (p. 92), "speculative" (p. 93), "contradictory" and "contradictions" (pp. 94, 115), "vagary" (p. 101), "incredulity" (p. 102), "credible" and "credence" (pp. 103, 123), "imagined" (p. 103), "impression" (p. 109), "dubious" (p. 123), "deceptions" (pp. 56, 139), "baffling" (p. 56), "uncertainty" (p. 56), "surmising" (p. 56), "scrutiny" (p. 59), "inkling" (p. 65), "imposture" (p. 76), "suppositions" (p. 76). Also present are many turns of phrase such as "what was the truth?" (p. 82); "if there was ground for mistrusting his veracity" (p. 82); "What meant this?" (p. 89); "puzzled to comprehend the meaning of such a knot" (p. 90). The above list is by no means exhaustive and could be multiplied many times in the longer work of The Confidence-Man.

1 The Piazza Tales, p. 66.

2 Ibid., p. 67.

3 Ibid., p. 68.

4 Clarel, Pt. III, canto xxxii, 11. 1-5.
Again using sight to represent insight in the quest for truth, Melville symbolizes the intensity of the quest by portraying the strain placed upon the eyes or by portraying near blindness in the effort to "see." To a company discussing blind Homeric bards, Babbalanja, in *Mardi*, remarks: "Few grand poets have good eyes; for they needs blind must be, who ever gaze upon the sun."\(^1\) In a letter to Evert A. Duyckinck 3 March 1849, Melville, after praising Emerson for diving into truth, praises the "whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began."\(^2\) \(^2\) In *Moby-Dick*, the spout of the White Whale is connected with "deep thoughts" and "incommunicable contemplations," and the observation is made: "I have heard it said, and I do not much doubt it, that if the jet is fairly spouted into your eyes, it will blind you."\(^3\) The captain of the Samuel Enderby (a ship also "hunting" the whale) tells how he and his crew tried to capture Moby Dick. They are accidentally drawn right next to the Whale, and the captain declares: "I was blind as a bat---both eyes out---all befogged and deadened with black foam."\(^4\) In language that points back to the sun image of *Mardi* included in the quotation given at the beginning of this paragraph, Ahab says: "Cursed be all the things that cast man's eyes aloft to the heaven, whose live vividness but scorches him, as these old eyes are even now scorched

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2. *Letters*, p. 79.
with thy light, 0 sun!"\(^1\) And in "The Candles" chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Ahab accosts the fiery "supernal power": "Thou canst blind; but I can then grope.

... Take the homage of these poor eyes... The lightning flashes through my skull; mine eye-balls ache and ache... Yet blindfold, yet will I talk to thee."\(^2\) The sun is a common symbol for God, the Whale is Melville's own. In his first close encounter with the Whale on the three climactic days of chase, Ahab comes off with "blood-shot, blinded eyes."\(^3\) On the third and last day of the chase, in statements that show the integration of "The Fountain" and "The Candles" chapters, it is said that "Ahab was fairly within the smoky mountain mist" of the Whale's spout;\(^4\) shortly after, Ahab cries: "I grow blind; hands! stretch out before me that I may yet grope my way."\(^5\) The indomitable Ahab refuses to give up the quest. In Melville's next novel, Isabel warns Pierre: "Thou shalt not strain thine eyes in the twilight."\(^6\) After describing Pierre's search for truth—"the deeper and the deeper that he dived, Pierre saw the everlasting elusiveness of Truth"\(^7\)—the narrator tells how Pierre's "incessant application told upon his eyes... Sometimes he blindly

\(^1\) *Ibid.*, chap. cxviii, 274.


\(^6\) *Pierre*, Bk. XXII, chap. ii, p. 420.

\(^7\) *Ibid.*, Bk. XXV, chap. iii, p. 472.
wrote with his eyes turned away from the paper."¹ The mysterious spirit spout of Moby-Dick becomes, in Pierre, the "mysterious tap-rooms"²--with a double entendre; finally, while winding in and out of the "obscurest warehousing lanes," Pierre is afflicted with "blindness, and vertigo, and staggering"³ and he falls. The Lawyer in "Bartleby" notices that Bartleby's vision is becoming impaired, and, in a bit of dialogue that is rich in both humor and dark implications, Melville has the Lawyer ask Bartleby: "How would a bar-tender's business suit you? There is no trying of the eye sight in that."⁴

According to Melville, man, for all his efforts to "see," is not able to come to unquestionable stable truths, to standards and criterions that he may know, and, what is perhaps even more important for Melville, that he may use as guides to correct, moral action. This inability to come by criterions, guides, and directing principles, whether natural or supernatural, is also symbolically expressed in Melville's art: it is the "chartless" voyage of Mardi,⁵ it is the "infallible" guidebook of Redburn that turns out to be a "delusion."⁶ In his "Apology," Montaigne wrote: "Where the compass, the square, and the rule, are crooked, all propositions drawn thence . . . must,

¹Ibid., p. 473.
²Ibid., p. 474.
³Ibid., pp. 474, 475.
⁴The Piazza Tales, p. 59.
⁵Mardi, II, chap. lxv; 276.
⁶Redburn, chap. xxxi, pp. 192, 193.
of necessity, be also defective."¹ Although Melville's mariner's compass is of a different kind than Montaigne's there is an affinity of thought in their use of the example of fallibility in the two instruments. In an episode that probably points ahead to Pierre and the wholly "inverted" thought and maxims of men that are due to the capricious "heavens,"² Ahab's instruments of direction, his compasses, are exactly "inverted" by an electrical storm (often connected with heaven and the deity by Melville), so that the Pequod is unwittingly going in the opposite direction from that of her intention.³ Melville again uses the figure of the inverted compasses in "The Haglets" and in Clarel, and, in both poems, the wrecked ships are presided over by the Fates symbolized by three birds⁴—symbols of heaven. The numerous references to "wrecks" in Melville's works probably derives from his view that man is voyaging through life without guides. The other means of ascertaining the course of the Pequod are also ineffective: Ahab tramples his quadrant because it cannot tell him what he wants to know,⁵ and the sea snaps the log-line and the log is lost.⁶ Ahab then makes his own instruments, but, in the end, the quest is not resolved but simply ends with Ahab's destruction. Melville, in The Confidence-Man, plays up the inefficacy of the Counterfeit Detector. The Simeon-like old man of the

¹Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 281.
²Pierre, Bk. IX, chap. i, p. 231.
³Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxxiv, 296.
⁴Collected Poems, p. 187; Clarel, Pt. III, canto xii, l. 97.
⁵Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxviii, 275.
⁶Ibid., chap. cxxv, 301.
closing chapter remarks of the Detector: "I don't know, I don't know. . . .
There's so many marks of all sorts to go by, it makes it kind of uncertain."¹
Man has no infallible faculties, no flawless instruments, no "incontestable
vouchers"² by which to steer his course.

Melville's world is a wildly wandering one without direction or cri-
terions. The ship, Melville's microcosmic world, is "chartless" voyaging:³
in Melville's view, there are no sure maps, no routes laid out for man's un-
questioning adherence. At the beginning of Moby-Dick, Ishmael, the signifi-
cance of whose name, for Melville, includes the concept of an orphan,⁴ embarks
on the world-ship Pequod, whose wake is described as "the devious zig-zag
world-circle of the Pequod's circumnavigating wake";⁵ at the end, he is picked
up by "the devious-cruising 'Rachel,'" as just "another orphan."⁶ Sceptically,
the novel comes full circle with Ishmael's uncertainty intact. The quest of
Clarel follows a like pattern: the pilgrims reach,

At last, Jerusalem! 'Twas thence
They started—thither they return,
Rounding the waste circumference.⁷

¹ The Confidence-Man, chap. xlv, p. 331.
³ Mardi, II, chap. lxv, 276.
⁴ See Pierre, Bk. V, chap. i, p. 125. Pierre has an "orphan-like"
feeling like Ishmael without a maternal Hagar.
⁵ Moby-Dick, I, chap. xlv, 251. Underlining added on "devious."
⁶ Ibid., II, "Epilogue," [368]. Underlining added. These two quo-
tations are in italics in the Standard edition.
⁷ Clarel, Pt. IV, canto xxix, 11. 11-13.
The microcosmic world of "Benito Cereno," the ship San Dominick, is marked by the "uncertainty of her movements." In The Confidence-Man, the ship Fidèle wends her way through eddies. Melville also used symbols of forests, woods, and wilderness to show man's plight. Pierre is seen "wandering through the forest, his eye pursuing its ever-shifting shadowy vistas." The hero of Israel Potter is fitly named Israel, "since, for more than forty years, poor Potter wandered in the wild wilderness" of the world. Like the traveler in "The Piazza," man follows a "zigzag, perilous road." In the enigmatic world of "Benito Cereno" Melville joins his sea and ship imagery with that of the forest: "The San Dominick had been battledored about by contrary winds, inveigled by currents, or grown weedy in calms. Like a man lost in woods, more than once she had doubled upon her own track." Melville's world is traveling blind, all ships devious cruising, man an Ishmael, a spiritual nomad wandering through a wilderness of contradictions. Melville was well aware of the limitations of the human intellect. The narrator in Pierre declares that it is only "the miraculous vanity of man" that would allow him to think he has "come to the Ultimate of Human Speculative Knowledge." Even when man does seem to find

1 The Piazza Tales, p. 68.
2 The Confidence-Man, chap. xvi, p. 100.
4 Israel Potter, chap. i, p. 5.
5 The Piazza Tales, p. 12.
6 Ibid., p. 81.
7 Pierre, Bk. IX, chap. i, p. 233.
significance, it is an "unconfirmed significance."¹

Finally, all is left in a state of doubt. Montaigne had asked during his explanation of Pyrrhonism: "Can any thing be proposed to us to grant, or deny, which it shall not be permitted to consider as ambiguous?"² Melville's Pierre, which, like his other philosophically influenced novels, questions the nature of God, man, and nature, is significantly subtitled Or, The Ambiguities. Further, in Rabelais's chapter on the Pyrrhonian philosopher Trouillogan, the "abnegation of both extremes" is called "neuter."³ Ephraim Chambers, in his article on scepticism, says that one of its maxims is "neutrality."⁴ Pascal proclaimed in his Pensées that "he who would think to remain neuter, is a Pyrrhonist par excellence. This neutrality is the very essence of Pyrrhonism."⁵ In the penultimate chapter of Pierre, Pierre entirely claims neither Lucy nor Isabel with what they symbolically represent (light and darkness, goodness and evil), and he declares: "Pierre is neuter now!"⁶

In the "Apology," Montaigne explains that it is practically impossible for a sceptic to speak without making a judgment whereas he is supposed to suspend judgment and maintain doubt. Therefore, if the sceptic says, "I know not" or "I doubt," he is accused of making a judgment or of being sure that he

¹Clarel, Pt. I, canto xlv, 1. 31.
²Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 231.
³Rabelais, III, Bk. III, chap. xxxv, 50.
⁴Chambers, p. 31.
⁵Pascal, 1835 ed., p. 529.
⁶Pierre, Bk. XXVI, chap. vi, p. 503.
does not know or that he doubts. Montaigne suggests that the sceptic would be less vulnerable to such accusation and that it would be more accurate if he used the interrogative form to express his doubt; instead of saying "I know not" or "I doubt," he would ask "What do I know?" It seems, however, a rather picayunish philosophical quibble to assert that the sceptic should logically not make any statements at all; statements may be made that are still unconfirmed and highly doubtful to a much greater degree than like statements made by a man who is unquestioning in intention and attitude. Further, in the dialectical approach of scepticism, with its consideration of polarities, statements are often made on both sides of an issue in the sceptic's self-debate, an approach which exemplifies his pervading and final questioning and doubtful attitude. An example of these counter considerations may be seen in Melville's short but significant chapter "Sailing On" in Mardi, Melville's first novel to give evidence of his growing scepticism. Melville writes in nautical terms of launching off and sailing on in the "world of mind" toward the attainment of truth—the "golden haven." His first consideration or statement is quite positive:

Those who boldly launch, cast off all cables; and turning from the common breeze, that's fair for all, with their own breath fill their own sails. Hug the shore, naught new is seen; and "Land ho!" at last was sung, when a new world was sought.

A few lines further he considers the negative prospects:

So, if after all these fearful, fainting trances, the verdict be, the golden haven was not gained;—yet, in bold quest thereof, better to sink in boundless deeps, than float on vulgar shoals; and give me, ye gods, an

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1 Montaigne, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 244.
2 Mardi, II, chap. lxv, 276.
utter wreck, if wreck I do.\textsuperscript{1}

The particular emphasis of the sceptic quest is, however, best expressed in the form of the question. In accordance with Montaigne's suggestion, Melville places many of his most prominent and persistent doubts in the interrogative form: "Where is the Ultimate?"; "What think you lies beyond?"; "Have we mortals naught to rest on, but what we see with eyes?"; "To what end your eternal inquisitions?"; "And what are men?" "What is it, to be something?"; "To what final purpose do I walk about, eat, think, dream?"; "What is death?\textsuperscript{2} "Where lies the final harbour, whence we unmoor no more?"; "Where is the foundling's father hidden?"; "Great God, where art Thou?"; "Faith? What's that?"\textsuperscript{3} "How can one sin in a dream?"\textsuperscript{4} "Can no final good be wrought?"; "Is life but a dream?"; "And life once over, who shall tell the rest?"; "Have we gamed and lost?"; "Is that high Providence, or Chance?"; "Yea, are ye, gods?"; "What basis then?"\textsuperscript{5} "How long wilt make us still to doubt?"; "What for earth?"; "What is stable?"; "Is life indeed a dream?"; "What clew, what clew?"; "What may man know?"\textsuperscript{6} "But aren't it all sham?"\textsuperscript{7} Finally, to the question,

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., 277.

\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., chap. xx, 81; chap. xxix, 115, 116; chap. xxxi, 126; chap. xxxii, 131; chap. xxxix, 159, 160; chap. lix, 255.

\textsuperscript{3}Moby-Dick, II, chap. cxiv, 264; chap. cxxiii, 293; chap. cxxvii, 309.

\textsuperscript{4}Pierre, Bk. XIX, chap. ii, p. 382.


\textsuperscript{6}Clarel, Pt. I, canto xiii, 1. 74; canto xxxiv, 1. 35; Pt. II, canto iv, 1. 93; Pt. III, canto xiv, 1. 118; canto xx, 1. 42; Pt. IV, canto iii, 1. 109.

\textsuperscript{7}Billy Budd, ed. Hayford-Sealts, leaf 349, p. [132].
"What is truth?", Melville the sceptic remarks through Babbalanja:

That question is more final than any answer.¹

¹Mardi, I, chap. xciii, 329.
APPENDIX

THE COMPLETE WORKS
OF
MICHAEL DE MONTAIGNE;
COMPRISING;
THE ESSAYS
(TRANSLATED BY COTTON);
THE LETTERS;
THE JOURNEY INTO GERMANY AND ITALY;
NOW FIRST TRANSLATED;
A LIFE, BY THE EDITOR;
Notes from all the Commentators;
THE CRITICAL OPINIONS OF EMINENT AUTHORS ON MONTAIGNE;
THE ÉLOGES OF MM. JAY AND VILLEMAIN;
A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE OF ALL THE EDITIONS;
AND COPIOUS INDEXES.

BY
WILLIAM HAZLITT.

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MDCCCLXII.
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whereas every other thing, whether an animal or a vessel, which enters into the dreadful gulf of this monster's mouth, is instantly lost and swallowed up; this little fish retires into it with the greatest security, and there sleeps.

[Passage from 1811 Essays, II, 100.]

“... whereas all the other things, whether beast or vessel, that enter into the dreadful gulf of this monster's mouth, are immediately lost and swallowed up, this little fish retires into it in great security, and there sleeps.”

[Passage from 1842 and 1845 Hazlitt edition of Montaigne's Works, Bk. II, chap. xii, p. 219.]

“... whereas all the other things, whether beast or vessel, that enter into the dreadful gulf of this monster's (whale's) mouth, are immediately lost and swallowed up, the sea-gudgeon retires into it in great security, and there sleeps.”

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[Extract from 1851 first American edition of Melville's Moby-Dick, p. xii.]
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APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Sister Mary Dominic Stevens, O.P. has been read and approved by:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

1/16/67  
Date  

Signature of Adviser