

MELVILLE'S QUARREL WITH THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Melville has usually been considered either as one of the Transcendental writers or as having been influenced by Transcendental thought. There has been a critical acceptance of the thesis that Melville began as a Transcendentalist; then, as he grew older and presumably less wise in the romantic sense, he eschewed his early idealism and opted for an acceptance of moral expediency and complicity.

The beginning hypothesis of this study will be that Melville, although he could be said to share some of Transcendentalism's secondary ideas and attitudes, objected to many of the Transcendentalists' most cherished beliefs. In fact, one can say that, rather than being a Transcendentalist writer, Melville was an anti-Transcendentalist writer, constitutionally and intellectually unable to accept the Transcendental view of life.

In advancing the argument of this study, the critical works of Melvillean scholars will be considered for the light they may throw upon Transcendental influence on Melville's work. In addition, critical source material will be used to garner Melville's thought embodied in the marginal comments and underlinings of his books where the original sources are not available. Further, Melville's own works will be analyzed in the light of the stated hypothesis to

determine to what extent they support the theory that Melville was not influenced positively by the Transcendental school of thought. After an evaluation of critical data and Melville's fiction, a conclusion will be drawn as to whether the original hypothesis can be sustained by documentary evidence.

There are three sources for data on Melville's opposition to Transcendentalism or to specific Transcendental philosophers. One source is the marginal notes and underlinings on his copies of Emerson's essays, on works which treat of Transcendentalism, or works which embody or refute its beliefs.¹ Another source is Melville's letters.² These are primary sources for Melville's feeling in regard to Transcendentalism and its official spokesmen. They require no interpretation and cannot be mistaken. A third source is the fictional works of Melville. These can only be interpreted in the light of his known remarks as to Transcendentalist beliefs.

The attack upon the problem will focus upon the main areas of Melville's opposition to the Transcendentalist philosophy. The primary area of difference is its basic idealism, and the qualities which follow from an idealistic outlook on life: intellectualism, optimism, and innocence.

¹These marginalia are found in various critical works treating of Melville. The exact source will be indicated in footnotes throughout this paper.

²Quotations from Melville's letters are from the Davis and Gilman edition. Exact footnotes are provided where quotations from this source are used.

CHAPTER II

MELVILLE AND TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM

Melville's quarrel with Transcendentalism rested ultimately upon his objection to Transcendentalist idealism. As Milton Stern shows in his argument for Melville's naturalism, Melville's cosmic view led him to disagree with the prevailing idealism in almost every area of man's philosophical interests: the nature of man, concepts of individual identity, the nature of social institutions, and the sense of history.³ This study will touch only lightly upon these ideas, as such, and will confine its argument to the three aspects of Transcendental idealism to which Melville objected most strenuously. These three offspring, as it were, of idealism were Transcendental intellectualism, which Melville called lack of heart; Transcendental optimism; and its corollary Transcendental innocence, or disbelief in objective evil. Transcendental innocence can also be termed a lack of the tragic view of life.

Two points basic to this discussion of Melville's quarrel with Transcendentalism must be considered as grounds for a fundamental

³Milton Stern, The Fine-Hammered Steel of Herman Melville (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1957). Mr. Stern presents a brilliant argument for Melville as an anti-idealist, many times citing Transcendental "cosmic idealism" as the contemporary philosophical belief to which Melville's was most opposed.

disagreement before proceeding to the argument proper. The first point is a consideration of what Melville considered Transcendentalism to be. The second is Melville's attitude to systematic philosophies in themselves.

There is a question as to whether Transcendentalism can be termed a systematic philosophy, or merely an attitude to life.⁴ There is no question but that Melville regarded it as another guise of Platonism and the Kantian idealism.

Plato, and Spinoza, and Goethe, and many more belong to this guild of self-imposters, with a preposterous rabble of Muggletonian Scots and Yankees, whose vile brogue still more bestreaks the stripedness of their Greek or German Neoplatonic originals.⁵

Even if one grant that Transcendentalism may not be a philosophy, it rests upon a systematic attitude, a certain way of viewing reality. This attitude is idealistic, and, in its purest form, is founded upon a disbelief in the reality of the apparent world.

One must, also, bear in mind that the word Transcendentalism, in addition to formal philosophical ideas and beliefs, also meant to Melville ascetic purity in conduct, cloudy mysticism, and abstractions carried to the point of attenuation, these all arising from a characteristic outlook on life which he charged to the Transcendentalists as a group.

⁴Henry David Gray, Emerson: A Statement of New England Transcendentalism as Expressed in the Philosophy of Its Chief Exponent (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1958), p. 26.

⁵Herman Melville, Pierre, or The Ambiguities (New York: Henricks House, Inc., 1957), p. 244.

That Transcendentalism had for Melville the meaning of ascetic purity of conduct and cloudy mysticism is evident from his "remarks on the Transcendental flesh-brush philosophy" in Pierre. The attempts to "fatten the soul by starving the body"⁶ are referred to by the narrator as

...that inevitable perverse ridiculousness, which so often bestreaks some of the essentially finest and noblest aspirations of those men, who disgusted with the common conventional quackeries, strive, in their clogged terrestrial humanities, after some imperfectly discerned, but heavenly ideals; ideals, not only imperfectly discerned in themselves, but the path to them so little traceable, that no two minds will agree entirely upon it.⁷

Melville says (if the narrator be Melville), "...the food of the body is champagne and oysters."⁸ In The Confidence-Man, Egbert's presentation of Transcendental friendship is an example of an abstraction carried to the point of attenuation.⁹ No human being could rise to this Transcendental concept of friendship; therefore, the ideal must remain forever in the world of spiritual reality. Egbert's concept of friendship is a practical elaboration of Emerson's idea of Transcendental friendship and is based on Henry Thoreau's concept as presented in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.¹⁰

⁶Ibid., p. 353.

⁷Ibid., p. 352.

⁸Ibid., p. 352.

⁹Melville, The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1964), pp. 207-231.

¹⁰Henry David Thoreau, Walden: and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), pp. 333-397.

It will become apparent as the argument of this study proceeds, that Melville's opposition to Transcendentalism as a philosophy will be centered primarily upon the figure of Emerson as Transcendentalism's leading exponent. Emerson's and less often Thoreau's philosophical essays will serve to illustrate the tenets of Transcendentalism to which Melville objected.

Melville's opposition to the Transcendentalists arose from the combination of a fundamental distaste for systematic philosophies of any kind, and a fundamental difference in spiritual outlook to those who espoused the Transcendental philosophy. Emerson will serve as the prime Transcendentalist whose idealistic outlook on reality will be opposed to Melville's more materialistic attitude.

Their fundamental difference in spiritual outlook was, also, the foundation for Melville's opposition to systematic philosophies. A systematized philosophy posits a basically unified and orderly universe. Melville disbelieved in cosmic unity and order.

Milton Stern, in a study of Melville's work as being naturalistic rather than romantic, has noted Melville's belief in an essentially chaotic, contradictory, and paradoxical universe.

...the cosmic idealist emphasizes the equality, the oneness, of man and nature. Melville also seeks sanity in an organic plan for human life....But he approaches the problem by emphasizing the differing identities of man and nature and of all natural forms. If cosmic idealism glosses the differences into a

unity, and the unity is made the Truth, the differences may kill man - as they killed the young sailor on the Mast-Head.¹¹

From Melville's belief in an essential chaos rather than a cosmos, Stern arrives at a view of Melville as a strict upholder of social institutions as the only order possible in nature. From this position, Melville upbraided the Transcendentalists as optimistic progressives who believed only in "newness."

Merlin Bowen, also, takes note of Melville's lack of interest in systematic philosophies.

"Metaphysical" as Melville's interests were, he was not drawn to the abstract or the systematic as such, nor did he feel himself bound to a philosophical consistency....Any attempt to fix or systematize them [Melville's metaphysical ideas] ends only in a weakening of one's sense of the dynamic complexity of Melville's attitude toward life, of his refusal of all static positions, and his acceptance (as Charles Fiedelson, Jr., has so well put it) of "the problematic and inconclusive, and the contradictory" as the true and only face of experience.¹²

Thus, one can see why Melville had no quarrel with Emerson's well-known inconsistencies, his "dotting a fragmentary curve." Melville felt that Emerson's fault was that he imagined his fragments constituted parts of a unified circle. Melville himself was a searcher

¹¹Stern, p. 18.

¹²Merlin Bowen, The Long Encounter: Self and Experience in the Writings of Herman Melville (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 8.

for truth under whatever guise it appeared. He was aware of the contradiction in the world's appearance. When accused of inconsistency, Babbalanja, the philosopher companion in Mardi, replies:

And for that very reason, my lord, not inconsistent; for the sum of my inconsistencies make up my consistency. And to be inconsistent to one's self is often to be inconsistent to Mardi. Common consistency implies unchangeableness; but much of the wisdom here below lives in a state of transition.¹³

Inconsistency to Emerson was an illusion masking an underlying consistency; to Melville the inconsistencies lay at the heart of reality. Melville could accuse Emerson of too much consistency when he (Emerson) endeavors to measure the universe by a systematic attitude to reality. Melville's quarrel with the Transcendentalists began with the belief that they had reached an ultimate truth to which all aspects of reality must, of necessity, fit tidily. It was this dogmatic Transcendental attitude that enraged Melville, this doctrinaire belief in a concept of reality with which the experienced facts of life are as frequently at odds as they are in agreement.

The Pantheistic corporation philosophy of the Oversoul, as Melville termed it,¹⁴ the supposed unity of all things was a case in point. In a letter to Hawthorne, Melville wrote concerning the

¹³Melville, Mardi, and a Voyage Thither (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), p. 399.

¹⁴Melville, Pierre, p. 356.

question of the identity of the soul. He quotes Goethe as saying one must "live in the all."

This "all" feeling, though, there is some truth in it. You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves on your head. This is the all feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion.¹⁵

Melville believed that there is some truth in all philosophical speculations. The evil lies in ignoring the contradictions and building a system that pretends to account for all. Those who ignore contradictions are the yea-sayers who answer "yes" to the one-sided Hellenic view of life. They are the reason why Melville "in the last stages of metaphysics always falls to swearing so."¹⁶ A total commitment to a particular view of life is almost a definition of evil to Melville, and he becomes, in consequence, a "thunderer of NO!"¹⁷

Edgar A. Dryden interprets the white jacket in Melville's White Jacket as a symbol of the falsity of a systematic philosophy. He cites the young sailor's failure to construct a self-adequate jacket as a symbol of man's inability to construct a systematic philosophy within which he can shelter from the contradictions or "inconveniences"

¹⁵Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (eds.), The Letters of Herman Melville (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 356.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 125.

of life. The system hampers rather than frees man and must be cast off to save himself.¹⁸

Dryden further explicates the symbolism of the white jacket by saying that the jacket's whiteness (or purity) is a cause of its danger to the sailor. It must be dyed with the world's hues.¹⁹ "In a man-of-war world one must either be 'dyed' or 'die'."²⁰ This could be further explicated to be a rebuttal of idealistic philosophies such as Transcendentalism which seek to transcend the man-of-war world of experience.

Dryden in his explication of Moby Dick carries the thesis of Melville's anti-idealistic attitude to reality even further. He posits Melville as believing that social institutions are a necessary fiction. Since they are grounded upon a seeming order, they give rise to a false view of reality.

Ishmael's narrative strategy...is grounded in a supreme fiction....Ishmael's creative gestures are a reminder to man that whatever seems stable in experience has been put there by himself. The hierarchical social structures aboard a well-ordered ship, the constructs of science and pseudo-science, pagan and Christian religious systems, even the concepts of space and time - all the forms which man uses to assure himself that everything which happens follows certain laws - are revealed, in Moby-Dick, as "passing fables."²¹

¹⁸Edgar A. Dryden, Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 73.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 74.

²⁰Ibid., p. 75.

²¹Ibid., p. 83.

Melville's idea of the fundamental chaos of nature is evident, says Dryden, in the story of "Benito Cereno," which "demonstrates...truth is revealed only when formal order is destroyed."²²

The Transcendentalists' concern with the problem of reality was answered by their postulating reality as beyond the world of appearance or experience. Melville was, also, deeply concerned with the nature of reality, but believed that whatever the ultimate reality is men are constrained to live by experience in this world. At the same time, he was saddened by the realization that man can never know reality, because he cannot comprehend the immense complexity of life. Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., explicates Ishmael's catalog of whale attributes as a humorous, yet despairing, presentment of this inability to fathom the immensity and complexity of the phenomena of life:

...a man who repeatedly protests his belief in the adequacy of systems, with humourous despair he offers us a "book" system of whale classification....a system which is absurd and arbitrary....yet what his vision records is so contradictory he is repeatedly forced to confess that he can make no rational explanation to make everything cohere. Emotion as well as reason falter before the whale....no feeling is in itself sufficient to comprehend both the temporal and spatial magnitude of the phenomenon....²³

Melville's awareness of man's inability to know truth was the point at which he parted company with all systematic philosophers. Any

²²Ibid., p. 208.

²³Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., Ishmael's White World: A Phenomenological Reading of Moby Dick (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 131-132.

philosophy which purports to know Truth is by definition false. The "Talismanic secret" of the universe has never been found, and "the only voice of God is Silence."²⁴ Man can only guide himself by the experienced heart through the complex and contradictory manifestations of an impenetrably mysterious universe.

Another ground of discord between the Transcendental Emerson and Melville is the difference in the spiritual outlook of the two. The foundation of Melville's repugnance to Transcendentalism is stated in Richard Garnett's biography of Emerson.

He [Emerson] could see, but he could not prove; he could announce, but he could not argue. His intuitions were his sole guide; what they revealed to him appeared to him self-evident; the ordinary paths by which men arrive at conclusions were closed to him. To those in spiritual sympathy with himself he is not only fascinating, but authoritative; his words authenticate themselves by the response they awake in the breast. [Emphasis mine] But the reader who will have reasons gets none, save reason to believe that the oracle is an imposition.²⁵

Melville, being out of spiritual sympathy with Transcendentalism, came to the conclusion that its exponents were imposters. He referred to them as Muggletonian Scots, those who believe their intuitive beliefs are divinely inspired.²⁶

²⁴Melville, Pierre, p. 244.

²⁵Richard Garnett, Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson (London: Walter Scott, 1888), p. 93.

²⁶Henry A. Murray, "Explanatory Notes," Pierre, Note 244.20, pp. 473-474.

In The Confidence-Man the Transcendental disciple himself suggests the truth of this lack of understanding as being based on constitutional makeup.

If the philosophy of that illustrious teacher [Mark Winsome] finds little response among mankind at large, it is less that they do not possess teachable tempers, than because they are so unfortunate as not to have natures predisposed to accord with him.²⁷

The Cosmopolitan, as the spokesman for Melville, received the statement as a "compliment to humanity, the truer because not intended."²⁸

In her study of Oriental influences on Melville's work, Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein notes the essential differences in the characters of Emerson and Melville as indicated by their reactions to the Oriental mystics, poets, and philosophers who influenced so many others during the Transcendental period.

By revealing the profound difference with which he and Emerson regarded Saadi, his markings in the book [Gulistan] provide additional evidence for the extreme divergence in the spiritual outlook of the two men.²⁹

Melville is almost European in his ability to fathom the tragedy and evil of life as revealed by the Oriental mystics. Emerson, a true American Transcendentalist, sees only what agrees with his optimism regarding the inherent good in man. Finkelstein quotes from Emerson's

²⁷Melville, The Confidence-Man, p. 213.

²⁸Ibid., p. 213.

²⁹Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein, Melville's Orienda (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 93-94.

Saadi to be thinking of himself as one who can see God, he would have placed him among the tribe of imposters.

Again, in her study of Melville's markings of his copy of Saadi's Gulistan,³⁶ Finkelstein notes:

The other passages singled out by Melville contradict Emerson's view of Saadi's "benevolent wisdom" and his belief in the omnipotence of good. They deal with evil in the world: fear, envy, malignity, ingratitude, false friends, hypocrisy, loneliness, the abuse of power, frustrated hopes, death, and, above, all, poverty.³⁷

Finkelstein notes in contrast that in Emerson's Preface to Gulistan Saadi is seen by Emerson as inspiring in the reader "a good hope.... He asserts the universality of moral laws, and the perpetual retributions. He celebrates the omnipotence of a virtuous soul."³⁸ He celebrates the "law of Compensation," in fact.

In his poem "The Rose Farmer," Melville notes Saadi's worldly wisdom.

...this prosperous Persian
Who, verily, seemed in life rewarded
For sapient prudence not amiss
Nor transcendental essence hoarded
In hope of quintessential bliss;

³⁶Finkelstein cites that both Melville and Emerson had read the Francis Gladwin translation of Gulistan. Emerson, however, used the 1865 American edition to which he wrote the Preface. Melville's copy was the 1822 London edition.

³⁷Ibid., p. 95.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 94-95.

No, never with painstaking throes
Essays to crystallize the rose.³⁹

Here Saadi is the Oriental humanist who endeavors to enjoy what little happiness there is in a sometimes monstrous world, with no attempt to "crystallize" the essence of life into Transcendental ideality.

Both Emerson and Melville could note Saadi's "ardor for beauty.... But he [Melville] also marked what Emerson passed over, the defeat of beauty by ugliness."⁴⁰ This awareness of the contrasting manifestations of life is evidence of Melville's un-American awareness of the complexity of life, the interweaving of good and evil which man has not the wisdom to undo, but must ever be busy at trying to undo. Melville believed that Emerson simplified life in his search for unity, as all systematic philosophers, or so Melville believed, do by denying the manifestations of evil. Emerson saw only those aspects of Saadi's philosophy which contributed to his belief in the One, and was temperamentally or constitutionally blind to the rest. On the other hand, Finkelstein says, "It is in the perception of evil and the maleficent laws of the universe that Melville found an affinity with Saadi."⁴¹ Where Emerson found authority for a belief in unity, Melville found only a belief in the diversity of the universe, a multi-verse, in fact.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 260-265.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 94.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 95.

The documentary evidence tends to show that, while Melville would agree that there is something in man that longs for unity, as the vast number of philosophies show, the fact that these philosophies arise and die so rapidly suggests that the wish is father to the belief. In his opinion, the experienced facts of life would seem to show that the Transcendentalist philosophy had failed to demonstrate the organic unity of all phenomena. In addition to his objection to the idealistic view generally, he was repelled by specific qualities which he felt were basic to the Transcendental philosophy. One such quality was its real emphasis upon intellect despite its theoretical emphasis upon intuition.

CHAPTER III

MELVILLE AND TRANSCENDENTAL INTELLECTUALISM

One of Melville's three fundamental areas of disagreement with Transcendental idealism is in the area of head versus heart. As in every other life concept, Melville advocated a sane balance between the two. In Melville's philosophy, a sane balance requires that the heart have preponderance over the head. Melville's distrust of excessive intellectualizing extends back to the First Cause Himself. In a letter to Hawthorne, he says:

The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is because they distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch.⁴²

There is evidence that Melville considers God to be the primal cause of evil. In speaking of Claggart as being naturally depraved, the narrator of *Billy Budd* says:

What recourse is left to a nature like Claggart's, surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are, but to recoil upon itself, and, like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end its allotted part.⁴³

The attributing of excessive intellectuality to God as the source of evil can be seen as a belief in the intellect as the source of most

⁴²Davis and Gilman, p. 129.

⁴³Melville, *Billy Budd and Typee* (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1965), p. 49.

of the evil in the world. It is important to note that Melville, also, emphasizes the intellectual qualities of Claggart (and incidentally, of Captain Vere). Evil natures in Melville's works are usually presented as being intellectual. This distrust of cold intellectuality is a major feature of Melville's philosophy.

An analysis of Melville's fictional work reveals that this distrust of intellect is the source of much of his opposition to the Transcendentalists. When he insists upon the importance of the heart over the intellect, he makes it clear that he considered Transcendentalism a celebration of intellect over feeling despite the insistence upon intuition. In his reference to the Transcendentalists as Muggletonian Scots,⁴⁴ Melville implies that they are rationalizing their cold intellectual formulations as being divinely inspired intuition.

Melville rejected the Transcendental purity of thought, arising from this constitutional intellectual coldness, because when it served as impetus to action in the world it resulted merely in conventional selfishness. The *Cosmopolitan*, in The Confidence-Man, objecting to the Transcendental purity of Egbert's concept of friendship, points up this flaw in the philosophy:

⁴⁴Murray, pp. 373-374.

Why wrinkle the brow, and waste the oil both of life and the lamp, only to turn out a head kept cool by the under ice of the heart? What your illustrious magian has taught you, any poor, old, broken-down, heart-shrunken dandy might have lisped.⁴⁵

All the Transcendental single-minded intellectualizing has accomplished is to formulate an ideal which, when put into practice, was indistinguishable from the conduct of one whose only motive is pragmatic selfishness.

Thus, one can see the reason for Melville's distrust of the intellect in contrast to the educated heart when one contrasts the subtlety of thought with the crudeness of action. The intellect will formulate subtle rationalizations which become dogma to be carried out in action. The action will often be expedient in trying to conform to the subtlety of the dogma. Expediency as a moral shortcut is evil. Thus, intellectualization is evil because it is an attempt to rule by reason in an area where human reason is not capable of ruling.

The Transcendentalist, while formulating a theory of appearance and reality which ended in the disbelief in positive evil, seemed unaware of the problem of thought versus action which is also concerned with appearance and reality. Since thought is subtle and action crude, a subtle thought must be expressed in a crude action because choices of action are extremely limited. If a thought must be expressed in an action which is evil, of what use is it to say the thought was good?

⁴⁵Melville, The Confidence-Man, p. 231.

T. S. Eliot says that the "greatest treason is to do the right deed for the wrong reason." Melville would say, or so the body of his work would seem to suggest, that a greater treason is to do an evil thing for a righteous reason.

In his essay on Thoreau, Heinz Eulau reasons that Thoreau's ignoring of moral reality would ultimately have led him to the evil of forcing his idea of the good upon a protesting world. In fact, Emlau considers Thoreau's defense of John Brown as evidence of his continuing movement toward greater violence.⁴⁶ The educated heart, however, a heart aware of life's complexity, formulates no rationalizing dogma. Rather, it follows the promptings of a sensitive conscience. Its actions may eventuate in evil; but it is not the primary evil of trying to guage by reason the good or evil of a chosen act.

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.⁴⁷

This evil is the secondary evil which results from an action operating in the world's complex web of interwoven cause, contingency, and effect. One who advocates a reasoned philosophy such as Utilitarianism

⁴⁶George F. Whicher and Gail Kennedy (eds.), "Wayside Challenger: Some Remarks on the Politics of Henry David Thoreau," The Transcendentalist Revolt (Lexington, Mass: D. C. Heath & Co., 1969), pp. 94-96.

⁴⁷Melville, "The Encantadas," Selected Writings of Herman Melville (New York: The Modern Library, 1952), p. 93.

will commit an act evil in itself but rationalized as the greatest good for the greatest number. The Transcendentalist with his idealistic philosophy will countenance an evil act because it must eventually result in good. In terms of practical results there is not much to choose between the two for one who thought the heart must rule by righteousness.

This belief in Transcendental denial of the heart's right to rule is seen in another important aspect of Melville's opposition to Emerson: his philosophical search for a systematic unity that would encompass all things. As we have seen, Melville was repelled by all systematized thought. Besides his anti-idealist temperament, Melville's distrust of systems was twofold. Systems are too rigid and too intellectual. Both rigidity and intellectuality deny the intuitive wisdom of the experienced heart. Compassion is the wisdom of the heart, compassion not for one particular person but for all. In The Confidence-Man, Mark Winsome and the Cosmopolitan are discussing whether pity for a fellow sufferer is a virtue. The Cosmopolitan would pity the one who suffers even if culpable. Winsome asks, "Don't you think that for a man to pity where nature is pitiless, is a little presuming?" The Cosmopolitan replies, "Let casuists decide the casuistry, but the compassion the heart decides for itself."⁴⁸ Rigid systems give rise to dogma and ultimately deny the flexible play

⁴⁸Melville, The Confidence-Man, p. 196.

of the heart's primal emotions intuitively searching out the righteous way among the forces and events of a complex universe.

That Melville's preference for heart was bound up with his distrust of intellectualizing is borne out by his letter to Hawthorne.

It is a frightful poetical creed that the cultivation of the brain eats out the heart. But it's my prose opinion that in most cases, in those who have fine brains and work them well, the heart extends down to the hams....I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool with a heart, than Jupiter Olympus with his head. [Emphasis mine]⁴⁹

A fine brain without a heart is a curse, Melville believed. The brain without the heart gives rise to intellectualizing and ultimately to evil. This is what Melville means when he says the intellect if given precedence will destroy the heart. The brain without a heart will invent inhuman philosophies such as Utilitarianism, one of the "counting-room philosophies" of Paley mentioned by Melville in a marginal comment to de Stael's Germany:

A man, regarded in a religious light, is as much as the entire human race.⁵⁰

Melville's comment (later erased) was that "this was an early and innate conviction of mine in reaction to the counting-room philosophy of Paley."⁵¹ One would expect, in Melville's opinion, the head to formulate a philosophy that would submit a balance sheet of good and

⁴⁹Melville, Letters, p. 129.

⁵⁰Leyda, p. 651.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 651.

evil and apply it with cold calculation to a tragic race of men inextricably enmeshed in a web of good and evil forces, acts, and intentions.

In a marginal comment to Emerson's essay "The Poet," Melville expresses his belief that the Transcendentalists' intellect destroyed the heart (or perhaps the lack of heart leads one to Transcendentalism, as he suggests in The Confidence-Man). In the essay in question, Emerson expresses his disbelief in objective evil.

Also, we use defects and deformities to a sacred purpose, so expressing our sense that the evils of the world are such only to the evil eye.⁵²

Melville's comment was:

His gross and astonishing errors and illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name. Another species of Mr. Emerson's errors, or rather, blindness, proceeds from a defect in the region of the heart.⁵³

Emerson's refusal to see evil in the world Melville sometimes saw as a spiritual as well as an intellectual pride. In "Spiritual Laws,"

Emerson says:

The good, compared to the evil which he sees, is as his own good to his own evil.⁵⁴

Melville commented:

A perfectly good being, therefore, would see no evil -
But what did Christ see? - He saw what made him weep....⁵⁵

⁵²R. W. Emerson, Essays and Representative Men (London: Collins Clear-type Press, n.d.), p. 228.

⁵³Leyda, p. 649.

⁵⁴Emerson, p. 89.

⁵⁵Leyda, p. 648.

This belief that one sees only what is in his own soul is spiritual pride when set forth by one who claimed he saw no evil. Melville believed it to be a spiritual pride arising from a basically cold nature. This constitutional coldness is the aspect of Emerson that Melville implies might account for his blindness to evil and for the optimistic hopefulness so much in evidence in his philosophy. In Mardi, Babbalanja says that there are some natures in which the vital force burns so low that they have no temptation to evil. It is easier for some men to be saints than for others to refrain from sinning.⁵⁶ In The Confidence-Man, Melville pictures Mark Winsome's appearance of youthfulness as the "reward of steady temperance of the passions, kept so, perhaps, by constitution as much as morality."⁵⁷ This, again, returns to the concept of Emerson as being coldly intellectual because he has no great heart to generate passions.

Intellectual pride is again commented on by Melville in a marginal gloss to The Solitude of Nature and of Man, by William Rounseville Alger. Alger says:

Even the kindly Emerson illustrates the temptation of the great to scorn the commonalty, when he speaks of "enormous populations, like moving cheese," "the more, the worse"; "the Guano-races of mankind"; "the worst of charity is that the lives you are asked to preserve are not worth preserving"; "the masses! the calamity is the masses...."⁵⁸

⁵⁶Melville, Mardi, p. 396.

⁵⁷Melville, The Confidence-Man, pp. 194-195.

⁵⁸Leyda, p. 720.

Melville's comment was:

The expressions attributed to the "kindly Emerson" are somewhat different from the words of Christ to the multitude on the Mount - abhor pride, abhor malignity, but not grief and poverty and the natural vices these generate.⁵⁹

These expressions of Emerson's contempt are evidence, Melville believed, of the lack of a compassionate heart, either the result or the source, Melville was not quite sure which, of his cold intellectuality. While Emerson may say in philosophical theory that all men are capable of nobility and carry a spark of the divine soul, one can see that he limits the capability to those fortunate enough to belong to the gentlemanly class. Only the Brahmin can attain insight or intuition.⁶⁰

In regard to this Transcendental belief in each man's divinity, Melville had never been convinced of Emerson's individualism. He thought Emerson frittered his individualism away into a type of Pantheism, which Melville detested as a loss of identity. He compared Pantheism to the soulless corporations which he also detested: "Corporations have no souls, and thy Pantheism, what was that?"⁶¹ There is a theme recurrent throughout Melville's works which warns of the

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 721.

⁶⁰This is actually a contradiction in Emerson's philosophical beliefs. If, as he says, the cultivation of the "understanding" inhibits the free play of intuition, then the uneducated masses should have freer access to intuition than Emerson's own class.

⁶¹Melville, Pierre, p. 356.

loss of identity from falling into the trap of a Pantheistic feeling in nature. This theme is particularly noticeable in Moby Dick.

But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at midday, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!⁶²

Here Melville warns of the dangers of the mechanical theories of the universe which would deny man any individual identity. When he feels that Transcendentalism is hovering on the edge of Pantheism, he must feel that it is in danger of becoming mechanical rather than idealistic. At any rate, a corporate identity such as the Oversoul is little better than no identity at all as in the mechanistic philosophies. Melville insisted upon each unique identity, whence comes his belief in the individual heart. The heart, to Melville, is the soul, and one's soul is one's identity.

Melville insisted upon the primacy of the heart over the intellect, since he considered the knowledge of the heart the source of the tragic vision of life. The knowledge of man's tragic predicament is a condition of the acceptance of life, and a knowledge of blackness is necessary to a "sane truth" in one's philosophy.⁶³ If one does not have

⁶²Melville, Moby Dick, pp. 214-215.

⁶³Leyda, p. 389.

a vision of tragedy, his philosophy is false, and the intellectual attitudes which contributed to the lack were false paths incapable of leading its followers to truth. Thus, one can see how the "wisdom of woe" would scorn Transcendental idealism, optimism, and innocence as juvenile.

In Melville's view the heart is the seat of a richness of spirit which comes from a profound knowledge of the tragedy of life. Heartlessness is a lack of the tragic vision. The tragic vision comes from plumbing the depths of the individual's own soul. Beginning with Mardi, Melville's works are a never-ending search into his own soul.⁶⁴

It is significant that all Melville's works are open-ended, that is they come to no final conclusion. This open-endedness is symbolic of the multiplicity of the universe which makes it impossible to be known systematically. In White Jacket, the narrator says, "I love an indefinite, infinite background - a vast, heaving, rolling, mysterious rear!"⁶⁵ In Mardi, Taji says, "Let me, then, be the unreturning

⁶⁴Bowen, p. 13. Bowen cites Coleridge's remark that there have always been men "who have been impelled as by an instinct to propose their own nature as a problem, and who devote their attempts to its solution." Bowen adds, "Herman Melville, by his own testimony and that of his friends, appears to have been such a man, and the greater number of his writings may be viewed as so many artistic attacks upon this problem."

⁶⁵Melville, White Jacket, or the World in a Man-of-War (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1956), p. 373.

wanderer....And thus, pursuers and pursued flew on, over an endless sea."⁶⁶ In The Confidence-Man, the narrator says, "Something further may follow of this Masquerade."⁶⁷ Open-endedness is symbolic, also, of man's intellect as incapable of encompassing the myriad facts, not only of the universe, but of his own heart.

In Pierre, Melville compares the soul of man in its infinite range to the amplitude of the Alps; where each peak scaled gives a view of infinitely more peaks yet to be scaled.

Appalling is the soul of man! Better might one be pushed off into the material spaces beyond the uttermost orbit of our sun, than once feel himself fairly afloat in himself!⁶⁸

In this infinity of the soul of man, one can see the reason for the open-endedness of Melville's books. "Lord, when shall we be done growing?" he wrote to Hawthorne.⁶⁹ The searching for and growing into the knowledge of one's identity is a life-long, never-ending task, but one that must be engaged in if man would realize his full humanity.

Melville, in addition, knew that the knowledge arrived at by way of soul-searching would not be such as would lead to an optimistic or complacent view of life or man. In his copy of de Stael's Germany, Melville scored the following passage:

⁶⁶Melville, Mardi, pp. 579-580.

⁶⁷Melville, The Confidence-Man, p. 260.

⁶⁸Melville, Pierre, p. 335.

⁶⁹Melville, Letters, p. 143.

It cannot be denied that there is in Goethe's book [Elective Affinities] a profound knowledge of the human heart, but it is a discouraging knowledge....⁷⁰

Melville's marginal comment was, "What inadventure!"⁷¹ And what an admission! - 'Profound knowledge' and 'discouraging knowledge.'⁷²

This discouragement comes not only from the revelation that man's complex soul can never be known entirely, but also from the knowledge that man's essential nature has a spark of the diabolical. (This belief will be explored in a consideration of Transcendental innocence.)

As was said before, in Melville's view any philosophy that is not based on knowledge of the human heart is nonsense. Again and again philosophies have contributed to a false view of the world by ignoring the tragedy of the evil and the contradictions present in life and in the heart. This truth is revealed to Pierre when he realizes that the world he has believed in is not the true one. From then, he is engaged in a tragic struggle to reconcile this real world "with his own soul."⁷³ All the philosophies he had believed so wise before now seem foolishness.

Now without doubt this Talismanic secret [the truth of life] has never yet been found: and in the nature of human things it seems as though it never can be. Certain philosophers have time and again pretended to

⁷⁰Leyda, p. 651.

⁷¹Melville always seemed to believe that when any writer revealed a "black" outlook on God, life, or human nature the revelation was accidental. Any deliberate revelation of this kind he believed to be hidden under a mask of irony.

⁷²Leyda, p. 651.

⁷³Melville, Pierre, p. 244.

have found it; but if they do not in the end discover their own delusion, other people soon discover it for themselves, and so those philosophers and their vain philosophy are let glide away into practical oblivion.⁷⁴

In coming to a knowledge of one's own heart, one will find oneself isolated from the rest of the world. For this reason, the world of expediency (which Melville hated but believed a sane person must accept) requires that one arrive at a sane balance between his own soul and the world. Media, in Mardi, represents the expedient world, when he says to the aspiring seeker after knowledge :

Babbalanja, you mortals dwell in Mardi, and it is impossible to get elsewhere.⁷⁵

This statement is also a rebuke to the idealists who postulate this world as appearance, not reality. It is also a statement of Melville's belief that one's search for truth of the heart must be balanced by a regard for the truth of worldly experience.

In Pierre, Melville presents a pamphlet which delineates the limits of any sane philosophy, and the limits of man's knowledge of good and evil. This "un-philosophy" endeavors to avoid both intellectual pitfalls of idealism and mechanism. The pamphlet is concerned with what its formulator, the philosopher Plotinus Plinlimmon, termed "horological and chronometrical time." These terms signify respectively man's laws of the world and God's laws of the universe. The philosopher

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 244.

⁷⁵Melville, Mardi, p. 320.

says that to try to follow God's laws perfectly in this world will ultimately involve one in "unique follies and sins." Therefore, men must live by the world's law while preserving a strict knowledge of God's laws, as everlasting standards by which man may check his tendency to abuse horological time. If one does otherwise, our conduct based on the world's time "would finally run into utter selfishness and human demonism which, as before hinted, are not by any means justified by the horologue."⁷⁶ The philosopher draws this conclusion:

A virtuous expediency, then, seems the highest desirable or attainable earthly excellence for the mass of men, and is the only earthly excellence that their Creator intended for them.⁷⁷

A virtuous expediency is a far different moral viewpoint than moral expediency as the world knows it. A virtuous expediency still requires one to live as righteously as possible, and will still set one at odds with the world's conventional conduct. It merely frees man from the burden of an impossible perfection and the guilt attending his failure to reach perfection. A virtuous expediency, even more than perfect virtue such as Christ's, will require a knowledge of one's heart.

The tragedy of Pierre dramatizes what happens to the idealist who would live by what he believes to be chronometrical or God's time in the world. Pierre defys the conventional world to follow the heart. He is right in his belief that the world's opinion, so much heeded by

⁷⁶Melville, Pierre, p. 251.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 252.

the conventional and the morally expedient, keeps the individual from a knowledge of the tragedy and sorrow of life. Pierre says:

Well may my heart knock at my ribs, a prisoner
impatient of his iron bars. Oh, men are jailors all,
jailors of themselves; and Opinion's world ignorantly hold
their noblest part a captive to their vilest;...The
heart!...'tis God's anointed; let me pursue the heart!⁷⁸

In the world of experience, however, Pierre is wrong in attempting to live in what he conceives to be perfect virtue. True to Plinlimmon's prediction he becomes involved in unique follies and sins. This is explicitly stated by Melville in an authorial aside when Pierre expresses a wish to know and understand Plinlimmon's pamphlet which he has mislaid.

I think that, regarded in one light, the final career of Pierre will seem to show, that he did understand it. And here it may be randomly suggested...whether some things that men think they do not know, are not for all that thoroughly comprehended by them....⁷⁹

While it is ethical for one to defy the world's opinion in cases involving real moral choices, one should be sure that his intentions are as pure as he would like to think them. Pierre equates the knowledge of the heart with Truth, and the nobility of man's nature requires that he live in this Truth, "glad Truth, or sad Truth."⁸⁰ Melville, of course,

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 106.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 346.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 76.

always said that man must be guided by the experienced heart. Man's nobility of nature may demand that he live in the truth of his heart, but the experienced truth of life teaches him that this is avvain attempt.

Pierre as he grows in knowledge of his heart finds that an individual's motives in what he believes to be a pure act may be impure and willfully hidden from himself. As Pierre realizes the impurity of his own motives, he learns that the real sorrow of life comes with the knowledge that one cannot live purely in the truth of his heart. He must reckon with the Satanic flaw of his nature and the fact of his entrapment in a world of enmeshed good and evil. This realization is one of the sad truths that makes man a tragic hero. Pierre, in despair at man's inability to achieve perfect virtue, ends with murder and suicide, as Plinlimmon predicted.

Despite Melville's criticisms of Emerson's cold intellectuality, he still considered Emerson "a great man."⁸¹ In a letter to Evert A. Duyckinck, Melville wrote:

I love all men who dive...the whole corps of thought-divers that have been diving and coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began.⁸²

Emerson was a deep diver into philosophical speculation, but, Melville believed, his excessive intellectuality prevented him from being a

⁸¹Melville, Letters, p. 77.

⁸²Ibid., p. 77.

diver into the human heart where Melville was most concerned. Any philosophy not based on a knowledge of the human heart and the facts of the known universe is of necessity false. In Melville's estimation, Transcendentalism failed to satisfy as a philosophy because of this fundamental lack.

The documentary evidence seems to suggest that Melville was anti-Transcendental because of its cold intellectualism, in addition to his being repelled by systematic philosophies and idealism in general. He was opposed to Transcendental intellectualism which sought to satisfy man's aspirations with heartless abstractions. The individual heart should be the center of any life philosophy. In this area, he felt, the Transcendentalists seemed to be strangely ignorant. It will be further shown that the Transcendentalists' lack of knowledge of the human heart was closely related to a lack of knowledge of human nature which gave rise to two closely related qualities of the Transcendentalists themselves: optimism and innocence.

CHAPTER IV

MELVILLE AND TRANSCENDENTAL OPTIMISM AND INNOCENCE

The tide of optimism was running high during Melville's most prolific years of writing. His contemporaries, even the great writers such as Emerson and Thoreau as well as lesser men, accepted or rejected the events of life, and sorted among philosophical ideas, culling from all only those aspects of life and knowledge which gave authority to their optimistic view of man and the universe.⁸³ Melville, almost alone of his generation, saw man as inherently evil and life as tragic.

In Melville's work the strains of Transcendental optimism and innocence are not strictly separated. They seem to exist bound together as inseparable aspects of a life view. Which aspect of character is basic to the synthesis is uncertain. There is a substantial body of imagery showing optimism and innocence as accompanying evil, giving the feeling that they are often equated. The defining sense of optimism, in the Melvillean view, seems to be the belief in the inevitable progress of man's nature and his institutions arising from a belief in man's essentially divine nature. Innocence seems to be defined as the inability either to see evil or to grow by experience of evil.

⁸³Finkelstein, p. 13.

This idea of progress is both theological and ontological. The basic assumption is that since man's nature is basically good all historical events are mere progression toward the fulfillment of God's beneficent plan for the universe. It follows of necessity that a belief in a universe so ordered, when applied to the plane of human existence, will give rise to idealistic attitudes toward the facts of man's nature, life, and institutions. This idealistic attitude Melville considered to be destructive to man because it precludes a true view of man's nature and the universe.

We have noted Melville's opposition to the idealistic cosmic view. Idealism views nature as essentially beneficent and without evil. Melville deemed nature as neither good nor evil but as indifferent. This view is essential to Melville's sane truth which sees both the pessimist and the optimist as wrong. In "The Lightning-Rod Man," the salesman is declared an imposter who would say that "the Deity will...of purpose make war on man's earth."⁸⁴ Ahab sees God as the prime cause of evil. This belief is illustrated by Ahab's reply to Starbuck's rebuke of revenge against a dumb thing (Moby Dick).

All visible objects...are but as pasteboard masks.
 But in each event...some unknown but still
 reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its
 features from behind the unreasoning mask. If a
 man will strike, strike through the mask!...That

⁸⁴Melville, "The Lightning-Rod Man," Selected Writings of Herman Melville, p. 221.

inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak my hate upon him.⁸⁵

Both may be right to an extent, but the destruction occurs when their concepts are put into practice on the historical plane of man's existence.

Stern, in his study of Melville as anti-idealistic, has noted the necessity of a "neutral" world to Melville's metaphysic.

In later naturalists, like Norris and Crane, it seems apparent that the natural world is no longer a neutral thing without moral pattern. The concept of neutral, albeit possibly horrible, indifference almost changes to Ahab's view of the universe as an agent of evil pattern and conscious hostility.⁸⁶

As Plinlimmon implies in his pamphlet, the idealist is ever subject to despair and his optimism becomes reversed to pessimism.⁸⁷

Optimism's vulnerability to reversal seems to Melville a symptom of its falseness. The truth must lie in a more serene position.

Along with his belief in an indifferent universe, Melville believed that there were in this indifferent world, forces of absolute objective evil as well as subjective evil. The Transcendental disbelief in either objective or subjective evil was necessitated by their belief that there is a unity of divinity in all things. Thus, by extension came Transcendental optimism in regard to the nature of man.

⁸⁵Melville, Moby Dick, pp. 220-221.

⁸⁶Stern, pp. 17-18.

⁸⁷Melville, Pierre, p. 252.

Melville was supremely impatient with the optimism of the Transcendentalists or any of those who do not know or refuse to know the tragedy of life. In his essay "Consideration by the Way," Emerson says, "In front of these sinister facts, the first lesson of history is the good of evil." To this Melville commented, "He still bethinks himself of his Optimism - he must make that good somehow against the eternal hell itself."⁸⁸ Throughout Melville's works, the words youthfulness, juvenile, shallow recur in describing the optimist. In speaking of the poet James Thomson, Melville says:

I relish it [his pessimism] 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.⁸⁹

In "I and My Chimney" the narrator speaks of his wife's "infatuate juvenility" and of her being "immortally hopeful."⁹⁰ The optimist is eternally planning for self-improvement and renovations which ignore the reality of the human heart and the experienced facts of life. The short story "I and My Chimney" dramatizes the conflict between the individual who lives by the mysteries of the heart and the optimist, who plans Utopias. The optimist, in this case, the wife, has an "alacrity for improvement which is a softer name for destruction."⁹¹

⁸⁸Leyda, p. 715.

⁸⁹Melville, Letters, p. 277.

⁹⁰Melville, "I and My Chimney," Selected Tales and Poems (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), p. 171.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 188.

In a letter to Duyckinck, Melville has mentioned destructiveness in relation to Emerson, also.

I could readily see in Emerson, notwithstanding his merit, a gaping flaw. It was the insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions. These men are all cracked right across the brow. And never will the pullers-down be able to cope with the builders-up...⁹²

In optimism Melville sees a destructive force which "takes to nothing but newness."⁹³

In addition to its destructiveness, Melville believed, optimism interferes with the deepening of the character to be achieved by a confrontation with evil. The optimist retains the callow "greenness" of youth. Optimism, therefore, is destructive of tradition which leads to a complexity of culture; and it is destructive of the knowledge of evil which leads to a complexity of personality. From Mardi to Billy Budd, Melville insists that a knowledge of evil is necessary to the full realization of one's humanity and to the understanding heart.

It is interesting to note in Melville's works how often he uses the bachelor as an image of the innocent optimist. Pierre, before his exposure to the experience that brings sorrow and maturity, says, "I have never known thee, grief, thou art a legend to me....I know

⁹²Melville, Letters, p. 79.

⁹³Melville, "I and My Chimney," Selected Tales, p. 170.

thee not,--do half disbelieve in thee."⁹⁴ In Moby Dick, where the names of the ships met by the Pequod have symbolic significance, the ship named The Bachelor, her hold filled with oil and sporting a Merrymaking crew, answers the hail as to whether she has seen the white whale, "No, only heard of him; but don't believe in him at all."⁹⁵ In "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," the bachelors are presented as the isolated beings who enjoy life's pleasures with no knowledge of the pain and tragedy that is the common lot of men. The bachelor is in the position of the maintop men in White Jacket, as noted by Dryden. He notices that the maintop men "fancy themselves the social and intellectual superiors of the other sailors" primarily because their lofty perch above "the dense, evil atmosphere of the deck" enables them "to develop a metaphysic which seems to solve the problem of evil."⁹⁶ From this vantage point, White Jacket quotes, almost literally, the sentiment that Melville had objected to so strenuously from Emerson: "We perceived how that evil is but good disguised...."⁹⁷ Here, Melville is accusing the Transcendentalists of maintaining their optimistic view of life by taking an observation point outside the main arena of man's struggles. The bachelor, also, has been insulated from a full share in human responsibility. Therefore, Melville uses

⁹⁴Melville, Pierre, pp. 46-47.

⁹⁵Melville, Moby Dick, p. 627.

⁹⁶Dryden, p. 75.

⁹⁷Melville, White Jacket, p. 182.

the bachelor as an image of Transcendental removal from direct contact with life, and of one who is not in a position to make any valid assessment of the human condition. From this position one can see that Melville would reject Newton Arvin's assessment of Emerson as being beyond the tragic view of life rather than incapable of it.⁹⁸ One can only feel himself to be beyond the tragic view by placing himself outside the arena of human affairs. The semblance of being beyond the tragic view, to Melville, is merely a supremely detached attitude arising from and maintained by a completely detached vantage point.

There is an underscoring in one of Melville's books which seems to indicate this feeling, although he does not specifically apply the implication to any particular moralist. In his copy of The Works of Robert Fergusson, in the editor's [Grosart] "Memoir," Melville scores:

Go, moralists, light of heart and jovial in
intercourse, living at ease, quiet and happy,
writing as a recreation in thy study, surrounded
with all the delicacies, and comforts, and
securities of life, on thy gilt-edged, prim-
folded sheet.⁹⁹

Could this be, perhaps, a picture of the Transcendentalist moralist?

⁹⁸Newton Arvin, "The House of Pain: Emerson and the Tragic Sense," The Hudson Review, XII, (Spring, 1959), p. 39.

⁹⁹Leyda, p. 645.

It is significant in the light of the foregoing discussion of the bachelor image that Captain Delano in Benito Cereno comes from the ship Bachelor's Delight. Captain Delano is an example of how optimism and innocence seem inseparable traits in Melville's view of human nature. It is natural for the optimist who knows no evil to be fooled by appearance. The "shallow juvenility" of Delano is easily hoodwinked by his predilection to see the Negro as essentially a good-natured "Rastus" type.¹⁰⁰ His own shallowness precludes the grasp of the complexities of the Negro heart as well as that of the white man.

Captain Delano is, also, the innocent who, even after his exposure to evil, fails to grow by the experience. This essential innocence is exemplified in Delano's failure to realize that evil must be reckoned with as a continuing fact of life even after the incident. He says to Benito Cereno who continues sad, "Why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky...."¹⁰¹ Benito, from the wisdom of the understanding heart which reckons with evil, replies, "Because they have no memory,... because they are not human."¹⁰² The optimist insulated from the full stream of life, and kept from any profound knowledge of evil, even when exposed to it, by his optimism and innocence, is not completely humanized by a realization of the tragedy of the human situation.

¹⁰⁰Melville, "Benito Cereno," Selected Writings, pp. 306-307.

¹⁰¹Ibid., pp. 89-90.

¹⁰²Ibid., pp. 89-90.

This lack of knowledge of human evil permits the Transcendentalists to formulate a theory that man is one with God and shares, to a lesser degree of course, the infinite wisdom of that Being. Furthermore, the sharing of the Oversoul or the union with the All-Good God assures that man must also share in the divine goodness. Thus, one arrives at Emerson's belief that the divine in man would respond when men were treated as divine. The Confidence-Man is a novel-length refutation of this belief of Emerson which is clearly stated in his essay "Prudence."

Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly, and they will show themselves great, though they make an exception in your favor to all their rules of trade.¹⁰³

Melville would regard this as an attempt to find an asylum in the "jaws of the fates," as he said in another connection. Melville commented in the margin to this statement, "God help the poor fellow who squares his life according to this."¹⁰⁴ In his copy of Chapman's translation of Homer, Melville checked and underlined the following phrase which is almost a motto for The Confidence-Man: "blind Confidence, (The God of Fools)."¹⁰⁵

After the Confidence-Man has made his initial appearance advocating charity which all on this "Ship of Fools" repudiate with scorn, he

¹⁰³Emerson, "Prudence," Essays and Representative Men, p. 141.

¹⁰⁴Leyda, p. 648.

¹⁰⁵William Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought: An Essay in Interpretation (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1943), p. 116.

appears throughout all his disguises as the advocate of confidence in the inherent goodness of humanity. After winning the victim to a blind confidence by adroit playing upon his own false view of himself, the Confidence-Man proceeds to expose the victim as a masquerader himself.

In his Journal, Melville cites Machiavelli's saying "that the appearance of a virtue may be an advantage, when the reality would be otherwise."¹⁰⁶ Machiavelli did not, however, mean that one should assume a semblance of virtue in order to fool oneself. One who would be safe from confidence-man, and, also, one who would be a confidence-man must know himself. The mask must fool others, not oneself.

The total impression one receives of the Confidence-Man is not that of a knave but of one who seeks to test men. The impression is not that of Satan, but of an angel masquerading as Satan. For what purpose he tests man is not made explicit. Perhaps, it is to force a self-revelation, if not to the victim then to the reader. Either the Confidence-Man is so good at his craft that even the reader is taken in notwithstanding his knowledge of the game, or the Confidence-Man is not consistently evil. His indignant reactions to Mark Winsome and his disciple seem to proceed from genuine disgust at such heartless abstractions of ostensible virtues.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶Leyda, p. 569.

¹⁰⁷Melville, The Confidence-Man, p. 231.

Brodtkorb notes a Melville reflection in Moby Dick in the character of Ishmael at the Spouter Inn: "'There is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast...' But as Melville saw it, the master paradox of life is that we cannot know the nature of justice and nobility until folly and the overreaching pride of the ego explain this nature by contrast."¹⁰⁸ The reverse would be true, also: that one would know falsity from truth if exposed to a revealing encounter with it. Could one not say that anyone so well-versed in the knowledge of human failings as the Confidence-Man could not be anything but one who seeks to educate man in knowledge of his own follies? In any case, the revelation of folly and pride should place man in a revealing light to the reader. In this, Melville follows the method of Erasmus in The Praise of Folly.

A review of The Confidence-Man after the book's first appearance states that "the grand morale of the book appears to be that the world is full of knaves and fools, and that a man who ventures to believe what is told him, necessarily belongs to the latter class."¹⁰⁹ The moral of the book actually is that we all wear masks to fool ourselves as much as anyone else. All the occupants of the ship are not knaves, although it is conceded by Melville that we are probably all fools. Nor could we be otherwise in a universe of an infinite variety of physical, metaphysical, and social manifestations with our finite

¹⁰⁸Brodtkorb, p. 251.

¹⁰⁹Leyda, p. 568.

capacity for reason. This can be substantiated by turning to a marking by Melville in his copy of Emerson's The Conduct of Life. In his essay "Illusions," Emerson cites life as a series of illusions, the greatest of which is the illusion that the universe is indifferent or hostile to man. He quotes a Persian poem as the epitome of "mental and moral philosophy."

Fooled thou must be, though wiser than the wise:
Then be the fool of virtue, not of vice. [Emphasis mine]¹¹⁰

Melville marked the Persian poem seemingly with approval, although not the Transcendental philosophy. (His works bear out his approval, since all his tragic heroes are "fools of virtue.") Some of the passengers on the Mississippi riverboat are compassionate and give freely to alleviate suffering, or so they believe. They can be made fools of as can anyone, but they are not fools. At least, they are "fools of virtue, not of vice."

The reprehensible fools are those who do not know themselves, and are fooled to the top of their bent by the Confidence-Man's pretense of believing they are what they themselves think they are. They are all confidence men who have "conned" themselves. Among these are the student and Pitch. The student believes he is a "smart" man of the world, one who can reveal the folly of others rather than his own. Pitch believes he is a boy- or man-hater, but succumbs to argument by

¹¹⁰Emerson, "Illusions," The Conduct of Life (New York: American Book Company, 1934), p. 353.

analogy, which he realizes afterward cannot convince against our prejudices but convinces through one's "cherished suspicions."¹¹¹ The old man believes he places entire trust in God, but continually seeks for safeguards for life and property. And, not least, Mark Winsome and his disciple are exposed as more knavish than the Confidence-Man, himself. One would suspect that the whole book had been written for just this one purpose.

Mark Winsome, as a satire on Emerson,¹¹² is the source of the theory that one must trust men. However, his first remark is that Frank Goodman (the Confidence-Man) should beware of the Mississippi operator. This is a small example (the Confidence-Man goes on to expose others) of how the rarified universal principles of Transcendentalism evaporate when applied to the particular. In practice, the Transcendentalist view is that one can trust man, but not men. As an individualist, Melville would prefer the opposite view: one can trust men but not man.

Winsome is an example of one whose view of himself is a delusion. He thinks of himself as being consciously virtuous. Melville, evidently, sees his virtue as only a symptom of his cold, intellectual temperament. Winsome, presumably Emerson, is described as sitting there "purely and coldly radiant as a prism. It seemed

¹¹¹Melville, The Confidence-Man, p. 138.

¹¹²Egbert S. Oliver, "Melville's Picture of Emerson and Thoreau in 'The Confidence-Man'," College English, (October, 1946), pp. 61-72.

as if one could almost hear him vitreously chime and ring."¹¹³ He is described as having "that look of youthfulness in maturity...the effect or reward of steady temperance of the passions, kept so, perhaps by constitution as much as morality."¹¹⁴ The Confidence-Man says that the Transcendentalist displays a head "kept cool by the under ice of the heart."¹¹⁵ Melville implies that the Transcendentalist philosophy as Emerson exemplified it was a philosophy unconsciously conditioned by the New Englander's native Puritan coldness combined with his "Yankee cuteness."¹¹⁶ The Confidence-Man's interview with Mark Winsome's disciple, Egbert, displays the latter as the living embodiment of the opposite side of Mark Winsome's character: his Yankee cuteness. The disciple serves as an example of the self-deluder whose cold selfishness masquerades as Transcendental self-reliance.

Thus, The Confidence-Man is Melville's rebuttal of Transcendental optimism in regard to man's nature. Not only can one not trust men, one cannot trust oneself. We are all masqueraders, seeking acceptance of the masks we wear as truth.

In every way that Melville tested the Transcendental philosophy, it showed itself playing into the hands of evil men. Just as blind confidence in the essential good faith of men made it easy for the

¹¹³Melville, The Confidence-Man, p. 209.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 205.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 244.

¹¹⁶Ibid., pp. 220-245.

Confidence-Man to cheat his victims, so its attenuated abstractions (such as Egbert's concept of friendship) become vehicles for evil. Thus, ultimately, the Transcendental optimism led to an acquiescence in evil masked by its concept of the essential goodness of the divine plan.

In line with his belief in the indifference of the universe, Melville could not see the universe as essentially good. To him, in addition to the subjective evil revealed in the study of the human heart, there is in the world an objective evil, a type of mindless evil which is symbolized in Melville's works by the shark. Throughout the body of Melville's work there is a constantly recurring theme of optimism accompanying evil. In pursuing the symbol of the shark as mindless evil, we find Melville continually insisting upon the pilot-fish as the accompanying image of mindless optimism. In Mardi, the narrator is appalled by the pilot-fish accompanying his boat who are thrown into a panic by the appearance of the devouring shark only to forget the evil as soon as the danger is over. One can see their resemblance to Captain Delano. In "The Encantadas," we find the image: "Poor fish of Rodondo: in your victimized confidence, you are of the number of those who inconsiderately trust, while they do not understand, human nature."¹¹⁷ Melville's poem The Maldive Shark presents

¹¹⁷Melville, "The Encantadas," Selected Tales and Poems, p. 243.

a chilling image of the pilot-fish who confidently play about the jaws of the shark. The final lines of the poem furnish clues to Melville's belief that optimism, by its misunderstanding of the nature of man, plays into the hands of evil.

They are friends; and friendly they guide him to prey,
Yet never partake of the treat--
Eyes and brains to the dotard lethargic and dull,
Pale ravener of horrible meat.¹¹⁸

To Melville, the optimist who believes that partial evil is universal good is finding "an asylum in jaws of the Fates" as the pilot-fish do.¹¹⁹ Hopeful acquiescence is a compromise with evil; and, as such, is evil.

Transcendental optimism led, in Melville's belief, to this compromise with evil by insisting upon man's sharing of the divine nature. Emerson himself could only love man if he believed that all men had a spark of the divine: "I like man, but not men."¹²⁰ He could see men as worthy and mysterious beings only if they partook of the mysteries of the divine soul. He could not see this divineness in the individual man or in the mass of men, but only in a theoretical concept of man. His love for men was dependent upon his belief in the essential goodness of the divine nature. This belief in an abstraction called man's divinity recalls Melville's strictures against ignoring reality in favor of a false ideality.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 243.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 243.

¹²⁰Emerson, "Journal, April, 1846," Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), p. 304.

Emerson's belief in man's goodness was merely a concomitant of his belief in the essential goodness of the divine nature. He had an instinctive belief in one God, the All-Good. Evil was merely the absence of good, negative, not positive. Melville, on the other hand, sometimes gives the impression of being a believer in two gods: one good, one evil. In his early career, Melville consistently sees God as the creator of both good and evil. In his copy of Balzac's Seraphita, he underlines:

How came it that Evil, King of the earth, was born of a God supremely good in His essence and in His faculties, who can produce nothing that is not made in His own image?¹²¹

As the years pass, Satan, in Melville's works, becomes more powerful and independent. By the time Melville wrote Moby Dick, Satan has become a personality to reckon with. Ahab baptises his spear in the name of the Devil.¹²² He is a Satan-worshiper celebrating the power of Satan as greater than God's. When Billy Budd is written, Satan is co-creator with God of man. In speaking of Billy's single blemish, Melville says:

In this particular Billy was a striking instance that the arch interferer, the envious marplot of Eden still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet earth. In every case, as much as to remind us - I too have a hand here.¹²³

¹²¹Leyda, p. 783.

¹²²Melville, Moby Dick, p. 621.

¹²³Melville, Billy Budd, p. 16.

To Melville, every man has a spark of the diabolical in addition to the divine. For the reason that the diabolical nature has more variable elements in it, Melville could see each individual as mysterious because he is unique. Each man is unique because he does not share an identity of soul with all other men, and each man is tragic because he is alone and marked with the tragic flaw of his diabolical co-creator.

Merlin Bowen believes that Melville's heroes confront evil in three ways: "by defiance: the way of tragic heroism; by submission; the way of weakness; or by armed neutrality: the way of wisdom."¹²⁴ All those who do not confront evil with full realization are not Melvillean heroes. They are merely innocent optimists. Captain Ahab is one who has encountered the evil in the world. His reaction is the ultimate defiance which is as destructive as Captain Delano's innocence. Melville's story of Captain Ahab can be seen as a rejection of the extremist position. While Ahab is not idealistic in the Transcendental sense (although there are implications that he once was), he is a reverse idealist in his simplistic reduction of all evil into the symbol of Moby Dick. He is an idealist turned materialist. Melville was aware of the abyss of despair arising from one's knowledge of the evil of existence, hence his sympathy for his "romantic" defiers. However, he warns of the danger in allowing the

¹²⁴Bowen, passim.

world to drive one mad, as Ahab had done. In his copy of The Autobiography of Goethe, Melville checked and underscored the following passage.

When one enters into the world, and gives way to it, it is necessary to be very cautious, lest one should be carried away, not to say be driven mad by it.¹²⁵

Melville's advocacy of a sane acceptance of human conditions for human life marked his rejection of the idealistic attitude. Captain Ahab was correct in his assessment of the evil of existence, but like Pierre his reaction to the evil was too pure, too Transcendental to be completely sane. Stern says that it is "idealism, but traveling ninety knots in reverse."¹²⁶ Melville believed that men have to accept life on mortal conditions, rather than trying to transcend existence. Ahab, like Pierre, by trying to live by too pure a vision of reality also became a unique sinner, as the philosopher Plinlimmon foretold.

To Melville, the foundation for any sane attitude to life is an awareness of life's complexity. Existence is both good and evil, inextricably interwoven. Optimism, innocence, indifference, and defiance, when put into action in the world of experience, are destructive. If the individual is to act in any way righteously in the world, he must realize the "tragic predicament of mortal man trapped in an

¹²⁵Leyda, p. 355.

¹²⁶Stern, pp. 17-18.

enigmatic substance which is both life-in-death and death-in-life,"¹²⁷ and, at the same time, retain his sanity. The only way this can be done, as the body of Melville's work shows, is compassionate charity between man and man. In fact, the answer lies in the possession of what he deemed the Transcendentalists to lack: the understanding heart.

¹²⁷Finkelstein, p. 110.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The beginning hypothesis of this study was that Melville was not a Transcendentalist writer and was not influenced positively by the philosophical tenets of American Transcendentalism. An analysis of sources has revealed fundamental differences in Melville's and Transcendentalism's thought in these areas: their concept of universal harmony, of reality, of evil, and of man's nature.

The area of disagreement begins with the Transcendental view of the universe: their cosmic idealism. From this fundamental disagreement, Melville's opposition to Transcendentalism descends to the specific conditions of man's existence on earth, and man's nature itself. Melville's view of the cosmos differed from the Transcendentalists' in that they saw the universe as an appearance of diversity which covers an essential unity. Melville believed in a chaos rather than a cosmos. His chaotic view extended to the area of man's existence and colored his view of the social order. Behind the imposed order of social institutions lies the primeval chaos.

Despite the lurking disorder, Melville never lost his belief that man is more important than the institution, hence his emphasis on the individual heart rather than the head. The institution exists for man, not the reverse. This belief in the importance of man in the social scheme is the basis of Melville's objection to the destructiveness of progressive optimism.

The idealistic view of the Transcendentalists lay behind their optimism. Only the optimist of the Transcendental order would dare to be an iconoclast who believes in nothing but newness, as Melville represents them in many of his short stories. A believer in fundamental chaos would not dare to meddle so lightheartedly with man's dearly won stability.

The Transcendentalists had the serenity of an accepted dogma. They enquired into reality only to verify an already formulated explanation of reality. This explanation, in the purest form of Transcendentalism, saw the evil apparent in the world as illusion caused by one's inability to see the beneficent plan of the creator. Their idea of reality was based on an intellectual formulation rather than upon the universal experience of men.

Melville, in contrast, was continually in a spiritual turmoil, continually seeking for truth but unable to accept any manifestation as eternal Truth. He was impressed by the contrariety and paradox of experience, but convinced that experience was the only valid ground for an accepted belief. In his insistence upon experience as the guide to truth, he could rest on only one final conclusion: that experience demonstrates innumerable varieties of truth and contradictions, but it does not demonstrate the truth of any philosophy.

This comparison of the life attitudes of the Transcendentalists and of Melville seems to support the hypothesis that Melville was not a Transcendentalist, and that he was emotionally and intellectually

unable to accept the Transcendental position. In addition, both the documentary and interpretive evidence shows that there is some doubt that Melville can validly be considered a Transcendentalist writer. He was negatively rather than positively influenced by the Transcendental philosophy in that the force of many of his works is generated by the tension between the opposing life view of idealism and materialism. Melville's narrative weight seems always to fall, by necessity rather than preference, on the materialistic side.

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