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# An American Forerunner of the Absurd: Herman Melville

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## **René Galand, An American forerunner of the Absurd: Herman Melville**

Herman Melville is without a doubt one of the most important American writers. His work, no less remarkable for its depth than for its volume, is characterized by his tragic vision of man's fate, by the power of its symbolism, and by the virtuosity of its style. Melville was only twelve when his father, a New York merchant, died a bankrupt. To make a living, Melville tried his hand at different jobs: bank clerk, farm hand, crew member aboard a trading ship which sailed from New York to Liverpool, elementary school teacher, before he eventually, in 1841, signed on as a seaman aboard the whaling ship *Acushnet*. In 1842, he deserted his ship in the Marquesa Islands, found passage for Tahiti and Hawaiï, where, the following year, he enlisted in the navy and returned to America aboard the frigate *United States*. In October 1844, he was discharged from the navy in Boston. His first two books, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), based on his adventures in the South Pacific, made him immediately famous. A more ambitious work, the allegorical novel *Mardi* (1849), was a failure. In order to regain his popularity, Melville published two other novels based on his sea adventures, *Redburn* (1849), inspired by his 1839 crossing to Liverpool, and *White-Jacket* (1850), by his service aboard a U.S. Navy frigate. Melville had married in 1847. After a trip to Europe (1849-1850), he returned to New York where he began to work on a major novel, *Moby-Dick*, in which he made use of his experience aboard the whaling vessel *Acushnet*. In order to write in surroundings more favorable to inspiration, he purchased (with his father-in-law's financial help), a farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. From the window of his study, he could see Mount Greylock, the tallest summit of the Berkshires. *Moby-Dick* was completed and published at the end of 1851. Critics failed to grasp the mythical significance of the quest for the white killer whale, which sold hardly better than *Mardi*. They did not do any better with Melville's next novel, *Pierre or the Ambiguities* (1852). Another novel, *The Isle of the Cross*, was rejected by his publishers, the Harper brothers, and Melville destroyed the manuscript. His literary career went on for a few more years. *The Piazza Tales*, a collection of short stories previously published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, came out in 1856. They include some of his most celebrated writings: *Bartleby*, the tragic tale of a scrivener; *Benito Cereno*, the story of a slave revolt aboard a Spanish ship; *The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles*, a series of sketches about the Galapagos. The title is ironical, since there is nothing enchanting about the islands described by Melville. Other stories were not collected, such as the diptych *The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids*.

Melville was still to publish a fictionalized biography, *Israel Potter* (1855), and a final novel, *The Confidence Man* (1857). After taking part in the battle of Bunker Hill, Israel Potter volunteers to serve at sea on an American brigantine which, three days out of Boston harbor, is captured by a twenty gun British ship. Held prisoner on a pontoon, Israel manages to escape and lead an adventurous life in England, France, and at sea. His exile will last fifty years. *The Confidence Man* still remains an enigma: who exactly is this swindler who operates aboard a Mississippi steam-boat: could he be the devil himself? This novel's bitter irony is reminiscent of Voltaire's *Candide*. Its failure brought an end to Melville's literary career, who lost every hope of making a living out of his pen. He was still to publish four volumes of poetry: *Battle Poems*, *Aspects of the War* (1866), *Clarel, A Poem*, and *Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876), *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888), and *Timoleon* (1891), these last two in editions limited to twenty-five copies. Melville had also written a number of articles and reviews, the most important one being the essay *Hawthorne and his Mosses*, published in the journal *Literary World* (August 1850). Shortly before his death, Melville also wrote the novella *Billy Budd*, which many critics consider his most accomplished masterpiece. The manuscript was found among his papers, and was not published until 1924. In 1866, Melville had been appointed a deputy inspector of customs at the

port of New York, a position he held until 1885. He died a few years later, in 1891.

With Baudelaire (1821-1867), Dostoevsky (1821-1881), and Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Melville (1819-1891) is part of a constellation, a "*quatuor de scintillations*", to use an expression of Mallarmé, which illuminates the threshold of modernity. Like them, he was so far ahead of his time that his works had to wait nearly a century to be truly understood and appreciated. The problems which he tackled are still very much with us: racism, sexism, the dehumanization brought about by the mechanization and commercialization of modern life, the coexistence, within man and society, of the drive to evil and of the nostalgia for innocence, the confrontation with the absurd.

In his very first book, *Typee*, Melville denounced the atrocities committed by white settlers in the islands of the Pacific. Those who claimed they were bringing civilization to the savage natives, were themselves guilty of the worst savagery. Melville also condemns his white compatriots for their treatment of the native Indian population. In his novels about Natty Bumppo, better known under his nicknames Hawkeye and Leather-stocking, James Fenimore Cooper describes the friendship between his Anglo-Saxon hero and two Indians, the last survivors of the Mohican tribe, Chingachkook and his son Uncas. This friendship is based on the loyalty, the bravery and the nobility which characterizes the three of them. In *The Confidence Man* [*Le Grand Escroc*], Melville paints a picture of the relationships between Whites and Indians which is exactly the opposite. His Indian hater is sworn to exterminate every living Indian, because for him the word "Indian" is linked to everything evil: "*Indian lying, Indian theft, Indian double-dealing, Indian fraud and perfidy, Indian want of conscience, Indian blood-thirstiness, Indian diabolism...*" (Chap. XXXVI). Melville shows that this attitude towards Indians exists even in the highest spheres of government, since it inspired the policy of genocide which led to expel the Seminoles from their ancestral land, chasing them out of Florida to resettle them in reservations where many died of hunger and cold. In his review of the book which Francis Parkman wrote about his stay among the Indian tribes scattered between the Western border of Missouri and the Rockies, Melville also demonstrates how unfounded was the contempt of the Whites for the native Indian population.

The problem of slavery, in the 1850's, had become quite acute: would the integration of new states into the Union give the majority to the slave states or to the free states? In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe had presented an idealized image of the Blacks. On the other hand, the defenders of slavery depicted them as child-like creatures unable to fend for themselves without the direction of white masters, or as uncivilized savages in need of stern disciplinarians. These are the clichés which Melville denounced in his novella *Benito Cereno*. Captain Amasa Delano, a good Yankee who is unable to see evil anywhere, has anchored in an island off the coast of Chile. There he runs into a Spanish ship transporting a cargo of black slaves from Buenos Ayres to Lima. He is unpleasantly affected by the indolence and the aristocratic demeanor of her captain, Don Benito Cereno, who, although his ship has the greatest need of fresh water and food, receives the Yankee's offer of help without the least thanks. On the other hand, he is most favorably impressed by the devotion and the zealousness with which Don Benito's black slave, Babo, watches for his master's expression in order to anticipate his every wish. The good captain will later learn that Babo's behavior was only a ruse intended to deceive him. Babo was in fact the organizer of the rebel slaves who had seized control of the ship and massacred most of her white crew. They had spared only those who were needed to sail her back to Africa. When captain Delano and his crew finally gain control of the Spanish ship, he notices Don Benito's continuing melancholy and asks him: " :*You are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?*" Don Benito answers: "*The negro.*" Such is the message which the author

addresses to his countrymen. They will have to pay with their lives for the evils of slavery. Melville's novella was written in 1855. At that time, the war between North and South appeared all but unavoidable. One century and a half later, the shadow cast by slavery is not yet fully dissipated.

To the oppositions between Civilized/Savages, Whites/Indians and Whites/Blacks, Melville adds another one: the opposition Men/Women. Melville had indeed conceived as a diptych the two parallel stories *The Paradise of Bachelors* and *The Tartarus of Maids*: paradise for men, and hell for women. The paradise of bachelors is a club for men located on the top floor of a building. Its members lead a sybaritic life which would provoke the envy of the characters in the movie *La Grande Bouffe*, as is clearly demonstrated by the menu of the dinner to which the narrator has been invited. This paradise clearly shows a regression to the oral stage of development. This is underlined by the fact that these bachelors have neither wives nor children to worry about. *The Tartarus of Maids*, on the other hand, takes place in a remote valley. Melville emphasizes the hellish character of the place by the use of the adjectives and place-names associated with it: "Woedolor Mountain", "Dantean gateway", "Black Notch", "Plutonian, shaggy-wooded mountains", "Devil's Dungeon". This is the site of a paper mill in which all the workers are women. The dangerous and unhealthy conditions under which they work are set off by the narrator: in order to push the cotton rags into the shredding machines, the hands of the workers come perilously close to the steel blades which shred the rags to be turned into paper paste. This process produces a dust which is extremely harmful to the lungs. This paper mill has something in common with the paradise of bachelors, however: the total lack of contact between the sexes. The director of the paper mill is a bachelor, and the boy who serves as a guide to the narrator is just an urchin. Ironically, he is named "Cupid", but this Cupid reigns over a world totally devoid of sex. The only procreative acts which take place in this mill are reserved to the machines, as is clearly indicated by the sexual terms used by Melville to describe the movement of the pistons in the cylinders and the appearance of the paper paste.

In modern society, the condition of the white collar worker is hardly better than a factory worker's, if one is to judge from the fate of Bartleby. This scrivener works for a lawyer. He is seated at a desk located in the corner of a dark room. On one side, the windows open on the brick wall of an adjacent building, and on the other on the wall of a ventilation shaft. The only light he gets comes, through the windows facing the brick wall, from the narrow opening which, far above, separates the two buildings. On the other side, his desk is isolated from the rest of the room by a green screen. Bartleby's boss soon discovers that his employee is so destitute that he lives only on crackers and cheese, and that, unable to afford an apartment, he sleeps on the office couch. Bartleby is in every respect a model employee until the day when his boss gives him a document to examine and Bartleby answers politely but firmly: "I would prefer not to." What can a boss do about an employee who has chosen not to accept "a request made according to common usage and common sense"? Following a series of similar refusals, the lawyer has no other choice than to get rid of Bartleby, who is eventually arrested for vagrancy and sent to jail, where he lets himself die of starvation. Melville seems to conclude that such is the fate of whoever refuses to conform to the norms of the society in which he lives

For Melville, man's fate is not determined exclusively by historical, economical or social factors. It is also subject to destructive forces at large in the universe, whether they be a rattle snake hiding in the tall grass (*The Confidence Man*) or a gigantic sperm whale which can sink a whaling vessel (*Moby Dick*). Evil exists, in nature and within man, and man's reason is unable to fathom the mystery of its existence. Man may be a thinking reed, as Pascal averred, but, as was already stated in the Book of Job, the universe is an enigma which transcends the limits of his

understanding. Job, as God tells him, has not entered the sources of the sea, nor walked about in the depths of the abyss. In *Moby Dick*, Melville illustrates the powerlessness of human reason faced with the mystery of the universe by the adventure of Pip, who serves aboard the *Pequod* as a ship's boy. During a whale hunt, a harpooned sperm whale has struck the hull of the boat just below Pip's seat. The black boy was so struck by fear that he jumped overboard. The sperm whale attached to the line of the harpoon has dragged the boat so far away that Pip has found himself abandoned in the middle of the ocean. He manages to stay afloat, and the *Pequod* finds him a few hours later, but the boy has gone mad. His life is safe, but his reason did not resist the ordeal: "... from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised" (Chap. XCII).

There may be Eden-like places on earth, the South sea islands which Melville described in *Typee* and *Omoo* or the New England landscape where he places the opening scenes of *Pierre*, for instance, but there are also hellish places, the Galapagos islands as they appear in *The Piazza Tales*, in the section ironically titled *The Encantadas*, or the Dantean valley which is the scene of *The Tartarus of Maids*. Similarly, next to creatures of light like Lucy, the heroine of *Pierre*, or Billy Budd, in the novella which bears his name, there are creatures who are like the serpent depicted in *The Confidence Man*: "When charmed by the beauty of that viper [the rattle snake], did it never occur to you to change personalities with him? to feel what it was to be a snake? to glide unsuspected in the grass? to sting, to kill at a touch; your whole beautiful body one iridescent scabbard of death? In short, did the wish never occur to you to feel yourself in the care-free, joyous life of a perfectly instinctive, unscrupulous, and irresponsible creature?" (Chap. XXVI). Melville describes such a character in *Billy Budd*, which takes place at the time of the Directoire. John Claggart, master of arms aboard the ship on which Billy Budd has been impressed. Melville compares him to a venomous beast, the scorpion. Claggart, like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, cannot bear innocence. This is why he must destroy Billy Budd, who is the embodiment of innocence. He will succeed, accusing him of inciting his shipmates to mutiny.

If it is true, as Nietzsche claims in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that tragic art makes manifest the triumph of the Dionysian over the Apollinian, then Melville's art is essentially tragic. This is illustrated in the novel *Pierre* by the ironical contrast between the fragility of the Apollinian forms which dominate the beginning of the work when confronted by the demonic irruption of the Dionysian forces which triumph in the end. One may see a similar opposition in this passage taken from *Moby Dick*. The narrator, standing at the helm, observes the preparation of the oil taken from the blubber or a sperm whale. Huge chunks of blubber are boiled in the try-works. What remains of the blubber after the oil had been melted out serves as fuel for the furnace. The ship's harpooners, the American Indian Tashtego, the African Black Daggoo, and Polynesian Queequeg, are in charge of the try-works. Melville turns their labor into a scene from hell "The hatch, removed from the top of the works, now afforded a wide hearth in front of them. Standing on this were the Tartarean shapes of the pagan harpooners, always the whale ships stokers. With huge pronged poles they pitched hissing masses of blubber into the scalding pots, or stirred the

*fires beneath, till the snaky flames darted, curling, out of the doors to catch them by the feet. The smoke rolled away in sullen heaps. To every pitch of the ship there was a pitch of the boiling oil, which seemed all eagerness to leap into their faces. [...] ... the harpooners wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dippers; as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides; then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul.*

*So seemed it to me, as I stood at her helm, and for long hours silently guided the way of this fire ship ion the sea. Wrapped, for that interval, in darkness myself, I but the better saw the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others. The continual sight of the fiend shapes before me, capering half in smoke and half in fire, these at last begat kindred visions in my soul, as I began to yield to that unaccountable drowsiness which ever would come over me at a midnight helm.”* (Chap. XCV).

This description contrasts with the same scene when it appears in the sunlight: *“Tomorrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, yhe only true lamp – all others but liars!”* (Chap. XCV). But is it not rather the Apollinian image which is an illusion? On several occasions, in *Moby Dick*, Melville emphasizes the deceitful nature of the sea when seen under the sun: its untroubled surface leads the spectator to forget the monsters, gigantic squids, sperm whales or sharks, roaming in its depths: *“... these are the times of dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willingly remember, that this velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang”* (Chap. CXIII). In one his prose poems, Baudelaire states that the drunkenness of art is more apt than any other to hide the terrors of the abyss (*Une Mort héroïque*). Melville's art, on the other hand, aims to make these terrors manifest. This is the lesson taught in the story *Cock-a-doodle-doo!*. It is in fact an ironic fable which illustrates the vanity, when confronted with misery, suffering and death, of an art whose main purpose is to make us forget them through the creation of the ideal beauty of form.

This is undoubtedly why Shakespeare and Hawthorne, the two writers for whom Melville, in his essay on the latter, expresses the highest admiration, are precisely those who, in their works, have seen that the luminous sky was only a fringe which hides *“the blackness of darkness beyond”*. Through such characters as Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, Shakespeare insinuates *“the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth”*. Melville is equally fascinated by the darkness which penetrates Hawthorne's writings, singling out as an example the story *Young Goodman Brown*: *“And with Young Goodman, too, in allegorical pursuit of his Puritan wife, you cry out your anguish, -- ‘Faith!’, shouted Goodman Brown, in a voice of agony and desperation; and the echoes of the forest mocked him, crying – ‘Faith! Faith!’ as if bewildered wretches were seeking her all through the wilderness”* (Hawthorne and his Mosses).

This is why one may consider Melville as a forerunner of the absurd as expounded notably by Camus, who, in an interview published in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (May 10, 1951) has recognized his indebtedness to his American forerunner: *“Si un peintre de l’Absurde a joué un rôle dans l’idée que je me fais de l’art littéraire, c’est l’auteur de l’admirable Moby Dick, l’Américain Melville.”* In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Melville also considers *Moby Dick* as a perfect

example of a literary work based on the absurd. I would like, in the pages which follow, to examine the affinities between these two writers. Bartleby's refusal to submit to society's rules and Ahab's revolt against the evil forces of nature know of no limit. As in the case of Camus' Caligula, their revolt leads to their own destruction, to the negation of the human. But for the authentic absurd hero, Sisyphus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* or Meursault in *L'Étranger*, there is acceptance, at the heart of their revolt, of the limits of the human condition. "Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux", says Camus. Meursault also accepts his mortality. The novella which may be considered as Melville's ultimate literary legacy, *Billy Budd*, ends with a similar acceptance of man's mortal fate.

Like Meursault's, Billy Budd's story is the story of an innocent murderer. When he shot the Arab who barred the way to the cave, to its cool shade and to the spring, Meursault was in fact shooting at the blinding sun and at its oppressive heat. His act was a form of revolt against the inhuman. When he finally comes to understand the true nature of his act, shortly before his execution, this understanding leads him to accept man's mortal destiny. In Melville's novella, Billy Budd, struck dumb by his bewilderment at Claggart's accusation, is unable to defend himself with words: he has no other means of expression than his fist, which strikes Claggart on the forehead and kills him. Billy has killed a superior under war-time conditions. Naval regulations leave no room for discussion, and the ship's commander, Captain Vere, sentences Billy to be hanged. Melville does not relate the conversation which Captain Vere had with Billy the night before his execution. Of Meursault, Camus has written that he is "*le seul Christ que nous méritons.*" And Melville describes Billy Budd's hanging in terms reminiscent of the crucifixion. Does this mean that Camus and Melville turned to faith for comfort against the absurd? Hardly, in the case of Camus: one only has to refer to the interview between Meursault and the prison chaplain, in *L'Étranger*, and to the story of Father Paneloux, in *La Peste*. As to Melville, the question is more complex. Just before his hanging, Billy speaks these words: "God bless Captain Vere!" (chap. 25). But Melville also wrote, comparing Claggart to a venomous beast: "... the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible" (Chap. 12). Can this God whose blessing Billy calls for Captain Vere be the same Creator in whom Melville sees the ultimate source of the evil forces at large in the universe? If Billy Budd's hanging, as described by Melville, is reminiscent of Christ's crucifixion, this analogy may well be intended to be ironical. At the very moment of his execution, Billy's body hanging from its rope swings heavenwards. But this ascension, unlike Christ's, does not lead him to heaven. His corpse is immediately cast overboard and sinks to the bottom of the ocean. One may see a similar irony in the blessing called by Billy on the officer who sentenced him to death: "God bless Captain Vere!". The Captain's ship, as it sails to rejoin the British fleet, encounters a French vessel which bears the significant name of *L'Athée*. In the course of the ensuing battle, Captain Vere is mortally hit by a musket ball: he dies a few days later. Death is therefore the answer given by the Creator to the men who call to him.

It is also the story of an innocent murderer which is recounted by Melville in his novel *Pierre or the Ambiguities*. The hero finds himself in jail, sentenced to hanging for having wished to act as a just man. He commits suicide by drinking poison so as not to be hanged. Isn't suicide the logical solution in a world where, as Melville puts it, "*Silence is the only Voice of our God*"? (Book XIV, I)?

The theme of communication between man and God reappears in *Moby Dick*. Indeed, the narrator's first words are: "Call me Ishmael". Ishmael: God calls. The narrator thus identifies himself with the son whom Abraham had from Hagar, his wife Sarah's Egyptian slave. Later on, Abraham fathered another son, Isaac, whom Sarah conceived in her ninetieth year through the

grace of God and against all human expectations. Abraham did not favor his elder son. He preferred Isaac. Sarah, who did not wish her son Isaac to share his inheritance with the son of the foreign slave, had mother and son driven into the desert. Ishmael is therefore the name of the sons of slaves, of the disinherited, of the exiles. Ishmael, condemned to live in the desert, made of the desert his kingdom. Such is precisely the message which Camus brings to man: turn his place of exile into a kingdom. But the kingdoms which he describes in the stories collected under this glorious title, *L'Exil et le royaume*, seem rather pathetic. Neither can we see a kingdom in the island on which Hunilla, the Indian half-breed, found herself alone (Sketch eighth, "Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow", *The Piazza Tales*). She did survive, however, bearing with courage and dignity hunger, thirst and solitude. Here is the final image which Melville gives of her : "*The last seen of lone Hunilla she was passing into Payta town, riding upon a small gray ass, and before her on the ass's shoulders, she eyed the jointed workings of the beast's armorial cross.*". Does she not appear as the perfect counterpart of Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, as an ironic figuration of the only Christ whom we deserve? Melville's contemporaries who saw in his the author of impious works were probably not entirely wrong.

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