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Evil's Masquerade:

A Study of Nature and American Democracy in Herman Melville's Fiction (1846-1857)

A Thesis

presented to the

Department of English

Lakehead University

Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the

degree of Master of Arts.

by

Raymond Leonard Champagne

May, 1996.

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ABSTRACT

Perhaps not surprisingly, there are as many theories about the intended meaning of Herman Melville's fiction as there are critical perspectives, and this, in turn, creates a great deal of confusion for readers interested in discovering both Melville's philosophy of evil and how his novels and stories embody his beliefs. This thesis, by virtue of advocating the existence of a unifying theme in his writing, attempts to clear up some of the issues that continue to bewilder Melville scholars.

Beginning with an awareness of Melville's preoccupation with evil, the thesis examines the frequency with which he focused on the apparent discrepancy between surface appearances and underlying reality; in other words, between what *seems* and what *is*. It is my contention that Melville perceived life as a grand *masquerade* - beautiful to behold but masking untold evil. The thesis studies both the nature of evil's masquerade and the ramifications of Melville's philosophical outlook and social concerns. As well, it forges vital links between his well-known and more obscure fiction.

Entitled *Evil's Masquerade: A Study of Nature and American Democracy in Herman Melville's Fiction (1846-1857)*, the thesis first examines Melville's understanding of philosophical Nature, revealing that beneath its splendor lurks a horrible evil God is responsible for. I describe Melville's conception of the masquerade theme in his early work and man's predicament

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in a world where evil appears bent on destruction.

The second half of my thesis highlights a crucial transition in Melville's writing; while retaining his notion of Nature's masquerade, he alters his view concerning the role man plays in the world. By examining in particular the baseness of the American character, Melville unearths a masquerade that man is guilty of perpetrating, a masquerade threatening to undermine the very foundation of democracy in America. I argue that Melville gradually turned away from metaphysical conundrums and began writing scathing social criticism, striving to make his country aware of its dangerous masquerade of democracy. Many critics fail to accredit Melville with any interest outside the metaphysical realm, something my research proves to be a fallacy.

My intention is to chart the path I believe Melville's mind travelled as he immersed himself in his writing. The masquerade theme lends a cohesiveness to his fiction that many have not realized. At the same time, I have tried not to compromise that quality of lubricity that characterizes Melville's best writing. For I believe each of his works is somewhat of a Loose Fish, always elusive and thus never entirely within the critic's grasp.

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To beguile the time
Look like the time, bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue; look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.

from ***Macbeth***, I.v. 61-64.

If these waters of human nature can be so readily seen through, it may be either that they are very pure or very shallow.

from ***The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade***

The years of war tried our devotion to the Union; the time of peace may test the sincerity of our faith in democracy.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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DEDICATION

It is with great pride that I dedicate this work in loving memory of my aunt, **Theresa Mabel Elizabeth Cragg Gouldsborough** (1945-1994). She fought her battle with courage.

I will always remember the way she used to sit in the shade of our old tree in the backyard, often alone with her private thoughts. She taught me to cherish laughter, time spent with family and friends, and all the other little things in life we take for granted.

I miss her.

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First and foremost, I want to thank my mom Elaine, my dad Bill, my sister Leah, and my brother-in-law John for their unfailing support. Without their love and encouragement this thesis would not have materialized. A special thanks to my mother and sister for putting a lot of time and effort into helping me type the final draft of this paper.

I wish to thank Professor R.D. MacDonald who first introduced me to *Moby-Dick* five years ago. For his guidance and patience during my study of Melville at Brock University I am eternally grateful.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express my utmost gratitude to Professor W.G. Heath, who kept my passion for Melville's writing alive during my postgraduate years at Lakehead University. The meticulousness with which he reviewed this manuscript at all of its stages forced me to dive deeper into Melville's work than I have ever done before. I thank Dr. Heath both for supervising this thesis and for being the first to make me feel welcome when I was so many miles from home.

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And, lastly, I thank my best friend, Karen, for believing in me even when I questioned my ability to write this thing. In Thunder Bay, she sat with me over many cups of coffee as we lost ourselves in the most enjoyable discussions about American literature and life in general. Karen's love for English never fails to inspire me.

R.L.C.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENTS PAGES

Introduction:	*The Masquerade Theme*	1-9
Chapter I:	*Nature's Masquerade*	10-28
Chapter II:	*The Importance of Experience*	29-53
Chapter III:	*Unmasking the American Character*	54-88
Chapter IV:	*America's Masquerade*	89-118
Conclusion:	*Tokens of a Divided Empire*	119-126
Works Cited		127-133

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INTRODUCTION

The Masquerade Theme

. . . 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.

from *Moby-Dick*, "The Gilder"

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Introduction: The Masquerade Theme

There has always been, and I suspect will continue to be, a fixation for "blackness" in American literature. This "blackness" is not easy to define; in fact, a great deal of its meaning, power, and aura lies in its abstruseness. It has, of course, been manifested in different ways in different eras by different authors in the twentieth century: John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* dramatizes the circumstances of Depression-era Americans, Ernest Hemingway captures a sense of the ferocity of brute nature in much of his work, and William Faulkner's prominent themes of death and suicide are evinced powerfully in such masterful works as *Light in August* and *The Sound and the Fury*. No matter how disparate these portrayals of life's blackness may seem, there is no escaping the fact that they are all inherently *dark*. Their imagery and symbolism, in the final analysis, serve to unveil something innately tragic about life. Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Faulkner are just three of a long succession of gifted writers whose work has had the advantage of the rich tradition of nineteenth-century American fiction from which to take inspiration.

One of the first American writers consciously to recognize and express this sense of blackness was Herman Melville (1819-1891), a man spurned by his American reading public largely because of the dark and complex messages behind his best fiction. In his essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville attributes the greatness of authors - including

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Shakespeare and Hawthorne - to their conception of what he deems the "great power of blackness" (540). Melville is surely correct: this intuitive understanding of blackness would seem to be what has made all of the aforementioned writers great. Certainly, it is what has made Melville so renowned this century. His influence in giving American literature both direction and stimulus is evident in Faulkner's claim that if there was one book he wished he could have written, it would be Melville's masterpiece *Moby-Dick* (Blotner 550).

It was out of my fascination for this theme of blackness that the topic for this thesis arose. I began to see an interesting correlation between Melville's well-known preoccupation with what he saw as the discrepancy between appearance and reality and the dark truth (blackness) characterizing reality. According to this philosophy, appearances function as a masquerade, disguising the evil at work in the world. Becoming convinced of Melville's constant use of the masquerade theme in his narratives, I had only to turn to the criticism of distinguished Melville scholars such as Harry Levin and James E. Miller, Jr. for confirmation. "The notion of the masquerade," Levin writes in *The Power of Blackness*, "which Poe and Hawthorne employed to diversify their somber tonalities, is an integrating concept for Melville" (193). But integrating in what way? My thesis attempts to answer this question by demonstrating that the masquerade theme may be usefully regarded as a unifying principle, serving to forge important links between Melville's

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more celebrated and less well-known fiction. These latter pieces are often attributed to the work of a troubled soul or, worse, to the misanthropic rambling of a disgruntled and mentally unstable man.

Taking Levin's lead, then, I have reexamined most of Melville's major fiction in terms of how it embodies the masquerade theme. I am well aware of the trap to which such a critical approach may lead; namely, the tendency to force connections and argue that the masquerade theme is prominent in *every* novel and short story Melville wrote. The ambiguity behind the meaning of most of his work makes this trap especially dangerous. As a result, upon reviewing the Melville canon, I included only those narratives in which I felt certain Melville deliberately explored the implications of life's masquerade. To my surprise, the research I did led me in unforeseen directions, one of which was the realization that Melville was not simply possessed by *God's masquerade*; in fact, he grew increasingly horrified at a *masquerade America* was itself perpetrating. A shift, in other words, from a metaphysical predilection to a more socially conscious understanding of the masquerade is evident in his work. This transition is a hazy area with no clear or definitive dividing line. I don't want to insinuate that Melville's art is ever either purely philosophical or purely social, for one must never divorce one from the other in his novels. His fiction is too complex for such trivial distinctions; if anything, it has the uncanny knack of tying every aspect of life into one intricate knot.

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In order best to reveal Melville's evolution as a thinker and writer, and to trace his increasingly complex understanding of God's and America's masquerade, I have divided my thesis into four chapters, dealing with the fiction more or less in chronological order. The first chapter, "Nature's Masquerade," explores Melville's notion of Nature in relation to Emerson's and Carlyle's, and illustrates man's separation from Nature in *Typee*, *Mardi*, and *Moby-Dick*. "Nature's Masquerade" deals with Melville's early philosophical ideas about the evil man is forced to come to terms with, an evil made all the more horrifying because of the deviousness of its mask of beauty and goodness. Melville's early fiction depicts a world in which man appears utterly helpless against an evil bent on destroying him. The source of this evil, while never fully explained and always ambiguously vague, seems to originate from a God of questionable motives. Chapter One concerns itself with the masquerade theme at its fundamentally philosophical level, the treacherous ground from which Melville draws and expands upon his portrayal of the masquerade.

The second chapter is a natural extension of the first. "The Importance of Experience" attempts to highlight Melville's thoughts about his perception of one of life's principal teachers. As the chapter title states, the significance of experience is my focus, and it is closely studied particularly within the context of the two novels directly preceding *Moby-Dick* - namely *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. This chapter's basic premise is that, in order for

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human beings to arm themselves against Nature's potentially evil masquerade, they must become as familiar as they can with their surroundings. This experience not only allows them to better recognize the masquerade, but also helps them to induce an awakening of their selves; that is to say, it brings about an awareness of a person's *relation* to the masquerade. For Melville's understanding of evil evolved from a belief in it as a strictly Nature-centred phenomenon to a comprehension of it as something human nature is to be held partly accountable for.

Becoming convinced that the human masquerade had as many far-reaching implications as God's, Melville was intent on examining the character of his fellow Americans as rigorously as he did the anatomy of the White Whale. My third chapter demonstrates how Melville effectively unmasks Americans' hypocrisy, conservatism, and self-centeredness in the short stories that he wrote after *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*. The speculations I put forth in the chapter are based on four stories in particular: "Bartleby, the Scrivener," "Jimmy Rose," "I and My Chimney," and "Benito Cereno." These stories are among the darkest Melville ever wrote, for each portrait betrays a failure of the human spirit, one that makes a mockery of the democratic ideal that America professed to embody.

In my last chapter, "America's Masquerade," I propound my theory that Melville, after expertly exposing the heartlessness of his American contemporaries, went on to assess the impact masquerading Americans had on the country as

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a whole. He does this in his last major novel, entitled *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, my focal text in the chapter. It is my assertion that, in Melville's mind, there are dire consequences to his country's future; Americans' masquerade as a people, Melville came to realize, necessarily translates into America's masquerade as a country. On the surface, Melville saw his country as a confident and aspiring nation, a nation that was somehow destined to lead the world into the future as a role model and champion of justice, good will, and charity. Experience, however, enabled him to peer through America's finally unconvincing masquerade of democracy to the black truth beneath. In the final analysis, Emersonian optimism and the promises of the American Dream were being undermined by tensions and prejudices threatening to erupt. America's evil was slowly but steadily destroying the remnants of its own moral fabric, and Melville's fiction serves as a prophesy of what will happen should America fail to heed its own internal warning signs. Death and destruction, as evinced so tragically by the American Civil War (1861-65), would be the disastrous result.

In addition to outlining the importance of the masquerade theme in Melville's fiction, I hope that my thesis reveals the richness and diversity of Melville's thought and craft. Some critics have, in the past as well as the present, unjustly condemned Melville by labelling him a man hopelessly floundering on a metaphysical plane he did not understand, writing nonsensical verbiage that did nothing but alienate his already small readership. For example, Henry F. Chorley calls

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Moby-Dick an "absurd book" in his *Athenaeum* review of 25 October 1851 and continues:

> Mr. Melville has to thank himself only if his horrors and his heroics are flung aside by the general reader, as so much trash belonging to the worst school of Bedlam literature, - since he seems not so much unable to learn as disdainful of learning the craft of an artist. (254)

Granted, Melville does at times appear to drown in that murky sea of ambiguity that he so loved and feared. But surely he cannot be faulted for his attempts, whether successful or not, to put to paper those philosophical issues that captured his imagination and ignited his creative talent. That Melville was consumed with *numerous* ideas and interests, not the least of which was his concern with the direction America as a nation was taking politically and socially, is an established fact. I believe Melville was rescued from obscurity early this century because of some dedicated critics' growing awareness that he had an uncanny insight into America's consciousness. Melville's disinclination to embrace his country's values as wholeheartedly as such contemporaries as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman makes him no less a patriot. In fact, in my mind, his willingness to criticize America and unmask its masquerade makes him more of one.

Moby-Dick enthusiasts will not fail to miss the obvious de-emphasis of Melville's masterpiece in this paper. But since my intention is to chart the evolution of a major theme over time, I thought it best to treat *Moby-Dick* equally with every other novel or short story I examine in the forthcoming chapters. For despite its excellence, it is a fallacy to

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think that Melville's career as a writer is wrapped up in this one book. His other fiction contains exciting new trends and thoughts that need to be accounted for when drawing any conclusions. I regret to say that the scope of my thesis could not include Melville's poetry, a genre he cherished. The works I do include however, are, I believe, representative of Melville's genius and epitomize the masquerade theme as he conceived it.

It is my earnest hope that this study will encourage others to expand upon the masquerade theme and examine other literature in its context. Comparisons could undoubtedly be usefully drawn with other writers like Hawthorne and Poe. I also welcome any discussion or debates that my thesis may generate. For so long as any criticism manages to either verify or unsettle the preconceived notions of its readers, it has not failed. Finally, of course, my thesis is but one more critical stance amidst a host of others. It was Melville himself who wrote in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," that "it is hard to be finite upon an infinite subject, and all subjects are infinite" (551).

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CHAPTER I

Nature's Masquerade

. . . all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within . . .

from *Moby-Dick,* "The Whiteness of the Whale"

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Chapter I: Nature's Masquerade

i

D.H. Lawrence, in his chapter in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1924) devoted to Melville's first two novels, writes: "never was a man so passionately filled with the sense of vastness and mystery of life which is non-human" (142). Truer words about Melville's predominant fixation in his literary creations were never written. Melville carries out his examinations of life's enigmas through the protagonists of his major novels, all of whom strive toward a better understanding of the world around them. But not one of his works, it should be added, points to the possibility of man ever attaining a knowledge of Truth; indeed, after *Typee*, each subsequent novel not only reveals Melville's increasing command over his art as a writer, but also his growing conviction that the world is not what it seems and that man's quest for Truth is inhibited by the innumerable ambiguities characteristic of the state of Nature.

The purpose of this first chapter is to attempt to elucidate Melville's conception of Nature and its false outward show. This, of course, necessitates a preliminary inquiry into what Melville, in all probability, thought Nature to be. To this end it is useful to look to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle as initial guides, since they, too, concern themselves with the subject of Nature. In a letter to his friend and editor Evert Duyckinck, Melville expressed his admiration for Emerson as a "thought-

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diver" but declared that he did not "oscillate in [his] rainbow" (Leyda 378). In the case of Carlyle, Leon Howard writes in his detailed biography of Melville that "of all the novels [Melville] read during the gestation of his own [*Moby-Dick*], Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* was the one which seems to have made the greatest impression upon him" (164). Melville's obvious interest in both Emerson and Carlyle warrants a comparison of their respective thoughts about Nature. Only after we possess a general understanding of Nature can we delve into Melville's fiction to find evidence for the premise of my thesis; namely, that for Melville, all of Nature is one grand masquerade.

To begin with, the word "nature" may be interpreted in various ways. It is clear that, for Emerson, "nature" means more than simply forests, streams, and meadows inhabited by a variety of wildlife species; as Richard Poirier writes in his helpful introduction to the writings of Emerson:

> it [nature] refers also - following an old distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, which he [Emerson] would have known at least from Coleridge - to the power which both creates and destroys these particular things. (xi-xii)

Emerson explains in *Nature* (1849) that he uses the word "nature" "in both senses; - in its common and in its philosophical import" (3). It readily becomes apparent, then, that throughout his discourse on Nature he is interested primarily in its philosophical implications as, I believe, is Melville. This is why, for the purpose of this thesis, I will capitalize "Nature" to emphasize its metaphysical quality.

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Although it will be shown that Emerson and Melville share a common philosophical understanding of Nature, both men take radically opposing views concerning the part it plays in a person's life. According to Emerson, there is no distinction to be made between terms such as "God," "Supreme Being," "Creator," or "Nature" - they are all one and the same. The following quotation from Chapter VII of *Nature*, entitled "Spirit," reveals Emerson's innermost thoughts about Nature:

> behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound, it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us . . . .(30)

Although the mystery of Nature is inextricably linked to the mystery of humanity in Melville's fiction, there is the sense that in Melville's view Nature rather "acts upon us from without"; that there is a Reasoning Being *behind* Nature. To use Ahab's expression: "some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask" (*Moby-Dick* 144). Still, the line separating Emerson and Melville is not as simple and neat as this.

William Braswell, in his article "Melville as a Critic of Emerson," opposes Melville's religious thought to Emerson's. He ascribes Emerson's more optimistic outlook on life to his Unitarian upbringing; in other words, to his belief in both a benevolent Deity and man as inherently good. As for Melville, the fact that he was raised in the Reformed Theology of Calvinism that regarded God as a jealous God and man as a

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depraved being explains why he was more skeptical of the possibility of a benevolent universe (332). Although I don't dismiss Braswell's hypothesis, I am more inclined to agree with Perry Miller who, in his chapter "Melville and Transcendentalism" in *Nature's Nation*, is not so quick to divorce Melville from the transcendentalist school of thought: "The fundamental terms for Melville are not God and man, but man in nature" (196). According to Miller, Melville "never got free of the incubus of Emerson" (195), which would account for his passionate responses - found in many of his books, particularly *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man* - to Emerson's dangerous trust of so powerful a force as Nature.

What I am advocating, then, is a compromise between the views put forth by Braswell and Miller; that is, between regarding Melville as essentially a Christian writer and Melville as a transcendentalist. By asserting only one or the other, one is necessarily presupposing that the author had some fixed ideology. But the fact is that Melville's longing to grasp Truth, much like Ahab's demoniacal desire to harpoon Moby Dick, was constantly denied him. As a result, I believe textual evidence will confirm my sense that Melville's transcendental understanding of Nature differed from Emerson's mainly in his conviction that Nature masqueraded as something it was not, and that behind the masquerade lurks God and evil.

In order to clarify my analysis of the state of Nature, let us turn very briefly to Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, in which he expounds his "Philosophy of Clothes." Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdrockh explains his theory of Nature thus:

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> The thing Visible, nay the thing Imagined, the thing in any way conceived as Visible, what is it but a Garment, a Clothing of the higher, celestial Invisible "unimaginable, formless, dark with excess of bright?" (51)

For Carlyle, Nature is the "Living Garment of God" (143). It is interesting to note that his friend Emerson, who was the driving force behind the publication of *Sartor Resartus* in the United States, also speaks of Nature as "garment" (*Nature* 21) and of the landscape as a face of God (*Nature* 31). According to both Emerson and Carlyle, Nature's garments are transparent. Melville, however, is not convinced. A study of *Typee*, *Mardi*, and *Moby-Dick* will demonstrate that he casts a serious shadow of doubt over Emerson's assurance that "Nature never wears a mean appearance" (*Nature* 5).

ii

The theme of masquerade in *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) is, perhaps, not immediately apparent. In this his first novel, Melville recounts some of his adventures among the natives of the Marquesas Islands after deserting the *Acushnet* in 1842. On the literal level, the adventures of Tommo and his friend Toby are quite entertaining; indeed, the combination of romantic setting, fanciful diction, and suspenseful plot assured the popularity of the young author's first effort and, as Howard emphasizes, won him immediate fame (*Herman Melville: A Biography* 98). Beyond the simple level of the adventure lies an intense examination of the Polynesian way of life. While extolling the virtues of this primitive society, Melville has his protagonist criticize his so-called

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"civilized" world, a world ruthless and corrupt in comparison to the Edenic existence enjoyed by the Typee natives; as George Woodcock notes in his introduction to *Typee*, "Like Swift, Melville uses the virtues of a simpler world to castigate the vices of that from which he comes . . ." (18). While no one would deny the obvious attacks upon missionary work and the French occupation of the islands, there are nevertheless subtle yet important clues to be found within the text warranting a philosophical reading. This latter interpretation involves the genesis of the masquerade theme.

"The very name of Typee struck a panic into my head which I did not attempt to disguise" (92). Such is our narrator's confession of his tremendous fear, a fear originating with tales of "*heathenish rites and human sacrifices* [Melville's italics]" (37). Rumours of the Typees' warlike nature and of their cannibalism (even "the word 'Typee' in the Marquesan dialect," Tommo tells the reader, "signifies a lover of human flesh" [60]) seem to be unfounded, especially considering the reception that Tommo and Toby receive when they first encounter these natives. In fact, they are treated as kindly and graciously as guests: Kory-Kory's attentiveness, Fayaway's loveliness, and Chief Mehevi's goodwill all serve to quell Tommo's anxieties.

Before long, however, Tommo becomes suspicious of "this excess of deferential kindness" (148) and believes that there must be an ulterior motive on the Typees' part. Within him is fostered an apprehension of evil. It is questionable, then, whether the sailors' descent into the Typee valley is a

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journey toward Paradise and salvation or a descent into Hell. Although Tommo's first glimpse of the valley causes him to exclaim, "Had a glimpse of the garden of Paradise been revealed to me, I could scarcely have been more ravished with the sight" (90), the dangerous ravine that he must cross to enter this valley is likened to a subterranean route through a catacomb (101). Within the beautiful and dense foliage of "Paradise" lurk shadows of potential evil and ambiguous designs.

Tommo voices his worst fears over what becomes one of Melville's major preoccupations as an artist and thinker - the discrepancy between appearance and reality:

> Might it not be that beneath these fair appearances the islanders covered some perfidious design, and that their friendly reception of us might only precede some horrible catastrophe? (122)

These fears seem unreasonable, given the friendly greeting he unexpectedly receives. What is it about the islanders' fair or "smiling appearances" (148) that causes Tommo's uneasiness? The cause, I believe, is a combination of things. First of all, Fayaway's consumption of raw fish has Tommo reeling in disgust (282). The humour of this scene does not lessen the reader's feeling that beneath the epitome of beauty lies a lurking horror. The natives' insistence upon tattooing him also extends beyond the comic to the macabre, and increases Tommo's already overwhelming urge to escape the island. Most importantly, it is the Typees' *denial* of cannibalism that frightens Tommo more than anything (154). For it is then that he knows they are lying to him. And any lingering doubt about

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their cannibalistic tendencies is stamped out with Tommo's discovery of the three human heads at Marheyo's home (309) and the human skeleton presumably picked clean after a recent feast (315-16). These findings provide evidence to confirm Tommo's worst nightmare.

One could argue that the Typees' masquerade is not Nature's but human nature's masquerade. While such a distinction is often futile, in this case the deceptiveness of the natives is not comparable to that of the missionaries or French imperialists. The Typees are made to represent brute nature. After all, there is something not quite human about the natives. As James E. Miller, Jr. remarks, "So nearly devoid of any life of the mind or of the spirit, the Typees seem subhuman, closer to fine, healthy, instinctive animals than to human beings" (31-2). Like the Tahitians in *Omoo*, the Typees are as dependent upon the uncultivated bread-fruit and cocoa-palm trees as any other brute animal would be on its environment. Tommo's stay on the island is spent largely in observing the antics and customs of the natives, in a manner akin to Ishmael's scientific approach to his study of whales. But such empirical approaches give neither Tommo nor Ishmael clues toward a greater understanding of the *true* nature of their respective subjects.

At the beginning of *Typee*, when the *Dolly* is approaching Nukuheva, Tommo tells of "some shapeless monster of the deep" that, after floating near the surface, would "fade away from the sight" (43). He also describes the islands of the South Seas which, when seen close up are beautiful, but when beheld

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from the sea are nothing like the falsely romantic depictions of "softly swelling plains" and "purling brooks" (45). "The reality," asserts Tommo, "is very different; bold rock-bound coasts, with the surf beating high against the lofty cliffs . . . form the principal features of these islands" (45-6). The effect of this is to admonish the reader of the dangers of accepting Nature at face value. As we have seen, the Typees are not "as pacific as so many lambkins" (184) as Tommo would have it. Their eagerness to war with the Happars, their insistence on keeping Tommo a captive under the pretense of being a guest, and their cannibalism all counteract the beauty and sereneness of their outward appearance and behaviour. Whether Melville deliberately set out to illustrate this or not, one would be hard-pressed to refute the obvious insinuation in *Typee* that evil is coexistent with innocence, for there is clearly a darker side to the sunlit existence of the Typees. An inherent evil overshadows any goodwill of the natives - so much so that Tommo, when making his daring escape, does not hesitate to plunge a boat-hook at a native whom he had grown to admire.

"I saw everything, but could comprehend nothing" (244). Tommo's confession is a far cry from Carlyle's claim that Nature's clothing is transparent. In *Typee*, Nature's clothing is hardly so unambiguous; it is more like a costume at a masquerade ball, inhibiting any observer from accurately determining the true identity of the wearer behind the mask.

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iii

The writing of *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither* (1849), his third novel, marks an important transition in Melville's career. For the first time, Melville turned away from the realism his audience had come to expect in his fiction toward the romance genre utilizing symbol and allegory. *Mardi* appears to have been intended initially as an adventure novel like *Typee;* the first fifty chapters recount the experiences of Taji, Jarl, and Samoa. But when the maiden Yillah enters the narrative, the book deepens "into an intermittent symposium on religion, philosophy, science, politics, and the poet's art, on faith and knowledge, on necessity and free will, on time and death and eternity" (Foster 661). Critics over the years have argued convincingly that without *Mardi, Moby-Dick* would not have been possible. It was clearly an important book for Melville, and its importance, in large part, lies in its continuation and expansion of the masquerade theme.

In this section I will focus on Babbalanja instead of Taji, since the former is widely recognized as Melville's mouthpiece. It is Babbalanja who, more than any other character, probes life's mysteries in hope of ascertaining the meaning of his existence. Taji's search for Yillah, whom we may regard as a symbol for Truth, is shared by Babbalanja, who assures his new friend, "Your pursuit is mine, noble Taji" (197). This search, undertaken by a party of five men - Taji, King Media, the historian Mohi, the minstrel Yoomy, and Babbalanja - provides Melville with the opportunity, in the

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tradition of Plato, to explore various themes through the dialogue of these men, each of whom brings a distinct perspective to bear on the discussion. As this group ventures further into uncharted waters in its quest for Yillah, Babbalanja penetrates the depths of his "self" so that he may unlock the secret of his being. The voyage in *Mardi* is very much a voyage of self-discovery.

Babbalanja is more Emersonian than any other of Melville's characters, for he believes that the spirit of Oro (the Mardian God) works through him: "Oro is *in* all things, and himself *is* all things" (427). But the elusive spirit of Oro, instead of enlightening Babbalanja about his true nature, prevents him from ever knowing himself. Compare Babbalanja's quandary to Emerson's emphatic assertion in *Nature*: "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (6). Babbalanja, longing for this wholeness and security, cannot identify with Emerson's optimism. Life has taught him differently:

> All I am sure of, is a sort of prickly sensation all over me, which they call life. . . . But how know I, that these sensations are identical with myself? For aught I know, I may be somebody else. At any rate, I keep an eye on myself, as I would on a stranger. There is something going on in me, that is independent of me. (456)

When asked by Media to describe the inscrutable and incomprehensible stranger in him, Babbalanja can only reply,

> My lord, I can not. He is locked up in me. In a mask, he dodges me. He prowls about in me, hither and thither; he peers, and I stare. . . . So present is he always, that I seem not so much to live of myself, as to be a mere apprehension of the

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> unaccountable being that is in me. Yet all the time, this being is I, myself. (457)

Babbalanja, unlike Emerson, questions his own free will and regards the spirit of God as an alien force. In *Mardi*, then, the theme of masquerade is given another dimension; Nature's masquerade exists *within* man and without, rendering any conjectures about the true nature of ourselves and the world around us tenuous at best.

Considering that Babbalanja's goal - Truth - anticipates Ahab's in *Moby-Dick*, it is astonishing that, near the end of the group's trip, he is willing to embrace life's mysteries and desist satisfying his hunger for knowledge. His following words could very easily be mistaken for Ahab's own:

> I am intent upon the essence of things; the mystery that lieth beyond; the elements of the tear which much laughter provoketh; that which is beneath the seeming; the precious pearl within the shaggy oyster. I probe the circle's center; I seek to evolve the inscrutable. (352)

And yet, after a vision on the Utopian isle of Serenia, Babbalanja tells his friends, "This have I learned, oh! spirit!- In things mysterious, to seek no more; but rest content, with knowing naught but Love" (633). This final acceptance of the "inscrutable" should not be viewed as Melville's advice, but rather as Melville's satire, a wry comment directed at the optimism of Emerson. Babbalanja's decision to take Nature and Oro in good faith is for him to become a passive observer in life. He had earlier asserted to Media that "Faith is to the thoughtless, doubts to the thinker" (428).

Mardi reveals that to simply "be content with the

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theology in the grass and the flower" (428), as Emerson and Walt Whitman seem to be, is to turn a blind eye to the unsettling ambiguities of Nature, ambiguities which defy any affirmation of a benevolent world. This novel exemplifies Melville's growing recognition of man's estrangement from Nature. Unlike Whitman, Melville could not bequeath himself to the dirt of the earth.

iv

Moby-Dick (1851), Melville's masterpiece, is an excellent work with which to conclude this present inquiry into Nature, for it is Melville's deepest dive into, and greatest study of, this phenomenon. Although the novel tends to reinforce Melville's earlier doubts about arriving at any fixed Truth about God and Nature and proposes more questions than answers, it nevertheless reveals a heightened awareness of the subtle workings of the universe that, in turn, leads the author to confirm his belief in life's masquerade. His acute sensitivity toward the mysteriousness of creation and Nature's motives challenges any attempt to understand Nature's elusive meaning.

Melville's search for Truth is, in many respects, embodied in Ahab's demoniacal hunt for the White Whale. This quest is also given expression in Ishmael's numerous observations about the watery world during the *Pequod*'s fated voyage. Both Ahab and Ishmael regard the whale as the emblem of Nature; and clearly Melville intended Moby Dick to

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symbolize Nature or God. "Moby Dick [is] not only ubiquitous, but immortal" (158) declare the superstitious whalemen. But all whales, not simply Moby Dick, are continually associated with the supernatural. Ishmael compares a soldier to the whaleman in battle; the former has only to deal with "the comprehensible terrors of man," whereas the latter must face "the interlinked terrors and wonders of God" (99). Perhaps more to the point, however, is Ishmael's discussion of the whale's brow in Chapter 79, "The Prairie":

> in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature. (292)

This brow, which he refers to in the following chapter as a falsity (293), is indecipherable. Hence Ishmael's dare - "I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can" (293).

Ishmael's realization of the whale's mysterious aura is by no means immediate. Beginning with the chapter "Cetology," he ponders the significance of each part of a whale's anatomy in hope of obtaining a better understanding of it. With each subsequent analysis, he deplores his inability to adequately articulate the fountain, the tail, etc.:

> Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? (318)

In effect, at a loss to comprehend the magnitude of the whale, Ishmael arrives at the same conclusion as Emerson that Nature's secret refuses to be known, for never "does the

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wisest man exhort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection" (*Nature* 5).

It is perhaps the whiteness of Moby Dick that disconcerts Ishmael the most. A troubling dualism emerges in Ishmael's discourse on whiteness:

> yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood. (164)

This "elusive something" is that which causes the horror of an already terrible object to increase tenfold if its outer appearance is white. This accounts for one's heightened fear of a white bear or a white shark. It is not the poet who instills this dread but "God's great, unflattering laureate, Nature" (165). Like whiteness, all other earthly hues are "but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without" (170). This chapter, "The Whiteness of the Whale," is Melville's greatest explication of his understanding of Nature's deception. Hence the masquerade theme. Contrast Melville's statement, "all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within" (170), with Carlyle's positive pronouncement in "The Everlasting Yea": "The Universe is not dead and demoniacal, a charnel-house with spectres; but godlike, and my Father's!" (143).

Ahab's understanding of Nature's deceitfulness, while not as sophisticated as Ishmael's, is nevertheless keen in its simplicity. He regards all objects as unreasoning pasteboard

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masks with some reasoning thing or intelligence putting "forth the mouldings of its features from behind" them (144). The chief aim of man should be to strike through the masks in order to get at the truth. Starbuck sees the whale as surviving through blind instinct (144) but for Ahab there is nothing blind about the malice motivating the whale's behaviour. Ahab's suspicion that there is something beyond mere appearance is shared by Ishmael, who holds to a "free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy" (196) in place of his captain's "audacious, immitigable, and supernatural" (162) desire for revenge.

In short, the suspicions that Melville's characters harbour - and by extension Melville himself - clearly oppose Carlyle's notion of the kindness of fixed Nature. In the chapter "Idyllic," Herr Teufelsdrockh paints a picture of Nature as a warm, bountiful, nurturing mother that wraps her Nursling (man) in "a soft swathing of Love and infinite Hope" (69). Melville's response is somewhat like that of the Missourian to the herb-doctor in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*: "Very motherly! . . . Look you, nature! I don't deny but your clover is sweet, and your dandelions don't roar; but whose hailstones smashed my windows?" (116). Nature is sinister and untrustworthy in Melville's mind, and we are forever at the mercy of God.

Ishmael conceives of God as "the unseen and unaccountable old joker" (195) and takes the "whole universe for a vast practical joke" (195) at his own expense. His horror at having to place his life in the hands of the steersman of his

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whale boat takes on larger connotations; Melville's intimation is that all of us resign our lives into God's hands. Of course, this is hardly a comforting thought considering Melville's depiction of Nature. Nothing could be more antithetical to his philosophy than Emerson's reassurance in *Nature*:

> God never jests with us, and will not compromise the end of nature, by permitting any inconsequence in its procession. Any distrust of the permanence of laws, would paralyze the faculties of man. Their permanence is sacredly respected, and his faith therein is perfect. The wheels and springs of man are all set to the hypothesis of the permanence of nature. We are not built like a ship to be tossed, but like a house to stand. (23)

Melville's Nature is not a finely tuned machine but an unpredictable power. It is likened to the sea that tosses the *Pequod*: "No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe" (235). Clearly, Melville questions the permanence of the very laws Emerson holds sacred. They are laws as wild and free as the sea which, after the ultimate destruction of the *Pequod*, "rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (469).

V

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" is a story about evil, revenge, and murder. The victim, Fortunato, is lured (during a literal masquerade) down into the catacombs of Montresor, a man intent on killing his enemy for insulting his family name. Montresor's success at exacting his revenge relies not simply on Fortunato's drunken stupor, but also on

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his (Montresor's) own kindly demeanor; that he in fact bore Fortunato malice is virtually undetectable in his outward aspect and his apparent concern for Fortunato's ailing health. Although I don't wish to insist upon an exact similarity, the Montresor/Fortunato conflict is oddly analogous to the relationship between Nature and man in Melville's work. Like many of Poe's victims, Melville's protagonists are often beguiled by their environments and prey to unforeseen calamities. Just as Pierre discovers in *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, each successive incident occurring in his life hints at a deeper and darker horror for which there seems to be no explanation.

Lawrance Thompson, in *Melville's Quarrel With God*, argues that Melville "began to resent and hate the attributes of God, particularly the seemingly tyrannous harshness and cruelty and malice of God" (5). Whether Melville hated God or not is debatable, but it seems to me that Thompson's focus on Melville's likely conception of an evil God is a thesis that any Melville scholar should take into account. Abundant textual evidence is supportive of not only the indisputable masquerade theme, but also of an innate evil within Nature. Consequently, Melville's fiction is in large part an exploration of man's struggle to survive when confronted with this evil. As the next chapter will elucidate, only by giving heed to experience can humanity hope to maintain its precarious footing in the world.

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CHAPTER II

The Importance of Experience

. . . a whale-ship was my Yale college and my Harvard.

from *Moby-Dick,* "The Advocate"

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Chapter II: The Importance of Experience

i

To argue that Herman Melville simply resigned himself to the hopelessness of the human predicament, given the deviousness of Nature's masquerade, is to misjudge and underestimate Melville's genius as an American writer. I do not mean to imply that Melville did not struggle to come to terms with man's plight, for struggle he most certainly did; indeed, much of his literature gives the impression that man's condition is no better than that of Ahab's or Pierre's, literary characters whose fate seems to rest in the hands of malevolent Nature. The truth of the matter is, however, that Melville continued to create characters such as Redburn, White-Jacket, and Ishmael, intending them to stand in direct contrast to those like Ahab. Redburn and White-Jacket are protagonists who, by their knowledge of the masquerade and maturation through that knowledge, acquire the outlook and skills necessary for hope and survival.

The fact is that Melville's perception of the masquerade and man's relation to it continued to evolve as his mind and talent evolved. Particularly after *Mardi*, Melville realized that man's knowledge of evil comes from his contact with it. Moreover, he believed that man's best means of defence against evil is, paradoxically, this contact, for experience enables man to become familiar with and, consequently, better prepared to guard against, evil's masquerade. Melville's own experience taught him much, including the recognition that the

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masquerade does not exist solely on the metaphysical plane. As my subsequent analysis will show, the more he explored the realm of experience through his literature, the more Melville became convinced that much of the world's evil was attributable to man rather than Nature.

Nowhere in Melville's fiction is the necessity of experience as a major theme more pronounced than in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. These two books are often neglected due to Melville's claim in a letter to his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, dated 6 October 1849, that "They are two *jobs*, which I have done for money - being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood" (Leyda 385). But despite Melville's remonstrances about having to write the type of books he did not wish to write, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* proved to be more than commercial successes; in Leon Howard's words, "in each of them Melville had written far better than he knew and far better than he could have written without the experience gained from *Mardi* . . ." (*Herman Melville* 135). While admittedly lacking the philosophical depth of *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, they are nevertheless rich in detail and symbolism. Most importantly, they reveal the need for man to be conscious of evil so that he may protect himself from it.

ii

Redburn (1849), Melville's fourth novel, is the account of a young man's first voyage in the merchant service from New York to Liverpool . Narrated retrospectively by an obviously older and wiser Wellingborough Redburn, the tale, like much of

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Melville's work, contains obvious biographical elements; indeed, notwithstanding Leon Howard's assertion in his biography that "Melville was not the forlorn boy he was later to describe in his story *Redburn*" (17), the early death of his father, his voyage to Liverpool, and his undeniably premature disillusionment with life provide the basis for much of the novel.

Redburn says that his "naturally roving disposition" (43) is a major factor in inducing him to ship as a sailor-boy. His boyish yearning for adventure and excitement is heightened by the ship advertisements in the papers which, Redburn admits, "possessed a strange, romantic charm to me" (43). Idealizing his father, whose business affairs evidently necessitated a great many crossings of the Atlantic, Redburn longs for the moment when he too may command attention and respect by discoursing freely with expertise "about remote and barbarous countries" (45). In effect, what Redburn craves is *experience*. Any knowledge he had acquired previous to his trip is from books or by word of mouth. Redburn wants to experience the world firsthand. Unfortunately for the youthful Redburn, the world, as he is to discover, is not like the glass ship in the glass case that presides in the sitting-room of his home. The glass figurine that tumbles from its perch and breaks the same day he leaves for his first voyage very much symbolizes Redburn's rather abrupt initiation into the world that ultimately shatters his remaining illusions.

Redburn is disillusioned about life prior to ever leaving the comfort of home for the sea, which is certainly not in

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keeping with the youthful picture Melville paints of the boy. But even though Redburn offers little explanation for the following revelation, the hard times are, without a doubt, attributable in large part to the poverty of his family after his father's death:

> Cold, bitter cold as December, and bleak as its blasts, seemed the world then to me; there is no misanthrope like a boy disappointed; and such was I, with the warm soul of me flogged out by adversity. (52)

Considering the poverty Melville's family endured under the same circumstances (*Herman Melville* 1), I am inclined to view the above quotation as Melville's recollection of his own bitterness. Nothing, however, prepares Redburn for the humiliation and degradation which his experiences on board the ship will bring. As a boy, Redburn flatters himself that he will conquer the world, when in reality he is a green recruit ignorant of its ways. He is, to use the chief mate's derogatory exclamation, "Green as grass! a regular cabbage-head!" (75).

Redburn is the first novel in which Melville establishes the ship as microcosmic, thereby showing that Redburn's unfamiliarity with ship usages is analogous to and indicative of his backwardness in life. When asked to perform simple tasks expected of any "boy" on the ship, Redburn stands dazed and confused, staring stupidly around him until reprimands and hasty explanations set him straight. As he eventually comes to learn his duties as a sailor, Redburn is introduced to the hardships always coexisting with any pleasures to be had. He learns about life's masquerade the hard way.

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If Redburn had any misgivings about shipping to Liverpool, they are allayed by Captain Riga's kindness and apparent goodwill upon their first meeting. Rowland Sherrill points out that Redburn and the friend with whom he stays in New York "are careful to find a ship's captain who satisfies Redburn's notion of the gentility which should belong to such a maritime figure" (43). Even Riga's ominous but truthful warning to Redburn that a sailor's life is a hard one falls on deaf ears, as Redburn is altogether too entranced by the elegant surroundings of the captain's cabin and the stately personage of Riga to heed his counsel. The novelty of being on board a seafaring vessel for the first time, combined with his instant attraction to Riga, entices him to sign on without reservation.

Redburn's initiation into the world is not an easy one. His inexperience and gullibility are ridiculed by his shipmates, whose verbal taunts incite within Redburn a hatred for them:

> I loathed, detested, and hated them with all that was left of my bursting heart and soul, and I thought myself the most forlorn and miserable wretch that ever breathed. (101)

He learns how it feels to be poor, cold, and hungry. What is more, his realization that Captain Riga - whom he undoubtedly hoped would fulfill a fatherly role - wants nothing whatever to do with him is the ultimate disillusionment. Taking exception to Riga's rudeness, slovenly aspect, and shabby clothes while at sea, Redburn concludes:

> I put him down as a sort of imposter; and while ashore, a gentleman on false pretenses; for no

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> gentleman would have treated another gentleman as he did me. (125)

More than ever, Redburn feels like a lonely and friendless outcast.

Of course, Redburn is often his own worst enemy, and the suffering he endures is sometimes attributable to himself. He begins the voyage with a sense of superiority because of his upbringing and family name. He refers more than once to his great-uncle Senator Wellingborough and to his father, who "was a great merchant and French importer in Broad-street in New York" (98). Shocked at the crass behaviour of the sailors, with their profanity and occasional drunkenness, Redburn announces that his affiliation with the "Juvenile Total Abstinence Association" (90) prohibits him from smoking and drinking with them. Furthermore, the fact that he is learned and bookish deludes Redburn into thinking that he knows more about the world than the rest of the crew. All of this causes him to feel pity for his shipmates; indeed, while engaging one sailor in conversation, he discloses the following:

> When I heard this poor sailor talk in this manner, showing so plainly his ignorance and absence of proper views of religion, I pitied him more and more, and contrasting my own situation with his, I was grateful that I was different from him; and I thought how pleasant it was, to feel wiser and better than he could feel; though I was willing to confess to myself, that it was not altogether my own good endeavours, so much as my education, which I had received from others, that had made me the upright and sensible boy I at that time thought myself to be. (97)

Redburn's assurance that he is "far from being vain and conceited" (97) is, needless to say, hardly an accurate statement about himself.

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When Redburn's arrogance is brought to bear on the discussion of his initiation into the world, it becomes apparent that for all of his indisputable suffering, it is his pride that is hurt the most. His ancestry means absolutely nothing on the *Highlander;* in fact, it works to his disadvantage when Riga assumes that he is wealthy and refuses to advance Redburn money for the necessities of sailor life (61). Most important, however, is the chief mate's decision to baptize Redburn as "Buttons" (73). Being degraded in such a way, along with his assignment of cleaning out the ship's pig-pen and being at his superiors' beck and call, prompt Redburn to compare himself to a slave:

> Miserable dog's life is this of the sea! commanded like a slave, and set to work like an ass! vulgar and brutal men lording it over me, as if I were an African in Alabama. (119)

Redburn's experiences on the ship and during his stay in Liverpool humble him. He slowly gains the respect, if not the friendship, of the crew when he shows himself to be eager in the rigging and a fast learner. Although despairing of what the Temperance Society might think of his weaknesses, he enjoys a sociable meal, drink, and smoke with the skipper of a salt-drogher. As well, he begins to associate with, and care about, those less fortunate. His education depends wholly upon the gradual wearing away of his pretentiousness.

However, nothing can quite prepare Redburn for what he eventually witnesses in Liverpool. He is overwhelmed by the squalid conditions he finds in the city he expected to be beautiful and quaint. "To be sure," he tells the reader,

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> I did not expect that every house in Liverpool must be a Leaning Tower of Pisa, or a Strasbourg Cathedral; but yet, these edifices I must confess, were a sad and bitter disappointment to me. (190)

The multitude of beggars pleading for help along the wharf and the pervasive destitution of Liverpool as a whole, the knowledge that his landlord Danby beats his wife Handsome Mary (195), and the death of Betsey Jennings and her children from starvation in Launcelott's-Hey after he tries in vain to help them, all take their toll on young Redburn.

Redburn's surprise at the degenerate state of Liverpool is owing to the things he has read in books. During the voyage, he conscientiously studies his father's guide-book of the city; in his words,

> I could not but think that I was building myself up in an unerring knowledge of Liverpool; especially as I had familiarized myself with the map, and could turn sharp corners on it, with marvelous confidence and celerity. (217-18)

Like the glass ship that causes Redburn to mistakenly believe that his voyage will be full of romance and gaiety, however, his book incites his imagination to paint a charming and altogether untrue picture of the seaport. What is more, the city has changed so drastically since his father's trips, that the guide-book is an unreliable source of information. It was "no more fit to guide me about the town," says Redburn with much sadness, "than the map of Pompeii" (224). In other words, Redburn learns a great deal more from his sightseeing trips around town than he does from books. His innocence and illusions are slowly giving way to experience and reality. Lacking the romance and adventure he longs for, the city

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impresses upon him the evil lurking everywhere and the necessity of being wary at all times.

Having described Redburn's experiences both on the *Highlander* and in Liverpool, it remains to be seen just what that experience teaches him. In effect, Redburn learns to spot "rat-traps" (268). "Rat-traps," Redburn's term for army advertisements promising adventure to poor emigrants, takes on the larger connotation of evil's masquerade. Note his rather disparaging assessment of Liverpool as a whole:

> of all sea-ports in the world, Liverpool, perhaps, most abounds in all the variety of land-sharks, land-rats, and other vermin, which make the hapless mariner their prey. In the shape of landlords, bar-keepers, clothiers, crimps, and boarding-house loungers, the land-sharks devour him, limb by limb; while the land-rats and mice constantly nibble at his purse. (202)

His encounter with a particularly suspicious looking old man who attempts to sell him a stolen ring causes Redburn to shun all dubious characters like the plague, including pedlars and pawnbrokers. He is also able to help his friend Harry Bolton by cautioning him not to be deceived by Captain Riga's good-naturedness when requesting permission to ship as a "boy" on the *Highlander*'s homeward voyage.

What Redburn learns to do, then, is speak with more wisdom of some of the things he has experienced. Granted, he continues to betray his innocence, especially with regard to his hasty trip to London with Harry. Suspicious of Harry's intentions, which are evidently to gamble in an illegal casino, Redburn still ignores his anxiety and foolishly accompanies Harry, choosing to be swayed by his longtime

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desire to see the city. Regardless of the excitement he feels while in London, when abandoned by Harry in a room of the gambling house, he quickly realizes the danger of his situation:

> spite of the metropolitan magnificence around me, I was mysteriously alive to a dreadful feeling, which I had never before felt, except when penetrating into the lowest and most squalid haunts of sailor iniquity in Liverpool. All the mirrors and marbles around me seemed crawling over with lizards; and I thought to myself, that though gilded and golden, the serpent of vice is a serpent still. (315)

Once back safely in Liverpool, the whole excursion to London seems to him like a dream, and he claims to "come away little the wiser" (318). His instinctual sense of evil is, however, heightened by the experience.

Ronald Mason, in *The Spirit Above the Dust: A Study of Herman Melville*, regards experience as destructive of all that is good about innocence. Thinking Melville a writer who is mourning the loss of innocence in *Redburn*, he concludes that the novel is "yet another conclusive statement of the fate of the innocent soul in the face of the dispassionate enmity of experience" (69). My analysis of *Redburn*, however, reaches a conclusion antithetical to Mason's. While I don't deny that there is a tragic aspect to lost innocence, I believe textual evidence confirms that Melville considered experience a valuable means to knowledge. To lament the loss of Redburn's innocence would be to also lament the loss of his ignorance, vanity, and immaturity. In Melville's depiction of Nature as discussed in my first chapter, the innocent is vulnerable to evil in all its guises. The experienced individual, on the

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other hand, is wary of evil's masquerade and better able to guard against it.

Catching sight of an old fort on a cliff prior to leaving America for Liverpool, Redburn recalls the days when he used to visit that "beautiful, quiet, charming spot" (82) with his uncle as a young boy. Reflecting on those happy days before his father's death, Redburn says, "I should like to build a little cottage in the middle of it, and live there all my life" (82). By the end of the voyage, Redburn learns that the world provides no possibility of such a haven. It is a cold, cruel world that he must confront. But the experiences that threaten his very existence are the same that ensure his hope for salvation.

iii

Before considering *White-Jacket* as a narrative in which Melville continues the thematic significance of experience, Emerson's essay, "Experience," deserves mention. William Braswell records that only fourteen of the thirty essays in Melville's secondhand set of Emerson's works are marked (319). Knowing Melville's habit of making notes in the margins of the texts he read, and that "Experience" is devoid of such markings, one might deduce that it was not read. If he had read it, Melville would have been astonished - as many critics have since been - at the candour with which Emerson expresses an unprecedented skepticism in his conception of the world.

Taking into account Emerson's transcendentalism, one could easily envision Melville conjuring up images of Emerson

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reclining in his armchair by the fire, formulating theories about life while viewing it through the window of his comfortable home. To be sure, Emerson did not weather any gales raging off the coast of Cape Horn as Melville did as a young sailor. But despite Melville's idea of Emerson as a man of thought rather than as a man of experience - a distinction Matthiessen makes (184) - "Experience" shows that Emerson was not as naive as Melville certainly imagined him to be. In "Experience," written after the death of his five year old son Waldo, Emerson obviously did a great deal of soul searching, all the while grappling with the tragedy to make some sense of it. In Mary Kupiec Cayton's words:

> With Waldo's death, his doubts about the beneficence of the universe crystallized in a new way that left his view of the individual's relation to nature transformed. (219)

Emerson's change in tone is indeed startling, especially for a man seemingly so confident in his relationship with Nature. Once able to assert his position as a "transparent eye-ball" (*Nature* 6), he now begins with the question, "Where do we find ourselves?" (216) and winds up with the answer, "Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again" (216).

Longing for an explanation for his son's death, Emerson despairingly perceives that Nature fails to provide one. More than once he refers to the slipperiness of Nature as its most disagreeable quality, particularly in the following sentence:

> I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition. ("Experience" 218)

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Emerson's need for a fixed ground of certainty - "Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand" (221), he writes - is similar to Ahab's in *Moby-Dick*. Redburn also struggles vainly to understand why he witnesses so much suffering. He wants a *reason* for the way things are. His initiation, however, is very much a realization that there are no reasons. Richard Poirier rightly makes the point that "When he [Emerson] insists in 'Experience' that 'life is not dialectics' he means it. Life does not consist, that is, of questions and answers" (xi).

The pervading theme in "Experience" of life's illusoriness leads Emerson to theorize that "We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them" (223). The meaning of this statement is radically different from the optimism of *Nature*, which is highly suggestive of the possibility of man's ultimate mastery over Nature. Here we do not have an evil that is "good in the making" (360), a concept Emerson explores in another essay entitled "Fate," or a limitation that "is power that shall be" (360); quite the contrary, for now Emerson senses a very *real* evil. Emerson feels more profoundly than ever the helplessness of humanity in the face of Nature's awesome power and a keen impression of his separation from it. Skating well on the surfaces of life denotes an ability of man to endure what comes his way and persevere. "Experience" marks the closest Emerson ever comes to identifying with Melville's own struggle to understand life's miseries. The sentiment underlying it echoes Pierre's despondency in the narrator's question in *Pierre; or, The*

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Ambiguities, "Ah, if man were wholly made in heaven, why catch we hell-glimpses?" (135).

Melville's sense of experience is similar to Emerson's. Redburn's initiation into the world exemplifies the necessity of learning to "skate well." But there is a more optimistic outlook in Melville's work with regard to what experience can teach. Emerson grieves "that grief can teach [him] nothing" (218), whereas Melville's grief teaches him much. This difference is easily explained if we remember that the hardships Emerson bears are inconsistent with his earlier philosophy. Melville's experience, on the other hand, only confirms the blackness he always intuitively suspects is there. Both Redburn and White-Jacket experience the truth of Emerson's claim that

> Every ship is a romantic object, except that we sail on. Embark, and the romance quits our vessel, and hangs on every other sail in the horizon. (217)

iv

White-Jacket (1850) is often regarded as a sequel to *Redburn*, with White-Jacket representing a more mature Wellingborough. According to James E. Miller, Jr., one proponent of this view, there are advantages to be gained by critically examining the two texts as one, since they "belong together in conception, spirit, and theme" (54). Subsequent analysis will reveal this to be true. Like Redburn, White-Jacket finds himself in unfamiliar surroundings and by experience learns to adapt to his new environment. *White-*

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Jacket is, however, a more intricately woven work than *Redburn*, greater in scope and more revealing of Melville's exceptional talent for drawing universal truths out of seemingly trivial details. Melville's depiction of evil is considerably more complex in *White-Jacket*. Furthermore, this novel marks an important transition in Melville's understanding of evil's masquerade.

"The object of this work," Melville writes in his preface to the first English edition, "is to give some idea of the interior life in a man-of-war" (1). Most of *White-Jacket* provides exhaustively researched descriptions of every aspect of a sailor's life in the navy. No one familiar with *Moby-Dick* will fail to miss the similarities between White-Jacket's explanation of naval rituals and Ishmael's examination of whaling procedures. As in *Moby-Dick*, Melville is constantly reaching at larger meaning in *White-Jacket*. By giving his readers "some idea of the interior life in a man-of-war," in actuality Melville is giving us an idea of life in America.

In *White-jacket*, Melville expands the idea of ship as microcosm to give more significance to White-Jacket's initiation into naval life. "A ship," he writes, "is a bit of terra firma cut off from the main; it is a state in itself; and the captain is its king" (23). While White-Jacket is molded into a maintop-man and begins to learn his specific duties, he is, in effect, being fashioned into a citizen of the community. It is important to emphasize Melville's elaborate descriptions of the *Neversink* as a "city afloat, with long avenues set out with guns instead of trees, and

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numerous shady lanes, courts, and by-ways" (77) or as "a lofty, walled, and garrisoned town, like Quebec" (77). By using such analogies, Melville heightens the reader's awareness that the hardships, cruelty, and unbridled evil permeating ship life reflect not only naval life but also North American society.

The difficulty with talking about White-Jacket as a fictional character is that, like Ishmael, he is more of an observer than a participant in the narrative. As John Seelye remarks, "strictly speaking there is no 'story' in *White-Jacket*, no appreciable narrative thread" (45). Unlike Redburn who roves constantly, White-Jacket exists merely as a narrative voice, passionately commenting on the sights around him. Still, the reader is able to sense a change in his character as he witnesses the barbaric acts of flogging. His initial enthusiasm at being homeward bound (5) wears away as he settles uncomfortably into the routine of the *Neversink*.

White-Jacket's initiation seems less abrupt than Redburn's due to his immediate friendship with Jack Chase but, however gradual, it creates no less of an impression. Like Redburn, he is an outcast because of his jacket. He is annoyed by the arduous and unnecessary tasks considered essential for the ship's neatness, and he detests the cramped living conditions. He is also horrified at the "scores of desperadoes . . . who stop not at the largest enormities" (40). These are the pickpockets and other thieves who cause White-Jacket to sew up the pockets of his jacket (39). Moreover, White-Jacket relates that the

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> floggings at the gangway and the floggings through the fleet, the stealings, highway robberies, swearings, gamblings, blasphemings, thimble-riggings, smugglings, and tipplings of a man-of-war, . . . by no means comprise the whole catalogue of evil. (376)

In *Redburn* the protagonist gradually learns to recognize evil's power in the world through his experience of it. Although he gains a sense of evil's masquerade in characters like Riga, for the most part the evil Redburn observes is fairly obvious: the poverty in the streets is evident, the murders committed are in plain daylight, and Jackson's diabolical stranglehold on the crew is pronounced from the outset. In *White-Jacket*, on the other hand, White-Jacket discovers that the evil perpetrated on the *Neversink* is more covert than overt. His encounter with evil's masquerade is much more immediate, especially in the characters of three officers.

When discussing the Surgeon of the Fleet, Cadwallader Cuticle, White-Jacket unmasks him for the idiotic but dangerous fool he is. Melville's depiction of Cuticle is arguably the best humourous episode in his fiction. Still, the reader is meant to be shocked and horrified at the surgeon's incompetency and complete disregard for life. After performing an entirely unnecessary and life-threatening amputation on a gunshot victim, Cuticle, when informed of the patient's ensuing death, coldly replies, "I predicted that the operation might prove fatal" (269). In an insightful observation, Seelye writes that, "Cuticle is a walking intellect, a man of science whose cruel, killing eye denies

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his assumed title of healer, a chilling personification of annihilatory power" (55). Under the guise of healer Cuticle performs the worst of evils.

Secondly, Captain Claret's true character is called into question during a gale threatening to capsize the ship. Aware that Claret's orders are detrimental to the safety of the crew, White-Jacket says,

> That night, off the pitch of the Cape, Captain Claret *was hurried forth from his disguises*, and at a manhood-testing conjuncture, appeared in his true colours. [my italics] (113)

Only Mad Jack, a more experienced officer, is able to save the vessel, thereby proving Claret to be entirely unfit to command. In a position requiring leadership and decision-making capabilities reigns a man lacking such crucial qualities. This, combined with Claret's "shipping of the quarter-deck face" (281), causes White-Jacket the most uneasiness. How Claret can be kind and indulgent one minute yet reply "I would not forgive God Almighty!" (139) the next when asked for forgiveness by a man writhing under the whip fills White-Jacket with terror. Similar to the way Tommo glimpses the evil underneath the natives' outward appearance, White-Jacket discovers the sinister nature of Claret's true character, which once again echoes Melville's interest in the masquerade theme.

However, it is in his portrayal of a third officer, master-at-arms Bland, that Melville creates his most deceptively evil character. Many critics regard Jackson in *Redburn* as his first important villain. But there is nothing

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at all misleading about Jackson - he is openly hostile and full of hatred. Bland is more dangerous because he masquerades as a good and decent man. As a master-at-arms, he is in charge of keeping law and order on the *Neversink*. Astounded at Bland's arrest and demotion for smuggling, White-Jacket has the opportunity to converse with him as one common sailor would to another. White-Jacket discloses that,

> In his conversation there was no trace of evil; nothing equivocal; he studiously shunned an indelicacy, never swore, and chiefly abounded in passing puns and witticisms, . . . In short - in a merely psychological point of view, at least - he was a charming blackleg. (190)

In him, White-Jacket recognizes that "vice *seemed*, but only seemed, to lose half its seeming evil by losing all its apparent grossness" (189). Bland's character only confirms his feeling that corruption exists at every level in a man-of-war.

White-Jacket's experiences in observing specific officers and common sailors cause him to become fixated with the ship's masquerade as a whole. He knows that, to a landsman, everything appears to be in order on the *Neversink*. The decks are kept spotlessly clean, and discipline and order are vigilantly enforced. Even for White-Jacket, the practice of flogging seems necessary at the beginning; in his opinion, "Were it not for these regulations a man-of-war's crew would be nothing but a mob . . ." (7). After witnessing innumerable floggings, however, White-Jacket begins to doubt the right of the navy to discipline the crew in such a manner. He personally feels the injustice of this brutality and

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experiences what no landsman will ever experience. Watching a young sailor scourged for the first time, White-Jacket remarks indignantly:

> You see a human being, stripped like a slave; scourged worse than a hound. And for what? For things not essentially criminal, but only made so by arbitrary laws. (139)

He declares the Articles of War to be "religiously, morally, and, immutably *wrong*" (148). Flogging made legal is simply an evil act that is justified under the pretense of necessity.

Overwhelmed by the evil he has unveiled for the reader, White-Jacket cautions the landsman that he may want to "forever abstain from seeking to draw aside this veil" (379). The word "veil" is used frequently in *White-Jacket*, reinforcing my belief that White-Jacket, through his experiences on the *Neversink*, catches glimpses of the same Truth Melville alludes to in his essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses":

> For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself . . . (542).

And the world of the *Neversink*, as we have seen, is very much a world of lies. Entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the democracy and freedom of America, the *Neversink* is itself a tyrannous fortress with a ruling class of officers and an oppressed class of sailors. For the sailor, White-Jacket declares, "our Revolution was in vain; to him our Declaration of Independence is a lie" (145). In *White-Jacket* Melville exposes a masquerade that America alone is guilty of.

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V

Any analysis of *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* would be incomplete without a consideration of Redburn's hunting jacket and White-Jacket's frock coat as major symbols. The precise symbolic meaning of the jackets has been a point of contention among critics. Many recognize that the eventual freedom from their jackets signals a type of baptism into the world for the protagonists, especially with regard to White-Jacket's dramatic plunge into the ocean from the top of the mainmast. How this baptism comes about and what it ultimately means becomes clear when the theme of experience is considered.

Melville does not emphasize the removal of Redburn's jacket when Harry Bolton outfits him in civilian clothes prior to their mysterious trip to London. This is in marked contrast to the spectacular scene in which White-Jacket rips open his frock at the end of that novel, which leads me to suspect that only in *White-Jacket* did Melville fully realize the potential for such a symbol. Nevertheless, Redburn's jacket does take on significance. It is a shooting jacket given him by his elder brother and obviously emblematic of the past - a past that, it will be remembered, Redburn tries to take comfort in. The past holds fond memories for him; it is a time of innocence, laughter, and prosperity. But as he gains experience of the present, the removal of the jacket suggests finally an abandonment of the past that offers no solace for the future.

In White-Jacket's case, his jacket is his own creation. Wrapped up in it, he delights in his ingenuity and the

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security he thinks he has secured for himself:

> For some time after completing my jacket, and getting the furniture and household stores in it, I thought that nothing could exceed it for convenience. . . . If I wanted anything in the way of clothing, thread, needles, or literature, the chances were that my invaluable jacket contained it. Yes: I fairly hugged myself, and revelled in my jacket . . . .(38)

Its whiteness suggests an innocence that White-Jacket attempts to preserve, but his experiences on the man-of-war gradually wear away this innocence and expose the man underneath. With the same resolve as Billy Budd, who the narrator says vowed "that never through remissness would he make such a visitation [as flogging] or do or omit aught that might merit even verbal reproof" (451), White-Jacket attempts to have nothing to do with the evil around him. But his experiences teach him that to remain in ignorance of evil would leave him vulnerable. When Claret threatens to flog him unjustly, White-Jacket realizes he is part of the world and must confront evil if he is to survive.

Within Redburn and White-Jacket is born a new level of consciousness, attributable only to their experience. It is an awakening, a rebirth into a world of knowledge that was hitherto unknown to them. In a way, by shedding their coats, they are shedding their masks of innocence and isolation and proclaiming their common brotherhood with mankind - a bond so crucial for democracy. Who can forget Redburn's feeling of helplessness as he attempts to help the woman in Launcelott's-Hey? Experiencing the coldheartedness of the civilians and their unwillingness to give aid, he becomes socially aware of

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the danger of such insensitivity:

> Surrounded as we are by the wants and woes of our fellow-men, and yet given to follow our own pleasures, regardless of their pains, are we not like people sitting up with a corpse, and making merry in the house of the dead? (257)

White-Jacket's plea for justice echoes Redburn's own. In the midst of the darkness of evil shines their light of humanity.

vi

Thomas Carlyle does not place a great deal of trust in what experience has to teach. "To the wisest man," he argues in *Sartor Resartus*,

> wide as is his vision, Nature remains of quite *infinite* depth, of quite infinite expansion; and all Experience thereof limits itself to some few computed centuries and measured square-miles. (194)

He compares man to a minnow, a creature familiar within its "little native Creek" (195) but entirely ignorant of the tides, winds, and currents "by all which the condition of its little Creek is regulated" (195). Melville's fiction reveals a similar understanding of the power and vastness of Nature, and man's minuscule portion of it in comparison. This is evinced rather terrifyingly in *Moby-Dick*, when the *Pequod* is destroyed by the White Whale on the immense ocean. Ahab sets out to conquer but is instead vanquished by an immeasurable power. What is more, his quest for knowledge - for that inscrutable thing behind the mask - is denied him.

Melville's trust in experience does, however, extend somewhat past that of Carlyle's. This chapter has attempted to show that man can learn from experience, regardless of its

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inability to lead him to ultimate Truth. Experience, in other words, helps to confirm one's suspicions about the blackness or evil intuitively felt to exist in the world. It fails, however, to penetrate Nature's mask and confirm God's part in evil's existence.

Melville's struggle to comprehend the blackness that, more often than not, overshadowed any of life's brightness for him is typically attributed to his desperate attempts to gain some fixed Truth about God. In this respect, I think Thompson's *Melville's Quarrel With God* is truly insightful, for I'm certain that Melville never wholly rid himself of the belief that God is somehow to blame for humankind's miserable existence. But I think that critics' obsession with Melville's inclination for the metaphysical causes them to neglect what I perceive to be Melville's growing recognition of *man's* masquerade within the larger framework of Nature's masquerade. The fiction after *Moby-Dick* is often noted for its dour tone and sullen mood, a pessimism many trace back to his so-called "quarrel" with God. I ascribe this mood, however, to Melville's newfound interest in - and subsequent assessment of - the American character. After attempting to understand God's part in Nature's evil, Melville turned to man, becoming convinced of his role in the masquerade, a masquerade threatening the very foundation of democratic America.

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CHAPTER III

Unmasking the American Character

At last, puzzled to comprehend the meaning of such a knot, Captain Delano addressed the knotter:-

"What are you knotting there, my man?"

"The knot," was the brief reply, without looking up.

"So it seems; but what is it for?"

"For some one else to undo," muttered back the old man . . .

from "Benito Cereno"

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Chapter III: Unmasking the American Character

i

The fiction Melville wrote after his seventh novel, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852), was considered by most critics during the Melville Revival of the 1920s to be inferior to his earlier work. Seeming to lack the artistry and philosophical profundity characterizing his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*, the short stories were regarded as lapses in Melville's creativity. Since the publication of Richard Harter Fogle's full-length study of the tales in 1960, however, Melville's stories have been reexamined and given the attention they deserve. Two stories, in particular, - "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" - have been hailed as among the best works in the Melville canon. Careful study of Melville's short stories, first published as magazine pieces in *Harper's* and *Putnam's*, will reveal that the tales continue to embody themes found in his novels. In the context of our present inquiry, the stories are particularly important insofar as they develop the masquerade theme.

In a bicentennial tribute entitled *Four Makers of the American Mind: Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville,* Leon Howard writes that Melville's "stories dealt with *American characters* - not *American character* [my italics]" (65). Although Howard's idea of "story" pertains more to Melville's novels, his generalization, it seems to me, is meant to include all of Melville's fiction - including the short stories. But my subsequent analysis of his short fiction will

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argue that Melville was indeed very much interested in the American character. As I suggested in the concluding remarks of my last chapter, Melville began to realize even prior to *Moby-Dick* that human beings are often not the innocent victims of Nature's wiles; on the contrary, he became fearful that human beings, particularly his fellow Americans, had the potential to commit evil under the guise of goodness or necessity. Melville's scrutiny of the American character confirmed his suspicions. Despite the geniality of some of his tales' protagonists and the often humourous overtones, his short stories all possess a general air of death, decay, and failure, a mood I ascribe to the pessimism Melville must have felt while laying bare the American mind-set.

It should be noted from the outset that, although Melville's interest in the human masquerade begins with characters like Bland in *White-Jacket* and continues with characters like Claggart in *Billy Budd, Sailor*, the evil that he unveils in the short stories is not the same malicious kind of evil that those villains are guilty of perpetrating. Melville's representative Americans in the four tales I will be examining - "Bartleby, the Scrivener," "Jimmy Rose," "I and My Chimney," and "Benito Cereno" - are all average, older men who are not vindictive at heart and whose masquerade is quite unconscious. They are all comfortable in the lives they have made for themselves, but somehow have managed in the process to erect an emotional and intellectual barrier cutting themselves off from society. Professing to be fair-minded, reasonable, and charitable - in short, claiming to exhibit all

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of those qualities that supposedly distinguish a democratic people - they are slowly made to betray their own hypocrisy.

From a general point of view, I think Melville looked around and saw a young country full of hope and promise. But America's love of tradition, wealth, and old-fashioned ways hindered the democratic ideal he was looking for. I believe Melville felt democracy originated in the spirit of the common man as did Emerson and Thoreau. The point of this chapter is to examine this common man and unmask him; that is to say, reveal him to be bereft of the democratic ideals of charity and humanity. While the evil Melville uncovers in the American character is not as dramatic as the evil the White Whale has come to symbolize, it is nevertheless just as alarming, for it threatens the very fabric of democratic America.

ii

"Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" (1853), Melville's first short story for *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, is, according to Warner Berthoff, "one of the undisputed masterpieces of nineteenth-century story-telling: Dickensian in its lively vernacular humor, Dostoievskian in its objective pathos and parabolic overtones" (39). In comparison with the failure of *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, Melville's accomplishments as a magazine contributor are even more impressive; whereas *Pierre* is virtually unreadable due to the author's obvious lack of control over subject and style, "Bartleby" reveals Melville in complete control of his art.

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As it did for Poe and Hawthorne before him, the short story genre proved a successful literary form for Melville's creative powers.

More than any other of Melville's tales, "Bartleby" is an oddly disturbing and frustrating story with a touch of the Poesque about it. I say disturbing because Bartleby's haunting "I would prefer not to" is unsettling and reminiscent of Poe's Raven's "Nevermore." It is frustrating because Bartleby's persistent refusal to comply with the narrator's not unreasonable demands is unaccountable. The enigma Bartleby presents has caused many critics to see any meaning in the tale as wrapped up in his passive resistance and mysterious past. Efforts to identify Bartleby as Henry David Thoreau, as Egbert S. Oliver does in his essay "A Second Look at 'Bartleby'", are interesting but ultimately ineffectual; indeed, Alfred Kazin regards such approaches as undermining the richness of Melville's fiction (77). Autobiographical approaches that see "Bartleby" as "a parable having to do with Melville's own fate as a writer" (Marx 85), as Leo Marx and Richard Chase argue, are suggestive yet inconclusive. Since the lawyer/narrator maintains that "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable . . ." (40), it makes more sense to look to the narrator for clues to the story's meaning, since we know more about him than Bartleby. As the narrator relates his experiences with his scrivener, Melville has him reveal more about his (the narrator's) own person than he does about Bartleby. The result is Melville's first important assessment of the American character.

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My conviction that the story is primarily about the narrator is supported by the fact that the narrator considers it necessary to divulge information about himself before he introduces Bartleby. "All who know me," he confides to the reader, "consider me an eminently *safe* man" (40). The word "safe" here is clarified by the lawyer's earlier statement - "I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best" (40). Although as a lawyer he works in a profession that he calls "proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times" (40), the narrator admits that he has never addressed a jury. Being candid about his unambitious nature, there is an air of hubris in his disclosure that "in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat, [he does] a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds" (40). Rounding out his portrait of himself are assurances that his two "grand" points are "prudence" and "method" (40). This frank description will prove crucial to our subsequent analysis of his relationship with Bartleby. The narrator is the epitome of that class of American businessmen whose individualism and pursuit of wealth Melville was to energetically expose and condemn in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*.

Some attention must be paid as well to the narrator's "snug retreat," for the setting of the office is important. One source of pale light exists at either end of the office, which is itself divided by "ground-glass folding-doors" (46) separating employer from employees. At one end is a view of

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the interior of a "spacious sky-light shaft" (40), a view that "might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call life" (41). This lifelessness is, of course, symbolic of the narrator's own stagnant existence. The other end has a window looking out on a massive brick wall not ten feet away. This blackened wall permits little light to shine through the windowpane, and becomes a familiar sight to Bartleby, whose desk is situated immediately next to the window. These details leave the reader with a strong sense of darkness. Cut off from life, this second floor office is perceived by the lawyer as a little haven from the everyday world, safe from the tumult of busy Wall Street below. In reality, however, the spiritless and lifeless chambers are almost cryptlike.

Only two employees, Turkey and Nippers, show any signs of life during each workday, and only when they are in foul moods. In fact, they are a source of constant agitation for the narrator. Knowing the narrator's personality, it is not difficult to see why he becomes annoyed with Turkey's unkempt appearance (a discredit to his office) as well as with the "strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him" (41). As for Nippers, his volatile temper and constant dissatisfaction with the height of his writing desk are also highly distressing for the narrator (44). Nonetheless, I believe the narrator permits - and grows accustomed to - his employees' eccentricities for three reasons: for one, he stresses that both men are valuable to him as workers (42-3); secondly, their bad tempers are

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predictable and thus bearable (like clockwork, Nippers is temperamental in the morning but civil and efficient in the afternoon, whereas Turkey is hardworking in the morning but irritable and prone to making mistakes with his copies in the afternoon); and thirdly, the lawyer dislikes confrontations, which causes him to be overindulgent with his staff. Notwithstanding the inconvenience that his employees' fits of rage present to the efficiency of the office, the lawyer is secure in the notion that even these unwelcome disruptions coincide with his need for order and routine. So despite Turkey's and Nippers' disagreeable qualities, they are industrious, obedient, and respectful and the narrator never relinquishes his feeling of complete control.

Initially, the narrator's acquisition of Bartleby's services appears to be a good decision. He is "glad to have among [his] corps of copyists a man of so singularly sedate an aspect . . ." (46) and hopes Bartleby's calm demeanour will have a positive influence on Turkey and Nippers. Situating Bartleby on his side of the wall next to the window, the narrator tells us:

> Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined. (46)

Entrusting Bartleby with his most important documents, the narrator comes to value his new scrivener's diligence and quiet manner of working. All of this, however does not prepare the narrator for Bartleby's subsequent peculiar behaviour.

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Nothing serves to astonish the narrator more than the day when Bartleby steadfastly refuses to comply with his demands. Bartleby's unwillingness to proofread his copies against any originals, run errands, or do anything else besides copying incites the narrator to anger at his employee's insubordination. All attempts to reason with Bartleby are to no avail; for every request there is the same flat reply, "I would prefer not to." Puzzled to account for such resistance, the narrator does not dismiss Bartleby outright because of the certain something that "touched and disconcerted" (48) him about Bartleby's manner. The narrator, who has clearly never met anyone as strange as Bartleby, is at a loss for words.

The narrator's ineptness when attending to the phenomenon presented in Bartleby may not be so surprising when his character traits are taken into consideration. On the one hand, he cultivates an insincere pity for Bartleby's obviously forlorn aspect and melancholic disposition - a pity the lawyer attempts to mask as genuine. In response to his assurances that he feels a common bond of humanity with Bartleby - "For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam" (55) he says -, Hershel Parker writes:

> So much for insight into the bond of common humanity: a moment later he is rifling the contents of Bartleby's desk under the well-rationalized theory that the desk is his own property. (163)

On the other hand, the narrator truly fears Bartleby, who he suspects is "the victim of innate and incurable disorder" (56). He keeps Bartleby on not only because all efforts to get rid of him fail miserably, but to ease his own troubled

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conscience. The narrator's shallowness is most evident in the following passage:

> Yes. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience. (50-1)

Although the reader knows virtually nothing about Bartleby, the pervading sense is that the narrator is somehow failing him by his smug attitude. The lawyer naturally does not wish to acknowledge his own failings; in fact, he is earnest in his endeavours to place all the blame on Bartleby's unreasonableness, thereby masking his own share of the guilt as innocence. For Bartleby's anger is evident when the narrator asks him why he has stopped writing; the reply, "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" (59), surely denotes more than the lawyer's surmise that Bartleby's eyes are bothering him. Indeed, one feels that the narrator is partly to blame for not knowing the answer to Bartleby's question. In truth, the narrator "sees" nothing; the aforementioned screen set up to ensure his privacy acts as much as an emotional barrier as it does a physical one. As well, after the narrator moves his entire law practice to another part of New York (an act as humourous as it is absurd) and Bartleby is cast into prison as a vagrant, any kind overtures on the narrator's part are promptly shunned by his scrivener:

> And so I found him there, standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall, while all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows, I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves.
> "Bartleby!"

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> "I know you," he said, without looking round - "and I want nothing to say to you." (71)

By abandoning Bartleby in the act of vacating his law office, and then denying any attachment to him when the new occupant makes inquiries after him, the narrator signals his final betrayal of the scrivener:

> "Then, sir," said the stranger, who proved a lawyer, "you are responsible for the man you left there. He refuses to do any copying; he refuses to do anything; he says he prefers not to; and he refuses to quit the premises." "I am very sorry, sir," said I, with assumed tranquillity, but an inward tremor, "but, really, *the man you allude to is nothing to me - he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him* [my italics]." (67)

Taking on allegorical dimensions, the narrative becomes analogous to Peter's denial of Christ in the Bible.

When all of the preceding facts are considered carefully, the narrator loses the reader's respect as the tale progresses. Regardless of his attempts to convince the reader of his patience and fairness toward Bartleby, and in spite of recognizing that Bartleby "seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe" (60), the fact remains that the lawyer is still only concerned with ridding himself of the scrivener he deems a nuisance; in his mind, Bartleby "had now become a millstone . . . not only useless as a necklace, but afflictive to bear" (60). Similar to Delano's self-importance in "Benito Cereno," the narrator is taken aback at Bartleby's lack of gratitude for all he has done for him:

> Not only did there seem to lurk in [Bartleby's manner] a certain calm disdain, but his perverseness seemed ungrateful, considering the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me. (57)

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But self-importance is just one disagreeable quality the narrator is guilty of. His vanity is apparent when he thinks himself a genius after devising a plan to get rid of Bartleby for good; his boast, "I was almost sorry for my brilliant success" (62), as it happens, is rather premature. Thinking only of the possibility that Bartleby might "scandalize" (65) his professional reputation, the narrator reveals his true colours as his self-centredness and smug attitude are unwittingly disclosed to the reader. In effect, the narrator unmasks his inhumanity just when he is trying his best to convince the reader of his humanity.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the narrator's relationship with Bartleby is how the scrivener inadvertently incites him to rebellion. Stating that "Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance" (50), the lawyer mentions "the evil impulse" (51) in him that strangely wishes Bartleby to defy him. More than once the narrator says in so many words that "I burned to be rebelled against again" (52). For him, Bartleby's refusal to do his bidding becomes personal and his obstinacy a battle of wills. Knowing that his plans to get Bartleby to leave have failed, the narrator thinks that Bartleby is savoring some hard fought victory; in the lawyer's words, to "permit [Bartleby] to enjoy this cadaverous triumph over me - this, too, I could not think of" (62). Defenders of the narrator point to the kindness of his final offer to take Bartleby home, but the lawyer's belief that Bartleby is a foe gives us some insight into his true character. Any charitable acts by the narrator must be regarded with suspicion.

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The most striking thing about the narrator is how little he changes as a result of his relationship with Bartleby. Instead of becoming more sensitive toward Bartleby's suffering, the narrator turns his back on him. In a sense, he gives up on the scrivener with the words, "I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach" (56). He never tries to reach Bartleby's soul, however (a task which is no doubt impossible for him due in part to his cold inability to relate to life) which is why I cannot accept Leo Marx's assertion that the narrator's final cry "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" (74) is indicative of "an expression of human brotherhood" (Marx 104). When the lawyer's masquerade of benevolence is taken into consideration, the statement "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" is empty of the love and understanding it should signify. By the end of the tale, the narrator satisfies himself that Bartleby's forlornness is owing to his prior employment in the Dead Letter Office at Washington (73), a trite explanation that restores the lawyer's need for a rational and ordered world.

If anything conclusive can be said about Bartleby, it is this - he represents a threat to the narrator's rigid and "safe" routine. With his employment, disruption sets in and countless inconveniences ensue. Able to satisfactorily account for Turkey's and Nippers' peculiar moods as a novice psychologist, the narrator panics at what is new in Bartleby. The narrator's failure lies both in his inability or unwillingness to adapt to change and his ultimate refusal to

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reveal heartfelt compassion to a fellow human being. As a representative American, his unfavourable character traits bode ill for America. Smooth business transactions and uncomplicated routines are all that concern our dull, smug, vain, conceited, and finally, uncompassionate narrator. His concern for business before moral obligations is what is particularly "American" about him. I think this is what troubled Melville the most; the decency and integrity of the American character, in his opinion, was being undermined by its pursuit of wealth and the American Dream.

The narrator begins to tell an astonishing tale about his encounter with an extraordinary scrivener but, unbeknownst to him, what he effects is his own unmasking - something Melville as author instigates. In the same vein as James Joyce, whose unmasking of Dublin's society depended upon an unmasking of Dublin's individual citizens, Melville reveals in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" the moral bankruptcy at the heart of his country.

iii

Melville continues his examination of the American character in "Jimmy Rose" (*Harper's*, November 1855). Just as with "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the meaning of "Jimmy Rose" is found in the first-person narrator William Ford. If careful attention is paid to Ford's descriptions of the house he has inherited, his account of Jimmy Rose's financial ruin, and the final days of Rose's pathetic life, new insights may be had into the narrator's personality, which is not altogether

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different from the "Bartleby" narrator's or the narrator's in "I and My Chimney." All three narrators unknowingly expose their true selves while intent on recounting stories seemingly not about themselves at all.

The narrator of "Jimmy Rose" tells the reader that he is "an old man" (316) who is heir to a large old house once owned by the late Jimmy Rose. Like the street that it is situated on, the house is beginning to reveal signs of modernization: the "fine old pulpit-like porch" (317) has been torn down and the window-shutters have been replaced by Venetian blinds (317). The interior, however, has escaped "the graft of modernness" (317) much to the narrator's delight, and he proceeds to give a detailed account of its contents. Above all, Ford cherishes the old wall-paper with its patterns dating back to the reign of Louis XVI. The beauty of the paper, despite its age, attracts Ford who revels in its bird illustrations; in fact, "so much of real elegance still lingered in [the birds'] shapes" (318) that the narrator refuses to allow his wife to replace the exquisite covering with new paper (318). This is because the wall-paper reminds him of Jimmy Rose, an old friend now dead. Ford, then, is a man evidently longing for the "good old days" and dreaming of the time when his district was "once the haunt of style and fashion, full of gay parlors and bridal chambers" (316). Despairing that the "glorious old soft-waffle days are over" (316), Ford keenly feels the world of his youth slipping away and the new world of "counting-rooms and warehouses" (316) taking control. Society's metamorphosis from the old to the

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new is symbolized by the rise and fall of Rose in the narrator's mind - hence his tale.

Ford describes his old friend Jimmy with frank admiration. An "uncommonly handsome" (318) man, Jimmy was born well-to-do but was able to amass an even larger fortune through his profitable business in trade. Ford recounts that Jimmy regularly lavished his wealth on guests; his "dinners, suppers, and balls," Ford remembers, "were not to be surpassed by any given in the party-giving city of New York" (319). Evidently the narrator has enjoyed Jimmy's hospitality himself on more than one occasion, for he is able to say that Jimmy was always splendidly dressed, always full of compliments for his guests, and never failing in his "sparkling wit" (319).

The disastrous sinking of two of his cargo vessels precipitates Jimmy's eventual fall from the pinnacle of success, wealth, and prestige. In the remainder of the tale, the narrator briefly chronicles Jimmy's life as a pauper. Having to rely on the charity of old friends and acquaintances for survival, Jimmy is able to eke out a meagre existence with his famous smile and well-known charm. Visiting as a guest at tea-time, Jimmy would flatter his hosts with compliments and entertain them with gossip and news about town. Ford remembers with pride that "Jimmy was rich in smiles. He smiled ever. The lordly door which received him to his eleemosynary teas, knew no such smiling guest as Jimmy" (323).

It is Jimmy's ability to retain a bloom in his cheeks and a smile on his lips that fascinates Ford. Recalling a day soon after his friend's financial collapse when Jimmy told him

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"I can trust no man now" (322), Ford views Jimmy's greatest victory as his ability to emerge from his misanthropic state; "Perhaps at bottom," Ford tells us, "Jimmy was too thoroughly good and kind to be made from any cause a man-hater" (322). Seeing him for the first time after twenty five years, Ford relates the astonishment he felt at Jimmy's miraculous recovery from adversity:

> He whom I expected to behold - if behold at all - dry, shrunken, meagre, cadaverously fierce with misery and misanthropy - amazement! the old Persian roses bloomed in his cheeks. And yet poor as any rat; poor in the last dregs of poverty; a pauper beyond alms-house pauperism; a promenading pauper in a thin, thread-bare, careful coat; a pauper with wealth of polished words; a courteous, smiling, shivering gentleman. (322)

Sitting in the parlor with the faded wall-paper, William Ford sheds tears and offers to his deceased friend's memory the refrain, "Poor, poor Jimmy - God guard us all - poor Jimmy Rose!" (325). This sentimentality is extremely telling, for in reality it is full of self-pity. By masking the more undesirable values of the past as the ones that made America great, Ford is blinding himself to the true vainglorious standards that characterized earlier times.

Throughout the tale, evidence suggests that Ford recognizes Jimmy's faults, but he chooses to ignore them. In fact, he is guilty of disguising Jimmy's flaws in his attempt to paint an overly exuberant portrait of a man he regards as an American hero. It is interesting to note that he refers to Jimmy as a "plagiarist" (319) in praise and wit, although Ford is quick to excuse him on that count. Nevertheless, it shows that Ford has seen through to the shallowness of Jimmy's

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character. To add to this charge of plagiarism, Ford says that Jimmy's attempt to remain a ladies' man wore thin:

> indeed, toward the close of Jimmy's life, the young ladies rather thought his compliments somewhat musty, smacking of cocked hats and small-clothes - nay, of old pawnbrokers' shoulder-lace and sword belts. (324)

He even questions whether Jimmy had a "weak love of vain display" (324), but quickly dismisses the thought as unlikely, considering it unchristian of him to think so. Most interestingly, however, is this statement:

> I still must meditate upon *his strange example*, whereof the marvel is, how after that gay, dashing, nobleman's career, *he could be content to crawl through life*, and peep about among the marbles and mahoganies for contumelious tea and toast, where once like a very Warwick he had feasted the huzzaing world with Burgundy and venison [my italics]. (325)

If we keep in mind the narrator's unmistakable sympathy for Jimmy, it is rather unlikely that Ford's reflections are meant to be disparaging in any way, but I think Melville is being highly ironic. Even though the narrator never really questions whether Jimmy is a failure or not, Melville definitely wants *us* to.

From Ford's description of Jimmy, it is apparent that the latter learns nothing from his misfortune. As Marie A. Campbell points out, "Jimmy cannot escape the culture which binds him because he cannot see its faults" (10). Instead of turning to hard work to build a new life for himself, Jimmy has clung to the life he has always known, a life of frivolous compliments and superficiality. He devotes his spare time to the reading-rooms, where "he kept himself informed of European

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affairs and the last literature, foreign and domestic" (323). He reads to make himself a welcome guest at various households during tea-time, but we are told that his presence was not always welcome. In effect, this is how Jimmy attempts to keep from starving; rather than earn his own living, he becomes a parasite living off the bread and tea of the rich. He carries on as if nothing has happened, unwilling to forsake the community that no longer wants him and that (as we have seen) is not worth holding on to.

What is most ominous about "Jimmy Rose" is not so much Jimmy's inability to realize the futility of his life as it is Ford's veneration for his old friend. Blinded by Jimmy's "rosey" gentlemanly manner, generosity, and charm, Ford tries to portray him as a man whose spirit is worthy of emulation. But the tale is finally not about American fortitude or perseverance in the face of adversity per se; instead, Melville is unmasking Jimmy as a failure just as Ford is doing his best to disguise him as a saint. The real tragedy is not Jimmy's downfall as Ford would have us believe, but rather Ford's own refusal to see the truth.

In "Jimmy Rose," Melville demonstrates that young America is failing to escape the fate of its past. The American character, in other words, is somehow not evolving by experience as it should; rather, it is eagerly donning the masks handed down from the past. Part of the result is stasis - a resistance to change despite the fact that the world, particularly America, is rapidly changing itself. By embracing Jimmy's own values, William Ford is destined to die

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a similar death.

iv

Critic Richard Fogle argues that the conservatism of both William Ford and the narrator of "I and My Chimney" (*Putnam's*, March 1856) is, for Melville, healthy and natural. With regard to "I and My Chimney" specifically, Fogle asserts that the chimney symbolizes this conservatism, which "aims at the preservation of organically human values, ties, and relationships" (Fogle 73). Fogle's claim is a curious one given that the narrator's strange attachment to his chimney serves only to threaten, rather than preserve, human ties and relationships. In fact, the only relationship the narrator seems to cherish is the bond he perceives to exist between the chimney and himself. In this section I will focus on this important theme of conservatism to reveal it as a potentially deplorable - instead of admirable - quality of the American character.

On the surface, "I and My Chimney" is quite simple and very comical. In it the narrator describes the chimney of his house, a towering mass of bricks that occupies its centre. It is so large, in fact, that a master-mason, after calculating its size to be "one hundred and forty-four square feet," exclaims to the owner: "Sir, this house would appear to have been built simply for the accommodation of your chimney" (342). This chimney becomes a source of contention between the narrator and his wife - the former delighting in its immensity and grandeur, the latter attempting everything

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within her power to have it removed. The humourous episodes that occur during the clashes between husband and wife prompt Warner Berthoff to suggest that "Melville appears on the happiest of compositional terms with the outlook he is projecting" (326). What Berthoff does not sense is the dark and serious side to the tale, brought about largely by the narrator's peculiar love for his chimney.

It is important to understand why the narrator worships his chimney the way he does. His obvious pleasure in describing the chimney as "a huge, corpulent old Harry VIII of a chimney" (327) points to the narrator's attraction to what is old. This attraction is substantiated further on in the narrative by the narrator's following confession:

> Old myself, I take to oldness in things; for that cause mainly loving old Montaigne, and old cheese, and old wine; and eschewing young people, hot rolls, new books, and early potatoes, and very fond of my old claw-footed chair, and old clubfooted Deacon White . . . and above all, high above all, am fond of my high-manteled old chimney. (337)

The above revelation explains why the narrator adamantly states to his wife that under no circumstances will the chimney be destroyed. By personifying it the way he does, it becomes his distinguished and revered old friend, with whom upon many occasions he shares a philosophical smoke. His reverence, in fact, extends beyond mere friendship: "Sir," he tells his wife's hired master-mason, "I look upon this chimney less as a pile of masonry than as a personage. It is the king of the house. I am but a suffered and inferior subject" (333). Since the chimney is an emblem of the past, the narrator is in essence pledging his allegiance to the past.

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Hating what is new and admiring what is old, the narrator is not unlike the previous two narrators I have called attention to.

The narrator's determination to save his chimney from his wife appears, on the whole, a rather harmless and amusing act of stubbornness on his part. But he drops certain hints throughout the tale that cause one to suspect that his obstinacy is more dangerous and troublesome than comical. The chimney, after being made vulnerable to the elements when a leaky roof is replaced, begins to crumble, putting the wooden house in danger of catching fire. All entreaties from his wife to do something before their house burns down fall on deaf ears. The narrator tells her "far better that my house should burn down, than that my chimney should be pulled down, though but a few feet" (332). Only threats from his mortgagor persuade him to have the top of the chimney replaced. The chimney also causes "endless domestic inconveniences" (335) for the narrator's wife. According to her, the chimney "stands midway in the place where a fine entrance-hall ought to be" (335). It is a dust-collector (the narrator tells us he cherishes the cobwebs) and by its very structure causes countless passage-ways and dead-ends:

> Going through the house, you seem to be forever going somewhere, and getting nowhere. It is like losing one's self in the woods; round and round the chimney you go, and if you arrive at all, it is just where you started, and so you begin again, and again get nowhere. Indeed - though I say it not in the way of fault-finding at all - never was there so labyrinthine an abode. (340)

The chimney's invalid condition, the inconveniences it

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presents, and the seemingly endless arguments it causes all fail to have an effect on the narrator. His resolution to defend his chimney at all costs remains to the end, but at the sake of potential destruction and discord.

The image of the narrator's house as a labyrinth is crucial to Melville's meaning in the tale. If we take the chimney to be symbolic of the past, we see the significance of the narrator, his wife, and daughters all revolving around the structure and getting nowhere. There is no sense of progress or growth in the house. It is a constrictive environment made so by its very construction around the enormous chimney. By defending his chimney against modern forces, the narrator defends and masks his meaningless existence and stunts his growth as an individual in the process.

The narrator is quick to blame his wife for stripping him "of one masculine prerogative after another" (338) when she assumes the household affairs. But what he does not realize is that, like the chimney, he has more or less settled into the earth and become immobile; in effect, he strips *himself* of his sense of worth and being. Consider his ignorance of his wife's plans to build a new barn on their property; it is because of his own admonition that he has "got to be quite behind the age, too, as well as running behind-hand in everything else" (328). In short, the narrator, who "out of a sabbatical horror of industry, will, on a week-day, go out of [his] road a quarter of a mile, to avoid the sight of a man at work" (336), is the very embodiment of laziness. Content simply to dwell beside his chimney like a fixture, he revels

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in the peace and comfort he feels his state of idleness ensures.

Some mention should be made of the narrator's wife. She is clearly a source of constant irritation for her husband since she is the exact opposite of her spouse in terms of industriousness and vitality. "Though in years nearly as old as myself," the narrator says, "in spirit she is young as my little sorrel mare, Trigger, that threw me last fall" (336). She loves what is new, a love her husband assures us arises from "that infatuate juvenility of hers" (337). For Melville, she represents what is modern and new: she builds a new barn, she wants to construct a new entrance-hall, and wants to modernize the entire house. With her daughters as allies, she wages war against her husband's complacency and desire to preserve his chimney.

As do most of Melville's characters, the narrator's wife leaves critics divided over what role she comes to play in the tale and what meaning she is meant to impart - if any. It is not surprising to find Fogle regarding her as a destructive force, considering his stance on the narrator's conservatism; in his words, "The narrator's wife is eager to do away with the chimney entirely, but the house is built around it and could hardly survive its loss" (74). Bickley sees her as threatening "the old narrator's fundamental self, both physical and spiritual" (52). Still other critics identify her as Melville's spokesperson, uncovering what is wrong with her husband's old-fashioned ways when she tells him, "it's I, young I, that keep you from stagnating" (338). More modern

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critics, however, have preferred to take a middle position, pointing out faults on both sides and advocating a compromise. This latter critical viewpoint is upheld most convincingly by Marie A. Campbell in her essay, "A Quiet Crusade: Melville's Tales of the Fifties." She identifies the conflict between husband and wife as a struggle between the old world and the new: "The old order is procrastinating against change which is inevitable; the new world abolishes all in its path. Neither is a complete answer" (12). This last position seems to me the most appropriate, and is worth closer analysis.

Fogle's point that the house cannot withstand the loss of the chimney is a central issue of the tale. Fogle emphasizes the narrator's following arguments to his wife: "To take out the backbone of anything, wife, is a hazardous affair" (341) and "the chimney - consider the chimney: if you demolish the foundation, what is to support the superstructure?" (336). But what is often overlooked is that the narrator is willing to forsake the house for the chimney's survival, as revealed when he exclaims:

> If undisturbed by innovators, then in future ages, when all the house shall have crumbled from it, this chimney will still survive - a Bunker Hill monument. (341)

The wife is equally unmindful of the lasting permanence of the house, but for different reasons. Her motivations are mixed concerning the chimney; on the one hand, she wants the chimney repaired to protect the house, but on the other, she really longs to have the chimney removed altogether. Her concern, it turns out, stems more from vanity and her desire for a grand

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entrance-hall than from safety. What neither considers is the well-being of the *present* superstructure. The narrator's fault rests in his neglect to realize that the chimney relies on the house for protection. By the same token, his wife is guilty of giving no thought to the structure of the house and the necessity of a firm foundation. On one side is a disregard for the future, and on the other is a disregard for the past.

Marvin Fisher points out in his criticism of "I and My Chimney" that, by dramatizing "the conflict between the pull of the past and a faith in the future within a kind of nucleus of the nation," Melville has demonstrated polar forces that "have produced a stalemate, a condition where each is far more capable of reaction than of action and neither can shape his own destiny" (210-11). I am not convinced, however, that such a stalemate exists. Clearly the narrator has succeeded in thwarting his wife's plans for their home; the past, in other words, is winning out. His final resolution - "I and my chimney will never surrender" (354) - is uttered with grim determination. In this tale, as in others, Melville unmasks a flaw in the American character - an undying devotion to the past with no thought for the future. The lawyer, William Ford, and the narrator of "I any My Chimney" all somehow manage to fight off what is new because it threatens their preconceived notions of what is right and natural. Instead of differentiating what is right from what is wrong with the past, Melville's protagonists are deciding to mask it all as good. It is a crippled and immobile society that, by refusing

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to expand through experience, chooses to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the sights and sounds of its own sickly condition.

V

"Benito Cereno" (*Putnam's* 1855) is one of Melville's better known tales and, along with "Bartleby, the Scrivener," has attracted more critical attention than any of his other magazine stories. One likely explanation for its popularity lies in Melville's decision to return to a setting he was always at home with - the sea. What is more, Melville's return appears to be accompanied by a reemergence of philosophical questions that continued to trouble him, such as man's relationship with Nature and the origins of evil. "Benito Cereno" is the one tale that seems to fit into critics' preconceived ideas of what Melville's predilections as a writer were. This novella, however, does not radically differ from the previous stories I have discussed in this chapter with respect to Melville's preoccupation with the American character. In a sense it is an excellent story with which to conclude since it embodies elements from the three previous tales. In it, Melville unmasks America's insensitivity and the dangers associated with a conservative perspective on life, and emphasizes the American character's slowwitted disposition and general naiveté. One major difference distinguishing "Benito Cereno" from the stories treated above is Melville's use of the third-person narrator. Captain Amasa Delano is the representative American of this

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tale. Since the meaning of the story rests on this captain, a close examination of Delano is warranted. But first a brief synopsis of "Benito Cereno" is in order.

It is the year 1799, and Delano, the American commander of the *Bachelor's Delight*, a cargo ship, spies a mysterious-looking vessel while at anchor at Santa Maria. Realizing the strange ship is in distress, Captain Delano decides to befriend her by offering his assistance. While on board the *San Dominick*, he meets the vessel's commander, Don Benito Cereno, and Cereno's faithful servant Babo. Cereno, who behaves strangely during Delano's visit, does not appear to be properly appreciative of the help Delano is giving him. Delano attributes Cereno's peculiar mood to the hardships he has obviously suffered while at sea. After questioning the Spanish captain, the American learns that scurvy and powerful storms off the Cape killed most of Cereno's crew. Suspicious about questions Cereno puts to him about his own ship, the uncomfortable secret conferences that Cereno has with Babo, and the disproportionate number of black slaves to Spanish sailors, Delano begins to fear that Cereno is a pirate who has most of his crew hidden below decks. Brushing aside all of his anxieties as childlike and absurd, and satisfying himself that he has done all he can for the *San Dominick*, Delano starts off in his whale-boat back to his ship. But when Cereno effects a dramatic jump into his whale-boat and Babo follows with knife in hand, Delano quickly realizes that Benito must have been a hostage of the blacks. The *San Dominick* is subsequently recaptured after a bloody battle,

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Babo is brought to trial as the ringleader, and Benito Cereno, still overcome with horror after his traumatic experience, retires to a monastery where he dies soon after.

In recent years criticism has focused attention on Amasa Delano rather than on the title character in an attempt to ascertain whether or not Delano should have been aware of the reality of the situation on the *San Dominick*. Delano has had his fair share of supporters and faultfinders, but the latter group, it seems to me, present a more convincing case with the textual evidence available. Too many critics, however, simply condemn Delano as stupid without examining the details of his character.

The fact that "Benito Cereno" is narrated in the third-person helps to give us information about Delano's character, information that Delano may not have divulged had he been narrating the story himself. Delano, we are told, is

> a person of a singularly undistrustful good-nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man. (239)

Delano's trust in the goodness of man has its repercussions as the tale unfolds. The narrator follows up his previous description with this challenge:

> Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benvolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine. (239)

He invites the reader to pay close attention to Delano's lack of perception as the captain wanders about the *San Dominick*'s deck. My analysis will attempt to show that Delano is to

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blame for his ignorance. The American's biggest flaw is his unwillingness to attribute evil to human beings. Similar to Billy Budd's innocence, Delano's flaw mars his ability to see the truth.

Those who are reluctant to call Delano's "superhuman innocence" (Miller, Jr. 154) a weakness argue that he could not possibly have been expected to guess that Babo was the mastermind behind the whole sham; Babo's evil designs, they say, are too brilliant for detection. The implicit skepticism with which the narrator treats Delano, however, surely points to the opposite conclusion. Consider just a few of what can only be deemed discrediting remarks about the captain: "blunt-thinking American's eyes" (251), "a man of such native simplicity" (257), and "the singular guilelessness of the American" (260). The narrator continually mentions Delano rubbing his eyes to see better, but clearer vision never comes. I believe the narrator's ironic depiction of Delano's blindness is Melville's own, given the earlier examples I have used to illustrate Melville's consistently disparaging assessments of the American character. What blinds Delano is not the cleverness with which Babo's masquerade is carried off, so much as it is the American's preconceptions.

Marvin Fisher notes a certain arrogance accompanying Delano's innocence and feels that Melville wanted to reveal "its demeaning or even dehumanizing effect on human relationships" (107). Delano, for instance, cultivates an air of superiority over Cereno. Wanting to be embraced as the *San Dominick*'s saviour, Delano is perturbed when he is ignored; as

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the narrator relates, "Captain Delano was not a little concerned at what he could not help taking for the time to be Don Benito's unfriendly indifference towards himself" (245). Stung by the Spaniard's coldness, Delano, instead of feeling heartfelt sympathy for Cereno's wretched condition, keeps his distance and eyes him more out of pity as an inferior seaman:

> Without communicating the opinion, of course, the American could not but impute at least part of the detentions [the *San Dominick*'s drifting] both to clumsy seamanship and faulty navigation. Eying Don Benito's small, yellow hands, he easily inferred that the young captain had not got into command at the hawse-hole, but the cabin-window; and if so, why wonder at incompetence, in youth, sickness, and gentility united? (251)

Delano's arrogance, in fact, causes him to make wrong inferences regularly. Again, his assumptions are not so much the fault of the masquerade as they are of his own vanity.

"Benito Cereno" is often regarded as a tale dealing with the slavery issue. Those who charge Melville with racism or those who see him as a champion of the abolitionist cause all find plenty of ammunition in the story. Although I don't believe "Benito Cereno" to be primarily about slavery, there is no doubt that Delano's racism contributes to his shortsightedness. The narrator says that the American had an "old weakness" (279) for blacks:

> In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs. (279)

Delano mistakes Babo's attentiveness to Cereno's ailments for affection and never entertains the possibility that Babo, Atufal, or any of the other blacks would have the intelligence

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or audacity to turn against their masters. Watching a black woman nurse her infant pleases Delano, who foolishly thinks, "There's naked nature, now: pure tenderness and love" (268). He underestimates man's potential for evil by trusting his preconceived sentimental notions of man's innate goodness and God's providence.

Delano *does* suspect something is wrong on the slave ship, but always prefers to drown ugly thoughts. Refusing to believe Cereno means him harm, the American rationalizes the Spaniard's odd behaviour and convinces himself that Cereno is in a deranged state of mind and evidently needs rest. By these reassurances, Delano attempts to mask his uneasiness and false sense of security. But it is important to note the narrator's comments when Delano makes excuses to assuage his fear: "Such were the American's thoughts. *They were tranquillizing*" (264); "as one feeling incipient seasickness, he strove, *by ignoring the symptoms*, to get rid of the malady" (271); "Hitherto, credulous good-nature had been too ready to furnish excuses for *reasonable fears*" (292) (all my italics). Delano is guilty in every instance of suppressing his instinctual awareness of evil; as Bickley explains, "he senses that he is viewing a masquerade, arranged for some deceitful purpose . . . but he is a man reluctant to yield his 'reason' to his intuition" (105-6).

Critics often regard Delano as a representative of the New World and Cereno as a representative of the Old World. As a staunch defender of Delano and the New World, James E. Miller, Jr. applauds the fortitude of the American captain and

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frowns upon what he views as the cowardice of Cereno:

> In his weakness in the face of danger and in his final withdrawal from life, Don Benito seems to be the representative of a proud but nearly exhausted civilization, one on the brink of disintegration and decay. (156-7)

After considering Delano's character, however, surely our estimation of the New World cannot be much different than Miller's estimation of the Old. Delano is himself poised on the brink of imminent destruction. Even though the American does manage to save Cereno from the clutches of Babo and expeditiously recapture the slave ship to restore order, it is the Spaniard who ultimately saves the day. Were it not for Cereno's last minute jump into Delano's boat, Delano's crew would have been slaughtered by the blacks who, as the trial makes known, planned to take the *Bachelor's Delight* that very night. Far from extolling the virtues of the American, Melville is showing the New World to be just as blind as the Old and as unprepared for the challenges that await it.

If "Benito Cereno" ended with a confirmation that, to use Delano's earlier assurance, "this day's experience shall be a good lesson" (281), then perhaps Delano could be forgiven for his obtuseness. But Delano's experiences on the *San Dominick* teach him little or nothing. He excuses his ignorance by reflecting, "acuteness might have cost me my life, without saving anothers" (315) and continues to believe that "all is owing to Providence" (314), thereby freeing himself from blame. Most importantly, his confrontation with evil has no effect on him; consider the following dialogue between the two captains:

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> "the past is past; why moralize upon it? Forget it. . . . You are saved," cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; "you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?"
> "The negro." (314)

That Delano even has to ask Cereno such a question is revealing. The American captain resumes his life much the same way as the lawyer in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" does - by putting all troubling thoughts out of mind.

"Benito Cereno" is a gripping tale about Captain Delano's encounter with evil's masquerade. But my analysis of Delano's character indicates that the American is by no means a maskless man himself. The narrator urges us to penetrate beneath Delano's display of Christian benevolence to expose his racism, air of superiority, vanity, and inability to learn from experience, all of which cloud his judgements and betray his old-fashioned sensibilities. The fate of the Old World threatens to become that of the New World as well.

vi

Prominent critics of Melville's short fiction such as William B. Dillingham and Johannes D. Bergmann suggest that Melville is practicing an "art of concealment" (Bergmann 249) in his tales; that is, he is attempting to hide his meaning in complex narratives that often take on the form of parable. While I think there is some truth to this theory of concealment, there is every reason to suspect that Melville wants us to judge the thoughts and actions of his American characters, since he provides enough details about them to warrant a reading such as I have given. That Melville's

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contemporaries saw nothing wrong with his presentation of William Ford or Amasa Delano, for example, indicates not so much that Melville cleverly disguised his meaning, but rather that the mid-nineteenth-century American reading public could identify with their American counterparts in the tales. The reading public's inability to perceive the shortcomings of Melville's protagonists is extremely telling and gives credence to his assessment of the American character. Melville did not have to be blatant to achieve successful social criticism. He let the collective ignorance, naiveté, and errors in judgement of his representative Americans speak for itself.

Full of an Emersonian optimism and trust in the American dream, mid-nineteenth-century Americans no doubt exuded an unsurpassed confidence in their democratic way of life. In his tales, Melville undercuts this hopeful outlook by unmasking the image of the self-confident and heroic Yankee. By so doing, he reveals the shivering, insecure, and conservative American living beneath the cloak of progressive, democratic America. In questioning the American character's capacity to adapt to the ever-changing world, Melville's stories become portents of disaster. His criticism of the American character is significant, for in many ways it translates into a disapproval of America as a whole. The dire consequences of America's masquerade will be the subject of my next chapter.

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CHAPTER IV

America's Masquerade

Outwardly regarded, our craft is a lie; for all that is outwardly seen of it is the clean-swept deck, and oft-painted planks comprised above the water-line; whereas, the vast mass of our fabric, with all its store-rooms of secrets, forever slides along far under the surface.

from *White-Jacket*

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Chapter IV: America's Masquerade

i

F.O. Matthiessen, in *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, places Melville in the esteemed company of those writers he feels were consumed with the "possibilities of democracy" (ix):

> Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville all wrote literature for democracy in a double sense. They felt that it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfillment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution, to provide a culture commensurate with America's political opportunity. Their tones were sometimes optimistic, sometimes blatantly, even dangerously expansive, sometimes disillusioned, even despairing, but what emerges from the total pattern of their achievement - if we will make the effort to repossess it - is literature for our democracy. (xv)

A bold but fair statement, I think, given that he takes care later to distinguish Hawthorne - and especially Melville - as the more "disillusioned" members of the group. But *how*, exactly, was Melville committed to democracy? After all, considering what is unveiled in the previous chapter, it seems odd even to entertain the notion that Melville could have faith in such an ideal as democracy. Any "potentialities freed by the Revolution" were, in Melville's estimation, being undermined by the nature of the American character.

Despite Melville's unquestionable disillusionment throughout the latter part of his career, there are, nevertheless, instances in his fiction that signal an equally undeniable devotion to a belief in man's potential to fulfill a democratic ideal. His more democratic characters tend to

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offset those unmasked in Chapter III, and exist as exemplars of those virtues Melville held as sacred. Furthermore, those characters exhibiting democratic qualities are common men - average Americans with few familial ties and little or no wealth. They are the dispossessed; like orphans, they are abandoned by a country that measures worth by class distinction and wealth. Cast aside, these so-called vagrants take to the ships in order to escape a nation they feel has betrayed them, a nation that masquerades before the world as a democracy worthy of emulation. And Melville, all too aware of this masquerade, despaired at the fact that his country was a living mockery of those ideals it had embraced at birth.

After examining Melville's conception of this democratic ideal in more detail, I will discuss how it is betrayed by the American character. In the previous chapter, I have indicated how Melville traced this betrayal to man's inhumanity; in this chapter I intend to demonstrate further that, among other things, Americans' greed for wealth and power, fueled by the economic opportunities made possible by America's New Age, was also a determining factor. Melville's novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, is an accusing portrait of a country that has lost its moral centre, a country that, by embracing a philosophy of individualism, has become infused with feelings of suspicion, fear, and hatred. America would have the world believe it was the very model of democracy, whereas Melville, striving to dig up the truth underneath his country's masquerade, would have the world see just the opposite.

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ii

There is an element of wildness inherent in Melville's conception of democracy; it is what Larzer Ziff, in *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America,* calls "landlessness" (260). The point is made by Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*: "But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God -, better it is to perish in that howling infinite, than be gloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!" (97). "Landlessness" is a spirit that is savage, untame, and free. It is the spirit of democracy, something as natural as the sea itself. Most importantly, it is what exists in the hearts of all mankind - Melville's *common* men and women.

Melville is not alone in believing the dignity of the common man to be special. Like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, he upheld the common man as a being endowed by God with a certain dignity, an "immaculate manliness" (104) we feel deep within ourselves. Ishmael enthusiastically continues:

> this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality! (104)

In the final analysis, Melville's common man is, paradoxically, not exactly *common;* he possesses a goodness and integrity known only to his kind. The common man is the lifeblood for the future of democracy.

Looking back to *Typee*, there is something intensely

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democratic in the natives' lifestyle and treatment of each other that is born solely out of their savagery. Tommo, in comparing his own culture with that of the Typees, claims that:

> Civilization does not engross all the virtues of humanity: she has not even her full share of them. They flourish in greater abundance and attain greater strength among many barbarous people. (274)

The virtues Tommo refers to are those such as hospitality, faithfulness, and friendship. Ziff picks up on this idea as well, arguing that Melville, like Cooper, traces the democratic spirit to nature rather than to a so-called democratic society. Comparing Natty Bumppo to Melville's sailors, he says that "Inherent value in the common man depends for its ripening on a degree of direct exposure to the natural environment" (266). Natty, like Melville's common seaman, is "not the product of American society nor does he live within it" (266). Instead, his adventures in the wilderness forge his strong moral fibre, just as Ishmael's experience at sea helps him to discover his democratic potential.

Becoming disheartened with his prospects on land, Ishmael decides to ship as a "simple sailor" (*Moby-Dick* 14) on the *Pequod*. Free of the encumbrances of society, he revels in his closeness to elemental nature. While terrified of Nature's potential for evil which, as we saw earlier, is forever menacing beneath its masquerade, Ishmael is nevertheless aware that it is only when he is out of sight of land and confronting dangerous circumstances that he is really living,

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really in touch with himself. Indeed, his attraction to the grandeur of the sea is intensely spiritual - "There is a magic in it" (13), he claims, notwithstanding Melville's own estrangement from God. Wrapped up in Ishmael's curiosity to see the White Whale is his desire to learn about his true self. In fact, the *Pequod*'s quest is very much his personal voyage toward self-discovery.

An integral part of Ishmael's maturation as an individual is the cultivation of his friendship with Queequeg. Being essentially a loner and outcast upon reaching New Bedford, he is unwillingly matched with the tattooed harpooneer with whom he is forced to spend the night. His prejudices against the savage dissolve, however, when he begins to admire Queequeg's native simplicity. After initiating the first gestures toward friendship, Ishmael is startled at Queequeg's readiness to become soul mates:

> He seemed to take to me quite as naturally and unbiddenly as I to him; and when our smoke was over, he pressed his forehead against mine, clasped me round the waist, and said that henceforth we were married; meaning, in his country's phrase, that we were bosom friends; he would gladly die for me, if need should be. *In a countryman, this sudden flame of friendship would have seemed far too premature, a thing to be much distrusted; but in this simple savage those old rules would not apply*. [my italics] (53)

It is difficult to imagine the nameless lawyer in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," or a person like William Ford, taking kindly to Queequeg's offer of companionship, but Ishmael is different. Ignoring the public's stares and remarks that result from their friendship, Ishmael and Queequeg are content with the sense of security and loyalty their bond brings. It

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is a bond that Melville holds in highest regard due to its beauty and rarity in the world.

The importance of the Ishmael-Queequeg relationship is particularly made manifest in "The Monkey Rope" chapter, in which Melville demonstrates the necessity of human beings relying on each other for survival in a perilous world. During the process of "cutting-in" (270), Ishmael watches Queequeg work on a captured whale while he (Ishmael) remains on the deck above. Tied together at the waist with a single rope, each man relies on the other for his safety; according to Ishmael:

> for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake. So, then, an elongated Siamese ligature united us. (271)

Should either party lose concentration, both would be in jeopardy. The thought of this tenuous connection frightens Ishmael, who ponders the prospects still further:

> I say, I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or another, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die. True, you may say that, by exceeding caution, you may possibly escape these and the multitudinous other evil chances of life. But handle Queequeg's monkey-rope heedfully as I would, sometimes he jerked it so, that I came very near sliding overboard. Nor could I possibly forget that, do what I would, I only had the management of one end of it. (271)

Ishmael knows that, no matter how carefully one steps about through life, a person's security depends upon other individuals. Far from Emerson's notion of man as a self-

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reliant being who needs only his connection with Nature to lead a fulfilling life, Melville recognizes man's need of man. As Matthiessen points out, "As Melville examined man's lot, he was impressed, no less than Hawthorne, by the terrifying consequences of an individual's separation from his fellow beings" (443). In fact, the only true bonds in Melville's fiction are at sea where, facing both the evil and serenity of Nature, men are able to realize that democratic potential within themselves that is so vital to human connectedness.

The sailors whom Melville praises, including Jack Chase, old Ushant, and Bulkington, all possess a grandeur that his other characters fail to live up to; indeed, given his sentimental dedication to Jack Chase in his final work, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, one feels that, sadly, Melville never did find another friend quite like him: "No man ever had a better heart or a bolder" (*White-Jacket* 12). Of course, the sea did breed corrupt sailors, usually officers exerting power over the common seamen. But for the most part, the protagonists in Melville's seafaring novels all find a home and embrace a feeling of belonging on the deck of a ship through their keen sense of brotherhood with the rest of the crew. This is emblematic of the spirit of democracy Melville cherished above all else.

Clearly, Melville was committed to the possibility of democracy. The decency and humanity of the common man was the foundation and lifeblood of America's democratic society. And yet, given the breed of men unmasked in Chapter 3, there can also be no doubt that Melville regarded America as a nation

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masquerading as a democracy. For in addition to those conservatives like Jimmy Rose who resisted change purely to protect their self-interests, there were those who embraced the tidal wave of massive societal changes during nineteenth-century America. Oblivious to anything but the pursuit of happiness, these Americans sacrificed their democratic faith and thereby brought about their moral and spiritual demise.

iii

Melville lived through some of the most exciting and horrific events in American history. His lifetime (1819-1891) spanned most of America's history during the nineteenth-century, a century that saw America build, reform, expand, divide, and modernize as a country. Melville's writing is, in large part, a reaction to these historic times.

The happenings of Melville's century arose - either directly or indirectly and for better or worse - out of the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, a document expressing the hopes of Americans for a better society through a recognition of the freedom and equality of all humankind. The Declaration, "a celebration of common people in government and society that became the essence of American democracy" (Wood 92), gave birth to a nationalistic fervor and an unparalleled optimism that would only intensify after victory in the War of 1812. In the years to follow, as the United States developed and gained strength, the country was well on its way toward becoming a world power to be reckoned with - and admired.

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There seemed to be nothing America couldn't do. It was to acquire a mythic stature among the nations of the world as a vast land of opportunity. The mass construction of roads, bridges, and cities; urbanization and immigration; the rapid growth of industry and mechanization (including steam engines and iron ships); the rise of labour unions and big business; and the construction of railroads forging links between states and territories taken in the spirit of Manifest Destiny: all in turn were fruits of the new epoch. Matthiessen notes that, "The triumph of the new age was foreshadowed in the gold rush, in the full emergence of the acquisitive spirit" (ix). In *The Times of Melville and Whitman*, a detailed book that brings nineteenth-century America to life, Van Wyck Brooks highlights the effects of this "acquisitive spirit":

> the vast region of Oregon had entered the Union. . . The republic had all but absorbed the continent and the temper of the American people was exuberant and more than ever uncritically sanguine. They felt that anything might happen in the nation, in the mind. (4)

Melville himself was caught up in the patriotism sweeping his country, and his writing bore witness to it. In *White-Jacket*, for example, he mythologizes America's role as a nation destined by birthright to lead the world:

> we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people - the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. . . . God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. (153)

He regards America, in Marcus Cunliffe's words, as "a pristine

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Adamic new world" (1), a world that must forge ahead and shake the burdensome yoke of the past. One might well mistake Melville's following words for Emerson's:

> The Past is dead, and has no resurrection; but the Future is endowed with such a life, that it lives to us even in anticipation. The Past is, in many things, the foe of mankind; the future is, in all things, our friend. In the Past is no hope; the Future is both hope and fruition. (*White-Jacket* 152)

But what is highly significant about Melville is that his social criticism tempers his transcendental impulses; note, for example, how he denounces the immoral act of flogging sailors in the same breath as he creates myths about America. He is all too aware that, for many, including the sailor forced to endure unjust suffering, "our Revolution was in vain; to him our Declaration of Independence is a lie" (*White-Jacket* 145). Melville's understanding of this betrayal left an indelible mark on his mind and work.

Melville's struggle to reconcile myth and reality is the subject of "Melville, Society, and Language," an essay by Milton R. Stern. In it he proposes that Melville's two views were, and are now, present in all American literature: the symbolic or mythic view on the one hand, and a disillusioned or historical view on the other (433). But Stern clearly identifies Melville as the forerunner of that class of writers intent on angrily dismantling the transcendental and suprahistorical mythic impression of America (434). While I think Stern is mistaken in his refusal to credit Melville with any idealistic urges concerning America, he is correct in his assumption that Melville felt the "American present to be a

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betrayal of their American future and the mythic meaning of America" (433). While Melville saw mythical - and thus *democratic* - potential for America, his experience rejected America's belief that it had fulfilled the myth. Melville was thus trapped between the dichotomy Stern describes, yearning for the ideal yet despairing about the reality.

Melville's work is in large part a criticism of American society. He realized the danger of such criticism; as Stern points out, the national culture denounced criticism "as hostile to democracy, the Republic, and God" (437). Although he is seldom blatant in his censure of societal ills, to the discerning reader Melville repeatedly criticizes the national culture for fostering a false sense of hope. This idealistic nationalism was responsible for America's masquerade. For not everything was how it seemed. The cost of progress was high, not only financially but morally as well. The American nation had sold its soul to Mephistopheles.

Capitalism made America an extremely wealthy nation. But what America's masquerade hid, and what Melville reiterated, was that the rich were still getting richer and the poor poorer. Far from the equality preached in the Declaration of Independence, the Republican government still retained the class distinctions assumed to have been eliminated with the aristocracy during the Revolution. America's democracy was, in fact, no more than a plutocracy. Brooks notes that, by the 1880s, "a feeling was growing up in the nation that a group of Titans had come to the top who were setting out to enchain and enslave the people . . . " (477). These Titans were

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millionaires made wealthy from profits seized from America's strides in industry. Melville's contempt for the rich is glaringly obvious in a letter he wrote to Nathaniel P. Willis, editor of the *Home Journal*, on 14 December 1849:

> tho' there are numbers of fine fellows, and hearts of blood, in the world, whom Providence hath blessed with purses furlongs in length - yet the class of wealthy people are, in the aggregate, such a mob of gilded dunces, that, not to be wealthy carries with it a certain distinction and nobility. (Davis 97)

Greed was not only changing the face of the nation but the hearts of its citizens as well. It fueled the feverish Gold Rush, Jacksonian expansionism, the bloodshed during the Mexican and Indian wars, the institutionalization of slavery in the South, and, ultimately, the catastrophic Civil War. The cost of the Civil War extended beyond the many billions of dollars spent fighting it; indeed, the legacy of corruption and hatred left behind remained a permanent scar on the American conscience.

This American *progress* was purchased, in Melville's opinion, at the cost of its humanity. As the wild frontier was gradually conquered, so too was the spirit of landlessness Ziff talks about. "The rural life," Brooks contends, "like the life of the sea in Cooper and Melville and Dana, had lost its preeminence and its magic in the minds of the masses" (477). Individualism replaced cooperation with competition and, in turn, bred distrust in a society that "became for Melville the mirror reflecting its human creators: heartless, unjust, violent, exploitative, selfish, and hypocritical" (Stern 442). The resulting tragedy was that, unlike

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Melville's sailors who bonded instinctively, the American people were alienated by a corrupt capitalistic society.

Having briefly described the tumultuous political, economical, and social agendas hindering the advancement of a true democracy in the United States, I wish to turn now to a more in depth look at the social ramifications of America's masquerade. As Ziff argues, Melville, above all else, "was concerned centrally with the sociology rather than the politics of democracy" (267). If we accept the notion that democracy originates in the moral fabric of man, then it seems worthwhile to attempt to elucidate further how democracy went awry in America. In his last novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), Melville explores the masquerade theme to the fullest and gives utterance to his profound belief in America as a democracy in name only rather than deed.

iv

The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, which Fitz-James O'Brien aptly calls "a thoroughly American story" (366), is an exceedingly difficult novel to interpret. At the time of its publication, it received scorn rather than praise from its critics. The *New York Dispatch* (April 5, 1857) bluntly remarked that the book leaves the reader "wondering what on earth the author has been driving at." In much the same vein, the *Literary Gazette* (April 11, 1857) wrote: "To describe Melville's book, one had need to be a Höllen-Breughel; to understand its purport, one should be something of a Sphinx." The novel's chapters are comprised of seemingly chance

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encounters and ensuing conversations between passengers travelling on a Mississippi steamboat bound for New Orleans on April Fool's Day. As the book unfolds, however, one senses that these meetings do bear relations to one another, and that the author's attentiveness toward the masquerade theme is unmistakable.

Despite the problematical nature of *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, there are sufficient clues to aid the reader in piecing together Melville's intentions. It is highly significant, for example, that the action of the novel takes place on board a steamer instead of an ocean-bound vessel. I think Melville realized that the cargo or whaling ship, as a literary symbol, was a cumbersome microcosm of the world; it did not adequately represent life in America. There are distinct advantages, on the other hand, in describing a steamer touching at various ports along the Mississippi, a river that came to symbolize the heart of America. A steamer gave Melville the opportunity to portray the lives of the citizens it took on and discarded throughout the voyage. These ordinary passengers were, as Melville came to realize, a breed apart from the sailors he was accustomed to writing about, and portraying them would thus enable him to present a more accurate view of nineteenth-century America. After a lengthy description of the various steamboat passengers, he writes that their aggregate was "In short, a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man" (15). Unlike Bunyan's pilgrims who struggle to reach the City of God, however,

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Melville's American pilgrims are shown to be on a downward spiral to hell.

As the title of the novel suggests, the book is about the Confidence Man's masquerade. The Confidence Man, who appears in various guises during the course of the voyage, is perhaps Melville's most complex literary creation. I agree with those critics who advocate the existence of *one* supernatural Confidence Man (whether identified with Christ, the Devil, or some other entity) as opposed to several natural ones. Such a reading gives the plot more unity and makes the Confidence Man's role as swindler more meaningful. Furthermore, I believe Melville intended to draw a parallel between the Confidence Man's masquerade and America's. When this comparison is made, the passengers of the steamboat become the Confidence Man's victims, people taken in by his false promises of happiness, confidence, health, and riches. In other words, they are manipulated by the delusive sense of optimism that was shaping America's masquerade.

Thinking of the two masquerades as analogous, however, is just one way I am proposing we interpret the novel and the Confidence Man's function in it. The other way to construe the role of the Confidence Man stems from a final inference we can make about the book; namely, that it is expressly about charity and confidence. My critique will primarily revolve around these two thematic issues since, in all of his dealings with the passengers, the Confidence Man beseeches charity, often in the form of money but always in the form of confidence. Because the structure of the novel is clearly

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built on these dealings or encounters, Melville wants us to focus not only on the role of the Confidence Man and *his* masquerade, but on the roles each of the passengers play as well. For a great deal of the novel's meaning may be understood by a careful scrutiny of the travellers' reactions to the Confidence Man's solicitations. Melville's ambition is to capture in words the true meaning of that

> dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide. (15)

He wants to unmask the true "spirit of the West" and shed light on the insecurities underneath America's "confident tide." To accomplish this, Melville penetrates below decks, so to speak, to depict an American community sadly lacking a philanthropic spirit so necessary for democracy.

The Confidence Man, then, in addition to being a type of symbol for America's masquerade, becomes a vehicle by which the author explores and unmasks the characters of those men and women occupying the moral wasteland to which America has been reduced. Although they are in one sense victims of society, Melville is also portraying some of the passengers as blameworthy for denying their democratic potential. With the complexity of the Confidence Man's purpose and his multifarious roles in mind, let us first turn to the subject of charity as a way into the novel.

The importance of charity as a theme in Melville's fiction is evident prior to *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. For Melville, the definition of the word

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"charity" encompasses more than the traditional generosity toward the poor; it consists of a love and understanding of the type found in Ishmael's friendship with Queequeg, and in Pierre's sacrifices for his sister in *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*. Matthiessen puts it best when he writes, "The fullest Charity, the expression of which [Melville] underlined in his copy of the thirteenth chapter of *First Corinthians*, was alone compatible with that unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity in all things" (442). Charity was held in such high regard by Melville that, in his story, "The Two Temples," he has his narrator claim that:

> All your life, naught but charity sustains you, and all others in the world. Maternal charity nursed you as a babe; paternal charity fed you as a child; friendly charity got you your profession; and to the charity of every man you meet this night in London, you are indebted for your unattempted life . . . You, and all mortals, live but by sufferance of your charitable kind . . . .(161)

But, as in "The Two Temples," *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* outlines the frightening absence of heartfelt charity in a world that is desperately in want of it.

The theme of charity is established at the outset, when in the opening chapter a deaf-mute, whom Melville purposely (and ambiguously) endows with Christ-like qualities, attempts to divert the attention of those passengers gathered around a poster promising a reward for the capture of a "mysterious imposter" (1). Although there is reason to suspect the deaf-mute, along with each of the other confidence men presented in the book, of being this imposter, Melville never gives us enough information to be sure of the exact nature of the

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Confidence Man. Instead, he focuses our attention on the contrast between the deaf-mute's charity signs and a barber's "No Trust" sign. This latter sign does not "provoke any corresponding derision or surprise, much less indignation" (12) from the crowd, whereas the charity signs like "Charity thinketh no evil" and "Charity suffereth long, and is kind" (10) immediately raise suspicion and scorn. By this comparison, Melville is pointing to the sad truth that a "No Trust" attitude overrules a charitable one. The crowd's rejection of the deaf-mute's messages signals their rejection of Christ's teaching.

Clearly associated with the question of charity is the juxtaposition of confidence against a lack of confidence. For the passengers clearly place greater trust in suspicion than they do in confidence. The novel's second confidence man, Black Guinea, is a case in point. The few donations that are given to him - in the spirit of a game rather than of brotherhood - are cut short when one traveller, a discharged custom-house officer with a wooden leg, accuses the black cripple of being a fraud. Asked if he is devoid of charity, this man replies, "Charity is one thing, and truth is another" (20). His suspicions have their effect on those around him, including a young Episcopal clergyman and a Methodist minister, two of Black Guinea's would-be defenders. When demanded to show proof of his crippled state, Black Guinea offers up a list of men who in later chapters assume the role of the Confidence Man. Only a country merchant finally gives the cripple unconditional confidence in the form of a half

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dollar; the others choose to play it safe and turn their backs on Black Guinea. One wonders whether these people, although richer in pocket, have not lost their humanity in the process.

In addition to the travellers' lack of charity, Melville also targets their greed. They will not give alms to the poor but they will buy shares in John Truman's *Black Rapids Coal Company* in a bid for riches. Consider, for example, the young collegian who, in his desire to invest, assures Truman in a haughty manner that "No appearances can deceive me" (54) and "Experience, sir, is the only teacher" (57). He is meant to be contemptible in the readers' eyes because of his smug attitude, made ridiculous in light of the fact that he has none of the experience he claims to have. His gullible nature is typical of other characters such as Thomas Fry and the dying old miser, both of whom are preyed on by the herb-doctor (the book's seventh confidence man), who is peddling his Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator and Samaritan Pain Dissuader. Buying the Confidence Man's miracle cure highlights their naiveté and insecurities. Thus, the novel is successful, as were the short stories, in unmasking the type of people Americans had become: cold, pitiless, and worldly.

In *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, Melville strips American society naked, charging it with baseness and heartlessness. By the same token, however, the book does contain glimpses of democratic potential; a few of the passengers, in other words, do show a capacity for goodness, and stand in direct contrast to the majority who, as I mentioned earlier, deny it. Melville insinuates that

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Americans are victims of the very society they helped to create. For this reason, the book becomes more complex, and we as readers are made to sympathize with some of the characters' predicaments rather than condemn them all outright. The role of the Confidence Man calls into question the very practicality of democratic acts of goodwill in a world that exploits them. How, then, is one to act or cope in such a morally dead and seemingly meaningless environment where everything is tinged with ambiguity?

I want to return for a moment to the country merchant, an interesting character because he is taken advantage of not only by Black Guinea but by John Ringman and John Truman, the Confidence Man in other disguises. The Confidence Man, whatever his motive, most certainly preys on both the goodness and avarice of this merchant. It is important to keep both perspectives in mind; it is too easy to dismiss Roberts as no better than the other money-hungry passengers wandering the *Fidèle*'s decks, considering his purchase of some stock in Truman's company (63). It is true, that, like the others, he is interested in turning a quick profit; in this respect, he could justifiably be unmasked as a typical American of the period. But Roberts, despite his obvious naiveté, is an undeniably *good* man, evident not only in his generosity toward Black Guinea, but also toward John Ringman, a man whom we suspect of fabricating a story about having met him in the past to gain his confidence before soliciting money. The problem then becomes the question of Melville's intention; more precisely, is Henry Roberts, a man he continually refers

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to as the "good merchant" (25), the biggest fool on "this ship of fools" (21), or the kindest heart? The answer may be both.

To understand Melville's meaning, we must first tackle James E. Miller, Jr.'s unsettling challenge; that is, why, after attacking "the innate weaknesses in human nature - the desire to get something for nothing, the willingness to traffic in the misery of others," would the Confidence Man exploit "generous and noble impulses too" (170)? Miller sees an "apparent mockery of unquestionable values" (170), values exhibited by both the merchant and by the charitable lady who gives a twenty dollar donation to the Confidence Man as the representative of the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum (52). But I think Melville's point is not to deride these values himself; instead, his purpose is to show *America*'s - and the Confidence Man's - mockery of them. By its very masquerade, America casts doubt on the relevancy and practicality of acts of charity and confidence. Without a firm moral foundation to society, charity, even the noblest kind, is made meaningless. Henry Roberts is nothing less than a noble fool.

The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade thus presents a Catch-22 situation: if charity is shown in the spirit of philanthropy, characters are looked upon as fools because they are duped, and if distrust supplants charity, men become misanthropes. Bernstein observes that:

> The novel is conspicuous for its lack of just one character who can in all honesty and sincerity say to the Confidence Man, "I would gladly give to any worthy charity or to any person in real need of assistance, but I will give nothing to you because you are a fraud." (162)

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He attributes this to Melville's pessimism in that "there is no middle ground between truth and faith, knaves and fools" (162). But I think it relates more to his belief in man's overall lack of experience; man does not *see* the Confidence Man because he is taken in by his promises. If we equate the Confidence Man's masquerade with America's, then we realize the danger of a society masquerading as something it is not.

It is because of Roberts' goodness that I am unable to accept completely Larzer Ziff's claim that *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* is "throughout an acting-out of man's selfishness" (293), nor do I believe that, in all cases, the passengers get the Confidence Man they deserve. Those who do, however, are the characters who appear to have an intuitive perception of evil. They are presented as ruthlessly cold individuals who are somehow out of touch with life. The man who suspects Black Guinea of being a white con-artist masquerading as a black cripple and utters "To do, is to act; so all doers are actors" (39), has, it will be remembered, one wooden leg and only one eye. The invalid soldier described as a "Titan in homespun" (91) also perceives the Confidence Man to be a liar before striking the herb-doctor and calling him a "Profane fiddler on heart-strings! Snake!" (94). Even Pitch, the Missouri bachelor wearing a bear and raccoon costume and carrying a rifle, calls the confidence men he meets "the most extraordinary metaphysical scamps" (144). But despite their awareness of the Confidence Man, these men, whose lives are full of pessimism and hate, are not held up as exemplary characters or as role models. Their misanthropy,

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ironically, has made them victims of the Confidence Man as well, for although they are not cheated out of pocket like the others, the Confidence Man takes something far more valuable - their humanity. It is interesting to note that their characteristics are akin to those of Colonel Moredock, the Indian-hater. Charlie Noble describes Moredock as strong, unsophisticated, impulsive, unprincipled, self-willed, self-dependent, and self-reliant (152). These qualities have alienated Moredock and the others from society completely. What is more, the novel never suggests that their radically suspicious attitudes lead them to knowledge any more than does complete confidence. Casting the misanthropes as crippled and partly blind is Melville's way of emphasizing their degenerate state.

Considering Roberts' goodness on the one hand and the misanthropes' evil on the other, the book may simply be warning us against, in Matthiessen's words, "the material dangers of gullibility and the spiritual dangers of mistrust" (229). While I think the problem is more complicated than this, there is certainly a defeatist undertone by the end; it is as if we are "damned if we do and damned if we don't." For the reality is that man has become a victim of American society - of the Confidence Man. Just as the Confidence Man preaches charity and trust for self-serving purposes, so too does America extol democracy in all things. The *Fidèle*'s passengers are lost in America's masquerade, becoming incapable of genuine friendship and having little reason to be charitable. Melville's novel presents a terrifying portrayal

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of life in America where everything appears suspect because the country's masquerade has made it so.

In spite of *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*'s bleak vision, the second half of the novel presents Melville's reaffirmation of those democratic values of charity and confidence that are threatened by the masquerade. This reaffirmation is revealed, ironically, by the last Confidence Man, Frank Goodman - the Cosmopolitan. The first person he addresses is Pitch, the misanthrope named earlier. Upon noticing Pitch's despondency and anger at having been momentarily swayed from his philosophy of "confidence in distrust" (112) during his meeting with the Philosophical Intelligence Officer, Goodman tells him a little parable, the aim of which is to demonstrate that people cannot enjoy life until they renounce their "too-sober view of life" (142). Pitch replies thus:

> since the too-sober view is, doubtless, nearer true than the too-drunken; I, who rate truth, though cold water, above untruth, though Tokay, will stick to my earthen jug. (142)

But Pitch has no more insight into the truth than does one who instills confidence in others. He is unwilling to compromise his longing for solitude regardless of what Goodman calls the "awful sin of shunning society" (145). Pitch's individualism stands in the way of even the remotest possibility of democracy, a condition Melville could finally not condone.

My belief that Melville comes down on the side of charity regardless of America's rejection of it is also based on Goodman's encounter with Winsome and Egbert. Taking an

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interest in Winsome's philosophy of life, the Cosmopolitan asks "if the study of this philosophy tends to the same formation of character with the experiences of the world?" Winsome replies,

> It does; and that is the test of its truth; for any philosophy that, being in operation contradictory to the ways of the world, tends to produce a character at odds with it, such a philosophy must necessarily be but a cheat and a dream. (204)

Winsome, in effect, rationalizes that if life is cruel, then so must be any serviceable philosophy. In his words,

> Mystery is in the morning, and mystery in the night, and the beauty of mystery is everywhere; but still the plain truth remains, that mouth and purse must be filled. (205)

Goodman gets a taste of this practical philosophy after engaging in a mock friendship with Egbert, Winsome's disciple and a poet. They proceed to act out a hypothetical situation in which one friend asks for money from the other to relieve his necessities. Egbert, acting under the assumed name of Charlie, refuses Frank's every appeal for assistance. After justifying his refusal through the story of China Aster, a man ruined by a friend's loan, he declares that there is only "folly, on both sides, of a friend's helping a friend" (229). Winsome's philosophy is nothing more than a protective coat that allows the idea of friendship but none of the selflessness true friendship requires. By definition, it is really no friendship at all; its masquerade of trust and love is more despicable than downright misanthropy.

Winsome and Egbert are able to defend their philosophy by arguing that it is the only practical means of survival in a

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world in which neither God, Nature, nor man is completely trustworthy. To avoid the pitfalls inherent in full-fledged trust or hatred, they advocate doctrines that they assure will lead men "neither to the mad-house nor the poor-house" (205). But, notwithstanding Egbert's apparent victory over the Confidence Man, which culminates with the latter giving over a shilling, I think it wrong to consider Melville endorsing this philosophy as a survival tactic in the face of life's masquerade. Melville could never, considering his feelings about charity, accept man's indifference to - and detachment from - his fellow man. To turn one's back on man was an unforgivable betrayal of the democratic spirit so vital to the well-being of any community.

Unfortunately, this was the type of society America was becoming; its democracy was so flagging that the Confidence Man, while masquerading as the man in the grey coat who solicits for the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum, outlines his plan for a World's Charity. Serving a similar function to Swift's "A Modest Proposal," it is intended to make people see the absurdity of their philosophy of no trust. The plan, intended to rid the world of poverty forever, calls for the levying of one grand benevolence tax that would require every individual on the planet to give one dollar. The Confidence Man suggests that charitable missions, in order to survive, must be infused with the same "Wall street spirit" (48) as the one governing America's capitalistic society. This proposal is an example of Melville's irony at its best; in a society where charitable acts are rare because they don't profit the

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benefactor, the only way to secure a margin of philanthropy is by methodizing the world's benevolence through taxes that will *force* men to be kind. This plan would be hilarious if the message behind it weren't so desperate.

We return to the question of "how to be?" Although Melville provides no easy answers as to how America can fulfill its ideal destiny, it is clear that he saw a need for social reform. Perhaps his disillusionment stems from a realization that America's masquerade would always exist - that the damage was irreversible. But I believe that Melville accepted the seriousness of the words of advice he gave to Frank Goodman:

> Life is like a pic-nic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool. To come in plain clothes, with a long face, as a wiseacre, only makes one a discomfort to himself, and a blot upon the scene. (141)

Here Melville is surely ridiculing the old man at the end of the book who, in fear of virtually everything, is armed with a door lock, money-belt, "Counterfeit Detector," and so-called life-preserver (260). Even with all this paraphernalia, the old man is at the mercy of the Confidence Man, who leads him symbolically in darkness to his state-room. Melville is urging us to be prepared to confront life as ourselves, even though we risk being its victims. To become defiant as Ahab did is to put our humanity and dignity at risk. We must strive to become what no character in the book is: wary through experience of the intrinsic dangers of confidence, but confident enough to place trust in one's fellow man. For only

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a true democratic spark formed in the impulse of charity can hope to redeem the world and set the masquerade ablaze.

V

In "Democratic Vistas," Walt Whitman expresses his disappointment in the failure of democracy in America:

> I say we had best look at our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart that at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ'd in, (for all this hectic glow, and these melodramatic screamings,) nor is humanity itself believ'd in. What penetrating eye does not everywhere see through the mask? (369)

Like Melville, Whitman was conscious of America's masquerade, finding the root cause of the nation's problems to be its failure to truly commit to democracy. While he admitted "our New World democracy" was successful in terms of materialistic development, he said it was "an almost complete failure in its *social* aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary and esthetic results [my italics]" (370). In other words, Whitman realized that democracy was not yet accepted as "the fully-receiv'd, the fervid, the absolute faith" (389), and that it would never come to fruition until it was.

It is no coincidence that Melville and Whitman, two famous contemporaries, cited an absence of democratic spirit as America's major flaw. This absence was all too obvious but, since it ran against the grain of American optimism, was a subject considered taboo. No one wanted to admit that the Stars and Stripes and the Statue of Liberty were nothing more

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than glorious symbols of a democracy that America had not yet attained.

Although the nature of man in part determined the type of country America was to be, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* shows that society, in turn, began to dictate the nature of its creators. This perpetuated a cycle from which it was not easy to break free. How a human being in the ideal, "so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature," could become "detestable as joint stock-companies and nations" (*Moby-Dick* 104) was, for Melville, the ultimate tragedy. He went beyond conventional American self-appraisal to show how democracy was being drowned in the "cosmopolitan and confident tide" (*The Confidence-Man* 15) that was sweeping the country. All that remained, from Melville's perspective, was a masquerade that America created to avoid the more difficult task of building a firm and truthful foundation for democracy.

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CONCLUSION

Tokens of a Divided Empire

If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.
And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.

from *The Gospel of Mark*, 3:24-25

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Conclusion: Tokens of a Divided Empire

In offering up a rationale for what might be considered his highly unorthodox retreat to the shores of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau pens the following well-known and inspirational passage:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (*Walden* 61)

This same spirit, I would argue, pervades Melville's work as well; his art is testimony of a struggle to make sense of the "essential facts" of his world. But unlike Thoreau, whose goal was "to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms" (61) and publish its meanness or sublimeness to the world, Melville could discover little that was definite about the life he had lived. The lessons Nature taught him were very different from those Thoreau learned during his stay at Walden. For Melville, Nature's masquerade did not yield easy answers to questions about the mystery of life. Nature's intangibility, in fact, denied him the possibility of the type of communion Thoreau professes to have felt in the woods. Whether sailing on the high seas as a common sailor or resting comfortably at his farm in Pittsfield, Melville never pretended to understand the enigma that was life. His soul, I think, experienced moments of unimaginable terror interspersed with feelings of joyous contentment and peace. It was buffeted by a sea that could be so cruel and yet so splendorous in its unrest.

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Nevertheless, the recognition, and subsequent exploration, of life's masquerade and its inherent blackness was Melville's greatest contribution to American literature. By making it his most consciously developed theme, Melville was able to give vent to the philosophical quandaries it was causing in his mind and to depict the political and social divisions it was bringing about in America. Consider the narrator in Melville's short story, "Cock-a-doodle-doo!", who, after picking his way along the wet countryside during a spring walk, remarks: "All round me were tokens of a divided empire. The old grass and the new grass were striving together" (76). His stroll is symbolic of what Melville himself discovered: a country divided not only by its old, traditional outlook and the demands of the New World, but between reality and the masquerade's distortion of that reality. America was play-acting democracy instead of living it in earnest.

There were others beside Melville who were not blind to the disastrous consequences of America's masquerade. President Abraham Lincoln's speech, "A House Divided," delivered on 16 June 1858 at Springfield, Illinois, was composed in direct response to the perilous path he saw America taking. In that speech, Lincoln abhors America's claim to be democratic while at the same time condoning slavery:

> I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*. I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved* - I do not expect the house to *fall* - but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided. It will become *all* one thing, or

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all the other. (1499)

Lincoln's plea for wholeness and unity in America depends entirely upon the country's willingness to embrace those principles it was founded upon, those extolled by Thomas Jefferson in The Declaration of Independence:

> We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness . . . .(*Autobiography* 640)

Lincoln urges Americans to have a firm belief in *something* together, to stand behind democracy or risk sacrificing it forever. That the masquerade survived even when slavery was abolished some years later is extremely telling. The prejudices boiling beneath America's masquerade were destined to spill over, one hundred years later, in the Civil Rights movement. The masquerade is, in fact, entrenched as firmly today in America and other countries as it was in Melville's day.

The United States of America has always been anxious to foster an image of optimism, judiciousness, and benevolence before the world. This image - its masquerade, if you will - has had unforeseen and harmful effects. Most significant of these has been the prevention of the birth of a true spirit of democracy, resulting primarily from America's denial of the blatantly obvious inequalities rife in the country. The problem, as Melville interpreted it, was America's difficulty in acknowledging its blackness, and this aversion for him was a sign of its naiveté and immaturity. Levin was one of the first critics to attribute Melville's own acceptance of evil

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to his mature outlook on life; according to him, "A mature perception . . . frankly presupposes the coexistence of blackness and brightness" (199). This awareness is most evident in Melville's wonderful short "story," "The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles," where his discussion of the two sides of a tortoise takes on a much higher significance than first imagined:

> every one knows that tortoises as well as turtles are of such a make, that if you but put them on their backs you thereby expose their bright sides without the possibility of their recovering themselves, and turning into view the other. But after you have done this, you should not swear that the tortoise has no dark side. Enjoy the bright, keep it turned up perpetually if you can, but be honest, and don't deny the black. Neither should he, who cannot turn the tortoise from its natural position so as to hide the darker and expose his livelier aspect, like a great October pumpkin in the sun, for that cause declare the creature to be one total inky blot. The tortoise is both black and bright. (104)

If we take this passage about the tortoise to symbolize the nature of reality, then we understand better Melville's concern about the danger of a one-sided viewpoint. The consequence is a fragmented, ignorant, and narrow-minded perspective on life. Wholeness can be achieved only when the masquerade of brightness is lifted and the darkness acknowledged.

In his essay, "The Spirit of Place," D.H. Lawrence also attributes Americans' problems to their tendency to "dodge their own very selves" (*Studies in Classic American Literature* 7). In their hurried quest for freedom, he argues, Americans have led themselves astray by refusing to be ruled by their inner voice. Believing in nothing, they have created a nation

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that has no direction or sense of place. "Men are free," Lawrence believes, only

> when they are obeying some deep, inward voice of religious belief. Obeying from within. Men are free when they belong to a living, organic, *believing* community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose. (12)

It is his opinion that "true liberty will only begin when Americans discover IT . . . IT being the deepest *whole* self of man, the self in its wholeness, not idealistic halfness" (13). What is interesting here is Lawrence's belief that if man is divided within himself, and the true spirit of democracy is unrealized, then this division will be reflected in the community as a whole. This "IT" is, in part, man's democratic potential, and to achieve this ideal, Americans must abandon the false precepts at the heart of America's masquerade, precepts responsible for what Lawrence calls America's "false dawn" (14). For America to be truly born, he writes, "You have got to pull the democratic and idealistic clothes off American utterance, and see what you can of the dusky body of IT underneath" (14). To see, in other words, what you can of the truth.

There is a distinct fear of impending doom in Melville's literature. Lawrence asserts that this doom is the message behind *Moby-Dick* (169); I believe it is the meaning behind most of his work. It is a doom that America's masquerade tries cleverly to hide from view. Melville's stories tend to forebode disaster, particularly in their endings; consider the terrible clash of Moby Dick with the *Pequod* during the last chase, Bartleby's eventual death in the Tombs, Pierre's

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suicide after a life of bitter disappointment, the image of the Confidence Man quietly leading an old man into the dark bowels of the steamboat, and finally, the gentle swaying of Billy Budd's corpse as it hangs from the yardarm. The death and carnage typifying Melville's endings are apocalyptic in their import, foreshadowing the tragedy resulting from what America had become. America disappointed Melville; he knew that its "protective framework of illusion" (Seltzer 85), or masquerade, was shielding Americans from the truth, and from their very selves.

In spite of his disappointment, however, I would say that Herman Melville was not finally a nihilist. It is true that most of what he wrote condemned the selfishness, ignorance, and inexperience of the mass of men. It is true that he despaired at life's ambiguities; he lashed out in frustration at a God who would permit the existence of evil, at the many faces of Nature, and at a human race that could not live in harmony without being coerced. It is also true that he prophesied the ultimate downfall of America and the collapse of democracy. But through it all, in Lawrence's words, "he stuck to his ideal guns" (152). Melville always cared enough to hate America's masquerade, and to despise its lack of faith. No truer words were ever written about the man than Hawthorne's reflection on Melville's persistence in his search for a definite belief:

> He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and

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> noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us. (1314)

What is so commendable about Melville is his refusal to give himself over to defeat. His love for his country is never in doubt even during his harshest criticism. And his idealism, always strives to balance his skepticism, and not allow him to believe that "the world [would] ever be so decayed, that spring may not renew its greenness" ("Hawthorne and His Mosses" 538).

Melville's art is charged with glimpses of hope and faith in a human being's ability to adapt to and overcome the blackness enveloping his or her world. For him, there was no more crucial time for Americans to help themselves, to become their own saviours. The following words from *White-Jacket* resonate in our minds:

> in our own hearts we fashion our own gods. Each mortal casts his vote for whom he will to rule the worlds; I have a voice that helps to shape eternity; and my volitions stir the orbits of the furthest suns. In two senses, we are precisely what we worship. Ourselves are Fate. (325)

If democracy was to succeed, and its history to be written, it would depend upon a divided house becoming whole, upon a faithless society regaining its faith, and upon Americans recovering some meaning in their lives, whereby ideals of integrity, trust, and charity would be embraced and practiced for their own sake. In a spirit similar to Thoreau's, Melville endeavoured to wake his neighbours up, urging them to unite as a country by shedding the false front of America's masquerade.

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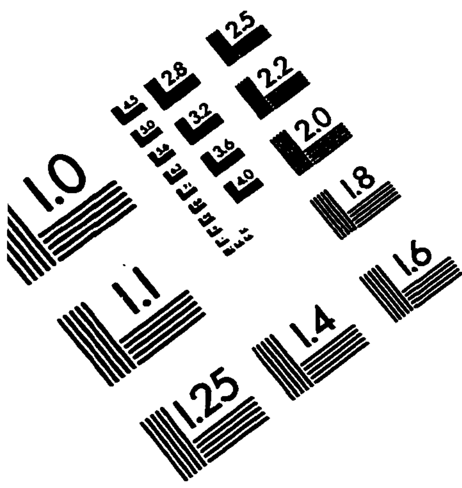

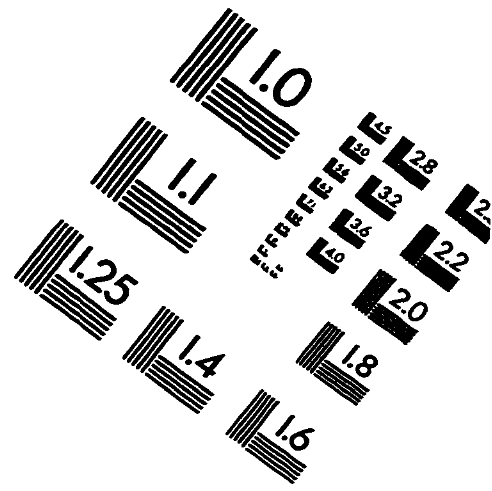

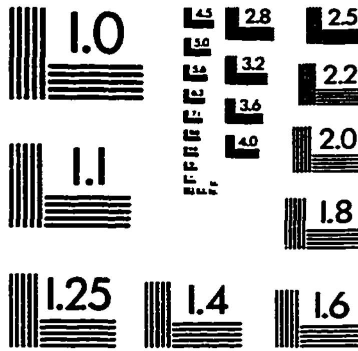

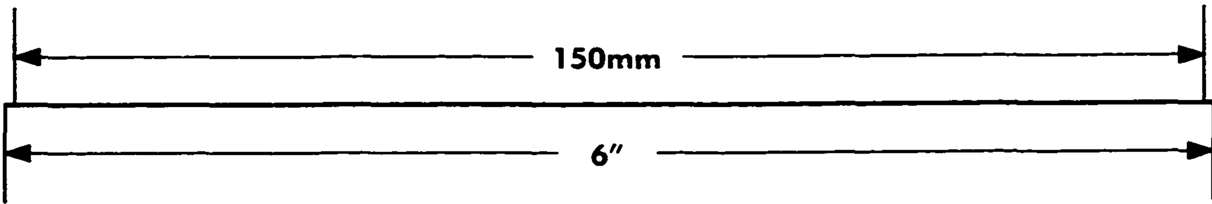

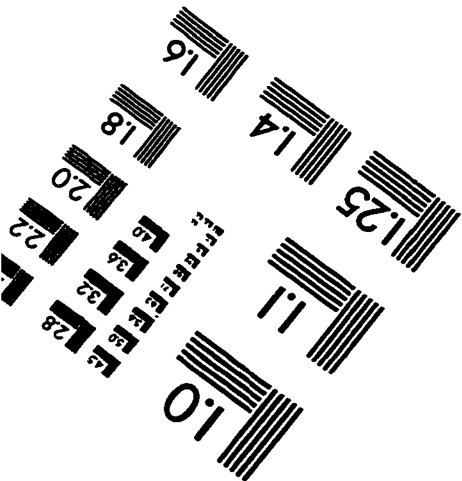

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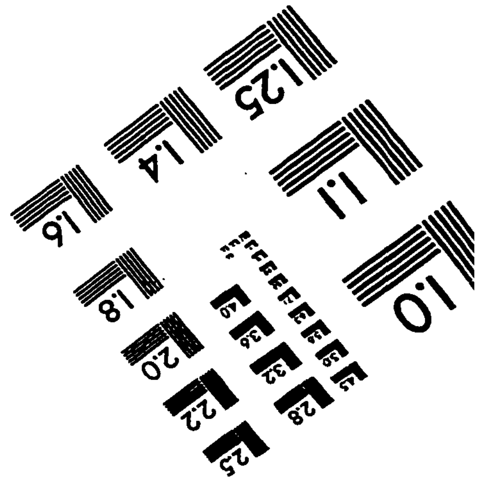

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