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# Herman Melville and the German Roman

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A MONSTROUS COMPOUND OF CARLYLE AND JEAN PAUL:

HERMAN MELVILLE AND THE GERMAN *ROMAN*

by

Birgit Noll

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

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## INTRODUCTION

No American Writer should write like an Englishman, or a Frenchman; let him write like a man, for then he will be sure to write like an American.

-- Melville, 'Hawthorne and His Mosses'

Small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything.

-- Melville, *Moby-Dick*

Frequently, readers of Herman Melville (1819-1891), if they encounter his works in the order in which they were written, are surprised and even disgruntled when, after enjoying his early and very popular South-Sea adventure novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), they find themselves entangled in *Mardi* (1849), *Moby-Dick* (1851) and (the brave and persistent ones only) *Pierre* (1852). One might think that this bewilderment on the part of the 20th or 21st century reader is due largely to the fact that we are so far removed from Melville's America, but a glance at the reactions of Melville's contemporaries reveals that they were even more shocked by the philosophical contents and extravagant language that characterized his major books between 1849 and 1852. However, unlike most readers today, Melville's contemporary critics, after declaring the author "mad" and lamenting his ill-advised wanderings among European Romantics, were able to identify convincing reasons for what they considered

a highly regrettable change in Melville's narratives. Knowing literary America of the 1840s and 50s first-hand and being familiar with foreign authors themselves, Melville's contemporary reviewers were quick to see the parallels between Melville's writings of the late 1840s and early 1850s and the works of several unique German authors, Goethe, Fouqué and Novalis among them. The most outspoken readers criticized *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* for resembling far too much the writings of Jean Paul Richter (1763-1825) in particular.<sup>1</sup> Among the sources Melville's reviewers claimed to recognize in his writing, the works of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) are mentioned repeatedly, along with the names of German authors whose writings he translated for his *German Romance* (1841) and thus made available to an English-speaking audience.<sup>2</sup> But while many of Melville's contemporaries lamented the fact that he had turned from telling exotic adventure stories to what he called "thought-diving," they also understood that he was doing some of this diving in German waters.

One of Melville's most prominent critics was George Ripley (1802-1880)<sup>3</sup>, who would have soon laid aside Melville's later work as "a monstrous compound of Carlyle and Jean Paul" had he not been familiar with his earlier novels (cited in *Melville Log I*: 303); Evert Duyckinck (1816-1878), an American man of letters and a close friend of

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<sup>1</sup> Although his full name is Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, literary critics refer to him as Jean Paul, which became his nom de plume. I will use "Jean Paul" throughout this study.

<sup>2</sup> Melville had access to the two-volume American edition of *German Romance* which did not include Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Volume one included the following: "Dumb Love," "Libussa," "Melechsala" by Johann August Musäus; "Aslauga's Knight" by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué; "The Fair-Haired Eckbert." "The Trusty Eckhardt," "The Runenberg," "The Elves," "The Goblet" by Ludwig Tieck. Volume two consisted of E.T.W. Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot" and Jean Paul's "Army-Chaplain Schmelzle's Journey to Flaetz" and *Life of Quintus Fixlein*.

<sup>3</sup> George Ripley was a Unitarian Minister and social reformer; he founded Brook Farm, a short-lived utopian community in West Roxbury, Massachusetts.

Melville's, likens *Moby-Dick* to "Jean Paul's German tales" (*Moby-Dick* 613); the *American Whig Review* provides by far the harshest criticism of *Pierre* when it claims that

Mr. Melville's style of writing in this book is probably the most extraordinary thing that an American press ever beheld. It is precisely what a raving lunatic who had read Jean Paul Richter *in a translation* might be supposed to spout under the influence of a particularly moonlight [sic] night. Word piled upon word and syllable upon syllable, until the tongue grows as bewildered as the mind, and both refuse to perform their offices from sheer inability to grasp the magnitude of the absurdities. (Branch 318, reviewer's italics)

Among the elements that annoyed Melville's contemporary critics is his habit of yoking together seemingly unrelated episodes in a random order--a habit that has become known among Melville scholars as his "grab-bag method." My own contemporaries often see Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4) as Melville's model for this bad habit, but he is likely to have seen and apparently enjoyed it in Jean Paul's *Leben des Quintus Fixlein* (1796) as well. In this fictional biography, translated by Carlyle and included in *German Romance*, the narrator claims to have found a box full of scraps of paper which he uses to reconstruct his protagonist's life -- without making any particular effort to connect all the pieces.

One might make the argument that Melville's books became increasingly unpopular after he turned towards a German literature which some American critics, among them Frederic Hedge in his articles on Coleridge and Schiller (1834), saw as

more philosophical, less unified than English literature. "German philosophy," Hedge argues, examines "subjects which have been usually considered as beyond reach of human intelligence...to penetrate into the most hidden mysteries of our being.... The preeminence of Germany ... in respect of intellectual excellence, is universally acknowledged" ("Coleridge" 70). In his review of a Schiller biography, Hedge lectures his audience on how to appreciate individual German writers instead of "lumping them all together under one rubric of scorn" ("Schiller" 78). Hedge tells his contemporaries that "an acquaintance with the German has now become an introduction to all that is beautiful and good of any age and clime" ("Schiller" 81). He praises the Germans for being "possessed with the love of philosophizing" and German novelists for avoiding the "regular and harmonious development of the subject before them." Hedge wants us to celebrate the fact that

the progress of a story, the interest of a plot, are with them matters of secondary importance; it is the exhibition of some variety of human nature, or some form of human life; or the illustration of some philosophical truth, which chiefly occupies them.... This is particularly true of their better novels, which differ... from those of every other nation.... They pursue no straight-forward course; the reader is not, as in one of Scott's or Miss Edgewood's compositions, hurried irresistibly along by a single thread of narrative...but is placed in a labyrinth of striking thoughts and beautiful illustrations, having no necessary connexion (sic) or dependence, through which he is left to find his way as he can. This it is, that so perplexes English readers on their first introduction to German literature.

Unacquainted with this species of composition, they sit down to a German novel

as they would to an English work of the same title, never doubting that they are to be entertained with a pleasant story; instead of which, they are treated to a series of philosophical disquisitions. ("Schiller" 81)

Hedge features the works of Jean Paul among the best examples of this "species of composition" ("Schiller" 79) and praises the better German novels as lacking "unity of purpose, continuity of interest, and entireness of effect." Jean Paul, he says, has developed his own unique sense of humor and, when it comes to "exuberance of fancy," his only rival is Shakespeare. Only Jean Paul, he says, can produce an "apocalypse of the most extravagant and unheard-of portents ..." (*Prose Writers* 405). But, as our quotations from contemporary magazines show, not everyone shared Hedge's preference for free-flowing philosophical inquiry as a desirable model for the emerging American novel.

Could Melville, who had never studied the German language, have read Jean Paul's difficult prose? Could a writer as eclectic and little known in this country today as Jean Paul be in any way connected with Melville's creation of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*? Could Melville's knowledge of Jean Paul and other Germans in translation have helped him in his development from writer of popular travelogues to writer of philosophical novels that attempt to tell dark and troubling truths as Melville saw them and do so in a prose noticeably different from his earlier and later works?

While Jean Paul is little known or read today, his name appears frequently in 19th century magazines, so that Melville was bound to find him sooner or later. As Edward Brewer has shown in "The New England Interest in Jean Paul Friedrich Richter," from the first comment on Jean Paul in an American magazine in 1802 until

1880, when America's interest in him had waned, almost 100 articles, reviews, and translated excerpts of his works appeared in some 40 periodicals. This interest in Jean Paul peaked in the 40's and 50's when many of these articles found their way into American magazines such as *Arcturus*, *The Literary World*, *Democratic Review*, *North American Review*, all of which Melville had easy access to in New York City.

Moreover, entire novels by Jean Paul were translated into English. The person who did most to promote Jean Paul's works in England and America was the Scotsman Thomas Carlyle.

From the meticulous research of Melville scholars like Merton Sealts, Mary K. Bercau and Jay Leyda we know that Melville read several works by and about Jean Paul in the spring and summer of 1850, arguably the most important time in his career. During this summer he met Nathaniel Hawthorne, wrote his now famous piece of literary criticism, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," and began his extensive and substantial revision of *Moby-Dick*. He changed it, as Leon Howard, James Barbour and Robert Milder have argued, from a story about a whaling trip to the complex philosophical quest narrative we read today and he refashioned Ahab into the dark, monomaniac protagonist whose unrelenting chase after the White Whale we have come to know and fear. The previous year, after completing *Mardi* and before departing for Europe, Melville had ordered a volume of Carlyle's essays which contains his two lengthy articles on Jean Paul, including his translation of Jean Paul's "Rede des toten Christus." He later borrowed from his friend and mentor Evert Duyckinck, Jean Paul's *Siebenkäs* (1796) and Carlyle's *German Romance*, which includes his translation of Jean Paul's *Leben des Quintus Fixlein* and *Des Feldprediger Schmelzles Reise* (1809) as well as Carlyle's biographical

introduction. Melville borrowed this volume not once but twice during the all-important summer of 1850: first in June or July, and again in late September (*Log I*: 376, 396). At about the same time, he also read Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, which alludes to Jean Paul's works and echoes them in theme and form.

While Melville's literary interest in Goethe and Schiller has received some much deserved attention, eminent Melville scholars, among them the late Harrison Hayford in his "Melville's German Streak" have lamented the fact that in-depth international studies have too often been neglected, that Melville has been seen primarily in the Anglo-American tradition which includes Carlyle but mostly neglects writers from European countries whose work Melville also knew.<sup>4</sup> This study hopes to build on earlier ones by Howard Vincent, Harrison Hayford, Newton Arvin and more recent ones by Scott Norsworthy and Robert Sattelmeyer, to name only a few, as it attempts to review Melville's interest in Germany and its writers during the months when he was working on *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. My hope is to shed some light on possible models for the "metaphysical" nature of these two puzzling works and on the unique structural and lexical qualities of *Pierre*.

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholar who best captured the theoretical discussion Melville was participating in by 1850 was David Masson (1822-1907), Professor of English literature at University College, London. In his *British Novelists and Their Styles* (1859), Masson creates a German context for the kind of philosophical and

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Professor Hayford for encouraging me to pursue this study and for making valuable suggestions for its methods.

psychological questing that occupied Melville.<sup>5</sup> Although Melville's writing after 1847 is very difficult to categorize, one could perhaps locate it somewhere between what Masson, in 1859, termed the "Novel of Supernatural Phantasy" and the "Art and Culture Novel." Masson cites Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* as examples of "supernatural phantasy" and establishes Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* as the prototype of the art and culture novel, "in which the purpose is to exhibit the growth and education of an individual character of the more thoughtful order." Masson maintains that "there can be no doubt that that work, since it was translated, has had some influence on the aims of British novel-writing" but, he regrets, so far England has not produced "any very pure specimens" of this type (Masson 225). Masson distinguishes the art and culture novel from what he terms the "Novel of Purpose" which, in his view, serves largely as "pamphlet." In its preoccupation with dogma it too often neglects the deeper insights into human nature that, for Masson, make a novel worth reading. While Masson admires the goal of the art and culture novel to guide a thoughtful young man through a series of doubts and perplexities to a final truth, he has reservations about the certainty with which most protagonists achieve this "truth" through either religious faith or a happy marriage or both. While, "from the time of Byron and Shelley," England has produced prose poems "exhibiting individual minds of the thoughtful order shattered to their very foundations by passions and skepticism, at war with all the institutions of society, and bellowing to earth and heaven their sense of Nature's cruelty and their own utter wretchedness," very few novels have attempted to portray the "passing feelings,

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Robert Milder for alerting me to Masson's work and for discussing with me its significance for *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*.

phrenzies (sic), doubts, longings and aspirations of the minds who are able to express themselves...." (284-85). According to Masson, England's novelists are only just beginning to produce prose narratives of this sort which do not end in "Mr. Kingley's happy solution," i.e. religious faith or marriage. Instead,

a poet or personage of the purely intellectual class is the hero, and the story is that of his progress through the very blackness of darkness, with only natural reason...as his guide. There is the mind preying on its own metaphysical roots; there is the parting, piece by piece, with the old hereditary faith, and yet all the remaining torture of the ceaseless interrogation which that faith satisfied; there are the pangs of love despised or disprized; there is the burden of sin and the alternate sullenness and madness of despair. (289)

Sometimes a person thus tortured tells himself that this eternal metaphysical searching is a waste of time and effort because the questions he seeks to answer are forever unanswerable; other times such a protagonist turns his back on the metaphysical and seeks "a few average certainties" in the secular world. But once a person has experienced the power of metaphysical questing, his mind

retains in it a touch of 'the demonic' ... through the shell of darkness that enspheres the visible world, there glimmers the gauzy light of a world believed in, though pronounced impenetrable; as the little island of life is tilled and cultivated, it is at least still known to be an island, and there is still heard in its midmost fields the roar of the surrounding sea. (Masson 289)

Masson again points, indirectly, to the connections between Melville and Jean Paul when he speculates that "Perhaps...the most characteristic of the special class of fictions which we have been describing are those in which 'clearness' is not represented as coming at all, but which confine themselves merely to a statement of the question." It is hard to imagine that he was not thinking of Ishmael when he says "The perpetual knocking at the unopened door--such is their image of human life." Masson acknowledges that realism still prevails, but adds that some novelists, Charles Dickens among them, claim for the novel also "that right of ideality which is allowed in metrical Poetry, and so to introduce in their novels incidents, scenes, and characters not belonging to the ordinary world, but holding their tenure from the sway of phantasy."

Although he does not seem to be aware of Masson's 19<sup>th</sup> century argument, Edwin Eigner, in *The Metaphysical Novel in England and America*, continues in Masson's vein. Like Masson, he mentions Charles Dickens as one of the main authors of such metaphysical novels, but Eigner includes American writers in his study and features Herman Melville among them. Eigner's categories differ from Masson's, but while the art and culture novel and the metaphysical novel are not identical, both claim the "right to ideality" previously reserved for lyrical poetry. Both mix "incidents, scenes, and characters from the ordinary world" with the wayward, the obscure, and both cite Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* as the book that best illustrates this new kind of writing. Much like Melville's Bulkington in *Moby-Dick*, the characters in these texts feel the irresistible urge to return to sea, to their life of questing, shortly after they reach land because they cannot feel content or comfortable with the false

sense of safety the shore provides. Jean Paul in particular mocks this false sense of safety in his anti-heroes who burrow in the ground and fancy themselves safe while surrounded by vivid portrayals of a horrific universe without God.

Eigner is using the term Bulwer-Lytton devised to distinguish his own fiction from "works of mimetic realism" and from the work of many of his later 19<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries who were "struggling to refine away such impurities" as mixed genres, multiple narrators, authorial intrusions, digressions in their pursuit of the "pristine unity of *The Ambassadors*" (Eigner 3). Having cautioned us that "in the nineteenth century metaphysical could mean psychological, philosophical, or even mystical," he defines metaphysical novels as ones that are "built upon the structural impurities of the earlier fiction and ... featured rather than avoided the clash of world views" (Eigner 4). Bulwer-Lytton, Carlyle, and others felt that "political economy" had replaced ethics, that "the minds that formerly would have devoted themselves to metaphysical and moral research" were instead pursuing more 'material' studies. To save his country from a philosophy too heavily influenced by Locke and Adam Smith, Lytton, like Carlyle, insisted that English writers must turn to visionary literature and German idealism, where romance and realism alternated. As Carlyle put it in "State of German Literature," the Germans, unlike Locke and his followers of the French, English, and Scotch schools who locate the *Urwahr* in the senses, deny this supremacy of Sense as the only inlet of knowledge. Instead, they seek their "Primitive Truth" through "intuition, in the deepest and purest nature of Man" (Eigner 9).

Northrup Frye adds a further crucial element to this discussion by arguing that

The essential difference between novel and romance lies in the conception of characterization. The romancer does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes. It is in the romance that we find Jung's libido, anima, and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine, villain respectively. That is why romance so often radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks, and why a suggestion of allegory is constantly creeping in around its fringes. Certain elements of character are released in the romance; thus romance is a more revolutionary form than the novel. The novelist deals with personality (i.e. characters have to function within confines of recognizable social reality), with characters wearing their personae or social masks. He needs the framework of a stable society, and many of our best novelists have been conventional to the verge of fussiness.

By contrast, the writer of romance is concerned with "individuality," with characters who, like the narrator in the opening chapters of Melville's *Mardi*, leave behind the all too realistic ship and, after floating in the ocean and boarding a mysterious ship that resembles a German castle, enter "a dream world ... with characters *in vacuo* idealized by revery." In the stories of the romancer, Frye argues, "something nihilistic and untamable is likely to keep breaking out of his pages," some fantastic elements that establish the "prose romance [as] an independent form of fiction to be distinguished from the novel" (*Anatomy* 304-5).

The romancer, then, is not confined by social and political reality and can therefore explore human nature in all its complexities and contradictions. As Mary

Shelley puts it, “the event on which the interest of my story depends is exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment. It was recommended by the novelty of the situations which it develops, and however impossible as a physical fact, affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield” (*Frankenstein* XXVii).

When Melville turned his attention from writing realistic travelogue to prose narratives that explored ideas rather than realistic characters and settings, he was initially attracted to literary romance, to a form where plot and characters can be presented in “a theater, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel,” in a “suitable remoteness” (Eigner 5). The romance, because it is free to explore ideas rather than characters and their actions, helped Melville create the island-hopping symposium in *Mardi*, where mythical characters can debate their questions about life and after-life without having to worry about the trivial matters of day-to-day survival. But to Melville, romance ultimately did not prove sufficient for the serious metaphysical questing he meant to do. After finishing *Mardi* and after being exposed to German literature and thought by Thomas Carlyle, Henry Noel, and George J. Adler (1821-1868), his close travel companion in the fall of 1849, Melville began to combine the elements of romance that suited him with the all-encompassing German *Roman* as defined by Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) in his *Letter on the Novel, Fragments*, and “On Goethe’s *Meister*.” When Schlegel views “Romantic poetry” as a “progressive and universal poetry” that aims to “reunite all the separate pieces of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric,” and when he demands

that it “mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism” (*Athenäumsfragment* 116), he is envisioning the *Roman* as a sprawling narrative that combines prose and poetry, drama and essay, as it tries to capture all the different facets of the human experience, even the ones his society considered indecorous.

As this study hopes to show, Schlegel’s concept of the *Roman* suited Melville’s purposes much better than the traditional British novel or the American romance. To explore what Melville’s writing might owe to German literature and thought of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, this study begins by acknowledging at the outset that due to Melville’s voracious reading of works by Carlyle, Shakespeare, Sterne, Burton, Goethe, Schiller, to name only a few, we cannot hope to determine what exactly passed from Jean Paul to Melville. I am grateful to Lionel Trilling for reminding us that originally, “influence” expressed a mystery, a flowing in, but not as a tributary river flows into the main stream.” Instead, Trilling argues, this flowing in occurs through “insensible and invisible means . . . the infusion of any kind of divine, spiritual, moral, immaterial, or secret power or principle” (Trilling 191). Although we will never know for sure what the complex literary relationship between Melville, Schlegel and Jean Paul really was, this study, in true Ishmaelian fashion, attempts to draw on the “evidence” we have to imagine what it might have been.

This study begins by providing a brief survey of Melville’s early books and examines *Mardi*, the first of his openly metaphysical works, to sketch how Melville

journeyed from adventurous travelogue to philosophical romance. After acknowledging minor German echoes in *Mardi* and after placing Melville's literary and personal ambitions within the context of his literary culture, it proceeds to examine carefully the innovative voice and amateur philosophizing of Melville's Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, the book most of his readers view as the center piece of his career. By identifying some of the many possible conduits for German literature and thought to travel to Melville's America, this project hopes to show that Melville did indeed come into contact with the works of Friedrich Schlegel and Jean Paul; by identifying echoes of German romantic irony and characteristics of the German *Roman* in *Moby-Dick*, it hopes to contribute to a fuller understanding of the rich, international context that helped produce Melville's most ambitious work. In its later sections, this study attempts to sketch what happened to Melville's "German streak" in *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*, the book that immediately followed *Moby-Dick* and perplexed and angered many readers and critics with its deliberately "ambiguous" tone that thinly disguises Melville's bitterly critical comments on a culture and society that seems to have betrayed him. Though Melville wants at least some of his readers to believe that *Pierre* is a wholesome "rural bowl of milk," this study attempts to highlight its biting irony and link its word creations to the style of Jean Paul.

## Chapter I: Drifting Towards the Germans

I love all men who dive. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles .... I'm not talking of Mr Emerson now – but of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with blood-shot eyes since the world began.

-- Herman Melville, "Letter to Evert Duyckinck" (March 3, 1849)

### From Travelogue to Metaphysical Quest Narrative

Immediately after completing the proofs for *Mardi*, Melville wrote in his letter to the British publisher John Murray (Jan 28, 1849): "Unless you should deem it *very* desirable do not put me down on the title page as 'the author of *Typee* & *Omoo*'. I wish to separate '*Mardi*' as much as possible from those books" (*Correspondence* 114). Because *Typee* and *Omoo* had been favorably received, Melville's desire to "separate" *Mardi* from his two earlier books seems surprising. As their subtitles indicate, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* and *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*, were semi-autobiographical travelogues that dramatized the author's roamings as a young man. They attracted attention because they provided a window into exotic cultures and lifestyles that Melville's readers found intriguing but had not experienced first-hand. While Melville had raised serious questions about the meaning of human life and death in both books, these questions surfaced only occasionally in these otherwise plot-driven adventures. In *Mardi*, however, Melville

had followed his urge to dive, to pursue his nagging doubts about the existence of God and the likelihood of an afterlife, and as his letter to Murray indicates, Melville therefore saw *Mardi* as fundamentally different from “those books.”

When judged against the realist narrative, the dominant prose form of Melville's time, *Mardi* is seriously flawed. It has neither a coherent plot that moves swiftly from beginning via climax to resolution, nor one strong and dependable narrative voice that guides readers from scene to scene and helps them interpret the action. In fact, there is very little action in most of *Mardi*, if by action we mean exciting events and suspenseful plot. While the book starts out as a continuation of *Omoo*, with "realistic" descriptions of "real people" and places that its readers and reviewers could find exotic, its mode changes once Taji's search for the mythical Yillah is launched. *Mardi* now portrays the very improbable story of a maiden who, having been rescued by Taji, disappears mysteriously and is being pursued by an idealistic and verbose philosopher, a poet, a historian, and a demi-god king. Except for the opening chapters, the setting is not a place that 19th century readers could recognize but a group of islands that exist only in the dream-world of romance.

As these structural decisions for *Mardi* indicate, Melville had come to feel that traditional narrative forms could not capture the world as he knew it. While he did not know exactly what he was looking for, and while he had not yet read the German authors who would later provide him with viable literary models for *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Melville sensed that the travelogue was not flexible enough to let him explore in his writing the philosophical and psychological complexities that perplexed him. As he experimented with multiple narrators and mixed genres in

*Mardi*, Melville began to neglect the conventions of story-telling and allowed his amateur philosophizing to take center stage. As the travelogue faded into the background, Melville happened upon a new format of loosely structured conversations among his travelers in the islands of Mardi. He embraced this structure because he sensed that creating a group of varied characters and presenting them in open philosophical debates without clear resolutions was truer to the human condition as he experienced it than the traditional adventure story with its predictable outcome. *Mardi* thus helps us appreciate Melville's development during this important, pre-German phase of transition. Having rejected traditional narrative structures as too confining, he, like the early narrator of *Mardi*, was truly adrift. Attracted by the world of literary romance before he knew to what extent it would let him combine philosophy and literature, Melville now started to write in many different modes and created a record of his inadvertent preparation for the "German streak"<sup>6</sup> he was soon to experience. In *Mardi*, we get to witness what Melville could have experienced only half-consciously: an American writer's transition from successful writer of semi-autobiographical travelogue to philosophical quest narrative, a genre largely unknown in England and America at the time but well established in Germany. This helps explain why Melville immediately recognized in the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Jean Paul, and Friedrich Schlegel a treasure-trove for his own philosophical inquiries when he encountered them in 1849-50.

Melville's situation while writing *Mardi* (1847-49) was quite different from what it had been when he was working on *Typee* and *Omoo*, which were written

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<sup>6</sup> I borrow this expression from Harrison Hayford's article: "Melville's German Streak."

while Melville was living with his mother and sister. By 1847, with these two popular books already published, Melville had established himself as a writer who was appreciated for his “descriptions of Polynesian Life,” for his “careless and elegant style which suits admirably with the luxurious and tropical tone of the narrative” and shows “instances of rare talent and superior literary acquirements” (Branch 66).

Nathaniel Hawthorne, in an unsigned notice in the *Salem Advertiser*, praised Melville’s “lightly but vigorously written” *Typee* and noted that it “gives a freer and more effective picture of barbarian life, in that unadulterated state of which there are now so few specimen remaining” (Branch 67). Melville clearly was no longer a beginner; he had learned to convert his own South Sea experiences into appealing adventure stories and to draw on the travelogues of earlier explorers where he lacked sufficient detail to satisfy his readers. As Charles Roberts Anderson and others have shown, he began *Typee* and *Omoo* by using his own experiences in the South Seas, then fleshed them out with details gleaned from explorers who had written about their adventures and catalogued their geographical and biological findings.<sup>7</sup> While Melville acknowledged that he had drawn on various studies of Polynesia, Harrison Hayford

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<sup>7</sup> From early adolescence, Melville read widely and enjoyed evenings when members of his family read out loud to each other works by Dickens, Longfellow, and Charlotte Bronte, to name only a few. So we can assume that while he was writing *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville drew on the popular fiction of his day as well as the vivid accounts of south-sea travelers. As a result, *Typee* and *Omoo*, as Merton Sealts has shown, are “neither unadorned fact nor out-and-out fiction, but an imaginative combination of personal observation and literary borrowing” (Sealts 30). Melville consulted books about the “Pacific and its islands, ranging from older reports of the first voyagers into the South Seas—collected in *An Historical Account of the Circumnavigation of the Globe, and of the Progress of Discovery in the Pacific Ocean, from the Voyage of Magellan to the Death of Cook* (1836)—to William Ellis’s *Polynesian Researches* (1833).” Sealts further argues that based on internal evidence, we can assume that Melville also used the following sources: *A Visit to the South Seas* by Rev. Charles Stewart (1831), *Journal of a Cruise... in the U.S. Frigate Essex* by Capt. David Porter (1813), *Voyages and Travels* by Georg H. Von Langsdorff (1813). For *Omoo* he consulted *Polynesia* by Rev. Michael Russell (1843) and the six-volume *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition* (1845)” (Sealts 30-31).

has demonstrated that his borrowings were very extensive and that William Ellis' *Polynesian Researches* served Melville as "historian, geographer, botanist, anthropologist, dictionary of native words common and proper, and even his eyes and ears" (qtd. in Sealts 31). Merton Sealts furthermore identifies in *Omoo* literary allusions to "Butler, Smollett, Milton, Virgil, Pope, and Hobbes" as well as echoes of Shakespeare and the Bible (Sealts 31). As these sources indicate, Melville, while producing a unique mixture from his own recent adventures and travel accounts by other explorers, was also reading serious fiction and philosophical literature, both old and new. While he would continue to draw on both kinds of sources, in *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, the balance was soon to tip in favor of philosophy and fiction. Evert Duyckinck, who praised *Typee* in a letter to Hawthorne, called it a "lively and pleasant book, not overly philosophical, perhaps" (qtd. in Davis 15). This reserved assessment suggests, as Davis says, that Duyckinck viewed Melville mainly as a "raconteur and humorist" at this time and did not see in him much real intellectual curiosity until he was working on *Mardi* (Davis 37).

After his marriage to Elizabeth Shaw (1822-1906) and his move to New York City, Melville had his own workroom set up in the new family home, visited the city's reading rooms regularly, and joined the circle of Evert and Margaret Duyckinck who, in the 1840's, were at the center of New York's literary world.<sup>8</sup> Melville not only had frequent conversations with other writers and publishers, he also had free access to Duyckinck's considerable library, well-stocked with literary classics. Melville, who

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<sup>8</sup> Evert Augustus Duyckinck (1816-78) and his brother, George Long Duyckinck edited the *New York Literary World* (1847-53). E.A. Duyckinck and Cornelius Mathews founded and edited the literary journal *Arcturus*.

had been an avid reader and autodidact since early adolescence, took full advantage of this resource but, as Duyckinck observed, his focus had changed. He was now reading less of the travel literature he had been consulting repeatedly while writing *Typee* and *Omoo*, and more "old books," among them the works of Dante, Rabelais, Sir Thomas Browne, Burton, Montaigne (Sealts 39).

In this literary environment, Melville felt secure enough to pursue his own interests, to satisfy his need for what he himself considered philosophical diving, for questioning what others took for granted. As much as he wanted to believe in a benevolent God and the afterlife He promised, Melville could not overlook what he had witnessed repeatedly at sea—for example the burial of a sailor whose body was thrown, with very little ceremony, into the water where, as Melville imagined only too vividly, the ever-present, voracious sharks would devour it, leaving nothing to remind the world of this individual's existence. "As the plank tipped, the body slid off slowly, and fell with a splash into the sea. A bubble or two, and nothing more was seen.... We had tossed a shipmate to the sharks, but no one would have thought it, to have gone among the crew immediately after" (*Omoo* 45). Melville had written about burials at sea in his earlier books, but now he wanted to focus on the philosophical, psychological, and religious questions such a burial raised for him. He therefore turned in his reading to "old books" which for Melville still captured the terror that contemporary writers tried to explain away. Before he encountered the German Romantics, Melville felt drawn to the earlier writers identified by Sealts and Davis, esp. Burton, Browne, and Montaigne.

This shift in his reading was immediately reflected in his writing and contributed to *Mardi's* unpopularity by leading him away from what had passed as realistic travelogue and into what Masson and Eigner (see above) have termed the "Culture Novel" or "Metaphysical novel," to what Melville himself calls "romance" in his preface to *Mardi*. The book is hard if not impossible to categorize and changes genres many times as its 195 chapters unfold. While it starts out as a realistic travelogue that continues in the vein of *Omoo*, *Mardi* soon develops into a hybrid collection of fantastic episodes in which symposia on religion, science and politics alternate with metaphysical digressions on such topics as necessity and free will. The multiple narrative voices, as they travel through the fictive Polynesian archipelago called Mardi, debate multiple political, ethical and metaphysical theories that draw on Melville's recent reading. They argue over the values of different world religions as they pursue their romantic quest for the maiden Yillah, who comes to represent ideal happiness and Truth. The book ends as a satirical comment on the real world of 1848 that criticizes human ambitions and weaknesses as expressed in different forms of government. The author seems to have made no effort to reconcile the polyphonic narrative modes of his book. South-sea travelogue, mystery-romance, philosophical treatise, Shakespearean soliloquy, Socratic dialogue all exist side by side and the text makes no apologies for its incoherent plot or its characters that are not real-life individuals but represent philosophical concepts Melville finds useful for exploring possible ways of living life. Though aware of these "shortcomings," Melville kept them in his book because they allowed him to capture the contradictions of real life,

its conflicting view-points that existed side-by-side, more effectively than the unified literary models he had rejected.

*Mardi's* plot opens in much the same way *Typee's* and *Omoo's* had, with a dissatisfied sailor deciding to jump ship and seek a better life among the natives. But there are significant differences: he jumps ship in the middle of the ocean, entrusts his life to a small, open boat and, as a consequence, is exposed to the forces of nature rather than to native tribes and their European "civilizers"; and, as Richard Brodhead (*School of Hawthorne* 22) and others have argued, he leaves because of internal, not external dissatisfaction, because of intellectual loneliness rather than physical discomfort: "There was no soul a magnet to mine; none with whom to mingle sympathies.... And what to me, thus pining for some one who could page me a quotation from Burton on Blue Devils; what to me, indeed, were flat repetitions of long-drawn yarns, and the everlasting stanzas of Black-eyed Susan sung by our full fore-castle choir? Staler than stale ale" (*Mardi* 4-5). Taji's impatience with everyday sailor life in these lines reflects Melville's own about chronicling it. What Melville and his protagonist are looking for is not to be found in the popular and conventional songs of common sailors but instead in a world of ideas, feelings, and metaphysical questing, perhaps in Burton's pages on melancholy.

Standing his "allotted two hours at the mast-head" --a dangerous place in Melville's fiction, for his protagonists do their serious soul-searching there and are in danger of falling and drowning, both literally and philosophically—Melville's narrator looks westward where "lay numerous groups of islands, loosely laid down upon the charts, and invested with all the charms of dream-land. I cast my eyes

downward to the brown planks of the dull, plodding ship, silent from stem to stern; then abroad." What he sees is the vision that leads him away from the loneliness and dull drudgery of the ship into the idealized world of fantasy and romance. "In the distance what visions were spread! The entire western horizon high piled with gold and crimson clouds; airy arches, domes, and minarets; as if the yellow, Moorish sun were setting behind some vast Alhambra. Vistas seemed leading to worlds beyond" (*Mardi* 7-8). That Melville uses imagery from the Arab and Muslim rather than the Christian world seems significant, especially since he had been highly critical of Christian missionaries in his two earlier novels. Though most of his philosophizing takes place within Western cultural terms, Melville, like many of his contemporaries, is clearly attracted by the unlimited possibilities of the exotic East. His narrator is aware that all this "was but one of the many visions one has up aloft," (*Mardi* 8) but this one is strong enough to make him jump ship, abandon the false sense of safety it provides, and take his chances in uncharted waters which, though very dangerous, hold for him a promise of new experiences and insights into the mysteries of human life.

With this vision from the masthead, and aided by the two "calms" (*Mardi* 8-10) that eliminate all exterior activity, the narrator's attention begins to turn inward, and so do large parts of *Mardi*. We soon leave behind the matter-of-fact world of realistic narrative and enter the realm of fantasy and imagination. As Davis has shown in detail, Melville soon abandons the fact-based truth-seeking his publisher and readers demand and instead pursues the intangible truths he is interested in, the ones that are located inside the human psyche. To explore them, Melville instinctively

experiments with hybrid literary forms that allow for open-ended and wide-ranging debate; he senses that he needs more than mimetic descriptions of reality can provide if he is to dive deep and explore what lies beyond.

As early as March, 1847, Melville had written in the *Literary World* about his leanings towards such poetic and philosophical inquiries in his review of J. Ross Browne's *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (*Piazza Tales* 205-11). Melville's voice sounds nostalgic when he reflects that "From time immemorial many fine things have been said and sung of the sea. And the days have been, when sailors were considered veritable mermen; and the ocean itself, as the peculiar theatre of the romantic and the wonderful." He then laments that "of late years there have been revealed so many plain, matter-of-fact details connected with nautical life that at the present day the poetry of salt water is very much on the wane." He expresses a sense of loss when he adds that "The perusal of Dana's *Two Years Before The Mast* ... somewhat impairs the relish with which we read Byron's spiritual address to the ocean" (*Piazza Tales* 205). When, in *Mardi*, Melville has his narrator look down at the planks of the ship, then out towards the endless horizon, he intuits the limitations in Dana's matter-of-fact account of life at sea; and when he speaks of his little boat, the Chamois, and compares the sea to the Alps, he is invoking Byron's *Manfred* instead. He senses that he needs the "poetry of salt-water" and its romance in addition to Dana's narrative of fact for the serious metaphysical exploring he is drawn to in *Mardi*. As he later says in his preface to his third book, "having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity, the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as

such; to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity..." (*Mardi* xvii). Though this remark is a tongue-in-cheek comment on his definition of "truth," Melville here openly departs from the conventions of his day and risks losing his publisher and his audience; he does so less because he cares about whether or not his book is seen as "true" travelogue or fantastic romance, but rather because he can no longer resist trying out literary forms that allow him to improvise, to address and explore in his fiction the philosophical and psychological questions he finds irresistible at this time. Melville is "drifting" towards the metaphysical quest narrative without knowing it and before he is aware of the German models he will soon find via Carlyle and Adler.

First among Melville's philosophical concerns is the human dilemma of yearning for knowledge, yet being painfully aware of the limits of what we humans can know. As the initial narrator in *Mardi* tells us as early as chapter 19, all our so-called knowledge is provisional and dependent on our perspective.

In bright weather at sea, a sail, invisible in the full flood of noon, becomes perceptible toward sunset. It is the reverse in the morning. In sight at grey dawn, the distant vessel, though in reality approaching, recedes from view, as the sun rises higher and higher.... And thus, too, here and there, with other distant things: the more light you throw on them, the more you obscure. Some revelations show best in a twilight." (*Mardi* 56)

As this passage suggests, twilight and dreams, two essential elements of Romance, can be more effective than light and logic if the goal is to look at things "distant," at ideas and matters of faith and doubt where our knowledge is by definition incomplete.

As soon as the narrator and his companion, Jarl, find themselves afloat in the Pacific Ocean in an open boat, their dangerous situation prompts their early philosophical reflections on the precarious existence of human beings. "At sea in an open boat," the narrator is struck by the "awful loneliness of the scene. Ere this, I had regarded the ocean as a slave, the steed that bore me whither I listed, and whose vicious propensities, mighty though they were, often proved harmless, when opposed to the genius of man. But now, how changed! In our frail boat, I would fain have built an altar to Neptune." Although the narrator might have dismissed Neptune and other gods while seemingly safe on board a big ship, he now sees himself at the mercy of the ocean. "What a mere toy we were to the billows, that jeeringly shouldered us from crest to crest, as from hand to hand lost souls may be tossed along by the chain of shades which enfilade the route to Tartarus" (*Mardi* 30). In this passage, Melville draws on both the facts and the poetry of salt water. He provides a vivid description of the physical facts but immediately transcends them and invests them with poetic and philosophical meaning, with the uncertainties of human knowledge and existence.

Because Jarl, true to his Viking origins, is aware of the danger and has been silent for several hours, the narrator tries to lift his spirits: "Cheer up, Jarl! Ha! ha! how merrily, yet terribly, we sail!" In his all too transparent effort to be optimistic, the narrator sounds like a fool providing comic relief in a Shakespeare play. By rhyming "merrily" with "terribly," Melville is mocking his narrator's efforts to cheer up Jarl when there is nothing in the scene to be cheerful about. This becomes even clearer as the narrator continues: "Up, up, -- slowly up -- toiling up the long, calm wave; then balanced on its summit a while, like a plank on a rail; and down, we

plunge headlong into the seething abyss, till arrested, we glide upward again. And thus did we go." They are lifted up and plunged down according to the whim of the elements and have no control whatsoever. Several times in these pages, the narrator is on the verge of adopting Jarl's dark disposition, but he always finds a way to sustain his optimism. He experiences a sudden "sense of peril so intense" as when he compares the fragile open boat to a "chip" and the sea to "fluid mountains .... But lingering not long in those silent vales, from watery cliff to cliff, a sea-chamois, sprang our solitary craft, -- a goat among the Alps!" (*Mardi* 37). By invoking the poetry of Byron's *Manfred*, the narrator achieves a tenuous balance between his conflicting feelings of safety and terror. Although Jarl manages to maintain his optimistic outlook in this scene, Melville's future protagonists will, after their author's encounter with serious German literature, give expression to his deep-seated uncertainties.

From the thorough research of Sealts, Davis and Anderson, we can infer that Melville's familiarity with German literature was very limited at this time. Among the travel literature he had been reading were Otto von Kotzebue's *A New Voyage Round the World*, 1830 (Sealts 191) and Georg H. Von Langsdorff's *Voyages and Travels*, 1813 (Sealts 30), but he found in these travel narratives information on the methods of warfare and tattooing among the natives rather than models for his metaphysical speculations. Most likely he was also familiar with some of the works of La Motte-Fouqué, whose character Undine could have inspired Hautia and perhaps Yillah (Davis 76), and Novalis, whose "blue flower" Newton Arvin recognizes in the romance sections of *Mardi* (Arvin 90). While these German sources were doubtless

relevant for *Mardi*, and while they seem to have inspired some of its characters as well as the theme and mood for Taji's pursuit of the ideal, Melville had not yet recognized the rich potential for thought-diving that romance had to offer. While writing *Mardi*, Melville was still in a state of transition between travelogue and the serious philosophical prose he was to attempt in *Moby-Dick*. Though he was familiar with a few early German sources, they are no more than the beginnings of Melville's growing appreciation for German romance as literary model for his metaphysical questing.

### **Creating the Voice of a Philosopher: Babbalanja**

*Mardi* turns into a meandering metaphysical quest narrative when we meet Babbalanja, "a man of mystical aspect, habited in a voluminous robe. He was learned in Mardian lore; much given to quotations from ancient and obsolete authorities" (*Mardi* 197). After Taji rescues the white maiden Yillah from the canoe of a native priest who is taking her to be sacrificed at the great shrine of Apo, he spends several idyllic months with her on the island of Odo. When Yillah disappears mysteriously, Taji begins his passionate pursuit of her and of the romantic ideal she has come to represent. Accompanied by a philosopher, a poet, a historian, and a king, Taji visits all the islands of Mardi in his effort to re-capture his lost dream. Once Babbalanja, a sage who resembles the Athenian Socrates, is introduced and the group begins its travels, we approach the core of *Mardi* and the passages that most angered Melville's critics. In what they dismissed as an "island-hopping symposium" *à la* Rabelais or

Johnson's *Rasselas*, Melville has his characters pursue both Taji's quest for Yillah and Babbalanja's for solutions to life's biggest enigmas.

Through the voice of Babbalanja we learn early on that "things visible are but conceits of the eye: things imaginative, conceits of the fancy. If duped by one, we are equally duped by the other" (*Mardi* 283). In other words, no matter how persistently we probe, we are not likely to find any definitive answers. Nevertheless, the rest of *Mardi* is an effort to approximate usable "truths" by employing various disciplines available to us, among them history and poetry, the ones Mohi (a historian) and Yoomi (a poet) are forever arguing about. Taji, who has been narrating most of the tale, becomes inadequate for the philosophical deliberations that follow. He therefore fades into the background and Babbalanja takes over for long stretches. But because no one voice can capture the multitude of theories and beliefs Melville feels compelled to examine, he begins to experiment with several different voices representing different intellectual disciplines. Their Socratic dialogues and debates provide a setting and format for open-ended inquiry, but they also frustrated the expectations of traditional readers who were looking for a single coherent narrative voice to guide them. While many readers complained about the unconventional techniques Melville employed in *Mardi*, he would soon have his literary experiments validated when he encountered Friedrich Schlegel's theory of the novel. But at this point in his development, Melville was not yet familiar with this German school of thought; he was merely stumbling towards it as he pursued his own questions about the meaning of human life.

While all the new voices are important for Melville's philosophical explorations, Babbalanja's stands out from the moment we meet him. Following in the footsteps of Bardianna, his favorite philosopher and role model, Babbalanja explores, often in endless debate with himself, every conceivable side of a problem. We frequently find him in deep disagreement with the historian and keeper of chronicles, Mohi, who does not seem to have digested the so-called knowledge he presents, or the all-too optimistic young poet, Yoomi, whose warbling strikes Babbalanja as too superficial. Traveling with these three questors is Media, a demi-god and King of Odo, who enjoys feeling superior to the others whose earthly origins limit what they can know. While the young and idealistic Yoomi shares Taji's and the king's conviction that Yillah, or Truth/ Ideal Love will be found, the two older, more experienced travelers, Mohi and Babbalanja, have their doubts from the very beginning.

Although there are some thoughtful characters in *Typee* and *Omoo*, Babbalanja represents a departure from the voices Melville had used so far in his career. Never before have we met a traveler who thinks of himself in just this way: "I am intent upon the essence of things; the mystery that lieth beyond ... 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" (*Mardi* 352). The philosophical chapters in the book are in fact driven by Babbalanja's search for essences and by the characters around him who either cannot be bothered to listen or find his endless analysis extremely annoying and frustrating. Media perhaps best captures Babbalanja when, in his dream, he describes him as follows: "Brother gods, and demi-gods, it is not well.

These mortals should have less or more. Among my subjects is a man, whose genius scorns the common theories of things; but whose still mortal mind can not fathom the ocean at his feet. His soul's a hollow, wherein he raves" (*Mardi* 565). Babbalanja knows all too well that Media is right, but that does not keep him from pursuing unanswerable questions, first among them the uncertainty of what happens to human beings after they die. While Media misses no opportunity to remind the other travelers that "you mortals are but too apt to talk in the dark," and that faith is their only alternative, Babbalanja persists in his quest for truth: "Faith is to the thoughtless, doubts to the thinker" (*Mardi* 430). Babbalanja, though he would like to believe in traditional religion, has seen too many inconsistencies and too much evil to have complete faith in Oro, the God of Mardi. We therefore observe him as, in emotionally charged passages that reflect his inner turmoil, he endlessly debates with himself his unanswerable questions:

But whether [the dead] ever lived or not, it is all the same with them now. Yet, grant that they lived; then, if death be a deaf-and-dumb death, a triumphal procession over their graves would concern them not. If a birth into brightness, then Mardi [the world] must seem to them the most trivial of reminiscences. Or, perhaps, theirs may be an utter lapse of memory concerning sublunary things; and they themselves be not themselves, as the butterfly is not the larva. (*Mardi* 209)

As Babbalanja tries to imagine what being dead is like, the ifs in this passage point ahead to *Moby-Dick*, where they assist Ishmael as he explores similar questions.

Hoping to establish that the dead continue to exist in one form or another, Yoomy, the

enthusiastic young poet, eagerly inquires whether this larva-butterfly image is an adequate analogy for what happens after we die, but Babbalanja soon gives his sobering response. Since the silkworm turns into a moth whose life is very short, death is once again inevitable and we do not know what comes after. "All vanity, vanity, Yoomy, to seek in nature for positive warranty to these aspirations of ours. Through all her provinces, nature seems to promise immortality of life, but destruction to beings. Or, as old Bardianna has it, if not against us, nature is not for us." Nature for Babbalanja (and Melville) is indifferent at best, certainly not benevolent. Having read Darwin's *Journals* recently, Melville felt the conflict between science and religion ever more strongly (Sealts 171). While nature suggested that Life continues, to Melville it did not provide compelling evidence that the individual did as well—a terrifying thought for the author and his fictional philosopher.

The young Yoomi is all too ready to interpret the nature metaphor so that it confirms eternal life for the individual, but Babbalanja is too experienced and sincere to accept this fiction and continues his probing. We next find him pacing on the tomb of King Donjalolo to see if the remains of this once all-powerful human being will yield answers where more ordinary bones have failed. But although his descendants have spared no trouble to preserve the king's body, weapons, and even tattooing, the tomb does not yield the clues from the dead that Babbalanja is searching for: "Walk over and over thy ancestral line, and they will not start. They are not here. Ay, the dead are not to be found, even in their graves...." Becoming ever more frustrated, Babbalanja next attempts to provoke the dead king: "Marjora! rise! Juam revolteth!

Lo, I stamp upon thy scepter; base menials tread upon thee where thou liest! Up, king, up! What? no reply? Are not these bones thine? ... Marjora! answer. Art thou? or art thou not?" Babbalanja here sounds like a parent who is getting impatient with a child's evasive answers and insists on a clear-cut yes or no. But he has to admit, after much to and fro, that it is not that simple: "I see thee not; I hear thee not; I feel thee not; eyes, ears, hands, are worthless to test thy being; and if thou art, thou art something beyond all human thought to compass. We must have other faculties to know thee by. Why, thou art not even a sightless sound; not the echo of an echo" (*Mardi* 237).

Babbalanja realizes that our reason and our senses are insufficient as we try to grasp what happens after death--we have no assurances, not even a believable theory. Oro's priests do not provide straight answers and the one man who, according to Biblical teaching, was raised from the dead, made no revelation concerning his experience. Yet we humans continue to hope for an afterlife, and we continue to look for proof that it exists. Exasperated, Babbalanja asserts that we "must" have other ways of knowing, yet his reason once again overrides his hopes and he accuses himself of wishful thinking: "An instinct is no preservative.... For backward or forward, eternity is the same; already have we been the nothing we dread to be. Icy thought!"

In Babbalanja's dialogue with himself, scientific thought and irrational hope alternate. The thought of the individual's annihilation is too terrible to take on board, and yet he knows that "Nothing abideth; the river of yesterday floweth not to-day; the sun's rising is a setting; living is dying.... Ah gods! in all this universal stir, am I to

prove one stable thing?" (237). He knows that he is asking a rhetorical question, and as his conversation with himself progresses, his tone becomes more and more ironic. He once again asks the dead kings to speak, and when they do not, he mocks them: "This, great Marjora's arm? No, some old paralytic's. Ye, kings? ye, men? Where are your vouchers? I do reject your brotherhood, ye libelous remains." In the midst of ridiculing the dead, however, he stops himself: "But no, no; despise them not, oh Babbalanja! Thy own skeleton, thou thyself dost carry with thee, through this mortal life ... thou art death alive" (*Mardi* 238). We leave Babbalanja where we found him, pacing in profound meditation on the royal sepulcher.

The chapter has to come to a close, but Babbalanja is by no means satisfied and returns to the life-after-death question throughout the book. Several chapters later, when his search has reached a point of desperation, he stretches his analogies to once again assure himself that there must be life after death:

For, does it not appear a little unreasonable to imagine, that there is any creature, fish, flesh, or fowl, so little in love with life, as not to cherish hopes of a future state? Why does man believe in it? One reason, reckoned cogent, is, that he desires it. ... As for the possible hereafter of the whales; a creature eighty feet long without stockings, and thirty feet round the waist before dinner, is not inconsiderately to be consigned to annihilation. (*Mardi* 289)

Having exhausted all his other tools, Babbalanja now treats the question of annihilation humorously by pretending to have found a "logical" reason for why whales must have an afterlife: where humans think they are too important to be

annihilated, the whales are simply too big to suffer such a fate. Much later in the book, when Babbalanja is once again debating this same question, he quotes old Bardianna's sobering thought that life after death might not be desirable: "we demand Eternity for a lifetime: when our mortal half-hours too often prove tedious." What if life after death were a continuation of our hope and suffering here on earth? What if it were equally tedious and unfulfilling? "Fellow men!" Bardianna continues, "our mortal lives have an end; but that end is no goal: no place for repose." One can imagine that Melville is picturing Dante's *Inferno* (Sealts 171) as he has Babbalanja reflect on an afterlife so unpleasant that it were better to lose one's individual identity after death: "Supine we can only be, annihilated" (*Mardi* 575). Since we do not know what comes after death, we have to imagine all the different scenarios, not just the attractive ones. And since we may not find "repose" but rather be forced to suffer eternally, "to live forever ... may truly appall us" (*Mardi* 576). Viewed from this perspective, silent bones in the ground suddenly appear a much better alternative, but of course Babbalanja still has not found the answers he has been seeking. He knows that as long as he is mortal, he will not find them, yet he continues his questing, much to the annoyance of King Media, Abrazza, and the other travelers in his boat.

Although it is perhaps too easy to say that Babbalanja's (and Melville's) inability to accept traditional religion accounts for Melville's disjointed book, we see in Babbalanja's oscillating that Melville was painfully aware of human uncertainty, of all that we cannot know. In *Mardi*, therefore, through trial and error, he experiments with literary forms and characters that might help him portray this uncertainty in his prose. As the many "flaws" in *Mardi* indicate, Melville has no real method at this

time. But because he senses that the traditional literary forms available to him, the ones that are coherent and tell "a straight story," can by definition not be sufficient, he tries out just about any combination of literary formats and invents new ones as he instinctively grasps for ways to capture uncertainty and open-ended inquiry. It is once again Media who provokes Babbalanja into spelling things out. Media, by this point very frustrated with Babbalanja's many philosophical digressions and his many ifs, is clearly in pain by the time Babbalanja announces that he does not know who he is, that several people dwell in him, including his devil Azzageddi, a mysterious stranger who takes over his body, and finally a raving lunatic. "How many more theories have you? First, you are possessed by a devil; then rent yourself out to the indweller; and now turn yourself into a mad-house. You are inconsistent" (*Mardi* 459). Babbalanja responds: "And for that very reason, my lord, *not* inconsistent; for the sum of my inconsistencies makes up my consistency. And to be consistent to one's self, is often to be inconsistent to Mardi. Common consistency implies unchangeableness; but much of the wisdom here below lives in a state of transition" (*Mardi* 459).

Sensing that human knowledge is always provisional, Melville has been trying out many different forms and voices, and he leaves all of them in his book because each represents an honest effort to approximate "truth" as much as is humanly possible. These failed efforts are valuable, he seems to be implying, because they are all that we have. But while Melville knew what he had accomplished in his book thus far, he was also aware, as he approached the end of *Mardi*, that he needed to "procure his yams." He had learned that the sales figures for *Typee* and *Omoo* had been disappointing in the end and that he would soon have to produce a book that would

sell. His uneasiness about finances and his awareness of what a gamble *Mardi* was might help explain the voice that comes out of nowhere in the chapter titled "Sailing On." As his letters to Murray and Duyckinck indicate (*Correspondence* 105-8, 127-29), Melville knew very well that he had been defying his readers' and publisher's expectations and that he would have to pay a price. His new book had drifted into something other than the sequel to *Omoo* that he had promised, and Melville felt the need to defend following his instincts while writing *Mardi*. "Oh, reader, list! I've chartless voyaged." With the spirit of a true literary adventurer, he has "cast off all cables" and turned from the "common breeze." He has "steered his bark through seas, untracked before [and] ploughed his own path mid jeers." He started out innocently enough, "essaying but a sportive sail," but was "driven from [his] course, by a blast resistless." Lacking the experience of a seasoned sea captain, he embarked prematurely on a dangerous journey that might well end in disaster. "But this new world here sought, is stranger far than his, who stretched his vans from Palos. It is the world of mind." So it is worth the risk. He knows that "fiery yearnings their own phantom-future make, and deem it present." But he is prepared for shipwreck: "So, if after all these fearful, fainting trances, the verdict be, the golden haven was not gained;--yet, in bold quest thereof, better to sink in boundless deeps, than float on vulgar shoals; and give me, ye gods, an utter wreck, if wreck I do" (*Mardi* 556-7).

After this declaration of independence, Melville once again uses the voice of Babbalanja to flesh out and defend his emerging definition of successful writing. True to his character, Babbalanja draws on *Mardi*'s established authorities, this time the ancient writer Lombardo, author of the 'Koztanza.' In a lively and humorous debate

with the other travelers, Babbalanja illustrates why the ‘Koztanza’ was so little appreciated in its own time and corrects the many misconceptions his audience has about the book. First and foremost, Lombardo did not have a detailed outline for his book when he began writing. In his effort to explore uncharted territory, he “did not build himself in with plans; he wrote right on; and so doing, got deeper and deeper into himself” until he suddenly announced: 'Here we are at last ... I have created the creative'" (*Mardi* 595). Lombardo abandoned the unities and all monitors from without and, like Melville in *Mardi*, relied entirely on his instinct. Abrazza objects that the result is flawed, that “the Koztanza lacks cohesion; it is wild, unconnected, all episode," but his complaint just helps Babbalanja make his point: "And so is *Mardi* itself: -- nothing but episodes; valleys and hills; rivers, digressing from plains; vines, roving all over; boulders and diamonds; flowers and thistles.... And so, the world in the Koztanza" (*Mardi* 597). Because of its fragmented nature, the Koztanza captures and accurately portrays human beings and the world they live in. It is therefore “true” while more traditional stories are not.

Anticipating a less than enthusiastic response for his *Mardi*, Melville has Babbalanja lash out at the critics of the Koztanza and thus ridicules in advance his contemporary critics who he is sure will misunderstand and condemn his new book. “They are fools. In their eyes, bindings not brains make books. ... Feelings they have none: and their very opinions they borrow. ... Critics? -- Asses! rather mules! ... Oh! that an eagle should be stabbed by a goose-quill!” (*Mardi* 599). Knowing full well that 19<sup>th</sup>-century readers of *Mardi* were likely to attack the book for defying the

literary conventions of its day, Melville still could not resist his urge to dive deep and record in *Mardi* all that he discovered.

Many critics did indeed tear into the book for the reasons Melville had anticipated, but unlike Melville, a few were familiar with a school of German thought and writing that celebrated the kind of open-ended questing Melville had intuitively practiced in *Mardi*. Afraid that this popular American writer might be imitating these awful German models and lose his ability to entertain with travelogues like *Typee* and *Omoo*, readers who had liked the two earlier novels now complained loudly about Melville's recent metaphysical tendencies and what they took to be their Germanic and Carlylean origins. These critics could not have known that Melville was, at this stage in his life, entirely unaware of the German romantics who had gathered around Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel and that those who cautioned him were themselves showing him the way to the Germans.

### **Discovering German Literature: Spring, 1849**

By January, 1849, Melville had completed *Mardi*. Early in January he took Lizzie to Boston where she could be with her family as she awaited the birth of their first child. He hurried back to New York where he and his sister Augusta finished the proofreading. By January 30 he had written his defiant preface for *Mardi* and was on his way to Boston to be with Lizzie. He had prepared himself for poor sales of his new book but was at the same time deeply invested in it. While he waited for his son's birth, his book's publication and his wife's recovery, Melville, according to Leon

Howard, felt anxious and unsettled. Lizzie's recovery was slow and difficult, and the book in which he had invested so much effort and hope was turned down by Murray before it was published by Bentley in March of 1849. Howard is probably right when he speculates that during this trying time "most of his tension found its escape in the imaginative perception of his reading" (Howard 130).

Shakespeare was doubtless the author who "gave [Melville] the most important direction," but we must also note that "the heightened interest in literature which Melville acquired during these anxious weeks in Boston led him into more extensive reading than he had ever done before" (Howard 131). As his letter to Evert Duyckinck (February 24) expresses, Melville was deeply moved by Shakespeare's plays: "Dolt & ass that I am I have lived more than 29 years, & until a few days ago, never made close acquaintance with the divine William. Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus..." (*Log I*: 289). Melville also purchased in late winter/spring 1849 *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton* (Sealts 198). In the biographical introduction he scored a section on Milton's religious doubt and added this comment: "He who thinks for himself never can rema[i]n of the same mind. I doubt not that darker doubts crossed Milton's soul, than ever disturbed Voltair. And he was more of what is called an Infidel" (qtd. in Parker 618) – a reminder that faith and doubt remain central for Melville and that he found in Milton's example validation for his conviction that true thinkers must continue to change their minds.

Despite his financial difficulties he ordered “through John Wiley a set of *British Essayists* for \$18.00” (Howard 131).<sup>9</sup> As Hershel Parker has pointed out, Melville, “for the rest of his life,” had on his shelves “a library of classic literary criticism of the previous half century” (Parker 618). He was to have ready access to reviews of the English Romantic poets that had appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* and to Thomas Carlyle’s essays on German literature and thought.

While waiting in Boston, perusing the papers and literary journals and looking forward to a summer of reading, Melville came across early reviews of *Mardi*, reviews that mostly condemned the book. As early as March, 1849, Henry Fothergill Chorley complained in the *Athenaeum* about *Mardi's* affected style, “in which are mingled many madnenses” (Branch 139). The reviewer for the London *Atlas* (also March), agreed. Having called Melville a “romancing philosopher” he continues:

We cannot follow the author through all his discussions of things real and unreal, nor would we if we could. The style is that of a true German metaphysician--full of tender thoughts and false images--generally entertaining--often ridiculous--attaining sometimes the brightest colorings of fancy, and at others talking the most inaffable [sic] bombast....” (Branch 142)

In April, William Young laments in *Albion* that “In Mr. Melville's style we notice a too habitual inversion, an overstraining after antithesis and Carlyle-isms...” (Branch 158).

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<sup>9</sup> The set consisted of eight volumes. v.1: *Essays, Critical and Miscellaneous*, by Thomas B. Macaulay; v.2: *Essays* by Sir Archibald Alison; v.3: *Works of Sydney Smith*; v. 4: *The Recreations of Christopher North* by John Wilson; v. 5: *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* by Thomas Carlyle; v.6: Francis Jeffrey’s *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review*; v. 7: *Critical Essays* by Sir James Stephen and Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd; v.8: *Miscellaneous Works* by Sir John Mackintosh. In addition, some catalogs advertised an unnumbered volume of *Miscellaneous Essays* by Sir Walter Scott as part of the set (Sealts 198-9).

In the eyes of these reviewers, "madness," "affected style," and "German metaphysician" are closely related. Like the audience Carlyle had anticipated and tried to win over in his "State of German Literature," these readers of *Mardi* saw German literature as wild, unstructured, undisciplined and they deplored its impact on American writers such as Melville, writers who previously had written sound travel books and adventure stories which their readers had enjoyed thoroughly. But now Melville had clearly been exposed to the German virus and had been infected. It was especially the lack of structure in *Mardi* that angered many of these critics. The *Examiner* (March) called *Mardi* "From first to last...an outrageous fiction.... A heap of fanciful speculations, vivid descriptions, satirical insinuations, and allegorical typifications are flung together with little order or connexion..." (Branch 143). And, as noted above, George Ripley in the New York *Tribune* (May) insists that "If we had never heard of Mr. Melville before, we should soon have laid aside his book, as a monstrous compound of Carlyle, Jean Paul, and Sterne...." In Ripley's view,

the story has no movement, no proportions, no ultimate end; and unless it is a huge allegory ... winding its unwieldy length along, like some monster of the deep, no significance or point. We become weary with the shapeless rhapsody, and wonder at the audacity of the writer which could attempt such an experiment with the long suffering of his readers.... (Branch 161-62)

We have no evidence that Melville had read the German writers referred to in these critical reviews, but as soon as he opened the Carlyle volume of *British Essayists*, he found an essay on the very same Jean Paul whose supposed influence on

Melville's *Mardi* the critics were lamenting. Having been compared to both Carlyle and Jean Paul, and having been accused of sounding like a German metaphysician, Melville must have been eager to learn more about them. We can picture him devouring not only Carlyle's essay on Jean Paul (1827)<sup>10</sup> that opens the volume but also his defense of German writers in "State of German Literature." Included also are essays on Werner, Goethe, Heyne, and Novalis, followed by a second, longer piece on Jean Paul, "Jean Paul Friedrich Richter Again" (1830)<sup>11</sup>, where Carlyle praises the German for just the qualities that Melville's *Mardi* was being condemned for. To Melville, who wanted fame and desperately needed money but was beginning to see that *Mardi* would bring him neither, Carlyle's assessment of Jean Paul must have been a hopeful one: "During the last forty years, he has been continually before the public...and growing generally in esteem with all ranks of critics.... And Jean Paul, at first reckoned half-mad, has long ago vindicated his singularities to nearly universal satisfaction..." ("JPFR" 6). Melville, who could not have known to what degree Carlyle was exaggerating Jean Paul's popularity, found it encouraging to read about a German writer whose early fate had resembled his own after completing *Mardi* but who had recovered from this rocky start and had won over his critics.<sup>12</sup> He was likely

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<sup>10</sup> Hereafter referred to as "JPFR"

<sup>11</sup> Hereafter referred to as "JPFR Again".

<sup>12</sup> Due to his limited knowledge of Jean Paul's life and work at this early stage in his acquaintance with the German, Carlyle gets quite a few facts wrong. But as he continues editing and translating Jean Paul's works between 1826 and 1830, he gradually corrects these and, in his 1830 essay, JPFR AGAIN, he gives a more accurate picture of Jean Paul's life. What does not change, though, is Carlyle's overall presentation of Jean Paul as hero/prophet. Where in 1826 Carlyle was unaware of just how poor Richter and his family were, he tells us in 1830 that Richter's father, a poor schoolmaster, could barely keep his family clothed and fed. When he died, he left his wife and children deeply in debt.

drawn to Carlyle's characterization of Jean Paul as neither "Novelist" nor "common romancer" but instead as "Philosopher and moral Poet" (JPFR 9).

Carlyle admits that Jean Paul's prose is often "vast and discursive" but insists that his stylistic idiosyncrasies are necessary choices that help him achieve his deeper meaning. Where Melville's *Mardi* was being attacked for its lack of traditional structure and its many digressions that seemed unrelated to the story proper, Carlyle praised Jean Paul's "erratic digressions" and appreciatively described his prose as a "mighty maze." He calls attention to Jean Paul's "astonishing liberality in parentheses, dashes, subsidiary clauses" and, unlike Melville's reviewers, applauds the fact that Jean Paul "invents hundreds of new words, alters old ones, or by hyphen chains and pairs and packs them together into most jarring combination." Instead of complaining, Carlyle celebrates these irregularities in Jean Paul's style: "A perfect Indian jungle it seems; a boundless, unparalleled imbroglio; nothing on all sides but darkness, dissonance, confusion worse confounded!" ("JPFR" 12).

To Carlyle, these stylistic devices reflect not errors in judgment or unawareness of literary decorum but instead necessary choices made by an author who, in his writing, is "piercing into the most hidden combinations of things, and grasping the most distant." With an "imagination vague, sombre, splendid, or appalling," Jean Paul, in Carlyle's estimation, is "brooding over the abysses of Being; wandering through Infinitude, and summoning before us, in its dim religious light, shapes of brilliancy, solemnity, or terror..." (JPFR 14). Carlyle appreciates Richter's innovations, his courage to depart from "the given forms of composition." He faults earlier readers and critics of Jean Paul for not seeing that for him to be the

uncompromising truth-seeker he is, he has to resort to unconventional literary techniques. While the “careless reader” might view Jean Paul as among the “wildest of infidels” because he “bandies to and fro the dogmas of religion ... and the highest objects of Christian reverence,” he in fact has “an intense and continual faith in man’s immortality.... He has doubted, he denies, yet he believes” (JPFR 22). Carlyle concludes his piece by recommending Jean Paul to “the study, the tolerance, and even the praise, of all men who have inquired into this highest of questions [faith] with a right spirit; inquired with the martyr fearlessness, but also with the martyr reverence, of men that love Truth, and will not accept a lie” (“State” 23).

To Melville, who certainly saw himself as such an honest and fearless inquirer, reading Carlyle’s praise of this German questor must have been a truly vindicating experience. As echoes of these works by Jean Paul in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* indicate (see below), Melville read on and devoured everything Carlyle had to say on Jean Paul and German literature. He was drawn to this German writer who, after striving in his prose to capture the uncertainties of human existence as Melville had in *Mardi*, had found such an appreciative reader, and a well-known and respected one at that.

At the end of Carlyle’s second essay on Jean Paul (written in 1830 and included in the Carlyle volume Melville now owned), Jean Paul’s famous “Rede des toten Christus”<sup>13</sup> was of special interest to Melville and reminded him of his recent comment on Milton’s “darker doubts.” One of Richter’s many digressions, “Rede” is a story within a story that introduces a narrator who falls asleep one “summer

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<sup>13</sup> The English translation is Christ’s Speech After His Death, hereafter referred to as “Rede.” Carlyle is translating from the first edition of *Siebenkäs*, where “Rede” opens the book.

evening, in the sunshine," i.e. secure in his religious faith, and dreams about a universe without God. In this nightmare, Christ himself appears, after his death on the cross, and proclaims to the dead that they were happiest while still alive, for after death they have discovered that their faith in God was no more than wishful thinking. Jean Paul, aware of how daring this piece is, explains early on why he wrote it. His purpose is to "transform the words into feelings," to dramatize "the rich meaning" of such faith or doubt, to make us experience the "terror" a person feels when, for the first time, "[he] enters the school of Atheism." From his perspective it would be easier to deny immortality than to deny God for we can live without certainty about some vague world to come, but we cannot live without a God who gives meaning to the present. "No one in Creation is so alone, as the denier of God; he mourns, with an orphaned heart that has lost its great Father.... The whole world lies before him, like the Egyptian Sphinx of stone, half-buried in the sand; and the All is the cold iron mask of a formless Eternity..." (JPFR 132). This statement, which comes just before the dreamer's nightmare, makes what follows all the more frightening. In his nightmare, the speaker awakens in a churchyard in which all the graves are open. Surrounded by shadows, he feels avalanches above him and earthquakes below; all is dissonance and confusion. "Now sank from aloft a noble, high Form, with a look of uneffaceable sorrow, down to the Altar, and all the Dead cried out, 'Christ! is there no God?' He answered, 'There is none!'" As both sentence structure and exclamation point indicate, Christ is certain that there is no God, but since his audience seems unable to believe him he backs up his statement with the following evidence:

“I went through the Worlds, I mounted into the Suns, and flew with the Galaxies through the wastes of Heaven; but there is no God! I descended as far as Being casts its shadow, and looked down into the Abyss and cried, Father, where art thou? But I heard only the everlasting storm which no one guides, and the gleaming Rainbow of Creation hung without a Sun that made it, over the Abyss, and trickled down. And when I looked up to the immeasurable world for the Divine Eye, it glared on me with an empty, black, bottomless Eye-socket; and Eternity lay upon Chaos, eating it and ruminating it." When the dead children, awakened by the noise, ask him: "Jesus, have we no Father?" he replies "We are all orphans, I and you: we are without Father!"

(JPFR 134)

Christ then turns to the dreamer who, like Dante's narrator in *Inferno*, is the only living person in the scene and, in a passage that echoes Shakespeare's *Tempest*, laments this man's fate: "Your little life is the sigh of Nature, or only its echo." Looking at the earth, Christ continues: "Ah, I was once there; I was still happy then; I had still my Infinite Father, and looked up cheerfully from the mountains into the immeasurable Heaven.... Ah, ye too happy inhabitants of Earth, ye still believe in *Him*." Christ both envies and pities these mortals, for once they die, they will find that there is no God who can heal their wounds, they will awaken "in a stormy Chaos, in the everlasting Midnight--and there comes no Morning, and no soft healing hand, and

no Infinite Father!" (JPFR 136). Shortly thereafter the dreamer awakens and finds himself grateful that he can "still pray to God."

To Melville, who had in his recently completed *Mardi* created a doubting Babbalanja (and his all too sudden conversion in Serenia), Jean Paul's "Rede" probably rang true. In episodes like "Rede," Melville could find an analogue to his own oscillating between faith and doubt; in Babbalanja's and the dreamer's leap into faith he suspected a desperate effort to escape the terrifying possibility of a world without God. As early as Chapter 16 of *Mardi*, completed before he read Jean Paul's "Rede," Melville had explored visions of a universe without God by parodying Genesis 2.2. While in the Bible God ended his work on the seventh day and rested, then created man on the eighth, in Melville's story there ensues a blank, a horrible nothingness: "On the eighth day there was a calm. It came on by night.... Now, as the face of a mirror is a blank, only borrowing character from what it reflects; so in a calm in the Tropics, a colorless sky overhead, the ocean, upon its surface, hardly presents a sign of existence.... But that morning," Melville's narrator continues, "the two gray firmaments of sky and water seemed collapsed into a vague ellipsis.... Every thing was fused into the calm: sky, air, water, and all.... The silence was that of a vacuum. No vitality lurked in the air. And this inert blending and brooding of all things seemed gray chaos in conception" (*Mardi* 48). Reminiscent of Jean Paul's "Rede" as well as Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," this early scene in *Mardi* portrays Melville's pre-German visions of a terrifying nothingness. Where Jean Paul's chaos is in violent motion, Melville's is even more frightening because nothing happens. Instead of the creation of man his Christian readers would expect, they find a "vague

ellipsis” at least as horrible as Christ’s announcement that there is no God. In both texts, the moments of doubt are followed by reassurance. Jean Paul’s dreamer awakens in the bright sunshine and prays to his god while Melville’s narrator, in equally overwrought prose, celebrates the awakening of the sea by the wind:

Dancingly, mincingly it came, just rippling the sea, until it struck our sails....  
Beyond expression delightful! Once more we heard the low humming of the sea under our bow, as our boat, like a bird, went singing on its way. How changed the scene! Overhead, a sweet blue haze, distilling sunlight in drops. And flung abroad over the visible creation was the sun-spangled, azure, rustling robe of the ocean, ermined with wave crests; all else, infinitely blue.  
*(Mardi 50)*

Both the words and their rhythm reflect the narrator’s relief at the new-found life of the ocean. Though Melville’s narrator and his readers know that there will be other calms, he is all too ready to celebrate the bright smile of the scene while it lasts. As this parody, written before Melville read Jean Paul’s “Rede” indicates, Melville’s pre-German portrait of nothingness resembles Jean Paul’s. The two writers shared and portrayed similar concerns and doubts, each in his own way, but when Melville encountered “Rede” in Carlyle’s essay, he must have experienced a shock of recognition.

Although the Duyckincks had praised *Mardi* and published excerpts from it in the *Literary World*, and although there had been the occasional reviewer who had a positive word or two for the book, the overall reaction was negative. By June, when he read in the *Weekly Chronotype* that "HERMAN MELVILLE'S new work has

greatly disappointed his old admirers...,” Melville knew that, financially speaking, *Mardi* had failed and that he would have to write a book that would sell before he could further indulge in his “thought diving.” But by this time Melville was also aware that in Germany there existed a literary and philosophical tradition that not only allowed for but demanded the kind of open-ended inquiry for which his *Mardi* had been so severely criticized. The reviewer in the *Chronotype* continued: “We cannot afford to let so vigorous and fascinating a writer in his own sphere become an imitator of Carlisle or of some fantastic German” and urged: “Come back, O Herman, from thy cloudy, super-mundane flight, to the vessel's deck and the perfumed i[s]les, and many a true right hand will welcome thy return” (qtd. in Parker 633). Having read Carlyle’s praise of German literature, Melville could now feel superior to such provincial criticism. He could at least imagine that what he had attempted in *Mardi*, though dismissed by most British and American critics, might be appreciated in a less provincial, more cosmopolitan context. He was more than ready for the excursions into German thought he was soon to undertake.

### **Melville and Adler**

Having worked to exhaustion while completing *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, two books he felt he had to write for money alone, Melville embarked on a trip to England and the continent, where he hoped to sell *White-Jacket* to a British publisher and collect new materials for future books. Melville could not have anticipated that immediately after leaving New York in October, 1849, he would meet George J.

Adler, honorary professor of German Literature and passionate student of philosophy, with whom he was to have extended conversations on German metaphysics, conversations that were to have a deep and lasting impact on his own writing. At this moment in Melville's career when he was beginning to assimilate what he had learned from Carlyle about German literature and thought, Adler proved an excellent resource. A native of Leipzig, Germany, Adler had emigrated in 1833 and become an instructor of German language. He was well versed in German literature and philosophy as well as the Greek Classics, Middle-Eastern literature, Provençal poetry and knew the languages in which these texts were written (Marovitz 374). During the journey that lasted nearly four weeks, the two men spent many hours together, "riding on the German horse" (*Journals* 9), and while in Europe, Melville frequently dined with Adler. As Dwight A. Lee has shown, the two men spent roughly forty-five days together in the fall of 1849. They crossed the Atlantic together from 11 October to 5 November, spent two weeks together in London, and met frequently for seven or eight days in Paris. According to Lee there is no evidence that the two men met after Melville departed for Germany and headed back to the United States, though we do know that he attended Melville's funeral in 1868 (Lee 140). As Lee suggests and as we have seen in the *Mardi* section, "Melville had the potential for his excessive introspective wanderings in metaphysical fields" long before he met Adler, yet the passages in his diary that refer to the German make it seem "probable that Adler gave considerable impetus to Melville's metaphysical explorations" (Lee 140-41). Sanford E. Marovitz agrees. Melville, he says, already had "an amateurish enthusiasm for metaphysics and the interest in epistemology" when he met Adler

(Marovitz 374), but Adler at the very least supported and encouraged the serious interest in these subjects that Melville had shown and been criticized for in *Mardi*. As Melville was beginning to think about his next project, Adler helped him develop more fully the theoretical questions he had addressed haphazardly in *Mardi*, particularly in "Sailing On."

When the two men met aboard the *Southampton*, Melville and Adler happened to be at similar crossroads in their careers and shared what Marovitz calls "remarkably compatible psychological states" (375). Each had spent the previous months working intensely, writing almost to exhaustion. Melville had finished *Mardi* early in 1849 and had, after the book received devastating reviews, written right on and produced *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* within a four-month period. Adler had just completed a project he had been working on for years, *A Dictionary of the German and English Languages; Indicating the Accentuation of Every German Word, Containing Several Hundred German Synonyms, Together with a Classification and Alphabetical List of Irregular Verbs, and a Dictionary of German Abbreviations*. Melville was deeply impressed, both by this ambitious compendium that Adler had written entirely by himself, and by the mental anguish it had caused him. In his journal he noted: "Adler ... is [the] author of a formidable lexicon ... in compiling which he almost ruined his health. He was almost crazy, he tells me, for a time. He is full of the German metaphysics, & discourses of Kant, Swedenborg, &c. He has been my principal companion thus far" (*Journals* 4). Melville could empathize with Adler's intense mental anguish. As he wrote in a letter to Evert Duyckinck, the news of Charles Fenno Hoffman's mental illness earlier that year had affected him deeply,

for Melville himself was only too aware that "in all of us lodges the same fuel to light the same fires. And he who has never felt, momentarily, what madness is has but a mouthful of brains" (*Correspondence* 128). The topic of madness had occupied Melville since his father's early death, which had been preceded by a short period of mental derangement, and was to remain central in all of his works, especially in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. Marovitz suggests that at least in part Melville was drawn to Adler for his intensity bordering on madness.

But Melville had other reasons to be interested in Adler. Aside from being the only intellectual he could talk with aboard ship, Adler happened to be a man with just the kind of knowledge of German literature and philosophy that Melville was eager to pursue after reading Carlyle's translations and critical essays. And although Melville's journal does not tell us exactly what the two writers talked about, we can easily imagine Melville raising fundamental questions about the purpose of human life, the possibility for an afterlife and the fear of nothingness after death; and we can assume that Adler was only too glad to engage these questions and respond, drawing on his thorough knowledge of German thinkers. Among the ones Melville mentions specifically in his journal are Kant, Hegel, and Schlegel but, as Marovitz surmises, Jean Paul most likely entered into the discussion as well. Adler had, in his preface to his dictionary, quoted three authors in their original languages; one of them was Jean Paul, whose work Adler admired and respected (Marovitz 378). The quote from *Levana*, Jean Paul's long treatise on education, reflects both Jean Paul's and Adler's philosophy of language: "It seems to me that man (just as the speechless animal swims in the outer world as in a dark benumbing sea) would likewise lose himself in

the star-filled heaven of outer phenomena if he did not through language divide the confused shining lights [leuchten] into star-maps for his consciousness. Only language illuminates the broad single-colored world-map" (Marovitz 378). Having recently cited these lines in his dictionary, Adler is likely to have paraphrased this and other passages by Jean Paul to Melville, and the young American must have been an eager listener and respondent. He must have made at least a mental note of the passage Adler had underlined, for this is precisely what Ishmael finds as he contemplates the whiteness of the whale, appalling to the person who looks directly at such white immensities and loses all sense of orientation. Ishmael's only way of approaching the terrors of the white whale's unknowability is to circle around it linguistically, to divide it into as many possible meanings as he can devise, each capturing only a small part of its mystery but nonetheless making it a fraction more acceptable to the human eye and soul. Seen in the context of the other two epigraphs Adler chooses here, one from Plato, the other from Coleridge,<sup>14</sup> this excerpt from Jean Paul's *Levana* illustrates the deep interest in the power and functions of language that Melville and Adler shared: language helps us understand, if only temporarily, the otherwise overwhelming world that surrounds us by providing us the tools to classify, divide, and organize the infinite details and impressions that threaten to drown us. Melville clearly found the reference to the "speechless animal ... in a dark benumbing

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<sup>14</sup> Adler quoted these epigraphs in their original languages. The one from *Biographia Literaria* by Coleridge reads: "Language is the armory of the human mind, containing at once the trophies of its past, and the weapons for its future conquest." In the second epigraph, taken from Plato's "Cratylus," Socrates is telling Hermogenes that "a name is an instrument of teaching and of distinguishing natures, as the shuttle is of distinguishing the threads of the web" (qtd. in Marovitz 378).

sea" striking; one can't help but think of his own struggle to anatomize the whale and the world he and the *Pequod* float in once he returns from his trip to Europe.

Among the German thinkers Melville and Adler discussed is Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829).<sup>15</sup> Melville had, in his recent reading of things German, come across the Schlegel brothers in Carlyle's essays, but he may not have known enough about them to appreciate their importance. When Adler, well-acquainted with Friedrich Schlegel's famous "Brief über den Roman" and with his review of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* as well as his "Aphorisms" and "Fragments," discussed Schlegel as a writer who defended Jean Paul's idiosyncratic approach to the German *Roman*, Melville must have been all ears.

As G.R. Thompson has shown, the philosophy of F. Schlegel is "deliberately fragmentary and elliptical, even paradoxical...." In his early phase, the short-lived "Jena period" that saw the publication of *Athenaeum*, Schlegel held that "the 'comprehension' of life depends on the 'richness and variety' of experience; the romantic irony of experience is centered in the perception that 'truth' changes 'from experience to experience and that wisdom depends on a recognition of the fickleness of truth'" (Thompson 211). To Melville, whose Babbalanja and Donjalolo had grappled with just this problem in *Mardi*, this German emphasis on the provisional nature of all human knowledge and of the language we use to express it would have been central. He doubtless wanted to hear more about this writer who, along with

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<sup>15</sup> Melville just says "Schlegel" without specifying whether it was August Wilhelm or Friedrich. Both probably came up in the conversations, but most critics assume that in the context of Jean Paul and German literary theory, Friedrich would have been the theorist they discussed.

Jean Paul and other Germans, was developing a language and form that allowed him to capture in his prose this “fickle” nature of truth.

When Friedrich Schlegel uses the term “irony,” he is not thinking of the traditional Augustan definition that sees irony as a rhetorical figure but rather elevates it into the realm of philosophy. In what Lilian Furst calls the “metamorphosis of irony,” a process she traces from Dr. Johnson via Goethe and Schlegel into the Romantic age, irony had been transformed from a mere “figure of speech, a vehicle for local wit, a means of adding brilliance to a discourse or of making a point strikingly” into a philosophical tool, a way to create meaning (Furst 24). This “authentic” type of irony, which operates on the “metaphysical plane,” springs from “a perception of the discontinuities of existence” (Furst 34). So when Schlegel, in his *Lyceum* and *Athenaeum* fragments (fragments seem to be the appropriate format for this kind of philosophy) and in his *Ideen*, uses the German word *Ironie*, he means not the rhetorical device but a philosophical theory, a way of seeing the world, of confronting and transcending “the contradictions of the finite world” (Furst 26). For Schlegel, irony is a deeply serious matter: As he says in *Unverständlichkeit*, “Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen” (qtd. in Behler 267: “Irony is something one simply cannot play games with”). This kind of irony may be witty and funny on the surface, but in its bemused smiles it carries serious and often sobering insights about our human existence.

Since for Schlegel, “truth” is multi-faceted and ever-changing, he has to find new literary forms to capture truths as he sees them. In his own writing, he frequently uses fragments and thus forces his readers to participate actively in the truth-seeking

process, for we the readers have to make connections between the flashes of insight conveyed in the individual and far-ranging fragments. Like “truth,” the “self,” the individual who perceives reality, is also in constant motion and therefore never unified. As Thompson has pointed out, Schlegel is aware of the "frequently naive assumptions and conceptions of 'truth' and 'unity' we all make as we strive to make sense of our surroundings. But such a simplistic concept of 'unity' in a text or a human being, Schlegel recognized, is in danger of denying their 'true' voices, namely, their 'medley' or 'ensemble' of (sometimes competing) voices" (Thompson 212).

We do not know how deeply into romantic irony Adler’s and Melville’s conversations led them, but even a brief introduction of the concept could have captured Melville’s interest, for he had recently explored these very ideas in *Mardi* in his own idiosyncratic fashion. Not only does King Peepi carry in him characteristics of all his ancestors that render him utterly inconsistent, but even Babbalanja has at least two names and several different indwellers who at times take over his body and make him wonder who he is. Long before Melville was exposed to German romantic irony, he sensed that the self is “a library of books, an ‘encyclopedia’ of voices” (Thompson 218). Although many had criticized *Mardi* and its characters for being incoherent and contradictory, Melville learned from Adler that the book met in form and style Schlegel’s criteria for a successful narrative that celebrates rather than denies the multiple identities of self, reality, and text.

For Schlegel, this high form of irony or "romantic irony" is an "artistically arranged confusion," a "happy symmetry of contradiction" (qtd. in Thompson 217). As Ernst Behler puts it, Schlegel is unwilling "to resolve this basic conflict in a final

synthesis," insisting on "tension, contradiction, and oscillation as the core of life" (qtd. in Thompson 218). We are reminded once again of the limits of language and translation as we attempt to capture Schlegel's definition of *Roman* in English. While the German word *Roman* is often translated as "novel" (see Behler's translation, for example), there really is no English equivalent. Using "novel" is very misleading because, to most readers, this suggests the more traditional British genre practiced by Jane Austen. Schlegel's *Roman*, however, is a medley of forms and voices presented through a mixture of literary genres. In *Brief über den Roman*, Schlegel defines the term as follows: "Der Roman ist ein romantisches Buch"(qtd. in Thompson 220). Mixing traditional genres is one of the main characteristics of this "new" way of writing that has its origins in the "mixed forms" of the middle ages and is best understood as a compendium or encyclopedia of the "thinking life" of an individual, in particular of an artistic genius in the midst of an aesthetic and philosophical quest. Any realistic depiction of the "inner life" of the "individual" will obviously have to include false starts and digressions because that is how our brain and psyche actually operate. As Schlegel says in *Athenaeum Fragment 124*, "if you ever write or read novels for their psychology, then it's quite illogical and petty to shrink from even the most painstaking and thorough analysis of unnatural pleasure, horrible tortures, revolting infamy, and disgusting physical or mental impotence" (Firchow 177). Schlegel's *Roman* thus defies traditional Anglo-American conventions of form and contents. Instead, he advocates a mixed literary form that portrays "a self-reflexive, intellectual-intuitive quest, focused on the interweaving processes of living and writing" (Thompson 221).

In "Letter About the Novel," Schlegel demonstrates what this new literature might look like. The piece opens with the narrator's proud announcement that he has changed his mind since the previous day. His interlocutor, Amalia, had "asserted that ... [Jean Paul] Richter's novels are not novels but a colorful hodgepodge of sickly wit; that the meager story is too badly presented to be considered a story; one simply had to guess it. If, however, one wanted to put it all together and just tell it, it would at best amount to a confession." The speaker had originally agreed with her but has since decided to defend Jean Paul's work because "such grotesques and confessions are the only romantic productions of our unromantic age" (*Dialogue* 95).

In "*Athenäumsfragment 116*," Schlegel identifies the mission of "Romantic poetry" (for him this includes the novel) as "to reunite all separate genres of poetry and to put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric." To this end Schlegel's *Roman* should mix together "poetry and prose, genius and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature...." Like the epic, Schlegel's "Romantic poetry" must serve as a "mirror of the entire surrounding world, a picture of its age." Schlegel stresses that this new literary genre is "still becoming; indeed, its peculiar essence is that it is always becoming and that it can never be completed.... It alone is infinite, as it alone is free; and as its first law it recognizes that the arbitrariness of the poet endures no law above him" (Firchow 141).

To Melville, who in 1848-49 was committed to metaphysical questing but had not yet found a successful format for his encyclopedic narrative, his conversations with Adler about Schlegel's theory was crucial, for it helped him imagine the new, more flexible and inclusive literary format he had been groping towards. As the

conversations with Adler and their travels in England and on the continent unfolded, the two men frequently discussed “German metaphysics” and Melville began to see the rich potential German writing provided for his own “thought-diving.” Through Adler and Carlyle, Melville had become acquainted with German Romanticism and its open-ended literary forms that neglected literary conventions and deliberately mixed genres and narrative voices to create the all-encompassing narrative Schlegel defined as *Roman*.

## Chapter II: Whaling and German Metaphysics

All the graves were unclosed, and the iron doors of the charnel house were opened and shut by invisible hands.... And when Christ beheld the grinding concourse of worlds, the torch dances of the heavenly *ignes fatui*" he exclaimed "How lonely is everyone in the wide charnel of the universe!"

Noel's translation of Jean Paul's "Rede"

(*Siebenkäs* 277, 280)

The Universe is not dead and demoniacal, a charnel house with specters; but godlike, and my Father's! (*Sartor*, "Everlasting Yea" 188)

And when we consider that ... theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues ... the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods [are] ... only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within. (*Moby-Dick*, "Whiteness" 170)

### Assimilating Adler and the Germans:

#### Melville on his Journey Home From England

By the time Melville boarded the *Independence* for home on Christmas Day, 1849, he had not only read about German thought in Thomas Carlyle's writing but also discussed Jean Paul and Schlegel with George J. Adler, his constant companion during his travels. Furthermore, Melville had just made a brief visit to Germany and had experienced first-hand the ornate Cathedral in Cologne with its flying buttresses and its ever-present crane (*Journals* 35). But his time with Adler and his travels in England, France and Germany, while vivid and stimulating as they were happening,

would take time to process and assimilate. As Hershel Parker surmises, Melville was likely thinking about his new book on the slow journey home and was mapping out in his mind a plot for his whaling story.<sup>16</sup> He could rely on his memories from his own seafaring years and from his readings in Beale and others, but he was also taking on board and trying out German philosophical and literary models in preparation for the serious thought-diving he felt compelled to do. His slow, calm crossing of the Atlantic provided the perfect setting for planning his new book and gave the two separate brews, whaling and German metaphysics, a chance to ferment together in his mind. Picturing Melville as he is re-living and processing his experiences with Adler while at the same time making at least mental notes for his new book gives us valuable clues as to how the unique voice of Ishmael that greets us at the beginning of *Moby-Dick* and some of the formal and linguistic idiosyncrasies of the book may have been created.

A closer look at Melville's 1849 journal entries suggests that Adler was more to Melville than simply teacher of German philosophy and literature. For more than six weeks, the two men were almost inseparable. Melville found in Adler a kindred spirit who shared his intellectual intensity and his interest in "metaphysics," in pursuing serious questions about human existence and trying out provisional answers in their conversations. What stands out in the journal entries that capture his hours with Adler is Melville's unusual sense of excitement and *joie de vivre*. As early as

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<sup>16</sup> As the editors of the Hendrix House Edition of *Moby-Dick* point out in their introduction, "nothing suggests that Melville wrote a single word of *Moby-Dick* before his return from London in February of 1850," but they do see "shreds of evidence" that Melville was processing his own whaling experiences as early as 1847. *Moby-Dick or, the Whale*. Eds. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent. New York: Hendrix House, 1962. Print. p ix.

October 12, only one day after leaving New York, Melville records that Adler had been “his principal companion thus far” (*Journals* 4). The following day, October 13, he reports that he spent the previous night walking “the deck with the German, Mr Adler till a late hour, talking ‘Fixed Fate, Free-will, foreknowledge absolute’ &c.” all questions Melville’s fictive philosopher, Babbalanja, had been struggling with throughout *Mardi*. Melville calls Adler’s philosophy “Colredegian” (sic) in that “he accepts the Scriptures as divine, & yet leaves himself free to inquire into Nature” (*Journals* 4) – an indication that Melville viewed Adler as religious but not orthodox and a glimpse into the range and openness of the conversations the two men were engaged in.

In Melville’s account of his journey to England, terrifying experiences alternate with convivial philosophizing in the company of male friends, especially Adler.<sup>17</sup> One gets the sense that together the two men were able to weather these profoundly unsettling moments and that, buoyed by their emotional and philosophical sympathies, they were able to develop a reassuring distance towards them. Just a few days after leaving New York, for instance, Melville witnessed the drowning of a fellow traveler. As an experienced sailor, he thought he knew what to do in a situation like this. He himself “got over the side, within a foot or two of the sea, & ... swung the rope towards him.” The man grabbed the rope but then let go of it. Other seamen swung ropes his way, but “his conduct was unaccountable; he could have saved

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<sup>17</sup> The notes in Melville’s journals indicate that the two fellow passengers with whom Melville and Adler spent some of their evenings were Theodore Frelinghuysen Mc Curdy, oldest son of the well-known New York merchant Robert H. McCurdy, and Frank[lin] Taylor, who had studied in Heidelberg. He was the older brother of Bayard Taylor, celebrated translator of Goethe’s *Faust* (1870-71). (*Journals* 251-52).

himself, had he been so minded. I was struck by the expression of his face in the water. It was merry.” After a minute or two, only “a few bubbles” remained of this human being “& [I] never saw him again.” Much to Melville’s surprise, “no boat was lowered, no sail was shortened, hardly any noise was made,” because the captain and most of the passengers knew that the man “was crazy, & had jumped overboard” (*Journals* 5).

This entry for Saturday, October 13, comes just one day after Melville’s initial meeting with Adler when the German scholar had told him that while compiling his German-English Dictionary, the exhausting labors had almost driven him mad. Melville was very empathetic because he, too, knew that all thinking people are more susceptible to madness than we care to admit. During spring of 1849, when he learned about his friend Charles Fenno Hoffman’s mental troubles, Melville had written in his letter to Evert Duyckinck: “Poor Hoffman – I remember the shock I had when I first saw the mention of his madness. – But he was just the man to go mad – imaginative, voluptuously inclined, poor, unemployed, in the race of life distanced by his inferiors, unmarried, -- without a port or haven in the universe to make.” Empathizing with Hoffman’s mental crisis, Melville imagines that his friend’s “present misfortune – rather blessing – is but the sequel to a long experience of morbid habits of thought” (*Correspondence* 128). Although Melville did not know this fellow traveler who jumped overboard and refused to be rescued, he notes in his journal that the drowning man’s face “was merry” (*Journals* 5), an observation that clearly made a profound impression on Melville and re-surfaced in *Moby-Dick* in the character of Pip. In the journal as in most of Melville’s writing, the dark realities of

death and madness are always just beneath the surface, but it seems that in the company of Adler and with the help of German romantics, Melville found a way to cope with this suicide and the frightening questions it raised. The following day, Melville writes that Adler “is an exceedingly amiable man, & a fine scholar whose society is improving in a high degree” (*Journals* 7). A few days later, Adler and Taylor came to Melville’s room for whiskey and punches. “We had an extraordinary time & did not break up till after two in the morning. We talked metaphysics continually, & Hegel, Schlegel, Kant &c were discussed under the influence of the whiskey....” (*Journals* 8).<sup>18</sup> We can assume that Melville was sober by the time he wrote these lines the next day, so his use of the word “extraordinary” here expresses his memory of a genuinely good time the night before when the combination of alcohol, male companionship, and German philosophy had provided him hours of intellectual stimulation and freedom from brooding. He seems exuberant and carefree here and sounds like a thinking man who has managed to keep the dark realities of life in check, who has managed to tame them, if only temporarily, with the assistance of enjoyable male companions, their take on German romantic philosophy, and a few glasses of potent punch.

This same pattern of horrific experiences alternating with pleasant times with Adler continues throughout Melville’s trip, both in London and in Paris. Having witnessed the hanging of a German couple, the Mannings, for robbery and murder, and having commented on the “inimitable crowd...men and women fainting,” he

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<sup>18</sup> We cannot be sure whether Melville is referring to Friedrich Schlegel or August Wilhelm Schlegel. He read the works of both. The editors of the Northwest-Newberry edition of *Journals* indicate in their index that Melville was referring to Friedrich Schlegel.

quickly turns his back on the “mob” that struck him as “brutish” and on the “horrible & unspeakable scene” (*Journals* 17) to tell us about the joys of drinking and talking with Adler as they make the rounds of British taverns. “Went with Adler to the ‘Edinburgh Castle’ a noted place for its fine scotch ale, the best I ever drank. Had a glorious chop & a pancake & pint & a half of ale, a cigar & a pipe, & talked high German metaphysics meanwhile.” Later on the same day, he “met Adler by appointment at the ‘Mitre Tavern’ ... up stairs & smoked a cigar. Cosey, & comfortable place enough. *No cursed white walls*. Stopped in at ‘Dr Johnson Tavern’ over the way and drank a glass of ale.... Stopped at the ‘Cock Tavern’ adjoining [Temple Bar].... And drank two glasses of Stout .... Dark and cosy – something Like the ‘edinboro’. Smoked a pipe also, & home with Adler & to bed” (*Journals* 19, emphasis mine). Drinking, eating good English food, and smoking cigars with Adler as they were visiting the parts of London where Boswell and Johnson had walked before them clearly raised Melville’s spirits and provided an escape from the existential worries represented in his journal by the image of “cursed white walls” and later in *Moby-Dick* by the whiteness of the whale.

Melville’s anxiety over not being able to locate Adler immediately after his arrival in Paris (Nov. 28) again signals how important the German philosopher had become to the American writer: “Arrived in Paris.... Took a cab...to find Adler. Could hear nothing of him... After dinner went to Galignani’s – Adler’s address not there.” The following day he writes “two letters to Adler” and is exuberant when he receives a “note from Adler (to my great joy) who said he would be at his rooms at ¼ past 7 this evening.” When Melville finds Adler “not in” at the appointed hour, he

waits patiently and is “rejoiced to see him” (*Journals* 31). The two men spend the next several days sightseeing together and the evenings drinking wine in Adler’s room where they “talked high German metaphysics till ten o’clock” (*Journals* 33). And his last night in Paris, Melville stays at Adler’s hotel: “Sat up conversing with Adler till pretty late, -- (Topic – as usual – metaphysics.) Then turned in, in a room below him” (*Journals* 34).

As we picture Melville reflecting on these moments of male companionship, perhaps even re-reading his journal, we begin to feel the calm, confident and genial mood that characterizes the opening paragraphs of *Moby-Dick*. In Adler’s company, Melville was able to balance off the suicide, the hanging he witnessed, and his own sense of loneliness and homesickness against the safety and comfort provided by his friend. What made its way from the journal into *Moby-Dick* is the light-hearted, convivial tone that greets us as we read the opening lines, “Call me Ishmael,” and continues throughout the chapters for which Ishmael serves as narrator. Over the next eighteen months, the whaling materials continued to provide the stage, vehicle, plot and language for the philosophical questing Melville was engaged in, while talking high German metaphysics with Adler on his journey to England and the continent helped him develop techniques for capturing his deep concerns about life, death and afterlife that he had been struggling to express in the voice of Babbalanja in *Mardi*.

Before returning home to New York, Melville made a brief excursion to Germany and visited the “famous cathedral [of Cologne], where the everlasting “crane” stands on the tower” (*Journals* 35). This enormous Gothic structure that took more than 600 years to build and was not yet finished in 1849 when Melville saw it,

clearly made a deep impression on Melville. It represented the highlight of his visit to Germany and was soon to appear in *Moby-Dick* as a rich metaphor for Ishmael's awareness that his efforts to capture the whale, and by extension the meaning of life, always remained incomplete. Melville recognized the significance of the ever-present crane and, on his journey home, was slowly becoming aware of the rich potential available to him in the German literature and thought he and Adler had been exploring.

### **Reading *Siebenkäs* and Working on "The Whale": Spring, 1850**

Adler must have inspired Melville to read Jean Paul's *Siebenkäs*, for why else would he have borrowed this unusual German *Roman* from Duyckinck's library immediately after visiting his family and friends and distributing the gifts he had carried across the ocean?<sup>19</sup> As many Melville critics have done, we can picture him in his study in New York as he is starting to create his whaling world and some of the characters in it, but we now also have evidence that he was simultaneously exploring new literary and philosophical methods for his metaphysical explorations of the human condition and some of its most frustrating conundrums. As Melville's contemporary critics of *Mardi* had lamented, he had in fact turned to the writings of Jean Paul and other Germans to see what they might contribute to his search for literary formats better suited for his amateur philosophizing.

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<sup>19</sup> "February M borrows from Evert Duyckinck's library...*Flower, Fruit & Thorn Pieces*, by Jean Paul Richter (London, 1845)" (*Log I*: 367).

What stands out immediately in the translator's preface to *Siebenkäs* is his praise for Jean Paul's unique style: "His richness and redundancy of language and imagery must not always be condemned,--judged by the one principle of simplicity. The effect of his gorgeous descriptions is sublime, and may be compared to the richly ornamented Gothic spires of his fatherland. *Who would criticize the cathedral by the standard of the Greek temple?*" (Noel ix, emphasis mine). So as soon as Melville opened Henry Noel's translation of *Siebenkäs*, this preface reminded him of Adler's praise for Jean Paul and of Carlyle's enthusiasm for this German writer's unique language and imagery that departed from Classical norms but opened up vast possibilities for philosophical prose: "The difficulty in comprehending Richter lies in his own originality. It is less national than universal," and his prose is so complex because he draws on a "mass of knowledge, accumulated from every source..." (Noel iv). Noel further analyzes why Jean Paul has been received hesitantly in England and America: "There is much in the spirit of German authors generally, and of Jean Paul in particular, that is opposed to the national taste of England, but as Novalis remarks—Germanism and Anglicism, like every other national individuality, are but types of the human..."(Noel v). This idea of an overarching human spirit expressed in a world literature rather than a narrow national one appealed to Melville who himself was a true cosmopolitan, ready to try out any literary model that helped him express his trans-national sense of what it meant to be human. The following passage from Noel's preface, therefore, was likely to resonate with him:

The authors of Germany are freer and bolder than we are, less confined in the expression of their thoughts by all that regards the forms, observances, and

doctrines of common life. Literature is to them as a wide, unenclosed common; a sort of debateable (sic) ground, on which, as by universal assent, every one may freely express his sentiments and opinions, without either giving offence or losing caste in the degree which would be the consequence of a like openness in this country. (Noel v-vi)

Having recently discussed with Adler Schlegel's and Jean Paul's definitions of the German *Roman* with its mixture of genres and voices, Melville must have seen the rich potential for Ishmael's questing and social critique in these paragraphs. He found attractive the emphasis on the elements in German literature and thought that crossed national borders and expanded the limits of literary taste. He most likely agreed with Noel's sense that "the tendency of the German mind is more intellectual and speculative, that of the English more sentimental and conservative; therefore they naturally come into opposition" (Noel v-vi). This preface probably confirmed Melville's growing conviction that German thought could provide him the literary models he needed for "The Whale." The fact that Noel points to parallels between Jean Paul and Shakespeare further intrigued Melville as he himself had recently become an avid reader of the bard. Noel insists that just as we would not be able to appreciate Shakespeare fully if we only knew "his finest passages," so we would miss much of Jean Paul's genius if we read only the sections of his work that fit our idea of good literature: "... for his Shakspearian (sic) touches—the readers of Jean Paul will pardon him the moments of *ennui* he may occasion them" (ix).

After his recent travels and metaphysical conversations with Adler, Melville was ready for Noel's assertion that the world owes much to German speculation and

for his acknowledgement that because of this tendency to speculate freely, Germans are often charged with “irreligion.” While he concedes that Jean Paul may at times seem irreligious, Noel assures us that he is in fact “eminently religious; but his religion is a religion which would embrace all creeds and all sects. He is the preacher of immortality—of a loftier, more liberal humanity” (Noel vii). The author who was soon to create a young Ishmael who finds a heathen’s religion more attractive than the Christian tradition in which he was raised, sensed a kindred spirit here and found a treasure trove for his own writing in Jean Paul’s idiosyncratic *Siebenkäs*. At the time when Melville was creating his fictional world of whaling that was to provide the concrete background and plot for his new book, Noel’s preface and Jean Paul’s fiction helped him develop the narrative techniques and the philosophical justification to explore the matters of the mind that so intensely interested him.

As soon as Melville began reading Noel’s translation of Jean Paul’s *Siebenkäs*, he must have been struck by the differences between a traditional English novel and this German *Roman*. He intuited the rich potential here for a work of fiction in which, by combining German metaphysics with American whaling, he could transcend traditional narrative conventions and expand the possibilities of fiction. The idea that Melville found in *Siebenkäs* a useful model for the philosophical whaling book he was working on may sound very strange to readers who are familiar with Jean Paul’s narrative. What, they might ask, does that book about the very ordinary life of an impoverished advocate of the poor in a provincial German town have to do with Melville’s world of whaling? While there certainly are no whales in *Siebenkäs*, (Melville already had all the whaling materials he needed,) it provided Melville a

format, a structure, that soon allowed him to break through British literary conventions he found too confining for the large-scale philosophical questing he felt compelled to undertake.<sup>20</sup> As the full title of Jean Paul's book suggests, this German work is organized in a provocatively unconventional way: "Flower, Fruit and Thorn Pieces: or the Married Life, Death, and Wedding of the Advocate of the Poor, Firmian Stanislaus Siebenkäs." The title alone gives us readers much to wonder about. The name, translated literally, means "seven cheeses," and lets us know that we had best maintain an ironic distance towards the protagonist. The book promises that we will read about his wedding *after* we have experienced the ups and downs of his married life and *after* his death. We can expect a good amount of humor from this book, and probably a humorously ironic attitude towards human life and death—an attitude that might well have reminded Melville of his recent joyous experiences while tavern-hopping and philosophizing with Adler. Melville must have appreciated Jean Paul's unusual arrangement of chapters in which the main story about the mundane details of the conventional relationship between Siebenkäs and his wife alternate with what Jean Paul calls "Extra-Leaves," philosophical reflections on all things human and divine that do not advance the plot but in subtle ways illuminate and comment on it. These philosophical digressions would have struck Melville as promising alternatives to Babbalanja's long meditations that had drawn severe criticism from his readers because they seemed to have nothing whatsoever to do with the story.

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<sup>20</sup> In addition to the works by Jean Paul, many, many other literary rivers flowed into Melville's *Moby-Dick*. For a much more detailed exploration of other possible sources, see the work of Sealts, Leyda, Bercaw and others. Of particular interest is Melville's reading to the novels of Sterne because Jean Paul was also an avid reader and admirer of Sterne.

Through his title, the author gives us fair warning that in this book, the traditional story is turned on its head, that while the conventional novel of manners may very well assume that a wedding always precedes the married life and death of a couple, in this book it isn't so. Melville clearly responded to this break with tradition. As we shall see in our discussion of *Moby-Dick*, he himself would soon experiment with non-traditional narrative voices and structures, especially as he adapted Jean Paul's treatment of Siebenkäs and his double, Leibgeber, to create the unique bond between Ishmael and Queequeg. Would he have dared to use the language of "marriage" to do so if he had not seen in Jean Paul's fictional world a convincing critique of traditional marriage and an appreciation for the ways in which the close friendship between these two men provides what is missing in the relationship between husband and wife?

Having discussed Jean Paul with Adler, and having read Noel's preface that highlights in Jean Paul's *Roman* several elements Melville could adapt for his own purposes, he probably immersed himself in Jean Paul's careful analysis of the relationship between Siebenkäs and his soul mate, Leibgeber. As we witness the wedding ceremony between Siebenkäs and his first wife, Lenette, an orphaned working-class woman who earns her living by making hats, the first-person narrator who knows all the characters in the book personally but is not himself one of them draws our attention to a strange figure who looks almost exactly like the groom. Leibgeber (literally translated as the 'giver of body') is our protagonist's *Doppelgänger* and closest friend (*Siebenkäs* 9). While the rest of the congregation is stunned to see the groom's double, our narrator, who is intimately familiar with their

history, explains that Siebenkäs and Leibgeber share much more than almost identical bodies: “So singular an alliance between two singular souls is not often seen. The same contempt for the ennobled childish nonsense of life; the same enmity to the mean, with every indulgence to the little; the same indignation against dishonest selfishness; *the same love of laughing in the beautiful madhouse of earth* ... these were but the more superficial traits of resemblance that constituted them one soul assigned to two bodies” (*Siebenkäs* 10, emphasis mine). In this instance, one soul has somehow been divided, not duplicated. Each body has attached to it enough crucial elements of this one soul that it can function and survive, but neither soul mate feels entirely complete without the other. Though both embodiments have the ability to laugh as they cope with their world, Siebenkäs is governed more by what Freud calls the superego that strives to function within conventional German society while Leibgeber, in whom the id seems dominant, has to live in exile because he is not able or willing to make the compromises required by civilized society.

While Siebenkäs and his friend Leibgeber have almost identical bodies, they are emotionally and psychologically very different. Siebenkäs, a writer and advocate of the poor, is good-natured and exposes in a humorous-ironic fashion the social circumstances that reduce him to poverty. Leibgeber, on the other hand, is an eternal wanderer, lonely and alone, who satirizes and rebels against the social conditions and individuals who threaten him and his friend. At the end of the novel Siebenkäs, with Leibgeber's help, escapes his confining marriage to the all too ordinary Lennette by staging his own death, taking on Leibgeber's name, and marrying his ideal woman,

Nathalie. Leibgeber, as a result, has to leave the region forever and find a new life and identity elsewhere.

As Dennis Mahoney points out in "Double into Doppelgänger," Jean Paul here transforms the old motif of the double, familiar to us from plays like Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors," into that of the *Doppelgänger*, a new literary device to "illuminate hidden depths in the human psyche." Early in the novel he defines *Doppelgänger* as "Leute die sich selber sehen," as people who see themselves. Here, a case of "mistaken identity involves not so much the outward appearance of two individuals as it does a single character's questioning of the "real" nature of his personality." In *Siebenkäs* Jean Paul dramatizes this question most effectively in this scene towards the end of the novel, where Siebenkäs and Leibgeber meet one last time after the mock-funeral. Leibgeber sees Siebenkäs's and his own reflection in a mirror and feels a chill: "It almost seems as if I beheld myself double, if not treble; one of me must have died, -- the one there within, or the one outside. Which of us, then, in this room, is dead, and appears afterwards to the other? or do we only appear to ourselves? Eh! you my three I's, what do you say to the fourth?, demanded he; and turning to their two images in the mirror, and then to [Siebenkäs], he said, 'Here am I too.'" Psychologically speaking this outward mirroring of one character's different selves dramatizes the fluidity of self and world that Schlegel captured as a mixture of separate voices and that Melville had tried to portray by giving Babbalanja several names and indwellers. As we have seen, Melville had intuited in *Mardi* that we are not the unified individuals we seem to be; in Jean Paul's *Doppelgänger* he may well have found a new model that he could manipulate for his

own purposes as he struggled to capture the multiple components of individual identity on the written page.

Having discovered the close bonds between them during their student days, Siebenkäs and Leibgeber wanted their names to be identical but could not decide which one to choose; so unlike marriage, where the wife gives up her name to take on her husband's, these two men have exchanged names. By deliberately blurring the names of his two protagonists, Jean Paul draws the reader's attention to the fluid qualities of language and the arbitrariness of human taxonomies. As the epigraph from Jean Paul's *Levana* that Adler used in his dictionary had suggested to Melville, we desperately need the illusion of stability that language provides to make sense of our surroundings. Siebenkäs's "real" name is Leibgeber, but the narrator explains that since he has introduced the advocate of the poor as Siebenkäs, he cannot correct his name at this stage and will continue to call him Siebenkäs. The two friends enjoy the mix-up of their names, but the very conventional Lenette, the first wife of Siebenkäs who cares only about appearances and is intellectually ill-suited to be the life-time companion of her husband, is very troubled when she learns about the exchange of names, for she now cannot say for sure whether she is Mrs. Siebenkäs or Mrs. Leibgeber. To her, names are much more important and essential, for in her narrow world of social norms, they provide her identity.

Melville must have thoroughly enjoyed the implied social criticism in the scenes that describe the married life of Siebenkäs and Lenette. Although in his journal he repeatedly tells us how much he misses his wife and infant son, we also know from the writings of Eleanor Metcalf and others that Melville himself was all too

aware of what marriage could and could not give him. As Metcalf comments, “if [Evert Duyckinck] recognized genius in his friend, as he seems to have done, he must have wondered about the kind of woman chosen by him for a wife. One cannot help feeling that Maria Melville had used a steering oar, that the ocean currents were supplemented by her activity” (Metcalf 42).<sup>21</sup> If Metcalf is right in suspecting that Lizzie was not “equal to [her] life with a genius husband, Siebenkäs and Leibgeber would have confirmed Melville’s suspicion that a close relationship with a congenial male friend could bring more intellectual satisfaction and emotional safety than the sexual encounters and domestic arrangements between husband and wife. He had explored such relationships in *Typee* and *White-Jacket* and in his journal, but he had not yet written about them as openly as he does in *Moby-Dick*, where he uses the language of “marriage” to introduce and develop the bond between Ishmael and Queequeg. Perhaps reading about Siebenkäs and Leibgeber persuaded him that if this German author could write about an intimate bond between two men and find appreciative readers, then maybe he could afford to try the same.

Melville must have appreciated the narrator’s reflection on male friendship: “Oh, ye friends ... But, why then have I always to repress the sentiment which the thought of you has again so strongly awakened in my bosom; the feeling with which,

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<sup>21</sup> Eleanor Melville (1881-??) was the oldest granddaughter of Herman Melville. Her parents were Melville’s youngest daughter, Frances, and her husband, Henry B. Thomas. We can see Eleanor’s mixed feelings about Lizzie reflected in her comments on the marriage: “Poor Lizzie—all her life she waited till she went to Boston to buy certain minutiae at the Thread and Needle Shop, because one ‘could not get them in New York.’ Augusta, whose sensitive response to the essential in human beings was so natural, used the phrase that best characterized her sister-in-law—simply ‘Kind Lizzie.’ She has been described to me ... as ‘easily discouraged’; she certainly was domestic in her tastes without proficiency; her life with a genius husband brought her much that she was emotionally unequal to; yet her loyalty and devotion to him were unswerving, even when she complained bitterly of her hardships to a confidant...” (Metcalf 55).

as it were by stealth, I was so deeply penetrated and refreshed in my youth, when I read in their letters of the friendship between a Swift, an Arbuthnot, and a Pope?" The narrator wonders whether other men have not, as he himself has, felt "warmed and encouraged by the touching quiet love of these manly hearts, which though cold, cutting, and sharp, to the outer world, yet laboured (sic) and throbbed in their common inner world warmly and tenderly for one another." He likens these close male friends to "lofty palm-trees armed with long thorns against all that lies below, but on their summits filled with precious palm-wine of the most vigorous friendship" and asks: "may I not likewise ... find in our two friends something similar to awaken the echoes of love? (*Siebenkäs* 48). The reference to Swift, Arbuthnot and Pope surely would have reminded Melville of his pleasant hours with Adler in London and Paris and of the comforting safety he had found in this kindred philosophical spirit. For the reader familiar with Melville's correspondence with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Jean Paul's allusions point ahead to the close relationship Melville developed with this contemporary American writer whom he came to recognize as his soul mate before *Moby-Dick* went to press.<sup>22</sup>

In *Siebenkäs*, the genuine efforts of Siebenkäs and Leibgeber to protect and understand each other stand in stark contrast with the limitations of Lenette. She does not understand her husband's thoughts and feelings at all but intensifies his sense of loneliness with her endless cleaning and her bourgeois values. While she is busy

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<sup>22</sup> For a recent and thorough analysis of the Melville-Hawthorne relationship, see Robert Milder's chapter "The Ugly Socrates" in his *Exiled Royalties*. Milder argues that "in Hawthorne, Melville found an unmatched union of the four things that most attracted him to men: physical beauty, an air of natural aristocracy, a taste for (modest) festivity and frank conversation, and a brooding melancholy suggestive of deep sorrow. Hawthorne was also his fellow writer" (*Exiled Royalties* 122).

pawning her china so that she can appear financially comfortable to her neighbors, Siebenkäs and Leibgeber “lived in a community of possessions, material and immaterial, such as few understand; their sentiments were already so elevated, that they felt no difference between the giver and receiver of a benefit; and they stepped, united, over the clefts of life, like the crystal-seekers of the Alps, who, by binding themselves together, ensure themselves against falling into the chasms of ice” (*Siebenkäs* 54).<sup>23</sup> But in the social context of Jean Paul’s narrative, the relationship between Siebenkäs and Leibgeber is associated with the Rabenstein, the town’s place of execution (89). Siebenkäs, who often feels “humorously melancholy” when surrounded by people, “abandoned the noisy market-place, and sought the silence of nature, and that *isolatorium* devoted at once to friendship and to crime” (90). As this combination of friendship and crime suggests, Siebenkäs is aware that his society would not tolerate his close bond with Leibgeber if it understood how close the two men really are.

Of special interest to Melville was the serious religious conversations between the two men coupled with the philosophical essays Jean Paul interjects in the form of extra-leaves. When the two soul mates are forced to part, this time because Leibgeber has offended one of the hypocritical but very influential leaders of the town, they ascend the *Rabenstein* together. “Siebenkäs looked down upon the stone-altar, partly

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<sup>23</sup> Melville probably recognized in Lenette the “conventionally religious” women of his own family who were intelligent and kind but not especially drawn to intellectual probing. Milder wonders how “Melville would have reacted to a woman with the intellect of Mme. de Stael and the vibrant sexuality of, say, Hawthorne’s Zenobia. But since Melville never met such a woman--the Duyckinck circle he frequented in New York was a masculine one—and looking for a soul-mate, or a recipient for the super-abundance he felt in himself, it was both serendipitous and biographically appropriate that he should have discovered one in Zenobia’s creator” (*Exiled Royalties* 123).

The image Jean Paul uses here of the two soul-mates tied together, for better or worse, is very similar to the one Melville uses in the “Monkey Rope” chapter in *Moby Dick*.

overgrown with green, of so many an innocent sacrifice ... what burning tears had flowed from child-murderesses—themselves murdered by the state and their lovers....” He reflects on other tortures that are an integral part of human life and, in a very emotional and sentimental scene, asks Leibgeber “dost thou not yet believe in the immortality of the soul?” The implication here is that Siebenkäs himself does believe or at least that he wants to believe. Leibgeber replies: “Friend...it won’t yet do.” He then explains that as long as men like Blaise, so corrupt that they “scarcely deserve to live once, not to speak of twice, and several times” are successful in this world, he cannot believe in immortality. At this moment,” he continues,

human beings seem to me rather to resemble the crabs which the priests formerly furnished with little torches, and turned adrift to creep about the churchyards, to represent souls of the departed; thus we too, with our torches of souls, with the masks of immortal beings, creep over the graves: they will perhaps some day go out. (46)

Melville must have found this moment in the book and especially the image of the crabs, highly suggestive. Again we are reminded of Babbalanja’s pacing on the sepulcher of kings as he debates with himself whether or not there is an afterlife, and we can’t help but think ahead to the urgent questions about human life and afterlife that Ahab and Ishmael are about to address in the new book Melville is working on.

This conversation between the two men draws our attention to one of the central themes in both Jean Paul’s and Melville’s fiction.<sup>24</sup> Here we see clearly, as we

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<sup>24</sup> Not long after his friend Adam Lorenz Oerthel died in 1786, Jean Paul wrote a sketch titled "What Death Is" [Was der Tod ist], which he included in the 1795 edition of *Fixlein*. In it, an angel descends to earth to experience death as a human being, as a soldier dying on a battle field. Jean Paul here

do in Jean Paul's letters and essays, that, in spite of Carlyle's assurances, the question of faith was never settled for Jean Paul.<sup>25</sup> In all his major writings, particularly in *Titan* and *Siebenkäs*, the views of believers are contrasted with and played off against those of skeptics. Much like Melville, Jean Paul was, throughout his life, open to "belief," yet he could not dismiss the possibility that, as Ahab puts it, there might be "nothing behind the mask." Neither Melville nor Jean Paul could quite make the leap into faith that Carlyle describes in "The Everlasting Yea." They continued to dive for the meaning of human life and death, only to re-surface with their same, deep-seated conviction that what they could know in this life was severely limited. Even though he did not know Immanuel Kant's work first-hand, Melville's "metaphysics" was nonetheless closer to the German philosopher's than to Carlyle's rendering of Kant's work in English.<sup>26</sup> Melville, by temperament, was attracted more strongly to Kant and

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highlights the extreme pain caused by human doubt, by the possibility of nothingness after death. Even the angel finds dying excruciatingly painful, despite the fact that he knows what humans do not: he will be saved and rewarded with eternal life. From this point on, death was ever-present in Jean Paul's writings, especially after his brother Heinrich, no longer able to cope with the desperate financial situation of the family, committed suicide in 1789, and after another close friend, Johann Hermann, died in 1790. Carlyle, in his translation of *Fixlein*, leaves out this sketch, probably because he did not consider it part of the story proper.

<sup>25</sup> In November of 1790, Jean Paul recorded this dream vision of his own death in his diary: "Most important evening of my life: for I experienced this thought of death -- that it makes absolutely no difference whether I die tomorrow or in 30 years, that all my plans and everything will evaporate and that I must love the poor human beings who will so soon collapse and with them the little bit of life they have -- this thought bordered on indifference towards all affairs" (*Chronik* 29, my translation). But the very next day, he willed himself into a more optimistic attitude: "I pull myself up again by telling myself that death is the gift of a new world and the improbable destruction a sleep."

Melville's letter to Hawthorne (June 1851) echoes this moment of willed faith: "If ever, my dear Hawthorne, in the eternal times that are to come, you and I shall sit down in Paradise ... then, O my dear fellow-mortal, how shall we pleasantly discourse of all the things manifold which now so distress us ... yes, let us look forward to such things. Let us swear that, though now we sweat, yet it is because of the dry heat which is indispensable to the nourishment of the vine which is to bear the grapes that are to give us the champagne hereafter" (*Correspondence* 191).

<sup>26</sup> For detailed analysis of Carlyle's version of Kant's philosophy, see pp. 39-44 of Rosemary Ashton's *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought, 1800-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. Print.

Jean Paul, who acknowledged the limits of human knowledge, than to Carlyle's and Emerson's more Fichtean, "transcendentalist" version of German idealism, which insisted that intuition could lead to knowledge of the Divine Idea.

This shared skepticism helps explain the language and imagery that puzzled so many of Jean Paul's and Melville's readers. Both writers felt they had to invent their own linguistic and literary forms because the conventional ones did not let them express sufficiently their deep sense of uncertainty, of a consciousness in which faith and doubt existed side by side throughout their lives. Because both insist that what seems stable and "real" is in fact fluid and ungraspable, they strike us as very "modern," even "post-modern" today. And many of their characters illustrate the dilemma of human beings who no longer have an unquestioning belief in a benevolent, supreme being, yet need some version of this belief to survive in a world that seems arbitrary and indifferent towards the individual. In the fictional worlds of both writers we therefore meet characters who explore the options available to human beings: Schoppe and Pip go mad; Leibgeber and Ahab must live in exile or even die because they pursue their quests to the extreme and refuse to accept ambiguity as part of their human condition; Viktor and Ishmael find hope in the human bond, in their deep friendship with other men; Wutz and Flask make some sort of peace by retreating, by creating a fantasy world, an imagined place where they can survive.

Both writers, throughout their lives, continued to ask questions about the afterlife; both wanted to believe but were always plagued by nagging doubts. In their writing we therefore see an endless oscillating between faith and doubt that is reflected in the actions and philosophical reflections of their main characters. As we

saw in ch.1, the most vivid example of this is Jean Paul's "Rede des toten Christus," an extra-leaf Melville had encountered in 1849 in Carlyle's essays. As he continued reading *Siebenkäs*, he experienced this memorable dream again, but this time in Noel's, not Carlyle's, translation and in the context of Jean Paul's *Siebenkäs*, i.e. surrounded by the two friends' reflections on doubt and faith and contrasted with Lenette's unthinking faith. Furthermore, he was now reading it as he was working on the setting and characters for his new book and therefore with a keen eye for how he might use this extraordinary digression for his own purposes.

The writer who had experimented with various formal possibilities to express the philosophical contents of *Mardi* recognized the rich potential of Jean Paul's "Rede," a philosophical digression that while it relates to the plot proper, does not advance it but rather serves as reflective philosophical comment on the protagonists' adventures. As Melville was reading this highly dramatic and vivid "extra-leaf" for the second time, he is likely to have focused on the figure of Christ who "lifted up his eyes to the Nothingness, and to the empty Immensity, and said:

"Frozen, dumb Nothingness! Cold, eternal Necessity! Insane Chance! Know ye what is beneath you? When will ye destroy the building [i.e. the world] and me? Chance! Knowest thou thyself when with hurricanes thou wilt march through the snowstorm of stars and extinguish one sun after the other.... *How lonely is every one in the wide charnel of the universe!* ... Is that a man near me? Thou poor one! Thy little life is the sigh of Nature, or only its echo. A concave mirror throws its beams upon the dust-clouds composed of the ashes of

the dead upon your earth, and thus ye exist, cloudy, tottering images!  
Look down into the abyss over which clouds of ashes are floating by.  
Fogs full of worlds arise out of the sea of death. The future is a rising  
vapour (sic), the present a falling one.” (Noel 280)

To Melville, who was likely sketching scenes and characters for his whaling novel at this time, Jean Paul’s imagery here must have been highly suggestive and invited adaptation, for the sea and vapor of “Rede” capture perfectly the fears Ishmael and his fellow sailors experience in *Moby-Dick*. Where Carlyle had seen affirmation of faith in God and the afterlife, Melville was likely to detect just the opposite.

In the following scene from “Rede,” Christ directly addresses the only living human being present and laments:

“Alas! I too was once like you—then I was happy, for I had still my infinite Father, and still gazed joyfully from the mountains into the infinite expanse of heaven.... Ah, ye too, too happy dwellers of earth, ye still believe in him.... Ye wretched ones! After death ... when the man of sorrows stretches his sore wounded back upon the earth to slumber towards a lovelier morning, full of truth, full of virtue and of joy, behold, he awakes in the tempestuous chaos, in the everlasting midnight, and no morning cometh, and no healing hand, and no infinite Father! Mortal who art near me, if thou still livest, worship him, or thou hast lost him for ever!” (Noel 280-81).

Having struggled with doubts about God and the afterlife himself, Melville would have noticed that Christ is telling the living to believe in God because doing so will get them through life, not because God actually exists. Unlike Carlyle, Melville saw

the contrast between Christ's conviction that there is no God and the dreamer who, when he awakens, exclaims: "My soul wept for joy, that it could again worship God" (282). In Jean Paul's "Rede," the living can choose to believe while the dead know for certain that there is no god—or at least that is the reality the atheist has to face in this vision of nihilism that overtakes him while he is asleep and therefore unable to control his thoughts.

To this day, "Rede" is known "as a dream of annihilation, the Conclusion of which is defined as a volte-face, in which doubt, overcome by terror, turns into belief in God and immortality" (Vijn 25). And although Jean Paul's introduction explains his "purpose," readers have frequently second-guessed him. Some, Guenter Jacob and Claude Pichois among them, take him at his word and insist that he wrote "Rede" to dramatize the horror of a world without God and thus to fight atheism. His own faith, they argue, was firm and lasting (Vijn 25-26). Others, however, cannot help but feel that "Rede" was "written out of a feeling of anguish and doubt." They see in it signs of Jean Paul's own spiritual crisis and his fear that nothing might follow this life. Walter Muschg reads it as a symptom of modern life which is plagued by meaninglessness and credits Jean Paul with being the first to portray this nihilism in literature (Vijn 26).

"Rede" does indeed invite different kinds of readings. One could focus on the dreamer, his reawakening and return to his comforting faith; or one might regard the dream itself as the center of the piece and be struck by the vivid presentation of a universe without God. Although Jean Paul himself claims in his preface that the dream is meant to dramatize the horrors of Atheism, one might argue that he merely

uses this frame as disguise, as a way to express some real fear and doubt he has and is struggling with. If, after reading “Rede,” we return to our previous faith simply because the alternative is too appalling, we may have missed the point. Like the dreamer, we would then turn away from this all too horrifying vision and leap into faith out of desperation. The dream itself, simply by being there, reminds us that faith is what we choose because we need it, because we cannot face the alternative. It furthermore cautions some readers, as Melville’s Babbalanja does in *Mardi*, not to hope for immortality without considering the possibility that without a God, immortality might not be so desirable.

There is little doubt that Melville saw the philosophical complexities of “Rede.” Given his own tendency to question religious faith while at the same time unable to live entirely without it, he must have seen the parallels between Babbalanja’s all too sudden conversion in *Mardi* and the dreamer’s grabbing hold of the lifeline provided by Christian faith when the alternative was too awful to contemplate. Melville admired Jean Paul’s “Rede” for dramatizing both possibilities. He wasted little energy trying to figure out which one was “true” but instead saw this passage as a courageous effort to grapple with the fact that as human beings we simply cannot know and must therefore accept both versions as equally “true.”

As we have seen, Melville found in *Siebenkäs* new models for capturing within his whaling book the metaphysical concerns that were so important to him. Although by May of 1850 he wrote two letters about his progress on “The Whale” indicating that the book would be ready for the press by fall, it actually underwent serious revisions and was not published until fall of 1851 or eighteen months after

Melville had declared it almost done. Among the generally accepted hypotheses as to why it took so long to complete the book, one is that Melville set out to write a whaling narrative early on but then saw the rich potential for combining whaling with metaphysics to produce a hybrid form, a metaphysical novel in which the gritty details of whaling provide the dramatic setting for metaphysical speculation. One can imagine Melville starting out with descriptions of physical whaling scenes and then later infusing them with metaphysical meaning, but the two were probably beginning to work together in Melville's mind during his journey home from England. With the help of Schlegel, Jean Paul, Carlyle and many other writers whose work he read during the spring and summer of 1850,<sup>27</sup> Melville was able to combine whaling and German metaphysics in his own unique way to express the doubts and dilemmas of the human condition.

### **Jean Paul Re-Tailored: Melville Reading Carlyle, Spring and Summer 1850**

That German literature remained important to Melville as his new book was taking shape has been shown by Merton Sealts, Jay Leyda and others. As their meticulous research indicates, Melville borrowed Carlyle's *German Romance* twice during the summer of 1850, the first time in early summer and then again in September (Leyda I 376, 396). At about the same time, he also borrowed Carlyle's

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<sup>27</sup> The work of Sealts, Leyda and Bercaw provides detailed accounts of Melville's reading throughout his lifetime. Sealts notes that while in Europe, Melville had been reading Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and De Quincey's *Opium Eater*. Among the books he purchased in England and carried back in his trunk were the following: Goethe's autobiography and his *Letters from Italy*, Rousseau's *Confessions*, De Stael's *Corinne*, two plays by Shakespeare, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Sealts 52-57).

*Sartor Resartus*, *Heroes and Hero Worship*, and Carlyle's translation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*. Since the larger impact of Carlyle's writing on Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* is well known to Melville scholars familiar with the work of Leon Howard, Luther Mansfield, Howard P. Vincent, to name only a few, this study will focus primarily on the German roots of Carlyle's work that interested Melville at this time. *German Romance* and *Sartor* are most significant because they introduced Melville to a wide range of German novelists and to two more works by Jean Paul. Furthermore, Carlyle's extensive "biographical and critical notices" on the writers whose work he translated for his anthology of German novelists provide significant insight into the kind of knowledge Melville had of Jean Paul, the Schlegel brothers, Ludwig Tieck, and several other German romancers. Though Melville, in letters to Dana and Bentley in the spring of 1850, had declared *Moby-Dick* almost finished, he continued revising the book throughout the summer and fall and well into 1851. In addition to German literature, his reading at the time also included extensive whaling accounts. From *Melville Log* we know, for example, that he purchased *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale* by Thomas Beale on July 10, 1850 and underscored central passages about the rising and sinking of the whale: "... he sinks suddenly in the horizontal position, and with remarkable rapidity, leaving a sort of vortex, or whirlpool, in the place where his huge body lately floated...." Melville's comment reads: "white & green vortex in the blue – as when a ship sinks." He also underlined "horrid sounds of thunder, terrible in the extreme, causing a sickening of the very soul. I felt desolate, as if the whole world had become a chaos, except the spot on which I stood, -- I and my companions,

like the family of Noah, were the only saved!” (qtd. in Leyda 377). As these passages show, Melville was still working out details of his new book and incorporating information from these whaling sources as he fashioned the conclusion of *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael is the sole survivor. These and other passages from Beale also resemble Jean Paul’s presentation of chaos and abyss in “Rede” and help us imagine Melville as he was drawing on whaling materials and German romantic literature while composing and revising *Moby-Dick*.

Melville borrowed from Evert Duyckinck the two-volume American edition of *German Romance* that was published in Boston in 1841. Volume I contained Carlyle’s “Preface” as well as his critical introductions to and selections from the works of Johann August Musäus, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, Ludwig Tieck. The second volume consists of Carlyle’s critical introductions of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Jean Paul Friedrich Richter as well as Hoffmann’s *The Golden Pot* and Jean Paul’s *Army-Chaplain Schmelzle’s Journey to Flätz; with a Running Commentary of Notes and Life of Quintus Fixlein. Extracted from Fifteen Letter-Boxes*. Because a detailed analysis of all the possible influences of these two volumes on *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* lies outside the scope of this study, we will focus here on Carlyle’s general preface, his introduction of each author, and on the two works by Jean Paul included in this anthology.

Much like Carlyle’s essays on German literature that Melville had read in 1849, these introductions apologize for bringing to the British public the works of German writers. Of the “mob” of German “Novelwriters” that has been practicing its craft for many decades, (*German Romance* v) only a very few are “poets,” i.e.,

writers who combine the art of poetry with philosophy and thus become true writers and sages. In his obvious effort to sell these German romances to his English readers, Carlyle distinguishes between the popular tale, the chivalry romance, the fantasy-piece and the Art-novel and reminds us that there are hundreds of persons in Germany “incessantly occupied in imitating, compounding, separating, distorting, exaggerating, diluting them.” The German novel is therefore much more varied than its English counterpart (*German Romance* x). He cautions us that these are “German Novelists, not English ones” and asks that we regard their “Germanhood” as a “quality, not as a fault,” for their style would be “false and hollow” if it tried to imitate and please English taste (*German Romance* xi). Carlyle concludes his preface by mentioning the shortcomings of all translations and encourages his readers to study the German language itself: “The difficulties of German are little more than a bugbear; . . . three months of moderate diligence will carry any man, almost without assistance of a master, over its prime obstacles; and the rest is play rather than labor” (*German Romance* xii). We have no way of knowing whether Melville heeded this advice, but if he did, he most likely found the German language much more demanding than Carlyle made it out to be.<sup>28</sup>

In his critical introduction of each writer, Carlyle makes no effort to hide his preferences. He does not think highly of Musäus but nonetheless includes some 200 pages of his selected writings because he expects them to be popular with English readers.<sup>29</sup> “He does not approach the first rank of writers; he attempts not to deal with

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<sup>28</sup> Note on Carlyle’s translations in *German Romance*.

<sup>29</sup> As Carlyle’s letters from this time period indicate, he needed to make money so he could afford to marry Jane. Writing to Henry Crabb Robinson in 1825 to ask him for help with *German Romance*,

the deeper feelings of the heart; and for instructing the judgment, he ranks rather as a sound, well-informed, common-sense thinker, than as a man of high wisdom or originality” (*German Romance* 11). But Carlyle admires his “overflowing store of sprightly and benignant humor,” a quality he considers essential in good writing (11). Hoffmann, too, leaves much to be desired because he was never “delivered from Self” and therefore cannot be called “a good or wise man” (18). Hoffmann’s tales show signs of a “glorious poet,” but they were never “purified [and] fused into a whole.” Furthermore, “his abundant humor is too often false and local,” and the impact of his writing is weakened by the fact that “he had read but little” (18). Carlyle laments that “there is too little meaning in that bright extravagance” of Hoffmann’s and that his work “less resembles the creation of a poet, than the dream of an opium-eater” (19).

Carlyle’s tone changes considerably as he approaches his favorite German writers, Tieck and Jean Paul. He dismisses Tieck’s early works because “a gloomy, tragic spirit is said to reign throughout all of them.” They are weakened by the presence of a “high, passionate mind” that scorns “the base and the false, rather than accomplishing the good and the true,” one that in “rapt earnestness” interrogates fate but received “no answer but the echo of its own questions reverberated from the dead

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Carlyle admits that he knows very little about these German writers and their lives: “My acquaintance with this branch of German literature is small, for it does not stand by any means in the highest favour with me; yet I calculate pretty confidently on being able to select a handful of sound wheat from the loads of chaff which I have examined only on the surface.” Given his own preference for history and other more “factual” accounts, Carlyle was from the outset suspicious of the *Volksmaehrchen* and *Rittererzählungen* by such authors as Musäus, Fouqué and “the other mob of gentlemen who write for the venerable *Plebs* of the reading community.” But he had resigned himself to including their work in *German Romance* because he hoped they would help sell his volumes: “I...must not altogether neglect them. For the sake of popularity independent of merit, I must try to get a specimen or two from each of these notable personages” (*Letters* III 317).

walls of its vast and lone imprisonment”(273). Carlyle is happy to report, though, that Tieck soon “worked his way through these baleful shades into a calmer and sunnier elevation...where the active and positive Goodness [displaced] the barren and tormenting negative” (274). This positive development was due in part to his move to Jena, where he became acquainted with the Schlegel brothers: the “trefoil of Tieck and the two Schlegels have the credit...of founding a New School of Poetry” (276). By raising doubts about “Corneille and the Three Unities” they helped bring about “a great change ... in German literature” and a “revolution” in the world of literature that is in its early stages in France and England but already completed in Germany (278).

Although he appreciates that Tieck’s tales take us back to earlier times when “the forms of the Spirit mingled and dwelt in trustful sisterhood with the forms of the Sense” (282), Carlyle’s admiration for German writers remains somewhat flat until he gets to Jean Paul, whom he introduces as “one of the chosen men of Germany and of the World” (*German Romance* II 125). Carlyle stresses the idyllic elements in Jean Paul’s life, leaves out moments of crisis, and invents harmony where it was lacking in Jean Paul’s life.<sup>30</sup> To him, Jean Paul stands out because he never “wrote or thought in the track of other men” (127), but he fears that readers unfamiliar with Jean Paul will be disturbed by his “grotesque and often ludicrous delineations,” his “effusions full of wit, knowledge, and imagination, but difficult to bring under any rubric whatever.” In his writing, Carlyle warns us,

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<sup>30</sup> For a fuller discussion of Jean Paul’s troubled career, Schweikert’s *Materialien* and *Chronik*.

all the elements [are] ... dashed together in such wild arrangement, that their order seems the very ideal of confusion.... The narrative is every now and then suspended to make way for some 'Extra-leaf,' some wild digression upon any subject but the one in hand; the language groans with indescribable metaphors and allusions to all things human and divine; flowing onward, not like a river, but like an inundation; circling in complex eddies, chafing and gurgling now this way, now that, till the proper current sinks out of view amid the boundless uproar ... and Richter stands before us in brilliant cloudy vagueness, a giant mass of intellect, but without form, beauty, or intelligible purpose. (128)

In this characterization of Jean Paul's style, Carlyle is, perhaps unconsciously, preparing the soil for his own *Sartor Resartus* while at the same time anticipating the kind of criticism Melville's mature writings were to encounter in England and America.

Melville probably remembered the other essays by Carlyle that he had read in 1849; he would have been once again drawn to this German writer whom Carlyle admired as a "colossal spirit, a lofty and original thinker, a genuine poet, a high-minded, true, and most amiable man" whose "Imagination opens for us the Land of Dreams; we sail with him through the boundless abyss, and the secrets of Space, and Time, and Life, and Annihilation, hover round us in dim cloudy forms, and darkness, and immensity, and dread, encompass and overshadow us" (131). If, as many critics assume, Melville was thinking about Ishmael during the summer of 1850, he must have appreciated Carlyle's praise for Jean Paul's humor which, like "the humour of Cervantes and Sterne, [is] the product not of Contempt but of Love, not of superficial distortion of natural forms, but of deep though playful sympathy with all forms of Nature.... Its result is not laughter,

but...the balm which a generous spirit pours over the wounds of life, and which none but a generous spirit can give forth" (132).

However, after this sunny introduction, Melville was surely surprised to find so much satire and doubt in *Schmelzle* and *Fixlein* when he read both. Although Carlyle insists that Jean Paul's mind is "at peace with itself," that "Religion... has reconciled for him the contradictions of existence [and]... overspread his path with light, and chastened the fiery elements of his spirit by mingling with them Mercy and Humility," and although he calls him a "Western Oriental poet" (135), Melville must have had his doubts about the accuracy of this characterization as he began to read Jean Paul's fiction. He was attracted by Carlyle's description of Jean Paul as "**deep, billowy, and vast**" (139), for Melville saw himself in similar terms, but he must have detected the irony in Jean Paul's sunny façade, especially after reading *Schmelzle* and *Fixlein*.

What stands out most about *Schmelzle* (1809), the story of a cowardly Army-Chaplain who travels to Flätz to prove his courage, is the format. As the fictive editor tells us in his preface, he feels the need to apologize for the "singular form" of this novella which stands "on a substratum of Notes" (*German Romance* II 144). Because the editor had so many thoughts and digressions of his own but was not permitted to let them interrupt the main story, he wrote them on separate sheets of paper. He took great care in numbering them, but while copying the manuscript, he left out the numbers and therefore the printer "took these Notes, just as they stood, pell-mell, without arrangement of Numbers, and clapped them under the Text" (145). He made sure that there were notes on each page but paid no attention to whether or not the notes corresponded in any way to the contents of that page. The editor, who has spent

the last twenty years trying to figure out how to “provide for my digression-comets new orbits” would have been delighted by these footnotes had he known what the printer was going to do. “I could scarce possibly have hit upon a better or more spacious Limbo for such Vanities than Chance and Printer here accidentally offer me ready-made,” for “what remotest allusions...might not have been privily introduced in every Text-page and Note-number; and what apparent incongruity in the real congruity between this upper and under side of the [note] cards!” (145). He regrets that he himself could not take advantage of this accidental opportunity but rejoices because from now on a writer can produce

in one marbled volume a group of altogether different works; of writing in one leaf, for both sexes at the same time, without confounding them, nay, for the five faculties all at once, without disturbing their limitations; since now, instead of boiling up a vile, fermenting shove-together, fit for nobody, he has nothing to do but draw his note-lines or partition-lines; and so on his five-story leaf give board and lodging to the most discordant heads. Perhaps one might then read many a book for the fourth time, simply because every time one had read but a fourth part of it. (146)

This image of extensive footnotes in which to package his many digressions and philosophical reflections surely appealed to Melville. Though he did not imitate Jean Paul’s technique directly, the accidental footnotes and the suggestion that, while seeming arbitrary, they might actually comment on the story itself, may well have suggested to Melville the “Extracts” that opened *Moby-Dick*, angered many of his

readers and prompted his British publisher to move them to the end of the book instead of publishing them at the beginning as Melville intended (Delbanco 178). Jean Paul's suggestion that several layers of footnotes would allow the author to write several books in the same volume and address several audiences on the same page would also have caught Melville's attention. As we will see in Chapter 3 of this study, Melville did try to address several audiences simultaneously in *Pierre* and failed miserably. One might argue that the book would have benefited from being divided into several "substrata" so that each reader could choose the one he or she found most congenial. Melville could have presented part of his book as "rural bowl of milk" for the ladies, another as harsh critique of the social inequalities at Saddle Meadows, a third as satire on the writing and publishing professions in mid-nineteenth century America, and so on. By leaving it up to the reader to make connections, intended or accidental, between text and footnotes, Melville could have achieved the ambiguities he strove for in *Pierre*, but his 19<sup>th</sup>-century American readers would have been even more disgruntled. *Pierre* would not be the same book at all and would not have been so cathartic for Melville to write.

In *Life of Quintus Fixlein*, Melville would again have been struck by its unusual structure. As its subtitle indicates, this narrative comes to the editor in *Fifteen Letter-Boxes* from which he must re-construct the life of this poor schoolmaster. The story starts out with a seemingly idyllic scene in which Fixlein, having just been promoted to "Quintus,"<sup>31</sup> is setting out on a sunny day to walk from the city of

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<sup>31</sup> Carlyle includes this footnote to help his English and American readers understand the German school system and its hierarchy: "A German *Gymnasium*, in its complete state, appears to include eight Masters; Rector, Conrector, Subrector, Quintus, Quartus, Tertius, &c, to the *first* or the lowest" (220).

Flachsenfingen, where he teaches, to his native village of Hukelum to visit his mother. “The dew was still lying; and as he reached the back of the gardens, the children of the Orphan Hospital were uplifting with their clear voices their morning hymn” (221). “He stept slowly along, through the crisped cole-beds, overlaid with colored beads of dew; and looked at the bushes, out of which, when the morning wind bent them asunder, there seemed to start a flight of jewel-colibri, so brightly did they glitter.” The editor/narrator now addresses his protagonist directly and admonishes him to walk more slowly so as to give his mother enough time to prepare for his visit and to “lay her Cupid’s-band of black taffeta about her smooth brow.” The narrator continues his direct comment on the scene when he says: “I am grieved to think my fair readers take it ill of her, that she means first to iron this same band; they cannot know that she has no maid” but is the poor widow of a gardener and has to prepare the festive dinner entirely by herself (222). As this passage shows, the narrator envisions wealthy women who do have servants among his readers and pretends to care about their opinion. If we as readers miss the underlying irony in the opening scene, the narrator makes sure we see it when Fixlein goes to the village church, where memories of “his young years inclosed (sic) him like children in their smiling circle.” If we expect a sentimental reunion with childhood friends or cherished teachers, we are disappointed when the narrator asks: “Was it not old Senior Astman that stood there on the pulpit Parnassus, the man by whom he had been so often flogged, while acquiring Greek with him from a grammar written in Latin?” (223). Readers familiar with Melville’s *Pierre* will wonder whether this seemingly idyllic scene of a poor schoolmaster returning to his native town might have inspired the

opening scenes in *Pierre*. In both texts, what seems like a sunny and harmonious rural “bowl of milk” is in fact undercut by the presence of orphan hospitals, poverty, severe class distinctions, and false pretensions of the clergy who, under the guise of doing the work of God, abuse and misinform their young students.<sup>32</sup>

Although Melville was most likely thinking about *Moby-Dick*, not *Pierre*, as he was reading Carlyle’s translations, they clearly made a lasting impression on him. Although Carlyle’s renderings of Jean Paul’s prose are not always faithful and although in the interest of British sales he edits out the many addenda that Jean Paul included in his originals,<sup>33</sup> these translations allowed Melville to read two famous short novels by Jean Paul that would otherwise have been unavailable to him. And although we can find much to criticize in Carlyle’s renderings of these unusual German texts, we must also acknowledge that he was, perhaps inadvertently, imitating Jean Paul’s unique style. In a letter to his fiancé Jane, he himself recognizes that his own writing has been deeply influenced by Jean Paul’s: “It is singular what a mockbird I am: I am writing here unconsciously in the very note of Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, on whose works I have been labouring for the last four weeks” (*Letters* IV 116-17). Melville was thus exposed to Jean Paul’s work in form, style and language and must have recognized Carlyle’s imitations of this German writer’s extravagant style as soon as he opened *Sartor Resartus*.

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<sup>32</sup> For more on the similarities between *Fixlein* and *Pierre*, see chapter 3 of this study.

<sup>33</sup> By 1825, Carlyle had worked out an agreement with Charles Tait, an Edinburgh Bookseller, to “prepare three or four volumes of Translations from the German intended as Specimens of their chief novel-writers, with Prefaces, Lives... which may serve to procure them a good-natured reception from the English public” (*Letters* III 317).

To Melville, who read *German Romance* and *Sartor Resartus* within a month of each other, the similarities in content, form and language would have been striking. Carlyle's six paper bags containing random notes about his protagonist's life resemble Jean Paul's letter-boxes too much to pass as accidental similarities, and Melville seems to have recognized immediately that Teufelsdröckh, the protagonist of *Sartor*, was Carlyle's version of a German writer/philosopher modeled after Jean Paul and spotted the many similarities between Teufelsdröckh's and Jean Paul's writing styles as portrayed by Carlyle. As soon as the editor receives a copy of Teufelsdröckh's book titled *Die Kleider, ihr Werden und Wirken*, he describes it as an 'extensive Volume,' of boundless, almost formless contents, a very Sea of Thought; neither calm nor clear, if you will; yet wherein the toughest pearl-diver may dive to his utmost depth, and return not only with sea-wreck but with true orient" (*Sartor* 129). A proud thought-diver himself, Melville was drawn to this fictive German author who resembled Carlyle's Jean Paul in character and writing style, and Carlyle's fictive editor in *Sartor* reminded him of the one he had recently encountered in *Fixlein*, where the editor also comments directly on the story and has to try to piece together a biography out of bits and pieces. Both editors intrude frequently into his narrative and both have to piece together the protagonist's life story from bits and pieces of random evidence. But even if he missed the resemblance, Melville would have made the connection when Carlyle's editor reports that he saw Teufelsdröckh laugh once, after listening to a story told by no other than Jean Paul.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> "Once we saw him laugh.... It was Jean Paul's doing: some single billow in that vast World-Mahlstrom of Humour...and Paul, in his serious way, was giving one of those inimitable 'Extra-harangues' ... on the proposal of a *Cast-metal King*" (*Sartor* 146).

Having read “Rede” twice by now, first in Carlyle’s essays in 1849 and then in Noel’s version of *Siebenkäs* in the Spring of 1850, Melville remembered it when he encountered echoes of it in Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, especially in the central chapters of Book II that focus on faith and doubt. While Melville scholars have pointed out echoes of Carlyle’s “Everlasting No,” “Center of Indifference,” and “Everlasting Yea” in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, we can now build on their work by showing that Carlyle borrowed the idea from Jean Paul’s “Rede.” Carlyle seems to be answering the doubts expressed by Christ in the dreamer’s nightmare when he has his protagonist exclaim: “The world is not demonical, but God-like and my Father’s,” (*Sartor* 254) and Ishmael seems to be objecting to Teufelsdröckh’s “Everlasting Yea” in “The Whiteness of the Whale.” As we shall see in our discussion of *Moby-Dick*, Melville was indeed disagreeing with Carlyle’s all too easy conviction that his protagonist’s spiritual journey would end in his conversion and re-birth, but Melville was also aware of the German origins of Carlyle’s “Yea” and may well have sensed that Carlyle’s interpretation of the dreamer’s awakening was one-sided and served the Scotsman’s own need for religious faith.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> For more examples of striking similarities between Jean Paul’s and Carlyle’s writings see Vida’s *Romantic Affinities* pages 177-196.

## ***Moby-Dick* Through the German Lens: Schlegel's Romantic Irony and Ishmael's**

### **Genial Desperado Philosophy**

Although Anne Mellor does not discuss Melville's Ishmael directly, she helps us see that Ishmael shares much with the theory of romantic irony that originated in Germany in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and was, as Mellor suggests, to a large extent formulated by Friedrich Schlegel between 1799 and 1801. Mellor distinguishes romantic irony from the "secularized Judaeo-Christian traditions" that Meyer Abrams discusses in *Natural Supernaturalism*. Instead, "romantic irony grows out of philosophical skepticism and the social turbulence of the French Revolution and the American War of Independence; it posits a universe founded in chaos and incomprehensibility rather than in a divinely ordained teleology" (Mellor vii). By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mellor reminds us, traditional belief in the Great Chain of Being had faded and with it the loss of faith in a God-ordained, hierarchical universe. The bloody revolutionary wars in France and the United States had shocked thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic and had helped displace human reason as a reliable guide in the search for "truth." As old belief systems were crumbling, and as more and more people were perceiving the world as chaotic rather than divinely created and planned, Schlegel and his followers were formulating a new world view that acknowledged the sense of chaos around them and set out to develop a philosophical approach that embraced this sense of chaos instead of trying to deny or tame it. They developed romantic irony as "both a philosophical conception of the universe and an artistic program. Ontologically, it sees the world as fundamentally chaotic. No order, no far

goal of time, ordained by God or right reason, determines the progression of human or natural events.” Artistically, the writers and thinkers who view the world as chaos must now create an “aesthetic mode that sustains this ontological reality, this never-ending becoming” (Mellor 4-5). Since the world itself is ever-changing and developing, old literary forms now become obsolete because they are the product of a philosophy that saw world order as stable because divinely ordained. The artist must now create new forms that fit the new, much more skeptical world view in which everything is always in flux.<sup>36</sup>

In a world of chaos and constant motion, we can never hope to capture reality by “fixing” it on the written page but must strive for a form that is infinitely changing and evolving. The romantic ironist “must acknowledge the inevitable limitations of his own finite consciousness and of all man-made structures or myths. But...even as he consciously deconstructs his mystifications of the self and the world, he must affirm and celebrate the process of life by creating new images and ideas. Thus the romantic ironist sustains his participation in a creative process that extends beyond the limits of his own mind. He deconstructs his own texts in the expectation that such deconstruction is a way of keeping in contact with a greater creative power” (Mellor 5).

The reader familiar with Melville’s Ishmael will sense immediately how well the German concept of romantic irony fits this young protagonist. Although we have

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<sup>36</sup> For a very detailed discussion of Schlegel’s theory of romantic irony, see Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs’s study *Die romantische Ironie in Theorie und Gestaltung*: “Das von Schlegel ausgesprochene Prinzip kuenstlerischer Ironie richtet sich zudem...gegen eine Kunst, die durch ruhende Vollendung, abgeschlossene Idealitaet und symbolische Gestalthaftigkeit ausgezeichnet ist” (*Romantische Ironie* 90).

no evidence that Melville read Friedrich Schlegel's writings directly, we do know that he read about them in Carlyle's essays, discussed them with Adler, and found literary adaptations of them in Jean Paul's works. And as we saw in our discussion of *Mardi*, especially of the philosopher Babbalanja, Melville himself, before encountering the Germans, was already responding in his writing to the new *Zeitgeist* in ways similar to those of the romantic ironists. He had been criticized for the endless questions Babbalanja was asking without resolving them, and he let him make his leap into faith when it was time to end the symposium. But as readers we cannot ignore our nagging suspicion that Melville himself was not satisfied with this solution, that an ongoing inquiry without answers or comfortable resolution would have seemed more true to Babbalanja and to Melville. We can therefore imagine his excitement when he learned, in 1849 and 1850, that there existed a school of thought that, unlike his British and American critics, shared his own suspicions that the world we live in might indeed be chaotic and unknowable, and that these German thinkers were exploring new literary forms to give expression to their sense of a world that was infinitely changing and becoming. By fall of 1850, he had been exposed to enough German literature and thought to begin using it in his own writing. He could now appropriate what he had learned from Adler, Carlyle and others and adapt it to fit his own literary needs and his context of whaling.

From the moment we are invited to call him Ishmael, we as readers sense that we are encountering an unusual protagonist. His playful tone and genial sense of humor convey from the very beginning that here is someone who is serious but does

not take himself too seriously, someone we want to get to know. And we linger over the opening line because we are not exactly sure what it means. This speaker is not telling us that his name is Ishmael—we are used to that sort of introduction—but rather that Ishmael is what we are to call him. Right away this undermines the importance of names and the illusion that if we know someone's name, we know that person, now and forever. In this instance, we would not be surprised if, in the next line, Ishmael told us he had changed his mind, that he had followed the example of Siebenkaes and exchanged names with another man. The opening line has something provisional about it but sounds, at the same time, confident, friendly, and playfully adventurous.

This first line also echoes Babbalanja who seems to have several identities and who changes names several times in the book, but by the time Melville writes *Moby-Dick*, he has a solid enough theoretical foundation in romantic irony and has seen enough examples to be able to sound very casual and confident as he writes this extraordinary opening line. In “Call me Ishmael,” Melville employs, right from the start of his new book, the new, mostly German philosophical approach that assumes a world in chaos, in constant flux.<sup>37</sup> And like Schlegel, he does not sound bitter about this loss of certainty but seems to be saying: let's see what we can do with it. Let's see where this can lead us. “I am tormented with an ever-lasting itch for things remote,” Ishmael tells us and “I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous

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<sup>37</sup> Melville's manuscript started with a section titled “Etymology” that examines the heritage of the word “whale.” “Etymology is followed by “Extracts,” in which a “sub-sub-librarian” provides us with “whatever random allusions to whales he could anyways find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane. Therefore you must not...take the higgledy-piggledy whale statements, however authentic, in these extracts, for veritable gospel cetology.... [They] are solely valuable or entertaining, as affording a glancing bird's eye view of what has been promiscuously said, thought, fancied, and sung of the Leviathan, by many nations and generations, including our own” (*Moby-Dick* 2).

coasts.” Literally speaking, Ishmael loves to explore virgin parts of the globe and find out who lives there and how; metaphorically speaking, he wants to explore all of human nature, not just the civilized parts that he was raised in. “Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it – would they let me – since it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in” (*Moby-Dick* 16). Through Ishmael, Melville here echoes Schlegel’s remark that in “writing or reading novels for their psychology,” we must not “shrink from even the most painstaking and thorough analysis of unnatural pleasure, horrible tortures, revolting infamy...” (*Athenaeum* #124). Like Ishmael, Schlegel asks us to overcome our “prudishness” and to acknowledge that “so-called good society is usually nothing more than a mosaic of polished caricatures” (*Athenaeum* # 5 and #31).

Aware of his own limitations and of the provisional quality of what he seems to know, Ishmael does not place himself above his audience but invites us to follow along with him as his equal. Because he does not present himself as a leader who claims to have answers but one of us who has many questions, we are immediately drawn to him. Like the rest of us, he gets melancholy when faced with the realities of everyday life and has to work hard to find a way to cope. For him, whenever it is a “damp, drizzly November in [his] soul,” when he is tempted to throw himself on his sword, as Cato did, he chooses a less dramatic response: “I quietly take to the ship” (*Moby-Dick* 12). Ishmael tells us that like all people, and especially like any “metaphysical professor,” he, too, is drawn to the water when faced with life’s unsolvable problems. “Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded

forever” (13). This Ishmael is clearly a thinking man, someone we might want to avoid because he is given to over-analyzing the daily events of life and thus endangering our sanity. But his upbeat voice helps us overcome our initial hesitation and we eagerly follow him on his quest. He is neither morose nor self-important, and he knows the limits of his own free will. He is dealing with life’s serious questions, ones we all ask but cannot ever seem to answer; while many of us tend to throw up our hands in frustration because we do not seem to be able to get anywhere with them, Ishmael is able to embrace them with his unusual sense of adventure and his open mind. We feel that perhaps in his company, we might give it another try. After all, we are as qualified as the next person to inquire, and by joining Ishmael in Melville’s metaphysical whaling novel, we might just get a glimpse of something new.

While Ishmael seems low-key, he is actually very ambitious, for to him as to Narcissus and the rest of us, the ocean represents nothing less than “the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (14). Although Ishmael insists on going to sea as a common sailor, right before the mast, and although he does not claim to have the answers to life’s riddles, he does understand that his quest is significant. And whereas most people are content to conduct their search for meaning within the parameters set by their culture and religion, Ishmael goes much farther; he follows his “everlasting itch” to see where it might take him. When he embarks on his whaling voyage, “the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose ... there floated in my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a

snow hill in the air” (22). While the *Pequod* and its crew are pursuing their physical hunt for whales and the profits they hope to make, for Ishmael the whaling voyage also represents a metaphysical quest for the meaning or meanings of human life. Significant here is the fact that Ishmael’s “itch for things remote” is “ever-lasting” and that his quest, therefore, will be ever-lasting as well. Unlike Carlyle’s Teufelsdröckh, whose spiritual crisis ends in the “Everlasting Yea,” Ishmael’s turns into what Robert Milder has called “the Everlasting Maybe” (*Exiled Royalties* 90).<sup>38</sup>

Though fully aware that he is examining some of the most serious and frustrating conundrums of human existence, Ishmael is in a jocular mood. He is able to make fun of his own conceit that he himself chose the whaling voyage, and by calling his surroundings a “wonder-world,” gives expression to his playful attitude. He manages to be serious about his dangerous journey and at the same time keep a sense of humor about it. Declaring that he always goes to sea as “a simple sailor, right before the mast,” he insists that his low place on the hierarchical ladder does not bother him because it reflects where we all are in real life:

Who ain’t a slave? Tell me that. Well, then, however the old sea-captains may order me about--however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing ... that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way--either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that

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<sup>38</sup> In these passages on Ishmael and Schlegel, I am indebted to pages 87-96 of Robert Milder’s *Exiled Royalties*, where he examines the parallels between Schlegel’s philosophy and Ishmael’s world view: “The literary mode commensurate with the Romantic ironist’s vision of happy chaos was, generically, happily chaotic, as art strove, in A.O. Lovejoy’s words, ‘to match the abundance and diversity and complexity of Nature.’ Schlegel refers to the literary work as an ‘artfully ordered confusion,’ Ishmael to the ‘true method’ as ‘a careful disorderliness’” (*Exiled Royalties* 95).

is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other's shoulder-blades, and be content (15).

In a further example of his down-to-earth humor, Ishmael explains that he goes to sea as a common sailor because he wants to smell for himself the pure air of the forecastle deck rather than be like the "Commodore on the quarter-deck [who] gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on the forecastle" (15). As Milder demonstrates,

in his mixture of ironic wit and ontological dread, Ishmael stands mid-way between Schlegel and his darker Romantic successors, for whom 'the initial optimism of joyous freedom' shaded into 'sadness, melancholy, and despair....' To be Ishmael is to live in a precariously balanced state between comedy and tragedy, straddling their midpoint without tipping too far toward the former (like Stubb) or the latter (like Ahab). (*Exiled Royalties* 94)

As these passages illustrate, Ishmael begins his journey with a healthy sense of humor and enough distance to smile at himself. Fully aware that he ultimately cannot know the whale or the "ungraspable phantom of life," he nevertheless embarks on his explorations with great enthusiasm. He is willing to take the risks and accept the fact that his results will be incomplete and of limited value. This does not lead him to despair but to a good-humored "desperado philosophy," a what-the-hell, devil-may-care attitude that lets him push his quest to the limits and live with what he finds. This puts him in stark contrast with Ahab, the monomaniac captain of his ship, who will not rest until he either kills the white whale and thus finds his revenge on the

creature that has crippled him, or until he perishes in the hunt. To Ahab, the whale has come to represent all that is evil in the world; unlike Ishmael, he therefore cannot maintain a philosophical attitude but is desperate to strike through the mask that is the whale and find out with absolute certainty what lies hidden underneath. If, as he suspects, the reality behind the mask is evil and hostile to humans, then he is willing to pronounce his own everlasting no and live with the consequences. Or, if much to his surprise he finds hope and benevolence, he is prepared to declare the everlasting Yea. What he cannot accept under any circumstances, though, is a non-answer, an indefinite quest, a reality that resembles Schlegel's in that it is ever becoming but can never be fixed as good or evil. Because Ahab has been too seriously wounded by life and is too bitter for such sporting with God and the universe, he needs absolute truth of the kind Christ provides in Jean Paul's "Rede" and would much rather die than live with doubt.

While the Ishmael we meet in "Loomings" resembles Schlegel's romantic ironist, we soon learn that he was not born that way but had to develop his tolerant, open-minded approach to the unfamiliar out of necessity. Looking back, the older Ishmael portrays his younger self as the greenhorn who is looking for cheap lodgings on a cold, stormy night in New Bedford, and as readers familiar with Schlegel's concept of Romantic Irony, we see the parallels between Schlegel's view of the world as ever-changing and Ishmael's careful dismantling of his old, judgmental views and his deliberate construction of new ones. His response to the landlord's initial description of Queequeg, a harpooneer from the South Seas who is to become Ishmael's bedfellow for the night, is typical of a naïve and prejudiced youth raised in

a traditional Calvinist culture. When Peter Coffin, owner of the Spouter Inn, teasingly tells Ishmael that Queequeg will be back as soon as he can “sell his head,” Ishmael is outraged: “Do you pretend to say...that this harpooneer is actually engaged this blessed Saturday night, or rather Sunday morning, in peddling his head around this town?” (*Moby-Dick* 25). As a good Christian with very limited experience of the world, young Ishmael can only assume that “this harpooneer is stark mad” and chooses to spend the night on a wooden bench by a drafty door: “I have no idea of sleeping with a madman” (26). He makes up his mind that Queequeg is dangerous and engaged in “cannibal business,” but the landlord assures him that “He pays reg’lar” and encourages Ishmael to give the nice, big bed in which the landlord and his new bride “slept the night we were spliced,” a try. Cold and tired from his search for a bed, Ishmael, against his better judgment, gives in to temptation and crawls into bed, hoping that the “infernal head-peddler” won’t return at all that night. After much tossing and turning, he has finally drifted into a “light doze” when Queequeg, candle in hand but unaware of his new bedfellow, walks in.

Ishmael is shocked: “Good heavens! What a sight! Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow color” and had mysterious black squares all over it.” Ishmael eventually works out that this must be a tattoo and admonishes himself to resist his learned, overly cautious reaction to “things remote:” It’s only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin” (29). As the warnings Ishmael has been hearing since early childhood flash through him “like lightning,” Queequeg, totally unaware of Ishmael’s presence, puts away his tomahawk and inadvertently causes Ishmael to plan his escape: “I am no coward, but what to make of this head-peddling purple rascal” is

beyond him. Remembering this fright-filled night as a mere greenhorn, the older Ishmael now analyzes the situation he then found himself in: "Ignorance is the parent of fear, and ... I confess I was now as much afraid of him as if it was the devil" (29). Spellbound, Ishmael observes Queequeg as he carefully uncovers a "curious little deformed image with a hunch on its back," which he concludes can be "nothing but a wooden idol." He carefully observes the religious ritual Queequeg is performing and comments on his "strange antics" and "still stranger guttural noises" that accompany his prayer. Against his better judgment, Ishmael has let himself be fascinated by the heathen's prayers, but when Queequeg suddenly jumps into bed and, because he is startled to find another body there, begins to "feel" Ishmael and threatens to kill him, he screams for the landlord to save him. Peter Coffin, who had been deliberately setting up this moment and is grinning ear to ear, tells him to settle down and go to sleep. Queequeg agrees: "You gettee in." Ishmael, surprised by the "civil...kind and charitable way" the "savage" talks to him, once again reminds himself to have an open mind: "For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal. What's all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself—the man's a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" (31).

Though still judgmental, this time of a Christian who does not follow the rules of sobriety, Ishmael decides that it is safe to spend what is left of the night with Queequeg as bedfellow. Much to his surprise, he sleeps soundly and dreams, as "The Counterpane" shows, about a day and night during his childhood when he had felt abandoned while sleeping at home in his own bed. When he awakens at the Spouter

Inn with “Queequeg’s arm thrown over [him] in the most loving and affectionate manner,” his “sensations are strange” (32) when he realizes the contrast between his current experience and the one he had just relived in his dream. Having broken one of the rules in his stepmother’s house, the child Ishmael had been sent to his room supperless and was forced to lie abed for sixteen hours before he would be allowed to rise again. As this seemed like an eternity to the child, he begged his stepmother to give him a good whipping and let him leave his room but, as she was the “best and most conscientious of stepmothers,” (33) she refused. Ishmael then spent many miserable hours in his bed and at last awoke imagining a “supernatural hand” placed in his. While, as a child, this hand had frightened him terribly, he now remembers the incident as he feels Queequeg’s arm around him and is struck by the similarities: having been deprived of the traditional comforts of home that his society and religion promise, Ishmael finds “civility and consideration” not in the arms of his family but rather in the arms of a Pagan.

Like Siebenkäs, who finds more comfort in his friendship with Leibgeber than in his marriage with the unthinking Lenette, Ishmael feels safer under the protective arm of Queequeg than in his Christian childhood home. Like Siebenkäs, who shows that he is fully aware of the very limited comfort his religion and marriage have to offer by saying “I go to no church!” (*Siebenkäs* 181) before setting off on a walk in nature and a visit to Rabenstein, to escape from his financial and marital troubles and seek comfort in this place of crime and execution, Ishmael, too, is left “cold” by his visit to the chapel, where he reads the “frigid” inscriptions on the bleak tablets that commemorate the dead: “What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that

seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrections to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave” (*Moby-Dick* 41). In characteristic Ishmaelian fashion, he now begins to ask a long series of unanswerable questions about what it means to die and concludes: “But Faith, like a jackal, feeds among the tombs, and even from these dead doubts she gathers her most vital hope.” Ishmael tries hard to let himself be reassured by the idea that though his body may well perish on the hunt for the whale, “stave my soul, Jove himself cannot” 41. But once Father Mapple climbs to his pulpit, pulls up the ladder, and begins his sermon about Jonah and the whale, Ishmael understands that the minister is isolating himself in a “self-containing stronghold – a lofty Ehrenbreitstein”<sup>39</sup> that symbolizes his “spiritual withdrawal” (43). Expecting a comforting sermon to take with him on his long and dangerous journey, Ishmael is disappointed, for while Father Mapple’s “lesson” may be comforting to the preacher, it leaves him feeling “alone.”

After listening to this sermon that is reminiscent of Carlyle’s *Sartor* in passages like “Woe to him who would not be true, even though to be false were salvation,” Ishmael returns to the Spouter Inn, where he is deeply moved by the traces of the “simple honest heart” he senses in Queequeg. He can feel immediately that this savage, though thousands of miles from home and surrounded by a completely alien culture, is able to preserve the “utmost serenity” and, “content with his own companionship,” appeared to be totally at ease. Ishmael senses something “sublime” here, a touch of fine philosophy. Shivering after the cold, Christian sermon he has just experienced, Ishmael reflects on the night he spent with Queequeg, and especially the

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<sup>39</sup> Melville visited Festung Ehrenbreitstein on his trip to Germany in 1849 (*Journals* 37).

“affectionate arm,” and is deeply moved: “I began to be sensible of a strange feeling. I felt a melting in me.” Where minutes ago he had seen himself in a “wolfish world,” he now realizes “this soothing savage had redeemed it.” Ishmael is aware that in this savage there “lurked no civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits,” and though Queequeg is “wild,” Ishmael begins to feel “mysteriously drawn towards him.” Queequeg’s foreignness, though it repelled him at first, now draws him like a “magnet.... I’ll try a pagan friend, thought I, since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy” (53). The two men soon smoke a pipe together and Queequeg “pressed his forehead against mine, clasped me round the waist, and said that henceforth we were married.” As “bosom friends,” the two men are now linked for the rest of their lives and Queequeg is prepared to die for Ishmael if necessary and immediately divides up his savings and gives Ishmael half.

As mentioned before, this moment echoes one from Jean Paul’s *Roman* where Siebenkäs and Leibgeber “both lived in a community of possessions, material and immaterial, such as few understand.” They “felt no difference between the giver and the receiver of a benefit; and they stepped, united, over the clefts of life, like the crystal-seekers of the Alps, who, by binding themselves together, ensure themselves against falling into the chasms of ice” (*Siebenkäs* 54-5). We cannot help but think ahead to the chapter “The Monkey Rope,” where Ishmael, tied to Queequeg by a line to keep him from falling into the water and being eaten by sharks, reflects on his precarious situation:

Being the savage’s bowsman ... it was my cheerful duty to attend upon him while taking that hard-scrabble scramble upon the dead whale’s back. You

have seen Italian organ-boys holding a dancing-ape by a long cord. Just so, from the ship's steep side, did I hold Queequeg down there in the sea, by what is technically called in the fishery a monkey-rope, attached to a strong strip of canvas round his waist. (*Moby-Dick* 270)

While Siebenkäs feels safe as long as he is tied to Leibgeber, Ishmael begins to examine the situation from all possible angles and resorts to humor as he realizes the dangers of the situation: “It was a humorously perilous business for both of us,” for while being tied to another human being is intended to ensure the safety of both, Ishmael now realizes that 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. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed. (270)

As in the scene at the Spouter Inn, Melville again echoes the wedding of Siebenkäs when he shows us that these two men are wedded for better or worse. When he calls them “twin brothers” despite the fact that they do not look alike, we are reminded of the close bond between Siebenkäs and Leibgeber.

After retiring to their room, Ishmael has to assure himself again that it is acceptable for him, a “good Christian, born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church,” to join Queequeg in his idol worship. “But what is worship? ... Do you suppose now, Ishmael, that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth –

pagans and all included – can possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood? Impossible!” They go to bed and share confidences the way man and wife do: “Thus, then, in our heart’s honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg – a cosey, loving pair” (54). Though many readers and critics have focused on this passage as a homo-erotic moment, doing so misses the point. For, homo-erotic or not, this moment is ultimately about Ishmael’s mental and emotional maturation, about learning that he has to embrace true comfort, warmth, and understanding anywhere he can find them, even in the arms of a cannibal.

While creating the Ishmael who lets himself be drawn to Queequeg, Melville, too, has been exploring the unfamiliar while writing these chapters. As “The Lee Shore” (ch. 23) illustrates, Melville is no longer following the rules of the traditional novel where each character must be developed and accounted for. Having introduced Bulkington, a fearless and very popular sailor, several chapters back, he now tells his readers that this “six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington,” not because Bulkington dies, but because Melville will abandon him now that he has served his purpose (97). Melville here prepares us for the fearless questing we will find throughout *Moby-Dick*; like Ishmael, Melville is breaking with tradition, with the safety provided by literary conventions, Presbyterian faith, and social constructs as long as we abide by their rules. He had sensed as early as *Mardi* that following these conventions, though safe, confines us and keeps us from fearless exploration of things remote. In *Mardi*, therefore, he has the speaker exclaim: “Oh, reader, list! I’ve chartless voyaged” (*Mardi* 556). In *Moby-Dick* he returns to the idea that with traditional tools of “compass and the lead, we had not found these Mardian Isles” and

develops it further. Having experienced his close friendship with Adler and having read *Siebenkäs* and Carlyle's *German Romance*, Melville here reminds us, through both the contents and form of this chapter, that "all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore" (*Moby-Dick* 97). Following convention would keep Ishmael from having Queequeg as his soul mate and Melville from experimenting with open-ended and as yet unpolished literary forms to capture the world as he sees it.

But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God--so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land! Terrors of the terrible! is all agony so vain? Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing--straight up, leaps thy apotheosis! (97-8)

Though Melville himself may not have been aware of his purpose, by abandoning Bulkington so early in the book without telling us what became of him, he is preparing us for some of the unconventional formal aspects of *Moby-Dick* that distinguish it from the traditional novel and link it with Schlegel's concept of the *Roman*. As we have seen, Melville had been exposed to Schlegel's writings via Carlyle and Adler and thus knew about his enthusiastic review of Goethe's *Meister*, where the German philosopher and critic praises the format of *Meister* and asks: "Why should there not be a poetic encyclopedia, a poetic license to use every poetic

license?" (qtd. in Wheeler 199). In Goethe's *Roman* as in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, we encounter multiple narrators and mixed genres. In *Moby-Dick* and *Meister*, as well as in *Siebenkäs*, the prose narrative is frequently interrupted by metaphysical reflections that resemble Jean Paul's "Rede;" in all three books we find a mixture of genres where plays, poems, songs, frame stories and philosophical essays all follow each other in rapid succession. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville seems to be responding to Schlegel's new poetic license: "If a spirit is there, it may assume any form in the world, like the world-spirit, which it alone can use and wear." When Schlegel laments that "the stylistics have demanded from the novel not the romantic spirit but its exorcism" and have turned the novel into "an unversified didactic poem...a thick almanac for theologians, philosophers, and housewives" (Firchow 237), he opens up the freer, more open-ended literary form that Melville needed for his philosophizing.

While there are many moments in *Moby-Dick* that illustrate Melville's contact with German literature, chapters 48, "The First Lowering" and 49, "The Hyena," are among the most striking. On Ishmael's first lowering in pursuit of a whale, his boat gets separated from the others in a squall. "No sign of the ship could be seen. The rising sea forbade all attempts to bale out the boat." Starbuck, the first mate in charge of the boat, after repeated attempts, finally manages to light a lantern and hands it to Queequeg "as the standard-bearer of this forlorn hope. There, then, he sat, holding up that imbecile candle in the heart of that almighty forlornness. There, then, he sat, the sign and symbol of a man without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair" (195). As Ishmael describes to us the heathen Queequeg

holding the candle, we are reminded of Jean Paul's image of the human condition in "Rede." Where Jean Paul resorts to pictures of earthquakes and other disasters that happen on land, Melville uses the ocean to show that we are all shipwrecked in this human life.<sup>40</sup> But in the visions of both authors, unless we are believers, we have to face the frightening possibility that we are all orphans, an image that is central in both books. In this situation, the candle does not signal to the ship where the survivors are in the wide ocean for we see it "empty" in the bottom of the boat the next morning. But it helps the shipwrecked sailors through the night, even the ones who do not believe in Christ as their savior. Melville's scene seems to echo Jean Paul's "Rede," where Christ encourages all of us to believe while we can, not because God exists but because believing in him helps us cope with the horrible loneliness and despair that we have to face in a world without God. The passage makes it quite clear that the ship "runs into their boat" totally by accident and that Ishmael's small crew could just as well have perished. Divine providence had nothing to do with the rescue and Ishmael knows it; this frightening experience during a squall in an open boat therefore leaves him no choice but to see the natural world as chaotic and human life subject to chance rather than divine providence.

Being a thinking man, Ishmael reflects on his narrow escape as soon as he regains the ship and draws his own conclusions: "There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and

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<sup>40</sup> To my knowledge, Kurt Wais was the first critic who pointed to this similarity in his article "Errettung aus the Schiffbruch," where he states: "Der Alpdruk des Verschlungenwerdens von dem ungeheuren Rachen des Nichts, ohne eine Aussicht auf jenseitige Fortdauer, ist das gemeinsame, tiefste Grunderlebnis der drei Dichter Jean Paul, Carlyle und Melville gewesen" (Wais 304).

more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own." At times like these, when no explanation suffices and we are too traumatized even to try to make sense of the events or discern their origins, a man "bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions... and as for small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril of life and limb; all these, and death itself, seem to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker." Having dismissed the Christian god as a trickster who plays practical jokes on human beings because he can, Ishmael explains that this "odd sort of wayward mood I am speaking of, comes over a man only in some time of extreme tribulation; it comes in the very midst of his earnestness, so that what just before might have seemed to him a thing most momentous, now seems but a part of the general joke." A whaling expedition, especially a young sailor's first "pulling into the charmed, churned circle of the hunted sperm whale" (193) provides the ideal environment to "breed this free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy; and with it I now regarded this whole voyage of the Pequod, and the great White Whale its object" (196).

In this remarkable passage Ishmael's earlier world view comes apart right before our eyes. This is the older Ishmael from the opening pages telling us about the experiences of his younger, more naïve self who used to believe in Father Mapple's Christian god but is beginning to have his doubts about the supernatural powers of a god who would put him through this terrifying night at sea. Faced with the sense of God as joker, Ishmael concludes that it will not do to take his own predicament too seriously. With the help of his gallows humor, he now looks at the incongruity of his

situation: while he, like all humans, wants to believe in his own significance, the experience of being lost at sea forces him to see that he may in fact be utterly insignificant in a universe without the Christian god of his childhood. As he is looking directly at the human condition, Ishmael finds that, for the time being, he is going to cope by developing an ironic distance accompanied by a thoughtful smile.

Although Melville's young protagonist is on his way to becoming a romantic ironist à la Schlegel, he is at that early moment in the chase far from embracing the ironic stance whole-heartedly.

Considering ... [that] capsizings in the water and consequent bivouacks on the deep were matters of common occurrence in this kind of life... and finally considering in what a devil's chase I was implicated, touching the White Whale: taking all things together, I say, I thought I might as well go below and make a rough draft of my will. (196)

As the "rough draft" indicates, the older Ishmael is fully aware of how naïve and self-important he was when he began his first whaling trip. With hindsight he is able to smile at this earlier self who, when faced with annihilation, is taking this mere legal matter far too seriously. Having acknowledged earlier that he has no "free will," the young Ishmael turns to writing his legal will, an activity that lets him exercise the only authority he thinks he has. And yet, while we want to leave Ishmael's illusion intact, we as readers fear that even this legal document may prove useless if the ship that carries both Ishmael and his will perishes at sea.

To help us appreciate the unique quality of Ishmael's genial desperado philosophy, Melville contrasts Ishmael's laughter with Stubb's. In "First Night-

Watch,” (ch.39) for example, immediately after Ahab has made the entire crew take an oath, “Death to Moby Dick,” we see Stubb’s response as he realizes all the dangers that this hunt for Moby Dick will bring. “Ha! ha! ha! ha! hem!...that ha-ha’s the final consequence. Why so? Because a laugh’s the wisest, easiest answer to all that’s queer; and come what will, one comfort’s always left—that unfailing comfort is, it’s all predestinated.... I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I’ll go to it laughing. Such a waggish leering as lurks in all your horrors! I feel funny. Fa, la! Lira, skirra!” (149). Because he is no longer sure that everything is “predestinated,” and because he cannot deny the serious dangers lurking everywhere on his journey, Ishmael never laughs out loud or tries to persuade himself and us that his experiences are truly funny. Instead, he learns to smile when confronted with human vulnerability and uncertainty, to develop an attitude that is characterized by a combination of humor and irony but never loses its seriousness.

Experience teaches Ishmael that his many metaphysical questions are too complex for him to tackle. In “Cetology” (ch. 32), he therefore undertakes a "systematized exhibition of the whale," of a physical creature that he can touch. But he knows that anatomizing the whale is no easy task either: "The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed." Just as Melville had prepared us for the fact that our knowledge of whales would always remain incomplete by citing many different authorities on whaling in “Extracts,” Ishmael begins by quoting "extracts" from Scoresby and others. Melville and Ishmael tell us at the very outset that there will be no conclusions in this book. Like Schlegel’s “Fragments,” “Extracts” illustrates for us that while human beings have had brilliant insights over

time, they have not and never will produce one coherent explanation of the incoherent experiences we call life. Ishmael then shares with us his qualifications and goals: "As no better man advances to take this matter in hand, I hereupon offer my own poor endeavors. I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty." Ishmael, though he has plenty of fears and doubts about his abilities to capture the whale's complexities, nevertheless perseveres: "But I have swam (sic) through the libraries and sailed through oceans; I have had to do with whales with these visible hands; I am in earnest, and I will try." This declaration of intent and confidence is immediately followed by a sentence resembling a disclaimer, something to slow him down: "There are some preliminaries to settle" (118).

This "disclaimer" is placed at the very end of the paragraph rather than at the beginning of the next, where Ishmael begins to settle the preliminaries. This seems odd at first, because the sentence seems to belong with the following paragraph, not the preceding one. By placing it at the end, though, Melville turns it into a comment on the preceding, confident statement of Ishmael's intention and thus illustrates a typical Ishmael moment where he builds up and then tears down his own construction in the same paragraph. In case we have missed it, Ishmael reminds us that,

You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my word ... I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. *God*

*keep me from ever completing anything.* This whole book is but a draught--  
nay a draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience! (128)

Melville here echoes Noel's question: "Who would judge the cathedral by the standards of the Greek temple?" Like Jean Paul's *Roman*, *Moby-Dick* is by design not a Greek temple and therefore does not follow its standards for symmetry and proportion. "So far as what there may be of a narrative in this book ... I care not to perform this part of my task methodically; but shall be content to produce the desired impression by separate citations of items, practically or reliably known to me as a whaleman; and from these citations, I take it--the conclusion aimed at will naturally follow of itself" (175).

For Ishmael as for Schlegel, the finite world is contradictory and can therefore be captured only partially and with the help of an ironic stance. But Schlegel sees irony as more than merely a passive way of perceiving reality; he also considers it an active force, a way for the writer/philosopher to transcend reality, to give him freedom to create, de-create, re-create endlessly. This is precisely what Ishmael does as he attempts to anatomize the whale. He knows that he can never completely know the whale, but by replying to his own questions with if-clauses, he can float a theory of what the whale might be. Ishmael de-constructs older theories of the whale, including his own, in order to re-construct new ones that better express his current perceptions. Like Schlegel, Ishmael sees the subject as the "intersection of a set of voices in a dialogue," in which even the "self is never single and unified." He does not give clear-cut definitions because they would not and could not be true but presents instead a 'medley' or 'ensemble' of sometimes competing voices"

(Thompson 212). Mikhail Bakhtin draws on Schlegel's philosophy when he suggests that "the personal pronoun 'I' [which also happens to be the first initial of Ishmael's name] gives only an illusory stability." As for Schlegel and Melville, for Bakhtin, too, the self is "many voices speaking." Although Melville has often been criticized for his "formlessness," he, like Schlegel during this early phase of his career, is unwilling to resolve this basic conflict in a final synthesis. Both Schlegel and Melville insist on recognizing tension, contradiction, oscillation as the core of life. But for both writers, this relatively optimistic phase of romantic irony was temporary. While Melville's Ishmael can function as romantic ironist in the way Schlegel suggests, his Pierre cannot. As we will see in Chapter 3 of this study, by the time Melville writes *Pierre*, romantic irony has lost its power to transcend. Ishmael's "genial desperado philosophy" has turned into desperation and Pierre is caught in the de-constructive phase of romantic irony, in a downward instead of an upward spiraling.

But in *Moby-Dick*, with the exception of a very few moments, Ishmael can accept the limitations and provisional nature of what he can know about the whale and about human life. Still, he continues his quest by tirelessly building up his endless theories, only to tear them down in the next paragraph and start over again. Melville's contemporary readers were mostly critical of what they considered tedious cetological chapters that did not seem to advance the plot of Ahab's hunt for the white whale in any way. But these chapters were crucial for Melville because they provided the space where, following the model of Jean Paul's "extra-leaves" that he had appreciated in "Rede," he could pursue his metaphysical questing. In the chapter "Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales" (ch. 55), Ishmael lists countless flawed efforts to

paint whales and then explains that “these manifold mistakes in depicting the whale are not so very surprising after all. Consider! ...Though elephants have stood for their full-lengths, the living Leviathan has never yet fairly floated himself for his portrait” and concludes that the “great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last.” There is “no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan” (228). In this delightfully humorous passage, Ishmael reminds us of the dangers inherent in his quest and warns us that we risk drowning if we push beyond our human limits.

In yet another effort to measure the whale, Ishmael turns to phrenology: "I try all things; I achieve what I can" (291). He humorously compares the brow of the whale to the "seal affixed by the German emperors to their decrees." But while everyone knows that this seal signifies "‘God: done this day by my hand,’ ... in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified" that when looking at it directly "you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature." Our eyes, overwhelmed by the enormity of what they see, cannot make out any distinct features: "no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none, proper; nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles" (292). Confronted with the whale's "pyramidal silence" Ishmael is tempted to give up: "How may unlettered

Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can" (293). But shortly thereafter we find him engaged in studying the tail of the whale with equal intensity: "At times there are gestures in it, which, though they would well grace the hand of man, remain wholly inexplicable.... Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will." In "The Blanket" (ch. 68), Ishmael is marveling at the whale's ability to maintain his necessary body temperature in freezing waters with the help of his thick, insulating blanket: "...herein we see the rare virtue of a strong individual vitality, and the rare virtue of thick walls.... Oh, man! admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it. Be cool at the equator; keep thy blood fluid at the Pole. Like the great dome of St. Peter's, and like the great whale, retain, O man! in all seasons a temperature of thine own." For a brief moment, Ishmael seems to have captured one aspect of the whale and immediately advises us to follow his example. "But how easy and how hopeless to teach these fine things! Of erections, how few are domes like St. Peter's! of creatures, how few vast as the whale" (261).

Following his characteristic pattern of building up and tearing down, Ishmael realizes that he himself cannot live up to the high expectations he has just outlined. Having urgently admonished the reader to follow the example of the whale, he just as urgently takes back his directive. In spite of the resignation we hear in his voice, he somehow manages to maintain his optimistic outlook and live with the provisional nature of all his insights. In "The Mat-Maker," for example, he thinks he understands the relationship between fate, free will, and chance, but as soon as whales are sighted,

he “drops the ball of free will” and has to acknowledge that his recent definitions of these philosophical concepts are only theories that will fall apart with the next bounce of the boat. As we learn by following Ishmael, the true romantic ironist is very different from the modern deconstructionists who are skeptics only. As Mellor puts it, “the authentic romantic ironist is as filled with enthusiasm as with skepticism. He is as much a romantic as an ironist.” Over and over again, Ishmael acknowledges the “fictiveness of his own patternings of human experience” and then “engages in the creative process of life by eagerly constructing new forms, new myths.” Fully aware that “his new fictions ... bear with them the seeds of their own destruction [that] they too die to give way to new patterns,” in a never-ending process that becomes an analogue for life itself, Ishmael follows in the footsteps of Schlegel’s romantic ironist by devising a “structure that simultaneously creates and de-creates itself” (Mellor 5).

Ishmael’s efforts to understand the whale culminate in "The Fountain" (ch. 85), where he attempts to settle the age-old question whether the whale spouts water or nothing but vapor (312). No matter how many details he lists about the whale’s physical parts and diving habits, “the question returns whether this gas-pipe is also a water-pipe.” In an impatient voice that mocks the common-sense school of his time, Ishmael tries to provoke a definite answer: “Speak out! You have seen him spout; then declare what the spout is; can you not tell water from air?” Though this seems like a straightforward request, the response is complicated, for we humans find “your plain things the knottiest of all. And as for this whale spout, you might almost stand in it, and yet be undecided as to what it is precisely.... The wisest thing the investigator can do, then, it seems to me, is to let this deadly spout alone” (313).

Having created a reasonable response to the question, and having conceded that we simply cannot know whether the whale spouts water or vapor, Ishmael, in the very next sentence, makes another attempt: "Still, we can hypothesize, even if we cannot prove and establish. My hypothesis is this: that the spout is nothing but mist."

Regarding the whale as both "ponderous and profound" and "convinced that from the heads of all ponderous and profound beings, such as Plato...the Devil...Dante...there always goes up a certain semi-visible steam, while in the act of thinking deep thoughts," Ishmael humorously settles on this pleasing hypothesis for the time being: "how nobly it raises our conceit of the mighty, misty monster, to behold him solemnly sailing through a calm tropical sea; his vast, mild head overhung by a canopy of vapor, engendered by his incommunicable contemplations, and that vapor--as you will sometimes see it--glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts." As rainbows only "irradiate vapor... so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye" (314). Ishmael here resembles the speaker in Jean Paul's "Rede" as he helps us see that faith and doubt are both realities and playfully encourages us to view both scenarios as real. This playful, hypothetical approach that irritates followers of the common-sense school gives Melville and Jean Paul the freedom to experiment with new literary forms as they strive to capture uncertainty and flux on the written page. This new

*Weltanschauung* opens up new formal and linguistic experiments they can use as they conjecture and argue, as they try out different truths and produce a collage rather than a linear tale out of their many impressions. For Schlegel and for Ishmael, this kind of conjecture that floats different scenarios but never casts them in stone represents a way for humans to “transcend ourselves,” to participate actively in the ongoing process of constructing and tearing down our world as we see it. As early as *Mardi*, Melville had stumbled towards romantic irony out of necessity, especially in the character of Babbalanja. By the time he wrote *Moby-Dick*, he had been exposed to this German philosophical approach and some of its practitioners and was therefore able to use it much more deliberately in the character of Ishmael.

One of the central, recurring themes that connects Schlegel, Jean Paul, Carlyle and Melville is the question of nothingness, the possibility that, as Ahab suspects, there is nothing behind the mask, no deeper meaning that we can cling to as we look for purpose and justice in this life on earth. As we have seen, Carlyle is concerned with this same question in *Sartor*, but unlike Jean Paul, Schlegel and Melville, he answers it by trying to reassure himself and us in “The Everlasting Yea” that there is a god and an afterlife. Carlyle and Teufelsdröckh resemble Ahab in that they need definite answers while Ishmael strives to regard faith and doubt with “equal eye” and live as if both were real.

Very early on in the book, the older Ishmael warns us that surrendering the certainties our faith and culture have taught us is very dangerous business—perhaps more dangerous than whaling itself. When he has to stand guard on the mast-head early in the book (Ch. 35), Ishmael confesses that “I kept but sorry guard. With the

problem of the universe revolving in me, how could I--being left completely to myself at such a thought-engendering altitude,--how could I but lightly hold my obligations to observe all whale-ship's orders, 'Keep your weather eye open, and sing out every time.'" Ishmael realizes that this "unseasonable meditateness" will interfere with the business of whaling and making a profit while at the same time endangering the life of such a "romantic, melancholy and absent-minded young man." Exposed to the "blending cadence of waves with thoughts," the dreamy young sailor at last loses his identity:

There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!

(140)

Ishmael's warning, as do most of his reflections, operates on a physical as well as a metaphysical level. While a certain amount of reflection may well be a good thing, "unseasonable meditateness" is dangerous because it may cause him to fall from the mast-head and drown, literally, or it may carry him so deeply into the sea of metaphysical questions that he finds himself overwhelmed by the abysses they open and drowns because he has strayed too far from the safety of the shore. In "Brit," (ch. 58), Ishmael again paints in vivid detail the dangers and treacherous nature of the sea

which, though it may seem friendly and calm, always has hungry sharks right underneath the surface. "Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!" (236). Even though he has only just begun his journey, Ishmael has already learned that if one sets sail just once and leaves the safety and comfort of the island, one commits to a lifetime of questing because there are no reassuring answers out there at sea. So Ishmael cautions us to make sure we are up to it before we leave the safety of home and family. This endless questing can leave us landless, forever adrift and exposed to nothingness and nihilism.

Although Ishmael shows us throughout *Moby-Dick* that he is up to the challenges of indefinite questing and open to any and all provisional truths his journey may yield, there are a few moments in the book where even Ishmael's genial desperado philosophy no longer suffices to help him cope with the horrors he glimpses. One of these occurs immediately after Ishmael explains what the whale means to Ahab. Because the whale mauled Ahab's leg on an earlier voyage, Ahab has identified with him "not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them.... All truth with malice in it ... all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*" (160). Ishmael's distinction between "what the

white whale was to Ahab”, and “what, at times, he was to me,” is crucial (163). Although both men are pursuing the same white whale, to Ahab Moby Dick represents evil incarnate throughout the entire book, while to Ishmael he represents different things at different times and thus serves as a much richer and more challenging symbol for the many unknowable and ungraspable mysteries of human life. In this instance, Ishmael feels a "rather vague, nameless horror concerning him." This horror is at times very intense so that it overpowers all his other feelings towards the whale "and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught" (163). We are reminded of the conversations between Adler and Melville on their sea voyage to England, when the two men discussed the limits of language and taxonomy. In reflecting on the white whale, Ishmael is experiencing a vague sense of intense terror that is very personal and yet beyond capturing through language. But Ishmael feels he must somehow give expression to this sense of horror for it forms the center of his entire journey. If he cannot share with us ALL of his emotions concerning the whale, then he has failed us.

We now accompany Ishmael on the long and indirect circling of his own emotions that we have by now come to expect of him. A long series of "though" clauses first lists the many positive and calming associations that people have with "whiteness," i.e., it enhances natural beauty, is an "imperial" color, a symbol of gladness, an emblem of noble things, justice, religious symbol of "divine

spotlessness," sacred vesture of Christian priests, redemption --"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." "Why should this be so?" is the first of a long series of questions Ishmael asks regarding the impact this whiteness has on the human psyche. As Melville himself suggested in his journal when recording the pleasures of drinking and talking with Adler in cozy taverns that *did not* have white walls, whiteness is unsettling in some subconscious way. We cannot rationally analyze this effect, but Ishmael surmises that perhaps by citing examples of the effects this whiteness has on living creatures, we may "light upon some chance clue to conduct us to the hidden cause we seek? Let us try" (167). Well aware that more conventional thinkers might accuse him of surrendering to a "hypo," Ishmael nonetheless gives chance a try when scientific inquiry won't do (169).

Several pages later, Ishmael is aware that with all his lists and questions he has so far not solved anything: "But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness" --we still don't know why on the one hand it is "the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity; and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind" (169). The imagery Melville uses to describe the horrors inherent in whiteness is reminiscent of Jean Paul's in "Rede." Ishmael likens the shipwrecked sailor in the Antarctic seas to the dreamer in "Rede" who, "instead of rainbows speaking hope and solace to his misery, views what seems a boundless church-yard grinning upon him with its lean ice

monuments and splintered crosses” (168). Ishmael continues with the same imagery as he poses his long list of questions:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of a color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for this reason that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows--a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? (169)

Like Schlegel, Melville here uses paradox and irony as his central means of expression. Jean Paul and Melville both use the churchyard setting to help us see the abysses that open up once we entertain doubts. Where Jean Paul uses a dream, Melville employs whiteness instead. As in the dream, we shrink from this whiteness because it touches in some ungraspable fashion our fear of nothingness, a fear that we try to ignore most of the time. But when we dream, we cannot ignore it because we do not have access to our powers to reason. Whiteness has a similar capability to unsettle us because it goes beyond reason or rather exists on a deeper level than reason. It is an ur-quality with which all humans are in touch. Where Jean Paul’s dreamer is afraid of being annihilated in a universe without god, Melville’s Ishmael is struck by the indefinite and ungraspable qualities of whiteness which trigger in him very similar fears.

And when we consider that ... theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues...are but subtile (sic) deceits, not actually inherent in substances,

but only laid on from without; *so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; ...* pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like the wilful travelers (sic) in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things, the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt? (*Moby-Dick* 170, emphasis mine)

As these similarities between “Rede” and “whiteness” show, Carlyle was very useful to Melville as mediator and translator of German thought and writing but, as we saw in our analysis of “Rede,” Carlyle did not go as far as Jean Paul and other German romantics when it came to exploring the possibility of nothingness. Yet Melville clearly sensed the open-ended nature of “Rede” and recognized the horrors of a world without god that Jean Paul had painted so vividly. In “whiteness” he uses Jean Paul’s image of the charnel house to contradict Carlyle’s “Everlasting Yea.” We can imagine Jean Paul, Carlyle and Melville in a Schlegelian dialogue where Jean Paul’s Christ insists on a universe without god, Carlyle’s Teufelsdröckh counters with his assertion that “the universe is not dead and demonical, but god-like and my Father’s,” and Melville likens nature to a “harlot” whose make-up covers the “charnel house” that is the universe.

As the example of Pip illustrates in “The Castaway” (ch. 93), “the awful lonesomeness” of a man afloat in the ocean on a dark night “is intolerable. The

intense concentration of self in the middle of such heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?" After jumping overboard and being abandoned as his boat leaves in pursuit of the whale, "Pip's ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably." The ship happens upon him and rescues him the following morning, "but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was." The sea had carried Pip's soul "to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miserman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; ... He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad....Wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic..." (347). Because human beings cannot embrace the idea that they are entirely alone in the world, they turn away from the truth Pip tells and call it madness. Even when Christ himself proclaims that there is no god and paints a vivid picture of the abyss, readers like Carlyle find ways to read his speech as a declaration of faith. But in "Whiteness," even Ishmael is in danger of losing his "genial desperado philosophy" when confronted with the horror of nothingness that the color white has come to represent. The tone here as in "Try Works" is no longer humorous but serious throughout and Ishmael's playfulness has reached its limits. While steering the Pequod one night when the try-works are burning to harvest the oil from a captured whale, the ship, "freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul." Ishmael has been too close to the "redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others. The continual sight of the fiend shapes before

me, capering half in smoke and half in fire, these at last begat kindred visions in my soul, so soon as I began to yield to that unaccountable drowsiness which ever would come over me at a midnight helm." Ishmael seems to have fallen asleep and experiences a nightmare in which he can see no compass and the tiller has been reversed. In his brief sleep he had turned himself around and awakens just in time to keep the ship from capsizing. "How glad and how grateful the relief from this unnatural hallucination of the night, and the fatal contingency of being brought by the lee!" Ishmael's sense of relief after he wakes up reminds us of the dreamer in Jean Paul's "Rede." He sounds very sure of himself when he issues his warnings:

Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm. Turn not thy back to the compass; accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp--all others but liars!

But like Jean Paul and unlike Carlyle, Melville does not end the passage with this sunny image:

Nevertheless the sun hides not Virginia's Dismal Swamp...nor all the millions of miles of deserts and of griefs beneath the moon. The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him [Stubb], that mortal man cannot be true--not true, or undeveloped. With books the same. The truest of all men was the

Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. 'All is vanity.' ALL. (355)

As in the opening paragraphs of *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael finds himself attracted to funerals during a bout of depression, he acknowledges that sorrow is indeed a true part of life but urges his readers to view light and darkness as parts of human existence: "There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness." Like the Catskill Eagle in some souls who "can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces," we must give ourselves to neither sunshine nor darkness. Like the speaker in Jean Paul's "Rede" and like Schlegel's romantic ironist, Ishmael also tells us that we must learn to live with light and darkness, a vision of a universe with God and one without.

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### Chapter III: *Pierre*, or the “Everlasting Elusiveness of Truth”

Deep, deep, and still deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair and the blackness of the shaft. (*Pierre* 288)

For readers who, after finishing *Moby-Dick*, move right on to *Pierre*, the narrative voice that greets them in what Melville promised would be a “rural bowl of milk” comes as a shock. With fond memories of the “Epilogue” of *Moby-Dick* that leaves us with Ishmael’s calm, optimistic voice and the humorous yet perilous image of him floating in the vast ocean, buoyed up by Queequeg’s coffin, we are hoping for a sequel. We know that Ishmael, after witnessing the utter shipwreck of Ahab, the *Pequod*, and the crew, is left floating in the ocean for many hours and ultimately rescued by the *Rachel*, a ship looking for its own lost children that rescues orphan Ishmael instead. He is the only survivor and eye-witness with an excellent view of the

disaster at sea and therefore can tell us what happened. “Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble ... did I revolve...until the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea.... The unharming sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks” (470). But while the epilogue suggests an open-ended continuation in which Ishmael reflects on his recent adventures and tries one more time to make sense of what he has witnessed, *Pierre* does not seem to be the sequel we are hoping for. Instead, we find, as we open *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*, an entirely different narrative voice that paints for us an overly idyllic scene and immediately undermines it:

There are some strange summer mornings in the country, when he who is but a sojourner from the city shall early walk forth into the fields, and be wonder-smitten with the trance-like aspect of the green and golden world. Not a flower stirs; the trees forget to wave; the grass itself seems to have ceased to grow; and all Nature ... sinks into this wonderful and indescribable repose. (*Pierre* 3)

We seem to have regressed. How did we get from the genial desperado philosophy of Ishmael to this saccharine narrative voice in *Pierre* whose tone is so aggressively ironic, critical, and ultimately negative? <sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For analysis of the role Melville’s own life as son, husband, and unappreciated writer may have played in the writing of *Pierre*, see especially the biographical studies of Newton Arvin, Leon Howard and Robert Milder. In *Exiled Royalties*, Milder argues that Melville felt abandoned and rejected after Nathaniel Hawthorne moved away from the Berkshires. “The ‘infinite fraternity of feeling’ he had felt in Hawthorne’s presence now appeared to him a symptom of psychic dependence...” “The ‘hardest’ lesson Pierre is brought to confront is the one Melville seems to have confronted as he set out to write his book: that the questor who has renounced common happiness for truth finds himself not only spurned by the social world, the mother (and Melville’s own mother was always harshly critical of his failure to make a living as a writer), but ‘likewise despise[d]’ by the gods, the father, who ‘own him not of their clan’” (*Exiled Royalties* 137, 139).

In *Pierre*, the narrator understands what Friedrich Schlegel termed “romantic irony” and what Pierre cannot grasp, i.e., the fact that truth is fickle, ever-changing, and ultimately unknowable. Whereas *Moby-Dick*, through the voice and character of Ishmael, celebrates the optimistic side of romantic irony that believes in man’s ability to participate in the creative process by endlessly tearing down old truths and building up new ones, *Pierre* illustrates what happens to a young idealist who, by overreaching, finds himself de-constructing without the ability to re-build. By focusing on the darker side of romantic irony, *Pierre* reflects Melville’s concern that too much questioning and uncertainty can lead to nothingness, to a void. For Pierre, the constructive capability that a unique combination of humor and irony had afforded Ishmael, are no longer effective. Because Pierre is a naïve and uncompromisingly idealistic youth whose beliefs are untenable, the narrator tells us early on that “fate” will topple Pierre, and so it does, because Pierre is unable to process and adapt to what he learns about himself and his elders, about society and human nature. Although in *Moby-Dick*, this tragic side of romantic irony is already present in Ahab, it is counterbalanced by Ishmael in his capacity as romantic ironist, by his endless constructing, de-constructing, and re-constructing that allows for an optimistic outlook throughout the book, even in the post-disaster epilogue.

As soon as we open *Pierre*, however, we hear the voice of an ironist who quickly begins to expose the false qualities of a seemingly sunny surface. Pierre feels deceived by the teachings of his hypocritical elders, especially his mother, Mrs.

Glendinning,<sup>42</sup> and his minister, appropriately named Mr. Falsgrave. Unlike Ishmael, who also felt he had been lied to by his elders and shudders after hearing Father Mapple's cold sermon, Pierre does not seem to recover from these disappointments. Where Ishmael becomes more tolerant as a result of Mapple's sermon and seeks comfort in his friendship with Queequeg, where he analyzes his previous beliefs, finds them faulty, and replaces them with new ones, Pierre acts mortally wounded and goes to extremes.

When we first meet Pierre Glendinning, he feels loved by his mother and has an idealized image of his deceased father. Although Pierre has lost one parent, he by no means feels orphaned. He is a proud member of the distinguished Glendinning family, lives at Saddle Meadows, his wealthy family estate, and has particular admiration for his paternal grandfather, "grand old Pierre Glendinning," who, "in a night-scuffle in the wilderness before the Revolutionary War, had annihilated two Indian savages by making reciprocal bludgeons of their heads" (29). Pierre finds comfort in the religion of his ancestors and has built in his heart a shrine in remembrance of his deceased father.

This shrine was of marble—a niched pillar, deemed solid and eternal ... which supported the entire one-pillared temple of his moral life; as in some beautiful gothic oratories, one central pillar, trunk-like, upholds the roof. In this shrine ... stood the perfect marble form of his departed father; without

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<sup>42</sup> The relationship between Pierre and his mother is indeed "ambiguous" throughout the book. "There was a striking personal resemblance between them....In the playfulness of their unclouded love, and with that strange license which a perfect confidence and mutual understanding at all points, had long bred between them, they were wont to call each other brother and sister. Both in public and in private this was their usage.... Thus freely and lightsomely for mother and son flowed on the pure joined current of life" (5).

blemish, unclouded, snow-white, and serene; Pierre's fond personification of perfect human goodness and virtue. (68)

While the opening pages of the book paint a bright and sunny picture, they stand in stark contrast with Ishmael's ever provisional erections where the crane is always present. Their tone and choice of diction, from the very beginning, undermine the seemingly idyllic atmosphere of Pierre's childhood and adolescence. On a beautiful morning in June, we see Pierre "issuing from the embowered and high-gabled home of his fathers." He is "dewily refreshed and spiritualized by sleep" as he approaches the cottage of his betrothed, a cottage that "peeped into view near the end of the vista." If we have been unsure about the tone in these opening lines, what follows removes all doubt: "The verdant tracts lay far and wide; and through it nothing came but the brindled kine, dreamily wandering to their pastures, followed, not driven, by ruddy-cheeked, white-footed boys" (3). Where are the dirt and dangers inherent in country life? Where the violent storms that can destroy a year's harvest within seconds? Whereas the peaceful epilogue in *Moby-Dick* is preceded by realistic evidence of disaster at sea, this real sense of danger seems entirely absent in the idyllic opening of *Pierre*. But with the help of the narrator who over-uses every imaginable idyllic cliché, the reader senses very early what Pierre does not: "Thus loftily, in the days of his circumscribed youth, did Pierre glance along the background of his race." He continues to believe in the benevolence of his family, society, and religion, "little recking of that maturer and larger interior development, which should forever deprive these things of their full power of pride in his soul" (6). This moment

in *Pierre* is reminiscent of the opening of *Oedipus Rex*. In each story we meet an overly confident and caring youth who stands ready to right an evil caused by the misconduct of others, only to learn that his very determination to do what's right leads to disaster. And in both stories, the audience knows more than the protagonist, which leads to our sense of tragic irony early on. We know and the narrator knows that Pierre's story will end badly; we are tempted to laugh at Pierre's naïve idealism and yet we also feel sympathy for him at times.

As readers, we have already experienced a tour-de-force of emotional ups and downs when the narrator introduces us to Pierre's mother, Mrs. Glendinning; she immediately becomes a target of the narrator's ridicule through her efforts to appear younger than she is. "In mature age," we are told by an ironic narrative voice employing heightening double-negatives, "litheness had not yet completely uncoiled itself from her waist, nor smoothness unscrolled itself from her brow, nor diamondness departed from her eyes. So that when lit up and bediademed by ball-room lights, Mrs. Glendinning still eclipsed far younger charms...." The narrator continues by emphasizing Mrs. Glendinning's "amaranthineness," her ever youthful appearance (4).

The narrator's contempt for this middle-aged, upper-class woman who cares more about appearing young than about the human suffering in her community is captured even more effectively in the sound of his words than in their contents. When he characterizes Mrs. Glendinning by mentioning the "diamondness" that has not completely left her eyes and presents her as "bediadimed" by the ballroom lights, he strains the English language to express his contempt for her. Following the example

of Carlyle's Jean Paul translations, Melville is creating words by adding the ending -ness to a given noun or the prefix *be-* to an adjective.<sup>43</sup> He thus invents jarring linguistic structures that are hard to pronounce and sound awkward and artificial in English, effectively imitating in his neologisms and archaisms the artificial qualities in Mrs. Glendinning's appearance and character. Melville's technique here reminds us of the long and often nonsensical words Jean Paul created by adding the syllable "heit" to any noun or adjective or verb if the combination helped him achieve mockery or satire at the expense of "die Grossen," the wealthy German patricians who, in his eyes, lacked all sense of social justice. In his *Siebenkäs*, for example, Jean Paul refers to the School Inspector Stiefel (the German word for "boot") as "gestiefelt," a perfectly acceptable word in German, but its English translation, "bebooted," has a slightly humorous ring to it. He continues his play with words by transforming his archaic adjective into a noun/nickname: because Stiefel, Siebenkäs's rival, is often seen wearing boots with a fur lining, the narrator begins to call him "Pelzstiefel" or "Furryboot" – a name that clearly mocks its bearer.

Melville employs a similar technique when he tells us that Pierre's paternal great-grandfather, after being mortally wounded, "sat unhorsed in his saddle in the grass.... This was Saddle Meadows, a name likewise extended to the mansion and the village" (6). In true Jean Paulean fashion, Melville undermines the great-grandfather's heroism and dignity by straining common usage; having "unhorsed" the old man, Melville first recalls Saddle-Back Mountain, an actual place he knew from his childhood, then turns the image of the hero in his saddle on the grass into the proper

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<sup>43</sup> Although Melville did not know German, he was able to imitate exaggerated German word creations as rendered in Carlyle's and Noël's translations.

name "Saddle Meadows," a name now become humiliating rather than heroic. As in *Siebenkäs*, the humor originates in the matter-of-fact relationship between concrete image and proper name.

As the story progresses, Pierre's beliefs are stripped away one by one until he is doubly if not triply orphaned. First, he discovers that he has a half-sister, Isabel (or at least she claims to be his half sister and manages to persuade the naïve young Pierre that she really is his father's illegitimate daughter); then, as Pierre revises his picture of his father and decides to set right the wrong Mr. Glendinning has done Isabel, he critically offends his mother by rejecting Lucy, the bride she has chosen for him. As the young idealist attempts to protect his father's image by not telling his mother about Isabel's heritage and by pretending to have married her, and as he takes it upon himself to right his father's wrong, Pierre is disinherited by his mother, who soon thereafter dies, presumably because she feels betrayed by her disobedient son.

Once Pierre has left behind his enshrined father, his proud mother, and his promised inheritance, he takes stock. He feels that "deep in him lurked a divine unidentifiableness, that owned no earthly kith or kin." Pierre would very much like to recall, for one moment, the "thousand sweet illusions of Life; tho' purchased at the price of Life's Truth; so that once more he might not feel himself driven out an infant Ishmael into the desert, with no maternal Hagar to accompany and comfort him" (89). After grappling with the voice that greets us in *Pierre*, a voice that stands in stark contrast with that of Ishmael, we are surprised to be reminded of the narrator-protagonist we have come to love but seemed to have lost. The connection Melville makes here between Pierre, the biblical Ishmael, and the protagonist of *Moby-Dick*, is

interesting, for while the last word in that book, too, is “orphan,” Ishmael and Pierre ultimately do not resemble each other as orphans or protagonists. Ishmael manages to maintain, throughout most of the book, his “genial desperado philosophy” which allows him to smile and jest when confronted with life’s and God’s ironies, while Pierre, though initially child-like and over-the-top idyllic, soon turns deadly earnest. Having known the comforts of his seemingly secure hearth and idyllic home during his childhood, Pierre feels all the more resentful when forced to give them up. But, as Melville illustrates so successfully, though Pierre’s soul “clamors for the support of its mother the world, and its father the Deity,” it is not really desperate as long as he can believe in a higher being of some sort. As he matures, however, Pierre learns that in his “infinite comparative minuteness and abjectness, the gods do likewise despise him, and own him not of their clan. Divinity and humanity then are equally willing that he should starve in the street for all that either will do for him. Now cruel father and mother have both let go of his hand, and the little soul-toddler” first wails, then toddles “entirely alone, and not without shrieks” (296).

Unlike Pierre, Ishmael had learned early in life that even those who seem privileged because of race or social status are ultimately subject to the “universal thump.” He feels reassured by the fact that everybody suffers daily blows and finds comfort in his friendship with Queequeg. Ishmael, even in his youth, is a cosmic orphan well acquainted with the “damp, drizzly November in [his] soul.” He copes by going to sea when this melancholy mood comes over him (12). His experiences aboard a whaler are at least as terrifying as Pierre’s at Saddle Meadows and later in the City, but as we have seen, with the possible exception of Chapter 42, “The

Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael manages to remain humorous in spite of the horrors he encounters, and we never hear him shriek.

Although the passage quoted above links him to Ishmael, Pierre resembles much more a younger Ahab and, though seemingly safe and on solid ground in New York City, comes to a similar end. One might argue that both commit suicide. Whereas Ishmael had derived enormous strength from his ability to regard both earthly doubt and heavenly intuition with an equal eye, Pierre is vulnerable precisely because, like Ahab, he cannot live with conjecture or doubt but goes to extremes in his search for certainty. As soon as Pierre learns of Isabel’s existence, he announces his quarrel with “Fate... Thou art a palterer and a cheat; thou hast lured me on through gay gardens to a gulf. Oh! falsely guided in the days of my Joy, am I now truly led in this night of my grief?” Pierre sounds much like Ahab when he threatens to “be a raver, and none shall stay me! I will lift my hand in fury, for am I not struck? I will be bitter in my breath, for is not this cup of gall? Thou Black Knight ... I strike through thy helm, and will see thy face, be it Gorgon! ... From all idols I tear all veils; henceforth I will see the hidden things and live right out in my hidden life!” (*Pierre* 65).

As readers we once again detect tragic instead of romantic irony here because the narrator knows, and has indicated to us in frequent predictions of gloom, that Pierre’s quest will end badly. Since he cannot have absolute certainty in this life, and since, as “Plinlimmon’s Pamphlet” illustrates later in the book, human beings must live with earthly limitations, the young and uncompromising enthusiast Pierre, like the older, monomaniac sea captain Ahab, must die. Ishmael, on the other hand,

survives because he is able to live with his many ifs, with temporary theories and the prospect of the everlasting quest.

### ***Pierre, or the Darker Side of Romantic Irony***

Only a few years after Schlegel's initial "futuristic belief in infinite perfectibility" which saw irony as "a mood which rises infinitely above all finiteness," this confidence had disappeared and been replaced by a profound "skepticism against irony as a legitimate principle in poetic creation" (Behler 45). Hegel began to attack the "infinitely absolute negativity" of irony, and the new theories of irony that continued to emerge tended to "turn from the initial optimism of joyous freedom toward sadness, melancholy, and despair." As Behler explains,

this melancholic note of irony devolves from the contradictory experience of infinite longing in the face of the finitude of life. Immeasurable sadness permeates every form of life, since the absolute can only appear in limited, finite, and transitory form. Pain is the basic timbre of nature, transitoriness the mark of art, and the death-wish the desire of him who encounters such experiences. At best, we can only mask and in irony disguise this *Weltschmerz* through feigned laughter and gaiety. (Behler 45)

In Germany, pessimistic feelings about the world soon became linked with "melancholic irony" and "tragic irony, where ... the protagonist, misjudging reality, makes in his hybris (sic) self-assured statements which affect the discerning audience

ironically" (Behler 45). Lilian Furst further helps us understand the dangers inherent in Schlegel's theory and the deadly consequences that result when one cannot move beyond the ironic stage: "the destructive de-creation of irony is envisaged [by the early Schlegel] as a vital step for the subsequent re-creation on a higher plane. The capacity for self-destruction is the ultimate measure of man's faculty for free self-determination" (Furst 28). But although Schlegel's irony springs from the "yearning for transcendence, the shortfall from that desired state can induce a damaging sense of negativity.... Instead of ascending in an ecstatic self-liberation, irony may provoke a descent into an agonizing awareness of uncertainty. The flux of its vaunted mobility may result in acute disorientation," in what Beda Allemann has called "the possibility of inversion into its dark other side" where nihilistic tendencies could take over (Furst 29).

For Schlegel, romantic irony provides a way to think of the world as chaos and to cope with this chaos that results once we lose our belief in God as creator and master of the universe. Because the romantic ironist knows that it will not do to impose a man-made system on this chaos, he strives to "acknowledge the inevitable limitations of his own finite consciousness." But this can work only if, while consciously deconstructing his mystifications of the self and the world, he manages simultaneously to "affirm and celebrate the process of life by creating new images and ideas. Thus the romantic ironist sustains his participation in a creative process that extends beyond the limits of his own mind" (Mellor 5). Viewed this way, life itself is nothing but a pattern of construction and deconstruction, of life, death, and

new life. As a result, our reading of life has to be equally flexible, never final or complete but always incomplete and ever-changing.

Although this fact is very painful to accept, Melville shows us as early as *Mardi*, especially in the character of Babbalanja, that he suspects the serious limitations of what his philosopher can know. In *Moby-Dick* he contrasts Ishmael, the romantic ironist who can accept the provisional nature of all structures we invent and value them as usable fictions, with Ahab who must perish because he cannot accept that "symbols are generated only to be qualified and rejected" and at the same time "affirm the creative process" (Mellor 6). Pierre fails one of the central tests of the romantic ironist, i.e., "the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, while still retaining the ability to function" (Mellor 12). Once Pierre makes up his mind that Isabel is his sister who has been wronged by his father, he sees it as his duty to save her. Although he acknowledges that he cannot unravel her story, he acts as if he has. He is unable to "sustain the incredibly difficult but not impossible dual awareness that everything one believes is both true and false; that what one is both exists and is constantly changing; that nature and society are as stable as they appear and yet are built in the quicksand of chaos." Mellor further reminds us that just as human beings cannot fully "comprehend the chaotic abundance of becoming ... they can never adequately express the limited perceptions they do have." Language itself is, according to Schlegel, a "structured, rational system that by its very nature cannot capture or articulate the unstructured and chaotic" (Mellor 10). As we saw in Chapter I, Melville and Adler were very much aware of the limitations of language. In *Moby-Dick*, we observe Ishmael as he tries and fails to anatomize the whale. In *Pierre*, we

see Isabel struggling with language to capture the many uncertainties she feels about her upbringing. Both Ishmael and Isabel, related by the similarities in the letters and sounds of their names as well as their awareness of the limitations of language, reflect Melville's awareness of and appreciation for Schlegel's philosophy.

### **The Story of Isabel**

As soon as Pierre sees Isabel, he thinks he recognizes features from his father's chair portrait<sup>44</sup> in Isabel's face and tells himself: "Pierre, have no reserves; no minutest possible doubt;--this being is thy sister; thou gazest on thy father's flesh" (*Pierre* 112). Though Isabel is not conscious of being ironic, both the narrator and the reader familiar with Melville's Ishmael detect irony as soon as Isabel begins to speak in doggerel: "Most of these dim remembrances in me, hint vaguely of a ship at sea. But all is dim and vague to me" (*Pierre* 181). She can never tell for sure whether or not she is dreaming and in her, "the solidest things melt into dreams, and dreams into

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<sup>44</sup> Throughout *Pierre*, the chair portrait, painted long before Pierre's father met and married his mother, is contrasted with the drawing-room portrait, the "official" image of her husband that Mrs. Glendinning commissioned herself. Pierre suspects that his mother dislikes the chair portrait because she can intuit that the glance of the face in the portrait, is not, in some nameless way, dedicated to herself, but to some other and unknown object..." (82). Pierre seems to detect similarities between his father's chair portrait and Isabel's face and tells himself: "Pierre, believe not the drawing-room painting; that is not thy father; or, at least, is not all of thy father. Consider in thy mind, Pierre, whether the two paintings may not make only one" (83). We as readers are reminded of the *Doppelgänger* in Jean Paul's *Siebenkäs*.

solidities." As she looks at Pierre, he seems to her surrounded "with a mysterious mistiness" and she tells him that "a second face, and a third face, and a fourth face peep at me from within thy own" (118). While Ishmael would see immediately that Isabel's uncertainties contradict Pierre's convictions, to Pierre, Isabel's story, while it seems uncertain and contradictory, is sure to reach an unambiguous conclusion, for the conventions of Saddle Meadows and the blue eyes of Lucy have always seemed so knowable to him.

Isabel's words at first seem very strange and random to Pierre and to the reader, but they illustrate effectively and painfully what it feels like to be uncertain. As Isabel proceeds with her story, as she tries to piece together different impressions from memory, her language reflects more and more strongly that the version she is telling is merely her current version, based on incomplete memories, of what really happened. Although Melville's critics objected vehemently to Isabel's language and called it "mad," when we view it in the philosophical context of what Schlegel termed Romantic Irony, Isabel's language suddenly becomes a remarkably modern tool, a linguistic device based on German rules for creating new compound words, to express in concrete language what is not at all concrete but only "seems" to Isabel. Melville here is exploring not only a German philosophical concept of eternal constructing and deconstructing, but he does so by using some of the German language patterns he had encountered in Jean Paul and Carlyle.<sup>45</sup> The most frequent

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<sup>45</sup> E. Duyckinck, for example, after objecting to *Pierre* on moral grounds, continues: "Mr. Melville can think clearly, and write with distinctness and force—in a style of simplicity and purity. Why, then, does he allow his mind to run riot amid remote analogies? Why does he give us incoherencies of thought, in infelicities of language? ... Such infelicities of expression, such unknown words as these,

pattern Isabel uses here is to add the suffix *-ness* to a given adjective (as in the German *Heiterkeit* or *Freundlichkeit*). As she tells Pierre about the various houses she lived in as a child, for example, she says the following: "I lived a long time in the house; that alone I know; I say I know, but still I am uncertain; still, Pierre, still the -- oh the dreaminess, the bewilderingness--it never entirely leaves me" (121). Shortly thereafter she uses the words "terribleness," "mercifulness," "beautifulness." As Isabel gets more and more emotional, her use of this language pattern intensifies. She describes how seeing an infant first made her aware of her own "humanness," of both the beauty and infinite sadness of human existence, "of the immortality and universalness of the Sadness." She remembers the "smilingness" of the infant but is mostly struck by the "bewilderingness" of her memories, and by "the stupor, and the torpor, and the blankness, and the dimness, and the vacant whirlingness of the bewilderingness" (*Pierre* 122). As we first read this passage, we feel relieved when Isabel asks Pierre to let her "be still again" (122). Like Melville's contemporary readers we have had enough of this tour-de-force; we are inclined to agree with George Washington Peck<sup>46</sup> when he complains that in these passages, we find "word piled upon word and syllable heaped upon syllable, until the tongue grows as bewildered as the mind, and both refuse to perform their offices from sheer inability to grasp the magnitude of the absurdities" (Branch 318).

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to wit: 'humanness,' 'heroicness,' 'descendedness,' 'flushfulness,' 'amaranthineness,' ... 'protectingness'..." (Branch 302).

<sup>46</sup> In November, 1852, George Washington Peck reviewed Melville's *Pierre* for the *American Whig Review*

But as we reflect on Isabel's awkward attempts to use language, we see that there is a purpose to what initially strikes and annoys us as mere madness. Through these forced word creations Isabel manages to express how extremely tentative her version of the story really is. The narrator and the reader can see how utterly ridiculous it is for the young and naïve Pierre to mistake her words for Truth. If Melville had Isabel use conventional language, her story would seem more certain and therefore more like any other story we hear or read. By alerting us to the fact that this is merely her version, Melville may be suggesting that all stories should resemble Isabel's, for then their fictive and provisional qualities would be clearly visible and we would not be tempted to read them as truth. Given the forced quality of Isabel's word creations, we have no choice but to remember that all language is provisional, that because we are used to its conventions, we take it as more permanent than it really is. We feel irritated because Isabel's language, while it tests our patience, is "truer" than our own. Our conventional usage hides its provisional quality under its familiar and polished surface and thus lies to us as the conventions of Saddle Meadows lied to Pierre. These conventions seem sunny and unambiguous like the opening of *Pierre*, but they are nothing but a colorful façade that hides the darkest, knottiest conundrums of human existence.

Isabel, on the other hand, who is presented to us as a natural child who has had no formal schooling and is therefore unaware of conventions, has to create her own words to try to express what she feels, and the awkward Germanic word creations he knew from Carlyle's prose are Melville's attempt to capture her efforts. Melville's scheme breaks down, though, when he has Isabel reflect on her own

inexperience with language. If she is truly a child of nature, how can she possibly be aware of and articulate the sophisticated sentence that follows? "I never affect any thoughts, and I never adulterate any thoughts..." (123). Isabel is much too aware of her own thought process here to be convincing, but perhaps this is Melville's reminder to his readers that he knows he is conducting a linguistic experiment and that therefore, we should not expect coherence and consistency. He is, after all, experimenting with an idea and is not attempting a realistic rendering of Isabel. By suddenly interrupting the otherwise consistently uneducated voice of Isabel, he may want to make sure that we are still paying attention, that we get it – or perhaps his critics were right and we should count this "flaw" among the many "inconsistencies" and "madnesses" they noticed in the book.

However, despite Isabel's constant reminders that she cannot be sure that what she is telling Pierre about the gentleman who came to her house one day is true, that all she has to go on is her impression of her own face resembling his when both were reflected in a puddle, Pierre decides that the man was his own father and that therefore Isabel is his half sister (124). In his characteristically certain words he tells her: "Know me eternally as thy loving, revering, and most marveling brother, who will never desert thee, Isabel" (127). The words "eternally" and "never" are crucial here, for no true romantic ironist would use them. But they indicate to the attentive reader where and how Pierre goes wrong; they express his desire to hold things still, to force this steadiness if necessary. Pierre has not yet learned that doing so ensures his own demise.

The narrator interrupts the story of Isabel and inserts Book VII to give Pierre an opportunity to process what Isabel has told him. "But the vague revelation was now in him, that the visible world, some of which before had seemed but too common and prosaic to him; and but too intelligible: he now vaguely felt, that all the world, and every misconceivedly common and prosaic thing in it, was steeped a million fathoms in a mysteriousness wholly hopeless of solution" (128). As Pierre becomes aware of the complexities he has been blind to, he himself begins to use Isabel's language: "...the enigmatical story...and the profound sincerity of it, and yet the ever accompanying haziness, obscurity, and almost miraculousness of it ... had displaced all commonness and prosaicness from his soul" (128). Furthermore, the "inexplicable spell of the guitar<sup>47</sup> ...had bewitched him, and enchanted him" (128). Melville is once again drawing on his reading of German books as he portrays Isabel's mysterious power over Pierre. By presenting her as "necromancer," he is using the mystical and supernatural to illustrate the process of deconstructing as it occurs in Pierre's psyche.

Pierre's very possessive mother notices that Pierre is different after his first interview with Isabel and threatens him: "Beware of me, Pierre. There lives not that being in the world of whom thou hast more reason to beware...." To seek refuge from these upsetting experiences, Pierre walks deep into the woods until he reaches a remote stone mass, irregularly shaped and precariously balanced, which he had "christened the Memnon stone" (132). As the narrator is quick to point out, Pierre had no idea of the story that gave the original its name but simply imitated what he had

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<sup>47</sup> Melville is likely to have borrowed the speaking guitar from *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, a German *Bildungsroman* written by Novalis (Arwin 90-91).

heard about the “Egyptian marvel of which all Eastern travelers speak” (135). The narrator then hastens to clue us in so that we will be able to see the full picture, the tragic irony inherent in the legend, as we continue to observe Pierre. We learn that "Memnon was that dewey, royal boy, son of Aurora, and born King of Egypt, who, with enthusiastic rashness flinging himself on another's account into a rightful quarrel, fought hand to hand with his overmatch, and met his boyish and most dolorous death beneath the walls of Troy" (135). Important here is the gap between what the narrator knows and what Pierre knows. One might view Pierre as a younger version of the narrator who, having experienced the hardships of life, is looking back at his younger self – similar to the older Ishmael looking back at the younger one. But this narrator’s attitude towards his younger self is very different, for while Ishmael looks back with bemused smiles and watches that self grow and develop with the help of Queequeg and the deadly realities of life aboard a whaler, the narrator in Pierre, though he feels empathy for the protagonist at times, often ridicules him and, from the very beginning, insists that Pierre’s story will end badly: “Oh, what quenchless feud is this, that Time hath with the sons of Men!” (8).

Familiar with the narrator’s lament, we as readers hold our breath as we watch Pierre tempting fate. By crawling under the huge stone that rests precariously on just one support and may come crashing down any moment, Pierre reveals his uncompromising demand for a definite answer. Though the if-clauses in this passage resemble Ishmael’s in *Moby-Dick*, their meaning differs significantly from Ishmael’s:

If the miseries of the undisclosable things in me, shall ever unhorse me from my manhood's seat; if to vow myself all Virtue's and all Truth's, be but to

make a trembling, distrusted slave of me; if Life is to prove a burden I can not bear without ignominious gringings; if indeed our actions are all foreordained, and we are Russian serfs of Fate; if invisible devils do titter at us when we most nobly strive; if Life be a cheating dream, and Virtue as unmeaning and unsequed with any blessing as the midnight mirth of wine; if Duty's self be but a bugbear, and all things are allowable and unpunishable to man;--then do thou, Mute Massiveness, fall on me! Ages thou hast waited; and if these things be thus, then wait no more; for whom better canst thou crush than him who now lies here invoking thee? (*Pierre* 134)

Whereas Ishmael's if-clauses indicate to us that his conclusions are provisional and that he is aware of this fact, coming from *Pierre* they are transformed into a provocation, a daring of nature and the higher powers to crush him if there is no higher meaning to human life. *Pierre* here reminds us of Ahab in "The Candles," where in a severe storm that has set the masthead on fire, Ahab, after grabbing hold of the lightning rods, "stood erect before the lofty tri-pointed trinity of flames" and tempts lightning to strike him" (*Moby-Dick* 416). Combined with the narrator's explanation of the Memnon myth and *Pierre*'s demand for absolute certainty, the if-clauses here foreshadow the tragic end of *Pierre*.

*Pierre*'s problem seems to come in part from the fact that he feels he has to *act* on his reading of the truth. All human beings experience this pressure to act when faced with uncertainty, but even as we act, we have to remember that we are acting according to our provisional reading, one that will change as we receive and process more information or as our emotions fluctuate. *Pierre* clearly does not meet the

criteria of the romantic ironist as outlined by Mellor and others. Although he realizes that Isabel will forever remain a mystery, he is nevertheless determined to make sense of her story: "He strove to condense her mysterious haze into some definite and comprehensible shape. He could not but infer that the feeling of bewilderment, which she had so often hinted of during their interview, had caused her continually to go aside from the straight line of narration; and finally to end it in an abrupt and enigmatical obscurity" (136).

At this point, Pierre shares the expectations of conventional readers who want a straight plot line without complications or digressions; he is convinced that the second interview with Isabel will bring clarity. Although "he saw, or seemed to see, that it was not so much Isabel who had by her wild idiosyncrasies mystified the narration of her history, as it was the essential and unavoidable mystery of her history itself, which had invested Isabel with such wonderful enigmas to him," (138) Pierre acts as if Isabel was without a doubt his half sister and views himself as her savior who has to set right the wrong committed by his father. The qualifier, "or seemed to see," speaks volumes here for one would assume that if Pierre understood the provisional nature of his interpretation, he would act accordingly and view any meaning he drew from Isabel's winding tale as provisional.

The narrator has known all along and we as readers are beginning to see that the way Isabel tells her story, with all its digressions and interruptions and "vaguenesses," is a truer way than most writers employ. And, just in case we missed it, the narrator tells us more directly what limitations he sees in the generally accepted criteria for a good novel. Not only do these traditional novels lie, they are also

responsible, at least in part, for Pierre's naïvité. As Pierre continues to think about Isabel, he becomes ever more certain that the “mysteriousness was unchangeable,” that “in her life there was an unraveled plot and he felt that unraveled it would eternally remain to him. No slightest hope or dream had he, that what was dark and mournful in her would ever be cleared up into some coming atmosphere of light and mirth.” To Pierre, who “had read more novels than most persons of his years,” this insight comes as a shock because up to this point he had believed in their

false, inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystematizable elements; their audacious, intermeddling impotency, in trying to unravel, and spread out, and classify, the more thin than gossamer threads which make up the complex web of life; these things over Pierre had no power now. Straight through their helpless miserableness he pierced; the one sensational truth in him, transfixed like beetles all the speculative lies in them. He saw that human life doth truly come from that, which all men are agreed to call by the name of *God*; and that it partakes of the unravelable inscrutableness of God.

Pierre comes to see that, as Masson later tells us about the traditional English novel, not always doth life's beginning gloom conclude in gladness; that wedding-bells peal not ever in the last scene of life's fifth act; that while the countless tribes of common novels laboriously spin veils (sic) of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last ... yet the profounder emanations of the human mind ... never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings; but in imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels ... hurry to abrupt intermergings with the eternal tides of time and fate. (*Pierre* 141)

But although "Pierre renounced all thought of ever having Isabel's dark-lantern illuminated to him," although he sees that "her light was lidded, and the lid was locked," he cannot accept that he may never know her paternal heritage and therefore immortalizes her: "for him [she] became transfigured in the highest heaven of uncorrupted Love." He idealizes her and the narrator assures us that "the thought of any other caress [besides one that is natural between brother and sister] was entirely vacant from his uncontaminated soul" (142).

During Pierre's second interview with Isabel, she tells him that her guitar originally came from Saddle Meadows and, as Isabel repeats the word "mother," the "untouched guitar responded with a quick spark of memory" (149). Pierre realizes that Isabel has a "marvelous power" over him, a "power which not only seemed irresistably to draw him toward Isabel, but to draw him away from another quarter...." Later, after his move to the city, Pierre recalled "this first magnetic night, and would seem to see that she then had bound him to her by an extraordinary atmospheric spell--both physical and spiritual--which henceforth it had become impossible for him to break..." (159). But instead of acknowledging his feelings for her, Pierre declares: "Thou art my sister and I am thy brother; and that part of the world which knows me, shall acknowledge thee; or by heaven I will crush the disdainful world down on its knees to thee, my sweet Isabel!" (160). By now we have come to expect Pierre to misread his own emotions as well as external events and to then fix his reading, to elevate it to the level of absolute truth and act accordingly. Though Pierre has persuaded himself that he is going to redeem Isabel by sacrificing himself, the narrator immediately warns us in a passage that resembles "The Whiteness of the

Whale" and "The Try-Works" in *Moby-Dick*: "In those hyperborean regions, to which enthusiastic Truth, and Earnestness, and Independence, will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought, all objects are seen in a dubious, uncertain, and refracting light." As a result,

most "immemorially admitted maxims of men begin to slide and fluctuate, and finally become wholly inverted.... But the example of many minds forever lost, like undiscoverable Arctic explorers, amid those treacherous regions, warns us entirely away from them; and we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by doing so he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike." (*Moby-Dick* 165)

As Ishmael tells us in both scenes, human beings put themselves in great danger if they push their questing too far or throw overboard too much of the traditional wisdom that has sustained them all their lives. Being a true romantic ironist, Ishmael recognizes his limits and acknowledges that he has to remain humble; he knows that as a mere human being, he can tear down an old truth and replace it by constructing a new one, but this process will continue indefinitely. Ishmael therefore does not attempt to nail down "Truth" once and for all and try to impose it on others, for then he would lose all sense of orientation and either drown or, to use the language of "Whiteness," go insane. Casting off from the "Tahiti of our soul," we may attempt to reach the pole, but we must never actually arrive there because we

cannot handle the barrenness and nothingness we would find. And if we ever feel we have reached the ultimate of human knowledge, we will soon revise our assumption.

We will resemble the traveler to the pole:

sudden onsets of new truth will assail him, and overturn him as the Tartars did China; for there is no China Wall that man can build in his soul, which shall permanently stay the irruptions of those barbarous hordes... so that the Empire of Human Knowledge can never be lasting in any one dynasty, since Truth still gives new Emperors to the earth. (*Pierre* 167)

The narrator here identifies Pierre's main error: when he ignores all signs of uncertainty and makes up his mind that Isabel is his sister, he acts as if his current version of the truth is final and leaves no room for revision.

Just as Pierre is preparing to tell Isabel that he has announced publicly that she is his wife (his mother knows this but Isabel does not), and after assuring her and himself that his motive is most pure, Pierre stands close to Isabel and he decides to whisper his secret into her ear.

He held her tremblingly; she bent over toward him; his mouth wet her ear; he whispered it. The girl moved not; was done with all her tremblings; leaned closer to him, with an inexpressible strangeness of an intense love, new and inexplicable. Over the face of Pierre there shot a terrible self-revelation; he imprinted repeated burning kisses upon her; pressed hard her hand; would not let go her sweet and awful passiveness. Then they changed; they coiled together, and entangledly stood mute. (192)

Pierre suddenly realizes that he is in love with and physically attracted to Isabel. Now he has to convince himself that she is not his sister and feels the need to destroy the chair portrait which, due to the resemblance Pierre sees between it and Isabel, earlier helped him establish that Isabel must be his sister (197). So far, Pierre has worked hard to interpret everything in such a way that it pointed towards Isabel being his sister and he her savior. But once he realizes that he is feeling passionate love for Isabel and not a pure love for the ideal she had come to represent, he needs to reconstruct his previous reading. We as readers see the irony in his change of direction. He now tells Isabel to call him brother no more: "I am Pierre" (192).

The second of the many elements in *Pierre* that remind us of Jean Paul's fiction is the old, crumpled pamphlet Pierre comes upon and reads as he and Isabel are en route to the city. Again Melville employs a literary tool he had encountered in the translations of Jean Paul's writings. He uses an "extra-leaf," a digression that appears to have no connection with the story proper, but after close examination turns out to be an essential comment on the story we have been reading. And much like Jean Paul's and Carlyle's "editors," the narrator here justifies including this fragment, this partial pamphlet whose conclusion is missing, by telling us that Pierre was not "entirely uninfluenced" by it. He therefore includes the "curious paper rag" which turns out to be a substantial part of a lecture. The narrator uses it to comment on and criticize the many philosophers who have pretended to have found the "Talismanic Secret" which must forever elude human beings. Among this "guild of self-

impostors,” he names “Plato, and Spinoza, and Goethe” and “a preposterous rabble of Muggletonian Scots and Yankees, whose vile brogue still the more bestreaks the stripedness (sic) of their Greek or German Neoplatonical originals.” These impostor philosophers claim to have received an answer from that “profound Silence that is the only Voice of our God, but we know they are lying, “for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence?” (*Pierre* 208). The narrator is clearly attacking Carlyle and the Germans he translated and admired. Why? What have they done to arouse his anger and distrust?

The pamphlet itself, which begins and ends with the word “if,” illustrates why the Germans along with the Muggletonian Scots and Yankees are not to be trusted. Although human and thus subject to earthly or Greenwich Standard Time, these so-called philosophers claim to have the ability to read heavenly time and tell us to live according to it: “Whereas, almost invariably, with inferior beings, the absolute effort to live in this world according to the strict letter of the chronometricals is, somehow, apt to involve those inferior beings eventually in strange, unique follies and sins, unimagined before” (213). This is clearly the narrator’s comment on what Pierre has been trying to do. He wants to pretend that he is Isabel’s savior and therefore interprets his actions as pure and heroic, only to find that as a human being he is following his all too human instincts. The speaker of the pamphlet then launches into a more sweeping attack of any teachings that tell human beings to be all good when this is ultimately impossible and leads only to hypocrisy. The pamphlet thus applies to the Reverend Falsegrave and his hypocritical treatment of an unwed mother as well

as to the philosopher who claims that human beings are capable of progress, of reaching heavenly goodness.

In the passages that portray young Pierre as the author attempting to write a mature book, Melville further dramatizes the dangers inherent in romantic irony. Once Pierre learns that his reading of Isabel and his actions to save her may not be accurate, he digs in his heels. As the narrator tells us, although the heavens are hidden to Pierre, he is determined to

follow Virtue to her uttermost vista, where common souls never go .... Let the gods look after their own combustibles. If they have put powder-casks in me-- let them look to it! let them look to it! Ah! now I catch glimpses, and seem to half-see, somehow, that the uttermost ideal of moral perfection in man is wide of the mark. The demigods trample on trash, and Virtue and Vice are trash! Isabel, I will write such things--I will gospelize the world anew, and show them deeper secrets than the Apocalypse!--I will write it, I will write it! (273)

Pierre here sees himself as writer-warrior who will tell the whole truth about human nature, including his own. But as he attempts to write this book he gets caught in the dark side of romantic irony, where all roads lead to nothingness. For Pierre, virtue and vice have become nothing, or less than nothing. "Look: a nothing is the substance, it casts one shadow one way, and another the other way; and these two shadows cast from one nothing; these, seems to me, are Virtue and Vice." When Isabel asks him why, if virtue and vice are nothing, Pierre torments himself with them, he replies: "It is the law...that a nothing should torment a nothing; for I am a nothing. It is all a dream--we dream that we dreamed we dream" (274). In this

remarkably modern passage, Melville anticipates a moment in Ernest Hemingway's short-story "A Clean and Well-Lighted Place," where the old waiter uses very similar language to explore nothingness: "It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too.... Our nada who art in nada, nada by the name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada as it is in nada. Give us this day our daily nada..." (Hemingway 114).

Pierre's book soon reflects his disillusionment with his idealistic mission and, as Harrison Hayford has shown, he begins to blame the very hands that fed him:

Now I drop all humorous or indifferent disguises, and all philosophical pretensions. I own myself a brother of the clod, a child of the Primeval Gloom. Hopelessness and despair are over me, as pall on pall. Away, ye chattering apes of a sophomore Spinoza and Plato, who once didst all but delude me that the night was day, and pain only a tickle. Explain this darkness, exorcise this devil, ye can not. Tell me not, thou inconceivable coxcomb of a Goethe, that the universe can not spare thee and thy immortality, so long as--like a hired waiter--thou makest thyself 'generally useful.' Already the universe gets on without thee, and could still spare a million more of the same identical kidney. Corporations have no soul, and thy Pantheism, what was that? Thou wert but the pretentious, heartless part of a man. Lo! I hold thee in this hand, and thou art crushed in it like an egg from which the meat hath been sucked.' (302)

The narrator now lets us glimpse at the fragments of paper that surround Pierre's desk. From these random slips that resemble Carlyle's paper bags and Jean Paul's letter boxes, we see that Pierre knows what is so "black in his soul." And yet he does

not seem able to act on this knowledge. “For in tremendous extremities human souls are like drowning men; well enough they know they are in peril; well enough they know the causes of that peril;--nevertheless, the sea is the sea, and these drowning men do drown" (303). We are reminded not only of the drowning man Melville tried to rescue on his journey to England in 1849, but also of the young Pip who, after spending a night afloat in the “awesome loneliness” of the ocean in *Moby-Dick*, speaks the truth he sees and is therefore considered mad by his fellow sailors.

Like Pip, Pierre “began to see through the first superficiality of the world [and] fondly weens he has come to the underlayered substance. But, far as any geologist has yet gone down into the world, it is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface.” Pierre soon learns the awful truth that

To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficialities. By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and no body is there! – appallingly vacant and vast is the soul of man!” (285)

Just a few pages later the narrator again warns: “Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair and the blackness of the shaft” (288).

Unlike Ishmael, who manages to hang on to Queequeg’s empty coffin-buoy, Pierre “drowns” when he realizes that the sarcophagus is empty. Pierre has accepted that soon as he acknowledged Isabel, his human relations deserted him, but he maintained an unidentifiable faith that he thought would keep him afloat. But as he digs ever

deeper and expresses his disillusionment in his book, his soul becomes that of an atheist: “For the more and the more that he wrote, and the deeper and the deeper that he dived, Pierre saw the everlasting elusiveness of Truth” (339).

## Conclusion

As we saw in our discussion of *Pierre*, the protagonist attacks the very same German thinkers who had been enriching Melville's writing over the last three years. Goethe and Carlyle seem to attract Pierre's special wrath here, but Plato and Spinoza are being mocked here as well. As readers, we are not sure how to take these sudden attacks on the Germans. Are we to laugh at our protagonist, because once again Pierre has misread and is now turning on the philosophers whose world view is too optimistic and sunny? Is Melville the author paying tribute to his German literary models by mentioning them at this central moment in the book? Or is Melville blaming the Germans, now that he has realized how the German *Roman* may have contributed to the ship-wreck of his career? Is Melville having second thoughts after following the example of Schlegel, Jean Paul, Carlyle and Goethe?

After his remarkably successful start, when Melville had created an audience that eagerly awaited the sequel to *Omoo*, his future as a writer seemed secure. But he himself was dissatisfied with the traditional travelogues he felt he had to write to please his audience. As he wrote in a letter to his father-in-law, Judge Shaw, who had helped him financially, Melville considered *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* "two jobs, which I have done for money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood.... So far as I am individually concerned, & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to 'fail'" (*Correspondence* 138). In *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Melville did just that, and by the time reviews of *Pierre* started appearing in English and American literary journals, Melville knew

that he had written “the other way” and had failed as far as his purse was concerned. The reviewers were outraged. The *New York Herald*, for example, objected to the themes of incest and murder in *Pierre* and then continued:

But who is Mr Melville, the copyist of Carlyle? ... No book was ever such a compendium of Carlyle’s faults, with so few of his redeeming qualities, as this *Pierre*. We have the same German English-- the same transcendental flights of fancy—the same abrupt starts—the same incoherent ravings, and unearthly visions. ... Like many other people, Mr. Melville seems to have attributed a large share of Carlyle’s popularity to his bad English. ... Could he [Melville] but sound the depths of his own soul, he would discover pearls of matchless price, that ‘twere a sin and a shame to set in pinchbeck finery. (311)

The American Whig Review raised similar objections by complaining about the “moral deformity” of the book, about its “repulsive, unnatural and indecent plot, a style disfigured by every paltry affectation of the German school, and ideas perfectly unparalleled for earnest absurdity, are deserving of condemnation...” (Branch 316).

After reading these and other equally negative reviews, Melville must have asked himself whether he had gone too far in defying the expectations of his readers and critics. He doubtless was grateful to Carlyle and Adler for providing him access to a group of German writers he found intellectually and literarily congenial, for in a letter to Hawthorne (1851) he writes: “I have written a wicked book and feel spotless as a lamb” (*Correspondence* 212). As the reviews of his last book-length narrative, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*, suggest, Melville’s contact with German philosophy and literature had indeed given him the models and the courage he needed

to write *his* way, to free himself of the confinements imposed on him by the conventions of the traditional British novel. By 1857, after *The Confidence Man* had been published on April Fool's Day of that year, Melville's reviewers were no longer complaining specifically about German influences on his work, but the damage was done. Melville had become a writer who, according to the *London Illustrated Times*, had no intention of writing a novel. Because the reviewer cannot decide what kind of a book *The Confidence Man* is, he refers to it as a "novel, comedy, collection of dialogues, repertory of anecdotes, or whatever it is," and shows his frustration when he adds that the book contains "a mass of anecdotes, stories, scenes, and sketches undigested, and, in our opinion, indigestible" (Branch 381). Although, as Harrison Hayford implies, Melville's "German Streak" was over by 1853, and although Melville only occasionally read German works after the summer of 1850, his experience with Schlegel's theory of the *Roman* had lasting consequences. As Gustaaf Van Cromphout suggests, *The Confidence Man* is as "Romantically ironic as anything written by Jean Paul" (Van Cromphout 41).

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