HERMAN MELVILLE’S conflict with his readers, which lasted the whole ten years of his professional writing life and ended in a defeat which even in our time has not been completely reversed, began in the first paragraph of his first book—Typee. The conventional, cozy, reader-writer relationship in the second sentence is promptly undermined by the apostrophe to “state-room sailors”:

Six months at sea! Yes, reader, as I live, six months out of sight of land; cruising after the sperm-whale beneath the scorching sun of the Line, and tossed on the billows of the wide-rolling Pacific. Weeks and weeks ago our fresh provisions were all exhausted. Those glorious bunches of bananas have, alas, disappeared! There is nothing left us but salt-horse and sea-biscuit. Oh! ye state-room sailors, who make so much ado about a fourteen-days’ passage across the Atlantic; who so pathetically relate the privations and hardships of the sea, where, after a day of breakfasting, lunching, dining off five courses and drinking champaign-punch, it was your hard lot to be shut up in little cabinets of mahogany and maple, and sleep for ten hours, with nothing to disturb you but “those good-for-nothing tars, shouting and tramping over head.”

The author, of course, is a “good-for-nothing tar,” and although he does not say that his readers are self-pitying state-room sailors, he invites such identification, as well as a hostile comparison of the self-pity imputed to them with his own. What he probably intended as playfulness he apparently later recognized as tactlessness (ever a weakness of Melville’s), for he deleted the
apostrophe in the second edition. But the basis of the conflict remained. A former member of that dispossessed class—the common sailor—with which he remained in permanent sympathy, he was now, as journalist, trying to sell prose to the world which dispossessed him. Within a page or two he resumed the sales talk with which he had begun: "The Marquesas! What strange visions of outlandish things does the very name spirit up! Naked houris—cannibal banquets—and bamboo temples carved canoes savage woodlands guarded by horrible idols—heathenish rites and human sacrifices."

Some of his professional problems (in his later and better, as well as in his apprentice, works) were the result of poor craftsmanship. The promise of "naked houris" in the passage above was to cause him trouble, but not for the reason one would expect. In the early Victorian age few objected to the nude females with which *Typee* is richly equipped, for the times granted general immunity to the representation in art of unclothed pagans. In literature, as in painting and sculpture, ladies could be naked from the waist up if they were Indians, ancient Greeks, or other heathen. Melville's real mistake here was technical—a matter of point of view.

As his ship "approached within a mile and half" of Nukuheva Bay, he observed what seemed to be a shoal of fish sporting on the surface but which was in reality a "shoal of 'whihenies' (young girls) who in this manner were coming off from the shore to welcome us," resembling, as they came closer, "so many mermaids." The "swimming nymphs boarded us, seizing hold of the chain-plates" and "bob-stays," where they "hung dripping with the brine and glowing from the bath, sparkling with savage vivacity, laughing gaily, and chattering away with infinite glee."

"Each one "performed the simple offices of the toilette for the other. Their luxuriant locks were freed from the briny element; the whole person carefully dried... anointed with a fragrant oil." Clad only
in a few folds of white tappa "in a modest cincture, around the waist," they were "quickly frolicking about the decks" or "reclined at full length." Extremely youthful, with "delicate features and inexpressibly graceful figures, their softly moulded limbs, and free unstudied action, seemed as strange as beautiful."

Thus far the writing is at least journalistically skilful. The native word "whihenies" establishes the necessary distance between the civilized reader and the naked savage; the metaphors "nymph" and "mermaid" are a demure transition to the more respectable classical heathen world; and in a whole series of phrases the nymphs are endowed with the charms attributed to females in parlor novels—"delicate features," "graceful figures," the ceremony of the "toilette," vivacious chatter. There is much evidence that this kind of thing in *Typee* beguiled even the feminine reader. But the distance between the author and his idyll is closed up by an arch and clumsy comment (also deleted in the revised edition): "What a sight for us bachelor sailors! how avoid so dire a temptation? For who could think of tumbling these artless creatures overboard, when they had swam miles to welcome us?" And the idyll becomes a brawl as the nymph-sylph metaphor, with its implication of innocence subjected to gross mortal aggression, becomes confused with images of piracy. The girls are a "party of boarders," the "bachelor sailors" are "prisoners completely in the hands of the mermaids." The "sylphs" get up a "ball in great style," but it is not a parlor affair: "there is an abandoned voluptuousness in their character which I dare not attempt to describe." The figure shifts again and the voluptuous pirates become victims:

Our ship was now wholly given up to every species of riot and debauchery. *Not the feeblest barrier was interposed between the unholy passions of the crew and their unlimited gratification. [Deleted in the revised edition.]* The grossest licentiousness and the most shameful inebriety prevailed. Alas for the poor savages when exposed to the influence of these polluting examples! Un-
sophisticated and confiding, they are easily led into every vice, and humanity weeps over the ruin thus remorselessly inflicted upon them by their European civilizers. Thrice happy are they who have never been brought into contaminating contact with the white man.

We are not concerned here with the false note in this last passage except to the extent that he exposes the sentimentality of his early liberalism by slipping into the language of the conventional morality which even this early he had rejected—"licentiousness," "polluting," "temptation," "ruin." More germane to our point is that he has confused the point of view of his old self with that of a new self which emerged only when he began to write. Up to the didactic passage he talks with journalistic casualness of the life of the common-sailor Melville of 1841; then suddenly, he shifts to the point of view of the socially conscious Melville writing in 1845. In the first part he reports sympathetically from the point of view of sex-starved bachelor sailors subjected to dire temptation; in the second, the crew becomes an abstraction of the polluting "white man." He sees himself in both cases as an anonymous member of a group whose group behavior can be explained; thus he, as an individual, is exculpated. But his own name was on the title page, and his guarantee that this personal narrative was the "unvarnished truth" was in his Preface. He was therefore anything but anonymous, and hostile critics reminded him of his scandalous past for years. Thus did Melville learn the first of many stumbling lessons in the necessity of putting some kind of distance between himself and his materials. Never thereafter in his work was the author a bona fide "common" sailor.

In his next book, _Omoo_, he separated himself from his mates by describing them as the licentious "reckless seamen of all nations," and himself as a man of education and therefore, inferentially, as one qualified to pass judgments on institutions. Early in _Mardi_, the anonymous narrator is spotted as a gentleman by his mates because of his language, his table manners, and his
"unguarded allusions to Belles Lettres affairs." And in Redburn and Moby-Dick distance is effected through an imagined spokesman who is not Herman Melville.

In this matter Melville might have learned something from Dana's *Two Years before the Mast* (1840). On Dana's first page we find the Cambridge gentleman discarding the "tight dress coat, silk cap and kid gloves of an undergraduate at Cambridge," for the loose duck trousers of a sailor. In his Preface we learn that he is intent on calling "attention to the welfare of seamen," and "promoting their religious and moral improvement." It is probable that Dana's book has always been a more popular classic than Typee because the common reader feels secure in Dana's clearly defined point of view—that he knows its "facts" can be trusted because the writer stands outside his material where the reader is, and never becomes imaginatively involved in the life he describes.

All the evidence shows that Melville, when he entered the literary life, thought of himself not as an artist but as the kind of practical writer who can be called, without prejudice, a journalist. That is, his intention was to communicate, in familiar language and literary forms, materials which readers could absorb and understand without special antecedent knowledge and without any great concentration or effort. His material—travel—was of established appeal, but he was aware that traditional travel-writing, shaped by eighteenth-century rationalism, and pretending to be both objective and "philosophical," was dull and pretentious, and that the new reading audiences found it tiresome. Irving and Longfellow had popularized European travel by romanticizing and sentimentalizing it, and Melville profited by the styles they developed without imitating them much. But Pacific travel-writing, still dominated by the ponderous British
scholarly tradition, had as yet been unaffected by the tastes of the journalist’s audience.

Melville’s first book title reveals his intention to get away from tradition. In *Typee: a Peep at Polynesian Life. During a Four Months’ Residence in a Valley of the Marquesas,* “Typee,” “Polynesian,” and “Valley of the Marquesas” are texture words suggesting the exotic; “Four Months’ Residence” promises that the exotic will be nevertheless based on “real”; and “Peep” (like “glance,” a word much exploited in contemporary journalism) is an assurance that reality will not get the heavy “philosophical” treatment. When the word “Typee” failed to appear on the title page of the first British edition, Melville assured the publisher that to restore that “magic, cabalistic, tabooistic” word would have a gratifying effect on sales.

The title of the London edition of his second book rode on the tail of the first: “*Omoo: a Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas; being a sequel to The ‘Residence in the Marquesas Islands.’ By Herman Melville, author of ‘Typee.’*” Melville’s sales letter to John Murray said that *Omoo* “embraces adventures in the South Seas (of a totally different character from ‘Typee’) and includes an eventful cruise in an English Colonial Whaleman and a comical residence on the island of Tahiti.”

Melville’s close interest in public taste is also reflected in his prefaces. Prefaces have historically had the function of setting the writer in relation with his reader. In general the pattern has been that prefaces are longer at the beginning of a writer’s career, or at crucial points in his development when he is uncertain about his work; and that when his status, whether high or low, has become established, he stops writing prefaces altogether. Melville’s practice fits the pattern. The Preface to *Typee* is a piece of salesmanship. The reiterated words are “adventure,” “occurrence,” “incident,” “yarn,” “singular,” “strange,” “fact,” these serving at once as guarantee and apology that he is diverg-

---

*This was the title of the New York edition.—Ed.*
ing from the traditional mode of travel-writing. He will refrain from “entering into explanations concerning [the] origins and purposes” of native customs, because such material is usually “diffuse,” i.e., non-journalistic. He will omit the customary dates, i.e., the kind of facts that do not serve to maintain interest. He will ignore formal chronological order whenever he wishes to serve the readers’ interest in recent events in the South Seas. He will not be scholarly about Polynesian pronunciation, knowing that the reader is less interested in philology than in “beautiful combinations of vocal sounds.”

In the narrative itself, Melville’s defense of journalistic method becomes an offensive against the “scientific voyagers”—the learned tourists who get their “facts” about primitive religions from “retired South-Sea rovers.” The beachcomber is flattered when interviewed by the scholar, and “his powers of invention increase with the credulity of his auditors. He knows just the sort of information wanted [exaggeration of the “evils of Paganism”] and furnishes it to any extent.” When the scientist gets home he writes a “learned” account of superstitions and practices, about which he knows as little as the islanders do themselves, for “they are either too lazy or too sensible to worry themselves about abstract points of religious belief.”

Although, apparently, Melville did not know it, such skepticism was in harmony with the mid-nineteenth century attack on inherited rationalistic methods of speculating about primitive cultures—on all the glorified guesswork and a priori thinking that went under the name of “philosophic research.” The London Spectator missed the point when it said that Melville was not “trained in those studies which enable men to observe with profit.” To the journalist such “profit” was spurious; his road to truth was through “what he had seen.” Twenty-five years later, American journalists were still on the offensive against the tradition, on behalf of the common reader. Mark Twain’s Preface to Roughing It asserts that his book is “merely a personal narrative”; that his material is “interesting,” “curious,” “peculiar”;
that his book is not a "pretentious history or a philosophical dissertation"; and that he will not "afflict [the reader] with metaphysics or goad him with science."

These two books, to Melville's eventual chagrin, were accepted largely on his own terms: they were instantly labeled, on both sides of the Atlantic, as "popular" writing "for the million." In dozens of reviews the same adjectives appeared: fresh, lively, light, animated, vigorous, racy, readable, easy, interesting.

But there was a powerful, if small, dissenting minority who were to become more influential once Melville's novelty had worn off and his later books spelled out the implications of the first two. It was to be expected that the missionary and denominational groups should resent his criticisms, attack him in their periodicals, and attempt to coerce his publisher. When the American Board of Foreign Missions appended to a large order of Wiley and Putnam books a statement of its "regret that [Typee] bears the respectable name of your house," Wiley promptly got Melville to prepare an expurgated edition, and was reported to be "agitated" in his "conscience" when he was offered Omoo.

The fact that Omoo was actually published by the Harpers, a firm which had religious connections with Methodism, suggests the problem faced by many American writers of that time—a reading audience so mixed that it was difficult to predict public reactions to deviations from common beliefs and accepted standards of decorum. Audiences have always been more or less mixed, of course, but in various times and cultures it has been possible for writers to address themselves to reader groups of definable degrees of tolerance and sophistication. The stratification which gives writers a degree of freedom in our time did not begin in America until well after 1850. In 1846, when Typee
appeared, books were offered to an undifferentiated audience of men, women, and adolescents, and were therefore subject to fantastically wide ranges of response. Melville's book, with its criticism of religious institutional activities, its naked "houris," voluptuous dances, and sailor orgies, was recommended for its "pretty and spirited pictures" by Margaret Fuller in the New York Tribune, who predicted that it would be read aloud in the "sewing societies of the country"; the columnist "Grace Greenwood" called it "charming"; and there is abundant evidence that it and Omoo were read aloud in families (including Longfellow's) and were popular with the young. At the other extreme, a representative New York magazine said that Typee catered to the "vicious appetites of [the] sailor"; and that Omoo was "vendible," "venemous," and "venerous." The London Times predicted that Typee would "exhilarate the most enervated and blasé of the circulating library loungers"; and Sir Walter Farquhar urged Lord Ashley to tell John Murray that Melville's works were not such as "any mother would like to see in the hands of her daughters," and that he was not living up to his pledge that the "Home and Colonial Library" (in which the two books were issued) would contain "nothing offensive to moral and good taste."

Between these extremes there was wide recognition that the books were "racy." Some, like Hawthorne in the Salem Advertiser, reminded the reader that the life of a young sailor "renders him tolerant of codes of morals little in accordance with our own." But it was Horace Greeley, Miss Fuller's employer on the Tribune, who saw the problem of reader levels: Melville was a "born genius"; but his books are "dangerous reading for those of immature intellects and unsettled principles. Not that you can put your finger on a passage positively offensive; but the tone is bad if not morally diseased."

Greeley's last sentence focuses for us the matter of the sophistication of Melville's readers. The editor did not put his
finger on that passage in Chapter XX of *Typee* where the half-naked, beflowered girls dance in the moonlight, “all-over, as it were,” in a way that was “almost too much for a quiet, sober-minded, modest young man like myself.” In the revised edition Melville wisely corrected this defect in “distance” by removing the last-quoted phrase. Apparently at this point, also, he removed from the manuscript a detailed description of the dance which he “thought best to exclude from *Typee*,” but used it, “modified and adapted,” in Chapter LXIII of *Omoo*.

To the modern reader that dance is plainly phallic, its patterns representing coition and orgasm. Two taller girls, their hands joined overhead, stand in the middle of a ring of dancers. Taking their cues from the pair within, the ring expands and contracts, its movements varying from wild abandon to languorous stillness. At the climax the ring-dancers reel forward, “their eyes swimming in their heads,” and joining in “one wild chorus,” they sink into each other’s arms. Greeley did not put his finger on this passage either, but note its new context: the observer is no longer a “modest young man” but, instead, two men with a touristic and anthropological interest in the “heathenish games and dances” which “still secretly lingered in the valley” after the advent of the missionaries. Far from being a part of the life openly observed and shared by the author in *Typee*, the dance is surreptitious, the girls being guarded by “hideous old crones, who might have been duennas,” and the two spectators are hidden at a distance. Personal response comes not from the young writer but from his disreputable companion, the “ruined gentleman,” Dr. Long Ghost, whom the narrator with difficulty restrains from “rushing forward and seizing a partner.” When, the next day, the doctor recognizes a girl who took part in the dance and makes overtures, he gets his ears boxed.

If Greeley and other commentators understood either the dance or the doctor’s reaction to it, they did not say so. It may have been at this time that Melville began to develop his convic-
tion that the unpalatable may, through disguise, be concealed from “superficial skimmers,” as he called the common readers. At any rate, he seems to have got away with certain crude passages, and with the chapter on the whale’s penis in *Moby-Dick*, and with allegory of gestation and childbirth in the “Tartarus of Maids,” which he published in *Harper’s New Monthly* in 1854.

Yet Greeley did say that Melville’s tone was bad, if not morally diseased, and there is other evidence that even at the height of his early popularity, he was beginning to be recognized as an enemy of society as well as of common standards of taste. Seen in strictly historical perspective, the most perceptive reader of his books was George Washington Peck, a self-described “conservative” whose allegiance to certain aspects of Coleridge’s thought entitle him to be considered a “new conservative” of that day. He declared himself impatient with writers like Melville who were producing “literature for the million” instead of for the “judicious few”; and as a spokesman for that class of readers (rather than for the mass or for the artist), Peck rightly condemned the “tone and spirit” of *Omoo* as effects of the author’s bad intellectual and moral character. As a believer of the culture of which he was a part, he understandably interpreted Melville’s hostility to civilized institutions as “cool, sneering wit, and perfect want of heart.” “If these writers would only leave us alone in our simple religious faith, in our common views of God, ourselves, and the world. But they muddle the mind, and make the voice of reason and conscience ‘an uncertain sound.’” Such candid recognition that literature is inimical to common beliefs was as rare in criticism then as now, but the implications of many less honest reviews of Melville were the same. Peck would probably have agreed with the writer of a rejoinder who said that the “vast majority of readers” accept *Omoo* “with unmixed delight,” for only his “judicious few” would let Melville’s social criticism spoil their pleasure in his narrative. And Peck did not, like most of the rest, mistake Melville’s
developing subversiveness for the sentimental primitivism of that day.

In England, where it was assumed that if a gentleman went to sea it was as an officer, never as a common sailor, some critics objected that *Typee* must be a faked narrative, for no common sailor, if he could write at all, could command such a style. These, then, must be the fabricated adventures of a gentleman-author. More perceptive British reviewers pointed out that things were different in America—where "popular education bestows upon the American a greater familiarity with popular attitudes and a readier use of the pen than is usual with classes of the same apparent grade in England," and that therefore Melville could be a social nobody. Yet the suspicion persisted that Melville was a gifted Munchausen, or that, at the very least, if his story was true, it had been "touched up" by some "literary artist." The controversy spread to America where commentators took sides—not one of two sides, but as many sides as there were attitudes toward fact and fiction.

In the forties, fiction, though increasingly popular, still had in general a low status as an art. One common opinion posited an absolute dichotomy between "fact," which was "truth," and "fiction," which was "falsehood." It was reported that when John Murray (a connoisseur of travel books whose contempt for fiction was well known) read the manuscript of *Typee*, he "scented the forbidden thing—the taint of fiction"; and that the house of Harper, after some disagreement, rejected it because "it was impossible that it could be true and therefore was without real value."

Melville himself contributed to the confusion (and shared it) by insisting that he had told the "unvarnished truth." It is hard to tell what he meant by "varnish," but his style is proof, if we
need it, that his eye had its own way of seeing: a Marquesan girl seen as a “nymph” is certainly “touched up.” He tells us that natives eat live fish, which is truth; he also tells us that when the beautiful Fayaway eats one it is “as delicately as a lady eats a biscuit”—which is not untruth but probably varnish. Even his ordering of the events in such a way as to create suspense by balancing his idyllic existence against the fear of being cooked by cannibals was a kind of varnish, if not a kind of fiction. But some readers associated this suspense with the artificial manipulations of “plotted” fiction, and therefore questioned the truth of the events. Hostile readers called him Munchausen, but the great majority called him the American Defoe, his book Robinson Crusoe, and his skill verisimilitude. Whatever genre Typee and Omoo may belong to, Melville had not yet explored the problem of the relation of fact to the imagination, for in his Preface to Omoo he was still talking in terms of “correct observation.” But only a year or two later, he says, through one of his mouthpieces in Mardi, “Things visible are but the conceits of the eye: things imaginative, conceits of fancy. If duped by one, we are equally duped by the other.” Sometime during the years 1847-48, Melville began to think like an artist.

Up to that point there is as little evidence in his books as outside of them that he was, or regarded himself as, any more than a gifted journalist and yarn-spinner whose major motive was to divert readers. He was untouched then (but not later) by that tradition of authorship which put a value on the writer’s privacy and shunned vulgar promotion and publicity. He co-operated gladly in getting editors to publicize his books, and even wrote an anonymous defense of Typee. In a review of another man’s nautical work he celebrated the triumph of “plain, matter-of-fact” sea narratives over “spiritual” addresses to the ocean, like Byron’s.

Nor had he at this time the serious writer’s feeling about the inviolability of his text. When he expurgated Typee at the request
of his timid American publisher, he remarked complacently that "I trust as it now stands the book will retain all those essential features which most commended it to the public favor"; and he was not quite honest, in the Preface to the revised edition, in saying that "several passages, wholly unconnected with that adventure, have been rejected as irrelevant," for the passages were not several but many, and some were anything but irrelevant.

Seen in relation to his later works, *Typee* and *Omoo* are something more than good diversion. The social criticism in them is more conspicuous to us than to contemporary readers because we have been taught to look for it. Moreover, we know now that in the process of recalling his adventures Melville was beginning to discover the self which was to produce *Moby-Dick*. But more serious and socially responsible readers like Greeley and Peck looked past his pretty nymph Fayaway and found the heathen mistress of a man who respected heathens as if they were people; looked past his idyllic valley to find an indictment of the valleys of the Thames and the Hudson; past his criticism of missionaries to find fundamental doubts about Christian culture. These few were in the vanguard of what was to become majority opinion about Melville.

5

Sometime between January 1 and March 25, 1848, Melville was transformed from a journalist into a writer who identified himself with the great tradition of Western art which grew out of the Renaissance. Before that time he had conceived of his third book, *Mardi*, which he began before *Omoo* was published in March, 1847, as "another book of South Sea Adventure (continued from, tho' wholly independent of, 'Omoo')." He was still thinking in terms of commercial originality: the scenes will be "altogether new," and the new work will "possess more interest
than the former, which treated of subjects comparatively trite"; the field is "troubled with few & inconsiderable intruders." Fear­ring that he had worked out the vein of factual, personal adven­ture in his first two books, he worked out a plan which "clothes the whole subject in new attractions & combines in one cluster all that is romantic, whimsical & poetic in Polynesia. It is yet a continuous narrative." Certain that it would make a "hit," he asked of Murray double the advance he had received for Omoo.

On March 25 Melville wrote John Murray the letter which announced the crucial change in his creative life. He now, a year before Mardi was actually published, informed the publisher who was to refuse his book that it would not be the continuation of South Sea adventures that he had promised. "To be blunt: the work I shall next publish will in downright earnest a 'Romance of Polynesian Adventure.' But why this? The truth is, Sir, that the reiterated imputation of being a romancer in disguise has at last pricked me into a resolution to show that a real romance of mine is no Typee or Omoo."

This was his "main inducement" in altering his plans, and he was to repeat it in the published Preface of the book. But he qualifies the motive at once: he had apparently conceived such a work much earlier. "I have long thought that Polynisia furnished a great deal of rich poetical material that has never been employed hitherto in works of fancy," and he had thrown off "occasional sketches" for such a work, but postponed the project. But as he wrote the first Mardi, which was a "narrative of facts I began to feel an incurable distaste for the same; & a longing to plume my pinions for a flight & felt irked, cramped & fettered by plodding along with dull common places,—So suddenly standing the thing altogether, I went to work heart & soul at a romance which is now in fair progress."

At this point he announced his departure from those current traditions of fiction which few but Poe and Hawthorne and Brown had thus far managed to escape from, and they only at
the cost of popularity. At a time when almost all vendible American fiction was based on either history or "real" contemporary life, Melville conceived an imagined narrative which, though it derived from Rabelais and Swift (and the tradition of allegory), was not classifiable with anything that readers were currently consuming. Aware that the fiction-hating Murray would misunderstand his use of the word "romance" (which indeed had no fixed meaning), he begged him not to "exclaim 'Pshaw! Puh!'—My romance I assure you is no dish water nor its model borrowed from the Circulating Library [where Murray found most of his customers]. It is something new I assure you, & original if nothing more. . It opens like a true narrative—like Omoo for example, on ship board—& the romance & poetry of the thing thence grow continually, till it becomes a story wild enough I assure you & with a meaning too." He saw the commercial risk in "putting forth an acknowledged romance upon the heel of two books of travel," but "My instinct is to out with the Romance, & let me say that instincts are prophetic, & better than acquired wisdom."

In the light of the statement that "it opens like a true narrative," one wonders whether he really "abandoned" his original project altogether. Certainly, in the finished work, the first forty chapters might have served as the beginning of the work Melville first proposed to Murray. The narrator and a shipmate, Jarl, desert a whaler in a small boat; encounter another ship, unmanned except for a Polynesian couple; hear the antecedent story of the couple and their ship; are forced to abandon the ship in a storm; and continue on in the small boat with the couple in search of certain islands. They meet an island craft full of natives who hold captive a beautiful maiden doomed to be sacrificed. The group rescues her, and the narrator kills the head priest.

Up to this point the story is a "narrative," in Melville's sense—imagined rather than autobiographical, it is true, but derived from physical rather than spiritual experience. Melville fans
might well have expected the maiden to be another Fayaway, and subsequent adventures to be itinerant as in *Omoo*. But at the point where the maiden is revealed to have been transformed by supernatural means from an olive-skinned brunette to a golden-haired, blue-eyed blonde, with whom the hero, in quite un-Tommo fashion, experiences transcendental love-at-first-sight, a new book begins. Though the hero and the girl are said to have "lived and loved," admirers of Fayaway found this romance antiseptic—and somewhat spoiled by the hero's growing doubts of his own motives in rescuing her and killing the priest. After the Mardi islanders, unlike the matter-of-fact Typees, mistake this jump-ship tar for a demigod (a "Taji"), the physique becomes insubstantial and translucent, and the continuing solidity of Jarl and Samoa are embarrassing to the story. When Yillah mysteriously disappears, and Taji begins his search—as abstract as Thoreau's quest after the hound, the bay horse, and the turtle dove—Jarl and Samoa are out of a job. Melville does not exactly drop them down a well, as Mark Twain said he did with his stranded characters in the first version of *Those Extraordinary Twins*, but he has to do some shifty footwork to get them off the scene. He may have guessed that many of his Circulating Library customers would exit with them, for among his alternative explanations of Samoa's refusal to continue the search (he was "not the first man, who had turned back, after beginning a voyage like our own") was his distaste for Babbalanja's "disquisitions" (which were indeed distasteful to most reviewers), and for a Mardi which had not met his expectations. A year after the London publication of *Mardi* in three volumes, Bentley, the publisher, wrote the author that the "first volume [which included all the first forty chapters] was eagerly devoured, the second was read," but the third was so ill adapted "to the class of readers whom the First Volume gratified" that it virtually "stop[ped] the sale of the book." The reviewers agreed that there was a general exodus of readers along with Samoa.
The exodus is understandable if one approaches *Mardi* as a book rather than as a revelation of Melville's intellectual development. Though every paragraph of the world-allegory that follows Chapter XL may be interesting for its speculative commentary on man's problems, it is allegory rather than narrative—and as tiresome and confusing as nineteenth-century allegory had to be, deprived as it was of a basis in common belief such as Spenser and Bunyan had been able to build on. Taji's quest for Yillah quite properly ended in suicide, not in a new version of the meaning of life which traditional allegory had offered.

The design of the allegorical part of *Mardi* can be explained largely in terms of Melville's need for scope and for protection from readers who insisted on typing him as an uneducated sailor with a gift for "popular" writing. The new Melville was overflowing with speculations on the nature of the individual, on the relation of genius to society, and on all the major problems of contemporary civilization. He needed a form in which his unordered, unfocused, many-sided, often contradictory speculations could be given free play—in which, indeed, he could play with ideas without committing himself to a position.

The form he found was that of the expanding "self." The first-person narrator, who on the title page and in the Preface is the well-known traveler-Melville, becomes in the first few chapters a learned, philosophic, poetic tar who is to record fictional adventures loaded with commentary. But after he loses Yillah, and is joined in his search for her by three mortals—Yoomy, the Poet; Mohi or Braidbeard, the Chronicler; and Babbalanja, the Philosopher—and by a real demigod, King Media (the Mediator), his status changes, his function as commentator being wholly taken over by his companions, especially Babbalanja. Even his role as narrator becomes obscure and confused. The "I" of the first chapters becomes "we" in the allegory, and even the "we" often becomes the voice of authorial omniscience released from the control of the grammatical first person. Sometimes,
within the space of a page or two, Taji speaks as "we," is addressed by the author as "you," and is referred to by his companions in the third person as if he were not there. In one spot, Melville even shoulders him aside and speaks directly as author: "My cheek blanches while I write while I slave and faint in this cell." (In context, "cell" can mean only Melville's study.)

Taji's disintegration as narrator is at the center of the structural weakness of the book. Nothing but his restlessness in the narrative portion motivates his quest for the bloodless lost blonde, or justifies his suicidal pursuit of her after his companions have deserted him. Both he and his quest are lost sight of entirely in long stretches of the allegory. The convincing quest in this book resides not in his search but in the speculative discourse of his mouthpiece, Babbalanja.

When Melville becomes Taji, his commentary becomes speculative discourse distributed among the three other mortals, with Media acting as a kind of chairman. Although Mohi, the chronicler, sometimes contributes stories, and sounds like Melville when he does, he functions mainly as the scorer of fanciful and imaginative elements in the discourse of Yoomy and Babbalanja. He is a compound of Melville's former self and of those critics who had doubted his "authenticity." Yoomy is the poet in the new Melville, a tender-minded believer, sympathetic with fancy and impatient of raw fact, but "capricious swayed by contrary moods . made up of a thousand contradictions [and] no one in Mardi comprehended him." In these respects he is counterpart to Babbalanja, though, unlike him, he is strongly affirmative: he is that in Melville which believed that the principle represented by Yillah (enduring truth and beauty) might be discovered in the United States.

The dominant character and chief talker is Babbalanja, who, from the beginning, is "not so buoyant of hope concerning lost Yillah" as Yoomy, but who nevertheless joins the party "in
quest of some object, mysteriously hinted.” He is the seeker after meaning, and the believer in “polysensuum,” or many meanings. He is the “everlasting foe” of all Mohis. He is the man who fights “the armed and crested Lies of Mardi.” He is also a poet, though he “dives,” unlike Yoomy, who “soars.” Through his explanations and defenses of the great mythical authors, Bardianna, Vavona, and Lombardo, he becomes the spokesman for art and the enemy of Philistinism. <In this role he is the outlet for Melville’s insatiable reading (at least one of his “quotations” is taken verbatim from ________) and his new commitment to the world of art and thought.>

But even this expansion of self through the great thought of the past is insufficient. He is in search of the very principle of “self,” and finds his own self multiple. He declares himself inhabited by a “stranger” whom his friends know but who is “independent of me.” When, in the pursuit of truth, he reaches the limits of the communicable, he is possessed by his demon, Azzageddi, and lapses into gibberish, muttering “fugle-fi, fugle-fo, fugle-fogle-orum.” And at times he puts both the “stranger” and Azzageddi aside and regards himself as a “lunatic,” but this is only in moments when “I most resemble all other Mardians.”

Through these many personae, then, but mainly through the line of Taji, Babbalanja, Bardianna, and Azzageddi, Melville found his needed scope, and, he futilely hoped, the protective barrier behind which he could make many bold explorations with few commitments.

From first to last Melville was a trial-and-error experimental writer who never quite knew what he wanted to do—or did not want to do—until he had done it. And the allegory of Mardi was one of his errors. (A year after publication his “mood” about the book had changed: he has never looked at it “since I thanked God it was off my hands.”) But the first forty chapters were a trial in which he found his proper form—a form which became the base (but not the superstructure in all cases) of his sub-
sequent books. And it was a form through which he might have acquired a sophisticated as well as a popular audience, as Shakespeare did with his plays.

That form consisted of a loose, episodic narrative—not at all dramatic (that is, it is not a *story* which delivers its chief weight through action and character), but dependent for its effect on vivid description and the graphic presentation of isolated incident. To his skill in this kind of narrative, as first displayed in the travel books and perfected in *Mardi*, his generation paid full tribute. But this to Melville was mere craft, and he felt cramped within its restrictions. To the narrative part of *Mardi* he added a new dimension which raised narrative to the realm of poetry. The episodic narrative becomes a vehicle for reflection and commentary—humorous, satirical, learned, allusive, philosophical, speculative, image-laden. If he learned this art of rich and varied commentary from Rabelais and Sir Thomas Browne, he made it an art of his own more completely than he was able to do with the dramatic art that he was shortly to learn from Shakespeare but never to master.

In a sense it is an art of digression: digression becomes art in that, though it is structurally separable, like a parenthesis in a sentence, it is still relevant to the embracing purpose. Thus, in Chapter II (“Calm”) the narrator’s wish to desert the whaler is intensified by the harrowing experience of a prolonged and absolute sea-calm. He is reminded of his first experience as a landsman with such a calm: “These impressions may merit a page.” He then by intense imaginative exploration of the experience evokes what he elsewhere calls the “metaphysics of the thing.” “It not only revolutionizes his abdomen, but unsettles his mind,” undermines his conceptions of time and space, renders the “parallels and meridians” of the globe truly imaginary, shakes “his belief in the eternal fitness of things; in short, almost makes an infidel of him,” and he grows “madly skeptical.”

Some of Melville’s finest writing is in his digressions on “wonders of the sea.” It is in *Mardi* that Melville first emerges
as one of the greatest of all American popularizers of natural history and the technology of seamanship. When, for example, he sees a devilfish, he makes it the occasion of an informal but learned essay on sharks. All of his book-learning on the subject comes to life through his actual observation of sharks in their element. Reflections on natural violence develop into a dissertation on love, hate, and Timonism.

Though no one can, with certainty, say exactly what numerous reviewers meant when they said *Mardi*, *White-Jacket*, and *Moby-Dick* were "poetic," it is evident that they were pleased with his combination of "fact and fancy" even when they disapproved of his books as totalities and distrusted the tone of his mind. It is possible that his new episodic-digressive method might have enabled the newborn poet to continue as self-supporting professional writer. But it did not. The new Melville needed even greater scope for self-expression than this method afforded, and in shifting to allegory after Chapter XL, he was only beginning his ceaseless and, on the whole, fruitless, search for an art structure (as opposed to method) adequate to his aspirations. And the further he searched, the more he alienated readers who were willing to meet him halfway on the road he had taken from journalism to poetry.

The search and the alienation began while he was writing *Mardi*, and both were products of two new developments in his vocational character. The search grew out of a new and exalted conception of the function and nature of the artist, a conception which was the product of the insatiable reading which began after his return from the Pacific. As he absorbed the masters—Dante and Rabelais and Browne and Milton and the King James Bible, to name only a few—he became aware of, almost obsessed with, a sense of his affinity with the creative spirit in Western art from Homer to Hawthorne, and with the need to do something "big." It was in a spirit of malice that some critics of *Mardi* said he had discovered he was a genius, but it would be fair to say that he had acquired a consciousness of what it means
to be a genius. And part of that meaning he defined as doom: it had always been the fate of the creative artist to endure suffering, frustration, and misunderstanding in his time. Only after it had broken and buried him had society ever been willing to celebrate (without comprehending) his art.

His own developing sense of doom, however, it must be emphatically said, was not the result of being rejected but of being accepted and admired for the wrong reasons. He had expected *Typee* and *Omoo* to be read as entertaining but truthful autobiography, and as accurate observation of the impact of civilization on primitive cultures. But in the critical debate over their authenticity, he was probably less amazed that the hostile minority called him Munchausen than that the friendly majority called him Defoe, for who believed that Robinson Crusoe’s adventures were Defoe’s own? Moreover, those who most admired him as a Defoe seemed to ignore his social criticism. Hence the belligerence of the *Mardi* Preface in the face of the “success” of *Typee* and *Omoo*: inasmuch as these had been received with incredulity, he would see whether this “fiction” would be “received for a verity.” In the book itself he reiterates his resentment. When Samoa told his “incredible tale” he told it as a traveller. But stay-at-homes say travellers lie.” Yet “few skeptics are travellers; fewer travellers liars.” In the chapter on “Faith and Knowledge” (XCVII) he says, “And many infidels but disbelieve the least incredible things; and many bigots reject the most obvious. The higher the intelligence, the more faith, and the less credulity.” Then, almost perversely, he challenges the reader’s capacity for imaginative truth: “In some universe-old truths, all mankind are disbelievers. Do you believe that you lived three thousand years ago? No. But for me, I was at the subsiding of the Deluge, and helped swab the ground.” In the opposition of *I* to “all mankind,” the alienation of the romantic artist is revealed.

The quarrel with the reader continues in Babbalanja’s discussion of the problem of contemporary reputation in relation
to posthumous fame—commentary we can be sure is authorial because it is echoed in Melville’s correspondence. He, like all American professional writers after 1800 from Irving to Faulkner, was a victim of the circumstance that literature was a potential commodity and the writer’s personality a sales factor. He had already felt the humiliation of being typed as “Herman Typee Melville,” “Mr. Omoo,” and Fayaway’s lover, and he was often to refer to himself bitterly as “Author of ‘Peedee,’ ‘Hullabaloo’ and ‘Pog-Dog.’” It was the public’s relentless determination to identify a book with their limited conception of the person who wrote it that impelled Melville to cry, through Babbalanja, when Yoomy sings an immortal but anonymous song, “This were to be truly immortal; to be perpetuated in our works, and not in our name. Let me, oh Oro! be anonymously known.” The Melville who asked Murray to omit “by the author of Typee and Omoo” from the title page of Mardi is the Babbalanja who asks, “Does not all Mardi by its actions declare it is far better to be notorious now than famous hereafter?” Yoomy suggests that the “unappreciated poet” may “console himself for the neglect of his contemporaries” by the hope of fame in the future. But Babbalanja asserts that there is “more likelihood of being over-rated while living than of being under-rated when dead.” Writers have a “feverish, typhoid” wish to believe that “now, while living they are recognized as those who will be as famous in their shrouds as in their girdles.” But this is illusion. The “ravening for fame,” even if appeased, “yields no felicity. To insure your fame, you must die.”

Later in the book Melville joins the long procession of American writers who, in their insecurity and their wish to be understood as writers, write literature about literature. One chapter, “Dreams” (XV), a direct utterance of Taji-Melville, constitutes a testament of romantic art to which most of his great contemporaries could have subscribed. In part it is a Whitmanian catalogue identifying self with everything outside of self—a breaking down of all barriers of time and space, of all
barriers between souls. In a catalogue of great writers of all times, it affirms the great “community of genius” in which a Melville is one with Montaigne, “blind Milton sings bass to my Petrarchs and Priors, and laureats crown me with bays.” All geniuses being but mouthpieces of the eternal, the flow of wisdom and light runs both ways in time, so that as Babbalanja says later, “I do not so much quote Bardianna as Bardianna quoted me, though he flourished before me.”

The exaltation of this feeling of community is not unmixed with terror, for as the vehicle of a “memory [of] a life beyond birth,” the poet is ridden by a Dionysus, and devoured by his “mad brood of eagles.” Nor is it unmixed with the romantic writer’s self-pity—the wish to let the world know that writing is agony, that the masterpieces it reads are the products of killing labor and exhausting involvement. “Oh!” says Lombardo, through Babbalanja, “could Mardi but see how we work, it would marvel more at our primal chaos, than at the round world thence emerging.”

Most of the commentary on writing, however, is conceived in defensiveness against the reader. A better part of twelve pages of Chapter CLXXX is devoted to corrections of the public’s vulgar conceptions of the creative process.

Though the discussion centers on Lombardo, author of “Koztanza,” who stands for any great artist of the past who received “coppers then, and immortal glory now,” the applicability of the passage to Melville himself is obvious. Lombardo’s motive for writing his great work was double: first, a “full heart,” and second, the need to “procure his yams.” Without the second—that is, lacking poverty, “fierce want,” or adversity—the genius has no lever to make him communicate. (Here speaks the Melville who, during the course of writing Mardi, married, borrowed to buy a house and got into permanent debt with his publisher and his father-in-law.)

In the conversation King Abrazza, the arch-Philistine of the group, utters platitudes about writers and writing (which are
still current), and is refuted by Babbalanja. Says Abrazza, Lombardo deserves small credit because it must have been easy work to set down full-fledged inspirations. (No, says Babbalanja, his thoughts were at first callow, though eventually they soared.) To get into the writing mood, he probably fasted and invoked the muses. (No, he bought vellum and quills, and had a good meal. "What fasting soldier can fight? the fight of all fights is to write.") Then he "dashed off. " (He dashed off nothing. In ten days he wrote fifty pages—and then burned them.) Oh, so this genius wrote trash! (Genius is full of trash, but tries to get rid of it: "giving away its ore, [it] retains the earth.") Then genius is inspired after all. (All men are inspired, even fools; but Lombardo wrote deeper and deeper into himself until he knew what he sought.) Did he not keep himself inspired by drinking? (No; "though he loved it, no wine for Lombardo while actually at work.") Why did he "choose a vehicle so crazy?" "The unities are wholly wanting in the Koztanza." It "lacks cohesion; it is wild, unconnected, all episode." (He chose that vehicle because "it was his nature." Mardi itself is "nothing but episodes; rivers, digressing from plains; vines, roving all over; boulders and diamonds; And so, the world in the Koztanza.") I suppose he admired his own work? (Hard to say. Sometimes when alone he thought well of it; but when among men, he despised it, and asked, Who will ever read it? At last, he had to send it off to be published before it was really finished, to get bread for himself.) Abrazza, finally: "I never read it."

"Who is this Abrazza?" Babbalanja asks again and again, and discovers that he can be identified only in terms of his ancestry, his wealth and status, his sensuality, and his refusal to be disturbed by unpleasant realities—among which are literature and writers, concerning whom he is by turns condescendingly ignorant, unsympathetic, and spiteful.

Against the Abrazzas of the world the writer must put up defenses. It is King Media who, in shutting off Babbalanja's
discussion of an allegorical adventure in religion, lays down a principle which is operative in *Mardi* and all Melville's subsequent writings. Serious discussion of religion is something which "all gay, sensible Mardians, who desired to live and be merry, invariably banished from social discourse." Says Media:

Meditate as much as you will, but say little aloud, unless in a merry and mythical way. Lay down the great maxims of things, but let inferences take care of themselves. Never be special; never, partisan. In safety, afar off, you may batter down a fortress; but at your peril you essay to carry a single turret by escalade. And if doubts distract you, in vain will you seek sympathy from your fellow men. For upon this one theme, even the otherwise honest and intelligent, are the least frank and friendly. Discourse with them, and it is mostly formulas, or prevarications, or hollow assumption of philosophical indifference, or urbane hypocrisies, or a cool, civil deference to the dominant belief; or still worse, but less common, a brutality of indiscriminate skepticism.

Melville revealed this position as his own often in the years between *Mardi* and *Pierre*. "Even Shakespeare," he wrote Duyckinck, "was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant universe is, or can be?" And he believed that Hawthorne took delight in "hoodwinking the world"—in "egregiously deceiving the superficial skimmer of pages." Though no one can say that he intended his rapidly developing techniques of symbolism, microcosm, irony, and ambiguity to serve the purpose of oblique and disguised statement of the unpalatable, they often had that effect. And it is demonstrable that his shift from straight narrative to various forms of dramatized narrative was partly motivated by his need to put a protective distance between his speculations and the readers' prejudices. For within the dramatic frame he could avoid direct statement by manipulating point of view. "Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago," he wrote in his review of Hawthorne, "[Shakespeare] craftily says, or
insinuates the things which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them.” In Typee and Omoo he had been “special” and “partisan”—had uttered unpopular opinions “in his own proper character.” In Mardi opinion is so refracted, so broken up and distributed among invented characters, so often deceptively labeled as crazy and irresponsible by other characters, that readers could only complain that Melville was capable of imagining the kind of people who could hold such opinions. His confidence in his methods of deception achieves the status of impudence when, a scroll having been read which constitutes a warning to the American democracy and a mob is so infuriated that it looks for a victim, Babbalanja and Media accuse each other of having written it. The document resembles in some ways the thinking of both, different though they are, yet is not wholly characteristic of either. “The settlement of this question,” says Taji-Melville coyly, “must be left to the commentators on Mardi [the world or the book?], some four or five hundred centuries hence.”

Nevertheless, the critics who guarded the fortress of congealed prejudice and indifference caught Melville on a turret and knocked him off, for even if he was not Babbalanja, they did not like Babbalanja. The attack on Mardi was lethal. In its whole nineteenth century only 3,510 copies were printed (it took seven years to sell the first edition of 3,000), and many of these were bought by mistake, as it were.

It was a book which, from the professional point of view, should never have been published in its present form—or perhaps at all, not because it turned out to be a failure, but because it was a laboratory job—an intensely personal purgation and recon-
struction of himself. He learned much about art and thought and himself in the course of writing it—learned, indeed, almost everything that was to make him the great writer of *Moby-Dick*. But what the book offers, even to the modern reader, is the process by which Melville explored his own mind. The general reader, then as now, is interested in results, not process, and he must look to Melville's later books for the results of the writing of *Mardi*.

A part of the process was Melville's reading, during the time he was composing *Mardi*, of certain authors who helped him find himself—Rabelais, Burton, Browne, and Dante—writers who could not be digested as rapidly as Melville tried to do. Melville apparently recognized this fact a few years later. A passage in *Pierre* that almost certainly refers to *Mardi* describes the young Pierre's reading, which "poured one considerable tributary stream into that bottomless spring of original thought which the occasion and time had caused to burst out in himself," not realizing then that "to a mind bent on producing some thoughtful thing of absolute Truth, all mere reading is apt to prove but an obstacle. Mere book-knowledge would not congenially weld with spontaneous creative thought." One can hardly dissent from Hawthorne's judgment that it was a book Melville had "not brooded over long enough."

A simple count of favorable and unfavorable American reviews shows that they were about equally divided, but Melville knew better than to be comforted by this fact. He must have known, for one thing, that the powerful Harper Brothers sent out "canned" reviews of their books for the benefit of lazy or overworked critics, some of whom knew how to keep on getting
review copies of expensive books from Harper’s tremendous list. Many of the most favorable comments were superficial, uncomprehending, and even stupid, and must have exasperated Melville more than some of the attacks. Some reviewers, like the one who wrote in the *Literary American* that there was little difference between *Mardi* and the earlier works, could not have read more than the first third of the new one.

On the whole, the most influential journals were hostile, and many of these seem to have taken their cue from reviewers in England, where the book had appeared a month earlier. The British were almost unanimously hostile. To a certain extent they had been misled by the format and the title page of the London edition. As Melville protested to the disgusted Bentley (who had paid Melville £210 and three years later was still £68 out of pocket), the book had been printed in the three-volume format of "dish-water" novels intended only to entertain the circulating library devotees. Moreover, against Melville’s express wishes, the London title page (unlike the New York) carried his authorship of *Typee* and *Omoo*, thereby encouraging his former fans to expect the same kind of thing. For all the latter knew, Mardi was another real place, like Typee.

As usual, reviewers tried to "place" *Mardi* by associating it with works of similar genre that they knew, and Melville was universally charged with being an unsuccessful imitator of Swift, Rabelais, More, Browne, and Carlyle. This charge to a certain extent derived from the reader’s immemorial defense against whatever is at once puzzlingly new, strange, unintelligible, and therefore offensive: there is "nothing new in it"; it has been done before and done better. Indeed, the reception of *Mardi* is a striking example of the way in which the general reader’s latent, deep-rooted hatred of the seriously experimental is flushed to the surface by a work that takes him off base when he is seeking amusement.
The recurrent and revealing words in the reviews are "crazy," "affected," and "unintelligible"; all three represent protest against Melville's departure from the publicly accepted norms of fiction.

Sanity had been an issue in the warfare between writers and readers since the beginning of Romanticism. Readers were willing to be diverted by "mad" fictional characters if they were clearly labeled thus, as in popular Gothic fiction. But when writers from Byron and Shelley to Poe and Hawthorne, Emily Brontë and Emerson, began to break down the artificial distinctions of the previous age between sanity and insanity, to find infinite variations between the two theoretical extremes, to see positive values in types of irrationality, and even to identify art and thought with the abnormal, the common reader was made to feel uncomfortably uncertain of his standards of normality. It is therefore not surprising that nineteenth-century reviewing tends to identify the serious treatment of irrationality in a work of literature with irrationality in the author, much as it used Poe's alcoholics and narcotic addicts as evidence about the author's private life. Melville himself confirmed the implicit charge that he found positive values in mental abnormality. During the British onslaught on *Mardi* he wrote Duyckinck concerning the sickness of the writer Charles Fenno Hoffman, "This going mad of a friend comes straight home to every man who feels his soul in him,—which but few men do. For in all of us lodges the same fuel to light the same fire. And he who has never felt momentarily what madness is has but a mouthful of brains." From incoherent Azzageddi and suicidal Taji through Ahab and Pip to Claggart, Melville was to tempt the reader to make assumptions about him.

For lack of examples in the reviews, one cannot be sure what was meant by the charge of "affectation," but apparently it referred, in part at least, to his style, and was used as a contrast to the terms "natural" and "easy" which had been so widely applied to the style of his earlier books. Certainly he was open to the charge that since his style had been simple when he was
writing of his personal adventures, his mixed, sometimes elevated, often hectic style in this work of fancy was strained and artificial—an attempt at “fine” writing. Other reiterated words in the reviews, especially “conceits” and “pedantry,” seem to refer not only to style but to substance—to his elaborate metaphors, his speculations, and his allusiveness. “Every page fairly reeks with the smoke of the lamp,” said Park Benjamin. In all such criticisms there was an implication of an underlying resentment that the journalist who had hitherto pretended to be no more profound or learned than his readers had suddenly become pretentious about his own culture and intellect. Though there is evidence enough that Melville at this time was taking himself too seriously (he was capable in 1849 of speaking of “building up [a] permanent reputation”), the reviewers seemed to be objecting to his taking his subject too seriously as well.

He seems to have been particularly exasperated by the accusation of unintelligibility—a charge which few major writers after 1800 escaped. The oft-repeated words in the reviews were “fog,” “obscure,” “indistinct,” “dark,” “dim,” and “nonsense.” A few recognized the book as an allegory—a “three-volume metaphor,” one of them called it—but confessed to being baffled by its meaning. Even George Ripley, trained in the abstractions of Transcendentalism, felt defeated—and angry. Melville thought the allegory was crystal clear, and the denial that it was led him to exclaim to his father-in-law, “‘There’s nothing in it!’ cried the dunce, when he threw down the 47th problem of the 1st Book of Euclid—‘There’s nothing in it—’” He must have felt that if his clues and keys were less obvious than those in Pilgrim’s Progress, they were at least as clear as those of Rabelais and Swift, whom everybody pretended to understand.

The allegory was not as transparent as he thought, even to the modern reader, equipped though he is with accumulated explications, but it was clearer than many critics found it. Only one of them made the necessary point about the general reader’s
immemorial habits: a book like this, not meant for mere entertainment, will escape the "careless reader" who "dozes" through it on "a summer afternoon." Parts of it "require a wide-awake application," or, as with Gulliver's Travels, "one half the aroma will be lost. The book invites study, and deserves close investigation." Melville's Mardi does not deserve to be read as closely as Swift, but a public that read Gulliver's Travels as a child's book was not going to take much trouble with an author whose hostility to them was clear even if his book was not.

8

Melville appears never to have defended Mardi as a book, and apparently he had his doubts about it if we may judge by the quotation from Pierre, and by a letter he wrote a year after publication: "My mood has so changed, that I dread to look into it, & have purposely abstained from so doing since I thanked God it was off my hands." Yet he was deeply hurt by the attack, because whatever the book's merits, the book was himself. "Hereafter I shall no more stab at a book than I would stab at a man. For [Mardi] was stabbed at—therefore, I am the wiser for it."

For a while he gave up the struggle to write above the level of diversion. His next two books were conceived in a mood of contempt for his readers, who promptly made them his third and fourth most popular works. We are bound to accept his reiterated statements that Redburn and White-Jacket were, to him, pot-boilers. The pair were written within the space of nine months, under dire pressure of debt. "But no reputation that is gratifying to me, can possibly be achieved by either of these books. They are two jobs, which I have done for money—being forced to it as other men are to sawing wood. My only desire for their 'success' (as it is called) springs from my pocket, & not from my heart." Forgetting Babbalanja's words about
necessity as being the mother of art, he lamented that when a man is surrounded by duns, nothing better can be expected of him than “a beggarly ‘Redburn.’” (The duns were real. Melville was living off advances on his books, and spending the advances before the books appeared. By the time *Redburn* was published, he owed the Harpers $832.) Melvillites deny that *Redburn* is beggarly, and can rightly argue that a writer’s judgments about his own works are notoriously unreliable. But there is no denying the contemptuous tone of his sales letter to Bentley. Having expressed his bitterness about readers who wish only to be amused, Melville offered *Redburn* as “a thing of a widely different cast from ‘Mardi’:—a plain, straightforward, amusing narrative of personal experience no metaphysics, no conic-sections, nothing but cakes & ale.” When it was praised, he wrote, “I hope I shall never write such a book again.” “I know it to be trash”—a “nursery tale.”

It was not much of a book, at that. Following predecessors like Captain Marryat, he was exploiting a popular formula: the adolescent middle- or upper-class greenhorn provides comedy and/or pathos as he flounders in the alien environment of the forecastle. There are some passages of pure Melvillian power, but on the whole he was not possessed by his subject: the whole episode of adventure in London sounds like a job of bored padding; and with his usual carelessness in the management of point of view, he lets his child hero slip into knowing adult commentary. The Melvillian theme of the initiation of innocence into evil is in the background, but if the trip to England which Melville made when he was twenty had any deep effect upon him, it is better, if more indirectly, reflected in his other books. On the whole he seemed here to be using up another segment of his experiences for quick returns.

The public response to the book is a good example of the audience’s compulsion to “type” an artist and coerce him into doing—over and over—what it wants him to do. A few reviewers saw its faults, and most British critics recognized the Marryat
formula. But in general, they sang its praises as a piece of "realism," scolded him for having deserted them in *Mardi*, and welcomed his return to sanity and intelligibility. The reigning note was one of condescension: again and again he was "advised" to stick to straight sea stories, to develop himself as an "agreeable writer" of "nautical yarns." What they meant by "stories" and "yarns" reveals something about the contemporary attitudes toward narrative. They showed little concern over "authenticity." It "reads like a true story"; "everything in it might have happened"; and Melville is "the Defoe of the ocean." In other words, what matters is that these things could have happened to someone within the limited range of the reader's understanding and sympathy. The boy Redburn was within this range (as Taji, or, to anticipate, Ahab, was not).

Melville himself, though he had described it to Bentley as a "narrative of personal experience" made up of materials "picked up by my own observations," was surprised that *Blackwood's* treated "the thing as real." Obviously there was a widening gulf between the public's conception of reality and Melville's. To him the actual event was real only to the extent that it was transformed and ordered by the imagination. He had shaped *Redburn*, as his sales letter indicates, not from the imagination but from stock formulas of the "amusing" and "the comic," such as are appropriate to minds still in "the nursery." When he had something serious to say in the book, he simply stepped out of the skin of his stock character and talked like Melville.

It is puzzling that Melville classed *White-Jacket; or The World In a Man-Of-War*, with *Redburn* as a potboiler, but it is significant that he made no further contemptuous references to this, one of the richest of his books. It is a more serious book,
even on the surface, than *Redburn* in so far as it is focused on a serious abuse that needed reform—the treatment of sailors in the navy. But this subject is only his vestibule to a world of ideas about authority, religion, and the sources of evil and corruption. He put no puppet like Wellingborough Redburn between himself and his reflections, but spoke in his own person, even asserting his status by referring to “my friend Dana” and my “fine countryman, Nathaniel Hawthorne.” Resuming the latitude he had given himself in *Mardi*, he made copious allusion to his wide reading in literature, philosophy, and history, and used without apology such phrases as “ontological necessity.” Above all, he consistently invested the facts of navy life with meanings of universal implication, as he was shortly to do with the whaling life in *Moby-Dick*.

Few readers (judging by the reviews) seemed to detect any purpose in the book beyond diversion and reformism. It was “real,” it was “poetic,” it exposed an abuse. But that Melville was relating naval atrocities to the moral structure of civilization, few seemed to realize—or to care. One British journal detected in it a “dangerous philosophy which ill accords with the truth of revelation”; and George Ripley of the *Tribune*, who had always been suspicious of Melville’s doctrines, thought a good story somewhat spoiled by the “moral and metaphysical reflection he sets forth in bad Carlylese.”

The scarcity of such serious responses suggests that Melville had gone far in developing techniques of disguise. (“What a madness & anguish it is,” he wrote after he had finished the book, “that an author can never—under no conceivable circumstances—be at all frank with his readers.”) His now-perfected microcosmic method left much to the imagination of readers not accustomed to using it, and his metaphors were deceptive. Accustomed to satires on clergymen, they probably did not mind Chapter XXXVIII on “The Chaplain,” but they may well have missed the unobtrusive but excruciating metaphor of the ship
(with its three mast-steeples) as church. Much “dangerous” reflection is buried in dialogues among sailors, in which pessimistic opinions are deceptively balanced against optimistic rejoinders. In Chapter XLV there is the “amusing incident” of the sailor-poet whose manuscripts were shot out of the cannon where he stored them. A commiserating shipmate recalls that once when he published a volume of poems “very aggressive on the world,” his friends looked sheepish, and the “one or two who liked it were non-committal” (like some of Lombardo’s friends in Mardi). As for “the addle-pated mob and rabble, they thought they had found out a fool.” This last statement is promptly sterilized by Jack Chase, who makes a distinction between the public and the people: “let us hate the one and cleave to the other.” The casual reader might probably have disposed of the passage by identifying himself with the people rather than with the public, but a careful reader might have noticed in the preceding chapter an ambiguous and ironic discussion of the capacity of “the people” (the name for the common sailors of a man-of-war) for self-deception on the subject of sin and sinners.

At about this time Melville bought a copy of Goethe’s autobiography and marked this passage: “ Whenever we wish to speak of affairs of the soul [we] withdraw from the crowd, and even from all society.” He was discovering ways of speaking to, without withdrawing from, a public he was dependent upon.

Moby-Dick, Herman Melville’s one unquestionably great full-length book, has never been properly understood as the work of a writer who was in a state of creative tension with a reading public whose limitations he had at last defined. Many of its devices, and to some extent its form and its greatness, can be
explained in terms of that tension—a tension which was a crucial factor in the creation of Poe’s major tales, Hawthorne’s novels, Emerson’s lectures, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Turn of the Screw*. All were products of a balance of the author’s wish to express himself and yet to be bought and read and taken seriously. If this hypothesis seems to make the general reader in the nineteenth century a partner in the creation of some of America’s greatest art, the compliment must be diluted by the fact that some of these works were commercial failures, that some were misunderstood, and some valued for the wrong reasons.

Certainly *Moby-Dick*, by all statistical standards of the time, was a public failure. At a time when, according to one knowledgeable publisher’s man, a novel could not be counted a success unless it sold five thousand copies, only 2,915 copies of *Moby-Dick* were printed; and if the publisher had not suffered a fire, no new printing would have been necessary for twelve years. Our problem is why a novel which can still be read as a tale of nautical adventure, and was so read by many in its time, sold only 2,500 copies in its first five years, and only 2,965 in its first twenty, whereas the somber *Scarlet Letter* sold 10,800 and 25,200 in identical periods.

While he was still writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville explained his fate thus: “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.” *Moby-Dick* was written both ways; and though some American critics considered it a botch, a majority of them did not, and some of the most favorable (if uncomprehending) commentary appeared in influential middle-class magazines like *Harper’s*, *Graham’s*, and *Godey’s*.

The influence of the review in literary history is a perpetual puzzle. In the case of *Moby-Dick* there are four suggestive facts: (1) The earliest reviews were hostile. These appeared in powerful London journals (the English edition was published a month
earlier than the New York), and some were reprinted in America. Many American readers responded more confidently to these than to the notices in clique-ridden American periodicals. That a majority of British reviewers (in London, Dublin, and Canada) attacked Melville’s greatest book undermines somewhat the claim of British support of Melville’s reputation. (2) Some American magazines like the Literary World and the Democratic Review, which had found something good even in Mardi, now turned against Melville, or radically qualified their praise. Melville’s closest ally, E. A. Duyckinck, came close to labeling it a subversive book, and gave it scant attention in his authoritative Cyclopaedia of American Literature five years later. (3) Magazines of the South, now increasingly partisan and increasingly sure of Melville’s hostility to southern institutions, condemned it. They could hardly have been pleased with a book in which the narrator and a savage made a “cozy loving pair” in bed, and in which a white is dubbed a “white-washed negro.”

A fourth factor may have been decisive. It is an axiom in the book trade that word-of-mouth recommendation is a far greater influence on the fate of a book than reviews. By 1851 women had become the chief consumers of fiction in America, and it may well be that their mouths may have settled the fate of Moby-Dick. They could not have failed to notice that in Melville’s last two books there was no place for women, or that there was unlikely to be one in a book about whaling. The Dublin Review spoke for them when it declared that in Moby-Dick there was “no love, no tenderness.” Melville himself said that he knew only one woman who was pleased with it (Mrs. Hawthorne): “for as a general thing, women have small taste for the sea.” The “Pequod” was wholly a man’s world, embracing the male’s interest in technology, male vulgarities about breaking wind, a male’s tolerance for subjects like the whale’s sperm and penis and viscera, and for mates who need to be told to “beware of fornication.” Was it Melville’s awareness of all this that
explains his conspicuously increased attention to the female world in his next book, *Pierre*, and in his magazine stories of what has been called the “feminine fifties”?

These are matters of the book’s immediate impact. Other novels as badly handicapped for the general market have achieved gradual acceptance after the first shock of annoyance or distaste has worn off. The great question is why *Moby-Dick* was forgotten when *Typee* was still remembered, and why it was not even rediscovered for thirty years after the author’s death; why, indeed, in spite of its present exalted place, it still has hostile readers and is still capable of stirring up that latent “hatred of art” which Flaubert, in Melville’s own time, declared to be universal.

*Moby-Dick*, as he first conceived it, was probably the same kind of compromise with his readers as the first part of *Mardi*, and *White-Jacket*. His first and premature sales letter to his British publisher described it as “a romance of adventure, founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries, and illustrated by the author’s own personal experience as a harpooneer.” It would deserve handsome payment because of its “great novelty.” He intended to “cook” this “blubber” into poetry by throwing in “a little fancy.” Duyckinck, who read the manuscript thus described, pronounced it a “romantic, fanciful and literal and most enjoyable presentment of the Whale Fishery.”

Melville must have revised this manuscript drastically to be able to describe the finished work as a “wicked book,” the product of “my evil art,” and for Duyckinck’s pleasure in the first version to turn into deep disturbance over the second. Almost certainly, in the process of rewriting, Melville transformed a typical harsh whaling captain, such as had provided motivation for desertions in his earlier books, into a crazy superman whose heroic satanism infects not only the rabble crew but the narrator, Ishmael-Melville. Nevertheless, his sales letter
accurately, if incompletely, describes the final version, and the general reader might have missed—often did miss, if we may judge by some of the reviews—the shattering implications of the role of Captain Ahab. It was still, potentially, for the superficial reader, an “interesting” book, and most of its surface was perfectly intelligible. Beneath the surface it was difficult (as two reviewers seemed to be aware), but no more difficult than Hamlet and Lear to the audience of that time, which, as Melville believed, went to Shakespeare for “the popularizing noise and show of broad farce and blood-smeared tragedy.” (Melville’s sense of what Shakespeare got away with in the popular market probably influenced his revision.)

He worked hard to make Moby-Dick interesting, intelligible—and saleable. The reviewer in Peterson’s, a fashionable ladies’ magazine, who said that if it had been compressed and all the “philosophical” and “transcendental” chapters deleted (he did not suggest, note, that Ahab be cast out), it “could [have been] decidedly the best sea-novel in the English language today,” was asserting indirectly a truth that is too often ignored: that the “high art” of Moby-Dick is erected on a broad base of middling art—the art, practiced also by Poe and Hawthorne, of making prose easy and palatable for readers who do not wish to work too hard when they read. This fact was recognized both by the London Spectator, which sneered that Melville’s medley of styles included that of “magazine article writing,” and by the thoroughly “middling” New York Home Journal, which believed that in writing this book Melville must have been determined to “combine all his popular characteristics.”

These characteristics included Melville’s “personal” tone (“[You] Call me Ishmael” has been subtilized, to use Melville’s word, by modern interpreters, but it is rarely recognized as an example of the prevailing coziness of mid-century journalism); popular varieties of humor—the pun, the exaggeration, the incongruous; light handling of technical information—a journalistic
skill which runs unbroken from Poe and Dr. Holmes to Paul de Kruif; and vivid, graphic description and action. The reviewers praised all these qualities, and admiration of the last named was all but unanimous.

Yet a majority of the reviewers felt that Melville had “spoiled” (often this was the word they chose) a pleasing book. Much of the criticism centered on one of two targets: the speculations of Ishmael-Melville on God, man, and institutions; and the “horrors and heroics of Ahab.”

Under the first heading he was found guilty of “abuse of society,” of “sophistry,” of a “piratical running down of creeds and opinions,” of violating “the most sacred associations of life” —of being downright “dangerous.” A good half of the reviewers pretended that his speculations were simply irrelevant, that he had intruded “gratuitous suggestions about psychology, ethics, and theology,” but we may suspect such a protest in a literary culture which gladly tolerated authorial interpolations in works of fiction. More characteristic of the time was the objection that the speculations were unintelligible—that they were “abstruse,” or “dreamy” or “transcendental.”

Inasmuch as informal speculation or “reverie” was in this decade becoming an established popular form in the work of Donald Grant Mitchell, G. W. Curtis, and O. W. Holmes, we may ask why Melville’s speculations were either disliked, ignored, or merely tolerated. It could not have been because the critics thought him merely negative about contemporary beliefs, for unless they were deaf they could hardly have missed such multi-decibelled “affirmations” as Ishmael’s celebration of “that democratic dignity which . . . radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute!” Dr. Holmes in his popular Breakfast Table series was to be even more critical about some aspects of democracy and contemporary religious belief. But Holmes’s speculative devices had attributes which define the difference between popular speculation and the intellectual processes of the
great Romantics. The comic device of the boardinghouse table relieved the reader of the necessity to take Holmes's elaborately casual, often obviously eccentric opinions too seriously. And, more important, he required of his readers no participation in his thinking processes except to affirm or deny, if they felt impelled to do either.

Melville, by contrast, was obviously serious, and—not so obviously—experimental. He opened doors, rather than closed them—tried to get readers to entertain propositions with him rather than to accept commitments. In a word, he wished his readers to join him in the search for truth, rather than demand of him confirmation of what they already believed.

To this end, he worked out a system to train the reader in imaginative, exploratory thinking. The characteristics of this method included, first, identifying himself with the reader; second, getting the reader interested in a fact or object, the nature of which invites speculation; third, "priming" the reader's mind by putting suggestions in the form of questions; fourth, sometimes stopping short after opening up a possibility and inviting the reader to draw the inference himself, as, for example, in Chapter LXXIV where a discourse on the relation of the size of the whale's eye to his sight ends in the invitation, "Subtilize it."

In Chapter I the object is water. The idea to be explored is the attraction of men toward the danger and the mystery which water represents. That "almost all men cherish the same feelings toward the ocean with me" is demonstrated by reference to the habits of men, to preoccupations of painters, to the myth of Narcissus, and to the "universal itch for things remote."

His task here was simple compared to that in the chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale," where his objective is nothing less than getting the reader to entertain the possibility—not the certainty—that behind the immensities of the universe there is a blank void of nothingness—of no-God—from which emanate terrors beyond our comprehension. The strain of this effort is
evident in his almost frantic appeals (five of them) to the reader to stay with him and give careful attention: (1) Unless I "explain myself" this book might be meaningless; (2) "Let us try. [for] without imagination no man can follow another into these halls"; (3) "What I mean may perhaps be elucidated by the following examples"; (4) But, you say, I am being a coward; (5) "But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness."

The climactic paragraph, in which the appalling proposition is put, is not assertion but question. We are told not that evil is absolute but that if we grasp imaginatively all the associations of whiteness, and all that history and science can tell us about it, then we are in a position to understand Ahab's "fiery hunt" for the source of evil. But we are also warned that he who sees nothing but the whiteness is a "wretched infidel" who "gazes himself blind."

As Melville rightly says, unless this chapter succeeds, the whole book may be meaningless, for if the crazy captain is to be anything more than a Gothic monster or a medical curiosity, all our stock responses to the facts of his situation and to the whale must be broken down. Melville is trying to do here what every major poet since 1800 has had to do: break down stock responses to images and types. The stock responses are not wrong, he assures us (in a sentence forty-four lines long, the first thirty-nine of which are subordinate clauses conceding the accepted benign associations of whiteness); they are merely one-sided and oversimple. To a generation of readers still predominantly governed by Scottish common sense with its official catalogues of approved responses to poetic stimuli, such a chapter offered training in a new kind of reading. But there is little evidence that the instruction was welcome, and we can assume that because it involved the reader in creative process, it was rejected.

The second major objection was to the character and speech of Ahab. Fewer than half the reviewers even bothered to mention him, and most of those either dismissed him as a crazy bore or
condemned his speech as extravagant and bombastic. Clearly, the method of Shakespearean tragedy with which Melville invested the Ahab story and the rhetoric of the Renaissance stage which he imposed on Ahab's speech were generally considered a violation of verbal realism.

The public failure of *Moby-Dick* remains, to some extent, inscrutable. It appeared in a decade when public resistance to serious fiction was relaxing. It contained much that was of approved attraction to the general reader. Its uninteresting or unintelligible parts might easily have been skipped by the many readers who confessed to being fascinated by the natural history, the technology, the description, and physical action with which the book abounds.

We must turn to one of the most perceptive and sympathetic of Melville's readers for some clue as to why a book with such attractions had such a brief public life. Evert Duyckinck thought that *Moby-Dick* was an important event in the world of fiction, which was "crowded with successful mediocrities," and thought it an honor to be in the company of such "nobler spirits" as Melville. Yet, he declared, "a fourth of the volume" is given over to a "vein of moralizing" and "extravagant daring speculation" in which there is a "piratical running down of creeds and opinions" and a violation of the "most sacred associations of life." He concedes that such speculation is not actually "dangerous" in this believing world, but it is "out of place and uncomfortable." "Uncomfortable" becomes a revealing word when we note that it refers, in the same sentence, to what he calls the "conceited indifferentism of Emerson." "Indifferentism" presumably describes both Melville's and Emerson's aloofness from the world's commitments—their ability to understand and share man's faith while rejecting the worldly context in which faith usually operates. But the most significant word is "conceited." In using it Duyckinck was in harmony with Melville's worst enemies, particularly the *Democratic Review*, which asserted that
his failure was due to his “vanity,” his “morbid self-esteem,” his determination to “centre all attention upon himself.” Such charges are incredible to modern readers who recognize (as no contemporary reviewer did) that the central theme of *Moby-Dick* is love and sympathy. But what Duyckinck really meant by conceit was introspection. He and the few who bothered to read *Moby-Dick* carefully enough even to feel “uncomfortable” about it were unconsciously but resentfully perceiving that fiction was beginning to be, like poetry, a potential means of self-exploration for the writer. This is a function of literature which the common reader has never accepted unless it is so disguised that he need not contend with it. No one recognized Ahab as a product of Melville’s self-exploration, and therefore, though he was thought repulsive by most reviewers, he was not resented. It was Ishmael-Melville who, through introspection, came to understand and sympathize with Ahab and caused discomfort.

II

Like a man marching to his doom, Melville began writing his worst professional failure before *Moby-Dick* reached the bookstores. *Pierre* was unanimously damned by reviewers, and sold only 1,856 copies (of an edition of 2,310) in thirty-five years. So offensive was it to the novel-reading public that biographers have often thought it Melville’s deliberate affront to an ungrateful public. It was not. Although it was one of his most serious books, he conceived it as a market novel, and, moreover, as only the first of a series in a “new field of productions” which were to be “not unprofitable business adventures.”

To understand his developing hope that he could write books both profound and popular, we must consider his state of mind in the summer and fall of 1851 when he finished *Moby-Dick* and began *Pierre*. He saw much of Hawthorne, and they had long
talks of “things of this world and of the next, and books and publishers.” In long letters he poured out his heart on the subject of the writer’s fate in his own time. He had already decided that Hawthorne was the one indisputable American genius of his day. When, that summer, he witnessed the popularity of *The House of the Seven Gables* and the successful “promotion” of Hawthorne by his publishers, he had reason to believe that in the nineteenth century it was possible, as it had been for Shakespeare, to plumb the depths of mind in “black” books which nevertheless had popular appeal. He himself was attempting precisely that in *Moby-Dick*, and when in November he learned that Hawthorne understood his book, he had a feeling of “unspeakable security”; he was comprehended by a man who, in successful books, said “No! in thunder.” The first sales of *Moby-Dick* looked promising—1,500 the first month. But he had a new child in the house, and he was $700.00 in debt to Harper. “Leviathan is not the biggest fish;—I have heard of Krakens.” Krakens was *Pierre*. By Christmas he was working at it with almost manic concentration.

All that we know at this stage about his strategy for opening the “new field” is that the new work was not a “chalice” of salt water, but a “rural bowl of milk.” The first five-eighths of *Pierre* (through Book 15) is decidedly rural, if not all milk. In idyllic country a rich, handsome, charming young squire woos a rich, beautiful, blonde girl, with the blessing of his haughty, aristocratic, widowed mother. A melancholy brunette spoils the picture by turning out to be the illegitimate daughter of Pierre’s revered father. Immolating himself for the sin of his parent, Pierre jilts Lucy and takes Isabel under his protection in the simulated role of husband. Cast off by his mother, he takes Isabel to the big city.

At this point the scene becomes and remains urban. Living in abject poverty in a tenement, the pair are joined by Lucy and a “ruined” girl from home named Delly. A villain enters in the form of Pierre’s rich, effeminate city cousin Glen, who is to
supplant him as heir. In a whirlwind finish, four characters die. Pierre murders his cousin, and in prison he and Isabel commit suicide as Lucy dies of heartbreak.

So far as these bare bones of plot reveal, the formula, except for the unhappy ending, derives from current melodrama and the “misery novel” as developed by Mrs. Rowson and her imitators. Isabel’s history serves as the theme of the long-lost child. There are overtones from current mass fiction; the “wholesome country-wicked city” myth, the theme of the permanent “ruin” suffered by the once-seduced girl. And occasionally Melville’s language rhythms drop to the level of popular melodrama. Delly is “forever ruined through the cruel arts of Ned,” thinks Pierre; and “Her father will not look upon her; her mother, she hath cursed her to her face,” says Isabel.

In the light of these characteristics of the book, we can understand Melville’s sales letter to Bentley: “My new book [possesses] unquestionable novelty, as regards [i.e., in comparison with] my former ones, treating of utterly new scenes & characters; and, as I believe, very much more calculated for popularity than anything you have yet published of mine—being a regular romance, with a mysterious plot to it, & stirring passions at work, and withall, representing a new & elevated aspect of American life. . .” The implication of the word “regular” and emphasis on “plot” indicate the area of his compromise with public taste, and the phrase “elevated aspect of American life” indicates the basis for a serious treatment of a popular form. The book itself shows that Melville intended to raise the “misery” formula to the status of Renaissance tragedy. By presenting Pierre and Lucy as members of the agrarian aristocracy at the top of the American social pyramid and making them sacrifice place and material comfort to higher values; by making a gaudy plot a vehicle for profound psychological revelations; by making his hero as intellectual and introspective as Hamlet; and by raising his prose to the pitch of poetic tragedy; and by letting the plot
follow its own logic to a tragic ending, Melville hoped to invest the common formula with dignity and meaning.

The story of Pierre-as-author has two lines of significance. In the first place, it contributed heavily to the unpopularity of the book, and was specifically attacked by many critics. In discussing the problems and the status of the artist, Melville once again tried to involve his readers in the creative process. And in describing Pierre's conflict with the publishing and reading world, he made the author the hero and the reader the villain. One notes that genuinely commercial writers sometimes flatter the public by reversing the formula: in our own time the fictional villain is often an "aesthete" or an "intellectual."

Melville here seems to take perverse satisfaction in abusing, satirizing, and insulting the reading public and its representatives—editors and publishers. He excoriates the kind of novels that they make popular. He accuses them of "unforgiveable affronts and insults" to great authors like Dante in the past; of missing the "deeper meanings" of Shakespeare; of judging literature as they do morals; of praising an author's worst books, or liking his best ones for the wrong reasons. The publishers who serve them are thievish illiterates. In short, "though the world worship Mediocrity and Common Place, yet hath it fire and sword for all contemporary Grandeur." But bad as the present is (it is a "bantering, barren and prosaic heartless age," which will not tolerate the serious), the future will be worse, for it will see "the mass of humanity reduced to one level of dotage."

Concomitantly, the author-hero is presented as a full-blown example of the Genius temperament. For this aspect of Pierre Melville disinterred Lombardo from Chapter CLXXX of Mardi, reappropriating many of the latter's concepts of art and authorship. Using some of Lombardo's phraseology, he made Pierre his nineteenth-century counterpart—a youth dedicated, lonely, divinely inspired, poverty-stricken, suffering, misunderstood, ruining his health by long hours of exhausting creativity in an ice-cold
That a character as morally and morbidly diseased as the reviewers thought Pierre was, should also have been a genius, set apart from and above the stupid public which crucified him, did little to improve the reader's already pejorative image of the creative writer.

The second significance of this extension of the story is that it is symbolic representation of Melville's own transformation from journalist to philosopher-poet. We need not hesitate to identify the narrator with Herman Melville. Though the book starts off in the mode of authorial omniscience, it is not long before we are aware of intrusions of authorial personality. Nor need we be put off by superficial differences between Pierre's career and Melville's. The country boy of eighteen who is a well-known amateur author of sonnets and fugitive pieces, and a magazinist rather than a book-writer, is not the Melville who, after roaming the seas, became a professional writer of travel works at the age of twenty-seven. Nor does the genteel, respectable, pious country boy correspond to the skeptical, roughneck sailor. But these contrasts represent necessary compromises with the given facts about Pierre. Everything else about his career could have been drawn from Melville's observations of the literary world in New York; and the "world-revelation"—the moral shock which transforms Pierre from a dilettante to a serious writer—corresponds to Melville's discovery, during the writing of *Mardi*, which transformed him from a journalist to the author of *Moby-Dick*. The distance between the celebrated country gentleman-amateur and the Pierre slaving at his Honest Book in New York is the same distance as that between the author of *Typee* and the author of *Mardi*. Through Pierre, Melville is looking back at his experiences with himself and with the literary world between 1846 and 1849. Opinions in this book about readers, critics, publishers, the exploitation of the newly popular writer, writing schedules and writing habits correspond to Melville's opinions in previous works and in letters and journals.
At the center is Melville’s memory of his experience with *Mardi*. Pierre’s book, like *Mardi*, is “comprehensive and compacted” and is intended to “surprise and delight” the world. Like Lombardo’s Koztanza it was born of the double need to “deliver Truth” and pay the rent; it was written under the excessive dependence of newly discovered great minds of the past. Some samples from Pierre’s book, “directly plagiarized from his own experiences to fill out the mood of his apparent author-hero, Vivia,” suggest the tone and mood of *Mardi* and its author-hero Taji, who, we remember, fainted and slaved in his writing cell as Pierre did in his New York flat. Pierre’s revulsion against that “vile book” after he finishes it reminds us of Melville’s thanking God when *Mardi* was “off [his] hands.” When Pierre is “stabbed” by the publisher’s letter in which he is accused of swindling them out of a cash advance “upon the pretense of writing a popular novel for us” which, instead, turns out to be a “blasphemous rhapsody” filched from “vile Atheists,” we think of the outraged reviewers of *Mardi* who had expected another *Typee*, and of Melville’s cry to Duyckinck that “that thing was stabbed.”

By 1852 Melville’s professional attitude was a mixture of perversity, innocence, and desperation, and a tendency both to overrate and underrate the general reader. And the cause of his confusion, in part, was his hope that he could, like Shakespeare, and by using some of Shakespeare’s methods, contrive to be at once profound, tragic, and popular. To the groundlings, he thought, Shakespeare offered “the popularizing noise and show of broad farce and blood-smeared tragedy,” and other effects of the “tricky stage.” So in *Pierre*, Melville offered violent renunciations, hypocrisies, treacheries, murder, suicide and high-pitched Renaissance dialogue. But just as Shakespeare craftily put into the mouths of his “dark” characters things so “terrifically true” that no “good man, in his own proper character” can “even hint of them,” so Melville, like his own Pierre, hoped to translate atheism into “godliest things,” disguise misery and death in
forms of "gladness and life," and conceal "everything else under the so conveniently adjustable drapery of all-stretchable Philosophy." Thus he might "egregiously deceive the superficial skimmer of pages."

Such deceptions had a chance of success in Moby-Dick, where, by keeping his story in the foreground, he rendered the intellectual and symbolic framework invisible or inconspicuous to readers who wished only to be diverted by action and description, and instructed about whaling. And if Ishmael is Melville, he is also within the drama as a guide necessary to the reader's understanding of the action and of whaling. But in Pierre the narrator is an intrusive nuisance. And he is most intrusive in the sections on authorship where he pretends to be exhibiting his hero's unspoken reflections on the creative life. In his artificial attempt to connect the story of Pierre's disillusionment as moral man with the story of his writing career, he commits the final perversity of rendering him disillusioned about the art of fiction. For the young author's despairing conviction that his finished book is a stacked deck ("he was but packing one set the more"), he was inviting the reader to share what was apparently his own loss of faith in fiction itself. If, as Charles Feidelson has argued, Melville wrote himself out of his belief in his craft, Pierre's suicide can be taken as a symbol of Melville's professional self-destruction.

Melville's reputation never recovered from this episode, and reviewers of his later works persistently reminded readers that they were by the author of Pierre. But his professional fate had already been sealed by his publishers. The wording of the contract for that work suggests that the Harpers had not read the manuscript when they accepted it, but they were by then so doubtful of his ability to please that for the first time they put the whole financial risk on him by exempting the first 1,190 copies from royalty. When he offered the work to Bentley, he was informed that the latter had lost a total of £453 on his works. Because in Mardi and Moby-Dick he had not "restrained [his] imagina-
tion”; had not “written in a style to be understood by the great mass of readers”; and had “offended the feelings of [the] sensitive,” Bentley refused to accept Pierre unless he was permitted to make “such alterations [i.e., ‘revisal and occasional omission’] as are absolutely necessary to ‘Pierre’ being properly appreciated here.” Negotiations broke down, and the British edition that appeared was made up of imported sheets.

Nevertheless, he continued as professional for another seven years, for his problem in adversity was that of Pierre: “What else could he do?” The following table will suffice to dispose of the old theory that he bid farewell to his public in Pierre.

1853 Began a book on “Tortoises and Tortoise-Hunting” (unpublished); contributed prose to three issues of monthly magazines.
1854 Contributed prose to thirteen issues of monthly magazines; another piece was rejected and was unpublished in his time.
1855 Contributed to nine issues of monthly magazines; published Israel Potter, which had been serialized.
1856 In spite of seven months of travel, contributed to four issues of monthly magazines; published Piazza Tales (all of which except the title piece had appeared in magazines).
1857 Planned book, “Roman Frescoes” (probably to be derived from his travel journals, but never published). Published The Confidence-Man. Gave eleven professional lectures.
1858  "Busy on a new book" (perhaps "Roman Frescoes," or a sequel to *The Confidence-Man*, or a volume of rural sketches). Gave eleven professional lectures.

1859  Gave nine professional lectures. Prepared a book of verse, which he completed in 1860.

Inasmuch as almost all of the completed prose works (except his uncompromising, strictly non-commercial novel, *The Confidence-Man*) were printed in middle-class magazines (*Harper's Monthly* and *Putnam's Monthly*), this coda to Melville's professional life looks like the weary capitulation of a defeated man to the general reader, or a mopping-up of his leftover materials from his life in the Pacific, the Berkshires, and New York, and his travels in Europe. Certainly there is defeat in his "guarantee," when he submitted the manuscript of his historical novel *Israel Potter* for serialization in *Putnam's*, "that the story shall contain nothing of any sort to shock the fastidious. There will be very little reflective writing in it; nothing weighty. It is adventure. As for its interest, I shall try to sustain that as well as I can."

That he was trying to come to some sort of terms with the common reader is suggested by the subject matter of his shorter pieces: three are returns to the romantic Pacific; nine have rural settings, and seven deal with the popular subject of home and woman. Under the circumstances he might have felt a wry satisfaction if he had known that a magazine expert, G. W. Curtis, thought his "I and My Chimney" "capital, genial, thoroughly magazinish." And other contemporaries called "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" "lively and animated"; "Bartleby" "lifelike," "quaint and fanciful"; "Benito Cereno" "thrilling"; "The Encantadas" "charming." Yet when we examine these eighteen shorter works, we find that only three do not deal essentially with some kind of loss, poverty, loneliness, or defeat. We may suspect that the old Melville was still at work, but that his techniques of disguise and
concealment were so successful that these works were considered suitable for a magazine audience.

The three ostensibly "happy" pieces are among the most suspect. They may have been part of an abortive plan for a book of country sketches, centering in Melville's Pittsfield farm, which he had had in mind as early as 1850. ("H. M. knows every stone and tree, and will probably make a book of its features," wrote his intimate friend E. A. Duyckinck in that year.)

"The Apple-Tree Table" and "I and My Chimney" have the same characters: the narrator, his aggressive wife, his two daughters, Julia and Anna, and a servant, Biddy. Inasmuch as they all turn up again in "Jimmy Rose," a story of the city to which the narrator moves from his country place, it is possible that Melville intended to link city and country stories in one collection. A country-gentleman narrator and a country community also figure in "The Lightning-Rod Man," "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" "Poor Man's Pudding," and "The Piazza"; and "The Tartarus of Maids" records an excursion from such a house in the Berkshires.

Two of these—"I and My Chimney" and "The Apple-Tree Table"—are in the form of domestic comedy, the narrator-husband putting up a semicomic defense of the values of country things and traditions which are threatened by the forces of modernism and efficiency (represented by the wife), a theme both common and popular in a culture which was changing too rapidly for comfort. Yet under the surface, these stories move away from the customary sentimentalism of the theme and become devastating commentaries on the idea of progress and the defeat of individualism and the imagination. The theme of "The Lightning-Rod Man" is similar, but here Melville's satire comes close to the surface: the salesman avoids "pine-trees, high houses upland pastures" and "tall men," and threatens to "publish" the narrator's "infidel notions." Several reviewers condemned this story without saying why. The "lively and animated" "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" reads, a hundred years later, like an impudent take-
off on the popular “sunshine and shadow” theme then so popular in the pages of Harper’s, where this sketch was published. The narrator’s “doleful dumps” are cured by the optimistic crowing of a magnificent rooster. He traces the bird to a miserable hovel where its owner, his wife, and their three children cheerfully die of sickness and starvation. The rooster then crows itself to death in an ecstasy of affirmation.

“Poor Man’s Pudding” (which was twice reprinted in other periodicals) seems to affirm the dignity and pathos of the American poor; but it is essentially a rejection of the sentimentalization of poverty practiced by the poet Blandmoor and his ilk, who “speak prosperously” of what is and “ever will be” the “misery and infamy of poverty.” The title phrase of the story (the point of which is that “through kind Nature, the poor, out of their very poverty, extract comfort”) reappears in “Jimmy Rose,” where a ruined rich man, turned parasite, but holding to his status as gentleman, indignantly rejects the comforts which are extended to paupers.

As little inclined as ever to accept popular slogans, Melville summed up explicitly in one of these stories of poverty his bitter conviction that “those peculiar social sensibilities nourished by our own peculiar political principles do but minister to the added wretchedness of the unfortunate.”

He rightly omitted most of these pieces from The Piazza Tales: they are interesting now just to the extent that we are interested in Melville. And to the credit of his public, the then most widely admired stories in that volume were his best—“Bartleby,” “The Encantadas,” “Benito Cereno,” and “The Bell-Tower.” Yet the point of his poverty sketches is retained in his prefatory sketch, “The Piazza.” From his piazza the narrator sees on a mountainside a sunlit cottage which seems a house in fairyland. But after he has journeyed to it, it turns out that the radiant windows are fly-specked, and that behind them lives, in solitude and poverty, weary, pale-cheeked Marianna. Hereafter, “I stick to my piazza,”
knowing that the truth comes in not with the sun but "with darkness": "I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna's face, and many as real a story." If the reviewers noted this unpromising preface to Melville's "real" stories, they did not mention it.

"Dark" as these stories were, they were moderately admired, and there were only a few complaints about Melville's unintelligibility and "peculiarity." In learning to write for the magazines he seems to have put into practice a principle he stated broadly in *Mardi* and in *Pierre*: "It is impossible to talk or write without apparently throwing oneself helplessly open." He now took protection in what might be called strategy of omission. In the Hunilla section of "The Encentadas" he asserts that he omits two crucial episodes in the widow's story because "I will not file this thing complete for scoffing souls to quote, and call it firm proof upon their side. In nature, as in law, it may be libelous to speak some truths." From the context one judges that the island on which the widow, a half-breed Indian woman, was stranded was visited by whalemen who subjected her to unspeakable atrocities. This guess is supported by the last sentence of the story: as Hunilla, bearing her destroying grief, rides away "upon a small gray ass before her on the ass's shoulders, she eyed the jointed workings of the beast's armorial cross." We remember that at the end of "Benito Cereno," the dead eyes of the executed slave, Babo, "met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites; and across the Plaza looked towards St. Bartholomew's church." And then we remember Melville's long obsession with the history of white, Christian corruption and abuse of primitive peoples in the Pacific, and the public's protests against his exposure of the Western civilizers in *Typee* and *Omoo*. His attack continues in these late stories, but the libelous truth is almost inaudible.

Melville's practice of deletion reflects also, perhaps, the tendency of serious novelists in the nineteenth century to thwart the common reader's tendency to identify the external action of a story with the story's meaning. He did this by suppressing story
elements which might deflect the reader's attention from the story's real purpose. Thus Hawthorne suppressed the "facts" of the crime in which Miriam is involved in *The Marble Faun* lest they be taken as an explanation of Miriam. Thus, in "Bartleby," a history of the events leading to Bartleby's withdrawal might have been mistaken for the meaning of his withdrawal. Thus, in "The Fiddler," an explanation of Hautboy's resignation from the status of genius would have deflected attention from Melville's real subject, which was the quality of wisdom in a man who has renounced ambition. The practice of deletion reaches its climax in Henry James, who at times almost achieved the objective (stated by Flaubert, a self-declared enemy of the common reader) to write a story "about nothing at all." *

* The conclusion of this essay has been omitted because it is too fragmentary to be useful.—En.