Melville's career in fiction reflects almost all those tensions between the artist and society which sometimes make literature and sometimes mar it. He was, first of all, out of harmony with a predominantly female fiction-reading public. It is a crude but not misleading index to taste in his time that *Moby-Dick*, a thoroughly masculine book which few women have liked, sold only 2,500 copies in its first five years and less than 3,000 in its first twenty, whereas *The Scarlet Letter*, in identical periods, sold 10,800 and 25,200.

Second, Melville's effective career came to an end at an unfortunate moment. Though the fiction-reading audience on the Atlantic coast had begun to stratify in the 1840's, it was a decade before reader levels in the national market were clearly defined. Melville's proper level was the upper middle class, where, in the 1850's, literary taste was beginning to be interpreted and guided by the editors of national monthly magazines like *Harper's* and the *Atlantic*. Central to Melville's problem was the fact that he entered this magazine world only in 1853, when his reputation was already ruined. All his earlier work was published in book form, and was offered to an undifferentiated audience of men, women, and children among whom there was, of course, a fantastic range of sophistication and seriousness. Thus it was possible for a leading critic to label *Typee* and *Omoo* as "vendible," "venomous," and "venereous," and for a Cleveland bookseller to advertise the same titles as "Books for Little Folks."
I shall be using the term “common reader” glibly, realizing that it refers to mentalities as different as “the superficial skimmer of pages” (Melville’s phrase) and what Albert Guérard calls “the alert non-professional reader.” In Melville criticism one locates the common reader by ear, as it were. His professional readers are more easily identified. They were not university men for whom, as in our time, literature exists in its own right, but reviewers for newspapers and magazines whose first allegiance was not to art but to the immediate interest of society. In other words, the great majority of Melville’s responsible critics functioned precisely as does the Henry Luce reviewing staff today.

The difference between his common readers and his critics emerges clearly in their responses to his public personality. From first to last, Melville was known by friend and foe alike as a vibrant, fascinating stylist whose moods, ranging from the gay, fanciful, playful, funny, and impudent, to the somber and meditative, were those of a living, colorful person. Because it was an intimate style, the common readers took it to be an expression of all that Melville was, and typed him as a free-wheeling bachelor-sailor with a gift for narrative. It was inevitable that they should have tried to exploit his personality (“Typee Melville” and “Mr. Omoo” were common nicknames, to his shame and annoyance), just as Wolfe and Hemingway and Dylan Thomas have been exploited in our own time. The critics, on the other hand, were worried precisely because this intimate style was so palatable to readers who could be corrupted by the subversive thinking which was masked by that style. They need not have worried. All the evidence indicates that common readers skipped or ignored his persistent criticism of institutions, and did not buy those books in which thinking crowded the narrative.

Melville’s public personality became a debatable issue in the first paragraph of his first book. Typee begins with the words, “Six months at sea! Yes, reader, as I live, six months out of
sight of land. “This is the cozy, person-to-person style of the journalism of the forties, which Melville was to develop so miraculously in the book beginning “Call me Ishmael.” But readers of the first edition might have noticed that, in a sentence he wisely deleted later, he fenced himself off almost at once by belligerently identifying himself with “good-for-nothing tars” who disturb the luxuriating “state-room sailors.” British reviewers promptly charged that no common sailor could write so well, and that therefore Melville must be a gentleman-Munchausen fabricating adventures for the mob. American readers, knowing that gentlemen sometimes sailed before the mast, either accepted his adventures as truth, or lovingly dubbed him the “American Defoe.” To the end of his life his readers wished him to remain just that.

Serious critics, however, suspected his sympathy with a dispossessed class and his hostility to the civilized world, and typed him as a dangerous malcontent. Still worse, not liking his ideas, they were able to attack his morals because in Typee he failed to put a protective distance between himself and his materials. Neglecting even the pseudonymity with which most American travel writers sheltered themselves, Melville declared himself a Melville on the title page, a Gansevoort in the dedication to his uncle, and a purveyor of the “unvarnished truth” in his Preface. Part of the “truth” which the critics seized upon was a drunken sexual orgy of the sailors with a crowd of native girls. Though, authorially, he specifically deplored this corruption of natives by their white “civilizers,” nothing in the text suggests that, as sailor, he absented himself from these festivities. In fact, technically, he made the episode disastrously personal by saying of his naked visitors, “What a sight for us bachelor sailors! how avoid so dire a temptation?” With similar clumsiness, he alluded in Chapter XX to half-naked girls dancing in the moonlight, “all over, as it were,” in a way that was “almost too much for a quiet sober-minded young man like myself.”
Deletions in the second edition of *Typee* corrected some of these errors in point of view; and in *Omoo* he managed a detailed description of a wildly phallic native dance without seeming to be in the middle of it.² Though the Victorian age had begun, common readers seem not to have been offended by the voluptuous dances of his "naked houris," his cohabitation with Fayaway, or his sailor orgies—or perhaps they thought it was all fiction. Margaret Fuller of the New York *Tribune* spoke as common reader rather than as critic when she recommended *Typee* for its "pretty and spirited pictures," and declared that the "sewing societies of the country villages [would] find this the very book they wished to read while assembled at their work." But the critics were appalled. Miss Fuller's employer, Horace Greeley, who saw the problem of an unstratified literary market, thought Melville a "born genius," but *Typee* and *Omoo* are "dangerous reading for those of immature intellects and unsettled principles. Not that you can put your finger on a passage positively offensive; but [these books] are "diseased in moral tone." Evidently Mr. Greeley had found something offensive to put his finger on by the time of Melville's marriage, for the *Tribune* reminded the bride of Fayaway in Melville's past. We need not wonder that Melville was excluded, like Poe and Whitman, from the nineteenth-century hall of literary fame, to which the academy admitted only those writers who had led blameless lives.

There is no evidence that Melville cared that his morals had been impugned except that he did not again, authorially, participate in the romps of sailors. But he at once set about altering the public's conception of him as a common sailor. In *Omoo* he carefully sets himself up as the only educated man in a crew of "reckless seamen of all nations." Early in *Mardi* he reports that his mates spotted him as a gentleman by his language, his table manners, and his "unguarded allusions to Belles-Lettres affairs."³ White-Jacket—Melville emphasizes his place among educated writers by referring to "my friend Dana" and "my fine country-
man, Nathaniel Hawthorne.” And Ishmael-Melville is a seagoing encyclopedia of the humanities, fine arts, and sciences. At the same time, though he retained his tones of journalistic intimacy, he broke through the restrictions of the journalistic vocabulary and drew more and more freely on philosophical terminology and on the imagery and diction of the Hebrew, classical, and Renaissance literatures. It is possible, indeed, that Melville became the most richly and learnedly allusive of romantic novelists partly in reaction against the label of “good-for-nothing tar” which he had pinned on himself. For such apostasy he paid the inevitable penalty: the journalistic world said his later work “smelled of the lamp,” and called him “pretentious” and “pedantic.” But he had escaped from his pigeonhole.

Nevertheless, as a professional writer, chronically in debt, he not only desperately needed the common reader but actually hoped—and for a while, believed—that it was possible “to suit at once the popular and the critical taste.” The words are Poe’s, and I take the latter phrase to mean, not the taste of critics (Poe knew better), but the taste that is critical—that is, the taste of the writer himself and of the few who understand him. An oft-quoted passage by Melville seems to contradict this hope: “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.” The important word here is not *botches*—his books may or may not be that—but *hash*, which asserts that he tried to write both ways at once. In more optimistic moods he believed that he could do so successfully. It was a hope which he shared with all his great contemporaries, including Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, and which even Henry James did not relinquish until the turn of the century. If it seems to have flickered out in our time, there are Hemingway and Faulkner and R. P. Warren to prove its viability. Melville seems to have given it up only in his last novel, *The Confidence-Man*; but even here we cannot be sure, for he
seems to have planned a sequel to this, the most baffling of his books, after both his American and his English publishers had abandoned him as a failure.

Melville's two ways of writing can be defined by analysis of the three works which he first conceived as popular books (written, that is, "the other way"), and then drastically reconceived so as to include also what he was "most moved to do." These were *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Pierre*. In the finished forms of all three, the popular materials remain either as a base or a starting point for the more private material which he imposed on them. I pause here to point out the impossibility of reading books so composed in the way many Melville critics try to do—that is, as structurally organic wholes all the parts of which can be schematically related to all the other parts. Melville's gift was not for unity, or integrated structure, but for diversity and digression, and he took advantage of all of what has been called the "novel's liberties and privileges."

In the three rewritten works, the two that he first conceived as forms of travel, *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, are based on precisely those popular materials which predominate in his four successful travel works—loose, episodic, anecdotal narrative; information; and informal, intimate commentary. These materials the readers liked and the critics praised, even though they rejected the two books as wholes. What he was "most moved to write" he added, to *Mardi*, in the shape of intellectual allegory; to *Moby-Dick*, in the Ahab drama. And it was the allegory and the drama which the public disliked. The rejection, it appears, was due primarily to Melville's shift from direct commentary to forms of thinking which the public found repulsive.

The forms of thought and opinion in fiction have been a major problem for American writers from Charles Brockden Brown to William Faulkner. In writers whose thinking was generated mainly by conflicts between themselves and public beliefs and values, e.g., Cooper, Howells, and Sinclair Lewis, ideas are usually
presented through the dialectic of characters who represent different social classes, occupations, races, regions, or sexes. By and large, this form of thought has been the safest, so far as tensions between writer and reader are concerned, partly because it is so easily skipped by the reader who is anxious to get on with the narrative, partly because it is potentially so deceptive even for the critical watchdog who seeks to identify what the author thinks with what his characters say. Such writers are most likely to get into trouble when they make direct authorial statements, or indirect ones through thin disguises, like Cooper's Major Effingham or Lewis' Arrowsmith. But if we can judge from the sales records of Cooper's novels, the common reader will stay with the author, no matter what he thinks, as long as narrative, information, and other diverting elements heavily outweigh the thinking. Cooper's readers rejected only those novels in which thought and opinion predominated.

Cooper's and Howells' characteristic dialectical thinking offers the reader choices: he can take sides in the argument, or accept it in suspension, or simply ignore it. The same is true of Melville's thinking in his first two books. Moreover, in these, his thinking was chiefly about primitivism. Though some critics resented his attacks on institutions, by the 1840's the subject was being argued more sentimentally than seriously. But when in *Mardi* Melville began to generate ideas out of contradictions within himself, he shifted to a kind of internal dialectic which gave the reader no choice. He involved him in the very processes of thought, made him collaborate in exploratory, speculative thinking which is concerned not with commitment but with possibility. It is the one kind of thinking that the general reader will not tolerate, and the nineteenth-century critic, when he detected it, declared it subversive.⁴

Melville began *Mardi* as "another book of South Sea Adventure (continued from, tho' wholly independent of 'Omoo')," and was so sure that it would be a "hit" (his word) with the general
reader that he asked of his London publisher an advance double that he had received for *Omoo*. His original intention survives, if at all, only in the first forty chapters. This portion differs from the earlier travel works in two respects. First, though the narrative is characteristically episodic and in the first person, it is somewhat more fictionalized. Second, and more important, there is a new quality in the non-narrative elements. In this part of *Mardi* he develops what he later perfected in *Moby-Dick*—the popular art of clear and charming exposition of natural and technological fact; and for the first time, he uses fact as a vehicle of meaning. Fact becomes occasion for meditation: the doctrinaire and contentious commentary of *Typee* becomes deeply personal reflection. This change in his style was widely admired as a way of combining "fact and fancy."

After this beginning, however, flesh-and-blood narrative fades into the patently allegorical story of the discovery, the loss, and the search for the maiden Yillah. In terms of the intellectual purpose of the book, that search means little: in long stretches Yillah is forgotten completely. She is not what the book is about. I suspect that she is the product of one of Melville's miscalculations of the common reader—that he invented her to provide a story-line to carry the reader along with him, and that the pursuit is about equivalent to Cooper's Indian chases, which keep the reader busy while the author interpolates materials which are of primary interest to himself. The substance and the essence of *Mardi* are in the discourse of the characters—in Melville's dialectic with the world and with himself.

He was, of course, deserted by readers as soon as they realized that the Yillah story was bait to lure them into an intellectual jungle. In England, where, to Melville's disgust, *Mardi* was printed in three volumes for circulating libraries in the format of the novel, defrauded readers were indignant, and the exasperated publisher, who lost money on it, reported that "the first volume 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 "stopped the sale of the book." 

In the allegory, which was what Melville was "most moved to write," he met head-on—and disastrously—the problems of authorial identity and of dialectical speculation. As long as the narrator in Volume One has a definable personality—that of a lively, learned, meditative adventurer, like White-Jacket or Ishmael, Melville's touch is sure. But after Chapter XL, when he is given the name of Taji, the narrator disintegrates. As the pursuer of Yillah he becomes a mere function of the perfunctory plot, takes no part in the discourse, and is often forgotten. The "I" of the first part tends to become "we" in the allegory, and even the "we" often disappears in a fog of authorial omniscience. Sometimes, within a brief space, Taji speaks as "we," is addressed by the author as "you," and is referred to in the third person by his companions as if he were not there. Once, even though Taji is supposed to be in the middle of the Pacific, Melville shoves him aside, and, speaking from his New York house, says, "My cheek blanches while I write while I slave and faint in this cell."

Though, in terms of the story, the narrator becomes Taji, in terms of the intellectual content of the book he is displaced by a set of characters who represent the component parts of Melville's new creative personality. The journalist survives as Mohi the chronicler, the purveyor of mere fact, who, though he sometimes spins yarns, is treated with contempt. Yoomy is the poet in the new Melville, a tender-minded believer, impatient of raw fact, "capricious swayed by contrary moods—made up of a thousand contradictions [and] no one in Mardi comprehended him." The dominant character and chief talker in this trio is the philosopher and critic, Babbalanja. He is the seeker after meaning, the believer in "polysensuum," or many meanings, the enemy of the "armed and crested lies" of the world and of
Philistinism. In a further fragmentation of personality, Babbanja, whenever his discourse reaches the limits of intelligibility, is possessed by his demon, Azzageddi, who talks gibberish. In these four entities, from the factual historian to the inarticulate demon, with the poet and the militant philosopher between, we get the full range of Melville's conception of creative self.

*Mardi* was a necessary laboratory job for Melville—an exploration of his mind at precisely the moment that the able journalist was becoming an artist. As a market book, however, it was an impossibility, for it cannot be read as story—it must be studied, and the content is meaningful not for the results of thought but for the process of thinking. The book was declared, all but unanimously, to be unintelligible, and it took Harpers seven years to get rid of 3,000 copies. Melville said bitterly that *Mardi* was "stabbed," meaning that the critics attacked not the book but the author. He and the critics were both right, for they perceived that the book *was* the author in a sense that fiction should never be.

Moreover, the critics sensed that the book was hostile to them, to the general reader, and to the world. It is sometimes wrongly stated that it was the critical attack on *Mardi* that caused Melville's increasing hostility to the public. The reverse is true, for the hostility is in the book and antecedent to its failure. Its immediate source was his humiliation that *Typee* and *Omoo*, which he had outgrown by the time he finished the latter, should have earned him such cheap notoriety. He had begged his London publisher to omit "by the author of *Typee* and *Omoo*" from the title page of *Mardi*. Babbalanja declares that there is "more likelihood of being over-rated while living than of being underrated when dead." And when Yoomy sings an immortal but anonymous song, the philosopher says, "This were to be truly immortal; to be perpetuated in our works, and not in our name. Let me, oh Oro! be anonymously known!" He implies that by exploiting the writer as person and trying to keep him down to
the level of his poorest work, the world gives him contemporary reputation at the expense of ultimate fame. "Does not all Mardi by its action declare it is far better to be notorious now than famous hereafter? To insure your fame, you must die." It was to be his bitterest pill from now on that Typee and Omoo kept on selling while his better works languished, and he predicted (what was to be true until 1920) that he would go down to posterity as a "man who lived among cannibals," and that Typee would be fed to babies along "with their gingerbread."

But the deepest source of his alienation was his sudden discovery of the meaning of genius and his affinity with it, and his belief that the world resents genius until time and death sterilize it. The word was used ambivalently in contemporary criticism. Though it often served as a mere compliment to the individuality of Melville's style, it was more commonly qualified by the word "but," in a context meaning that such individuality as his was not to be trusted socially. And he was all the more distrusted because in Mardi and Pierre he not only identified himself with genius but put it in invidious contrast with the common character. "Men like you and me," he wrote Hawthorne, form "a chain of God's posts round the world," and in the "boundless, trackless, but still glorious wild wilderness" which is the domain of genius, we are attacked by "Indians [who] do sorely abound, as well as [by] the insignificant but still stinging mosquitoes." The mosquitoes sting in Chapter CLXXX of Mardi, where Babbalanja is the spokesman for Lombardo, a mythical great artist of the past who received "coppers then, and immortal glory now." In a dialogue about Lombardo's masterpiece, the Koztanza, Melville's belief that genius is hated must have been plain to any attentive reader. Abrazza, an arch-Philistine, utters stupid and spiteful platitudes about genius that are still current. Babbalanja's attempts to correct him are futile, for it is clear that Abrazza resents not literature but writers: when he has
finished attacking the Koztanza, he confesses, "I never read it." Equally obvious is the soaring egotism in the chapter, "Dreams," in which, shaking himself free from all his spokesmen and writing as Melville, he allies himself with the great community of genius of all time: "In me" the great writers "recline and converse." "Blind Milton sings bass to my Petrarchs and laureats crown me with bays." This egotism is capped with romantic self-pity as he speaks of "the Dionysius that rides me," so that he is "less to be envied, than the veriest hind in the land." In a dozen furious reviews of Mardi, the crucial word was "conceit."

From Irving and Longfellow to James and beyond, one of the symptoms of friction between the American writer and his public has been his tendency to write about writing—to write poems about poems and fiction about novelists. Though such works vary widely in tone from defensiveness to a guilty deprecation of art itself, they all derive from the sense that the writer is different from people and that people resent him for it. He has often attempted to minimize that difference, as Poe did when he described the writing of "The Raven" as a purely rational process. Just as often he has allied himself with people against writers. It is a sure sense that impels a James Whitcomb Riley to attack poets in his verse and a Herman Wouk to make villains of artists and intellectuals.

Melville, like Henry James in his short stories of the nineties, took the offensive, and, particularly in Pierre, made the embattled genius a hero and a martyr. This is the book which shut him off from any further serious consideration by contemporary critics, and the public's rejection of it was conclusive: it took Harpers 35 years to sell 1,800 copies. Considering Melville's original intention in writing it, it was an incredibly blundering and perverse performance for a professional writer. His intention is plain: he conceived it as a market novel, based solidly on the formulas which mass fiction had been exploiting since the days
of Mrs. Rowson, and which in Melville's time were the chief staple of Robert Bonner's mass story paper, the New York Ledger. Here is the plot:

In idyllic country a rich, handsome, charming young squire woos Lucy, a rich, beautiful blonde, with the blessing of the boy's haughty, aristocratic, widowed mother. A melancholy brunette, Isabel, spoils it all 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 New York City. Living in abject poverty in a tenement, the pair are joined by Lucy and a ruined servant girl from home. The villain enters in the person 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. Except for the unhappy ending, this is the stuff of mid-nineteenth-century misery fiction and melodrama. Here also is the popular myth of the wholesome country vs. the wicked city, and of the permanent "ruin" suffered by the once-seduced girl. Occasionally Melville even lapses into the language of melodrama: "Her father will not look upon her; her mother she hath cursed her to her face," and Delly is "forever ruined by the cruel arts of Ned."

This work he described to a publisher as a "regular romance, with a mysterious plot to it, & stirring passions at work." It would, moreover, be the first of a "new field of productions," which would enrich both him and his publishers. That he wished its popularity not to be damaged by association with his previous works is evident in his request that it be published anonymously. Poverty and debt had forced him into the mass market.

But beneath—or above—this intention lay another. He was coming to believe that "the tribe of 'general readers'" (his words), who would not tolerate the unpleasant truth, could be deceived. The artist could be as profound as he wished without
being resented if he concealed his profundities under a pleasant or sensational narrative surface through which the reader looking for mere diversion could not penetrate. Thus greatness could be achieved in the public art of fiction in the nineteenth century, as it had been in Shakespeare's theater. The idea is hinted in \textit{Mardi}, when Media, warning Babbalanja of the Abrazzas of the world, shuts off the philosopher's undisguised speculations on religion with the words, "Meditate as much as you will, but say little aloud, unless in a merry mythical way." He had practiced the merrily mythical in \textit{Moby-Dick}, with some success, if one may judge by reviews which admired the surface and nothing else. He brooded about how Shakespeare, beneath the surfaces of "popularizing noise and show of broad farce and blood-besmeared tragedy," "craftily" puts into the mouths of dark characters like Hamlet and Timon "things which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness" for any writer "in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them," and how this "madness of vital truth" is undetected by the public which burns its "tuns of rancid fat" at Shakespeare's shrine.

In the summer of 1850 he discovered in Hawthorne the darkness and the depth of Shakespeare, and was convinced that his neighbor was not only, like Shakespeare, "almost utterly mistaken" by his readers, but that he deliberately courted misunderstanding in order to protect himself. Indeed, this genius "takes great delight in hoodwinking the world," partly by giving his dark stories innocent titles (like "Young Goodman Brown") which are "directly calculated to deceive—egregiously deceive, the superficial skimmer of pages." In 1851, when he was finishing \textit{Moby-Dick} and beginning \textit{Pierre}, he had long talks of "things of this world and of the next, and books and publishers" with Hawthorne, who, for the first time, was reaching a large public with serious fiction. It was at this point that Melville deserted the adventure narrative and conceived a domestic thriller in which, under a surface of popular formulas, he would dive to
greater depths than he had reached in *Moby-Dick*. "Leviathan is not the biggest fish," he wrote as he began *Pierre*; "I have heard of Krakens."

The result of all this scheming was an out-and-out attempt to invest the sensational love novel with the dignity and profundity of Shakespearian tragedy. Pierre and Lucy are presented as agrarian aristocrats and are put at the top of the American social pyramid in order to provide for the classic tragic "fall." The gaudy plot is a vehicle for profound psychological perceptions. The country-boy hero is an intellectual and introspective as Hamlet. The language and dialogue, a combination of Shakespeare and Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth of the *Ledger*, are elevated right out of the realm of recognizable English speech. And the plot, which a *Ledger* writer would have twisted into a happy ending at the last moment, is allowed to follow its natural course to a catastrophe which kills off the good and the bad alike. He puts into Pierre's mouth the "vital truth" which it would be "madness" for him to utter "in his own proper character"—but not "craftily" enough. The reviewers promptly identified Pierre with Melville and found him both mad and socially dangerous.

Once more, the fault lay partly in Melville's bad handling of speculative commentary and of technical point of view. Much as readers either disliked or ignored the speculation in *Moby-Dick*, he had tried to lead them gently into it—indeed to train them in speculation. In the chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale," for example, his object was to get 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. Aware that a generation which had been taught to read by the Scotch rhetoricians tended toward stock responses to images, he worked patiently to complicate these responses without destroying them. After a long list of the accepted benign associations of whiteness,
he tried to lead the reader, example by example, to the realization that white is also the symbol of terror, and that therefore malignity and benignity are inseparably one. The climactic paragraph, in which the appalling proposition is put, is not assertion but question. The reader is told not that evil is absolute but that if we grasp imaginatively all the associations of whiteness, then we are in a position to understand a madman's "fiery hunt" for the source of evil. But we are also warned that he who sees nothing but the "colorless, all-color of a-theism" is a "wretched infidel" who "gazes himself blind." Again and again, in this chapter, Melville begs the reader to concentrate and to collaborate with him. "Let us try," he says at one point, "for without imagination no man can follow another into these halls." Note the community between writer and reader that is implied or invited by the we and by the use of "another" (man) instead of the divisive pronoun "me."

This sense of community is wholly lacking in the speculations in Pierre. No collaboration is invited, and the reader gets no guidance toward possibility. Properly guided, he might, perhaps, have understood that Pierre's progress toward disbelief in virtue (which is the theme of the book) is a necessity of his character, not of Melville's; that what was necessity for Pierre was possibility for Melville; that the denouement does not prove that Melville thinks Pierre is right—only that the possibility of a man's thinking like Pierre constitutes the "tragedy of mind." We recall that, in the denouement of Moby-Dick, a regenerated, believing Ishmael survives not only shipwreck but his own speculative thinking.

Much of Melville's blundering in Pierre may have been due to his having radically reconceived and rewritten it during the course of composition. On January 8, 1852, he wrote Mrs. Hawthorne, "I shall not again send you a bowl of salt water. The next chalice I shall commend, will be a rural bowl of milk." On February 20 he signed a contract with Harpers for a book of
about 360 pages. On April 16 he wrote his English publisher that his book could be about 150 pages longer than the one he had first proposed. In the finished book the first five-eighths (to Book 16) is rural; the rest is urban. Nothing in the rural part prepares us for the revelation in Book 17 that the country youth is a popular author deeply involved in the literary commerce of the big city; in fact, Melville belligerently concludes a lame apology for this surprise by saying, "At any rate, I write precisely as I please." This is only one of the many places where Melville is an intrusive nuisance, who talks over his hero's shoulder or patently puts his own thinking, with which his critics had long been familiar, into Pierre's head.

In revision, then, Melville added a story of authorship, which ends in defeat, to a tragedy of morals. The denouements of both are artificially—almost comically—synchronized. I conjecture that, finding his initial plot inadequate to motivate the catastrophic change in Pierre's moral thinking—from complete innocence to a knowledge of evil—Melville arranged for him to find himself and clarify his problem by writing a book. This was a mistake. For not only is the hero a writer, an intellectual, and a full-blown example of the "misunderstood Genius," as cordially detested by the public then as he is now, but the public, as readers and publishers, become villains who crucify the Genius. Even in the rural story Melville as narrator had gone out of his way to excoriate the popular novel and those who read it; to accuse the world of "unforgiveable affronts and insults" to poets like Dante; of missing the "deeper meanings" of Shakespeare. Now, with the sufferings of Pierre as author to spur him on, he accuses his readers of judging literature as they do morals, of praising an author's worst books, or liking his best ones for the wrong reasons; and pictures the publishers who serve them as thievish illiterates. In short, "though the world worship Mediocrity and Common Place, yet hath it fire and sword for all contemporary Grandeur." And the future will be worse, for
authors will be as “scarce as alchymists” and the “mass of humanity reduced to one level of dotage.” The world repaid Melville in kind for these compliments, and his reputation never recovered from the attack on *Pierre*.

One would expect this to have been the climax of Melville’s quarrel, but it was not. He continued as professional author for seven more years—to 1859—chiefly as an anonymous magazinist. Ironically enough, it was in magazines that he practiced most successfully the deceptions he had intended in *Pierre*. In two books and fifteen magazine pieces he did some of the darkest and bitterest writing of his life. But he had learned his lesson, as he explicitly admitted when he submitted *Israel Potter* for serialization: in apparent capitulation, he promised the editor that it would contain “very little reflective writing in it; nothing weighty.” He continued, in other works, to be reflective and weighty, but his thinking is so solidly embodied in situation, or so well disguised in the dialogue of deceptively cheerful or dull-witted or eccentric characters that it cannot often be imputed to him. Occasionally the old embattled Melville rises to the surface. Even *Israel Potter*, in its ironical dedication to the Bunker Hill Monument, contains some thinly covered bitterness about fame in America. And in “The Encantadas” he has the enemy in mind when he declares that he omits two crucial episodes from the widow’s story because “I will not file this thing complete for scoffing souls to quote. In nature, as in law, it may be libelous to speak some truths.” But on the whole he masks his rejections of public values and slogans so skilfully that, although twelve out of fifteen of his magazine pieces deal essentially and unsentimentally with some kind of loss, poverty, loneliness, or defeat, some of the blackest of these were praised as “quaint,” “fanciful,” “lifelike,” “genial,” and “thoroughly magazinish.” His most impudent piece of deception was a takeoff on the popular “sunshine-and-shadow” theme. “Cock-a-doodle-doo!” appeared in *Harper’s Magazine*, which its founder had dedicated to “the plain people ...
philosophers and poets.” The narrator in this story is cured of a case of the “doleful dumps” by the inspirational crowing of a distant rooster. Tracing the bird to a miserable hovel, he finds its owner, his wife, and their three children cheerfully and optimistically dying of sickness and starvation. The rooster then crows itself to death in an ecstasy of “affirmation.” Today this piece would not fool even a *Life* magazine editorial writer, but a contemporary reviewer called it “lively and animated.”

Yet, if I interpret correctly one of Melville’s most enigmatic stories, he had finally come to terms with himself as a writer, in his time, and in America. “The Fiddler” (1853) is a parable about genius, reputation, and fame. In *Harper’s*, where it appeared, it seemed to harmonize comfortably with popular middle-class writings, like G. W. Curtis’ *Prue and I*, which deprecate ambition and celebrate simple contentment. The fiddler, Hautboy, is a former English prodigy, who, at the age of twelve, had received the homage of the crowd on the London stage. For reasons not given, he had resigned from his status as genius, and now, at forty, he is an American who teaches fiddling for a living, walks Broadway “happy as a king”—and “no man knows him.” The narrator, Helmstone, is a poet, whose classical tragedy has been attacked by the press. At the circus, watching the crowd’s enjoyment of the clowns, he thinks bitterly of the rebuff he would get if he were to read to such people one of his “sublime passages.”

So far, analogies with Melville’s career, past and future, are obvious. His serious work, too, had been attacked, and he also was to resign and to walk Broadway unknown until his death. But we hear a new note when, at the circus, the poet is struck by the genius’s innocent delight in the clowns, and his capacity to share simple pleasures with the crowd. Hautboy’s “honest cheeriness disdained my disdain. My intolerant pride was rebuked.” The fiddler is again at one with the crowd when, at home, he plays “Yankee Doodle” and other common tunes. Yet the listening poet is “transfixed by something miraculously superior in the style,” and his “whole splenetic soul capitulated
to the magic fiddle,” to the “bow of [this] enchanter.” And as he plays, the fiddler has a “divine and immortal air, like that of some forever youthful god of Greece.”

When a third character tells the persecuted poet that “neglected merit, genius ignored, or impotent presumption” are all much the same thing, we come close to the meaning of the story. I take this to be that no writer can know whether his productions are the stuff of immortality, or rubbish. What is durable is not the Epic—the Big Job—in itself; this can fail precisely because it attempts something beyond mortal achievement. But style, which is the expression of character, is immortal. And the real fruit of genius is not the epic it attempts but the character which genius achieves while creating. Hautboy’s reward lies in his mature capacity for life itself. His good sense and good humor enable him “intuitively to hit the exact line between enthusiasm and apathy,” “to see the world pretty much as it [is].” Yet “he did not theoretically espouse its bright side nor its dark side. Rejecting all solutions, he but acknowledged facts. What was sad in the world he did not superficially gainsay; what was glad in it he did not cynically slur; and all which was to him personally enjoyable, he gratefully took to his heart.”

Can we say that this version of genius and this truce with the insensitive public was the final settlement of Melville’s long quarrel with readers? One never knows with him. “The Fiddler” seems to anticipate the studied resignation in Billy Budd, which he did not publish. The conclusion of his career in print was logically perfect: two volumes of verse privately printed, in editions of twenty-five copies each.

*Read before the English Institute on September 3, 1957.

1. That four of his most popular books are slightly fictionalized autobiographical travel rather than novels makes his case the more significant; for it is precisely in this borderland between forms of fact (that is, travel, history, and the literal representation of manners) and forms of fiction that the American novel became a respectable literary genre (respectable, that is, in the eyes of the cultivated contemporary reader) during the first sixty years of its existence.
2. Chapter LXIII. Melville reports this not as a "modest young man," but as an observer with a touristic and anthropological interest in the "heathenish games and dances which still secretly lingered in the valley." He watches from a hiding place, and the girls are guarded by "hideous old crones who might have been duennas." Rather perversely, however, he points up the sexual symbolism of the dance by recording that it was with difficulty that he restrained his companion from "rushing [out of the bushes] and seizing a partner." The dance was at first a part of the manuscript of *Typee*, from which he excluded it because, possibly, in that context it would have been more personal than in *Omoo*. Melville to John Murray, January 29, 1847: "You will perceive that there is a chapter in the book which describes a dance in the valley of Tamai. This description has been modified and adapted from a certain chapter which it was thought best to exclude from *Typee*.

3. Chapter III. The whole chapter is an elaborate exposition of his social status and identity in relation to the character of the common sailor.

4. See a representative comment by Melville's friend, E. A. Duyckinck: In *Moby-Dick* (which Duyckinck greatly admired) Melville's "extravagant daring speculation is out of place and uncomfortable," and it violates "the most sacred associations of life."

5. Compare the autobiographical passage in *Pierre*, where the publishers write the young author, "Sir:—You are a swindler. Upon the pretense of writing a popular novel for us, you have been receiving cash advances from us, while passing through our press the sheets of a blasphemous rhapsody, filched from the vile Atheists, Lucian and Voltaire" (Book 26, sec. iv).

6. This was now Melville's view of his earlier works. In explaining to John Murray why he changed *Mardi* from a continuation of *Omoo* to a work of fancy, he said, "Well: proceeding in my narrative of facts I began to feel an incurable distaste for the same; & . felt irked, cramped & fettered by plodding along with dull common places . ' (March 25, 1848).

7. See his comment less than a month after it appeared: . . . 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" (April 5, 1849). If one accepts Pierre's writing of his magnum opus as analogous to the writing of *Mardi*, the second paragraph of Book 21, sec. i, in *Pierre* suggests that Melville had some regrets about having loaded *Mardi* with undigested reading.

8. A unique exception deserves to be remembered: Other parts [of *Mardi*] require a wide-awake application, or, as in 'Gulliver's Travels,' one half the aroma will be lost. . . The book invites study, and deserves . . close investigation" (*Albion*, April 21, 1849).

9. Nothing in *Tycee* and *Omoo*, and nothing in all the documents printed in Jay Leyda's *Melville Log*, suggests that Melville thought about his writing in terms of genius, or in anything but commercial terms, before January 1, 1848. But on March 25 of the same year he wrote the famous letter to Murray announcing the newly conceived *Mardi*. Thereafter, the concept of genius pervades his writings and his correspondence with Hawthorne.