

THE POETRY OF HERMAN MELVILLE

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PREFACE

It seems incredible that any work of Herman Melville can be said to be suffering from a lack of critical attention. Yet, it is true. Not only one work suffers ignominy but five published volumes, two in manuscript, and a number of miscellaneous pieces. Several students of Melville (F.O. Matthiessen, Hennig Cohen, and Richard Chase) have published selections from his verse and they have included some valuable comments or notes on their selections. But their volumes are necessarily incomplete, and cover, even altogether, relatively few poems of Melville's total output. Virtually all of the full-length studies on Melville concentrate on the prose fiction, and either ignore the poetry entirely, or plunder from it occasionally to make a point. The primary source for this study, Mr. Howard Vincent's Collected Poems of Herman Melville, is complete with, of course, the exception of Clarel. Mr. Vincent's notes are replete with information and insights, but primarily emphasize biographical details or sources, and do not pretend to fully explicate every poem in the volume. With all this in mind, the purpose of this study became clear: to attempt some sort of comprehensive examination of Melville's poetry, and to regard it as a continuous entity which exhibits, if not a progression, at least con-

siderable diversification in technique and form. Toward this end, then, the arrangement of this study follows the chronological order of Melville's composition, and points out certain recurrent themes and imagery, and departures or experiments in forms or technique. An attempt has been made to include enough specific analyses of representative poems not previously anthologized or commented upon in detail to provide what is hoped to be an original contribution to Melville scholarship.

I wish to thank Dr. Green D. Wyrick for his kind assistance and encouragement in directing this study. Also I wish to thank Dr. Gary W. Bleeker and Dr. Charles E. Walton for their reading and assistance.

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CHAPTER I

BATTLE-PIECES: "OF SOME CONCERN"

Of all human events, perhaps the publication of a first volume of verses is the most insignificant; but though a matter of no moment to the world, it is still of some concern to the author.¹

Melville wrote these words in reference to a collection of poetry that he had planned to publish in 1861. However, he later referred to these early poems as "doggerel," and evidently disposed of most of them, although a few were apparently included in a later volume, Timoleon. The actual publication of his first volume of poetry was delayed until 1866, when he published an entirely new collection entitled Battle-Pieces and other Aspects of the War, in an edition of 1200 copies.² Melville was right, of course. His poetry was even less popular with the reading public than his later novels. Battle-Pieces sold only 525 copies in ten years.³ Melville's wry comments in the headnote to this chapter show that he anticipated the reaction, or rather, lack of reaction, to his verses, and that his

¹Collected Poems of Herman Melville, edited by Howard P. Vincent, p. ix. Subsequent poetry quotations from this work will be documented by enclosing CP, along with the page number, in parentheses following the quotations. Melville's idiosyncratic spellings are retained.

²Vincent, op. cit., p. 446.

³Loc. cit.

motivations in writing them were now almost purely private. He no longer hoped to support himself by his writings. In fact, he had already accepted the job as Customs Inspector with the Port of New York in 1865.⁴

Melville's "Preface" to the 1866 edition of Battle-Pieces further supports the idea that he was now writing for personal satisfaction only, and was following his own literary "impulse." That impulse, for the most part, was simply to record his memories and impressions of the Civil War:

. . . I seem, in most of these verses, to have but placed a harp in the window, and noted the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings.
(CP, p. 446)

Melville's plan seems somewhat similar to Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity." Melville is recording his emotions as "moods variable" and in their order of natural occurrence: "They were composed without . . . collective arrangement, but . . . naturally fell into the order assumed" (CP, p. 446). Battle-Pieces, then, contrasts sharply with the later very painstaking structure of Clarel.

However, despite the seemingly casual aspects of the verses in Battle-Pieces, the natural order of the volume

⁴CP, p. xi.

and the careful symbolic choices in the individual poems deserve more than casual consideration. The natural order follows generally the sequence of events, from "The Portent" of the ensuing war, through various land and sea battles or skirmishes, to a final group of dirges, requiems, and commemoratives. The tone of the whole impresses one, as several critics have observed, not as the usual bucolic products of patriotism or hysteria, but rather as a realistic appraisal of the war, its meaning and its effects upon the participants. This should not be surprising, since the poems are the products of the same mind that had explored the facets of good and evil, death and deception, in the novels. With this in mind, one may move on toward a more specific analysis of the volume.

Although Melville's sympathies lie with the cause of the North, his attitude toward the war in Battle-Pieces is most often one of detachment. He was apparently a genuine admirer of Lincoln (cf. "The Martyr") and regarded slavery as opposed to the principles of both Christianity and democracy. But war, whether for right causes or wrong, as in the fight for emancipation, ends by being a contest of might, and results in destruction. Indeed, Newton Arvin asserts that ". . . it is not too much to say that Melville is the first poet in English to realize the meaning of

modern technological warfare."⁵ Some individual poems may be examined in order to clarify and illustrate Melville's attitudes, and to illustrate his poetic accomplishment.

Robert Penn Warren remarks on the "boldness" of comparison in "The Portent" (1859), the first poem in

Battle-Pieces:⁶

But the streaming beard is shown
 (Weird John Brown),
 The meteor of the war. (CP, p. 3)

The second poem in the collection, "Misgivings," perhaps more characteristic of the whole collection, is a delightful exercise in comparative imagery of the kind familiar to readers of Pierre or Moby Dick. The first stanza begins:

When ocean-clouds over inland hills
 Sweep storming in late autumn brown,
 And horror the sodden valley fills,
 And the spire falls crashing in the town,
 I muse upon my country's ills--
 The tempest bursting from the waste of time
 On the world's fairest hope linked with man's
 foulest crime.
 (CP, p. 3)

The sea-imagery fuses with the images of waste and destruction now filling the land, and the phrasing of the whole stanza builds up to the longer last line, the climactic statement of ambiguity, "fairest hope" and "foulest crime."

⁵Newton Arvin, Herman Melville, pp. 217-218.

⁶Robert Penn Warren, "Melville the Poet," Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 148.

The "foulest crime" probably refers to slavery; the "fairest hope" perhaps to freedom. But the crime would seem to be as well the "tempest" of war itself, or man's capacity to wage war, and thus act inhumanely in the name of humanity. The poem continues, "Nature's dark side is heeded now," in Melville's characteristic manner of linking differences. Man as a paradox is linked with the paradox of nature, which is both benign and stormy. War is a natural, however regrettable, manifestation of that impulse.

A third poem, "Apathy and Enthusiasm," works with opposites again, and again uses setting as a kind of objective correlative of emotion:

O the clammy cold November,
 And the winter white and dead,
 And the terror dumb with stupor,
 And the sky a sheet of lead. (CP, p. 8)

One hardly notices, at first, Melville's inclusion of the abstraction "terror" with the more concrete November, winter, and sky. But the term is fused and given a sensate quality like lead. Lead is suggestive of color, of heaviness, and of the machinery of war. "Apathy" becomes a kind of quiet, dull despair--"patience under gloom." Part II of the poem turns to "Enthusiasm," and one expects the final effect of the poem's variable moods to be similar to that in "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." Part II does seem at first to complete the pattern. The poet speaks of spring, Lent,

Easter, and other biblical allusions, but instead of ending on a note of rejoicing, ends with:

The Iroquois' old saw:
Grief to every graybeard
When young Indians lead the war. (CP, p. 9)

The poem becomes applicable not only to the war context, but to the lives of men, their changing moods, age and youth, despair and hope. One may note that this despair-hope pattern, and fusion of setting and metaphor with folkloric, biblical, and mythological allusions will occur again; will, in fact, form the basic thematic pattern of Clarel.

The poem "Lyon" shifts to another mood. Here, Melville seems to be completely sincere in admiration for Nathaniel Lyon, killed at Springfield, Missouri, in 1861 while leading his badly outnumbered troops. After a "prophetic, sad" introductory stanza, the poem changes to a first-person narrator ("we") who relates the action as a dramatic situation. Even in a near-eulogistic piece such as this, Melville's treatment differs subtly and characteristically from the popular poetry of the period. For one, the poem opens with a tone of sadness, rather than obvious hero-worship. Words such as "host" are used sparingly, and the poem is kept on the level of reality by the generous use of concrete details. A second difference lies in the nature of Melville's peculiar admiration for Lyon: "This seer

foresaw his soldier-doom, / Yet willed the fight" (CP, p. 14). Melville's respect is not hero-worship, but rather delight in the heroic type. Indeed, "Lyon" suggests similarities in treatment of other Melville heroes, Ahab, for example. Ahab, like Lyon, is heroic in perceiving and accepting the fact that "Fate seemed malign." Both become aware of their paths of destruction, yet "will the fight" in a final, tragic assertion of the right to freedom of will, even to the point of choosing its own destruction. Thus, Melville removes himself, and the situation, from judgment on the cause (whether war or whaling) and emphasizes the existential involvement of man versus fate, the drama of tragedy.

Another mood-piece is "Balls-Bluff: A Reverie." The poem opens with a quiet, dreamy statement of youth and death and fairly successfully attempts to fuse sound with emotion:

They moved like Juny morning on the wave,
 Their hearts were fresh as clover in its prime,
 (It was the breezy summer time).

(CP, p. 14)

Beneath this dream-like surface is the knowledge that the young soldiers will meet "Death in a rosy clime," just as the romantic "Juny" morning on the sea will be replaced by storm and disaster. Characteristically, Melville's poetry, like his novels, probes beneath surfaces to explore and explain the ambiguity of existence.

The remaining poems in Battle-Pieces are generally on the same level of quality and develop similar aspects of the themes of struggle and duality. Some of the variations may be mentioned briefly, as they are also encountered in the novels, or in the later poetry. Some also provide statements of purpose. "Dupont's Round Fight," for example, admires a military strategem, but also provides a somewhat illuminating comment on Melville's artistic purposes:

In time and measure perfect moves
 All Art whose aim is sure;
 Evolving rhyme and stars divine
 Have rules, and they endure.

A type was here,
 And victory of Law.

(CP, p. 15)

The emphasis on rules, unity, and law recalls Pope. Certainly the statement of the poem is in opposition to the then prevalent notion of direct expression of emotion. The theory in this poem, Neo-Classical in implications, does seem to jar somewhat with the statements touching on the Romantic theory in the "Preface" to Battle-Pieces.

Certainly, Melville was not a strict Neo-Classicalist, but rather mediates between it and Romanticism, particularly in techniques. Thematically, he seems closer to classical, or Neo-Classical, concepts. The emphasis in the poem under examination on "round" strategy is significant, for, elsewhere in Battle-Pieces, war is linked with disorder. In

"The Armies of the Wilderness," for example, Melville links man's capacity for war directly to natural instinct. "Man runs wild," and war becomes a continuing madness, a "maze of war," and finally "a riddle of death." In "Running the Batteries," Melville gives mythic personification to war in the form of the enchantress, Circe. In "The Stone Fleet," "Nature is nobody's ally," and in "Donelson," even heaven gives "no quarter."

By extension, and becoming existential as well as classical, the purpose of art is to make sense of or to impose order upon a wild, potentially malevolent nature; to explain and justify nature to man and human nature to itself. Without these attempts to intellectualize it, existence remains but a "riddle" and a "maze," and man is capable only of blind reaction, not of effectual action.

Lest all this seem too somber, two other aspects of Battle-Pieces may be mentioned. The first is that Melville does suggest the healing power of nature and of time, and the power of a people to recover from war. In "America," Melville traces the personified spirit of the country from "young maternity" through despair, sleep, and terror, to finally,

A clear calm look. It spake of pain,
 But such as purifies from stain--
 Sharp pangs that never come again--
 And triumph repressed by knowledge meet,
 Power dedicate, and hope grown wise,

And youth matured for age's seat.
(CP, p. 107)

Melville writes at his most optimistic level, hoping that a nation, as an individual, may learn from experience.

The other aspect of Battle-Pieces which alleviates the harsher tones is the use of wit and irony. In "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight," Melville sees a potential good even in the coming of iron-age, mechanized warfare, since now war is placed where it belongs, not in heroic sagas, but "among the trades and artisans." Hopeful now, the poet declares, "War's made/Less grand than Peace" (CP, p. 40).

As mentioned, Battle-Pieces has suffered less from critical neglect than much of Melville's other poetry. However, many critics seem to be admiring Melville's intellectual toughness and are uncertain how to regard his poetic techniques. John Freeman, for instance, in his 1926 book on Melville, struggles to define what he considers a lyrical quality in many of the poems in Battle-Pieces:

. . . there is a singular anticipation of the tenderer mood and echoing music of a poet of our own day, Thomas Hardy. . . . Like Mr. Hardy, Melville loves rhyme and its more prolonged and complicated effects, and like Mr. Hardy he has a strangely pleasant awkwardness in handling the stanzas he is so fond of. . . .⁷

⁷John Freeman, Herman Melville, p. 158.

Freeman does not specifically identify those "prolonged and complicated effects," but one receives the impression that he is admiring the ideas rather externally to their embodiment within the poetry.

Twenty years later, Mr. Warren apologizes in remarkably similar terms: "I do not wish to deny the statement that he [Melville] did not master his craft, but I do feel that it needs some special interpretation."⁸ Warren goes on to praise highly some of the ideas in the poetry, particularly those which will find fullest expression in Clarel. While it is difficult to disagree with Warren's contention as to the unevenness of Melville's poetry, one feels compelled to suggest that an appreciation of the ideas is often impossible without an appreciation of the means of their expression. Thus, this chapter has defended the success of some of Melville's techniques in individual poems. The comments have attempted to show the range and depth of Melville's thought in his first published volume and assumed that his techniques were successful if a clear statement of thought was made. More remarkable is the even greater amount and range of thought and technique in the volumes which followed.

⁸Warren, op. cit., p. 144.

CHAPTER II

CLAREL: THE HOLY WASTELAND

Scholars of Melville have generally regarded his epic poem Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land in one of two ways. They either ignore it entirely, apparently viewing it as the production of a great novelist working out of his genre, or, they have consulted the poem only briefly or cursorily in order to find support for their own theories of Melville's intellectual progress toward the final apotheosis of Billy Budd. William E. Bezanson is a notable exception to the prevalent critical attitudes. Mr. Bezanson's "Introduction" to the only recent printing of Clarel is the only study of any length.⁹ Mr. Bezanson seems correct in his opinion that a critical examination of Clarel will be of value not only to clarify Melville's intellectual attitudes during the so-called "dry spell" between the composition of The Confidence-Man (1857) and Billy Budd (1891), but also toward a justification of the poem on its own merits. This chapter will attempt to satisfy these two general requirements. As an interpretative study, it will

⁹Herman Melville, Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land, edited by Walter E. Bezanson, 1960. Passages quoted from Clarel will be documented by enclosing book, canto, and line numbers in parentheses following the quotations, again with Melville's spellings.

be directly concerned with the clarification and direction of thought in Clarel. Indirectly, the interpretation may help to justify the poem as the unexcelled example of its kind in American literature.

Clarel may be referred to as a "Holy Wasteland" because it bears comparison with Eliot's poem in broad thematic terms. Clarel presents America as a spiritual wasteland, a part of the "rank world" which has been left behind on a quest for spiritual comfort in the Holy Land. But the Holy Land itself is a wasteland of death, sterility, and useless relics of a once flourishing and Grand Golden Age of the Soul. Clarel's reconciliation with and acceptance of what one may term a tragic vision of perception constitutes the basic thematic pattern of the poem.

Although many students of Melville tend to read the actions of the protagonist of the poem, Clarel, as spiritual autobiography, several things in the introduction of Clarel indicate that Melville did not intend the poem to be read as such. Rather, the major characters in the book, including the narrator, are perhaps facets of Melville's personality, as well as embodiments of intellectual or religious attitudes. Any attempt to read the total poem would have to regard it as something of a composite personality.¹⁰

¹⁰Cf., Bezanson, op. cit., pp. lxxxiv-ff.

Clarel himself is a young, somewhat naive, student of theology who has begun his pilgrimage in order to enter into a greater level of experience and awareness than he has hitherto obtained from his books:

But here unlearning, how to me
 Opes the expanse of time's vast sea!
 Yes, I am young, but Asia old.
 The books, the books, not all have told.
 (I.i.80-84)

Melville's own experience was exactly opposite to that of Clarel, as Melville's first "books" were the actual experiences of travel. Only later did he read his theology. But Clarel's book-learning is now over, and, having been unsatisfactory in allaying his thirst for like, he is now ". . . let to rove at last abroad among mankind"(I.i.109).

In addition, the first lines of the poem have established a certain distance between the narrator, presumably Melville, and the protagonist, Clarel:

In chamber low and scored by time,
 Masonry old, late washed with lime--
 Much like a tomb new-cut in stone;
 Elbow on knee, and brow sustained
 All motionless on sidelong hand,
 A student sits, and broods alone.
 (I.i.1-6)

The similarity of Melville's portrait of Clarel with Rodin's sculpture "The Thinker"(1880?) is striking. Even more interesting, bearing in mind the parallel of the last

three parts of Clarel and The Divine Comedy, is the information that The Thinker was intended to be a portrait of Dante. Although we cannot conclude from such speculations that Clarel was intended to be a detailed allegory, it is evident that Melville is setting up an epic structure with a central "pilgrim." The differences between the "salvation" that Melville's pilgrim finds and the salvation attained in The Divine Comedy or in The Pilgrim's Progress are what make Clarel more modern, existential, and, in short, a wastelandic variant of the traditional allegory. Clarel was, then, intended to represent the common dilemma of loss of faith in the Victorian world, rather than an exact description of Melville's spiritual doubts.¹¹

Bezanson's comments on the narrator and the protagonist are also supportive of a non-autobiographical reading of the poem:

The narrator is the presiding intelligence . . . Clarel's passivity, inarticulateness, and baffling tendency to "disappear" (as if captured by Bedouins) make for a vaporous rather than real presence; Clarel is more problem than person.¹²

Despite what Bezanson feels is "vaporous" characterization,

¹¹William Ellery Sedgwick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind, p. 214.

¹²Bezanson, op. cit., pp. lxix-lxx.

the fact remains that Clarel is a true persona and not Melville's characterization of himself. Neither is the narrator to be confused entirely with Melville himself, although it is frequently tempting to do so, especially when the narrator describes the scenery with allusions, and when he stops the action to comment directly in the poem. At any rate, the narrator's primary role is artistic rather than personal. He is the "presiding intelligence" who keeps the action moving, occasionally comments on the action, and appears to be ". . . watching the cards as they are played."¹³

After Clarel's tableau introduction, the narrator introduces the main theme of the poem. In Canto i, "The Hostel," Clarel explains how he met a countryman of his, "new-returned" from travel in Jerusalem. This "grave one in Jaffa-lane" told Clarel how to prepare himself for the spiritual pilgrimage he is embarked upon. The "grave one," the first of many possible "guides" in the poem, had told him:

"Our New World's worldly wit so shrewd
Lacks the Semitic reverent mood,
Unworldly--hardly may confer
Fitness for just interpreter

¹³Bezanson, op. cit., p. lxx.

Of Palestine. Forego the state
 Of local minds inveterate,
 Tied to one poor and casual form.
 To avoid the deep saves not from storm."
 (I.1.92-99)

In one of the first direct references to America, the New World becomes, as well, the scientific age. This age of "wit" contrasts with the ancient "reverent" age. Characteristically, Melville uses a sea-going image to clarify and summarize the problem. Thus, if Clarel is to "justly interpret" Palestine, indeed, the entire Holy Land, then he must not avoid, but even seek the "deep." The deep refers, no doubt, to the seriousness and sternness of the Old Testament, in contrast to the "New World's worldly wit . . . tied to one poor and casual form." Further, these eight lines seem to be a fusion of Hebrew thought with other thought as well. Bearing in mind that Jerusalem is, on Clarel's arrival, in the Vigil of Epiphany, the implied rebirth of Clarel will take place by fusion of four distinct elements: Christian, Hebraic, and Platonic (higher forms) thought, and an existential involvement of the whole man now "roving" or involving himself "among mankind". However, Clarel's struggle is only beginning and will hardly be easy. His initial state of mind is a kind of despair which fits well into the wasteland treatment. Disillusionment and doubt are as strong as are the religiously optimistic notions of epiphany. Clarel

feels disturbed by "thy blank, blank towers, Jerusalem" (l. 61). Romantically expecting some kind of mystical experience from his initial contact with the Holy land, Clarel voices his disappointment:

'Twas scarce surprise; and yet first view
 Brings this eclipse. Needs be my soul,
 Purged by the desert's subtle air
 From bookish vapors, now is heir
 To nature's influx of control.
 (I.i. 65-69)

The appearance of the city shatters his romance, as Jerusalem contains only dust, thieves' huts, blank towers, heat, blind arches, sealed doors and windows, rotting weed, and above all, a reigning death-like silence. Clarel attempts a prayer in order to hold, or gain, faith, but finds himself incapable of speech and can only gaze silently upon the city. His soul is as much a wasteland as the dead city and the desert. Yet, again the pattern of hope-despair, despair-hope, occurs as Clarel gazes upon the city and sees a high hill, Olivet. The reference is significant, and foreshadows coming events, because Clarel will, like David, seek the wilderness in attempting to regain inner peace.

Canto ii, "Abdon," the host of Clarel's Hostel, also signifies an emblem of Clarel's quest. The story of Abdon, the "Black Jew," is the narrator's tongue-in-cheek version of the end of perhaps one (or more) of the ten Lost Tribes

of Israel. "Here was one . . . Descended from those dubious men,/The unreturning tribes"(I.ii.22-24). The Black Jew relates how a "remnant" of his people settled in "Cochin," but he, longing for Judah, had returned to Zion and found only "a rude gravestone/Sculptured, with Hebrew ciphers strown"(ll. 68-69). The Jew then summarizes his fate:

"Ere yet a little, and I did.
 From Ind to Zion have I come,
 But less to live, than end at home.
 One other last remove!" he sighed,
 And meditated on the stone,
 Lamp held aloft. That magnified
 The hush throughout the dim unknown
 Of night--night in a land how dead!

(I.ii.72-79)

Clarel recognizes the Jew's speech as emblematic of his own quest--Zion is a "land how dead"--thus unattainable. Yet the full canto restates the hope-despair-hope thematic pattern; Clarel muses on "Solomon's Song" and "Sharon's Rose," and remembers the words of the "Palmer": "dust and ashes both were trod by me," before falling asleep.

Canto iii, "The Sepulcher," repeats the pattern of contrasts. The Holy Tomb is now beset by pedlars and "venders of charm or crucifix." Balancing these images of corruption are the hermits and friars who tend the Sepulcher, and who are linked by the narrator to the Golden Age of primitive and unquestioning faith, when ruled "tradition, not device and fraud." The narrator

nostalgically envies an age "unvexed by Europe's grieving doubt/Which asks And can the Father be?" (ll. 135-136). Clarel's position is between the pedlars and friars, as one who "deplores" the pedlars' activities, yet as one who "shares the doubt" of God's existence. The narrator gives specific advice. He tells Clarel to turn from preoccupation with death to active celebration in life and characteristically reinforces his advice by a symbol at the end of the canto: "from such dismay" will arise "Lilies and anthems which attest/The floral Easter holiday" (ll. 199-200).

Canto iv, "Of the Crusaders," contains what at first appear to be two disparate elements: the narrator comments on the Crusaders, and he comments on the verse form chosen for Clarel. However, it would seem that Melville is attempting to justify, at once, both his theme and his prosody by an example of their fusion. The Crusaders were men of

. . . complex moods; and in that age
 Belief devout and bandit rage
 Frequent were joined; and e'en today
 . . . the brigand halts to adore, to weep.
 (I.iv.10-14,17)

The poet juxtaposes that statement on the nature of man with another on the nature of the verse:

But wherefore this? such theme why start?
 Because if here in many a place
 The rhyme--much like the knight indeed--
 Abjure brave ornament, 'twill plead
 Just reason, and appeal for grace.
 (I.iv.30-34)

Thus, Melville attempts to justify the complexity of his theme by appealing to the complexity and paradoxes of human nature, particularly in its religious strivings. The comparison of the knight to the verse (and by implication, to the poet) likens Melville's art to a "crusade" of sorts. In addition, the comparison justifies the allusiveness of the verse as well as its Miltonic phrasing, diction, and patterns of grammar.¹⁴ Nor is it difficult to see here, as well, a similarity in purpose of Clarel and Paradise Lost: both writers are concerned with a form of "justifying the ways of God to man." A verse form that "abjures brave ornament" is therefore well-suited to the basic, but vastly important central theme of faith versus despair. "Unornamented" aptly describes a verse form which, as Robert Penn Warren says, can ". . . be interpreted as the result not of mere ineptitude but of a conscious effort to develop a nervous, dramatic, masculine style."¹⁵ Warren refers, of course, to all of Melville's verse, as well as to Clarel, and cites instances of the shorter poems which, as he argues, reflect the same consciousness (if not always total success) of relating mechanics and style to primary intention.

¹⁴Henry F. Pommer, Milton and Melville, pp. 35-47.

¹⁵Warren, op. cit., p. 146.

In the remainder of Part I, forty cantos, Clarel explores the ruins of Jerusalem. The majority of the major characters are introduced, three of whom (Celio, Rolfe, and Vine) will accompany Clarel on the pilgrimage in the last three parts of the poem. Although sheer length makes it necessary to summarize, some mention of individual cantos must be made in order to show how Melville continues and varies the despair-hope sequence.

Canto v, "Clarel," could easily stand alone as a shorter poem, and works particularly well as a miniature or emblem of the whole. Clarel arises early to seek the "urn" of Christ's ashes. At the entrance to the tomb, he sees candles at the altar, the smoke of which "befogs" the light. This leads Clarel to ask, "Of Him their Lord--Nay, is He fled?" The question is ambiguous: is Christ absent because not worshipped--or not worshipped because absent? The ambiguity poses Clarel's central, characteristic problem. He needs intellectual certainty of his faith but is unable to find it. Whether it is Clarel's own fault, his age's fault (its scientism), or because faith is now impossible because Christ has "fled" in the sense of being non-existent or indifferent remains ambiguous. Thus, the modern dilemma provides for the recurrent contrast between the "simple natures" of those who come to pay unaffected homage at the urn, and those who, like Clarel, have "the

complex passion."

In the next few cantos, Clarel meets Nehemiah, the first of several "guides" who are not guides at all in the sense that Virgil and Beatrice are guides to Dante. Clarel's guides are alternatives, possible ways of belief, or unbelief, which are all duly noted and mused upon. Nehemiah (Jehovah comforts) is frequently referred to as a "saint," as a man of "primal faith." Clarel reveres the older man, but he also believes that Nehemiah's nature is too simple to be an adequate guide. There is also some question of Nehemiah's sanity, but Clarel is willing to see what the old man has to offer, and together they explore the ruins of Jerusalem, each lost in his own thoughts. The ruins that they explore include the Garden of Solomon, David's Tower, the Arch and Via Crucis, the Wall of Wail, a leper colony, the Site of the Passion, and the cemetery mounds on Mount Zion. Clarel's reactions to each site (and the narrator's comments) are important thematically and structurally. At the Garden of Solomon (Canto x), Clarel feels nostalgia for the days of the "anointed" ones; the garden contrasts with a charnel-house. In Canto xiii, Clarel muses on Via Crucis, and links this canto with another, xxxiv, "Via Crucis," the next to last canto of the poem. The earlier canto is essentially a complaint and a questioning. The perturbed Clarel wonders why the

"lamb of God" was destroyed; Clarel somewhat parallels Christ since each must wrestle with doubts of faith: ("My God, my God, forsake me?", l. 47). This earlier canto ends on a note of despair and the problem of faith is unresolved. In the later canto, the narrator presents a kind of reconciliation--emphasizing the final thematic statement.

When Clarel and Nehemiah visit a leper colony, Clarel shrinks, feels revulsion--Nehemiah, on the other hand, calls one of the lepers "fellow-man":

. . . And afterward
 The student from true sources heard
 How Nehemiah had proved his friend,
 Sole friend even of that trunk of woe,
 When sisters failed him in the end.
(I.xxvi.75-79)

This would seem to be an example of true "charity," with none of the ambiguity or even viciousness attached to that phrase in The Confidence Man. However, Nehemiah fails as an adequate guide because of the separateness of his age, the era of undaunted evangelistic optimism, to Clarel's age of spiritualism vitiated by science and doubt. Two other possible guides are introduced in Part I, Ruth and her father Nathan. Nathan may be examined first.

Nathan's sire was an early Illinois settler. As the narrator puts it,

Nathan had sprung from worthy stock--
 Austere, ascetical, but free,
 Which hewed their way from sea-beat rock

Wherever woods and winter be. (I.xvii.1-4)

Nathan grew up "hardy and frugal," and tilled the farm while keeping "the Christian way." However, four influences conspired to tear down this idyllic state. The first was the prairie itself, its "sway and power of vast space," and its "swimming swell" and "undulation." Sea imagery, of course, is usual for prairie description; but the effect of its vastness upon Nathan is characteristic of Melville's imagery--he begins to brood. The second influence upon Nathan is three Indian burial mounds which he "daily beheld." Adding to the omnipresence of death, Nathan sees evidence of natural malignity: "Lambs had he known by thunder killed,/Innocents--and the type of Christ/Betrayed" (I.xvii. 74-76). The fourth influence, similar yet distinct, is a landslike that Nathan witnesses: even "our mother, Earth" proves unstable and treacherous. While in this dark state of mind, Nathan saw his mother die. Subsequently meeting a Jewess, he became converted to Zionism. Now, Nathan has brought his wife, Agar, and their daughter, Ruth, to Jerusalem and maintains a separate life as a hermit in the desert. Clarel seems impressed by Nathan's story, but before a friendship can be established, Ruth learns of her father's death at the hands of bandits. Nathan has sought Zion but found only death.

Clarel's relationship with Ruth begins on a note of

innocence:

She looked a legate to insure
That Paradise is possible
Now as hereafter. 'Twas the grace
Of Nature's dawn: an Eve-like face
And Nereid eyes with virgin spell.

(I.xvi.173-177)

The comparison would seem to follow the Biblical pattern, where Ruth symbolizes friendship, loyalty, and fidelity. However, Ruth has died at the end of the poem. "Nature's dawn" becomes sunset in the Holy Land. Her death would seem to negate the possibility of paradise "now," although the possibility of the "hereafter" is left open. That possibility remains and is even strengthened in the last canto of the poem: "Even death may prove unreal at the last,/And stoics be astounded into heaven" (IV.xxxv.25-26). Thus, the Clarel-Ruth relationship itself restates the dominant hope-despair sequence; death and uncertainty always negate hope for paradise, yet the poem ends on an affirmative note.

Canto i, "The Calvalcade," begins Part II, "The Wilderness," by paralleling Melville's pilgrims with those of Chaucer with, of course, important differences:

Not from brave Chaucer's Tabard Inn
They pictured wend; scarce shall they win
Fair Kent, and Canterbury ken;
Nor franklin, squire, nor morris-dance
Of wit and story good as then:
Another age, and other men,
And life an unfulfilled romance.

(II.i. 7-13)

Although Melville's pilgrims do indulge in "wit" (there are nearly a dozen "songs" scattered throughout the work), the differences in the age and men are glaring. Chaucer's tone is optimistic; Melville's tone is a continual denial of hope. Chaucer's characters are ostensibly entertaining themselves; Melville's are on a most grave and serious quest. The seasonal setting for The Canterbury Tales is spring; the prevalent imagery of Clarel is a non-seasonal wasteland of aridity and death. Men now, indeed, live lives of "unfulfilled romance."

The last three parts of Clarel parallel in broad outlines The Divine Comedy. Part II, "The Wilderness," is a literal descent into the Dead Sea, 1300 feet below sea level, and a figurative descent into death and hell. Mortmain, introduced first in Canto i of Part II, becomes a prominent figure through-out the section. His name (death-hand) and the black skull-cap he wears symbolize his ultimate "self-annihilation" from despair.¹⁶ Mortmain is the "illicit son" of a noble Swedish lady and has been "conspirator, pamphletteer, and prophet." Disillusioned and despairing now "of human nature," Mortmain has "mad fitful" moods and roves the "gray places of the earth" in search of redemption, or at least peace. Clarel's reaction

¹⁶Bezanson, op. cit., p. 541.

to Mortmain mediates between Derwent who sees him only as "queer" and Vine and Rolfe who are fascinated by his strangeness.

Nehemiah's story ends in Part II. With a "throbbing brain/O'erwrought by travel" (II.xxxviii.7-8), Nehemiah has a "Pentateuchal" vision in his sleep. He imagines an "ecstasy" in which he sees "people in the deep" Dead Sea, then:

Dream merged in dream: the city rose--
Shrouded, it went up from the wave;
Transfigured came down out of heaven.

. . .

And a great voice he hears which saith,
Pain is no more, no more is death;
I wipe away all tears: Come, ye,
Enter, it is eternity.

(11. 15-17, 28-31)

Nehemiah then confuses in his dream the Dead Sea with the New Jerusalem and walks into it and drowns. The subsequent canto, "Obsequies," closes Part II by a brief funeral ceremony, the thunder of an avalanche in the mountains, and finally by a rainbow appearing momentarily on the horizon and showing the pilgrims the route to follow the next morning.

Part II ends within sight of the mountains and Part III begins with the pilgrims journeying across the "high desert" to Mar Saba, a fifth-century Greek monastery whose twin towers rise high above the Judah mountain ridge. The ascent continues to parallel Dante, "Mar Saba" becoming Purgatory.

The dominant imagery of this section is rugged, barren landscape, one of huge stones and metallic rock, as if some horrendous battle had been fought here by the gods, as if, indeed,

Where Chaos holds the wilds in pawn,
As here had happed an Armageddon,
Betwixt the good and ill a fray,
But ending in a battle drawn,
Victory undetermined . . . (III.i.41-45)

The pilgrims reflect the conflict between good and evil. Margoth, the man of science, the geologist who ridicules all "theologic myths," embodies spiritual and actual destruction (Mars and Goth); his symbol is a hammer. Margoth was seen briefly in Part I and met again in Part II. In Part III, Margoth "and his henchmen twain/Dwindling to ants far off upon the plain" (1.52-53) depart, and Rolfe, apparently speaking for all of the remaining pilgrims, sums up their reaction to scientific materialism:

"So fade men from each other!--Jew,
We do forgive thee now thy scoff,
Now that thou dim recedest off
Forever. Fair hap to thee, Jew:
Consolator whom thou disownest
Attend thee in last hour lonest!"
(III.i.54-59)

Although dismissed, the conflict has not been settled. Mortmain, at the opposite pole from Margoth, becomes increasingly possessed by spiritual fever. When the pilgrims arrive at the monastery, they forget their ordeal of conflict in a night of drinking, singing, and telling

stories, except for Clarel and Mortmain. Clarel only observes the revelry, being one ". . . unversed/In men, their levities and tides" (III.xiv.98-99). Mortmain lies too near death to participate.

The monks of Mar Saba present a masque (Cantos xix & xx) as part of the "levities." The masque, one of the finest thematic statements of the poem, consists of a re-enactment of the legend of "the Jew who wanders ever." According to the monk's (Melville's) version, the Jew "his churlish taunt at Jesus threw/Bowed under cross with stifled moan" (I.xiii.113-114). The monks perform the masque at night, red torches blaze, and the Jew, remorseful and alone, looks toward Jerusalem:

"O city yonder,
Exposed in penalty and wonder,
Again thou seest me! Hither I
Still drawn am by the guilty tie
Between us; all the load I bear
Only thou know'st, for thou dost share.
(III.xix.19-24)

Having included Jerusalem, the Jew then expands the metaphor to include "Egyptian, Mede, Greek, Arab, Roman, Turk, and Frank." The Jew's universal alienation is expanded to cover also a time-span of 1800 years. He relates his experiences in a dream-like sequence "through time . . . deathless and sleepless," and mentions his wanderings through Rome, Spain, and France. Finally, the Jew vanishes and another friar sings a song. The song repeats the pat-

tern of lament for a lost Eden or Golden Age of man:

Seedsman of old Saturn's land,
Love and peace went hand in hand,
And sowed the Era Golden!

Golden time for man and mead:
Title none, nor title-deed,
Nor any slave, nor Soldan.

Venus burned both large and bright,
Honey-moon from night to night,
Nor bride, nor groom waxed olden.

Big the tears, but ruddy ones,
Crushed from grapes in vats and tuns
Of vineyards green and golden!

Sweet to sour never did sue,
None repented ardor true--
Those years did so embolden.

Glum Don Graveairs slunk in den:
Frankly roved the gods with men
In gracious talk and golden.

Thrill it, cymbals of my rhyme,
Power was love, and love in prime,
Nor revel to toil beholden.

Back, come back, good age, and reign,
Goodly age, and long remain--
Saturnian Age, the Golden! (III.xx.1-24)

The primitivistic vision compares to that in Melville's Typee in its portrait of a peaceful, easy, communal life, uncorrupted by contact with the West and untroubled by the kind of intellectual doubt and despair that Clarel inherited. Melville's sources for the vision seem primarily Greek, with only a suggestion of the biblical Eden. The Bacchic overtones may explain why the Greek monks so "revel." Certainly, Melville is no Puritan, Paradise con-

tains both "love" and wine.

The next morning, Mormain has died with his eyes fixed on a palm tree, a symbol, as the narrator says, of at least peace and perhaps immortality. Vine and Clarel recognize the symbolic portent of the "holy tree" (the symbol is a stronger one than Nehemiah's rainbow) and Clarel nearly accepts its full significance. But in Canto xxxi, "The Recoil," he thinks of Ruth, his "Eve," and of the sure eternality of "Love feminine." Finally, Mar Saba fades in the distance with Clarel still feeling "suspended 'twixt the heaven and hell."

The last section of Clarel, Part IV, "Bethlehem," again like Part I, provides a framework for exploring ruins and sites now catering to tourists and souvenir hunters. Clarel muses during his explorations on two ways; in his confusion he cannot decide whether to follow the way of the more ascetic monks at Mar Saba or the epicureanism of "The Prodigal" he meets in Canto xxvi. Finally, he decides to await the outcome of the journey. He returns to Jerusalem through "The Valley of Decision" (Canto xxx) and finds that men are digging graves for Ruth and her mother. Ruth has remained loyal to her mother and to grief and so closes the "Eve" alternative for Clarel. He reacts initially by crying plaintively, "O blind, blind, barren universe." Yet while still grieving, he declares:

" . . . I'll endure; all spirit's fled
 When one fears nothing.--Bear with me,
 Yet bear!--Conviction is not gone
 Though faith's gone: that which shall not be
 It ought to be!"

(IV.xxx.124-128)

Endurance points to Clarel's final reconciliation. All the other pilgrims leave the city, since "life demands her own, and more." Clarel remains alone with his grief, although the city swarms with people observing the Easter processions and festivities, and Clarel asks, "Christ is arisen/But Ruth, may Ruth so burst the prison?" (xxxiii. 65-66).

In that frame of mind, Clarel enters "Via Crucis," the next to last canto of the poem. The "way" is congested with pilgrims of all nationalities and types, and they all share in the burden of experience.

In varied forms of fate they wend--
 Or man or animal, 'tis one:
 Cross-bearers all, alike they tend
 And follow, slowly follow on.

(IV.xxxiv.41-44)

Cross-bearers and an earlier reference to Christ as "Pain's Lord" (I.xxviii.9) support the view that the poem's essential message invites comparison with Sartre's statement that "man is anguish."¹⁷ Sartre's statement concerns the anguish of decision, of accepting responsibility for one's actions. Similarly, Clarel's anguish is perhaps best

¹⁷Jean Paul Sartre, The Philosophy of Existentialism, p. 38.

understood in terms of that necessity of the individual to decide what action, intellectual or physical, he should take. Clarel's yearning for the lost Golden Age is a vacillation: he would rather be in that age when natural and divine urges were the same--where there was no necessity to accept moral responsibility. But since there seems to be now no feasible alternative to the agony of decision except the "madness" of a Nehemiah, man, the isolato, must suffer. The cross thus becomes the symbol of anguish and pain. Yet, Melville's existentialism differs from Sartre's and one may consider a final modification.

The "Epilogue," the last canto in the poem, completes the plan of the poem and emphasizes the implication that Christ ascended, as well as suffered. The narrator of Clarel asks, "if Luther's day expand to Darwin's year,/ Shall that exclude the hope--foreclose the fear?"(IV.xxxv. 1-2). He then answers the question: "Unmoved by all the claims our times avow,/The ancient Sphinx still keeps the porch of shade"(3-4). Thus, despite Darwin and the so-called advances of modern science, scientism does not fully explain the mysteries of the Sphinx nor of the shades of existence. Further, the narrator asserts,

. . . Faith (who from the scrawl indignant turns)
With blood warm oozing from her wounded trust,
Inscribes even on her shards of broken urns
The sign o' the cross--the spirit above the dust.

(IV.xxxv.8-11)

Clarel would seem, then, to be a final affirmation similar to that which Matthiessen finds in Billy Budd, an "affirmation of the heart."¹⁸ As Billy ascended from a cross (a mast) so Clarel ends with explicit references to ascent:

Even death may prove unreal at the last,
And stoics be astounded into heaven.

• • •
Emerge thou mayst from the last whelming sea,
And prove that death but routs life into victory.
(IV.xxxv.25-26, 33-34)

Clarel's awareness of the affirmative aspect of the cross is not as fully realized as the narrator's. In fact, the narrator gives specific advice to Clarel: ". . . keep thy heart, though yet but ill-resigned"(l. 27). Yet Clarel has made considerable progress toward reconciliation, toward justifying God's ways for himself. He has said that he will endure. He remains positive of that; he also remains positive of God's existence, of that which "ought to be."

Thus, an affirmative reading of Clarel seems the best interpretation. This reading is supported by the dominant patterns of despair and hope, wasteland and "spirit above the dust," and by the final emphasis on endurance and reconciliation. Melville would seem to have settled his "quarrel with God."¹⁹

¹⁸F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance, p. 510.

¹⁹Lawrance Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God.

CHAPTER III

JOHN MARR: "FOR DISTRIBUTION AMONG FRIENDS"

With the publication of John Marr and other Sailors in 1888, Melville retained no illusions about selling his poetic attempts. He arranged for a private printing of twenty-five copies of John Marr "for distribution . . . among his friends."²⁰ Over-all, the volume shifts to a much lighter tone and mood than that in either Battle-Pieces or Clarel, and Melville explores new poetic styles now familiar to modern readers.

The most obvious new technique in John Marr is the attempt at a familiar, conversational style.²¹ Fittingly, whether by design or not, the volume is also shorter than the earlier two. Two important techniques contribute to the familiar tone. First, Melville creates a distinct persona, or rather personae, and second, the persona relates his private, often confessional reminiscences. The controlling persona, John Marr, may be examined in some detail.

The title poem, "John Marr," opens the volume most curiously, for, actually, the poem begins with a six-page prose passage and ends with only slightly over two pages of

²⁰Vincent, op. cit., p. 467.

²¹Warren, op. cit., p. 146.

verse. The prose passage establishes the background and character of John Marr in considerable detail, and definitely distinguishes him from his author, although, as elsewhere, the similarities between Melville and his creation tempt one toward an autobiographical reading.

John Marr, toward the close of the last century born in America of a mother unknown, and from boyhood up to maturity a sailor under divers flags, disabled at last from further maritime life by a crippling wound received at close quarters with pirates of the Keys, eventually betakes himself for a livelihood to less active employment ashore. There, too, he transfers his rambling disposition acquired as a seafarer.

After a variety of removals, at first as a sail-maker from sea-port to sea-port, then adventurously inland as a rough bench-carpenter, he, finally, in the last-named capacity, settles down about the year 1838 upon what was then a frontier-prairie, sparsely sprinkled with small oak-groves and yet fewer log-houses of a little colony but recently removed from one of our elder, inland states. Here, putting a period to his roving, he marries.²³

Marr's life seemed perhaps so similar to Melville's own that he thought it necessary to establish some fifty years of historical distance between himself and his creation. However, the "disposition" of the two seems hardly separable, as is explained more fully later in this chapter. Marr's story is distinct. His marriage results in a child, but also in the early death of both child and mother. He is a man left alone, with only the Indian burial

²³CP, p. 159.

mounds and a desolate prairie to consort with.²⁴ His physical and social isolation results from the cultural differences between he and the settlers:

They were a staid people; staid through habituation to monotonous hardship; ascetics by necessity not less than through moral bias; nearly all of them sincerely, however narrowly, religious. They were kindly at need, after their fashion; but to a man wanted--as John Marr in his previous homeless sojournings could not but have been--to the free-and-easy tavern-clubs affording cheap recreation of an evening in certain old and comfortable sea-port towns of that time, and yet more familiar with the companionship afloat of the sailors of the same period, something was lacking. That something was geniality, the flower of life springing from some sense of joy in it, more or less. This their lot could not give to these hard-working endurers of the dispiriting malaria,--men to whom a holiday never came²⁵

Perhaps Melville reveals more of himself here than he intended. Although one sees much less of John Marr than of Ahab, for example, Marr is the more human, common, and natural character. Ahab must, despite his highly dramatic effectiveness, remain the allegorical personification of the idée fixe, a madman. John Marr is no hero, to be sure, but only an old sailor, perhaps a retired Ishmael, sitting by the fireside ruminating on his past adventures. But

²⁴A similar use of Indian mounds has been noted in Clarel, in the story of Nathan's sire (I.xvii). The mounds are symbolic there of closeness to death; thus middle America is equated figuratively and historically with a Dead Sea.

²⁵CP, p. 160.

surely this aspect reveals as important a facet of Melville's personality as the wildness in Ahab. Melville's granddaughter, Eleanor Metcalf, recalls Melville as such an old sailor, telling sea-stories to the child on his knee.²⁶

One may contend that Melville approaches "John Marr" not poetically but rather with a brief and effective example of his short-story technique. However, one might also maintain that in "John Marr" Melville mixes genres in a manner which anticipates the efforts of a writer such as Hemingway. At the least, one may suggest that the prose passage effectively introduces the rest of the volume, and that it establishes a tone altogether in keeping with the whole. The isolato, John Marr, establishes the framework point-of-view for the rest of the volume. Marr's state of mind prepares the reader for the reminiscences in the poems which follow, as invocations for one who, because of his isolation from a social community, must necessarily turn to memory and imagination. Thus, "He invokes there visionary ones,--striving, as it were, to get into verbal communion with them."²⁷

²⁶Eleanor Metcalf, Herman Melville, p. 283.

²⁷CP, p. 164.

However, a certain confusion ensues. Melville places Marr's story in 1838, and the "invocation" leads one to think that the poems which follow are persons from Marr's memory. But such is not the case. Melville places the next poem in 1876. Therefore, the reminiscences have to be Melville's, not Marr's. Still, Marr acts as a controlling "disposition" to prepare the reader for what follows. The poem "Bridegroom Dick," for example, Dick narrates the poem in first-person. But the details and symbols of "Bridegroom Dick" and the poems which follow are clarified by Marr's opening comments and point-of-view. One may examine them more closely.

"John Marr," after the prose passage, contains seven stanzas. Stanza length varies from three to twelve lines, ten being predominant. However, the long stanzas seem to group themselves most readily into ballad-like quatrains and cinquains, which are well-suited to the sailor persona and to the frequent references to a sailor's song. The rhyme scheme is, however, somewhat various and its informality contributes to the character of the speaker, a retrospective, probably self-educated sailor whose stories occasionally rise to the level of song. But the content of the song does the most to raise it.

Once, for all the darkling sea,
You your voices raised how clearly,
Striking in when tempest sung;

Hoisting up the storm-sail cheerily,
Life is storm--let storm! you rung.
 Taking things as fated merely,
 Child-like though the world ye spanned;
 Nor holding unto life too dearly,
 Ye who hold your lives in hand--
 Skimmers, who on oceans four
 Petrels were, and larks ashore.
 (CP, p. 165)

The sailor's attitude of simple enjoyment balances his tragic awareness. The sailors recognize that "life is storm," but abandon themselves "child-like" to the struggle with freshness, not despair. "Petrels" and "larks" emphasize through natural symbols these contrasting aspects of the sailors' characters. The connotations of "petrels" are numerous--from a long-winged, far-flying sea-bird and a common sailor's omen of an approaching storm to an allusion to St. Peter's feat of walking on water. The lark, of course indigenous to John Marr's prairie, also provides the commonplace associations concerning sailors' activities "ashore." The stanza echoes other Melville heroes in Clarel and Battle-Pieces and especially Ishmael: the Melville hero recognizes the dual nature of existence and accepts that existence with even an occasional glint of humor.

"Bridegroom Dick" is more of a "type" character, but also a salt-sea philosopher. He narrates his nautical career to his "old woman," himself now sixty-five. He

describes his own character as "chirrupy even when crosses rubbed me" and shows an awareness like Marr's of "sad disaster," which he meets with a laugh. Then he nostalgically recalls numerous fellow sailors with names like "Rhyming Ned" and "Jewsharp Jim." In all, the poem attempts to convey attitudes as colorful as the sailors' names, yet the tone of nostalgia, change, and fate prevails. The key statement of the poem occurs in the last stanza:

My pipe is smoked out, and the grog runs slack;
 But bowse away, wife, at your blessed Bohea:
 This empty can here must needs solace me--
 Nay, sweetheart, nay; I take that back;
 Dick drinks from your eyes and he finds no lack!
 (CP, p. 182)

The speaker regrets the passage of time because he has enjoyed life.

Probably the most successful song-poem in the collection is "Ton Deadlight." The preface, a brief prose paragraph, informs the reader that Tom Deadlight, a British Petty Officer aboard the Dreadnought, died at night in the sick-bay of the vessel, but not without reciting a "sea-ditty," while ". . . wandering in his mind, though with glimpses of sanity." The conventional death-bed scene avoids the usual attendant sentimentality by the adroit use of detail, dialect, and symbol:

I have worried through the waters that are called
 the Doldrums,

And growled at Sargasso that clogs while ye grope--
 Blast my eyes, but the light-ship is hid by the mist,
 Flying Dutchman--odds bobbs--off the Cape of Good
 lads--
 Hope!

(CP, p. 183)

"Doldrums," "Sargasso," and "mist" form a natural, objective part of the seaman's experience, but within the context of the poem, they become synonyms for despair and evil--and life is finally death, the "Flying Dutchman," the ironic negation of "Good Hope." The personal reminiscence becomes the common experience of sailors and non-sailors alike. But the poem ends, not in negation and despair, but rather in wit and native good humor:

The signal!--it streams for the grand fleet to anchor.
 The captains--the trumpets--the hullabaloo!
 Stand by for blue-blazes, and mind your shank-painters,
 For the Lord High Admiral, he's squinting at you!

But give me my tot, Matt, before I roll over;
 Jock, let's have your flipper, it's good for to feel;
 And don't sew me up without baccy in mouth, boys,
 And don't blubber like lubbers when I turn up my keel.
 (CP, p. 184)

The last line contains perhaps the only unevenness in an otherwise finely executed poem. "Blubber . . . lubbers" seem too familiar, and somewhat incongruous with the finely satirical "Lord High Admiral . . . squinting." One notices also the keen awareness on the sailor's part of the transitory nature of all the maritime "hullabaloo."

Another poem, "Jack Roy," restates the thematic statement of "Tom Deadlight," but with changes in technique.

The point of view changes to a more distant commentary,
and a more conventional statement:

Kept up by relays of generations young
Never dies at halyards the blithe chorus sung;
While in sands, sounds, and seas where the storm-
petrels cry,

Dropped mute around the globe, these halyard singers
lie.

Short-lived the clippers for racing-cups that run,
And speeds in life's career many a lavish mother's-
son.
(CP, p. 184)

"Life's career" is dangerously conventional, but the tough,
unsentimental "mother's-son" saves the stanza. As a whole,
the poem builds the contrast between social forms, as
"clippers," "ribbons," "starry flag," and the anti-social,
"Mercurio" character of Jack Roy. His devil-may-care atti-
tude finally rises to the level of metaphor as the last
two lines summarize the poem:

Ashore on liberty he flashed in escapade,
Vaulting over life in its levelness of grade,
Like the dolphin off Africa in rainbow a-sweeping--
Arch iridescent shot from seas languid sleeping.

Larking with thy life, if a joy but a toy,
Heroic in thy levity wert thou, Jack Roy.
(CP, p. 185)

The dolphin-rainbow metaphor is appropriate, even beauti-
ful, and explore associations. Flash, vault, arch, and
shot--all are dynamic, suggest movement as well as light
and color, and contrast with the motionless, dull, and
"languid" sea. The ending couplet slows down the tempo
after "shot," and remains memorable and concise.

"Jack Roy" sympathetically portrays a common seaman.

"The Haglets" is a far less admiring portrait of "The Admiral." The poem begins:

By chapel bare, with walls sea-beat
 The lichened urns in wilds are lost
 About a carved memorial stone
 That shows, decayed and coral-mossed,
 A form recumbent, swords at feet,
 Trophies at head, and kelp for a winding sheet.
 (CP, p. 185)

The poem has remarkable tension; beneath the marvelously dream-like surface glides threatening disaster. The "wizard sea" gives rise to dreams of "treasure" and "trophy," which, even if realized, prove unreal at the last. But even the satirical thrusts at the Admiral slide into dreamy unreality, and lead to the remote, almost Romantic last stanza:

On nights when meteors play
 And light the breakers dance,
 The Oreads from the caves
 With silvery elves advance;
 And up from ocean stream,
 And down from heaven far,
 The rays that blend in dream
 The abysm and the star. (CP, p. 194)

One may admire the lyricism of the stanza, but deplore its ambiguity. Melville seems to fuse both death and the imagination into that curious "dream." Perhaps applicable here is Marius Bewley's assertion that ". . . Melville's work grows increasingly sombre," and that a "provincial formlessness . . . overtook Melville" after the great

achievement of Moby Dick.²⁸ Surely Bewley refers only to the prose, and perhaps it is true that The Confidence Man and Pierre are more somber than Moby Dick (although the later is a rather somber tragedy). The poetry does quite the opposite, it grows increasingly less somber as one moves from Battle-Pieces to John Marr. "The Haglets" is a case in point. Although one may see it as nihilistic, perhaps even solipsistic, one may suggest that its dream-like atmosphere represents a striving for effect rather than a philosophic position. The effect here is primarily satirical and polemic. Melville provides the alternative to the vanities of the "Admirals" in this world in the persons of the common sailors.

The poem also attempts what Warren refers to as a kind of mythic act, which ". . . ends in legend, in the perspective of history, which is fate," and which provides a resolution to that fate ". . . in terms of nature and history."²⁹ Applied to "The Haglets," nature and history reconcile the fate of the Admiral and his men. That is, the particular incident is universalized into the "abysm and the star" and becomes a part of the body of knowledge which men use for their own reconciliations with fate.

²⁸Marius Bewley, "Melville and the Democratic Experience," Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 114-115.

²⁹Warren, op. cit., p. 154.

A number of short, impressionistic poems in John Marr which Melville appropriately entitled "Minor Sea Pieces" remain to be examined. These range from "The Man-of-War Hawk," a short piece which strains for verbal effect,

Yon black man-of-war hawk that wheels in the light
 O'er the black ship's white sky-s'l, sunned cloud to
 the sight,
 Have we low-flyer's wings to ascend to his height?
 No arrow can reach him; nor thought can attain
 To the placid supreme in the sweep of his reign.
 (CP, p. 197)

to a seven-part poem called "Pebbles" which is satirical light verse, pure exercise of wit.

Though the Clerk of the Weather insist,
 And lay down the weather-law,
 Pintado and gannet they wist
 That the winds blow whither they list
 In tempest or flaw. (CP, p. 205)

Even in the minor pieces, Melville continually returns to the central theme of John Marr: suffering, despair, and disaster are balanced by acceptance, robust humor, and a final note of almost religious thankfulness:

Healed of my hurt, I laud the inhuman Sea--
 Yea, bless the Angels Four that there convene;
 For healed I am even by their pitiless breath
 Distilled in wholesome dew named rosmarine.
 (CP, p. 206)

This last "Pebble" especially reminds one of Ishmael's remarks in the opening chapter of Moby Dick:

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth;
 whenever it is a damp drizzly November in my soul;
 whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before
 coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every
 funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get
 such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong

moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off--then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.³⁰

In the poetry as well as the novels, Melville's characters turn to the sea and to the sea-life for regeneration. Whatever the differences in form, or in success of form, Melville's later works are no more morbid than his earlier. John Marr enjoys living as much as Ishmael.

³⁰The text used is the 1952 edition of Moby Dick.

CHAPTER IV

LAST YEARS: A WEED, SOME ROSES

Timoleon, like John Marr, was printed privately in an edition of twenty-five copies only in 1891. Vincent remarks that Timoleon is

. . . one of the rare and valued items in American bibliography . . . Careful consideration and analysis of the contents of Timoleon will show that it was the distillation of the matured thought and poetic art of Melville, who by 1891 had fairly overcome the technical tangles which had troubled him in the writing of much of his previous poetry. Melville, like his American Alce in Timoleon, put out an unexpected bloom of beauty.³¹

Vincent's reaction to the volume is evidently more personal and emotional than strictly aesthetic. In fact, many of the poems seem to have been written years before, some were left over from Clarel, and others were written during Melville's wanderings through Europe. Thus, Timoleon's date of publication does not ensure that the volume reflects more maturity in thought. It is difficult to ascertain how much revision the poems underwent from the time of composition until they were published. However, in regard to "poetic art," Timoleon has impressed this writer as being somewhat more conventional and superficial than the

³¹CP, p. 473.

supposed "earlier" volumes, although a very few of the poems are equal to any of Melville's finest. Essentially, the collection seems to be a collection of miscellany rather than the continuation of a formal plan. One may turn to Newton Arvin for support of this view, ". . . many of the poems in the last collection Melville printed, Timoleon, seem weaker, tamer, and more conventional than those in either Battle-Pieces or John Marr."³²

Timoleon is more conventional in that most of the poems have as subject matter either an historical personage or an artifact, which Melville only occasionally incorporates into meaningful symbol. The tone of the whole volume varies correspondingly: no single subject, theme, or group of images holds the volume together in the kind of "natural" unity of Battle-Pieces or John Marr. Further, only one poem ("After the Pleasure-Party"), succeeds in creating a coherent, distinct persona.

The title-poem, "Timoleon (394 B.C.)," exhibits both the manifest defects and slight virtues of the volume:

If more than once, as annals tell,
 Through blood without compunction spilt,
 An egotist arch rule has snatched
 And stamped the seizure with his sabre's hilt,
 And, legalized by lawyers, stood;

³²Arvin, op. cit., p. 279.

Shall the good heart whose patriot fire
 Leaps to a deed of startling note,
 Do it, then flinch? Shall good in weak expire?
 (CP, p. 209)

"Annals," "blood . . . spilt," "seizure," seem to be examples of conventional diction which make no original or powerful statement. And the rhetorical questions, six out of twenty-four lines in this first stanza, render the whole passage weak and inconclusive. Better and more characteristic of the best poetry, is "egotist arch rule" or "legalized by lawyers"; the tone is ironic and more natural. However, there is not enough realism in it to rescue the whole poem. The opening statement of theme, simply "does the end justify the means?", continues rather abstractly, and one does not receive a very vivid impression of Timoleon's conflict for the poet is too distant. The poem demands different treatment to be successful, probably a kind of subjective monologue as in "After the Pleasure-Party." Finally, the resolution of the poem seems unsatisfactory. Timoleon goes into a type of voluntary exile from Corinth, although the Corinthians now regard him as, "Not slayer of thy brother, no, / But savior of the state, Jove's soldier, man divine" (CP, p. 215). Although there is ironic justice here, (Timoleon refuses to have anything to do with the fickleness of the Corinthians) the opening theme has been ignored rather than resolved.

By contrast, "After the Pleasure Party" is certainly the best poem in the volume and one of the best of all his verses. Several critics have analyzed the poem, and it is usually selected for inclusion in anthologies of Melville's poetry. It will be sufficient here to remark on several features of the poem that others have noted. The first is the remarkable choice of a feminine persona, a fitting choice for a poem about "amor." The subjective monologue reveals a woman who has dedicated her life to intellectual pursuits, and now, late in life, recognizes that sexuality cannot be successfully thwarted.

Now first I feel, what all may ween,
That soon or late, if faden e'en,
One's sex asserts itself . . .

Hence the winged blaze that sweeps my soul
Like prairie fires that spurn control,
Where withering weeds incense the flame.

(CP, p. 217)

A second feature of the poem is its unity of setting and theme, noticeable in the introductory stanza:

Behind the house the upland falls
With many an odorous tree--
White marbles gleaming through green halls,
Terrace by terrace, down and down,
And meets the starlit Mediterranean Sea.

(CP, p. 216)

"Tree," "green" and "Mediterranean" all suggest the fertile or procreative impulse, for which the "white marbles" of

intellectual pursuits have been substituted. However, the poem is not a simple either-or choice: Melville's persona brings body and soul, passion and intellect, together in a fusion, a whole precisely like the landscape. Art without a sensual basis is "art inanimate" which cannot "for long inspire." Nature has made us "in halves--co-relatives," and art must similarly be based upon, or joined with, the pleasures of the senses, "animated" by its appeal to psychological needs. Melville follows this precept in the poem itself. One cannot ignore the Freudian imagery of "lunge" and "piercing" in these lines:

Could I remake me! or set free
 This sexless bound in sex, then plunge
 Deeper than Sappho, in a lunge
 Piercing Pan's paramount mystery!
(CP, p. 219)

The idea here is surely as "animated" as any in Melville's work, and the final effect is a remarkable assault upon both intellect and emotion.

The remaining poems in Timoleon are bland by comparison. A brief one called "The Ravaged Villa", probably a representative example, is brief enough to quote in entirety:

In shards the sylvan vases lie,
 Their links of dance undone,
 And brambles wither by thy brim,
 Choked fountain of the sun.

The spider in the laurel spins,
 The weed exiles the flower:
 And, flung to kiln, Apollo's bust
 Makes lime for Mammon's tower.
 (CP, p. 222)

Although the poem turns neatly on the series of contrasts, sylvan, dance, sun, flower--shards, brambles, weed, lime, the images are not as unified as those in "After the Pleasure Party," and the final emotional effect breaks down. Still, the poem concisely and meaningfully protests against the vitiating influence of "Mammon," and not so much parodies, but rather tragically modernizes the version of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

A slightly longer poem called "C----'s Lament" romantically longs for lost youth, or perhaps the Golden Age:

How lovely was the light of heaven,
 When angels leaned from out the sky
 In years when youth was more than wine
 And man and nature seemed divine
 Ere yet I felt that youth must die.
 (CP, p. 232)

Although it contains a few flowers, Timoleon is, on the whole, a weed.

Melville had written the poems for another collection to be entitled Weeds and Wildings and a Rose or Two and had arranged them in manuscript not long before his death in 1891. He probably intended them for private publication as with the two earlier volumes. There remain, also, two

long poems which were apparently intended to form another volume of poetry entitled "Marquis de Grandvin" and a fairly large group of miscellaneous or uncollected poems. Perhaps the most striking feature of the last poems is what Newton Arvin refers to as an "almost complete transformation of mood" with a kind of "homely imagery."³³ The moods of the last poems vary considerably, as might be expected. However, the prevailing mood of playfulness and wit is often deceptive in its simplicity. The "homely imagery" represents an effort to use natural, familiar symbols with often surprising effectiveness.

Weeds and Wildings appears to have been conceived as a nature cycle. Melville entitled Part I "The Year" and included pastoral poems such as "Clover," "Butterfly Ditty," "The Blue-Bird," "A Way-Side Weed," and "Field-Asters." Part II is a more abstract treatment of time, entitled "This, That and the Other." Part III is another part prose, part verse piece like "John Marr," called, with obvious delight, "Rip Van Winkle's Lilac." The second section of the manuscript, "A Rose or Two," explores various aspects of rose symbolism, both homely and exotic. First, one may examine "The Year."

The first poem in the section, "The Loiterer," seems

³³Arvin, op. cit., p. 280.

conventional enough in its assurance that spring will come, however much it dallies. The relaxed mood sets the tone for the whole volume:

While snow lingered under the fir,
Loth to melt from embrace of the earth
And ashy red embers of logs
In moonlight dozed on the hearth . . .

She drew to the weather-beat door
That was sunned thro' the skeleton-tree:
Nothing she said, but seemed to say--
"Old folks, aren't ye glad to see me!"
(CP, p. 260)

"Snow lingered" and dozing embers seems conventionally competent, and only one fresh image here, "skeleton-tree," is suggestive as well as vivid and pictorial. One may, however, compare a seemingly similar treatment by Longfellow called "An April Day":

From the earth's loosened mould
The sapling draws its sustenance, and thrives;
Though stricken to the heart with winter's cold,
The drooping tree revives.³⁴

The difference in the use of concrete detail and contrast becomes immediately apparent. "Skeleton-tree" is at once more realistic and more suggestive than "drooping." Perhaps the image cannot be called one of Melville's best, but one still agrees with Richard Chase's comment that Melville ". . . is a far greater poet than Longfellow, a title we easily grant him because of the toughness and richness of

³⁴The Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, I, p. 36.

of his mind and the energy and forthrightness of his verse."³⁵

"Butterfly Ditty" continues the seasonal cycle in what appears to be another facile treatment:

Summer comes in like a sea,
Wave upon wave how bright;
Thro' the heaven of summer we'll flee
And tipple the light!

From garden to garden,
Such charter have we,
We'll rove and we'll revel,
And idlers we'll be!

We'll rove and we'll revel,
Concerned but for this,--
That Man, Eden's bad boy,
Partakes not the bliss. (CP, p. 264)

Certainly this poem shows Melville in a lighter mood, yet it is deceptive in its seemingly innocent tribute to nature. The characteristic sea-imagery is used only for descriptive, visual and aural impact, and does not rise to the level of metaphor. "Heaven of summer," "tipple," "rove and revel" all seem childishly simple, almost banal. However, the last stanza almost completely turns the poem's meaning and gives a serious ironic twist to the simple "ditty." The identity of "we" becomes not only the butterflies, who are not concerned about man, but also the Christ-symbol who does concern himself about man. Man has lost his "heaven of summer," must wander from the "garden,"

³⁵Richard Chase, Selected Tales and Poems of Herman Melville, p. xix.

and is indeed condemned to toil rather than "idle." Man must suffer, not "revel," and can share in the "bliss" only through Christ's intervention. In short, the poem becomes a rather poignant statement of man's situation since the Fall in a short exercise of wit which indicates that Melville was still in full possession of his intellectual powers and was still experimenting with form.

"Always with Us" works with a similar ironical turn of meaning. The poem begins with three stanzas praising in conventional terms the spring "Robin":

Back, he'll come back
 In his new Spring vest
 And the more for long absence
 Be welcomed with zest. (CP, p. 269)

The poem continues in similar vein, but the last two stanzas shift abruptly to:

But thou, black Crow,
 Inconsiderate fowl,
 Wilt never away--
 Take elsewhere thy cowl?

Whatever the season,
 Croaker, foreboder,
 We hear thy call--
Caw! Caw! Caw! (CP, p. 270)

"Cowl" suggests the actual meaning of the black bird, the omen of death, and the mocking noise of the bird in the last stanza makes that meaning explicit. One may recall the title and bring further ironical significance to the poem: death, like the Crow, is indeed "always with us." A mind like Melville's assures itself of spring, but cannot

avoid, even in light pieces, dwelling on its ironic counterpart. Although such natural, homely symbols seem somewhat anticlimactic after the large conceptions of Moby Dick or Clarel, they are still better poems than most turned out by Melville's contemporaries " . . . with such glibness of tongue and complacency of spirit."³⁶

The group of eleven poems under the heading of "A Rose or Two" are also relaxed but even more deceptive in their simplicity. Dorothee Finkelstein has traced Melville's rose symbolism in Mardi, Clarel, and "A Rose or Two" to its Christian, Bacchic, and Persian sources and gives a fairly detailed analysis of its use in one of the longer poems in this section, "The Rose Farmer." She suggests:

The theme of "The Rose Farmer" is the antithesis between the rose and its attar, the attar-gul or the essence of the rose. . . . The choice between the rose and its attar is the perpetual conflict between the enjoyment of life and the quest for the meaning of life.³⁷

The choice is similar to the one which faces Clarel in the closing cantos of that poem: whether to follow the worldly hedonism of the "Prodigal" or the asceticism of the monks at Mar Saba. The narrator of "The Rose Farmer" establishes the theme in the first stanza of the poem with Burns' rural imagery:

³⁶Warren, op. cit., p. 148.

³⁷Dorothee Finkelstein, Melville's Orienda, p. 257.

Coming through the rye:

Thereof the rural poet whistles;

But who the flute will try

At scrambling through the thistles!

(CP, p. 303)

The narrator must choose between living in simple harmony with nature or "scrambling" against it. The third stanza of the poem puts the choice even more directly in terms of a simple or a complex life: "Indigence is a plain estate:/ Riches imply the complicate" (CP, p. 307). The narrator then "recalls" himself to his story and tells how he has inherited a rose-farm from a friend, "a corpulent grandee of the East." The narrator is uncertain what to do with his rose-farm, whether to harvest the roses, "make me heaps of posies," and thus live in simple enjoyment, or to crush the roses and attempt to distill them into some "crystal drops of Attar."

Thus musing upon his alternatives, the narrator begins a dialogue with a Persian, another "sort of gentleman-rose-farmer," and asks advice. The Persian replies at length, to the effect that he gives away some of his roses to those who enjoy them, but "more I sell." As for the attar-essence or ascetic quest for truth, the Persian says "Tis far from popular," and he is a good businessman who does not try to sell that for which there is no demand. Further, the Persian raises an ethical question concerning the mutilation of roses to get at their "essence":

. . . Yon Parsee lours
 Headsman and Blue Beard of the flowers.
 In virgin flush of efflorescence
 When buds their bosoms just disclose,
 To get a mummified quintessence
 He scimeters the living rose! (CP, p. 307)

Asceticism equates, then, to a form of self-mutilation. Further, as Miss Finkelstein suggests, the ". . . quest for attar leads to poverty, misery, loneliness, and finally, annihilation."³⁸

Melville then lets his narrator lightheartedly personify the roses, as if they were a Greek chorus assenting to the Persian's speech: "Methought his rose-seraglio stirred" (CP, p. 307). The Persian grows more eloquent with the responsive chorus assisting and links the roses explicitly with all earthly pleasures:

It was this fleeting charm in show
 That lured the sons of God below,
 Tired out with perpetuity
 Of heaven's own seventh heaven aglow.
 (CP, p. 308)

The treatment of the "fortunate fall" is reminiscent of Twain's visions of heavenly boredom. Certainly the Persian does not regret the Fall; there would be nothing for men to write about, or enjoy, without it.

However, it is not entirely certain that the poem's narrator is completely persuaded to the Persian's view of

³⁸Finkelstein, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

things. The narrator leaves "in second thought's immersion," musing on the Persian's "sapient prudence." Finally, he decides that the "flower of a subject is enough," implying at least tacit agreement.

The poem should not be read as a simple statement of hedonism, but rather as the "affirmation of the heart" in lieu of the ascetic quest for spirituality. The affirmation is not purely sensual, since the narrator is physically old, "I came unto my roses late," and surely too prudent, like James' Strether, to "live" now like a younger man. But he affirms that "down in heart youth never dies." Thus, he affirms a kind of affectionate humanism rather than ascetic self-immolation or a self-centered search for pleasure. "The Rose Farmer," as Ronald Mason suggests of Clarel, is ". . . the abrogation of the scolding intellect in favour of the receptive imagination."³⁹

A shorter poem, "Rose Window," is similarly humanistic. However, the rose here is in terms of more traditionally Christian imagery. Actually, the poet satirizes religious orthodoxy, but affirms the symbol of the rose as a vital force. The narrator, while in church during a "slumbrous afternoon," listens as the preacher begins his sermon using the Rose of Sharon for his text. Naturally, the narrator

³⁹Ronald Mason, The Spirit Above the Dust, p. 243.

falls asleep, and dreams:

I saw an Angel with a Rose
 Come out of Morning's garden-gate,
 And lamp-like hold the Rose aloft,
 He entered a spulchral strait.
 I followed. And I saw the Rose
 Shed dappled down upon the dead;
 The shrouds and mort-cloths all were lit
 To plaids and chequered tartans red.

(CP, p. 299)

The rose, as symbolic of the resurrection and of individual rebirth, is well-handled in the dream sequence and its color contrasts and transforms the "shrouds and mort-cloths." Kinetic imagery such as "shed dappled down" reminds one of Hopkin's "sprung rhythm." When the narrator awakens, he sees the light coming through the rose-window of the Church, and it throws "Transfiguring light on dingy stains,/While danced the motes in dusty pew" (CP, p. 299). Thus, the rose is a powerful enough symbol to overcome the dulling, vitiating influence of orthodoxy.

That Melville's earlier work was profoundly sceptical of Christian orthodoxy is well attested to by James Baird.⁴⁰ However, the point here is that Melville's later poetry shows an equally tough-minded quality and evinces a still very active intellect and artistic impulse. The evidence of the poetry does much to refute a common critical attitude, such as Mason's statement that ". . . there is

⁴⁰James Baird, Ishmael, esp. pp. 78 ff.

nothing between Clarel and Billy Budd to reveal the intricacies of the process [of the affirmation of the heart]."⁴¹

Another aspect of Melville's last poetry deserves fuller discussion. As mentioned, two tendencies have seen occasional expression, a propensity toward the comic, or satiric mode, and very modern attempts to fuse sound or form with thought. One of his last poems shows both tendencies; it fairly successfully fuses sound and thought, and is in a greatly satirical mode. The poem, "Naples in the time of Bomba, as told by Major Jack Gentian," appears as the second long piece in what Melville had planned as another volume of verses, the "Marquis de Grandvin." The exact date of composition remains uncertain, but Vincent believes the poem may have been written as early as 1860, since Melville had visited Naples in February of 1857, as is recorded in the Journal up the Straits.⁴² However, it should be remembered that Clarel also stems from Melville's journeys during the same 1856-57 period and was not finished and published until 1876. Also, the playful style of the whole "Marquin de Grandvin" is quite similar to another poem, "Montaigne and his Kitten," which virtually all students of Melville regard as a product of his last years.

⁴¹Mason, op. cit., p. 245.

⁴²Quoted in CP, p. 485.

In addition, the projected volume underwent considerable revision from its initial composition, and the manuscript was still unfinished at the time of Melville's death. At any rate, the important thing is the experiment.

Melville's visit to Naples occurred three years before the revolutionary Garibaldi overthrew King Ferdinand, the "Bomba" of the poem. Ferdinand's absolutism and the revolutionary tension were much in evidence during Melville's visit, as the entries in the Journal indicate:

Blocked way . . . Balconies with women . . . Military continually about the streets . . . Vast crowds . . . Palace--soldiers--music--clang of arms all over city. Burst of troops from archway. Cannon pointed inwards.⁴³

In the poem, Jack Gentian, like Melville, drives through the streets of Naples and is stopped by demonstrators. Gentian bows to the crowd, receives their applause, and moves on. The whole affair is handled comically, Gentian is a seemingly lighthearted persona, the companion of the Marquis de Grandvin (the convivial personification of the vine), and he presents "Naples in the Time of Bomba" as a kind of Bacchic extravaganza, although with serious social and political satire underneath.

In Part I, Gentian sees a "posturing mountebank" called Punchinello:

⁴³Loc. cit.

And, merrily there, in license free,
 The crowd they caper, droll as he;
 While, arch as any rolled in fun,
 Such taterdemalions, many a one!
 (CP, p. 339)

Part II of the poem becomes more serious in tone, as Jack muses on the "dire tyranny in Naples," and the King's preparations for revolt--a "fortress . . . in heart of town."

Flaunting the overlording flag,
 Thumping the domineering drum,
 With insolent march of blustering arms
 They clean put out the festive stir,
 Ay, quench the popular fun.
 (CP, p. 343)

The narrator contrasts the royal absolutism with the fun-loving people and links the people with their naturally benign surroundings.

For much has Nature done, methinks,
 In offset here with kindlier aim.
 If bayonets flash, what vineyards glow!
 (CP, p. 344)

Jack is completely swayed by his notion of nature and the people and declares his sympathy with the revolutionaries: "A fig for Bomba! Life is fair."

Part III of "Naples" is quite brief and consists mainly of, as Melville's prefatory note describes it,

. . . a fervent little lyric which, if obscure in purpose or anyway questionable to a Hyperborean professor of Agnostic Moral Philosophy, will nevertheless to

readers as intelligently sympathetic as our honest narrator, be transparent enough and innocent as the Thirty Thousand Virgins of Cologne. (CP, p. 346)

The "lyric" is sung by a tarnished Apollo, spokesman for the revolutionary impulse and includes a passage which articulates the informed humanistic base of Melville's satire: "Ripened heart maturely kind,/St. Martin's summer of the mind" (CP, p. 346). Innocent, perhaps, but the satire becomes increasingly pointed and sophisticated as the poem progresses. Jack Gentian encounters various "pranks and rhymes" of street singers, urchins, and "fruit-girls," and in Part VII, he encounters a "prepossessing little tatterdemalian Triton," who holds a sea-shell to his ear. Melville's characterization of the street-urchin is surely one of his best sketches:

A weed of life, a sea-weed he
 From the Levant adventuring out;
 A cruiser light, like all his clan
 Who, in repletion's lust for more,
 And penury's strife for daily bread,
 As licensed by compassionate heaven
 To privateer it on their wits,
 The Mid Sea rose from quay to quay,
 At home with Turban, Fez, or Hat;
 Ready in French, Italian, Greek--
 Linguists at large; alert to serve
 As chance interpreters or guides;
Suave in address, with winning ways--
 Arch imps of Pandarus, a few;
 Others with improvising gift
 Of voweled rhyme in antic sort,
 Or passionate, spirited by their sun
 That ripens them in early teens;
 And some with small brown fingers slim
 Busier than the Jackdaw's bill.

(CP, p. 358)

Several recurrent images in the boy's sketch may be pointed out as being significant to the whole poem. The sea-images of course predominate. The boy, listening to the sea perhaps like Ishmael, is a "tatterdemalian Triton," a sea-weed who, though poor and ragged, yet partakes of the sea-god's vital principle of life. Of no significance whatever to the King of Naples, the boy is yet "licensed by compassionate heaven" to live as he may. By implication, the King's tyranny opposes the laws of both nature and heaven. The boy has natural "repletion" in the simple act of living, despite his economic and political penury. He acts, then, as a "linguist" in that he translates the language of the sea for the crowd gathered around him.

The boy, a natural performer, surveys the crowd of "large-chested porters," a blind man, a soldier, etc. The brief details of individual members of the crowd are significant. The blind man is probably a fake who spies for the King. The soldier's "livery lace" outwardly symbolizes his total bondage to the King. Members of the clergy receive two hits. A "fat monk," like some of Chaucer's clerks and holy men, prospers handsomely in a corrupt society. A "Jesuit grave, genteely sleek/In dapper small-clothes and fine hose" is "a useful man to lawless power,/Expert to legalise the wrong."

Having prepared the scenery for the revolution and

the boy's performance, the narrator then lets the boy speak for himself in a long recitative, notable for its inventive playfulness and final, serious poetic effect.

The boy's "prelude" is a highly personal invocation:

"Metheglin befuddles this freak o' the sea,
Humming, low humming--in brain a bee!

"Hymns it of Naples her myriads warming?
Involute hive in fever of swarming.

"O, couch of the Siren renowned thro' the sea
That enervates Salerno, seduces Baiæ;

"I attend you, I hear; but how to resolve
The complex of conflux your murmurs involve!"
(CP, p. 360)

The verses which follow should be read in entirety in order to fully recognize the attempt, and the success, of fusing sound with emotion and thought. One can only attempt to separate the stages here and perhaps convey part of its total impression. Ten short couplets picture the crowd, its noise and stir of activity, and foreshadow what is to come. The boy portrays the crowd:

Hark, the stir
The ear invading:

Crowds on crowds
All promenading;

Clatter and clink
Of cavalcading;

Yo-heave-ho!
From ships unloading.

• • •
Litany low--
High rodomontading. (CP, p. 360)

Then he foreshadows the King's reaction to the revolution:

Crack-crick-crack
Of fusillading!

Funeral dole,
Thro' arches fading. (CP, p. 361)

Then the boy summarizes and recapitulates:

Hurly-burly, late and early,
Gossips prating, quacks orating,
Daft debating:
Furios wild reiteration
And incensed expostulation! (CP, p. 362)

The poem continues to build in tempo and dramatic force as the crowd rises in revolutionary fervor, until both are abruptly stopped:

Larking laughing,
Chattering, chaffing,
Thrumming, strumming
Singing, jingling
All commingling--
Till the Drum. (CP, p. 362)

The drum-beat signifies the arrival of a "thousand" troops from the King in an attempt to quell the rebellion by force.

The boy mocks the martial manuevers:

Rub-a-dub, Rub-a-dub,
Rub-a-double-dub-dub,
Rub-a-double-dub-dub-o' the drum!
(CP, p. 363)

The boy's song ends, and the narrator, Jack Gentian, takes over in a final triumph of satiric rhyme:

The lad had caught the wafted roll
Of Bomba's barbarous tom-toms thumped,
And improvised the beat. Anon
The files wheeled into open view.
A second troop a thousand strong
With band and banners, flourished blades,

Launched from second cannoned den
 And now in countermarch thereon;
 The great drum-major towering up
 In aigulets and tinsel tags--
 Pagoda glittering in Cathay!
 Arch whiskerando and gigantic
 A grandiose magnifico antic
 Tossing his truncheon in the van.
 A hifalutin exaggeration,
 Barbaric in his bearskin shako,
 Of bullying Bomba's puffed elation
 And blood-and-thunder proclamation,
 A braggadocio Bourbon-Draco! (CP, p. 363)

Certainly this poetry reveals a mind strong and vigorous and hardly in despair, however strong the sympathetic attitude toward the downtrodden. In addition, the techniques, such as alliteration, assonance, the use of coined terms, slang, foreign idioms, and degradation of the human to a "barbarous" level, are not matched by any poet of Melville's time. In fact, one may not find a comparable example of sound-thought fusion until Wallace Stevens' "Bantams in Pine-Woods"(1922):

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
 Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

Damned universal cock⁴⁴

Of Melville's last volumes of poetry, one may conclude that Timoleon, with a few exceptions, is not representative of Melville at the height of his verse-making powers. Rather, the volume reflects, at least partially, some of his earlier, if not earliest, attempts. In contrast, Weeds

⁴⁴In Chief Modern Poets of England and America, p. 156.

and Wildings and Marquis de Grandvin, the two projected volumes, represent Melville's powers within a few years of his death. Although less ambitious than Clarel, the last poetry is still very vigorous. The last poetry, and especially "Naples in the Time of Bomba," reflects an active imagination still experimenting with poetic forms in its striving for expression.

CHAPTER V

MELVILLE DISTILLED

Melville's poetry has been examined as a continuous entity. That is, the poetry constitutes the experiments in technique and the restatement or variations upon themes that form a large part of Melville's work. Certainly Melville's thought in this portion of his life's work cannot be totally separated from his thought in the novels and short stories. However, one may feel that some attempt should be made to systematize his thought in the poetry and to delineate Melville's peculiar gestalt, his individual vision of man and his environment. In this chapter Melville's particular views of nature, of society and its religious and secular institutions, of art and history, and finally, of man himself will be examined.

It is especially difficult to separate and abstract "nature" from the vast expanse of Melville's thought. In any view of nature, there are presuppositions which determine how nature is to be viewed. To Emerson, nature was the outward manifestation, the embodiment of the Creator's powers. To a modern poet such as Wallace Stevens, nature is rather the wilderness of raw experience, a formless group of sensations which the mind or imagination abstracts and categorizes into some form of order. To Melville,

nature is almost equally amorphous and inclusive. Seldom does he consider nature qua "nature." Nature is nearly always combined with mythological, biblical or historical references into a richly allusive texture. However, one may abstract certain qualities which provide a workable definition.

Melville's celebrated "ambiguity" is as evident in the poetry as in Moby Dick or Pierre. The duality of nature, its capacity to both nurture and destroy is certainly recognized by all critics of Melville. Nature is, then, probably indefinable in essence: nature is--the problem for man is to define his own relationship with that vastness which is, and to attain some sort of equilibrium within it. All this is, of course, existential in outlook. Melville says more than once that nature is "inscrutable" and philosophizing as to its origin is therefore highly unprofitable and can lead only to paralysis of will or to the distortions of a mind like Ahab's. It is no accident that the common sailors in Melville's work, such as Ishmael and those in John Marr, share a tacit refusal to speculate upon the origin of the world, but rather emphasize the ability of the individual to act in the face of two-faced nature, to avoid the extremes of religious ecstasy or its correlative despair. Nature's "ambiguity" is perhaps better defined as relativism. James Baird goes so far as

to name this tendency in Melville as the "terror of absolutism."⁴⁵ One may define Melville's comprehensive attitude toward nature as this cautious presupposition, that absolutes are to be avoided.

Melville doubtless recognized the inherent paradox even in that cautious premise--that the denial of all absolutes can itself become a form of absolutism. In fact, Margoth in Clarel is nearly the personification of extreme scepticism. The ultimate means of dealing with nature is, then, caution in choosing values, but also the affirmative acceptance of whatever values, or faith, is necessary for man to act despite his dilemma. This ability is perhaps exemplified in a late poem in manuscript after Melville's death entitled "Montaigne and His Kitten." The persona, Montaigne, rejects all "superfluous business" and ambition and concludes that man is exceedingly vain and foolish, in his schools, in his quest for brave "ribbons," and in his refusal to admit the cat (significantly named Blanche) into the human "sphere." What balances the garrulous scepticism in the poem is the affection exhibited by the persona for the cat. Clearly, Melville intends for man to temper his scepticism with the humanism of a Montaigne. Man should not, otherwise, have any grounds for insisting

⁴⁵Baird, op. cit., p. 261.

that he is so far above the cat in the "great chain of being."

Melville applies his informed humanism to man in all his social institutions and in particular to religious orthodoxy. As early as Typee and Omoo, Melville called attention to the uncharitable acts and results of the attempts by the Christian Missionaries to convert the Polynesian. As Richard Weaver points out, Melville ". . . saw the promise of the certain extinction of the Polynesians."⁴⁶ Melville's condemnation of Protestant and Catholic dogma is even more evident in Clarel, and his objections are deeper, more fundamental. In both Clarel and The Confidence Man, even the concepts of charity and philanthropy are shown to be suspect, to be capable of perversion even to the point of being masks for their exact opposites. But, as especially evident in Clarel, Melville's differences with the orthodoxy of his day rested ultimately upon their radically opposite interpretations of scripture and of the universe. Melville's God was as much Hebraic as Christian, but above all, functionally absent from the affairs of men, or at least not noticeably responsive to their demands. Neither was there in Melville that intellectual smugness that eternal bliss awaits all those who

⁴⁶Raymond Weaver, Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic, p. 224.

profess Christianity. Indeed, at times even Christianity itself was distasteful to Melville.⁴⁷ Miss Finkelstein suggests that, in his turning to Polynesia and the Orient, Melville had " . . . a sense of cultural failure in Western man."⁴⁸ However, one cannot disregard the innumerable religious allusions which permeate Melville's work. Melville was actually attempting to inject new life into the Judao-Christian tradition.

Melville's relation to democracy is equally ambivalent. In condemning slavery, for instance, he was upholding the ideals of democracy and yet was well aware of its shortcomings. This was mentioned in Chapter I, in reference to the poem "America." There, and also in John Marr, and occasionally in Clarel, Melville evinces a certain pride in his country's history. There is a suggestion in the constant linking of the prairie with the similarly desolate landscapes of the Holy Land, that this kind of landscape is itself capable of engendering a religious hope as well as the expectation of tragic suffering. Melville felt somewhat awed, perhaps, as T.E. Lawrence later did, that the great religions of the world were spawned in country notable for its aridity, rockiness, and terrible aloofness to the aspirations of solitary and wandering man. In John

⁴⁷Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville, p. 320.

⁴⁸Finkelstein, op. cit., p. 4.

Marr and Clarel, Melville conveys this feeling that man is somehow heroic in his striving for existence in such unfriendly surroundings. This strength and idealism is apparently what Melville admired in the democratic experiment of America. Weaver calls him "radical" in this sense: that he would consider money or position as superfluous to the true measure of a man, yet would maintain and insist upon the inequality of men, that some are wiser or better than others.⁴⁹ Melville, of course, would insist upon his own definition of those two terms. In short, one may borrow Charles Olson's cryptic comment that ". . . the Declaration of Independence does make a difference."⁵⁰

Melville was also quite proud of his own family's history and tradition. Weaver notes how Melville's father, Allan, had completed a genealogy of the family and had inscribed upon it ". . . the Melville motto, Denique Coelum--'Heaven at last.'⁵¹ It is interesting to note how Melville incorporated that motto into the end of Clarel.

However much sympathy Melville might feel for American ideals, he was far too classically oriented and too experienced in the practical world to accept the doctrine of

⁴⁹Weaver, op. cit., p. 36.

⁵⁰Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael, p. 42.

⁵¹Weaver, op. cit., p. 34.

progress then so popular. He could envision no coming of a better or a happier era.⁵² The satiric treatment of the revolutionary Mortmain in Clarel adds support to Tyrus Hillway's contention that ". . . Melville distrusted the social and political movements that occupied (and still occupy) so large a place in American life."⁵³ Battle-Pieces, in particular, broods over the fact that, in order to alleviate the social evil of slavery, America had to resort to the socially destructive and morally abhorrent evil of war. However, Melville seems rather sympathetic to a revolution which is not simply bombast, but is the result of genuine oppression (cf. "Naples in the Time of Bomba"). Similarly, Melville seems to view the American revolution as a justifiable, perhaps even necessary, reaction. Revolutions, like philanthropic societies and religions, must be approached with caution.

Melville objected most strongly to the doctrine of progress when it involved industrial expansion. There are countless links in Clarel between industrialism and Mammon; Melville regarded it as even further movement away from whatever state of grace man may have once had. He remarks upon the Iron Age's potential for ever more terrible wars in Battle-Pieces and expressly condemns the factory system

⁵²Mumford, op. cit., p. 343.

⁵³Tyrus Hillway, Herman Melville, p. 143.

in "The Tartarus of Maids." He regretted the coming servitude to the machine as much as he deplored the system of slavery in the Old South.

The history of man, as revealed in Melville's poetry, is a curious admixture of what can be termed ideality and realism. The ideality can be described as a kind of romantic longing for what "ought to be" and is evidenced by the many instances of the Golden Age concept. Realism denotes Melville's opposite tendency to regard man as a curious accident in a relativistic world. There is a continual pattern, especially noticeable in Clarel, of belief in a Golden Age that once existed, when man was completely happy in his relationships with other men and with himself. This may be partly explicable by his knowledge of Christian myth, but the concept which Melville seems to be at times attracted to, at times repulsed from, is probably more closely linked with the seventeenth century concept of mutability and degeneration. Eleanor Metcalf attests to the fact that Melville was familiar with the concept as expressed in the work of Sir Thomas Browne.⁵⁴ Melville was, of course, too intellectually astute to accept completely the doctrine that man's history is a gradual but continuing degeneration, yet the idea appealed to his

⁵⁴Eleanor Metcalf, Herman Melville, p. 56.

brooding tendencies.

The idea of the Golden Age, and the nostalgic yearning for it, perhaps partially explains what James Baird, in his fascinating study of primitivism in art, views as a dominant tendency in Melville to search for new values in primitivism. Baird cites Melville's references to the Golden Age, the journey in Typee, the non-Christian symbolism in Moby Dick, and the rose symbolism in Weeds and Wildings as evidence for the tendency to look to the Orient, or to Polynesia, for alternatives to the symbols which have failed Western man.

To Melville's particular sentience, as to that of every authentic primitivist considered in relation to him, nineteen hundred years of Christianity do not prove that the implications of these symbols are susceptible of human realization. Furthermore, to this same primitivistic mind, the meaning of the original Christ has been obliterated by constant accretions of symbolisms. If love and blood will not redeem man from error, then as symbols they become eventually meaningless. The typical Protestant mind must have, at all cost, the emblems of progress. It cannot submit to an evidence of stasis in morality; it cannot entertain the probability that man gets neither better nor worse from age to age. To the primitivist originating in the confusion of these Protestant requirements, the unknown Orient is a last resort.⁵⁵

Baird seems to suggest that primitivism must involve a rather complete substitution of Christian symbolism. Typee may be this kind of search, but from the later works,

⁵⁵Baird, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

especially Clarel and Weeds and Wildings, one concludes that Melville's effort was not so much a substitution but rather a synthesis of Western and foreign symbols and values.

History and art become synthesized into this expanding "myth" concept of man's basic relationship with his world. History is "ritual and repetition" to Melville's imagination.⁵⁶ The necessity for the ritual is as instinctual as self-preservation. Or, as H. Bruce Franklin suggests, "Man creates a god His religion is a myth which saves man from himself."⁵⁷

⁵⁶Olson, op. cit., p. 13.

⁵⁷H. Bruce Franklin, The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology, p. 206.

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