

The “Universal Cannibalism” of Things:
A Historical, Psychoanalytic Treatment of Melville’s *Bartleby*, *Benito Cereno*,
The Encantadas, and *Billy Budd*

David Potter Townsend Webb

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In Memory: David Potter Webb, 1945-2011.
~*Your Fingerprints Are On All I Do*~

Introduction

In what would later become one of the most critically acclaimed novels ever written, Herman Melville decried the “horrible vulturism of the earth! from which not the mightiest whale is free” (*Moby Dick* 269). Throughout *Moby Dick*, Melville demonstrates his obsession with the sea and its kingdom’s hierarchized relationships in which fish are both predators and prey. When Ishmael later ruminates on these eternal cycles, he almost seems to be speaking mimetically for Melville himself:

Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.

Consider all this . . . do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself?
(*Moby Dick* 333)

Indeed, in the years following *Moby Dick*, Melville would turn from his examination of the sea and increasingly focus on the predatory relationships that man had created in his so-called civilized society.

From roughly 1830-1885, the United States underwent some of the most powerful socio-ideological transformations in its history as a sovereign nation. Society’s hierarchies shifted and redefined themselves as the country’s conceptualizations of itself transformed. As the nation grappled with contradictory evaluations of inclusion/exclusion, person/chattel, and civilized/barbaric, it underwent tremendously destabilizing fragmentations in its social, religious, and philosophical environments. America ultimately found itself torn between its mythical representation and its historical reality.

As Milton Stern contends in “Melville, Society, and Language,” 19th century views of America were bifurcated between two opposed images of society: an idealized, “mythic view,” and a disillusioned “historical view” (Stern 433). Derived from Puritan ideology, the mythic view of America as the ‘City on a Hill’ understood the nation as a New World, fully divorced from the rigid verticality of European social hierarchies. If America was a New World possessing redemptive and redeeming qualities, the American citizen was conceived of as a “rational New Man who, sandwiched between the lost primitive Eden of the past and a socially perfected natural man to come, would find his apogee and fulfillment in America” (Stern 435). Accordingly, the nation embraced an ideal of “the open competition of values (as of goods) and encourag[ed] discrepant views to coexist” in a harmonious, democratic society (Bercovitch 15). Even as citizens challenged each other’s priorities, conflicting viewpoints were championed as evidence of America’s elevation of the individual within a unified community. While the mythic view did not wholly gloss over the shortcomings of America’s historical reality, its lens was fixated on the purported redemption to come.

In contrast to the “mythic view,” the “historical view” was largely critical and portrayed America as its society actually experienced it. This sociological view was an angry dismantling of the mythic America, unabashedly acknowledging the fissures that slavery, Indian removals, inequalities of wage labor, sexual politics, and immigrant relations drove through the nation. The demythologizing revelation of the “historic view” was that of an American society “deluded into unexamined Idealist certitudes . . . immune to the nonmillennialistic limitations of all other human beings in other societies” (Stern 434). This historic understanding dismissed idealized America as a constructed illusion that disguised the actualities of 19th century life. Therefore, it saw society’s failure not as caused by God, but as showing how human existence was structured

by man's own imperfection. The division between the mythic and historical views of America thus constituted an essential perceptual difference between one's understanding of America's moral, social, and political shortcomings: the mythic view understood the world as fallen, "a momentary askew sign of a divinely ordered world-to-come," while the historic view entertained the possibility that the "vicious society of the fallen world" might itself be an autonomous reality (Stern 437).

This study will evaluate Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, *Benito Cereno*, *The Encantadas*, and *Billy Budd* as evidence of Melville's embrace of the historical view and will further analyze these novellas using a methodological framework that attempts to synthesize a historical lens and psychoanalytic perspectives. While the historical and psychoanalytical approaches may sometimes appear to resist reconciliation, they will generally complement each other. The two perspectives can be conceptualized as parallel train tracks moving toward the same destination. Throughout the course of this essay, we will move back and forth between each track, utilizing their perspectives to demonstrate Melville's deep skepticism about both man's divinity and society's progress. It is only through analysis that takes into account both the psychoanalytic and the historical that we can comprehend how intensive is Melville's sense of a social degeneration that affected both the internal subjective demands on citizenship and the external evidence of history. As I will demonstrate, between 1850-1891, Melville became deeply disillusioned by the social abuses, violence, and injustice he saw: the Mexican-American War, slavery, and Indian eradication. Further, his concern with the "moral and spiritual paralysis of his [generation]" forced him to question the existence of God and to consider the possibility of existential emptiness (Fisher xi). Ultimately, the progression of Melville's works demonstrates his understanding that American society was not a product of divine creation. Void of benevolent

divine direction, society was a reflection of its own human architects: conscienceless, unjust, violent, and exploitative.

Chapter 1

Encounters with the Other: The Universal Equality of Man in *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *Benito Cereno*

Introduction

While Julia Kristeva is primarily known for her articulation of so-called “French” feminism – that is, a feminism that draws on psychoanalytic and poststructuralist insights into language – this thesis will not emphasize these aspects of her writings. Instead, this chapter uses her concept of the “other as part of the self” as an informational context through which to evaluate Melville’s works, particularly *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *Benito Cereno*. Kristeva’s contention that “otherness,” “alterity,” and “foreignness” are revelatory constructs of an individual’s consciousness, elucidating one’s insecurity and awareness of his own difference from socio-political norms, will be utilized to demonstrate how a Kristevan perspective generates fresh insight into Melville’s writings. Insofar as “the foreigner,” in Kristeva’s words, “comes in when the consciousness of [one’s] difference arises,” this section focuses on the interactions between the stories’ protagonists and the character that they perceive as “the other”: Bartleby and Babo (Kristeva, *Strangers* 1). The following paragraphs offer a general orientation to the historical subject matter.

In their books *Beneath the American Renaissance* and *Subversive Genealogy*, David S. Reynolds and Michael Paul Rogin, respectively, examine how the national, political, and cultural crises of 19th century America threatened nationalism and, in the process, influenced its literature. Both critics posit that the literature of the period is inseparable from its socio-political circumstances and that neither developed wholly independently of the other. For Rogin, American literature took on critical political functions in response to the fragmented nature of

American politics themselves. Politics and literature “did not develop in isolation, . . . the political effort to unify and reanimate American life came first [and] as the artist responded to that effort and its failure, it gave him his native ground” (Rogin 19). Similarly, Reynolds contends that the “competing language and value systems [that were] openly at war on the level of popular culture” offered the material that Melville and other authors would adopt and transform in “their literary texts” (Reynolds 3). The overarching condition of social fragmentation, according to both authors, was interwoven in the 19th century’s literary, social, and philosophical environments.

Reynolds, however, goes further than Rogin and contends that this fragmentation resulted in a shift in authors’ subjects and use of rhetorical strategies. Authors began writing significantly more “imaginative texts” that focused on the “tragic or perverse” (Reynolds 7). The “moral mixtures” and “ambiguities” that saturated the social environment became rich sources of material for the emerging class of “subversive fiction” writers (Reynolds 8-9). Melville’s writings thus became as ambiguous as the social issues from which they derived their subject matter. Absent easily-categorized moral declarations, “subversive fiction” harbored seemingly contradictory meanings. When attempting to extract one coherent message, readers were met with paradoxes and enigmas, the products of the multiple cultural voices compressed into each work. Ambiguity provided Melville the vehicle by which he could publish otherwise socially-unacceptable speculations about the nature of God, man, and society.¹

The ambiguity created by Melville, however, was not without limits. In *Splintered Worlds*, Greenberg succinctly captures one of the key characteristics of Melville’s works:

¹ Melville was keenly aware of the fact that many of his works were particularly jarring to the public. In a 1849 letter to his father-in-law, Melville wrote, “And while I have felt obliged to refrain from writing the kind of book I would wish to; yet in writing [*Redburn* and *White-Jacket*] I have not repressed myself much—so far as *they* are concerned; but have spoken pretty much as I feel . . . So far I am individually concerned, & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those books which are said to ‘fail’” (author’s emphasis, *Letters* 91-2).

Preventing [his] materials from flying into chaotic confusion was . . . an important impulse for him, . . . correspondence between subject and object provides each with a basis to provide connections and achieve moments of coherence amidst representations of difference, discord, otherness, and violence. (Greenberg 204)

While there is certainly coherence in Melville's works, this thesis contends that the ambiguities in Melville's novellas demonstrate their author's intent to amplify the fragmented nature of the mythical America and American self, rather than a desire to suppress intra-textual chaos.

As both a recorder and interpreter of American society, Melville was particularly attuned to the paradoxical nature of both American Democracy and the American self. Beginning with a voyage to Liverpool at the age of nineteen, he had a long career as a common sailor and had worked alongside, and on equal terms with, men of all races, classes of society, and religions.² In connecting the psychological with the sociological, I use a Kristevan interpretation of *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *Benito Cereno* to demonstrate how Melville dramatizes a society that aims to "ceaselessly construct and deconstruct othernesses," resulting in what I have described as its social fragmentation and lack of identity (Kristeva, *Strangers* 191). To establish a homogenous identity, one united American self, society defined itself not in autonomous terms, but in juxtaposition to those people it excluded; "the foreigner . . . can only be identified in negative fashion" (Kristeva, *Strangers* 95). As Bercovitch points out in *Rights of Assent*, one of the 19th century's defining characteristics was its "astonishing variety of official or self-appointed committees to keep America pure: 'progressivists' for eradicating the Indians, 'American Christians' for deporting Catholics, 'benevolent societies' for returning blacks to Africa, and 'Young Americans' for banning European culture" (Bercovitch 27). Americans were "the chosen people versus the nations of the earth"; consensus was reached through negation (Bercovitch 22).

² For a full examination of the impact of Melville's career as a sailor, see: H. Bruce Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 31-4. See also: Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 1-28.

Society's calls to homogenize the country, however, revealed both its conscious and unconscious tensions due to the indeterminate nature of its categorization of individuals as 'black,' 'foreign,' and/or 'other.' In the words of Kristeva, these tensions arise from "the discontents of that singular condition that amounts to claiming a difference at the heart of a set that, by definition, comes into being by excluding the dissimilar" (Kristeva, *Strangers* 41). The "other" is thus a threat not only to individual's identities, but also to society's character: "by explicitly, obviously, and ostensibly occupying the place of the difference, the foreigner threatens the homogeneity of the national identity" (Kristeva, *Strangers* 42). This threat catalyzes society to impulsively totalize or annihilate "otherness."

From both literal and psychological perspectives, the apparently distinct characters of Bartleby and Babo serve as Melville's representation of "the other." Bartleby's negative discourse and Babo's cunning and power, constitute literal subversions of society's norms. On a psychological level, the "other" represents part of the narrator's and Captain Cereno's own unconscious. In their rejection of the "other," they experience a strange sense of depersonalization due to the fact that "the other is within us" (Kristeva, *Strangers* 191). By clashing with the "other," one identifies the self with "that good or bad other that transgresses the fragile boundaries of the uncertain self" (Kristeva, *Strangers* 188). Therefore, that which we exclude is actually interior to our identity. In both *Bartleby* and *Benito*, the dichotomous categories of us/them, included/excluded, and same/other are destabilized, catalyzing the narrator and Captain Delano to recognize the "other" in themselves; this recognition creates a dangerous region of "the in between," an area that can be categorized as neither the foreign nor the native. Bartleby and Babo are thus "others" who "defie conversion into a safe form, produc[ing] anxiety, fright, and horror" because their alterity cannot be easily subsumed (Kristeva, *Strangers* 190).

Bartleby the Scrivener

Published in the 1853 November and December issues of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, *Bartleby the Scrivener* is cited by many critics as Melville's most ambiguous short story. In his introduction to *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville's Tale "Bartleby the Scrivener,"* Lewis Leary instructs his readers to approach *Bartleby* as "a continuing challenge and a snare," describing the story as possessing "[a] charm [that] resides in what Melville preferred not to reveal, so that no one key opens it to simple, single, or precise meaning" (Leary 25). The multiplicity of interpretations offered by critics since the story's publication in 1853 attests to the charm scholars find in the novella's opacity.³

While several works have examined the story's linguistics, few have explored how the actual act of speech functions in the narrative.⁴ An analysis of Bartleby's speech and its effect on his surrounding environment demonstrates that Bartleby's spoken words represent a rejection of what his contemporaries conceptualize as language. In doing so, he creates his own discourse and secures an autonomous identity in a world of imitation and copying. Further, his struggle for selfhood is fundamentally ineffectual. In a world in which language functions as the ultimate determiner of identity, Bartleby's attempt at originality succeeds only by negating language itself. While initially successful in destabilizing linguistic conventions, Bartleby is ultimately undone by his own self-negation.⁵ Viewed through a Kristevan lens, Bartleby constitutes the

³ Scholars have posited that the story represents Melville's fictive autobiography (Freeman 1926, Eliot 1947, Brooks 1947, Marx 1953, Chase 1949), an exploration of an individual and his psychological double (Marcus 1962, Keppler 1972, Hallam 1979), a social commentary on the working conditions of Melville's America (Donaldson 1970, Fischer 1977), and even an allegory of the relationship between God and Man (Cervo 1972, Bickely 1975).

⁴ Kissane examines sentence structure and its "bearing on the characterization not so much of Bartleby as of his employer" (Kissane 195). Similarly, Hardwick (1981) considers the importance of the juxtaposition between Bartleby's short sentences and the lawyer's flowery speech.

⁵ Although beyond the scope of this short essay, many scholars have specifically compared Bartleby's demise as a parallel to the defeat Melville felt when the public rejected *Pierre* and demanded more 'sea-journey' tales (*Typee*, *Omoo*, *White-Jacket*).

“foreigner,” “the speech-denying strategist” whose fate exposes society’s insatiable appetite for homogeneity (Kristeva, *Strangers* 17).

The polymorphous nature of the word “language” is an inevitable obstacle when attempting to discuss its function in *Bartleby the Scrivener*. It thus behooves us to define the term; as we are examining the novella through a Kristevan lens, it is logical to use Kristeva’s conceptualization of language. In *Language: The Unknown* (1981), Kristeva sets forth her views on the relationship between language, discourse, subjects, and “the other.” For Kristeva, language is “the basis of social communication, . . . there is no society without language” (Kristeva, *Language* 7). When two or more individuals wish to interact with each other, language is the process through which one (sender) communicates with the other (receiver). Each speaking subject, however, is both the addressor and addressee of his own message. Since the sender is capable of emitting a message, he must be able to decipher it at the same time as, in principle, he will not emit anything he cannot decipher. Thus, the “circuit of linguistic communication leads us into the complex realm of the subject, his constitution in relation to his other, and the way in which he internalizes this other and is confused with him” (Kristeva, *Language* 8). Kristeva’s theory of language is thus focused primarily on what language is not: *what lies outside of language and naming?*⁶

To facilitate her analysis of language, Kristeva borrows the Saussurian concept of *la langue*, defining it as “the aspect of language that lies outside the individual who can never create or modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract by the members of the community” (Kristeva, *Language* 9). In contrast to *la langue*, which is common to all, discourse is an individualizing phenomenon. The hierarchy thus runs from top to bottom as follows:

⁶ See Kristeva (1981), page 8: “What does it mean to ‘name’? How does ‘naming’ come about, and how are the named universe and the universe that names differentiated from each other?”

language--*la langue*--discourse. Language consists of a collection of formal systems and structures; *la langue* constitutes the specific systems and structures within language; discourse serves as individuals' unique message or method of delivery. Discourse, therefore, implies the participation of the subject in his language "through *his speech as an individual . . . within la langue*, the subject forms and transforms himself in the discourse he communicates to the other" (author's emphasis, Kristeva, *Language* 11). Individuals use discourse as the instrument through which their "personality is released and creates itself, reaches out to the other and makes itself recognized by him" (Kristeva, *Language* 268). Connecting her theory of language with her theory of "the other as self," Kristeva contends that "the unconscious of the subject is the discourse of the other" (Kristeva, *Language* 266). By analyzing *Bartleby the Scrivener* through this psychoanalytic model of language, one resists evaluating one language through one *la langue* and discourse and is forced to search for differences in languages and discourses.

From the very beginning of the novella, Melville creates a sense of strangulation and anonymity. Confined in an office between views of "the white wall of the interior of a light shaft" and the "unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall," the novella's characters spend entire days copying law papers (*Bartleby* 5). Quite literally, the characters undergo the task of creating what Derrida described as "an endless linked series, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer" (Derrida, *De la grammatologie*). While the copies create the idea of the original, the original is never actualized and is continually deferred; the copyists are completely void of originality.⁷

The dreary world *Bartleby* enters is one in which the failure of speech and the spoken word define individuals' personhood and identity. Lacking the ability or freedom to create via

⁷ This quotation is taken from Derrida's musings on the "immediate presence" that arises from aesthetic experience. Endless copies produce an essence or impression of original, the very thing said copies defer. The feeling thereby remains while the actual concept fails.

the written word, characters must attempt to wield speech as their means of individuating themselves. From their first introduction, it is clear that Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut lack complete identities and merely appropriate others' definition of their selfhood. All three characters are not referred to by their real/given names, but instead by "nicknames, mutually conferred upon each other . . . and deemed expressive of their respective persons and characters" (*Bartleby* 5). Their "nicknames," however, are derived from the foods that they eat and are not, as the narrator suggests, "expressive of their characters," suggesting their lack of full personhood.⁸ Their identity extends no further than the food they eat. The fact that Bartleby is the only character to be assigned a real name in the story augments the contention that Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut lack identity and thus merely participate in the linguistic conventions of the office: mindless repetition.

In contrast to his co-workers, Bartleby successfully liberates himself from the social conventions of the office. In reply to several of the lawyer's requests, Bartleby offers only, "I would prefer not to" (*Bartleby* 10, 11, 14). As articulated by Saussure, "language is a system of differences . . . what makes each element of language, what gives it its identity, are the contrasts between it and other elements within the system of language" (Saussure, quoted in Culler 58). Bartleby's response is thus paradoxical. Although he states that he "would prefer not to" (engage in such a discourse), he is responding to the discourse through a non-response. To borrow Culler's words, one must "attend to what literary language *does* as much as to what it *says*" (author's emphasis, Culler 98). Bartleby's statements *say* that he would prefer not to engage in the language (copying) of his office, yet his responses *do* precisely that: he repeats a negation of

⁸ Melville constructs a fairly blatant juxtaposition between Turkey, Nippers, Ginger Nut, and Bartleby several pages later: "[Bartleby] lives then on gingernuts . . . now what was ginger? A hot, spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all" (Melville, *Bartleby* 13).

a phrase and, by extension, protests the accepted structure of his office's language.⁹ He cultivates a new discourse that is structured in opposition to his society's conceptualization of language. This non-discourse, or negation of language, serves as Bartleby's vehicle to accrue agency and personhood in his interactions with the narrator.

As the novella progresses, readers witness the initial power hierarchy between the narrator and Bartleby invert as the latter increasingly destabilizes the former's mode of communication. Like a contagion, Bartleby's negative discourse infects the language of those around him. Continually rebuffed in his attempts to coerce Bartleby to work, the narrator remarks, "somehow, of late I had got into the way of involuntary using this word '*prefer*' upon all sorts of *not* exactly suitable occasions" (emphasis added, *Bartleby* 20). Subconsciously, the narrator substitutes 'not exactly suitable' for the more economical 'unsuitable.' He remains, however, completely unaware that his discourse has been infected to such an extent by Bartleby's new language; his comments refer to the involuntary usage of 'prefer' and fail to recognize that his sentence structure now parallels Bartleby's speech. It is not that the narrator is simply using a word he associates with Bartleby, but rather that he is conversing in the new Bartlebian language.

The narrator's exchange with Turkey only paragraphs later further accentuates the extent to which Bartleby's language has been synthesized with the social discourse of the office:

⁹ Culler's contention that, "the possibility of repetition is basic to language, and performatives in particular can only work if they are recognized as versions or of quotations of regular formulas," is illuminating when considered in the context of Bartleby's repeated phrases (Culler 99).

Turkey: "I think that if he would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day, it would much towards mending him . . ."
Narrator: "So you have the word too"
Turkey: "With submission, what word, sir?"
Bartleby: "I would prefer to be left alone here"
Narrator: "*That's* the word Turkey . . . *that's* it"
Turkey: "Oh, *prefer*? Oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer." (*Bartleby* 20-1)

The office's adoption of Bartleby's negative language confirms the success of the discourse's Derridian-performative function; it establishes itself in juxtaposition to the office's accepted method of communication "but [succeeds by] bringing into being the condition to which it refers" (Culler 100). Whereas at the beginning of the story Bartleby is the sole character to converse in his negative discourse, by the time Bartleby is arrested and sent to jail even the narrator has adopted the Bartlebian worldview. Ruminating on Bartleby's arrest on charges of vagrancy, the lawyer views the incident through a Bartlebian lens: "a vagrant, is he? What! He a vagrant, a wanderer who refuses to budge? It is because he will *not* be a vagrant, then, that you seek to count him *as* a vagrant" (*Bartleby* 27-8). The lawyer's statement can be applied not only to Bartleby's arrest, but also to language within the story. It is precisely because Bartleby will *not* copy the accepted social discourse that the said discourse metamorphoses to include Bartlebian language.

In the social world of the office, language absorbs and reduces all differences to create a false perception of unification and sameness that suppresses individuality. Echoing Derrida's concept of *différance*, language in the office is always same, just stated differently.¹⁰ When the office's language incorporates Bartlebian negative discourse, it demonstrates what Derrida specified as "the violence of language:" "explaining otherness in terms of sameness . . . the

¹⁰ In *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida describes *différance* as, "the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other . . . it is always said as unsayable, as difference and deferral – as 'between' . . . the same unfolds itself as *différance*. Always different refers to repetition . . . the same is stated as an always different repetition of [the unthinkable]" (Derrida, *Margins* 6).

necessity that the other not be respected except in, for, and by the same” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 133). For Bartleby, a character who accrued personhood and “a wondrous ascendancy” over his environment via his unique use of language, the aforementioned process of homogenization represents an inevitable demise (*Bartleby* 24). What was once inimitable and jarring has now become commonplace, an object to be repeated and copied. Paralleling Derrida’s concept of *différance*, Bartleby decenters language by forcing the office to consider its structurality; by definition, however, to consider structurality is to revisit the existing system. As Derrida posited in his essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” “not a single destructive proposition has not had to slip into the form, the logic and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 280-1). While his form of negation allows Bartleby to accrue agency for a period of time, his discourse is trapped (in a Derridian sense) in a circle that prevents it from asserting its autonomy. Language proves, to borrow Kristeva’s words, to be “assimilating and destructive, . . . for although its drives may be simultaneously ‘positive’ and ‘negative’, it is ultimately destructive, dissolving and reversing any temporary restructuring” (1974 Kristeva, 27-8). Bartleby’s uniqueness itself thus becomes negated.

Bartleby’s drastic change of speech following his confinement in the Tombs constitutes a desperate attempt to regain his identity and selfhood. Abandoning his signature ‘I prefer not to,’ Bartleby begins to respond very directly to the narrator: “do you not see the reason yourself? . . . not yet I am occupied . . . I know you and want nothing to say to you” (*Bartleby* 21, 29, 32). The new mode of speech, however, is only a reversion to the same language Bartleby rejected at the beginning of the story. Stripped of his individualizing negative discourse and lacking any means to reassert his personhood, Bartleby resigns himself to a process that parallels a perversion of

what Isaiah Berlin has described as “positive liberty of self realization” (Berlin 131). In *Four Essays on Liberty*, Berlin contends that positive liberty derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master.¹¹ As human beings may be prevented from achieving their desires by other men, they instinctively limit their desires to shrink the area susceptible to encroachment. By withdrawing into oneself, one produces security, the sense that the soul and self will be preserved.¹² In his rejection of language, Bartleby evidences his realization of Lacan’s concept of “the frustration of language:” “in the labour which [one] undertakes to reconstruct [language] *for another*, he rediscovers the fundamental alienation that made him construct it *like another*, and which has always destined it to be taken from him *by another*” (emphasis added, Lacan 41-2). After his negative discourse is taken from him, Bartleby collapses in upon himself to protect what remains of his personhood. In a world in which language defines one’s identity, Bartleby simply “give[s] up copying” (*Bartleby* 22). Realizing that he no longer possesses a means of differentiating himself through speech, he becomes the silent man, an attempt to forever preserve the individualization he had once achieved.

When one compares Bartleby’s perverted concept of “positive liberty of self realization” with Kristeva’s account of the foreigner’s “sole liberty,” striking similarities emerge. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva contends that, pushed to the absolute limens of society and thoroughly ostracized, the “other” is “completely free of ties with the people-- . . . nevertheless, the consummate name of such a freedom is solitude” (Kristeva, *Strangers* 12). Hidden from the narrator by a screen, Bartleby suffers “alone in a solitary office,” detached from the other scribes and the narrator’s demands (*Bartleby* 25). It is, in fact, Bartleby’s absolute isolation

¹¹ See Berlin 133.

¹² See Berlin, pages 131-142: “They tyrant threatens me with the destruction of my property, with imprisonment, with the exile or death of those I love. But if I no longer feel attached to property, no longer care whether or not I am in prison, if I have killed within myself natural affections, then he cannot bend me to his will, for all that is left of myself is no longer subject to fears or desires” (Berlin 135).

that forces the narrator to remark, “what miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great, but his solitude, how horrible! . . . he seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe” (*Bartleby* 17, 22). His only possible companions are those individuals against whose conformity he juxtaposes his discourse and identity.¹³

Bartleby’s embrace of negative discourse further augments a Kristevan interpretation. According to Kristeva, the state of the “other” also manifests itself in one’s language. As the object of society’s continual repulsion, the “other” conditions himself

to disagree. Constantly, about nothing . . . Becoming weary of [the unacceptance] and *walled up* in one’s tarnished, neutralized disagreement, through lack of having the right to state it. No longer knowing what one truly thinks, except that ‘this is not it.’ (emphasis added, Kristeva, *Strangers* 17)

At no point in the story does Bartleby state what he wants; he responds to the narrator’s inquisitions and yet never actively engages another character in conversation. His signature response, “I prefer not to,” only connotes a rejection of the narrator’s world of continual imitation: he never expresses what he truly wants, except that [what the narrator urges him to do] is not it.

While the preceding analysis of Bartleby’s actions helps inform our Kristevan exploration of the story, it must be supplemented by an investigation of the narrator’s psyche. The Kristevan “other” functions on both literal and psychological levels: “the foreigner is within us and when we struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our own unconscious” (Kristeva, *Strangers* 190). On account of this subconscious unity, individuals’ encounters with the other “lead the citizen to a feeling of discomfort . . . [that] impels him to identify – sporadically, to be sure, but nonetheless intensely – with the other” (Kristeva, *Strangers* 19). Indeed, the narrator

¹³ See Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, page 12: “the paradox of the foreigner is that none are willing to join him in the torrid space of his uniqueness . . . [and those that he could join] would be the members of an affiliation whose uniformity discourage him” (Kristeva, *Strangers* 12).

and Bartleby's relationship is marked by the former's inexplicable magnetism toward Bartleby, a man he describes as having "[not] any thing ordinarily human about him" (*Bartleby* 11).

Under nearly any context, Bartleby's direct defiance of his superior's orders would result in the termination of his job. In *Bartleby*, however, the exact opposite occurs. His actions mystify the narrator and allow Bartleby to occupy a position of indescribable authority: "[Bartleby's behavior] had such a strange effect on me . . . [that I] did as desired . . . I could not completely escape that wondrous ascendancy which the scrivener had over me" (*Bartleby* 16, 24). Bartleby is simultaneously rejected and internalized by the narrator, part of a "common humanity [that] drew [the narrator] irresistibly to gloom—a fraternal melancholy!" (*Bartleby* 17). It is at this point, when one "confronts the foreigner whom [s/he] rejects and with whom at the same time [s/he] identifies, [that] I lose my boundaries" (Kristeva, *Strangers* 189).¹⁴ The once-sharp distinction between *me* and *you* (included *me* and excluded *you*, the "other") begins to dissolve as an individual watches the "otherness" of his counterpart slowly dissipate. The final lines of the story, "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" can thus be interpreted as the narrator's recognition of Bartleby's selfhood; while Bartleby is initially described as "a ghost," his death elicits from the narrator a double apostrophe bemoaning existence in a Bartlebyless world (*Bartleby* 27, 34).

In Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, language functions as both creator and destroyer. While Bartleby originally is able to construct an identity in opposition to the office's method of communication, language's insatiable appetite for unification consumes his negative discourse and adapts it to its universal purpose; language "copies" and incorporates Bartleby's discourse. Paralleling American society's inclination to "welcome the foreigner within a system that obliterates him," language within *Bartleby* subsumes that which is different (Kristeva, *Strangers*

¹⁴ The narrator's statement, "I never feel so private as when I know [Bartleby] is here," is particularly illuminating within this context.

2). Stripped of any meaningful way to negate language, Bartleby sacrificially negates himself in an effort to rebuff his society's suggestion that he embrace the monotony of repetition and anonymity: he "takes root in his own world of a rejected person whom no one is supposed to hear" (Kristeva, *Strangers* 17). The physical embodiment of *différance*, his existence is one of difference and deferral; like the dead letters of his previous office, he is always "in between," the disrupter of language between sender and receiver. The apparent distinction between Bartleby and the office's languages reveals itself, like *différance*, to be only an interval of deferral between two moments, "the interval appears and gives the effect of an opposition and disappears to give the impression of unity . . . this barely existing limit [is] consumed as soon as it is posited" (Derrida, *Glas* 220). On an "errand of life," his attempt to establish personhood, Bartleby "sped to death," forced to negate himself by the very thing he had once negated: language (*Bartleby* 34).

Benito Cereno

If *Bartleby the Scrivener* serves as the vehicle through which Melville explores society's unrelenting desire to homogenize via the annihilation of those it deems "other," *Benito Cereno* provides the grounds for him to survey the consequences of one's recognition of the "other" in himself and the resulting region of "the in between" area that can be categorized as neither the foreign nor the native. Throughout their encounter with the novella, readers are haunted by an inexplicable anxiety. Nothing is what it seems in the story that unfolds on a "peculiar" day in which "shadows [are] present," both on the surface of the ocean and in the depths of readers' minds (*Benito* 35). Indeed, throughout the course of the story, Melville uses 54 variations of the word *seem*, 27 of *as if*, 15 of *appeared* or *appearances*, and 115 conjectural expressions,

including *perhaps, possibly, probably, and presume*.¹⁵ *Benito Cereno*'s shocking revelation that the slaves had mutinied and forced their former masters into a ventriloquistic bondage affirms readers' suspicions that something had always been amiss. Perceptions, and the preexisting notions that inform them, are both the facilitator and subject of the story; it is precisely because Captain Delano is a slave to his racial biases that he is unable to recognize the reality of a slave revolt.

Scholars' interpretations of race in *Benito Cereno* are largely dichotomized. While one camp contends that Melville's depiction of blacks reveals a biased author harboring "deep fears and hatred," their counterparts posit that Melville strove to demonstrate slavery's "tragic flaw" (Widmer 89; Adler 93).¹⁶ The scholarly debate, therefore, often centers on what Melville was trying to show about the institution of slavery itself. A more pertinent question, however, remains: *what was Melville trying to show about race and racial constructions?* When analyzed in this light, *Benito Cereno* reveals the fragility of "otherness" and elucidates Melville's destabilization of racial constructions in the short story; binaries of black/white and civilized/barbaric dissolve into one uncertain middle region of grayness.

From the moment that Captain Delano sets foot aboard the *San Dominick*, it is clear that he views the world through a racially oriented lens. Throughout the story, an air of belittling benevolence characterizes his interactions with the *Dominick*'s slaves; he considers Africans to

¹⁵ John Douglas Seelye makes this observation in *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* (Evanston: Illinois, Northwestern University Press), 1970.

¹⁶ For critics who view Melville as a racist, see: Schiffman, "Critical Problems in Melville's *Benito Cereno*," Jackson, "Melville's Use of a Real Slave Mutiny in 'Benito Cereno'," Meacham, "Selected Nineteenth-Century Interpretations of Organized Slave Resistance: Black Character and Consciousness as Represented in the Fictional Works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, and Martin Robinson Delany and Related Historical Studies," and Matthiessen, "Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman."

For scholars who view Melville as a harsh critic of slavery, see: Berstein "'Benito Cereno' and the Spanish Inquisition," Simpson, "Melville and the Negro: From Typee to Benito Cereno," Ray, "Benito Cereno: Babo as Leader," and Wright, "Ethiopia in Babylon: Antebellum American Romanticism and the Emergence of Black Literary Nationalism."

be “unsophisticated,” “the most pleasing body servant[s] in the world,” “organ-grinders . . . stupidly intent on their work,” and “fit for avocations about one’s person, . . . natural valets and hair-dressers” (*Benito* 39, 40, 47, 70). Delano cannot even entertain the notion that the blacks are capable of plotting and/or executing a mutiny. The blacks are “too stupid” in comparison to the whites, who, “by nature, were the shrewder race” (*Benito* 63). In the context of Delano’s usage, however, race does not refer to two different demographics of human beings. Within Delano’s mind, blacks and whites are species that are as different as humans and animals: “who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from *his* very species almost, by *leagu*ing it with the negroes?” (emphasis added, *Benito* 63). Delano’s repeated comparisons of the slaves to animals further demonstrate his belief that the blacks are sub-human, a species in an entirely different ‘league’ than whites.¹⁷

Throughout his time on the *San Dominick*, however, Captain Delano exhibits an increasing sense of uneasiness. Following his first meeting with Cereno, Delano reports that he was unnerved by the Spanish Captain’s “cadaverous aspect,” and that, “an apprehensive twitch [occurred] in the calves of his legs” (*Benito* 47). The longer he spends on the ship, the greater his inexplicable anxiety. Within the next five pages of the story, Delano convinces himself that Cereno is an imposter, “some low-born adventurer, masquerading as an oceanic grandee . . . under [his] aspect of infantile weakness, the most savage energies might be crouched” (*Benito* 52). This mixture of suspicion and fear builds upon and reinforces itself until Delano cannot eliminate his “ghostly dread of Don Benito” and convinces himself that “if, indeed, there be any wickedness on board [the] ship, be sure [Cereno] has fouled his hand in it” (*Benito* 59).

¹⁷ During the course of the novella, the slaves are compared to, “Newfoundland dogs,” “a social circle of bats, sharing in some friendly cave,” “a doe in the shade of a woodland rock [with] a wide-awake fawn [sprawling at her lapped breasts] with hands like two paws,” “unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves,” “cawing crows,” and “wolf-like” (Melville, *Benito* 71, 68, 60, 61, 86, 88).

In juxtaposition to his views of Cereno, Delano repeatedly shows a fondness and sense of trust toward Babo. He is amazed at the “affectionate zeal which transmute[d] [Babo’s] actions into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves” (*Benito* 40). Time after time, Delano marks “the good conduct of Babo . . . [and] the spectacle of fidelity on one hand and confidence on the other” that he inspires (*Benito* 43, 68). His seemingly illogical behavior finds its explanation in Kristeva’s contentions regarding the “Dialectics of Master and Slave,” (her elaboration of Hegel’s “Lord and Bondsman” dialectic in his *Phenomenology*).

When two people encounter “the other” who they consider to be markedly different from their “normality,” they undergo several unconscious processes. First, the presence of “the other” catalyzes the individuals to reflect upon their own interior differences. This leads to an initial feeling of “discomfort as to his sexual, national, political, and professional identity” (Kristeva, *Strangers* 18). As a result, a distancing, much like the one Delano undergoes, occurs in which each individual begins to see “the other” in all of those around him (this includes those previously categorized as “same”). Consequently, that which is considered “strangely uncanny [becomes] that which *was* (the past is important) familiar, . . . the strangeness from the outside is relocated to what was once one’s own and proper” (author’s emphasis, Kristeva, *Strangers* 183). At the same time, the recognition of one’s “interior other” engenders a reconceptualization of his relationship with the actual “exterior other.”¹⁸ The foreigner’s alterity “impels [an individual] to identify – sporadically, to be sure, but nonetheless intensively – with the other” (Kristeva, *Strangers* 19). This urge is so great in Delano that he goes so far as to attempt to buy Babo from Cereno, “I should like to have your man here for myself – what will you take for him?” (*Benito* 58).

¹⁸ I use actual here as the “interior other” is a unconscious entity while the “exterior other” is another human being.

Melville further develops his presentation of “the other as part of the self,” through his use of parallelisms. When one compares the whites’ retaking of the *San Dominick* with the black’s original rebellion, striking similarities emerge. On a very topical level, the number of men the rebel slaves kill is equal to that of the whites. Captain Delano reports that, “nearly a score of the negroes were killed,” in the battle to reclaim the *San Dominick* (*Benito* 88).¹⁹ Similarly, when the blacks seize Cereno’s ship they kill “eighteen of those who were sleeping upon the deck” (*Benito* 91). Beyond quantitative parallels, the slave rebellion and the whites’ recapturing of the *San Dominick* have distinct aspects that are nearly identical. Many scholars have criticized Melville for his depiction of Babo in the closing scenes of the narrative, positing that his leap into Delano’s rowboat and attempt at murder render him little more than a savage brute.²⁰ The scene, however, in which Babo is described as “aiming with a second dagger – a small one, before concealed in his cloak . . . at the heart of his master,” finds its echo in the actions of a white sailor described by Cereno during his deposition: “Delano also wrenched from the hand of Bartholomew Barlo, a dagger secret at the time of the massacre of the whites” (*Benito* 85, 99). It is important to note not only the striking similarities between the names Babo and Barlo, but also the fact that the white sailor was “in the act of stabbing a shackled negro”; Babo attempts murder but the white sailor actualizes his intent (*Benito* 99). Even the blacks’ murders of eight prisoners taken during the revolt, the fact most often cited to substantiate claims of Melville’s racist intent, is mirrored by the white sailors’ execution of some slaves “after the capture and re-anchoring at night, when shackled to the ring-bolts on deck” (*Benito* 99). Melville’s depiction of the slave rebellion is indeed violent, yet not to a greater degree than that of the whites’ recapturing of the *San Dominick*. On the contrary, Melville went to great lengths

¹⁹ Melville use of ‘score’ here is Old English pertaining to “*scora*; related to Old Norse *skor* notch, tally, twenty” (Online Etymology Dictionary). The whites killed just under twenty slaves.

²⁰ See Schiffman, *Three Shorter Novels of Herman Melville*.

to preserve an equilibrium between the two events, privileging neither race with the status of “more savage.”

It is the character of Babo, however, that most fully destabilizes the categories of Negro and White. Throughout the course of the story, Delano describes Babo as “unsophisticated,” “too stupid,” “simple witted, but harmless,” “[subject to] the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind,” and a man “not unconscious of his inferiority” (*Benito* 39, 63, 64, 71, 75). Yet the events of the story prove Delano to be completely wrong in his assessment of the former slave. Far from being simple witted, unsophisticated, or docile, Babo possesses a head that is a “hive of subtly” which he wields to orchestrate his plot of escape: “from first to last, . . . he was the helm and heel of the revolt” (*Benito* 102, 97). Furthermore, he displays an advanced understanding of how the “White world” functions. Having seized the *San Dominick*, he quells his fellow insurrectionists so that he they can partake in a contractual negation and “agree to draw up a paper, signed by the deponent and the sailors who could write, as also by the negro Babo, . . . in which the deponent obliged himself to carry them to Senegal, and they not to kill anymore” (*Benito* 94). Similarly, he understands the role that is expected of him; he acts completely subservient, dull, and blissfully ignorant of his status as a slave, continually downplaying his personal importance.²¹

Babo’s theatrical role thus forces a reader to consider the extent to which race can be conceptualized as a performative function. According to Judith Butler’s often-cited theory of performative identity, gender does not have a unified nature/essence but is a “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts . . . to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being” (Butler 33). One’s gender is not the result of cultural codes that are inscribed or

²¹ “don’t speak of me . . . what Babo has done was but duty” (*Benito* 48)

“in his own land, [I] was only a poor slave; a black man’s slave was Babo, who now is the white’s” (*Benito* 51).

superimposed upon a passive body; instead, gender must be performed and lacks any original coherence. Gender is a question of *what you did*, not a universal *who you are*: “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender . . . identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 25). Butler uses the example of dressing in “drag” to demonstrate that appearance is not necessarily reality. By transgressing the status-quo, drag “reveals the imitative structure of gender” (Butler 137). All individuals put on a gender performance, so the question that echoes from Butler’s work is not *should one perform*, but rather *what form will my performance take?*

While Butler’s work, as detailed above, centered on the issue of gender, her theory easily transcends its boundaries. By substituting race for gender within Butler’s equation, one creates a viable framework within which to analyze the character of Babo in *Benito Cereno*. Much like the “drag” dresser diminishes the binaries between male and female, Babo systematically breaks down the boundary between Negro and Caucasian. Babo overthrows a ship of white slave owners, manipulates Captain Cereno, and orchestrates his entire ship of freed slaves to successfully dupe Delano for the majority of the novella. More simply, he does exactly what Delano believes is beyond a Negro’s sophistication and intellectual prowess. In the novella’s dichotomy of Caucasian and Negro, Babo possesses the rationality and intelligence of a “Caucasian” but wears the social “mask” of a Negro (*Benito* 85). Babo’s performative identity therefore calls into question the very racial binaries it navigates between. By fictionalizing an overthrow in which former-slaves perform enslavement, Melville disputes society’s supposedly natural racial hierarchy and the allegedly organic relationship between a master and his slave. In doing so, he allows for the possibility of a continuum to emerge in place of the traditional racial dichotomy, thereby creating the other’s ambiguous space of the in between. Lacking the security

of society's well established racial binary, the in between or "grayness of everything" provokes "regressive and protectionist rage: must we not stick together, remain among ourselves, expel the intruder, or at least keep him in 'his' place?" (*Benito* 65; Kristeva, *Strangers* 20). Delano and his men do exactly that, recapturing Babo's ship, denying him testimony in court, and severing his head. Nevertheless, Babo's actions speak louder than his words; Cereno is haunted by his epiphonic realization that slaves are human beings. Having been enslaved himself, he has shared in the blackness of "the other's" experience. He cannot now escape the negro's shadow "cast upon him," the haunting realization that he and the other are one and the same (*Benito* 101).

Chapter 2

“They Still Awaken in Us Some Thoughts of Sympathy”: Man, Man’s Nature, and God

Introduction

Originally printed in three separate installments in *Putnam’s Monthly*, the ten sketches that comprise Melville’s *The Encantadas* were not compiled into a single unit until the publication of the *Piazza Tales* in the spring of 1856. While both contemporary and modern critics generally agree on the beauty and power of the collection, there remains little consensus on the source from which these attributes are derived.²² In the words of Jonathan Beecher, “critics disagree about the structure of the work, the credibility of the narrator, the function of [each section’s] epitaphs, the importance of Melville’s borrowings, and the question of what binds the [sections] together” (Beecher 89). Perhaps the greatest testament to the compilation’s complexity lies in critics’ fundamental inability to place *The Encantadas* in a genre.²³

Notwithstanding the difficulty in characterizing the sketches and sourcing their genius, critics have almost universally agreed that the unit possesses an inherent allegorical dimension. In Carolyn Karcher’s often-referenced *Shadow Over the Promised Land*, she posits that the

²² Examples of contemporary reviews are as follows: “[The Encantadas] hold an indefinable but irresistible sway over the imagination” (Thomas Powell, *New York News* in Higgins and Parker 469). “Melville is a kind of wizard, . . . he writes of things that belong to other worlds beyond this tame and everyday place we live in” (*New Bedford Mercury* in Higgins and Parker 474). “Melville’s magnificent description of scenery, sea, and cloud-land [parallels] the glowing richness and exquisite coloring [characteristic of] Tennyson’s poetry” (*New York Times* in Higgins and Parker 482-3).

For modern reviews see: *The Encantadas* show Melville “as an electric necromancer” (Hartley 105). “Melville reaches a pinnacle of stylistic brilliance in *The Encantadas*” (Robertson-Lorant 339). “The imaginative impact of *The Encantadas* is of another kind” (Dillingham 76).

²³ The collection has been called, “a series of travel-sketches” (Beecher 89), a story in “mixed descriptive and narrative forms” (Fischer 28), “a sequences of sketches revealing something like a unified vision” (Newberry 49), and “a special problem in literary unity” (Fogle 34). In “The Shorter Fiction of Herman Melville,” Charles Hoffman directly examines the issue of *The Encantadas*’ genre and suggests that it is best conceptualized as a hybrid: “Melville seems to be experimenting with the shorter forms of fiction, seeking form involving a more flexible narrative than that usual in short story but a stronger structure and form than sketch” (Hoffman 422).

sketches' constitute Melville's indictment of slavery and Caucasian imperialism. Other authors have contended that *The Encantadas* represent a contestation of Darwin's theories (Franklin) and a "microcausm of a complex reality, . . . [Melville's] method of stating that the world is more complicated than you think" (Fogle 35). In a similar analysis, Yarina has argued that the stories are Melville's reminder that there are many sides of truth (Yarina 141-8). Like the sketches' sailors, critics are "irresistibly draw[n]" toward an allusive allegorical meaning, "as if by a mysterious indraft" (*Encantadas* 52).

In this chapter, I further this critical approach and conceptualize the stories not simply as the depiction of a physical place, but rather as Melville's nuanced analysis of the condition of man's existence. In contrast to prior critics' tendency to analyze the sketches chronologically, the following exploration will generally ignore the sketches' numerical order, elucidating both parallelisms and juxtapositions between various sections. Such movement will demonstrate Melville's understanding of man as merely an unchanging, predatory animal. *The Encantadas* depicts a world void of God or a benevolent power, one in which the supra-human force of evil pervades. The only viable check against this omnipresent immorality resides in man's relationship with his brethren; hope resides in the human world, not a divine realm. Through mutual trust in, and support for, one another, members of society could achieve what Melville would consider an aspect of redemption, a check against the prevailing wickedness in the world. If *Bartleby* and *Benito* elucidate Melville's belief that differences between human beings were artificial, social constructs, his tacit endorsement of man's universal equality, then *The Ecantadas* reveal his inescapably pessimistic understanding of how men interact with one another and the hell these interactions thereby create.

The Encantadas

Desolation, Depredation, and Duality in Sketches I-IV

The Encantadas opens with the same sense of ambiguity and uncertainty that characterizes *Benito*.²⁴ Melville begins the sketches with an epigraph borrowed from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, warning his readers that "those same islands seeming now and than, / Are not firme land, nor any certain wonne, / But stragling plots which to and fro do ronne / . . . For whosoever once hath fastened / His foot thereon may never it secure / But wanderth evermore uncertain and unsure" (*Encantadas* 49).²⁵ Indeed, the focus of Melville's narrative telescopes in and out of examinations of land, animal, and humans in the sketches, exploring ambiguities and multiple meanings as he develops his extended allegory for the state of humankind.²⁶

The first sketch, "The Isles at Large," serves as Melville's introduction to a world that "could exist in no land but a fallen one" (*Encantadas* 51). Described as a group of extinct volcanoes resembling "abandoned cemeteries of long ago [and] old cities tumbling to their ruin," the Enchanted Isles are a god-forsaken place, void of rain and life apart from a small collection

²⁴ See page 20: Nothing is what it seems in the story that unfolds on a "peculiar" day in which "shadows [are] present," both on the surface of the ocean and in the depths of readers' minds (Melville, *Benito* 35).

²⁵ Numerous authors have identified the sources of the epigraphs that begin each sketch of *The Encantadas*. For focused analyses on these epigraphs and other sources Melville likely used in his construction of the sketches, see: Albrecht, "The Thematic Unity of Melville's *The Encantadas*," Howard, "Melville and Spenser – A Note on Criticism," and Thomas "Melville's Use of Some Sources in *The Encantadas*."

²⁶ Interestingly, *The Encantadas* were originally published under the pseudonym Salvatore R. Tarnmoor. The playful penname is derived from the Spanish name meaning savior (Salvatore) and the compound last name of Tarn ("pool" derived from the Middle English *terne*) and Moor ("marsh" but may also refer to the Moors of North Africa). Melville's choice of last name appears to be a cryptic acknowledgment of the ambiguities he planned to interweave in *The Encantadas*: the mixing of a pool and marsh (pure and dirty) results in a gray hue. The name might also have a racial implication wherein the mixing of English (white) with the Moors (black) produces gray. Melville's fascination with the 'inbetweenness' of the color gray, as repeatedly seen in *Benito*, thus reaffirms itself in *The Encantadas*.

Yarina (1973) was one of the first critics to acknowledge the aforementioned components of Melville's penname. Fisher (1977) interprets the significance of Melville's penname differently, contending that Salvatore R. references the seventeenth-century painter Salvator Rosa; the reference would suggest Melville's "dissatisfaction with false idealizations of the conventional picturesque" (Fischer 28-9).

of reptiles (*Encantadas* 51).²⁷ One can hear neither the lowing of cows nor the howling of wolves on the island; appropriately, the only audible sound of life is a hiss.²⁸ It is a desolate wasteland, “looking much as the world at large might after a penal conflagration” (*Encantadas* 49).

In his description of the geography, however, the narrator locates the Isles’ “special curse” not in their desolation, isolation, or sterility, but rather in the fact that “to them change never comes, neither the change of season nor of sorrows” (*Encantadas* 50). Melville’s choice of emphasis amplifies the penitential nature of the Isles and links the sketches’ physical setting with the animal embodiment of static despair: the tortoise. In the words of the narrator, “lasting sorrow and penal hopelessness are in no animal form so suppliantly expressed as in [the tortoise]” (*Encantadas* 50).²⁹ The fact that Melville had originally intended to title *The Encantadas* “Tortoise Hunting” or “Tortoise Hunters,” reveals, to an extent, the importance and centrality that the image of the tortoise holds in the ten sketches (Davis and Gilman 164).

An in depth analysis of the first sketch’s final paragraph demonstrates Melville’s subtle extension of the link between the tortoises and the Isles to man. Just as the tortoise metaphorically serves as a living counterpart to the islands’ geographical features, man in *The Encantadas* symbolically represents the tortoise in human form:

²⁷ The Isles are rainless “like split Syrian gourds left withering in the sun, cracked by an everlasting drought beneath a torried sky,” and “refuse to harbor even the outcasts of the beasts, . . . Man and wolf alike disown them, little but reptile life is found [there]” (*Encantadas* 51).

²⁸ I use the word appropriately as, in the opening description of the Isles, the Narrator’s asks his reader to imagine “five-and-twenty heaps of cinders dumped here and there in an outside city lot” (*Encantadas* 49). The image created is that of a burning ember being extinguished in the sea.

²⁹ The tortoise and Enchanted Isles also appear to have similar origins. The narrator states that the tortoise “seemed hardly of the seed of earth, . . . [as if they] newly crawled forth from beneath the foundations of the world” (*Encantadas* 57). Similarly, the Isles “exploded into sight from some volcanic convulsion” (*Encantadas* 103).

Nay, such is the vividness of my memory, or the magic of my fancy, that I know not whether I am not the occasional victim of optical delusion concerning the Gallipagos. For, often in scenes of social merriment, and especially at revels held by candlelight in old-fashioned mansions, so that shadows are thrown into the further recesses of an angular and spacious room, making them put on a look of haunted undergrowth of lonely woods, I have drawn the attention of my comrades by my fixed gaze and sudden change of air, as I have seemed to see, slowly emerging from those imagined solitudes, and heavily crawling along the floor, the ghost of a gigantic tortoise, with " Memento * * * * * " burning in live letters upon his back. (*Encantadas* 53-4)

Just as Don Benito cannot dispel the shadow of the Negro "cast upon him," the narrator remains haunted by the "ghost" of the tortoise long after he has left the island (*Benito* 101, *Encantadas* 54).³⁰

In *Melville's Shorter Fiction*, William Dillingham also observes the metaphoric connection between man and tortoise, positing that the tortoise is a constant reminder of "man's fate to be finally and eternally . . . tucked in with the clinkers" (Dillingham 78). Dillingham understands the tortoise as a living monument to man's ephemerality; accordingly, he interprets "Memento *****" as meaning *memento mori*.³¹ When one considers this interpretation in the context of Melville's emphasis on the changeless and penitential nature of the Isles, however, it appears inadequate. Historically, death is a literary motif for release, a change in the state of one's existence.³² The Enchanted Isles, in contrast, are a hellish, unmitigated prison of existence. This, when coupled with the fact that Melville uses five *s and not four, suggests that a more accurate translation of the phrase would be *momento vitae* (a reminder of life).³³ The narrator's suggestion that sailors believe "all wicked sea officers . . . are at death (and in some

³⁰ Many scholars have pointed out the parallelism between the shadow of the tortoise hanging over *The Encantadas* and the shadow of the white whale hanging over *Moby Dick*.

³¹ *Memento mori* is a Latin phrase that roughly translates to 'a reminder of death.'

³² The change in the state of one's existence occurs one of two ways. A person either dies, thereby ending existence completely, or dies and transcends their bodily life to a spiritual existence. In both cases, a fundamental change has occurred in your state of being.

³³ *Vitae*, the genitive case of the Latin noun meaning life (*Vita*, -ae), has five letters whereas *mori*, the genitive case of the Latin noun meaning death, has four.

cases before death) transformed into tortoises” augments the contention that the tortoise does not signify impending death, but rather serves to torturously emphasize the desolation and anguish that characterize a man’s existence (*Encantadas* 53). Paralleling the tortoise’s “dateless, indefinite endurance,” man must slog through the desolateness of his existence, a prisoner to his own life (*Encantadas* 56).

While the first sketch of *The Encantadas* served as an introduction to the Isles’ physical landscape and offered only a brief discussion of the native tortoises, the second sketch provides a deeper analysis of the animals’ attributes -- a thinly veiled meditation on man’s characteristics -- and is markedly more philosophical than its predecessor. In one of the most cited passages of the ten sketches, the narrator meditates on the juxtaposition between the dark top and bright underside of tortoises’ shells in the hopes of mitigating the Isles’ gloom:

Moreover, everyone knows that tortoises as well as turtle are of such a make that if you but put them on their backs you thereby expose their bright sides without the possibility of their recovering themselves, and turning into view the other. But after you have done this, and because you have done this, you should not swear that the tortoise has no dark side. Enjoy the bright, keep it turned up perpetually if you can, but be honest, and don’t deny the black . . . The tortoise is both black and bright. (*Encantadas* 56)

Upon first inspection, the meditation appears to contain a relatively straightforward message: notwithstanding the fact that something may appear all black (bad), there is always a bright side (good), even in the Enchanted Isles. Indeed, the sketch’s epigraph, again taken from Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, seems to anticipate the tortoise allegory’s tension between appearance and reality: “Fear naught, then said the palmer, will avized, / For these same monsters are not there indeed, / But are into these fearful shapes disguised” (*Encantadas* 55).³⁴ As William Stein has pointed out, however, in nearly every sketch “Melville is busy undermining all the glorifications of virtue contained in [its] epigraph” (Stein 422). A closer examination of the allegory elucidates

³⁴ All referenced-sources for the epigraphs were found in Thomas, Russell. (1932) “Melville’s Use of Some Sources in *The Encantadas*.” *American Literature* (3) No.4: 432-56.

a troubling element; to expose the bright (good) side of the tortoise's shell, one must flip the animal upside down. In doing so, an individual places the tortoise in an unnatural position and renders it completely defenseless. The relationship is thus asymmetrical; man exposes the bright side "through the concerted force and will of an aggressor" (Fisher 37). Tellingly, despite the fact that the tortoises "affected [the narrator] in a manner not easy to unfold," the next evening he and his shipmates make "a merry repast from tortoise steaks and stews" (*Encantadas* 57, 59).

Ironically, the tortoise is ignorant of the very lesson it provides the narrator. Described as being cursed by "their drudging impulse to straightforwardness in a belittered world," tortoises lack the ability to see both the dark and bright aspects of individuals (*Encantadas* 58). They simply lumber forward, driven on by either their "stupidity or [a] resolution so great that they never went aside for any impediment" (*Encantadas* 58). As noted above, in the Enchanted Isles the result of such blindness is death. Yet the fact that the narrator and his shipmates' eat the tortoises gives rise to an infinite cycle of metaphoric cannibalism; sailors die and metamorphose into tortoises, only to be hunted and killed by another generation of sailors. The nature of man therefore engenders an infinite progression of predatory behavior and suffering.³⁵ Melville will return to the cyclical nature of suffering and subordination in his treatment of the Dog King (sketch seven) and Oberlus (sketch nine).

"Sketch Third" and "Sketch Fourth" transport the reader from his contemplations of the two-sided nature of the tortoise's shell to an exploration of Rock Rodondo, "a high stone tower . . . [offering] the best mode of gaining a comprehensive view of the region" (*Encantadas* 60-1). Gazing up from the base of the two-hundred-and-fifty-foot rock, the narrator is seized with wonder at the "entablatures of strata . . . rising one above another in a graduated series to a

³⁵ The concept of endless repetition and suffocation returns a reader to the environment in *Bartleby*. In the "lasting sorrow and penal hopeless" of the tortoise, one might see Bartleby's "self-condemned, entombed" hopelessness.

shaven summit” (*Encantadas* 61). Paralleling his destabilization of the boundary between man and tortoise, Melville wields the stratified groupings of birds in the third sketch to demonstrate the arbitrariness of racial and biological classifications while simultaneously challenging Rodondo’s existing social order. As a result, the demarcations between supposedly rigid dichotomies of bird/human/fish begin to blur.

On Rodondo’s lowest shelf, a strata described by the narrator as “the widest” in the hierarchy, the reader encounters the “most ambiguous and least lovely creature yet discovered by man:” the penguin (*Encantadas* 63). A symbol of absolute ostracism, the penguin is endowed with a bill too short to be a bird, legs too short to be a human, and feet too large to be a fish. Further, “the member at their sides is neither fin, wing, or arm” forcing a liminal status upon the penguin; as “neither fish, flesh, nor fowl” the creature possesses a rudimentary claim of belonging to all three kingdoms yet truly identifies with none (*Encantadas* 62-3).

Above the penguins sit the Pelicans. These birds are categorized by their “penitential,” “pensive,” and “lugubrious” attributes, the combination of which produces a sense of changelessness that parallels the Isles themselves (*Encantadas* 63). Interestingly, Melville gives the pelicans the nickname, “sea Friars of Orders Gray.” While critics have largely ignored this line, the implications of its allusion are instrumental to Melville’s subtle social critique. Franciscan Friars were members of a Roman Catholic Order that followed the rules and teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi. Formed in 1209, the Friars “followed an ideal of total poverty – they possessed nothing in common or individually” (Lambert 15). This ban on property included money; in a state of voluntary poverty, the Friars lived day-to-day by working and begging. By the middle of the thirteenth century, the Order had grown considerably and instructed a unified code of dress: “[Friars] wore a gray tunic with a white cord at the waist,

hence, their English name: Gray Friars” (Lambert 18). The allusion thus aligns Rodondo’s lower strata with poverty. In doing so, Melville produces an inescapable parallel between the avian hierarchy and that of American society.

From the third level of Rodondo’s social structure to the rock’s summit, the pace of the narrator’s description significantly increases. The “unsightly” and “unpoetic” gray albatross is only briefly touched upon before the narrator catalogs orders of “gannets, black and speckled haglets, jays, sea hens, [and] sperm-whale birds” (*Encantadas* 63). Tellingly, the fast-paced descriptive sequence concludes with a qualifying clause that ascribes the birds with symbols of human authority: “thrones, princedom, powers, dominating one above another in the senatorial array” (*Encantadas* 63). In sharp juxtaposition to the penguin and pelicans’ associations with poverty, the birds in the higher strata on Rock Rodondo are aligned with power, wealth, and influence, bolstering the contention that the birds’ social structure is reflective of American society.

The narrator’s description of Rock Rodondo, however, subtly undermines the very hierarchy it details. In the words of critic Denise Tanyol, “as [one] might expect, the lowliest birds occupy the lowest stratum on the rock, and each succeeding rank occupies its matching station as the rock rises into the air” (Tanyol 259). Despite the structure’s implication that value has a positive relationship with the height of a bird’s position on Rock Rodondo, the narrator actually devotes the majority of his attention to the two lowliest birds. Both the penguin and the pelican are the focus of their own paragraphs consisting of nine and seven sentences, respectively. Indeed, as the narrator describes the penguins’ ambiguity and abasement, even as he ponders the “dull, ashy plumage” of the pelican, he seems to value the birds in spite of (or perhaps for) their lowliness (*Encantadas* 60). While the next order, the gray albatross, also is

given its own paragraph, it consists of only one sentence. In contrast with his descriptions of the basest orders of birds, the narrator speeds through the hierarchy's upper echelon, "jumping from shelf to shelf" and packing seven strata into one sentence (*Encantadas* 63).³⁶ Melville thus appears to question indirectly the common assumption that value or worth can accurately be judged based upon one's social standing or arranged hierarchically as in a claim of being great.

Melville's challenge to traditional understandings of social worth is further developed in the narrator's recollections of the fairy fish in the water beneath Rock Rodondo. In a somewhat jarring change of focus, the narrator moves from his discussion of the highest order of birds directly into his observations on the "finny hosts which people the water at [Rodondo's] base" (*Encantadas* 64). As a result of this abrupt transition, the fairy fish actually "seem to be aligned along the same continuum of the classification of birds" (Tanyol 260). The inclusion of the fish in the avian classification spectrum, however, destabilizes the process of classification itself. Both the fairy fishes' placement in the narrator's description of the hierarchy and their physical beauty imply that they reside atop the birds' social tower. Described as "exceedingly beautiful," "striking[ly] novel," and possessing "hues that were as yet unpainted, and figures which are unengraved," they are the complete opposite of the "outlandish" and "grotesque" penguin (*Encantadas* 64, 62). Nevertheless, such an elevated standing is thoroughly incompatible with the fishes' *actual* location and nature; the fish live in the labyrinth of honeycomb grottoes that are beneath not only the penguin, but the entirety of Rock Rodondo. Unlike the senatorial array of "thrones, principdoms, and powers" at the rock's acme, the fish comprise a group who, ignorant of man's predatory nature, are enslaved to their "victimized confidence" and trust

³⁶ "As we still ascend from shelf to shelf, we find the tenants of the tower serially disposed in order of their magnitude: gannets, black and speckled haglets, jays, sea hens, sperm-whale birds, and gulls of all varieties" (*Encantadas* 63). The final, and presumably highest order of birds (gull), is notably denied even the attention given to the "black and speckled haglets." That is, all gulls are lumped together as if not deserving of distinction whereas the haglets are at least categorized by color.

(*Encantadas* 65). Tanyol succinctly summarizes the situation, stating, “the fairy fish occupy both ends of the taxonomy, rendering classification impossible” (Tanyol 261). Through his placement and description of the fairy fish, Melville destabilizes the difference between the two classifications of animal. When this destabilization is considered in tandem with the already-established link between man and tortoise, a view of the Enchanted Isles begins to materialize in which the seemingly undisputable biological differences between animals (humans, tortoise, bird, fish) are rendered illusory, an enchantment of the mind of humans.

The Dog-King, Oberlus, and the Savageness of Man in Sketches VII and IX

The ocular deceptions described in the first four sketches of *The Encantadas* pre-figure a pattern of human deception and subjugation that characterizes “Sketch Seventh: The Dog-King.” Roughly based on the actual exploits of José Villamil, a general in Ecuador’s war of independence, the Dog-King is never named beyond his description as a “Creole adventurer” (*Encantadas* 80).³⁷ Following Peru’s achievement of independence, the Creole asks for Charles’ Island as his restitution for the bravery and patriotism he showed during the war. Lacking the “wherewithal to pay off its troops,” Peru grants his wish and allows him to be made “Supreme Lord of the Island”; the Creole is acknowledged as an independent sovereign king (*Encantadas* 81). To populate his newly acquired kingdom, he offers free land, tools, and necessities to any

³⁷ Several critics have demonstrated that Melville appears to amalgamate the histories of the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, and Peru. In the sketch, The Dog-King was a general in the Peruvian army that fought to secure independence from Spain. Villamil, however, was a general in the Ecuadorian army. Melville’s conflation is likely a derivative of the close proximity of Peru and Ecuador’s independences. Villamil became the first governor of the Galapagos Islands after Ecuador attained independence from Spain in 1830. Peru had already attained its independence from Spain in 1821. See: Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land*, 110-3. Tanyol (2007), “The Alternative Taxonomies of Melville’s *Encantadas*,” 264-5. Newbery, “‘The Encantadas’: Melville’s Inferno,” 62-3. Fisher, *Going Under*, 40-1. Von Hagan, *The Encantadas; or Enchanted Isles*, 106-7.

‘subjects’ who are willing to live under him. Eighty individuals answer his offer and join the Creole (now king) on his colonizing mission to the island.

From the very beginning, the voyage to Charles’ Island appears doomed to a hellish failure. The narrator’s description of the expedition as a “ship for the promised land,” ominously reminds readers of Rock Rodondo’s dual appearances: those on the islands see it as “a dead desert rock,” while sailors viewing the crag from afar swear it is “a glad populous ship” (*Encantadas* 81, 65). Any illusion of positivity, however, is quickly dispelled when the Dog-King boards the ship with his large pack of loyal dogs:

On the passage, [the dogs] refused to consort with the emigrants and remained aristocratically grouped around their master . . . casting disdainful glances upon the inferior rabble. (*Encantadas* 81)

While the shifting biological boundaries in “Sketch Third” may have tempted readers to infer that a simple willingness to see through subjective categorizations confers morality, these animals dismiss such a possibility. The Dog-King’s “large grim dogs” are, arguably, villains in the sketch and align more closely with the predatory, vicious human beings of *The Encantadas* than with the Isles’ other animals. Nevertheless, Melville appears to qualify their viciousness by attributing it to their loyalty. The dogs thus are viewed more positively than either the Dog-King or his subjects whose respective viciousness arises out of their willingness to expose their fellow human beings to savagery and abuse.

The pilgrimage to Charles’ Island dissolves into a nightmarish experience of subjugation and violence almost as soon as it reaches its destination. To ensure complete dominance over his subjects, the Dog-King handpicks an infantry bodyguard from his eighty settlers to supplement his vicious army of dogs. The situation, however, quickly deteriorates. Appearing increasingly paranoid, the King imagines that the entire population is dichotomized between his guards and

“downright plotters and malignant traitors” (*Encantadas* 82). He eventually declares martial law and, aided by his loyal sentinals, hunts and kills those subjects he deems rebellious. When the King realizes that his practices have decimated the island’s population, he is forced to suspend his bloody tactics, instead focusing his efforts on kidnapping sailors from visiting ships. Ultimately, the influx of “lawless mariners” leads to a successful, bloody revolt against the King who is subsequently banished from his kingdom.

The rise and fall of the Dog-King is perhaps best characterized by the concept of cyclical subordination that was first introduced by the relationship between man and tortoise. Almost every major plot development in the seventh sketch entails a restructuring of the island’s social hierarchy and the exploitation of a new subsection of its population. While the reader is never explicitly told that the Dog-King’s pack of dogs was forced into bondage-like service, the narrator hints at the possibility, stating that the dogs were “of a singularly ferocious character, though by severe training rendered docile to their master” (*Encantadas* 82). When pressed into bondage, the dogs instinctively elevate themselves above the “inglorious citizen-mob” and use their “terrific bayings . . . to keep down the surgings of revolt” (*Encantadas* 82-3).

The King’s infantry bodyguards show the same instinct toward a violent means of self-affirmation. Despite the fact (or perhaps due to the fact) that they remain “subordinate to the cavalry of bodyguard dogs,” the men selected for service persecute their former peers as if they were “game to shoot” (*Encantadas* 82). By having the bodyguard-men conceptualize other subjects as game, Melville appears to be employing a very dark sense of humor. In an ironic twist, the bodyguard-men, a group ranking below actual animals (dogs), dehumanize other human beings in an attempt to realign the Isles’ social hierarchy and reassert themselves above the status of animal (the subjects they know conceptualize as game). The effort is ultimately

ineffectual; due to their success in hunting down subjects, the King is forced to abolish the death penalty. With no further use for the men, the King revokes their elevated status and forces them back into the general population and its slave-like existence “cultivating the soil and raising potatoes” (*Encantadas* 82).

Just as in *Benito Cereno*, the result of the Island’s continual processes of subjugation is bloody conflict. When the King and his dogs march against the mutineers “three men and thirteen dogs [are killed] . . . [and] many on both sides [were] wounded” (*Encantadas* 83). The resulting banishment of the Dog-King, however, offers no mitigation of the Island’s processes of violence and suppression. Despite the mutineers’ proclamation of a republic, the Island merely devolves into a Hobbesian state of nature, eventually lapsing into an anarchic hell: “the insurgents confederated themselves into a democracy neither Grecian, Roman, nor American, nay it was no democracy at all, but a permanent *riotocracy*” (*Encantadas* 84).³⁸ As an asylum for all runaways and deserters, the new society champions the fact that “they have no law but lawlessness”; each member is subjected to the wills and whims of desperadoes who “did just what they pleased” (*Encantadas* 84).³⁹ Even though despotism has been replaced by anarchy, humans’ nature remains the same, spreading the violence and repression that has plagued the

³⁸ While there is certainly no empirical evidence that Melville read Hobbes, few would argue that authors write their works in intellectual vacuums. Years of research has demonstrated with certainty that Melville owned an incredibly disparate group of philosophical works ranging from Plato’s *Phaedon* to Sir Thomas Browne’s *Sir Thomas Browne’s Works, Including His Life and Correspondence* (Ed. Simon Wilkin) to Seneca’s *Morals by Way of Abstract* to Schopenhauer’s *Religion: A Dialogue, and Other Essays*. The fact that Melville owned an edition of Aristotle’s *Treatise on Rhetoric* that included Hobbes’ analysis and examination questions, however, suggests that Melville likely had at least some familiarity with Hobbesian philosophy (Sealts, Jr., *Melville’s Reading: A Checklist of Owned and Borrowed*. The above referenced books are listed by call number in the order which they appear: 404.1A, 89, 458, 445, 14B.)

³⁹ Cf Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, Ch. XIII: “[the state of nature] is a war of every man versus every man, [and] this is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place . . . there is no law; where no law, no injustice.”

island since its colonization. In the words of Robert Albrecht, “the changelessness of the islands reflects the endless and unchanging exploitation by human beings of one another” (Albrecht 477). In a society where the division between man and dog is blurred by their interchangeable viciousness, where people participate in an eternal cycle of violent exploitation, evil flourishes.

In Oberlus, the title character of “Sketch Ninth: Hood’s Isle and the Hermit Oberlus,” the evil of the Enchanted Isles fuses with man’s innate predatory instincts to create a diabolical, “beastlike” man. In their analyses of the sketch, critics have generally gravitated towards two aspects connected to Oberlus. First, his description as a “wild white creature . . . in the person of a European bringing into this savage region qualities more diabolical than are to be found among any of the surrounding cannibals” and its resulting association with colonization has proven nearly possible to ignore (*Encantadas* 102). Scholars then often argue that Oberlus’ enslavement of an individual described as a “Negro,” the sketch’s second captivating aspect, in combination with his European descent, constitutes Melville’s allegorical condemnation of slavery. Karcher’s aforementioned *Shadow Over The Promised Land* offers the most detailed and acclaimed example of such interpretation:

[The Oberlus sketch] exposes the ugliness of the master class through an allegorical history of slavery in the New World, . . . a history that presents the antiface of the European myth in which the white man civilizes the wilderness and overcomes its inhabitants’ savagery by virtue of cultural and religious superiority. (Karcher 114)

The process of viewing the sketch through this lens, however, often elevates the racialized aspect of slavery above a broader philosophical inquiry into what the sketch reveals about man’s nature itself. In *The Encantadas*, however, dualism abounds; that Melville positions Oberlus in such a straightforwardly evil light should give readers pause. The tortoise has two sides; Rodondo simultaneously appears to be a populous ship and a cadaverous rock; indeed, the islands were named precisely for their “apparent fleetingness and unreality” (*Encantadas* 52-3).

A closer examination of “Sketch Ninth” elucidates the thread of ambiguity that Melville interweaves throughout the story and calls into question more traditional interpretations of the work. Beneath the denunciation of the white man’s exploitation of blacks, there is an additional layer to the sketch that transcends mere socio-political allegory. This more subtle construction does not minutely focus on the issue of white men enslaving blacks (in the context of colonialism or in the United States), but rather forces a reader to ask the question: *what is it in people that drives them to exploit and subjugate other human beings?*

Melville hints at this deeper meaning through the ambiguity he instills in the character of Oberlus. Notwithstanding the fact that Oberlus is identified as a white European, he claims that he derives his right to rule from his mother Sycorax: “the island is mine by Sycorax my mother” (*Encantadas* 105). As many critics have suggested, the statement is a direct quotation from Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.⁴⁰ Caliban, however, is neither European nor white. Described in the First Folio’s *dramatis personae* as “savage” and “deformed,” he is an indigenous monster whom Prospero finds upon his arrival on the island; at several points in the play, Prospero actually refers to Caliban as his slave.⁴¹ Further, the narrator’s description of Oberlus as having “befreckled skin, . . . [a] nose flat; . . . [and] hair and beard unshorn and profuse,” echoes characteristics that whites often attributed to blacks in the 19th century (*Encantadas* 103).⁴² By endowing Oberlus with features that a 19th century reader would attribute to an African American, Melville subverts not only Oberlus’ whiteness, but also the

⁴⁰ *The Tempest* I.ii.331.

⁴¹ “We’ll visit Caliban my slave” (I.ii.308).

“What, ho! Slave! Caliban!” (I.ii.315).

“Thou most lying slave” (I.ii.352)

⁴² The entry for “Negro” in the Ninth Edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1884) lists, among others, the following characteristics: (a) “the abnormal length of the arm, which in the erect position sometimes reaches the knee pan.” (b) “short flat snub nose.” (c) black hair that was “distinctly woolly.” (316-7).

idea of race itself. Oberlus represents neither white nor black, but instead becomes a symbolic representation of man.⁴³

If one conceptualizes Oberlus as denotative of man's nature, then the events in "Sketch Nine" can be understood as Melville's explication of man's universal desire for recognition and the subjugation that such a drive often engenders. Tellingly, Melville places an immense amount of emphasis on Oberlus' "vast idea of his own importance," a characteristic trumped only by his malignancy (*Encantadas* 104).⁴⁴ As an exploration of the psychological aspects of the struggle for recognition, Hegel's "Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage" provides an illuminating context through which to evaluate the relationship between Oberlus and his slaves.

According to Hegel, individuals exist for themselves as a 'somebody' only to the extent that they are recognized or acknowledged by someone who they simultaneously acknowledge as a 'someone'.⁴⁵ Recognition is therefore necessarily mediated by another individual and is proportional to the mutuality of the two parties' respect for each other.⁴⁶ A person's first instinct when encountering the other, however, is to conceptualize them as an inhibitor to their own selfhood; a life and death struggle therefore ensues between the two rivals.⁴⁷ This solution is

⁴³ Melville also appears to link Oberlus with man transitively through the tortoise. In Act I, scene two of *The Tempest*, Prospero commands Caliban to follow him using the phrase, "Come, thou tortoise!" (I.ii.316). The effect is best demonstrated through a diagram: Oberlus → Caliban → Tortoise → Man → Oberlus.

⁴⁴ See also: "it seems incredible that such a being should possess such vanity, a misanthrope be conceited; but he really had his notion" (*Encantadas* 104).

⁴⁵ Due to Hegel's exceedingly convoluted writing style, I have relegated direct quotations from "Lordship and Bondage" to footnotes. Each paraphrasing will thus be accompanied by the actual passage that it is derived from. "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (Hegel 111).

⁴⁶ "Each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites itself; and each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through mediation. They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other" (Hegel 112).

⁴⁷ "Self-consciousness is, to begin with, simple being-for-self, self equal through the exclusion of everything else . . . What is other for it is an unessential, negatively characterized object . . . The presentation of itself, however, as the pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself as the pure negation of its objective mode, or in

inadequate as the death of one party leaves the surviving person without self-recognition; someone who is dead cannot grant acknowledgment.⁴⁸

The master-slave relationship offers an incomplete resolution to this problem wherein one party (master) appears to achieve recognition through the submission of the other (slave). The incompleteness of the relationship is derived from two facts: (1) the master cannot gain true recognition from the slave as the slave is now beneath him and (2) the master becomes paradoxically dependent on the slave who is the only productive member of the relationship.⁴⁹ For Hegel, adequate recognition requires a mirroring of the self through the other—a mutual conference of selfhood.

At the beginning of “Sketch Ninth,” Oberlus is in the first stage of Hegel’s paradigm. He has convinced himself “that his visitors came equally well led by their longings to behold the mighty hermit Oberlus,” yet lacks recognition from another human being (*Encantadas* 103). As a product of his unbroken solitude, “his never encountering humanity except on terms of misanthropic independence,” Oberlus’ sense of importance balloons (*Encantadas* 104). Ironically, the very isolation which grants him his confidence denies him of any subjects to recognize his status. He thus “pants for a chance to prove his potency upon the first specimen of humanity” that he should encounter (*Encantadas* 105).

When Oberlus encounters a “Negro” on the beach, he moves into the second phase of the quest for self-recognition: a life-and-death struggle with an ‘other.’ The narrator’s description of

showing that it is not attached to any specific existence, that it is not attached to life. In so far as it is the action of the other, each seeks the death of the other . . . the two individuals prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle” (Hegel 113-4).

⁴⁸ “This trial by death, however, does away with the truth which was supposed to issue from it . . . for just as life is the natural setting of consciousness . . . death is the natural negation of consciousness” (Hegel 114).

⁴⁹ (1) “But for recognition proper the moment will be lacking, that what the lord does to the other he also does to himself, and what the bondsman does to himself he should also do to the other. The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal” (Hegel 116).

(2) “but the lord, who has interposed the bondsman between [labor] and himself, takes to himself only its dependent aspect” [Hegel 116].

each character circling one another, Oberlus “persist[ing] in keeping behind the Negro, who . . . dodges about to gain the front of Oberlus [who] dodges also,” is nearly identical to Hegel’s conceptualization of the brief period that occurs after two individuals have met yet precedes their death-struggle.⁵⁰ When the Hegelian battle for recognition actually occurs, Oberlus is initially triumphant, using a blunderbuss to intimidate the “Negro” into bondage. The roles are quickly reversed, however, and Oberlus is overthrown during a moment of distraction.

While Oberlus is eventually successful in his quest to subjugate individuals to his will, he is doomed to realize the inadequacy of the master-slave relationship through a markedly Hegelian experience. Under his tyrannical rule, the slaves devolve “into reptiles at his feet, . . . creatures of an inferior race” (*Encantadas* 108). At the same time, Oberlus undergoes his own degradation. Dependent “in good part on the labor of his slave,” he becomes a slave to his role as master, forced to sleep either hidden in a “sulphurous pitfall” or in front of the slaves’ shed with gun in hand. Indeed, the narrator describes him as “the worst of slaves” (*Encantadas* 108).⁵¹ Melville emphasizes this condition by concluding the sketch with Oberlus in a South American prison, the actualization of Hegel’s metaphor. Like the “wicked commodores and captains” who are transformed into tortoises, Oberlus has become a prisoner to his own predatory instincts (*Encantadas* 53).

Although it might seem improbable that Melville would have been familiar with a German philosopher’s work, especially one that was not translated into English until 1910, his

⁵⁰ The movement is a double movement of the two self-consciousnesses: “Each sees the other do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as it does the same”(Hegel 112).

⁵¹ “But for recognition proper the moment will be lacking, that what the lord does to the other he also does to himself, and what the bondsman does to himself he should also do to the other. The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal, . . . the object in which lord has achieved lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. ” (Hegel 116-7).

journals suggest otherwise.⁵² In the fall of 1849, Melville set sail for Europe aboard the *Southampton*. In his second journal entry of the trip, he described how there were many “very pleasant passengers on board with whom to converse:”

Chief among these is a Mr. Adler, a German scholar, to whom Duyckink introduced me. He is author of a formidable lexicon, (German & English); in compiling which he almost ruined his health . . . He is full of the German metaphysics, & discourses of Kant, Swedenborg &c. He has been my principal companion thus far. (*Melville Log* 319).

Several weeks later, Melville wrote about an occasion in which Adler and a mutual friend joined him in his cabin for drinks:

Last night about 9½ P.M. Adler & Taylor came into my room, & it was proposed to have whiskey punches, which we did have, accordingly. Adler drank about three table spoons full – Taylor 4 or five tumblers &c. We had an extraordinary time & did not break up till after two in the morning. We talked metaphysics continually, & *Hegel*, Schlegel, Kant &c were discussed under the influence of whiskey. I shall not forget it. (emphasis added, *Melville Log* 322)

In fact, the topic almost appears to have dominated the two men’s conversations: “Sat up conversing with Adler pretty late, -- (Topic—as usual—metaphysics)” (*Melville Log* 343).

Melville’s journals reveal an author who seemed to be enthralled with Adler and the insight he provided into 19th century German philosophy.⁵³

It is thus likely that Melville, whether on a conscious or subconscious level, was informed by Hegelian philosophy in his construction of Oberlus’s quest for recognition. Within the Enchanted Isles, both human and non-human animals’ desires for recognition result in eternal processes of subjugation and abuse. Evil arises from, and is perpetuated by, the cyclical progressions of man. Even Oberlus, one whose appears to be innately evil, appeals to this sense

⁵² The first English translation of *Phenomenology of Spirit* was translated by J. B. Baillie and published by George Allen & Unwin under the title *Phenomenology of Mind*.

⁵³ Melville mentions at least three other conversations devoted to German metaphysics. November 2nd: “In the evening played chess, & talked metaphysics with my friend till midnight.” November 15th: “Had a glorious chop & a pancake a pint & a half of ale, a cigar & a pipe, & talked high German metaphysics meanwhile.” December 4th: “thence to his room and talked German metaphysics till ten o’clock.” (*Melville Log* 325, 332, 343).

of turning cosmic injustice. Before setting sail from his island, he leaves a letter written in “tristful eloquence” that states: “I am the most unfortunate ill-treated gentleman that lives, . . . [and] have been long endeavoring . . . to make myself comfortable in a virtuous though unhappy old age but at various times have been robbed and beaten by men professing to be Christians” (*Encantadas* 110-1). When considered in the context of subtle footnote at the end of “Sketch Ninth,” it appears that Melville wanted his reader to connect Oberlus with the subjects of the Dog-King.⁵⁴ Once a member of the exploited, Oberlus rises to become a savage tyrant, perpetuating the Isles’ cycle of exploitation.⁵⁵

God, Hunilla, and the Possibility of Redemption in Sketches VIII, and X

Amidst the despair and hopelessness of *The Encantadas*, the story of Hunilla the Chola Widow emerges as one of the few sources of hope. “A half-breed Indian woman,” Hunilla, along with her brother Truxhill and husband Felipe, pay the captain of a French whaling boat to deposit them on Norfolk Isle in the hope of procuring tortoise oil to sell upon the group’s return to her hometown of Payta, Peru (*Encantadas* 88). Placing their trust in “the Frenchman,” the group pays for their passage out in silver with the understanding that the whaler will return for them after its “fourth month cruise in the westward seas” (*Encantadas* 88). After only seven weeks on the island, however, tragedy strikes and both Truxhill and Felipe drown. Matters become more dire when the French whaler never returns for Hunilla, abandoning her to an indefinite prison term on the Isle: “time was her labyrinth, in which Hunilla was entirely lost” (*Encantadas* 93).

⁵⁴ The footnote cites conflicting testimony as to whether Oberlus was on Hood’s Isle or Charles’ Isle (home of the Dog-King): “[Porthe narrator’s] authorities place Oberlus on Hood’s Isle [whereas] Porter’s, on Charles” (*Encantadas* 112).

⁵⁵ One might also note that, upon freeing himself from Oberlus, the “Negro” captures Oberlus and partakes in the same abusive cruelty that he was formerly subjected to. He and his company are “too vindictive” and severely whip Oberlus and steal his vegetables, tortoises, and money (*Encantadas* 107).

Isolated, and at the mercy of the Enchanted Isles' harsh climate, Hunilla courageously clings to survival for an unfixed length of time. Eventually, the narrator and his ship's crew inadvertently discover Hunilla and safely return her to Payta.

Due to the religious imagery Melville infused in the sketch, it is tempting to evaluate Hunilla's ordeal as an allegory for the triumph of the Christian faith. When Hunilla is "wrapped in misery," her "strong persuasions of Roman faith" prompt her to continue the daunting yet "pious" search for her husband's body (*Encantadas* 89, 92, 93). Similarly, throughout her time on the island, she clings to a "little brass crucifix" for strength and directly calls upon the "Holy Virgin" to aid her in times of desperation (*Encantadas* 99, 94). The sketch's final sentence, however, strips the positivity from the Christian imagery: "the last seen of lone Hunilla she was passing into Payta town, riding upon a small gray ass; and before her on the ass's shoulders, she eyed the joint workings of the beast's armorial cross (*Encantadas* 101).⁵⁶ While the scene is clearly meant to parallel Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey (Luke 19: 28-44), in *The Encantadas*, only Christ's passion remains; Hunilla is denied resurrection or triumph. Hunilla suffered with her cross on the Isles just as the donkey now lumbers forward under its weight; humankind and animal are linked in a unified community of suffering.

But notwithstanding the uplifting aspect of Hunilla's perseverance and survival, one cannot ignore the fact that she did participate in the Isles' cycle of depredation and subjugation. As Albrecht notes, "she is one of those who hunts until she becomes one of the hunted" (Albrecht 475). Before her brother and husband die, she kills "hundreds" of tortoises; when the sailors are taken to her hut they likewise find "some twenty moaning tortoises" tied to the ground (*Encantadas* 99). Perhaps even more damning, when rescued Hunilla abandons several of the

⁵⁶ In a letter to Melville, Charles Briggs (Melville's editor) reports that the Christian imagery brought "tears into the eyes" of poet James Russell Lowell (Leyda 460).

dogs that she “had so clung to” during her internment on the Isles. In a passage once again blurring the taxonomies between human beings and animals, Melville writes that the dogs left on shore “did not howl or whine; they all but spoke, . . . had they been human beings, hardly would have more vividly inspired a sense of desolation” (*Encantadas* 101). Paralleling the two sides of the tortoise’s shell, Hunilla is both bright and black; she, like man, is deserving of pity yet is, in a sense, the cause of her own condition.⁵⁷

The events of “Sketch Eighth,” thus do not support the contention that there is any casual relationship between Hunilla’s actions, faith, and her salvation. It is, after all, a drunken sailor who sees Hunilla desperately waiving her handkerchief. In fact, Melville constructs a string of puns that subtly appear to mock spirituality. The sailor is “high lifted above all others” due to the “elevation of his spirits,” a result of his drinking “a dram of Peruvian pisco” (*Encantadas* 87). In sharp juxtaposition to the drunken sailor’s proactive response to Hunilla’s pleas for help, the crucifix, a representation of faith and God, constitutes only an “ancient graven knock long plied in vain” (*Encantadas* 94). Further, the narrator states that Hunilla “leaned upon a reed,” an eighteenth- and nineteenth century symbol of weakness or pliancy.⁵⁸ Melville thus appears to suggest that Hunilla’s faith is misplaced; God is as illusory as the Enchanted Isles. Indeed, as the narrator resignedly asks, “Ah, Heaven, when man thus keeps his faith, wilt though be faithless who created the faithful one? But they cannot break faith who never plighted it” (*Encantadas* 91).

⁵⁷ Albrecht makes a similar observation and notes that the sketch’s three epigraphs all center on the notion of false pity. The first epigraph is taken from Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* Book II and details sirens attempting to lure seaman to come to their aid. Epitaph two, taken from Chatterton’s *Mynstrelles Songe from Aella*, an individual is lamenting the death of a woman who is in fact still living. The third epigraph is taken from Collins’ *Dirge in Cymbeline* and again involves the mourning of a false death. See Albrecht, “The Thematic Unity of Melville’s *The Encantadas*,” 474-5.

⁵⁸ The phrases “as weak as a reed” and “shaken like a reed” abound in the literary world of the 18th- and 19th century. For examples see: Whiting, Bartlett Jere. *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*. 1977. Boston, MA: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 359.

Respite from the world's evil must be sought in one another, here in a mortal realm, and not in some divine figure. Brief moments of redemption occur when human beings break their cycle of subjugation and exploitation, when they are able to “out of treachery invoke[e] trust” (*Encantadas* 94). The sailors are moved by a sense of pathos for Hunilla even though she is a “half-breed” and might otherwise be considered as beneath them; they see her as a human being.⁵⁹ The final image of the *Encantadas*, a grave headed by an epitaph which, taken from Porter's *Journal*, is significantly changed, affirms Melville's focus on the mortal world and his rejection of a higher being⁶⁰

Porter

Gentle Reader, as you pass by,
As you are now, so wonce was I;
As now my body is in the dust
I hope in heaven my soul to rest.

Melville

Oh, Brother Jack, as you pass by,
As you aer now, so once was I.
Just so game, and just so gay,
But now, alack, they've stopped my pay.
No more I peep out of my blinkers,
Here I be – tucked in with clinkers!

By deleting the final line of Porter's *Journal*, Melville refuses to “point readers toward a promise land in heaven” (Fisher 49). To return to Kristeva and Hegel, Hunilla and the sailors transcend the evil of the Enchanted Isles when each party is able to see the other in themselves and mutually confer respect. Redemption is neither to be found in a heaven nor granted by God. The few times good is able to mitigate the Isles' pervasive evil are the results of human beings interactions with one another, when “out of treachery” they mutually “invoke trust” (*Encantadas* 94). In Melville's now-famous words: “We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men; and among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects.”

⁵⁹ As Bernstein has pointed out, the reason that Hunilla will not speak about other ships that have passed the islands is likely due to the fact that their crews raped then left her: “though some vessels passed near the island, the only thing that probably happened was that their crews raped the young widow” (Bernstein 178).

⁶⁰ In *The Complete Stories of Herman Melville*, Leyda identifies the source and original wording of the poem. Newberry makes the same comparison between the two versions in “*The Encantadas: Melville's Inferno.*”

Chapter 3 “The Angel Must Hang”: Melville’s Increasing Despair 1860-1891

Introduction

By May of 1857, Melville had published eight novels, eight articles, and one short story collection.⁶¹ Starting in the early 1850s, however, the success of his ‘1840s seafaring tales’ had begun to wane from his critics’ minds, subjecting Melville to increasingly more pointed and disparaging reviews. The complexities and relatively dark nature of his ‘post-1850’ writings were jarring juxtapositions to their more colorful predecessors. Both the public and critics slowly turned from Melville; *Pierre*’s reviews marked the first time that Melville’s writing had met universal critical hostility. One critic’s description of *Pierre* as an “impossible and un-understandable creature” might best be understood as an attack on Melville himself, elucidating the schism forming between the author and his readers (*New York Times Supplement*).⁶² In a

⁶¹ Novels: *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847), *Mardi: And a Voyage Thither* (1847), *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849), *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* (1850), *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities* (1852), and *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855).

Articles:

"Fragments from a Writing Desk, No. 1" (*Democratic Press, and Lansingburgh Advertiser*, May 4, 1839)

"Fragments from a Writing Desk, No. 2" (*Democratic Press, and Lansingburgh Advertiser*, May 18, 1839)

"Etchings of a Whaling Cruise" (*New York Literary World*, March 6, 1847)

"Authentic Anecdotes of 'Old Zack'" (*Yankee Doodle*, II, excerpted September 4, published in full weekly from July 24 to September 11, 1847)

"Mr Parkman's Tour" (*New York Literary World*, March 31, 1849)

"Cooper's New Novel" (*New York Literary World*, April 28, 1849)

"A Thought on Book-Binding" (*New York Literary World*, March 16, 1850)

"Hawthorne and His Mosses" (*New York Literary World*, August 17 and August 24, 1850)

Collection:

The Piazza Tales (1856).

⁶² See also: "A bad book! Affected in dialect, unnatural in conception, repulsive in plot, and inartistic in construction" (*New York American Whig Review*).

"Comment upon the [plot] is needless. But even this string of nonsense is equaled by the nonsense that is strung upon it, in the way of crazy sentiment and exaggerated passion. What the book means, we know not . . . It [is] almost utter worthlessness" (*Boston Post*).

letter to fellow author Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville described the divergence between his writing interests and the public's demands: "[I am] so pulled hither and thither by circumstances . . . [that which I feel] most moved to write, is banned, -- it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other way I cannot*" (*Letters* 128). True to his word, when Melville published *The Confidence Man* in 1857, it contained the same dark elements that had both confused and offended readers of *Pierre*. A despairing satire centering on a corrupted America, the novel met with the same hostility and derision of his previous two publications. In the words of one English reviewer, Melville "ruined [*The Confidence Man*], just as he did with *Pierre*" (*London Literary Gazette*). Having generated little income from his past three novels, Melville was forced to choose between writing that had meaning for him and writing for the public's enjoyment.⁶³ Paralleling *Bartleby* and *Babo*'s choices of silence, Melville never published another novel in his lifetime.⁶⁴

After nearly a decade, Melville was shocked from his silence by the eruption of the Civil War. In truth, the War shook Melville to his core as it placed him within an impossible paradox: he was forced to choose between his hatred of violence and his hatred for subjugation (slavery). Melville's *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, a collection of poetry published in 1866, elucidates his struggle with this fundamental issue and reveals a cautious optimism Melville found in the War's conclusion. Notwithstanding the violent upheaval it had just suffered,

"The author has attempted seemingly to combine in it the peculiarities of Poe and Hawthorne, and has succeeded in producing nothing but a powerfully unpleasant caricature of morbid thought and passion" (*Philadelphia Graham's Magazine*).

⁶³ Critics' increasing dislike for Melville is best evidenced by his total book sales. *Typee* sold 9,598 copies, *Omoo* 7,403, *Redburn* 4,718, *White-Jacket* 4,922, *Moby-Dick* 3,215. In comparison, *Pierre* sold only 1,821 copies and grossed Melville a mere \$157.75. Although surviving records of *The Confidence-Man* are no longer available, historians estimate that its sales were between 1,200 and 1,500 copies. See: Tanselle, "The Sales of Melville's Books," *Harvard Library Bulletin* (1969), 8: 195-215.

⁶⁴ See *Bartleby*: "I know you . . . and I want nothing to say to you" (32). In *Benito*: "Seeing it was all over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (102).

America, in the wake of abolition, had an ability to permanently eliminate the cycles of extortion and subjugation that had dominated Melville's focus in *The Encantadas*.

In the wake of Reconstruction, however, Melville became increasingly disillusioned of any possibility of national regeneration. In the words of historian James Randall, the reconstruction era was "a time of party abuse, of corruption, [and] of vindictive bigotry, . . . the nadir of national disgrace" (Randall 689). As Melville watched corrupt, self-serving northern politicians punish the South for its secession, he became increasingly certain that man's nature was such that it inescapably catalyzed cruelty, violence, and suppression. The optimism he had cautiously embraced at the War's end, a hope that nobility and idealism might lead the country to an actual fulfillment of its mythic representation, rotted; a resigned appreciation of the human proclivity to depravity grew in its place.

In the posthumously-published *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Melville's understanding of the human drive for destructiveness unites with his conceptualization of a Godless existence to present an expression of his ultimate loss of hope in man. In a story in which individualization of character is impossible, bad is good and good is bad. The only element of consistency resides in the cyclical nature of human kind's dangerous propensity for evil. Innocence and evil are therefore depicted as relative concepts on a scale that is, in itself, nearly all bad; individuals move back and forth on its continuum throughout their lives but even the most 'innocent' people partake in society's cycles of abuse. If there ever was a God, he abandoned the world to its own destructive impulse long ago. In the words of scholar Hurtgen, "the novel depicts the human realm as bereft of natural or divine support and sanction" (Barber and McGrath 245). As the designers of their own prison, humans are condemned to infinite cycles of conquest, violence, and suppression. To Melville, American society was a "Man-of-War" (*Billy Budd* 103).

The Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Cautious Optimism of *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*

When *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* was published (1866), nearly an entire decade separated it from Melville's previous work, the critical and financial disaster that was *The Confidence Man*. Ironically, while reviewers scorned the majority of his 'post-1850' novels for their darkness, intensity, "vast idea[s] of power that amount[ed] to nothing,"⁶⁵ and, "outrages on the moral senses,"⁶⁶ they dismissed *Battle-Pieces* for its detached, "lethargic"⁶⁷ tone. In sharp contrast to what one scholar has referred to as the "newspaper verse" of the 1860s, Melville's poems are void of satirical attacks on the South, patriotic song lyrics, or vivid recreations of actual battles.⁶⁸ Indeed, the collection's intensive focus on abstract considerations prompted one reviewer to write, "they seem to have presented themselves as dreams, but at last they remain vagaries, and are none the more substantial because they have a modern speech" (*Boston Atlantic Monthly*).

Such criticism, however, reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of Melville's intentions. If Melville at times strove to capture the vividness of battle -- the sounds of gunfire, hand-to-hand combat, and death -- this desire was almost universally overridden by his primary concern in writing *Battle-Pieces*: to understand the events of the Civil War as the United States experienced it. To Melville, the War was not a mere battle between the North and South, but rather a violent expression of the nation's anguished past and its struggle to find a unified,

⁶⁵ *Washington National Era*

⁶⁶ *Southern Literary Messenger*

⁶⁷ *Boston Atlantic Monthly*

⁶⁸ Stanton Garner. *The Civil War World of Herman Melville*. See pg. 13.

harmonious future. The myriad of voices that a reader encounters, encompassing northern and southern soldiers, abolitionists and former proponents of slavery, the young and the old, and blacks and whites, demonstrates Melville's desire to express the War as it was experienced by all *Americans*. As he wrote in the collection's introduction:

The aspects which the strife as a memory assumes are as manifold as are the moods of involuntary mediation—moods variable, and at times widely at variance . . . of consistency, 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. (*Battle-Pieces* 34).

Emphasis is placed not on the individuals who fought in the War, but rather on the varied and conflicting perceptions and attitudes of different kinds and persuasions of Americans for which said individuals are synecdochic.⁶⁹ As will be shown, Melville saw in the horrors of the War the possibility of a national regeneration and moral realignment; such reformatory processes, however, ultimately hinged upon the North's ability to realize that, "the [South's] fate is linked with ours, and that together [the North and South] comprise the Nation" (*Battle-Pieces* 196). America had the opportunity to realize its idealistic, mythic self, but such a metamorphosis required former enemies to overcome the horrors of War and to embrace each other as lost brothers.

In the interplay between the poems "America" and "The Apparation," Melville masterfully develops his conceptualization of America as a nation on the verge of achieving its mythic destiny:

⁶⁹ Garner makes a similar observation in *The Civil War World of Herman Melville* but moves in a slightly different direction, positing that said emphasis makes the collection "a public rather than a private literary event" (36).

	“The Apparition (A Retrospect)”		“America”
	Convulsions came; and, where the field Long slept in pastoral green, A goblin-mountain was upheaved 15 Valor with Valor Strove, and died: Fierce was Despair, and cruel was Pride; And the lorn Mother speechless stood, Pale at the fury of her brood.
10	The unreserve of Ill was there, The clinkers in her last retreat; But, ere the eye could take it in, Or mind could comprehension win, It sunk! – and at our feet.		25 A watcher looked upon her low, and said- She sleeps, but sleeps, she is not dead. But in that sleep contortion showed The terror of the vision there
	So, the, Solidity’s a crust— The core of fire below; All may go well for many a year, But who can think without a fear		31 It was a thing to see So foul a dream upon fair a face But from the trance she sudden broke--
15	Of horrors that happen so?		35 The trance, or death into promoted life; At her feet a shivered yoke, A clear calm look. It spake of pain, 40 But such as purifies from stain—

The “solidity” of post-war America was nothing more than a thin layer of stability beneath which chaos threatened to erupt. The greatest danger to the nation’s unity was forgetting the “unreserve of Ill” that threatens to burst through the appearance of solidarity. The Civil War had ended in only four years; as quickly as it had erupted it had “sunk,” denying many the ability to fully comprehend its meaning. The maternal figure of “America” watches her children destroy themselves; she has seen the “unreserved of Ill,” what Melville later describes in “A Meditation” as “wars of natural brotherhood,” and internalizes both its significance and meaning (*Battle-Pieces* 193). She thus emerges from the “trance” with slavery (a shivered yoke) at her feet and a forward gaze to the future.

This is not to say, however, that Melville’s understanding of the nation’s potential was not qualified by his deep concerns about the impending processes of reintegration. The image of the waterfall in “A Canticle: Significant of the national exaltation of enthusiasm at the close of

the War” offers the collection’s strongest example of the tension between Melville’s guarded, yet somewhat idyllic optimism, and his irrepressible understanding of the immense obstacles between post-war America and its successful reunification with the Confederacy. In the poem’s first stanza, the waterfall is likened to “the congregated Fall,” and produces “multitudinously thronging” waters that “all converge” and churn at its base (*Battle-Pieces* 393).

While many scholars have cited the fairly obvious connection between the “congregated Fall” and the biblical Fall-of-Man, a stronger interpretation understands the Fall as representative of a shattered covenant between the nation’s citizens; society turned against itself thereby generating the “multitudinously thronging” and churning of the nation at its base (*Battle-Pieces* 128). This interpretation is strengthened by Melville’s later description of the tumultuous pool as “heav[ing] his forehead white as wool -- / Toward the Iris ever climbing” (*Battle-Pieces* 129). When the pool was in turmoil, Iris was “half in tracelessness / Hover[ing] faintly fair” above it; the suggestion is that the rainbow is a symbolic representation of America’s promise, its mythic potential (*Battle-Pieces* 128). Once the churning pool “heaves” itself (in unity) toward Iris, the waterfall no longer produces multitudinous throngs, but “Generations pouring / From times of endless date, / In their going, in their flowing / Ever form the steadfast State; *And Humanity is growing / Toward the fullness of her fate*” (emphasis added, *Battle-Pieces* 129).⁷⁰ Melville subtly undermines the poem’s seemingly unhampered optimism through what amounts to a clever sleight of hand; the pool at the bottom of the waterfall (society’s direction) has realigned itself while the waterfall (society itself) remains unaltered. Just as the thin “crust [of] Solidarity” is the only obstacle preventing chaos’ return, the currents within the waterfall’s pool are only a directional-shift away from “multitudinous thronging.”

⁷⁰ Tellingly, the rainbow is a biblical symbol of God’s covenant that “the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh” (*Genesis* 9:15). Cf. *White-Jacket*: “and after her came the *rainbow* banner of France, sporting God’s token that no more would he make war on the earth” (*White-Jacket* 632).

It is not until the collection's final essay "Supplement," however, that the true source of Melville's concern for national stability is realized. In the context of the War's conclusion, it is logical to assume Melville's anxiety derived from his belief that the South might attempt another rebellion or purposefully catalyze instability after its re-assimilation with the United States. Instead, Melville asserts that "it depends not mainly on the temper in which the South regards the North, but rather conversely" (*Battle-Pieces* 196). Prophetically, Melville locates the main threat to liberty in the North's looming retributive actions. At several points in the essay, he stresses the fact that the majority of the South should not be blamed for their actions: "through the arts of the conspirators and the perversity of fortune, . . . [were] entrapped into the support of a war whose implied end was the erecting in our advance century of an Angelo-American empire based upon the *systematic degradation of man*" (emphasis added, *Battle-Pieces* 197). Melville's decision to use "man" instead of "blacks" is particularly illuminating.⁷¹ Beneath the topical reference to slavery, Melville appears to subtly cry out: *having just fought to secure the freedom of blacks are we now to systematically degrade our Southern brethren?* Indeed, he almost states as much when he writes, "in our national solicitude to confirm the benefit of liberty to blacks, let us forbear from measures of dubious constitutional rightfulness toward our white countrymen" (*Battle-Pieces* 200). The North's unreserved condemnation of the South would render any attempt at unification futile.

Many critics have expressed dismay at Melville's apologetic stance toward the South and his consequent comments on the status of blacks in post-war America.⁷² Aaron and Karcher's contentions have risen to the forefront of such criticism:

⁷¹ Melville uses "blacks" the other four times he references the newly freed African Americans.

⁷² The following quotation has attracted the most criticism: "the blacks, in their infant pupilage to freedom, appeal to the sympathies of every humane mind . . . [but] kindness [toward blacks] should not be allowed to exclude kindness to communities who stand nearer to us in nature" (*Battle-Pieces* 199).

In *Battle-Pieces*, Melville lost sight of his cause; he had a profounder insight into the blight of Negro slavery before 1861 than after . . . Negroes are virtually absent in *Battle-Pieces*, and the black storm clouds scudding through the poems do not refer specifically to slavery. The War is a white man's tragedy. (Aaron 90)

The prose Supplement, [implies] that the brotherhood of race overrides that brotherhood of humanity . . . We are forced to conclude that the powerful egalitarian convictions that Melville had dramatized with greater acumen than any other write of his time were not rooted deeply enough in his psyche to withstand the shock of a war that brought his deepest personal conflicts into play. (Karcher 277)

To fully understand Melville's sympathies, one must recall the evolution of his thought processes through *Bartleby*, *Benito*, and *The Encantadas*. In both *Bartleby* and *Benito*, Melville elucidated his belief that differences between human beings are artificial social-constructs and tacitly endorsed the notion of universal equality. *The Encantadas* then built upon this premise, suggesting that all men are innately driven to participate in eternal cycles of subjugation thereby creating their own hell on earth. These cycles could only be mitigated by the recognition of a reciprocal claim to humanity and through a mutual conference of respect, or, as Melville phrases it in *Battle-Pieces*, "amity itself can only be maintained by reciprocal respect, and true friends are punctilious equals" (*Battle-Pieces* 201). Thus, when Melville calls for Northerners to "in imagination place [them]selves in the unprecedented position of the Southerners" he is once again returning to his belief that one's recognition of another's humanity is the sole means by which humankind's patterns of abuse can be disrupted (*Battle-Pieces* 200). Following the War's conclusion, each side of the conflict should be moved by the horrors they have both endured and engendered, their "pathos now at last out to disarm animosity" (*Battle-Pieces* 198).⁷³

Aaron and Karcher's contentions suggest that, because blacks do not enjoy a notably privileged status in *Battle-Pieces*, Melville had lost touch with his original conceptions of

⁷³ Melville was passionate in his belief that *both* the North and the South were equally to blame for the tragedy that had befallen the nation: "let us not cover up or try to extenuate what, humanly speaking, is the truth – namely, that those unfraternal denunciations, continued through years, and which at last inflamed deeds that ended in bloodshed, were reciprocal (emphasis added, *Battle-Pieces* 199).

equality.⁷⁴ If anything, Melville's essay reveals how *deeply* he had absorbed the notion of human equality. The cycle of subordination in which blacks had been unjustly confined was temporarily suspended; nevertheless, if Northern whites reconstituted the cycle by "pervert[ing] the national victory into oppression for the vanquished," the War stood only to perpetuate exploitation by substituting one part of society for another (*Battle-Pieces* 200).⁷⁵ In the words of critic Stanton Garner, "[Melville's] sympathies were too broad to distinguish black slavery as the special evil that in retrospect it seems to have been" (Garner 25). Slavery was a despicable practice, but it was not a condition Melville viewed as pertaining exclusively to blacks.⁷⁶ The distinction between the particular exploitation and brutality to which slavery subjected blacks and the other tyrannies he saw men visiting on their fellow man was only of degree.⁷⁷ Thus, while the War tested individuals' dedication to the United States, Melville predicted that "the time of peace [would] test the sincerity of our faith in democracy," that is, to each other as human beings (*Battle-Pieces* 201).

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Melville's darkest fears about human nature appeared to be confirmed. Rather than rejoicing in their triumph as an "advance for [the] whole country and for humanity," many Northerners embraced victory as their right to treat Southerners with vindictive and oppressive malice (*Battle-Pieces* 198). Reconstruction, a process that Melville had hoped could propel the nation into a fulfillment of the expectations which "kindle the bards of

⁷⁴ One might argue that, paradoxically, if the collection *had* noticeably privileged blacks, then it would have demonstrated that Melville, despite altruistic intentions, actually *could not* transcend the issue of race and was unable to see blacks as simply people.

⁷⁵ I use temporarily here in light of the fact that Jim Crow Laws would rise to prominence in the late 1870s.

⁷⁶ Recall Ishmael's inquiry in *Moby Dick*: "who ain't a slave, tell me that" (*Moby Dick*).

⁷⁷ Other examples Melville may have understood as "subjugatiojns" include factory labor and its diminution of the worker in the face of the industrial revolution, the exploitation of Indians and the United States' unlawful seizure of their lands following the Removal Act of 1830 (most famously demonstrated by the 'Trail of Tears' in 1831), the Mexican-American War and the resulting Mexican Cession, and the intense anti-Irish sentiment that swept the country between 1850-1890 in which Irish were held to be inferior creatures closer to "Africanoids" and "Ape-like degenerates" (Wohl 1).

Progress and Humanity,” eroded into a phase of history that has since been called, “The Tragic Era,”⁷⁸ “The Age of Hate,”⁷⁹ and “The Blackout of Honest Government”⁸⁰ (*Battle-Pieces* 202).

While a comprehensive history of the period is beyond the scope of this chapter, a brief overview of its aspects which most likely sickened Melville will inform our understanding of his poetry in *Clarel* and *Timoleon*.

The presidency of Ulysses S. Grant was perhaps the era’s greatest symbol of corruption and political scandal. In the words of historian Kenneth Stampp, “during Grant’s two administrations [Grant and his cabinet] so prostituted the civil service as to make *Grantism* an enduring symbol of political immorality” (Stampp 8).⁸¹ Under Grant’s leadership the South was kept under a suffocating military occupation and was further debased by the newly formed governments which Northern politicians stocked with their own corrupt appointees. These ills were further compounded by the influx of northern “carpetbaggers,” men who moved South during reconstruction in search of financial and political opportunity. Carpetbaggers earned their name for the travel carpetbags they would lug over their shoulders. As they bought up plantations, land, and merchandise from the blighted and impoverished Southerners, the public began to conceptualize them as insidious looters and plunders, men who fed on the hardships of other men.⁸² Southern “Scalawags” exhibited a parallel cannibalistic impulse. Scalawags, in a

⁷⁸ Claude G. Bowers. *The Tragic Era; The Revolution After Lincoln* (Boston: The Literary Guild of the World), 1929.

⁷⁹ George Fort Milton. *The Age of Hate: Andrew Johnson and the Radicals* (New York: Coward-McCann), 1930.

⁸⁰ Title of Chapter VII in Ellis Merton Coulter’s *The South during Reconstruction: 1865-1877*. Vol XIII in *The History of the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 1947.

⁸¹ During Grant’s presidency, seven federal departments were implicated in corruption including the Navy (Catell & Company Scandal 1876), Justice (Pratt and Boyd Scandal 1875), War (Trader Post Scandal 1876), Treasury (Black Friday Gold Panic 1869), Interior (Delano Affair 1875), State (New York Custom House Ring 1871), and Post Office (Star Route Postal Ring 1872).

See: Hamlin Garland. *Ulysses S. Grant: His Life and Character* (New York: Double Day & McClure Co), 1898.

Cf: Mark Grossman. *Political Corruption in America: An Encyclopedia of Scandals, Power, and Greed* (New York: ABC-Clío), 2003.

⁸² See: Richard Nelson Current. *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1988.

move viewed by many as a betrayal of their own people, collaborated with corrupt Northern politicians to obtain seats in the newly formed southern governments and ensure their personal economic well-being.⁸³

In place of the “reciprocal respect” that Melville had hoped might heal the nation, an array of new cannibalistic cycles of subjugation had arisen. Reconstruction devolved into an orgy of political, financial, and moral corruption, “the most soul-sickening spectacle that Americans had ever been called upon to behold” (*Battle Pieces* 201; Rhodes 263). The unqualified failure of reconstruction appears to have forced Melville into a full embrace of the aforementioned “historic view” view of America. As both the perpetrators and prisoners of their ceaseless successions of political, social, and moral injustices, human beings were innately predatory and evil. In no world of God could such viciousness pervade unchecked. This conceptualization of human beings’ cosmic isolation resounded in Melville’s third poetry collection, *Timoleon*. When the protagonist of the title poem desperately appeals to the gods to give him a “little sign” of their existence and “me reassure, nor let me be / Like a long dog that for a master cries,” he is answered by silence (*Timoleon* 14).⁸⁴ In “The Margrave’s Birthnight,” “toil-worn peasants” labor away in preparation for their Lord’s birthday (*Timoleon* 26). Despite the fact that they journey to their master’s castle “year after year . . . in old observance,” there is “no host withal!”; as if part of a ritual, the peasants annually make the journey to pay homage to an “empty throne and

⁸³ See: David H. Donald. “The Scalawag in Mississippi Reconstruction,” *Journal of Southern History* 10 (1944) , 447-60.

James Alex Baggart: *The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 2003.

For a comparison of the predatory nature of Scalawags and Carpetbaggers, including an analysis of their success in southern politics, see: Peter Kolchin. “Scalawags, Carpetbaggers, and Reconstruction: A Quantitative Look at Southern Congressional Politics, 1868 to 1872.” *Journal of Southern History* 45 (1979), 63-76.

⁸⁴ The original wording of his question is as follows: “What basis then? O, tell at last, / Are earnest natures staggering here / But fatherless shadows from no substance cast? / Yea, are ye, god?” (emphasis added, *Timoleon* 14).

vacant cover” (*Timoleon* 28). Similarly, the army in “The Night-March” marches over endless plains and “twinkling” distances only to “gleam / No chief in view!” (*Timoleon* 26).

The world had not “temporarily fallen” from God, nor was it the predecessor of a “divinely ordered world-to-come” (Stern 437). Mankind was alone in the universe living out an incidental existence circumscribed by its own depravity. What Melville observed in the human experiences following the Civil War extinguished in him any trace of optimism for either man’s potential or God’s existence. The intensity of Melville’s growing despair evidences itself best in a letter he wrote to John Hoadley in 1877:

You are young (as I said before) but I aint; and at my years, and with my disposition, or rather, constitution, one gets to care less and less for everything. Life is so short, and so ridiculous and irrational (from a certain point of view) that one knows not what to make of it, unless -- well, finish the sentence for yourself.

Thine
In these inexplicable fleshy bonds
H.M.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ In Hershel Parker’s *Herman Melville: A Biography Volume II, 1851-1891* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2002: 819.

***Billy Budd* and the Eternal Cycles of Barbarity**

Melville began work on *Billy Budd* in 1886 and was still in the processes of revising the story when he died in 1891. It was not published in any form until 1924. Since Raymond Weaver's initial analysis of the novella in his pioneering biography *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic*, critics have consistently acknowledged the prominent role Christian imagery plays in *Billy Budd*. Indeed, the work's abundance of religious symbolism has contributed to its position as the most critically analyzed piece in Melville's oeuvre.⁸⁶ Within a religious context, Billy is most often aligned with "innocence" and Christ, Claggart with "depravity" and Satan, and Billy's execution with Christ's Crucifixion; debate thus centers on whether Melville was embracing or deriding Christianity (*Billy Budd* 130, 128).⁸⁷ Although the following analysis will support my prior claim that Melville did not believe in God, I contend that his primary focus was not to attack or mock Christianity. A near decade of failed novels had taught him that he needed to couch his speculations on the nature of God, man, and society in abstract forms of narrative.⁸⁸ Melville thus imbedded his dark speculations about society in a readily acceptable Christian allegory. Like the *Bellipotent*, *Billy Budd* itself is "luminous on the [its surface]," but in its cavernous levels below, "levels so like tiered coal mines," contains a "secret and dubious side"

⁸⁶ Hayford and Sealts, Jr. make this claim in the 1962 edition of *Billy Budd* that they co-edited though they caution that *Benito Cereno* is a close second. In the mid-1980s and 1990s, analyses produced by Weisberg (*The Failure of the Word*) and Cover (*Justice Accused*) solidified the novella's place in the canon of "Law and Literature" studies; this catalyzed a renewed interest in the work. It is therefore likely that Hayford and Sealts' claim still holds. It should also be noted that Raymond Weaver's *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* was published in 1921; his commentary was based on the yet-unpublished manuscripts of *Billy Budd*. He included the story in the 13th volume of his self-edited *Melville: Complete Works* (1924).

⁸⁷ For some famous examples of this type of analysis, see: Rogin: "Claggart is a figure of natural depravity to match Billy's natural innocence, . . . the former a snake, the latter a songbird" (301). Reynolds: "just as Billy is flawed but totally virtuous, so Claggart seems civil but totally evil" (306). Yoder, "Claggart is a snake; the snake represents Satan; Satan represents Evil. Billy represents humanity in a state of innocence" (132). Seeyle, "the opposition of Christly Billy and Satanic Claggart is surely diagrammatic" (162). Sten, *Billy Budd* is a "secularized version of the Crucifixion story" (38).

⁸⁸ See Stern, "Melville, Society, and Language": "Led by his sense that the actual is subject to multiple and shifting meanings, Melville had to find [ways of expressing] his themes in a marketplace that would not accommodate a literary realism unmistakably expressing socially and nationally unacceptable conjectures" (438).

(*Billy Budd* 162, 141). It is within these deepest and darkest levels that *Billy Budd* reveals itself as a return to the “horrible vulturism of earth” that Melville first examined in *Moby Dick* and later revisited in his treatment of *The Encantadas*’ cycles of subjugation (*Moby Dick* 369). Here, at its bottommost point, *Billy Budd* examines human beings’ inevitable social cannibalism.

When the Lieutenant of the *Bellipotent* boards the *Rights of Man* and selects Billy for impressment, the reader is transported from a naval setting to a bizarre ceremonial affair. As Billy packs his bags, the Lieutenant sits across from his new sailor and observes him with an unmistakable hunger: “settling himself in his seat [he] smack[ed] his lips with high satisfaction, looking straight at the *host*” (emphasis added, *Billy Budd* 106). In the scene’s context, the word *host* acknowledges the fact that the Lieutenant has barged into Billy’s room: Billy must host him as he packs. When considered in tandem with the novella’s overwhelming amount of Christian imagery, however, the use of ‘host’ aligns the scene with the Christian rite of the Eucharist. In this version, however, Billy “was left nothing but to play the part of the *enforced host*,” eliminating Christ’s accepting, self-sacrificial intentions; he will be devoured against his will (emphasis added, *Billy Budd* 107). Melville’s description of the Lieutenant and Captain Graveling’s exchange outside of Billy’s room further emphasizes the ritualistic nature of Billy’s impressment:

These proceedings over, the master broke the silence . . . “Lieutenant, you are going to take my best man from me, the jewel of ‘em.”

“Yes, I know,” rejoined the other, immediately drawing back the tumbler preliminary to a replenishing. “Yes, I know. Sorry.” (*Billy Budd* 106)

Paralleling the Roman Catholic Liturgy of the Eucharist, the Lieutenant first receives the body (bread) of Christ before drinking his blood (wine).⁸⁹

⁸⁹ The actual words of the liturgy for the Eucharist are as follows: “Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life. Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this

The symbolic images of predatory hunger and consumption only intensify once Billy boards the *Bellipotent*. Claggart, the master-at-arms who is reported to stare at Billy with a “glittering dental satire,” enlists the help of his subordinate to spy on Billy. When the information is relayed to Claggart, the narrator describes the process as “feed[ing] Claggart’s passion” (*Billy Budd* 137, 140).⁹⁰ Similarly, when Claggart accuses Billy of mutiny in Vere’s cabin, he fixes on him with a voracious, “mesmeric glance of serpent fascination” (*Billy Budd* 144). As the two face each other, however, it is as if Claggart is truly devouring Billy, a “hungry torpedo-fish” feeding on its prey’s vitality. The color drains from Billy’s face and he looks as if he is on the verge of death; in sharp juxtaposition, Claggart’s “rich violet” eyes appear to absorb the blueness of Billy’s irises, “blurring [their violet] into a muddy purple.”⁹¹ As if truly dying, Billy undergoes a “strange dumb gesturing and gurgling . . . like that of a condemned vestal priestess in the moment of being buried alive” (*Billy Budd* 145).⁹² It is at this point that he strikes Claggart, killing him instantly.

The cannibalistic consumption of Billy’s vitality does not, however, cease in the wake of Claggart’s death. Instead, the grim symbolism intensifies as Billy nears his execution and reaches a powerful crescendo when Billy’s body is ‘buried at sea.’ When Billy utters his now-

wine to offer, fruit of the vine and the work of human hands. It will become our spiritual drink” (*The Liturgy Documents*) (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications), 2007.

⁹⁰ Note also the play on the word passion which foreshadows Billy’s execution.

⁹¹ Billy’s “rose-tan of his cheek looked struck with white leprosy. He stood like one impaled and gagged” (*Billy Budd* 144).

⁹² Although beyond the scope of this chapter, psychoanalytic analyses of *Billy Budd* often discuss the novella’s elements of homosexuality and homosexual desire. Many of these accounts argue that the ‘mess hall scene,’ in which the narrator remarks “[Claggart] was about to ejaculate something hasty at the sailor, but checked himself,” suggest a homosexual relationship between Billy and Claggart (*Billy Budd* 125). In this context, Melville’s use of the phrase “vestal priestess” is particularly interesting. In ancient Roman religion, a Vestal was a celibate priestess who devoted her life to Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth. If a Vestal was convicted of breaking her oath of celibacy, she was buried alive at the “Campus Sceleratus.” As this scene occurs after the mess hall incident, one could argue that it implies a sexual encounter had previously occurred.

For interpretations of homosexuality in *Billy Budd*, see: Chapter 2 in Eve Sedwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1990. See also: Greven, David. “Flesh in the Word: *Billy Budd*, Sailor, Compulsory Homosociality, and the Uses of Queer Desire.” *Genders* 37 (2003): 1-57.

famous last words, “God bless Captian Vere!,” the narrator informs the reader that Vere, “either through stoic self-control or a sort of momentary paralysis induced by emotional shock, stood *erectly rigid as a musket* in the ship-armorer’s rack” (emphasis added, *Billy Budd* 163). The sentence’s significance is twofold. By describing Vere as erectly rigid, Melville directly juxtaposes him to Billy who, in his death, lacks the “muscular spasm” typical of an individual that dies by hanging (*Billy Budd* 164). In fact, Melville devotes the entire chapter following the execution to a discussion between the ship’s purser and surgeon in which they agree that “the absence of spasmodic movement was phenomenal” (*Billy Budd* 164). Vere then, gazing upon Billy just as Claggart had when he made his accusation, symbolically devours Billy’s vitality.⁹³

This contention is bolstered by the narrator’s comparison of the rigidity to a “musket in the ship-armorer’s rack”; the phrase returns readers to the eve of the trial when Billy lays “prone in irons in one of the bays formed by the *regular spacing of guns* comprising the batteries on either side” (emphasis added, *Billy Budd* 159). Like a small melting patch of snow, Billy has literally begun to waste away: “the skeleton in the cheekbone . . . was just beginning to delicately be defined” (*Billy Budd* 160).⁹⁴ Yet here it is not Vere who consumes, but rather fate, described as having “nipped” Billy (*Billy Budd* 160). While ‘nip’ is generally defined as “pinching” or “squeezing sharply,” it carries two additional meanings: “to bite” and “drink in – to take nips of alcoholic drink.” In fact, the examples of the verb’s usage in the *Oxford English Dictionary* demonstrate that between 1500 and 1800, the word often carried the latter two meanings.⁹⁵

⁹³ Vere’s paternal relationship with Billy -- combined with the fact that Melville cagily suggest that the two could actually be father and son (Billy doesn’t know who his father is and Vere “is old enough to have been Billy’s father”) – might suggest a Thyestean allusion. In Greek mythology Thyestes dethroned and cuckolded his brother Atreus who, with the help of Zeus, regained his thrown and served Thyestes a soup that contained his own sons. The allusion would obviously amplify the cannibalistic nature of Vere’s actions.

⁹⁴ The description again recalls eating and orality: “like a patch of discolored snow in early April lingering at some upland cave’s black *mouth*” (emphasis added, *Billy Budd* 163).

⁹⁵ For usages of “to bite,” see:

Melville's description of the prisoner thus subtly implies that even the environment itself has begun to feed on the involuntarily-sacrificial prisoner.

By the time Billy is 'buried' at sea, representations of feeding and consuming reach their apex. Wrapped in canvas and weighted down with bowling balls, his body is thrown overboard and sinks beneath the surface. Near the spot of the body's entry, however, "certain larger seafowl" dive toward the water, screeching and circling (*Billy Budd* 166). The narrator describes said birds as being "dictated by mere animal greed for prey" (*Billy Budd* 166). Only one page prior to the above description, the narrator had commented that the boatswain and his mates' whistles were "shrill as the shriek of the sea hawk" (*Billy Budd* 165). While Melville had previously depicted the environment and ship's men feeding on Billy separately, here the images collapse into one. Fate, animal, and human being coalesce in their symbolic final gulp of their prey. It is, in the narrator's words, "[one of life's] brief experiences [that] devour our human tissue" (*Billy Budd* 160).

The fact that Billy is cannibalistically consumed (or in most critics' terms crucified), however, does not necessarily support an interpretation of the novella as a "testament of acceptance," Melville's understanding the Billy had to die because innocence cannot survive in the world.⁹⁶ The validity of such a reading hinges upon uncompromised values of innocence and

1530. J. Palsgrave in *Lesclarcissement*: "he hath nyped me by the arme tyll it is blacke" (644/1)

1585. T. Washington tr. N. de Nicolay, *Naugations Turkie*: "They doe bite and with their teeth nip one another" (iii.x.86).

1633. R. Sanderson in *Sermon*: "biting, and nipping, and devouring one another" (ii.41).

c1700. *Street-robberies Consider'd*: "Nip, to bit" (33).

For usages of "to drink in," see:

1858. A. Mayhew in *Paved with Gold*: "the gentlemen nipped before starting" (218).

1887. Lady Bellairs in *Gossips with Girls*: "a man who drinks to excess or habitually nips" (ii.64).

1896: G. M. Stisted in *True Life R. F. Burton*: "he could take his bottle after dinner with any man, but nip he could not" (xi.267).

All excerpts are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁹⁶ The phrase "testament of acceptance" was coined by Watson in his same-titled essay "Melville's Testament of Acceptance." For other readings of this vein, see: Sedgwick *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of the Mind*, Berthoff, "Certain Phenomenal Men: The Example of *Billy Budd*," and Rosenberry, "The Problem of *Billy Budd*."

evil. Indeed, throughout *Billy Budd*, Claggart and Billy are differentiated by their antithetical attributes, or, in the narrator's words, there is "a marked contrast between [the two] persons" (*Billy Budd* 129). Claggart hints of something "defective or abnormal in [his] constitution and blood," is the "direct reverse of a saint," is endowed with a "Natural Depravity," and possesses a taste that would "smack of a compound wine [to the moral palate]"; Billy exudes "natural regality," is referred to as an "Angel," is "honest and humane," and might taste like "untampered-with berries."⁹⁷ But Melville simultaneously unravels these distinctions by including details that specifically call into question Billy's innocence. Perhaps most obviously, Billy is "a peacemaker" who physically assaults two characters in the story, one of whom he kills (*Billy Budd* 107). Similarly, he allegedly has "little or no" self consciousness, the result of which is the fact that "it never entered his mind" to tell the authorities about his solicitation to mutiny. During his 'trial,' however, we learn that it was an "innate repugnance to playing a part" of an informer against his shipmate that "stood in the way of his reporting the matter at the time" (*Billy Budd* 134, 150). On top of these already-numerous ambiguities, Melville inserts several discernible *parallels* between his supposed binary-characters: neither Billy nor Claggart know the identity of their father, both inspire mysterious antipathies in one of their superiors, both suffer from tongue-tied convulsions, and each is paralleled with Christ at points in the narrative.⁹⁸ The result of such mixing and negating is an erosion of the boundaries of characters in the novel. As Sharon Cameron succinctly phrased it, "the category of character is disturbed in

⁹⁷ All quotations from *Billy Budd*. Claggart's attributes: 120, 127, 128, 111. Billy Budd's attributes: 103, 146, 149, 111.

⁹⁸ Only "God knows" who where Billy is from or the identity of his father. He inspires a mysterious antipathy in his superior (Claggart) that is both "spontaneous and profound," is said to have "convulsed into a tongue-tie," and undergoes a passion similar to Christ (*Billy Budd* 110, 126, 145). "Nothing is known" of Claggart's life; when Claggart reports to Vere's cabin there "is something in [him] whose aspect nevertheless now for the first provokes a vaguely repellent distaste." His death is described as a "lasting tongue-tie." Following the mess hall incident, the narrator states that there were times when Claggart "look[ed] like the man of sorrows"; this is the same description used to describe Jesus in Isaiah 53.3, "he was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows."

Billy Budd because of the virtual indistinction of factors that govern character from factors that govern other phenomena” (Cameron 190). Melville subverts the individuality of his characters in *Billy Budd* not only by demonstrating their inner transposition of diametrically opposed attributes, but also by their fluent exchange of characteristics with individuals to whom they are purportedly diametrically opposed. To return to Cameron’s terminology, forces of evil, good, right, and wrong are not owned by any individual, but rather “play” through the characters nonuniquely (Cameron 191).

The ultimate irony in *Billy Budd* then is not that an Angel kills or that a Devil becomes a victim – “innocence and guilt personified in Claggart and Billy Budd in effect changed places” -- but rather that readers are unable to see that the inversion is meaningless: humankind is innately evil. Just as Babo and Oberlus change from slaves to brutal masters, as the North transformed from a noble emancipator of slaves to a savage sociopolitical and economic subjugator of the South, Billy’s relative innocence gives way to the evil that is deep inside of every human being. As the narrator questions:

Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does one first blindingly enter into the other? (*Billy Budd* 147)

For Melville, the liminal realm between base human animal and human being is razor thin, and it is this frighteningly permeable barrier that give rise to the constant cycles of subjugation that ravage society. After its initial “ending,” *Billy Budd* has three additional “endings” that depict two different versions of the events. In one version, a newspaper transcription portrays Claggart as the heroic victim and Billy as the depraved villain; in the second version, a poem written by Bill’s shipmate, Billy is the hero and descends into the depths of the ocean. Indeed, far from totalizing itself into intentional finality, the story begins to repeat itself, telling itself first in

reverse, then in verse.⁹⁹ Qualifications of good and evil are wasted because human beings are confined to society's prison of eternally operating cycles of violence, depredation, and subjugation. What is now good will later be evil and vice versa. As Stern correctly posits, "history [in *Billy Budd*] becomes a misinterpreted misrepresentation of the ever-shifting participial present" (Stern 465). *Billy Budd* is the continually reenacted story of Abraham and Isaac wherein there is no God to stop the sacrifice; the only difference between each reenactment is the individual who is forced to play the role of Isaac.

⁹⁹ I am indebted to Barbara Johnson for this observation. See: Chapter 5: "Melville's Iron Fist: The Execution of Billy Budd" in *The Critical Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press), 1980: 80-1.

Conclusion

In both *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *Benito Cereno*, Melville examines the relationship between American society and those that it deems as “the other.” While in *Bartleby the Scrivener*, this exploration focuses on the American self’s tendency to define itself in a negative relationship to those that it excludes, ultimately totalizing and annihilating these liminal groups, in *Benito Cereno* it exposes the “other’s” ability to destabilize dichotomies via its creation of in-between spaces. Both treatments reveal the fundamental characteristic of the “other”: the foreigner is within us as a part of our unconscious, both psychically and socially. Melville thus demonstrates his understanding of the fallacy of dichotomous we/them constructions; as a nation composed of millions of “others,” such a system eliminates individuality and engenders ostracism on the basis of socially-constructed differences. Forced to be either predators or victims, individuals thus inevitably perpetuate an endless cycle of exploitation and injustice. In a society in which personhood and agency were granted or withheld based upon membership in social groups structured about a given political power, Melville “recognized [‘the other’] within himself, and [was thus] spared detesting [the other itself]” (Kristeva, *Strangers* 1).

Melville furthers *Bartleby* and *Benito*’s conceptualization of man’s equality in *The Encantadas*, but adds to it a dark twist: through their mistreatment of one another, human beings have created a world in which man lives a drudging existence characterized by exploitation, heartlessness, and violence. Humans are predatory creatures often acting only in consideration of their own betterment or survival. As such, man is the architect of his own hellish society. Melville implies that the prospects of redemption from the evil of such a world are scant, but if they exist, are to be found in the positive relationships between individuals. Every man is both a “robber and murder” as well as a “meditative philosopher [and] rural poet” (*Encantadas* 78).

One must therefore see both the dark and bright side of man and realize that trust can lead to both redemptive relationships and danger. Phrased differently, “often ill comes from the good, as good from ill” (*Encantadas* 93).

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1865 gave Melville a brief hope that his pessimism in humankind was misplaced. The Union’s victory offered a unique opportunity to permanently disrupt the cycles of exploitation that had dominated Melville’s work throughout the 1850s. As expressed in his poetry and prose in *Battle-Pieces*, however, it would largely be the responsibility of the Northern states to see their Southern brothers as equals. The South was broken and vulnerable and needed the North to unilaterally lift it up and embrace it so that the Nation could move toward its “mythic” potential. By 1877, however, it was clear that Melville’s skepticism had been well founded. The Civil War had abolished slavery, yet Reconstruction had taken the fetters from African Americans and placed them on the Southern states. As Melville watched vicious cycles of economic rape and political exploitation unfold, it became clear to him that such atrocities could not exist in a world presided over by God.

By the time of his death, Melville had resignedly reached the conclusion that human beings were largely evil. As shown in *Billy Budd*, categorizations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ became worthless. When Melville turned from his inspections of the sea, he found the same dark predatory instincts in the hearts of man; at the foundation of humankind’s existence, Melville discovered a hidden desire to cannibalize his fellow man thereby promoting its own well being. As much as he believed in his findings, however, that he was living in a Godless world, a prison built by unjust, violent, and exploitative human guards, Melville struggled with their unnerving consequences and implications. Nathaniel Hawthorne, the one friend whom he most admired and opened up to, perfectly described Melville’s struggle in a revealing journal entry:

It is strange how he persists -- and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before -- in wondering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be wholly comfortable in his unbelief. (Argersinger 46).

As if entrapped on the Enchanted Isles, Melville understood his existence as one of unmitigated despair; the most he could do was persist.

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