

# Melville and His "Two Books"

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## INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of the present paper is not to interpret and criticize each work of Melville, but to illustrate his views on writing by noting some particular expressions found in his works. This is not to suggest that we are concerned with such self-criticism or self-satisfaction as a writer in his later days may have had in looking back on his life. Our concern lies rather in explicating how Melville at his best was considering the act of writing itself in the actual process of writing a book. The phrase "two books" in the title is borrowed from *Pierre*. The narrator says it is the act of attempting "two books" that confines Pierre to a desolate and beggarly room in his apartment. In fact Pierre is writing one book at one time, but, in the words of the narrator, he is attempting "two books" simultaneously. One might ask what the narrator wants to say by using such a contradictory and puzzling expression.

Before we immediately set about unravelling the problem, however, we should like to digress for a moment and take the phrase out of context. The mere phrase out of context is directly associated with the dual structure of the whole work. In his letter to Hawthorne dated Nov. 17(?) 1851, Melville writes, "So, now, let us add Moby Dick to our blessing, and step from that. Leviathan is not the biggest fish;—I have heard of Krakens".<sup>1)</sup> It shows that immediately

after he had finished such a great work as *Moby-Dick*, he had the plan of a much greater work in mind. But in the letter dated Jan. 8 1852 to Sophia Hawthorne, he writes, "My Dear Lady, I shall not again send you a bowl of salt water. The next chalice I shall commend, will be a rural bowl of milk."<sup>2)</sup>

Should we read such different expressions in these two letters which were written by the same person during an interval of only a few months, we might be obliged to conclude that the next book Melville had in mind would be "two (quite different) books." We know that this is not the case, but at least it may be inferred from these letters that two motives moved him to writing *Pierre*. One was his eagerness in his quest of the truth to dive into boundless deeps, deeper than Moby Dick could ever dive to: namely the heart of a man; the other was his economic circumstances, in which he was obliged to write a lucrative romance of the sort popular among women. Melville attempted a very bold solution to these two aims, apparently mutually incompatible according to the literary standards of those days: i.e. to pursue a profound problem within the framework of an everyday romance. Such a dual structure as that which *Pierre* seems to have is so familiar it hardly needs elaborate illustration here. Indeed it is hardly related to what we are going to argue about as regards Melville's views on writing in terms of "two books." In fact *Pierre* as a writer is overwhelmed by "the devouring profundities, now opened up in him," so that, "would he, he could not now be entertainingly and profitably shallow in some pellucid and merry romance."<sup>3)</sup>

## ( I )

Here is the section including the phrase in question:

Two books are being writ; of which the world shall only see one, and that the bungled one. The larger book, and the infinitely better, is for Pierre's own private shelf. That it is, whose unfathomable cravings drink his blood; the other only demands his ink. But circumstances have so decreed, that the one can not be composed on the paper, but only as the other is writ down in his soul. And the one of the soul is elephantinely sluggish, and will not budge at a breath. Thus Pierre is fastened on by two leeches;...<sup>4)</sup>

On reading such lines, one may complain that Pierre's two books are not worthy of special mention, since they are nothing but a book written down in his soul and another book into which he has transcribed it with pen and ink. Indeed such an opinion is not wrong, for we can find in the above-cited section one of the traditional literary views that a book is only a written copy of a writer's vision, or in other words, is simply the means of delivering his message. Typical advocates of this view can be seen among Melville's contemporaries: Emerson and other transcendentalists, who regarded a book as a "record" of "the seer's hour of vision."<sup>5)</sup> What mattered to them was "the point of view which the universal mind took through the eyes of one *scribe*."<sup>6)</sup> Pierre as a writer seems to share their view of a book. What first impelled him to write a book was, in his words, to "show them deeper secrets than the Apocalypse,"<sup>7)</sup> or "to deliver what he thought to be new, or at least miserably neglected Truth to the world."<sup>8)</sup> We cannot deny that Melville himself also considered a book as one of the means of delivering the truth; rather we could

declare even more positively that it is one of the most important elements that constitute his literary world.

But what really deserves particular attention in the cited section is not so much the fact that the "two books" Pierre was writing were his vision and its transcription as the fact that the narrator (Melville) considers the book written down in his soul as "infinitely better" than the book composed on paper: there is a great disparity in estimation between the two. To the narrator, Pierre's act of writing a book seems to amount to two different acts which never really coincide with each other. Perhaps in case of any other writer than Melville, including Pierre in the very act of writing, he would see it otherwise: he would not even acknowledge to himself that he was simultaneously engaged in writing two books quite different from each other in value. Even if he should recognize two stages of writing, he would attach value to the written copy of his vision (a book) in proportion to his thinking highly of its content. On the contrary, in the case of Melville there is a lack of connection between the "two books," one of which is for the writer's solitary soul and the other for the public. Therefore we are obliged to conclude that Melville in fact entertained a strong and serious doubt as to a view of literature as a means of delivering the truth, a view that he apparently shared with other writers. This dualistic view or split consciousness as a writer which we have seen in the description of Pierre's act of writing is specifically Melvillean in the peculiar quality of its expression: i.e. undisguised contempt for the act of writing a book or a book itself as opposed to unqualified approval of the act of thinking or speculation. Our next task is to confirm such a view of writing by others of his sentences and consider how he came to obtain this

view.

First let us cite the famous passage about Shakespeare in the essay entitled "Hawthorne and His Mosses." The part describing Shakespeare in the essay has much in common with Emerson's view of the dramatist in "Shakespeare; or the Poet" in *Representative Men*. Just as Shakespeare is "the profoundest of thinkers" rather than "the great man of tragedy and comedy"<sup>9</sup>) to Melville, he is "a poet and philosopher" to deliver "a king's message" or the "wisdom of life" to Emerson who thinks "his dramatic merit" "secondary."<sup>10</sup>) Indeed they are thus similar to each other in belittling Shakespeare as a dramatist and yet, in case of Melville, what is peculiar to him shows itself:

And few of his endless commentators and critics seem to have remembered, or even perceived, that the immediate products of a great mind are not so great as that undeveloped and sometimes undevelopable yet dimly-discernible greatness to which those immediate products are but the infallible indices. In Shakespeare's tomb lies infinitely more than Shakespeare ever wrote. And if I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing. For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth, even though it be covertly and by snatches.<sup>11</sup>)

Despite Melville's assumption that the great thinker used drama in order to tell the truth, he defies the reader by presenting the startling paradox that Shakespeare's greatness lies in what he did not tell. It follows then that, compared to the truth buried with Shakespeare in his tomb and unuttered in life, his written works are of secondary

matter to Melville. He thinks them to be but "the indices"<sup>12)</sup> to the great Volume Shakespeare wrote down in his mind. Here we find the repetition of similar expressions—"those occasional flashing-forth," "those short, quick probings," "by cunning glimpses," "covertly," and "by snatches." They tell us that what flashes forth at moments in the dramas is really "the indices," by the aid of which we barely catch brief glimpses of "those deep, far-away things" in Shakespeare. If we use that particular phrase in *Pierre*, we can also say that Shakespeare wrote "two books" at one time. To Melville, the books which immortalized his fame as a dramatist are no more than "the indices" to the other "infinitely better" Book hidden deep in his tomb. To be sure, such a view of Shakespeare is likely to be open to attacks from the modern critics who tend to regard his works as nothing less than dramas. But what attracts attention here is the idiosyncrasy in Melville of imagining another far-away book behind the magnificent sight of books by Shakespeare himself, or taking note of the silence behind the wordy lines of the dramas. In Shakespeare's way of "Telling the Truth," Melville perceives a strong disbelief in the communicative function of a book, or in other words, in the audience (readers) who cause a book to fail in performing its proper function. He thinks a dramatist will naturally keep silent when he knows the fate of what he wants to communicate: it is often distorted, falsely judged, or ignored and will never reach the audience who see a drama only for pleasure.

It is easy to see that this reflects Melville's own skepticism as his opinions on Hawthorne do his own literary view. If you read his contemporaries' criticism of his books, you will know that his first book *Typee* was favorably received by them and became one of the

important criteria by which they would judge his later books. It must have been disappointing and even mortifying to the writer who took a direction very different from that of *Typee*. The matter became so aggravated that, when he later thought of the publication of the first volume of verses, he went so far as to say, "For God's sake don't have *By the author of "Typee" "Piddledee" &c* on the title-page."<sup>13)</sup>

The following sentence in *Pierre* sarcastically describes the pitiful fate few books can escape: "Is there then all this work to one book, which shall be read in a very few hours; and, far more frequently, utterly skipped in one second; and which, in the end, whatever it be, must undoubtedly go to the worms?"<sup>14)</sup> Edgar Allan Poe successfully builds an original world of poems and tales by making positive use of such a socially unfavorable milieu to a writer. He knows that "there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art—the limit of a single sitting,"<sup>15)</sup> but he insists without hesitation that the most advantageous field for his genius is "the composition of a rhymed poem not to exceed in length what might be perused in an hour"<sup>16)</sup> and of "the brief prose tale."<sup>17)</sup> Unlike Poe, Melville suffers from so strong a disbelief in either a book or readers as to say that in writing a book *Pierre* is really writing for his own private shelf what is infinitely better than a book. To admit this would be virtually suicidal for a professional writer.

## (II)

We have considered the phrase "two books" in terms of the

relation between a writer and readers. To appreciate its full meaning, we must also read the following section in *Mardi* that comprises another view of writing peculiar to Melville.

But at best, the greatest reviewers but prey on my leavings. For I am critic and creator; and as critic, in cruelty surpass all critics merely as a tiger, jackals. For ere *Mardi* sees aught of mine, I scrutinize it myself, remorseless as a surgeon. I cut right and left; I probe, tear, and wrench; kill, burn, and destroy; and what's left after that, the jackals are welcome to. It is I that stab false thoughts ere hatched; / that pull down wall and tower, rejecting materials which would make palaces for others. Oh! Could *Mardi* but see how we work, it would marvel more at our primal chaos than at the round world thence emerging. It would marvel at our scaffoldings, scaling heaven; marvel at the hills of earth, banked all round our fabrics ere completed. How plain the pyramid! In this grand silence, so intense, pierced by that pointed mass, could ten thousand slaves have ever toiled?<sup>18)</sup>

This is what Lombardo mutters in anger when some professional critics "betrayed such base, beggarly notions of authorship"<sup>19)</sup> as to his work *Koztanza* yet to be published; perhaps they doubted his sanity. Needless to say, *Mardi* and *Koztanza* overlap each other here. Melville attacks the future reviewers of his yet unpublished *Mardi* beforehand. When he was writing it, he was still recognized as a promising writer who had published a successful first book. But he could predict that it would be unfavorably received by the professional critics, or he may have shown his manuscripts to some of them for their opinions as Lombardo did. The above-cited sentences, however, can not be summarily dismissed merely as the young writer's defensive attitude or counterattack.

Lombardo likens his book to some completed structures—the

earth, palaces, buildings, and the pyramid. Very interestingly his view that the pyramid seems quite plain as compared with "this grand silence, so intense, pierced by that pointed mass" reminds us of the comparison between the silence enfolding Shakespeare's tomb and his works. But there seems to be something here besides the disbelief in readers (audience) that Melville tried to hint when he called our attention to Shakespeare's silence, for a book is reduced from "the indices" to the grand Volume to "leavings." We can somehow understand the view that readers should marvel more at the writer's chaotic writing process before a book is finished than at the book thence emerging, a view diametrically opposed to the one that a finished book is self-contained and self-sufficient by itself. But we are completely at a loss to understand the view that a book is "the leavings" the jackals are welcome to. If a book is to be "leavings" as he says, the question would be naturally raised as to what kind of dinner the writer had or why his book should be regarded as its leftovers. And those who are more interested in Melville as a writer than as anything else would be confronted with a vitally important question, i.e. what we should do with the fact that he devoted his life to writing books one after another despite his derogatory remarks about books.

To answer these questions, we might glance at another passage in *Pierre*.

And it is often to be observed, that as in digging for precious metals in the mines, much earthly rubbish has first to be troublesomely handled and thrown out; so, in digging in one's soul for the fine gold of genius, much dullness and common-place is first brought to light. Happy would it be, if the man possessed in himself some receptacle

for his own rubbish of this sort: but he is like the occupant of a dwelling, whose refuse can not be clapped into his own cellar, but must be deposited in the street before his own door, for the public functionaries to take care of. No common-place is ever effectually got rid of, except by essentially emptying one's self of it into a book; for once trapped in a book, then the book can be put into the fire, and all will be well.<sup>20)</sup>

A book as a "receptacle" for its author's rubbish is quite the equivalent to a book as "the leavings." The one can be put into the fire and the other the jackals are welcome to. *Mardi* was written only three years before *Pierre*, but if we take the total of Melville's activities as a writer, it can be regarded rather as a study or étude. Since the view of a book shown in the study is given more appropriate comparison in *Pierre*, we could justly say that he did not write down a mere casual idea here but he expressed a belief that came to be growing firmer after his actual writings, namely that by writing a book a writer can get rid of his own rubbish. This would encompass impurities such as common-places, borrowings, falsities etc. contained in "the soul's overflowings" or his thoughts "brimful, bubbling, sparkling, and running over like the flagon in your hand."<sup>21)</sup>

Though "a receptacle" for rubbish sounds contemptuous, yet really it mentions the close relationship between a writer and his act of writing. When in *Mardi* Abrazza says, "And to Lombardo, the scheme of his *Kostanza* must have come fullfledged, like an eagle from the sun," Babbalanja denies it, adding that "like eagles, his thoughts were first callow; yet, born plumeless, they came to soar."<sup>22)</sup> This creative process relates to that of Melville and also to that of *Pierre*, who began to write a book in order to "show them deeper secrets than the Apocalypse." He neither sets out to

write a book with contents ready in advance, nor under a mature and elaborate scheme. The act of writing becomes "conduits" to drain off thoughts latent in his soul. Until he begins to write he remains a "cipher" both to himself and to others. Richard H. Brodhead in his brilliant essay on *Mardi* sums up this creative process as "the symbiotic relation between verbal articulation and the generation of creative consciousness."<sup>23</sup> The function of verbal articulation is not only to awake creative consciousness in a writer's soul but at the same time to discriminate his thoughts forming "an infinite series, indefinite, from its vastness, and incommunicable."<sup>24</sup> Especially to a man of unbound, creative imagination like Melville, this process of sorting out must have been of great importance.

*Mardi* is peculiar in that, while one chapter deals with the creative process, another chapter serves as its obvious illustration. It is Ch. 119 called "Dreams." Suddenly "I", that is, the author himself appears and brings his creative process to notice, not by mentioning it, but actually by giving free rein to his imagination, which makes a flight throughout the world from the present back to the ancient times, or from the sea up to the sky. Then "I" changes his tone abruptly and complains of his distress as a writer: "My cheek blanches white while I write, I start at the scratch of my pen, my own mad brood of eagles devours me, fain would I unsay this audacity, but an iron-mailed hand clenches mine in a vice and prints down every letter in my spite."<sup>25</sup> The same metaphor of eagles, which in other places expressed a writer's soaring imagination or creative consciousness, is here used to mention his madness or some burden that crushes him down. The instant he interrupts his dreaming state and starts to write, the act of writing itself functions two different

ways, as the conduits for conveying his thoughts and at the same time as a compelling force in driving him to write further. In other words, "For the nonce, he was not his own master—a mere amanuensis writing by dictation," which was "a sort of sleepwalking of the mind."<sup>26</sup>

Because he well knew such peculiarity of his writing process, Melville must have considered it a matter of great importance to sort out the truths and falsities in his own soul. Lombardo wrote full fifty folios in ten days, read them attentively, and put them into the fire. Melville himself could not have done the same thing under his economic circumstances. That is why, to our relief, his great books remain to posterity. One of Melville's ideals as a writer was, however, to repeat an extraordinary paradox, that is, to write books one after another, which, completed, should never be published but rather burned up. When he puts into the fire a book as a receptacle for rubbish, he can explore a new frontier with more purified and deepened words and thoughts. Of course the act of writing and burning would be repeated until he attains his ideal Book, which may not have the form of a book for ever. But if a book should be published instead of being put into the fire, the writer would find himself in the ironical and irritating situation of readers merely reading his "leavings" or "receptacles for rubbish" without paying attention to what he has attained by writing them.

### (III)

In the section from *Pierre* first referred to in the present study, the narrator says Pierre is attempting "two books" at one time. This

means that he is writing a book he should put into the fire in order to write the Book. The disparity in estimating between a writer's vision and the act of writing it down in a book that we have found in Melville's writings is thus partly due to his peculiarity that in writing one book his concern is always split into writing a book to be put into the fire and writing the ultimate Book. To "any thoroughly sincere man, who is an author," will the time possibly come when these two books overlap each other into one, namely, when he can reach the ultimate Truth and communicate it in the form of a book? The answer seems to be hopeless, especially in *Pierre*. In addition to this despair, there exists Melville's strong disbelief in readers. We should be inclined to imagine that, had he been sure that such a time come to him at last, he would have kept silent without ever writing the Book. Thus the question of "two books" seems to tell us about an ambitious and yet ominous future for the writer.<sup>27)</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1) Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman(ed.), *The Letters of Herman Melville* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 143.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 3) Herman Melville, *Pierre or, The Ambiguities* (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1962), p. 359.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 358.
- 5) Stephen E. Whicher(ed.), *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Burton: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 69.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 7) *Pierre*, p. 321.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 333.
- 9) Edmund Wilson(ed.), *The Shock of Recognition* (New York: Grosset's Universal Library), p. 193.
- 10) Edward W. Emerson(ed.), *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (AMS, 1968), Vol. 4, pp. 210-1.
- 11) Edmund Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-4.

- 12) O. E. D. gives the following example as regards a figurative use of "indices."  
1663 J. Spencer *Prodigies* (1665) 71 God hath appointed... all the labors of Nature,  
as a kind of Indices to this great Volume of the World.
- 13) Eleanor Melville Metcalf, *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle* (Westpoint: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1953), p. 183.
- 14) *Pierre*, p. 358.
- 15) David Galloway(ed.), *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Writing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 482.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 444.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 445.
- 18) Herman Melville, *Mardi: and a voyage thither* (New York: Signet Classics, 1964), p. 497.
- 19) *Ibid.*, p. 496.
- 20) *Pierre*, p. 303.
- 21) *Mardi*, p. 490.
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 492.
- 23) Richard H. Brodhead, "Mardi: Creating the Creative," *New Perspectives on Melville*, ed. Faith Pullin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1978), p. 49.
- 24) *Mardi*, p. 490.
- 25) *Ibid.*, p. 306.
- 26) *Ibid.*, p. 493.
- 27) I read this paper in the 21st annual meeting of the American Literature Society of Japan held in October in 1982.