

Heretical Necessity

Herman Melville and the Fictions of Charity

by Colin Harrison, MA.

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la necesidad tiene la cara de un hereje

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ABSTRACT

Heretical Necessity explores the various ways in which an idea of value was established and debated through the literature of mid 19th century America. Above all, it concerns moral value, the language of personal virtue and social ethics; this includes notions of sympathy and self-sacrifice promoted in sentimental fiction, which I read alongside Melville's responses in his later work: the perversion of altruism in *Pierre*, his critique of benevolence in the short stories, and his ironization of trust in *The Confidence Man*. Charity is a key issue because it refers both to a notion of fellowship integral to the sentimental vision of society and to a principle of unreciprocated (hence antagonistic) action: giving one's all becomes incompatible with the more measured principles of justice on which a democracy has to be based.

I argue that moral value is related to the production of value in the economic sphere, since charity is at once a religious and a financial practice, thus linking the Christian notions of fellowship and giving to ideas of utility and luxury in capitalist society. In this respect my work is informed by the idea of symbolic exchange, via the theories of figures like Mauss, Bataille, Baudrillard and Derrida; prompted by these thinkers, I attempt to identify different types of contract in the literature (commercial, social, masochistic, and literary) and incorporate them in the same general analysis, as a way of exploring the structural complexities of the moral narrative and the discourse of American community.

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INTRODUCTION

I Aesthetics and Utility

What *good* is a novel? What are its functions in society? Although the question may be slightly obsolete now - the issue of the moral responsibilities of representation having passed to other electronic media - it was of great concern in 19th century America. As novels consolidated their place in the market for luxuries and the minds of the middle classes, they generated debate on a number of themes: the meaning of leisure time; the status of education alongside pleasure and entertainment; and the nature of authority, both internal and external. At stake was a new definition of the moral subject, which might be influenced by texts consumed privately within the home, beyond the surveillance of public institutions. Many people, not only critics and clergymen but the novelists themselves, asked in what ways fiction influenced an individual's moral constitution. Was there a distinction between education and diversion in a novel? If it is not required to serve a purpose as education, does it nevertheless fulfil a comparably *useful* role as diversion? If it is escapist, is escapism necessary? If it presents another world, should the tie that we feel be an ethical one?

The thesis, then, aims to explore this region which is the intersection between reading and the construction of value. Reading itself was being privatised from the beginning of the 19th century: as the literate population rose the centrality of public

oratory declined, and even the durable domestic tradition of the father reading aloud to family members was giving way to a more atomised consumption of texts.¹ Individual communion with a novel seemed to conflict with strong nationalist demands for a set of “values” that were publicly acknowledged: and the didactic tone that spread from clerical discourse into sentimental literature mid century was partially a response to this sense of a disjunction in cultural authority.² The notion of value, as Daniel Howe points out, was a key element in many spheres of American Victorian culture although never directly called into question itself: value was asserted as natural, divine and immutable.³ But as I hope to indicate, the rapid developments in economic culture changed the perception of the way value was created and exchanged, and this had repercussions in all other spheres including those of ethics and cultural value. Thus political, religious and aesthetic economies were inextricably linked.

Charity is a key site of interest in this respect because it straddles the economic and the sacred, showing their interconnectedness in one situation, and therefore describing the mutual construction of value from different perspectives. Charity represents the universally acclaimed activity of giving in an institutionalised form - whether on a level of state or church authority, or as an ethic within individualist ideologies: the idea ranges from the public arena where it serves as a reminder of the ethics of exchange, counterbalancing morally free markets, to private

¹ Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

² Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (London: Papermac, 1996).

³ Daniel Walker Howe, ed. *Victorian America* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976).

codes of behaviour in which being charitable can mean a generosity not only of material wealth but also of feelings and interpretation, something often expressed as “giving the benefit of a doubt”. Furthermore, in its Christian etymology charity already contains the notion of *fellowship* (in fact this was its primary meaning, and the concept of single gifts was derived from it, not the other way round), thereby offering a way of examining questions of economy and value alongside the problem of community. Charity describes giving as a total social system, rather than an individual virtue.

The texts I have chosen all explore in one way or another the “heretical” nature of charity: its intervention in daily life and its capacity to call into question the accepted morality of the system. The conflict is the context for the narratives, whether they concern the unforeseeable consequences of benevolence, or the corruption of good intentions by a pervasive money mindedness, or the impossible ideals of Christian altruism and self-sacrifice; all are forms of giving which clash with routine social principles, in the way that the generous practice of “turning the other cheek” clashes with the contractual law of “an eye for an eye”. My concerns fall into three broad categories:

i) *the fiction of charity* This is literature representing charitable acts as a central component of moral construction and social redemption. It is generally covered by the term “sentimental”, either disparaged for converting suffering into scenes for aesthetic enjoyment or recuperated as fiction which does an amount of “cultural work”, to borrow Jane Tompkins’s words. Thus the *sympathy* which it

deploys as a major charitable strategy is reflected in the sympathy which the text aims to create with its readers. We shall see that the latter undermines the former: the privatistic enjoyment of reading belies the communal designs of sympathetic activity; thus what seems a retrieval of an older social value is revealed to be a product of new cultural conditions.

ii) *charity as fiction* This involves the critique of charity as an ideological construct, questioning its professed distinction from commerce or conversely using its interventions as a means of problematizing the rationality of economics. Thus the structural logic of giving is compared to that of capitalism. On the face of it, the gift is a special kind of exchange, one in which the objective fact of exchange (the thing that is transferred from one person to another) seems to be secondary to its meaning as a gesture or a symbolic action. The gift is supposed to testify to a certain form of human relations which is different from “mere” commerce, raising the possibility of an alternative kind of value to price, such as is manifested in things like friendship, trust, the recognition of strangers, the disinterested act; these are signs of the other realm which giving represents, against which by comparison the commercial transaction is seen to be a matter of cold-hearted and clinical reason, refusing to take the person into account at all. Indeed, the gift is all that a commercial exchange isn’t; it professes to include a social dimension which the other professes to exclude, and ideally it intends to operate beyond the instituted and impersonal rules of behaviour which characterize contractual relations. The gift would prefer to be beyond calculation of any sort.

But although ostensibly a more “sympathetic” approach, charity conflicts

with justice over the need to make calculations in political economy, and fails to provide adequate strategies for public action. This is something that Melville consistently points out in his stories: the rhetoric of generosity can work to obscure real material inequities, which call for justice instead.

iii) *fiction as charity* Where it is not charity that brings a possibility of an alternative form of exchange but fiction, signifying a realm of the imaginary which has nothing to do with economic values such as productivity or social function, but is entirely nonrational and *autotelic* (ie undertaken for its own sake). Melville explores the relation of narrative to exchange in various ways: in Bartleby's withdrawal from society and the labour process, in stories of disappearance and exile, or by using the trope of the secret, something held back from circulation but whose presence generates narrative.

Within the epistemological tradition deriving from gift exchange (which will be mentioned later), it is Bataille who attempts to claim a value for fiction in the liberation from value: its uselessness provides the space for true freedom to be explored. Of course, this only goes to reinstate a sublime function for literature at the point of renouncing it (since freedom is a culturally necessary idea for the West); but it does signify a change in the notion of aesthetics from modernism onwards. After a period in which the evaluation of a literary text took into account its didactic context and correspondence with a set of cultural values, modernism instigated a separation of the aesthetic from the political; a work was now judged in terms of its linguistic and generic structures, rather than its social reference. This meant that

artistic value was stated as a thing in itself, free from the vicissitudes and compromises of the market and history. Moreover, it meant that artistic production was no longer linked to a discourse of community, as they had been previously united by a sense of the moral values necessary to a culture. Indeed, one might think of various developments in the latter half of the 19th century as part of this disassociation of aesthetic from political concerns: the stories of exile, silence, escape from society and withdrawal from circulation, or transcendence and self-reliance, and the cult of domesticity all contain a similar “agoraphobic” logic (to borrow Gillian Brown’s term, literally a fear of the marketplace⁴) whereby areas of cultural production are progressively differentiated and removed in order to preserve them from the vagaries of the commercial economy.

Since then, questions of value have been persistently addressed to the acceptability of the aesthetic-political divide. What is the relative value of seeking a space either sublime or escapist beyond the market, society, and dialectics? As Steven Connor comments in his book *Theory and Cultural Value*, “the notion of pure and non-negotiable aesthetic value always has a non-aesthetic exchange-value in political and economic terms.” He argues that critical theory is situated at the conjunction of one trend of professionalization, transforming aesthetic appreciation into a “positivist instrumentalist” discipline and exiling evaluation; and another that reaffirms ethical matters within the academy in things like the politics of interpretation or the distribution of power within discourse. To look at the rhetoric of giving in 19th century fiction, then, is not only an opportunity for me to examine

⁴ Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in 19th Century America* (Berkeley LA & Oxford: University of California Press, 1990).

capitalist ethics under construction, as it were, but also to recreate from a postmodern perspective a discourse that links up differentiated forms of value. Connor notes that this is to some extent a project of restoration: “In returning the aesthetic to the political, such critics are restoring the authority of the question ‘What is this text/artefact/practice good *for*?’ against the modernist question ‘What is it good *as*?’ , and allowing the question ‘*What* good is it?’ to be added to the question ‘*How* good is it?’”⁵

II Emerson: sympathy as indifference

In a minor essay of 1844 called “Gifts”, Emerson offers an outline of a theory of giving which looks at its function in social, economic and philosophical terms: more specifically, what it reveals about people’s systems of exchange, the meanings of abundance and necessity in their relation to nature, and the origins of more sophisticated commercial relationships. Although in such a brief essay he barely scratches the surface, such issues are the basis of his discussion. He asks questions like, What is a “proper” gift? What are its rules? And how do they differ from the rules of commerce and justice? For the exchange of gifts may be more than merely a quaint code of etiquette which has nothing to do with supposedly real economic relationships; it may in fact speak of a deeper moral principle or an entirely different locus of value. And in fact Emerson implies in the course of his argument that gifts are an element of a different system: that, like nature itself, they are evidence of a

⁵ Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Oxford & Cambridge Ma: Blackwell, 1992), 13.

transcendence in everyday life. But at the same time, it is indicative of his philosophy that such an argument does not lead to a critique of economic relations - only to a reaffirmation of the otherworldly and a curious dead end where gifts become manifestly impossible. In other words, although unwilling to justify the current economy (which is a burgeoning industrial capitalism), Emerson seems unable to imagine any other form. Gifts appear as a strange and radically different phenomenon, and yet they fade out of existence just as soon as they arrive.

“It is said that the world is in a state of bankruptcy,” begins Emerson, but he distinguishes gifts from this kind of economy by saying that the problem is not that we cannot afford them, but that it is difficult to know what they should be in the first place. Rather than a matter of cost, gifts appear to problematize the whole idea of what is valuable. Appropriately, he turns to Nature for an example of the “true” gift: “Fruits are acceptable gifts because they are the flower of commodities, and admit of fantastic values being attached to them.”⁶ Significantly, Emerson is not trying to separate the idea of a gift from what is practical and useful: fruits are not superfluous to the natural scheme of things but simply beautiful demonstrations of “severe universal laws”. Nature is abundant but not excessive: hence people are still subject to necessity’s moral demands while open to the appreciation of other noneconomic values such as beauty and love. So the first kind of gift that he identifies is occasioned and dignified by necessity: necessity gives someone an opportunity to

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Gifts”, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* Vol. III; eds. Joseph Slater, Alfred Ferguson, Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge Ma. & London: Belknap Press, 1983), 93. *Commodity* is being used here in the older, now obsolete sense of convenience or utility: it is an etymology which has been somewhat obscured. Through later stages of capitalism, and after its marxist inflection, commodity comes to represent the object of trade and therefore that which has a *diminished use-value*. Such a transformation in the idea of utility is part of a historical and theoretical narrative which is central to the thesis.

help another in the recognition of their “universal dependence”. (This, incidentally, is simply the state of bankruptcy on a mythical level: it is the idea that scarcity, whether abstracted or naturalized, forms the basis of value.)

The second kind of gift involves a more serious personal involvement, however: “The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me.” (94) Emerson translates this into the affairs of an artisan economy, so that bleeding for another becomes offering the product of one’s labour, ie property: “Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing. This is right and pleasing, for it restores society in so far to the primary basis, when a man’s biography is conveyed in his gift, and every man’s wealth is an index of his merit.” Connecting a Christian sacrificial ethic with the morality of artisans, it should be noted, helps above all to perpetuate a fantasy of the productive community in the face of a harsher logic of mass industrial capitalism. This is the point of view which scorns bought gifts because they are impersonal and seem to assert commerce over production. (Such gifts are symbols of corruption, like payments of blackmail or offerings to kings, Emerson says.)

What is apparent in these two kinds of gift is a certain construction of individuality which underwrites Emerson’s thinking in general. In the first, individuality is naturalized by the notion of necessity, making the satisfaction of needs the core to the self; and then it is given a moral dimension in the imperative to sacrifice a portion. Such primary individuality is his unquestioned assumption.

The fundamental relation is that of a single self dependent through necessity on an abundant nature - justifying work and production as a means to property ownership, in which the full civic subject is realized. Although this dependence through necessity is called universal, there is never any suggestion of original codependence - it is merely a universally experienced individual relation (an independent dependence, one might say). However, in the subsequent examination of the laws of giving Emerson indicates a more reciprocal basis of social exchange which sits uncomfortably with his former assumption. After the initial problem of giving comes the problem of receiving, which is a kind of degradation. "We do not quite forgive a giver," he says, when their action implies that we are deficient in something. In the following passage he looks for the ideal relation which might be neither an excessive assertion of the giver's presence or an excessive exposure of the receiver's needs:

Some violence, I think, is done, some degradation borne, when I rejoice or grieve at a gift. I am sorry when my independence is invaded, or when a gift comes from such as do not know my spirit, and so the act is not supported; and if the gift pleases me overmuch, then I should be ashamed that the donor should read my heart, and see that I love his commodity, and not him. The gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him. When the waters are at level, then my goods pass to him, and his to me. All his are mine, all mine his. I say to him, How can you give me this pot of oil, or this flagon of wine, when all your oil and wine is mine, which belief of mine this gift seems to deny? (95)

Emerson is looking for a space between not wanting and wanting too much, and yet what he evokes is a kind of spiritual communion. Thus he summons an idea of equality which bypasses the awkward considerations of necessity and desire which are at the heart of political economy. As such, the gift becomes disassociated from the material world: neither fit for addressing necessities nor forging new social

bonds, it functions only as a degraded sign of transcendence. Rather than dynamic within material exchanges, it is only symptomatic of static ideals.

Such an exchange in which everyone already has everything is, of course, no exchange at all. Indeed, any kind of rationale for society is difficult to provide with such radical individualism, where selfhood is predicated on an absolute lack of codependency; for Emerson there is simply no *reason* for people to give anything to each other. And the more he describes the ideal society the more gifts lose their meaning altogether - as is represented by the paradox, "You cannot give anything to a magnanimous person. After you have served him he at once puts you in debt by his magnanimity." The impossibility of a pristine gift, one that escapes reabsorption into a cycle of gratitude and counter-gift, is integral to exchange and makes it a perpetually voracious and instable system. But Emerson backs away from it, too concerned for the integrity of sentimental dispositions: as he goes on to say, "The service a man renders his friend is trivial and selfish, compared with the service he knows his friend stood in readiness to yield him, alike before he had begun to serve his friend, and now also." Hence the logic of indebtedness appears to recede vertiginously from the actual event, as if a real gift ought never take place. The vertigo of accounting for a gift will make itself known soon after any action and it is not unusual to follow the convolutions of giving, receiving and returning until the evaluation of what is actually exchanged passes out of sight. Many of the narratives observed in this dissertation hinge on the various repercussions of an indeterminate gift. What is unusual here is that Emerson reverses the logic away from activity, minimizing the value of exchange itself. Such a reflex is *agoraphobic*, scorning

material vales in the name of ideal virtue. The result is a vision of purified exchange, noncommercial and only conducted between absolute equals, a sort of friendship abstracted from society.

In fact Emerson goes so far as to state that gifts are useless anywhere else but between those who are so alike the gift is already unnecessary - that is, gifts are useless for creating new bonds and only function as signs of bonding. “No services are of any value, but only likeness.” (96) Such a construction of “likeness” as the rationale for gifts sheds light on the philosophical grounds of the sentimental project and its ethic of sympathy. Sentimentality appears to affirm the value of spontaneous benevolence towards others, friends or strangers, as soon as their suffering is recognised; hence it can be used as a narrative for the expansion of humanism, the virtue of toleration, or the assertion of universal rights. Emerson shows how the generous impulse is based entirely on a sense of community whose equality is already assumed, disregarding the need for justice and all questions of difference. “Let him give kingdoms or flower-leaves indifferently,” goes the conclusion, and while it asserts the indiscriminate nature of generosity the pun also reveals the paradox at the heart of the gift, where sympathy is *indifference*, and generosity is not justice.

Emerson’s essay carries a logic which I believe is characteristic of the 19th century, spread across the period’s sentimental literature and whose critique by Melville is one of my key concerns. A gift is an act of the utmost prestige because of the giver’s apparent selflessness and lack of concern for the consequences.

However, as the more complex laws of reciprocity are revealed, the possibility of free selfless giving is denied, and this not only undermines the understanding of value but also problematizes the basic principles of exchange. The gift is at once an ideological obfuscation making a virtue out of the exercise of power, and the trace of another economy, one in which the self and property are not alienated from each other. For this reason it threatens the notion of possessive individualism so integral to 19th century citizenship: the gift acknowledges the fabrication of individuality in alienation from things. Thus Emerson argues the transcendence of a certain commonality which giving is the sign of, without taking the genesis of property and the birth of the individual into consideration, as concepts abstracted from a general social exchange. Therefore his are ultimately communities of property owners whose exclusions are naturalized and whose economic differences are suppressed.

III Religion and Need

The modern theoretical tradition stems from Marcel Mauss, whose work *The Gift* (1925) was an attempt to document the presence of gift-exchange in various cultures through history in the search for a common principle, to arrive at a genealogy for the modern western contract. He asks questions similar to Emerson's about the gift's set of obligations and difference from commerce, but his conclusions are otherwise: rather than argue for an ideal community based on an impossibly free gift, Mauss stresses the combination of interest and disinterest for the most efficient

and cohesive social force.⁷

Not only has Mauss's attention to a "total social system" in gift-exchange provided the rationale for sociological practice; his text is also the point of reference for two divergent lines of thought. As Julian Pefanis explains, there are two fundamentally incompatible models in *The Gift*: one is a cycle of reciprocal actions in giving, receiving and returning, characterized by the Melanesian kula in which the hau circulates through the group representing a spiritual quality, the presence of the donor for example, alongside the object itself; the other focuses on the Kwakiutl potlatch ceremony and identifies a principle contrary to reciprocity - that of violent expenditure and loss, which secures the bonds of community in a spectacular *giving up* of property. In the former case, reciprocity allows structuralism to argue for a society in which exchange is the deterrent from war: it controls the distribution of value and the surplus of production by expanding horizons and forming necessary alliances with others outside the group. In the latter, exchange is *derived* from war; the communal bond and the violence of the wasteful gesture being translations of its original violence and martial alliances. "The potlatch society prevents accumulation by the immediate sacrifice of the surplus, la part maudite, in an active principle of consumption which ensures an undivided social body and forbids the development of class society."⁸

Although neither principle exists in absolute isolation from the other (within

⁷ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York & London: Norton, 1967).

⁸ Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard and Lyotard* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1991), 53.

sentimental discourse reciprocity predominates in the ideal of fellowship and excess in abundant and unconditional sympathy, for example), it is the latter notion that I shall emphasize in the dissertation. Following from Georges Bataille, this is the view that culture is a matter of *expenditure* and not conservation; at its heart, it is characterized by the irrational disposal of surplus wealth (whether energies, raw materials or products) rather than the management of resources. Poverty and necessity are never so insistent that they constitute the entire meaning of human existence; indeed, Bataille argues that far from being natural qualities they and their fellow categories utility and production are learnt by society in the repression of instincts for wasteful activity. Consumption, then, divides into necessary and unnecessary forms: the first maintains a relation with nature (as subsistence) and the system of production (as labour); the second persists in certain cultural forms such as “luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity... all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves.”⁹

Christian religion is a special case of expenditure, however, because in its promotion of an individual soul over mutual spiritual identification it represents an atrophied and subordinated form of waste. Much the same criticism is levelled against Christian bourgeois culture here as in Weber’s analysis of the spirit of capitalism: that it is an internalization of a set of principles within an individual conscience which prepares the way for a rationalization of economic life and simultaneously diminishes the vitality of public life. For Bataille (and for Nietzsche,

⁹ Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure” in *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl Lovitt and Donald Leslie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 118.

indeed), Christianity's ecstatic construction of suffering is an emasculated response to deeper relations of power: "The meaning of Christianity is given in the development of the delirious consequences of the expenditure of classes, in a mental agonistic orgy practised at the expense of the real struggle." (127)

Jean Baudrillard further explores the theorization of gift exchange when he posits a "symbolic order", a realm of the gift and its challenges and duties, which capitalism has repressed; instead of a circulation in constant flux we get a polarization of value, absolutely accumulated at one end as capital and at the other as the pristine gift. The rationale of this system has to be constantly policed, else it fall back into the unconscious state in which "the arresting of value on one term, the very possibility of isolating a segment of exchange, one side of the exchange, is unthinkable, that everything has a compensation, not in the contractual sense, but in the sense that the process of exchange is unavoidably reversible."¹⁰ Therefore mythical mechanisms are set up to naturalize the economy and lend it a moral dimension. For Baudrillard, ethics are generated by the imposition of restrictions on a general economy - both where needs define the play of desires in the subject, and where utility controls the wasteful and ambivalent presence of the symbolic order: "[Utility] is the transcription at the heart of things of the same moral law (Kantian and Christian) inscribed on the heart of the subject, positivizing it in its essence and instituting it in a *final* relation (with God, or some transcendent reality)."¹¹

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London : Sage, 1993), 48n.

¹¹ Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (N.p.: Telos, 1981), 133.

In the same way that economic shortages stage a return of necessity and thus a restoration of moral order, the psyche complies with a corresponding restriction in *ascesis*, “that pathetic investment born of lack and deprivation” (*Symbolic Exchange*, 32). Once again we are concerned with the interrelation of economic and spiritual value. Both Bataille and Baudrillard talk about the rationalization of economics by means of internalizing certain principles, whether that of expenditure or asceticism (cf. Weber’s “worldly asceticism”). Asceticism, under this formulation, can be seen as a manifestation of the other: it is the excessive expenditure of energies in the repression of desires - as if desires (as opposed to needs) would pose a threat to political economy. Indeed, Baudrillard later sees it in a more extreme sense as “absolute mortification” which *is* subversive to the system: “But the ascetic’s secret dream is to attain such an extent of mortification that even God would be unable either to take up the challenge, or to absorb the debt. He then will have triumphed over God, and become God himself.” (38)

It is such an oscillation between expenditure and reserve across Christian and capitalist economies that constitutes the theoretical centre of my thesis. This is not only where charity is both a religious injunction to excess (to give away unconditionally) and a servant of the system, privately performing a function that ought to be in the domain of the state; it is also where necessity is both the rationale for utility and production and yet *heretical*, fundamentally unstable. The title refers to a South American saying, *necessity has the look of a heretic*, to bring out this ambivalence in contrast to the more familiar Western version. “Necessity is the mother of invention” is characteristic of a Protestant productivist ideology which

elevates need to the status of a factor in human progress; it presents a myth of the individual's meeting with an alien universe (as does Emerson) to legitimate invention and appropriation, and in doing so it contributes to the normative structure of industrial expansion. Note the way it is further naturalized by giving invention a female parentage: thus necessity not only reproduces but nurtures production. In the other case, necessity is given a meaning in relation to the religious; it is not a factor in technological evolution but something that is seen to be disruptive - the implication being that where necessity is heretical the orthodoxy is somehow *unjust*. It is this meaning that I would like to stress, with its idea that needs may sometimes occasion calls for justice which interrupt utilitarian economics, exposing the *injustice* of its rationality. In this way they are not only an alibi for production, but also heretical within it. (In the same way one can criticise Marx for founding his critique on an "anthropology of scarcity" which only helps to reassert the value of production, and yet it is this grounding that provides the moral impetus for critique in the first place.¹²)

Chapters illustrate in various ways the correspondences and conflicts of values across textual, religious, and political economies. In Melville's writing, the issue of charity also involves *trust*. The problem of fictional trust - in which the reader is continually having to deal with an unreliable narrator, a division of sympathies, or negotiating a circular logic - is paradigmatic. Trust is at play in the social contract, at the heart of democracy; in the naturalization of language and

¹² Cf. Pefanis, 51: "In truth, Marx's anthropology is an anthropology of scarcity where starvation "stalks the stalker" who is condemned, in the economic debate, to play the role of the bad example: the so-called subsistence economy."

commodities as property; and in the circulation of money and goods within and beyond the community. Furthermore, trust is also at play within the psychology of the individual, informing their relation to society: their thinking of ethics and value is inextricably involved with its principles of utility and productivity, even to the extent that religious action is conceived as a transcendence of economic activity. So the argument guiding this discussion will be that trust's fundamental interference in exchange is something which is generally suppressed, not only within capitalism but also in liberal conceptions of the self. Under the auspices of rationalization a model of social exchange has been constructed in terms of contractual obligation - that is, between self-contained, economically rational individuals - as a supposed security against indeterminate or unequal power and resources. But I am interested in cultural moments (riots, sympathy, contricks, literature and religion) which seems to be heretical towards such a system.

1) The Astor Place Riots of 1849 suggest some of the roles trust played in democracy - since it is a puzzling historical event that cannot be explained merely as a culmination of political turmoil, but is instead a crisis of belief in America's cultural identity, the efficacy of its pluralism, and its institutions for maintaining public order all at once. In this sense, the event is a problem of authority, representation and interpretation. At any point where the civil guard is called upon to fire at its own citizens, faith in the system must certainly be open to question: and it is the image of the democratic crowd, with mechanisms of social control visible in front of it, that I want to highlight and reiterate in later chapters. As an image of

social trust on the threshold of being tested or broken (which is, possibly the same event) it stands for what is at once most reassuring and alarming in the American experiment.

The chapter is principally intended to place Melville's cultural critique in a context of such conflicts with trust at the core; but it is made more intriguing by the fact that he himself is to be found in the middle of this incident, invoking trust in established methods of mass-control, which sheds a new light on his own characterization of publication and mass audience.

2)The second chapter looks at the concept of sentimentality, which was particularly important in defining the expressions of charity in the 19th century. Often a kind of protest against a perceived decline in values (be they religious or social or political), sentimental literature seemed to represent a different model of social behaviour, based on more feminized principles of generosity and abundant feeling. It promoted an ideology of the family as the foundation of a moral integrity which was to extend to the nation, and described the private virtues of sympathy and altruism as socially active and campaigning forces. However, such a form did not offer a radical political practice after all: indeed, it only preserved conservative definitions of the family and community, and ultimately reproduced the values of commerce.

I have chosen four texts to illustrate the dimensions of the "sentimental economy": two of the genre and two that satirize it. In *The Wide, Wide World* and

The Lamplighter, by Susan Warner and Maria Susanna Cummins, social ethics are based around particular constructions of the family whose exchanges reveal a clash between the religious values they want to promote, and the economic values they represent. Furthermore, they indicate a curious relation to masochism, in the proximity of discourses of emotional sympathy and suffering. If the latter novel is an attempt to render sympathy in an urban context, dealing with a growing phenomenon of the community of strangers, then George Lippard's reformist novel of a decade earlier, *The Quaker City*, presents the opposite view of the city: a nightmare of corruption where trust is entirely absent. This and Melville's novel *Pierre* both address the instability of notions of value - in religion, political economy, and fiction itself - which the former texts are oblivious to; and they also touch on the masochistic element when they extend the sense of crisis to a corruption of sexual relations.

3) The second section introduces a closer inspection of the relations between economic and literary exchange. First of all I consider the manifestation of economic discourses in fiction, concentrating on the issue of charity; then in the next chapter I will look at literary form itself as a manifestation of symbolic forces in the economy. As Marc Shell suggests, Melville was responding to a crisis of representation whose effects were to be found also in commerce: "The fear that all literature was, like money, in this sense a merely passable 'naught' - a mere cipher - troubled Melville, an expert on confidence, for whom the tropic centre of symbolization is an 'algebraic x' threatening language and money with devaluation

and annihilation.”¹³

Charity is at once a religious ideal, a transcendent virtue; an economic matter (the management of social resources and the morality of capital); and a question of representation (of “charitably interpreting”, giving another the benefit of a doubt). It is a prevalent theme of many of Melville’s short stories, which they all complicate by an ambiguous narration, compromising the reader’s construction of meaning from the text and free investment of sympathies. As a whole, they address different types of exchange and their shortcomings. In some (“Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs”, for instance) Melville attacks Christian and utilitarian ideologies for their inadequate representation of poverty (not a critique of inequities of wealth so much as a critique of the critiques of inequities); elsewhere he considers the available spaces for fantasies of transcendence - in Bartleby’s suicidal withdrawal from exchange, or in the ritual, eucharistic economies of the church and stage (“The Two Temples”); in “I and My Chimney” Melville assesses the “cryptic” nature of narrative, where trust lies at the heart of storytelling alongside death, the elimination or appropriation of unknown property.

4) Chapter four looks at Melville’s archetypal text on trust, *The Confidence-Man*: seeing it as a critique of the social relations that both capitalist and Christian ideologies construct. “The contrick deconstructs the contract” - exposing a pure expenditure of faith in the unknown beneath what has been formalized as a safe, rational practice. At the same time the contrick challenges ideal discourses of

¹³ Marc Shell, *Money, Language and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1982), 7.

friendship and generosity, exposing them to be something very different from the loci of excessive qualities which they pretend to be - instead, ironically, they are the opposite, reduced to parodies of calculation. Thus the model of exchange whereby morality supplements a rational economic sphere is totally inverted: what is revealed is a human capacity for loss which reason or morality is unable to contain.

5) This principle of loss may perhaps be best described not as trust, or a need for credit (ie a system which manages imaginary and symbolic resources as well as material), but *faith* - and here I would argue that Melville's perpetual ambiguity over religion is tinged with a certain admiration for its irrational economics, foregrounding what capitalism and sentimentality suppress. Hence the final text is *Billy Budd*, which returns to the problem of democracy and the mass and raises the issue of social commitment being a sacrificial act: a masochistic trust in authority, the ultimate expenditure of the self. Whether the tale is Melville's final statement of resistance or a last minute reconciliation of faith, death is still the primary trope of economy - not an escape from it, but an originary factor of moral calculation and narrative.

CHAPTER ONE : DEMOCRACY AND THEATRE

Nationalism and Cultural Hierarchy in Astor

Place, New York on 10 May 1849

“Probably there never was a great and bloody riot, moving a mighty city to its profoundest depths, that originated in so absurd, insignificant a cause as the Astor-place riot.” So begins Joel Taylor Headley in the first American attempt to provide an account of collective violence and public order in New York.¹ In the busy history of 19th century rioting, this event seems to defy explanation: its absurd cause is no more than a personal feud between two actors, which becomes invested with the languages of nationalism and class politics and then loses all proportion. But while the riot cannot be understood in a normal manner - that is, as the outcome of structural tensions in the city, poor planning and administration, or deep-rooted conflicts between classes or races, or even as part of a tradition of violent political activism - it is nevertheless emblematic of major shifts in the constitution of national culture. It stands for a crucial moment in the history of art’s public relations, as a sign of changing distinctions of elite and popular forms, of private and collective cultural appreciation. Hence it sets the scene for the thesis, containing many of the issues of community, exchange and circulation, trust, and democratic values in the one incident. Besides, it presents a number of the key player in chapters to come: not only is Melville to be found taking sides, but on the other is Ned Buntline,

¹ Joel Taylor Headley, *The Great Riots of New York 1712-1873* (1873; New York: Dover Press, 1971), 111.

representative of the sensational and politically inflammatory dime novelists; also Forrest, his champion, who will reappear in one of Melville's stories; and Joel Taylor Headley, historically adjudicating, but by no means neutral in New York's cultural politics at this time.

It presents an image which will recur throughout: *the gathering of crowds around a figure or a sign* (a person or a notice, that is). Here the actor onstage is replaced by a placard prescribing the rule for the audience's behaviour; and similar scenes will crop up in *The Quaker City*, *The Confidence Man*, and Melville's stories. Such an image resonates in various ways: it can be a positive vision of the democratic poplace, a community witnessing order and justice actively and mutually; or it can be a negative picture of a chaotic, precultural mass, suggesting the corruption or insufficiency of the principles of representative government. It may signify the facelessness and lack of communal bonds in urban environments, as endlessly evoked in tales of the city, or it can convey the idea of a market, constructing relations between individuals' diffuse needs and desires. Wherever a crowd gathers, such meanings are at stake. But furthermore, the image introduces an *analogy between the theatre, church and democracy* running through the thesis, based on the same model of a charismatic representative (actor, priest, demagogue) and the public (as an audience, congregation, community or mob). In this comparison, religious and democratic claims to truth and the mediation of the collective good are parodied by theatricality. The sense that a community can be brought together, its emotions and sympathies directed by something that is purposely superficial, profoundly disturbs rational political foundations.

By the mid nineteenth century the theatre was one of the most conspicuous forms of “expressive” or public culture, widely performed and enjoyed throughout America in all sectors of society. Its foremost actor, Edwin Forrest, ardently promoted American identity and he built up a strong nationalist following amongst audiences across the states.² As his fame grew on tours on both sides of the Atlantic, he came to be compared with England’s own theatrical ambassador, William Macready - also a Shakespearian player and also hugely egotistic, such that rivalry between them was almost inevitable. The two were oceans apart not only in nationality but also stylistically, in social standing, and in their attitudes towards the theatrical institution. Tensions came to a head on March 2 1846, when Forrest openly hissed Macready’s performance of *Hamlet* in Edinburgh; he had been frustrated in his attempts to secure engagements in Europe and believed Macready responsible - and he was full of scorn for Macready’s idiosyncratic portrayal, which included his trademark, a pirouette with a handkerchief during a soliloquy (a “fancy dance”, according to Forrest). The minor furore this action stirred up prompted Forrest to defend himself in a letter to *The Times*, where he stated his “unquestionable right” to express distaste, and that “hissing [is] a salutary and wholesome corrective of the abuses of the stage”.³

Three years later it was Macready’s turn to tour America. He encountered some popular opposition to his affiliations with genteel society, the press nicknaming him “McGreedy” - and personal opposition from Forrest who matched

² In 1828, for example, he instigated a contest for the best new play with an “aboriginal hero”; cf. Richard Moody’s account in *The Astor Place Riot* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958).

³ Letter to the *Times*, April 4 1846, 7.

him play for play and part for part in many provincial theatres on the way. Finally, on May 7 1849, Macready found himself opening in *Macbeth* at the Astor Place Opera House against Forrest in the same play at the Broadway Theatre. This hostility was matched within the auditorium. Macready recalls the trouble in his diary:

Copper cents were thrown, some struck me, four or five eggs, a great many apples, nearly - if not quite - a peck of potatoes, lemons, pieces of wood, a bottle of assafoetida which splashed my own dress, smelling, of course, most horribly. The first act, at least in my scenes, with these accompaniments, passed in dumb show; I looking directly at these men as they committed these outrages, and no way moved by them... At last a chair was thrown from the gallery on the stage, something heavy was thrown into the orchestra (a chair) which made the remaining musicians move out. Another chair was hurled by the same man, whom I saw deliberately throw it, then wrench up another, and throw it too - I bowed to the audience, and going up to Mr Chippendale, observed that I thought "I had quite fulfilled my obligation to Messrs Niblo and Hackett, and that I should now remain no longer."⁴

Macready was unhurt, but on the point of abandoning the tour and would have done so had not a letter from prominent New Yorkers (including Washington Irving, editor Evert Duyckinck, and Herman Melville) persuaded him otherwise. "...The good sense and respect for order prevailing in this community will sustain you on the subsequent nights of your performance", it assured him. The next performance was set for May 10. In the meantime there was a pervasive atmosphere of agitation in the city, left over from previous days of Anniversary Week rallying; crowds were becoming mobilized, and cards were distributed in the streets that incited anti-British feeling.⁵ On the night, the Astor Place was packed (the box

⁴ *Diaries of William Charles Macready 1833-1851, Vol II* ed. William Toynbee (London: Chapman & Hall, 1912); May 7 1849, 422-4.

⁵ They read:

WORKING MEN! - SHALL AMERICANS OR ENGLISH RULE IN THIS CITY?
THE CREW OF THE BRITISH STEAMER HAVE THREATENED ALL AMERICANS WHO SHALL DARE TO

office having oversold), and police were ready to capture infiltrators who they had been informed were out to attack Macready once he came onstage. With a few arrests the play did carry to the end, though inaudibly, due to the noise of protest. At one point a board was pushed onstage with a notice to distinguish the rioters from the rest of the audience, reading “THE FRIENDS OF ORDER WILL REMAIN QUIET”.⁶

Outside the building, however, a crowd of over ten thousand were protesting - some organized by a certain E.Z.C. Judson, alias Ned Buntline, dime novelist, for the “Friends of Forrest” and the Native Americans (militant nationalists and anti-Catholics)⁷. Also involved were members of the Know-Nothing party, and the rest were a collection of working class citizens from a variety of trades and districts. Unable to cope with such numbers the police called on the local militia for assistance (a common measure for the underresourced service), who arrived down 8th Street from Broadway only to find themselves pelted with paving stones which had been taken up for road maintenance. After a series of hesitant confrontations and calls to order, they fired on the crowd. In all between twenty and thirty people were killed, and over a hundred were injured.

This is a sketch of a situation which seems hard to understand in historical

OFFER THEIR OPINIONS THIS NIGHT AT THE
ENGLISH ARISTOCRATIC OPERA HOUSE
WORKING MEN! FREEMEN! STAND UP TO YOUR LAWFUL RIGHTS!

⁶ Moody, 114-6, 138.

⁷ See the pro-Macready account by Alan S. Downer, *The Eminent Tragedian* (Cambridge Ma: Harvard University Press, 1966), 300-305.

terms, defying most of the categories of 19th century public disturbances. The progression from feud to disrupted performance, and from a battle of pamphlets and letters to a full-blown riot seems so tenuous that Joel Taylor Headley initially suspects hidden operations (“a mysterious underground influence at work”, 112), then he abandons his enquiry and resorts to vehement authoritarianism which is the tenor of his whole approach: “The authorities have to do with riots, not their causes; put them down, not deprecate their existence, or argue their justice.” (127) More recently, historians have sought to comprehend the riot in general as something other than a crime against order - instead as a moment which questions the value of that form of order being maintained, and reveals the society’s matrix of power and law. In the examples Adrian Cook gives of other mid-century riots in the city, a reaction to social changes at the onset of modernity is evident in retrospect: in 1843 the Harlem Railroad was torn up by a mob after a little girl was run over; in 1844 the council’s attempt to ban pigs from downtown streets created disturbances; and in the “Resurrection Riot” of 1853, three thousand stormed an apothecary’s shop when it was rumoured that human bones were being robbed from graves for medical students to practise on.⁸ John Schneider offers more general categories: riots as the result of longstanding conflicts between urban communities, racial or religious; violence against immigrants; protests over a particular issue, such as anti-abolitionism or labour disputes; or even the common battles between rival voluntary fire companies, who used to fight each other more eagerly than the fires themselves.⁹ Certainly the incident here was exacerbated by a general air of protest, a symbolically divisive

⁸ Adrian Cook, *The Armies of the Streets; The New York City Draft Riots of 1863* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1974), 27-28.

⁹ John Schneider, *Mob Violence and Public Order in the American City 1830-65* (Diss. University of Minnesota, 1971), 10-20.

issue (however slight), the polarization of authority and poor police coordination; but at its origin, the Astor Place Riots speak of a reaction to more obscure changes, which are somewhat difficult to perceive from a modern perspective.

The riot is a peculiarly Victorian phenomenon in which the meaning of *entertainment*, as a locus of leisure and pleasure, is a crucial public matter. Indeed, the way of understanding and enjoying art was an integral part of national consciousness and identity. (A modern mind may find it hard to understand the high seriousness with which the 19th century treated issues which have since become concerns of private life and psychology, and the way that it applied concepts of utility and necessity to leisure as to all economic activity.) Regardless of the inflections and distortions given to the original actors' feud, the incident remained close to the quarrel in that all parties knew that it concerned different styles and different manners of appreciation. The protesting audiences were reacting throughout to the implication that its form of entertainment was unsophisticated, and therefore *uncivilized*: hence the speed with which the quarrel escalated into an ideological battle. Lawrence Levine argues that the incident describes the waning of a common public space for the appreciation of culture and its replacement by a new hierarchy, separating "high" from "low" responses, which consequently become more private. He calls the riot "in essence... a struggle for power and cultural authority within theatrical space", and shows how subsequent developments contributed to a certain bifurcation within the institution: auditorium space was segregated by split-level ticket pricing; a professional orchestra substituted local musicians for touring companies, reinforcing the gap between audience and stage;

dress and behaviour codes were implemented - all ultimately alienating the public as a single group from the work being performed. Unable to maintain identity as a microcosm of society, the theatre audience split and gradually took on a more individualized and passive character.¹⁰ But the way that the theatre functions as a political medium for those at the time occurs on various levels. There is a dispute over national identity, one of class politics within American society, one over the theatre's relationship to its audience, and one over acting styles. The levels are connected in that each dispute seems to engender another out of the contradictions it entails in working through. As the actors' technical criticisms of each other turn into an argument over the refinement of their respective audiences, which in turn is reconfigured in public discourse as a conflict of the genteel establishment and the common workingman, so the conflict of classes finds itself involved in a different debate about the identity of the Republic - in whose interests, of course, all believe they are acting. These discourses about the arts and public culture demonstrate a remarkable interdependency and fluidity of movement across different domains.

Macready was writing about Forrest's technique in his journal well before the feud began. Admiration is mixed with disapproval, but it is clear that the terms of appraisal have already been set in a model separating mind and body - so that what he praises is merely raw and physical, and he can accuse Forrest of a total lack of mental refinement:

He has great physical power. But I could discern no imagination, no original thought, no poetry at all in his acting. Occasionally in rage he is very strong and powerful, but grandeur in his passion there was

¹⁰ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge Ma. & London, Harvard University Press, 1988), 68. I owe much of the account of the riot to this book.

none; pathos, *none*.

And again:

There was much to praise in Forrest's execution frequently; he seems to have his person in perfect command, but he has not enriched, refined, elevated and enlarged his *mind*...

Evidently the contrast is between Forrest's melodramatic style, emphasizing gesturality and bodily signs of emotions, and Macready's more cerebral approach which suggests the sublimity of the emotions by underplaying physicality and stressing verbal subtlety. "He did not fully comprehend his poet," Macready goes on to complain. Distinguishing mind from body in this way, and poetry from brute force, Macready is effectively passing a judgement upon educational potential which is not merely applicable to the actor, but extends to the general population with the same pejorative inferences.

... I said then [seventeen years earlier], if he would cultivate those powers and really study, where, as in England, his taste could be formed, he would make one of the very first actors of this or any day. But I thought he would not do so, as his countrymen were, by their extravagant applause, possessing him with the idea and with the fact, as far as remuneration was concerned, that it was unnecessary.¹¹

Thus the difference of melodramatic and cerebral styles is translated into the vulgar versus the genteel in society - voicing Macready's fear that a marketplace in control of the arts will compromise their integrity. He concludes, "the state of society here and the condition of the fine arts are in themselves evidences of the improbability of an artist being formed by them." Odd though an actor's hostility towards his audience might seem, it speaks of an increasing disassociation of the popular from the arena of cultural production, by those promoting art as an ideal and nonsocial thing.

¹¹ *Diaries*, Oct 21 1843, pp.228-230

Once in the domain of a discourse about intelligent appreciation (rather than one assumed to be more spontaneous or sensory), the same opposition carries through to all levels of cultural activity. Different audiences become representatives of different national and class sensibilities: *Punch*, for example, reported the affair in England as proof of America's lack of refinement, characterizing Forrest as "the Indian Savage WHITEFEATHER".¹² In America, the noise of the protestors was explicitly distinguished from savagery - hissing was not an animal sound but a true sign of democratic expression. At the rioters' trial the defence counsel called hissing an "undisputed right" - as Forrest himself had done - "exercised in this country towards... other Englishmen, towards Power, and towards Macready himself, by the general judgement of the people."¹³ So the division was articulated either as the aristocracy vs. the people (from the protestors' point of view) or the people vs. the mob (as the elite phrased it). The image of the crowd is central in all cases, coming to signify either the social body, the citizenry defined in positive terms, or a faceless and unindividuated mass. The former view had been expressed by Walt Whitman in an earlier article describing Forrest's return to the Bowery Theatre, conveying his sense of the muscular strength of democratic participation:

...packed from ceiling to pit with its audience mainly of alert, well-dressed, full-blooded young and middle-aged men, the best average of American born mechanics - the emotional nature of the whole mass arous'd by the power and magnetism of as mighty mimes as ever trod the stage - the whole crowded auditorium, and what seeth'd in it, and flashed from its faces and eyes, to me as much a part of the show as any - bursting forth in one of those long-kept-up tempests of handclapping peculiar to the Bowery - no dainty kid-glove business, but electric force and muscle from perhaps two thousand full-

¹² *Punch*, XVI 1849, 217.

¹³ Words of John Van Buren, quoted in Levine, 67.

sinewed men...¹⁴

The latter view becomes the fear of modernity, the spectre of the mob, which seems to have neither self-interest or respect for others' property, and whose movements are supremely irrational.¹⁵ Most of the press reports that followed took up this position, choosing to lay blame at its feet rather than examine the action of the authorities. For the *Courier and Enquirer* the visibility of the law was at stake: "If Macready had not appeared, the whole world would be justified in saying that the laws of New York could not protect a man in the exercise of his lawful calling, that they were powerless, in the presence of an organized mob." Other newspapers talked in a similar way, asserting the importance of a common right to protection. The underlying principle was that society could guarantee order on the condition that individuals curtailed their freedom to act against it. As Clive Bush points out, this arrangement marks a sadly degraded form of the optimistic ideals of representative government, which had been withering since the turn of the century. "Theoretically power was in the hands of the people, but actually to assume that power was in the hands of the people was felt by many to destroy centralized government and law itself. In the growing reactionary atmosphere, there grew up a kind of good taste consensus that questioning of authority was mob rule, and that deference was

¹⁴ Quoted in Moody, 29

¹⁵ The refusal to perform according to laws of necessity is what aggravates Headley most of all. He concludes an account of a riot against the inflation of food prices with a utilitarian's astonishment:

It was certainly a very original way to bring down the price, by attempting to destroy all there was in the city. Complaining of suffering from the want of provisions, they attempted to relieve themselves by putting its possession out of their power altogether. With little to eat, they attempted to make it impossible to eat at all. A better illustration of the insensate character of a mob could not be given.

"Flour Riot of 1837", 110.

democracy.”¹⁶ In such a climate the political representative becomes a demagogue manipulating group interests: he is a kind of empty public vessel echoing the sound of power rather than the voice of the citizens.

The decline was also noticeable in the way that mutual obligations within the society are articulated. The contract made over freedom and protection is invested with a different vocabulary - in the *Tribune*'s editorial, the bargain between individual capacities and collective social good is redescribed as an economic contract:

To drive him from the stage is to say,
Though he wishes to play and must do so to live, and though there
are thousands who wish to see and hear him play on the terms
proffered, *yet we of our sovereign pleasure will not permit that
reciprocity of benefits to be effected.* Though we be but forty, and
those who wish to listen and enjoy be a thousand, yet we will break
up the performance by yelling and rioting, driving off the players by
showers of offensive and dangerous missiles!¹⁷ (my italics)

This is not about the priority of security so much as the success of a commercial transaction. In return for an observance of law, individuals are now guaranteed the right to work and the right to consume. The comment uncovers a tension between the old republican formulation of the reciprocal principles on which society should be based, and the new rules of exchange derived from the market which state, on the contrary, that pleasure *is* sovereign in determining value, that it cannot be made to surrender to the justice of reciprocity.

So whether they conceived it as an organized insurgent group or an example

¹⁶ Clive Bush, *The Dream of Reason: American Consciousness and Cultural Achievement from Independence to the Civil War* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 25.

¹⁷ Moody, 182, 120.

of unrestrained and irrational human activity (as a reminder of the Hobbesian state of nature), the effect of calling the crowd a mob was to deny it a representative function, and make it an expression of what civil society was not. In this sense the rioters' violence was more symbolic than real; their "disturbing of the peace" exposed peace to be a rhetorical phenomenon, an absence of speech, more than it meant order, an absence of conflict. If reciprocity is the community's guiding principle, silence is its sign - THE FRIENDS OF ORDER WILL REMAIN QUIET being the true words of the 19th century's social contract, wheeled onstage in front of a vociferous public. Consumption demands its own terms and conditions. Indeed, Levine argues that from this point, silence begins to be instituted as the "proper" mood for cultural appreciation - one which facilitates everybody's undistorted attention to the work on show but also encourages private responses, reproducing a kind of individual communion with the object. The achievement of this new sensibility is predicated not so much on the control of a natural unsocial chaos, signified by the mass, but on the loss of a rich and noisy public space.

Reproaches were levelled not only at the mob but the press itself, some of whom were accused of incitement: "...the law ought to visit such disturbers of the peace (the editors), such traitors to a profession whose every duty is the maintenance of law through moral force," the *Public Ledger* declared the day after, May 11. In a later editorial the *Tribune* expressed the same sentiment, but once again came up against the irreconcilable conflict between a social order based on reciprocal consensus and the unruliness of pleasure and consumption. It begins with a tirade against "the licentious, unprincipled and venal press - the press which sells its

influence to the most corrupt uses, which sneers at benevolence and mocks at religion, which has neither faith in men, reverence for God, nor belief in anything, which panders to depraved appetites, traffics in falsehood and calumny, speculates on dishonor, gloats over vice, and does its utmost to weaken the moral sense of the public and bring the law into contempt.” But then, in affirming the value of a single, unified moral standard, which the press should help to secure by circulating it through the public domain, it stumbles upon the principles of another circulation in the market. “Who can tell how much of the violence there displayed was the fruit of its insidious assaults on all that is best and most sacred? And by whom is such a press kept in existence? That, too, reader, is a question which we leave for you to reflect on.” The question is rhetorical because the argument is circular: the readers who have been incited to antisocial outrage by the gutter press become indistinguishable from the readers who are to be incited to moral outrage by this leader. The *Tribune* discovers that the moral consensus on which it would like society to be founded is underwritten by commercial principles, and faith, reverence and belief are undermined by other forms of trust - involving traffic, speculation and appetite.¹⁸

So at the point when the authorities are called upon to suppress their own citizens by force, the riot is not merely a matter of protecting the normal functioning of society from minor unruly elements but it becomes suddenly a political problem, bringing the whole constitution of society and the nature of representative government into question. The tacit assumptions about the distribution of power,

¹⁸ Moody, 182, 225.

the rights of its members, the methods of control - all the things that are usually taken for granted break the surface and seem to need to be articulated once again in public. Thus what happened at Astor Place is a rhetorical event as well as a fact of urban social history. In the language of the riot itself - in the discourses of protest, of reassertion of order, and retrospective analysis - we can identify a conflict in the principles of exchange on which American community is symbolically constructed, where the reciprocal obligations that make its society conflict with the sovereign freedom to pleasure that makes its individuals. We can similarly identify the problems of its representative politics, whose bargain between popular will and the force of authority, moral or governmental, proves ultimately insufficient to contain the energies of the charismatic demagogue.¹⁹ Thus it becomes a drama of ideology: the disturbance to democracy in the theatre gives a reflection of the disturbance of the theatrical in democracy.

¹⁹ See Bush, Ch. 2, "The Hero as Representative".

CHAPTER TWO : THE SENTIMENTAL ECONOMY

“I don’t want you to read any more of that, Ellie; it is not a good book for you.” Ellen did not for a moment question that he was right, nor wish to disobey; but she had become very much interested, and was a good deal annoyed at having such a sudden stop put to her pleasure. *The Wide, Wide World*, 385

Sympathy

The narrator does not specify which book has been deemed so unsuitable for the young heroine, but we are led to assume here and from several other instances that it is a novel. No matter what kind of novel, either, whether salacious or edifying: it is the use of a novel in general which is being warned against. The novel can be a dangerous indulgence if not properly moderated; the pleasure it gives the young girl at the beginning of her education in strongly sensual language: “...when Ellen had read [a book] once she commonly wanted to go over it again, and seldom laid it aside until she had sucked all the sweetness out of it.” (311). This curious paradox - that a novel uses its power of influence to advise against succumbing to the novel’s power of influence - is in fact not uncommon to sentimental fiction, and is worth exploring. What might account for the novel’s self-denunciation?¹

I have chosen to begin with this quotation because it illustrates a key tension between different kinds of value which is integral to the novel in the 19th century.

¹ Cf Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 47-49 for an earlier example, Rev Enos Hitchcock’s *Memoirs of the Bloomsgrave Family* (1790): “Hitchcock writes a novel in order to read the novel out of the republic of letters.”

Ellen here is caught in the middle of two psychological forces, moral instruction and novelistic pleasure, and while she recognizes the stronger claim of the voice of authority, her private enjoyment is unsupervisable and undiminished. It threatens to lead her astray from a patriarchal, clerical and severely enforced consensus of moral values. This tension seems to be rooted in the history of the novel in America, evolving from the entirely new imaginative relation to national culture that it provided for literate individuals. As Cathy Davidson argues in her book *Revolution and the Word*, it helped construct a new form of citizenship; the American text, and its reproduction in different myths and meanings, became open to a wider audience who no longer needed mediation, politically or spiritually, from the established elite groups. Everything that could be the imaginative content of the novel - themes, setting, narratives - were now available to Americans as never before. “With the advent of the novel, the indirect and secondary audience of much previous literary discourse became the direct, primary audience for much present literary discourse and the mediating middlemen, such as the expounding clergymen, were removed from the transaction.” (44) Thus it is not surprising that the clergy were to be found at the turn of the 18th century writing their own novels, appropriating the form they saw as a threat, in order to preserve and promote their moral rhetoric. Hence the convergence of the clerical and the feminine in the moral orientation of sentimental literature. (In *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas understands this event as a pooling of resources from two sectors of society whose social and economic centrality was diminishing significantly.²) At the same time, Davidson argues, it is the novel’s basis in *pleasure* that does most to undermine conventional

² Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, especially Part One, “The Sentimentalization of Status”.

sites of authority: “With the novel, ‘there always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness’ - a surplus that creates new needs, different desires, and that thus controverts the status quo. Moreover, the very temporality of the novel - its emphasis on the here and now rather than on a classical tradition of timeless forms, right readings, and proper responses - similarly aggravates desire in a way that extends far beyond the novel to compromise even the good work of those other forms...” (44)

Hence the critical problem that a work like *The Wide, Wide World* inherits is one of function; its moral didacticism attempts to substitute for a lack of discursive space for clerical supervision, and control the play of desire at the same time. Thus, while Ellen is involved in a series of tasks and trials through which she emerges into a female and Christian maturity, a significant part of her education is learning how to *read*: her guardian not only selects the “good” from the “bad” literature for her, but also teaches how to read the divine truth in nature, and how to *enjoy* the Bible... It appears that the novel’s main textual practice is to fuse moral supervision with the control of desire, and make the reading of God’s Word the greatest pleasure.

In the sense that the sentimental novel internalizes the problem of authority, makes it its underlying subject, and by extension characterizes the reading relation explicitly as a relation to the social body, it can be seen as the paradigmatic early American genre. But in the 1850s, with the emergence of a commercial culture, the growth of markets and for the first time the potential for mass production and distribution of printed literature, the sentimental novel takes on a further

construction. While novel reading facilitates a more immediate engagement with cultural forms it also *individualizes*, reducing the manner of engagement from the collective, a regional or family group, to a single unit. As Richard Brown observes in his study of information culture, this effected an important change in the nation's sympathies - emotional experience became discernibly more private, and each reader's relation to their surroundings became inflected though a more intimate domain of fictional imagery.³ At the same time, however, such emotional privatization was going on across the country on a wide scale, through the matrix of consumerism reconstituting a common identification which appeared to be diminishing. The literary market multiplied the intensely private experiences of each reader, forming an imaginary community distinct from the real. Henry Read referred to this process in a lecture to the Philadelphia Athenian Institute and Library: "If two persons but read the same book, there is a concord of the heart of one which may be answered from the heart of the other. Strangers with an ocean between discover in some sympathy of literature the elements of friendship."⁴ The key is *sympathy*: that emotional relation describing reading and friendship, two activities becoming increasingly mutually exclusive, at the same time. Through sympathy the novel intensifies an imaginative bond between reader and story, and then projects it as a primary social bond, to evolve what might be called a mass privacy, a simulation of unique personal experience. As Ron Zboray comments, it is a kind of selfhood that corresponds to the relations of exchange in consumer capitalism: "Severing readers

³ From a variety of evidence about the use of diaries, letters and the conventions of conversation in the early republic, Brown identifies "the transition from the more corporate sensibility of the 18th century to the highly individual, more romanticized consciousness of the Victorian era"; *Knowledge is Power*, 177.

⁴ Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 119.

from their sense of human connection while fulfilling the affective needs and expectations created by participation in preindustrial community life, fiction helped individuals construct the more independent and self-contained identity required from life in modern industrial society.” (119)⁵

Popular novels of the first half of the 19th century, both sentimental and sensational, are no less than machines for producing sympathy; they understand the point of fiction as the creation of maximum sympathy in the reader. To do this they use devices such as suspense (which intensifies the reader’s engagement); narratives of separation and reunion (which together reflect the reader’s movement between privacy and community); a focus on characters’ internal experience - their personal, domestic lives and their conscience; an exaggeration of characters’ responses (to mimic and instruct the reader’s own); and the moral priority of emotion over reason within the story. The way the novels deployed such sympathy and linked it with moral or political rhetoric was a key element of their meaning and evaluation. Part of the criticism of sensationalist novels was that the mere depiction of “low-life” would contribute to the corruption of readers through imaginative sympathy. On the other hand, female sentimental authors saw it as their duty to carry a coherent and socially beneficial message, a “moral” to the story. In the words of the novelist Mary J Holmes, “I mean always to write a good, pure, natural story, such as mothers are willing their daughters should read, and such as will do good instead of harm.”⁶

⁵ Zboray, *ibid.*

⁶ Quoted in Mary Kelley, “The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal in the Home” *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4/3 1979, 434-446. Kelley draws attention to the background most women writers had in common: “As the daughters and wives of clergymen, legislators, journalists, educators, merchants, and jurists they came from families that provided a leading, prominent, active citizenry, accustomed to the tradition of overseeing its society’s values and its nation’s direction.” (438)

In such didactic literature the text is a model of utility, since all aspects of its narrative - in the deviations of plot and accident, in the description of characters of an exhausting moral two-dimensionality, and in the articulation of themes - ultimately serve one end, to produce a meaning which will be clearly defined and instructive to the readers in their daily life. Ambiguity, or moral complexity, is wasteful, distancing each reader from a consensus.

The Sentimental

The following analyses of four novels concern the types of exchange figured in mid 19th century fiction, as examples of a single economic syndrome. The different types are Christian, democratic and capitalist, and each gives varying representations of excessive and reserved principles. The Christian discourse of value moves between sovereign expenditure (altruism, self-sacrifice) and reciprocal fellowship; the democratic between charismatic and judicial speech; and the capitalist between the speculative and the contractual. In each category the rationalized second term is undermined by the transgressive first term. Each novel refers to the sentimental structure of sympathy I have just described: the authors of *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* search for a rhetoric of Christian community, in the family and beyond, which they try to integrate with the culture of commodities and markets; they are both asking who owns the self and the soul. The two other texts, *The Quaker City* and *Pierre*, criticize the structure of sympathy, envisaging a breakdown of community and family which is also a collapse of the

whole idea of value.

But what exactly is “sentimental”? The word has a long history, evolving from a precise definition within enlightenment philosophy to the vaguest of terms today. Initially referring to forms of thought derived from feeling as opposed to classification or abstraction, it then became associated with a literary tradition representing heightened emotional states - beginning with William Hill Brown’s novel *The Power of Sympathy* in 1789. During the 19th century with the growth of distinctions between popular and elitist, and male and female spheres of culture, the sentimental literary style suffered a loss of status, until its systematic repression in modernism. Jane Tompkins has argued that sentimental features have only been allowed to continue, paradoxically, in the Western, where the hero’s self-denial and endurance of pain, and the intensity of sensation, projected onto the landscape, reflect the emotional charge of women’s domestic writing of half a century earlier.⁷ Today sentimentality emerges as an “unwarranted discourse”, in the words of Suzanne Clarke, whereby it takes on a diminished role in critical practice and a withered literary significance in private histories or as an obsolete, degraded style. It is considered mawkish, indulgent, *excessive, unproductive*.⁸ Tompkins defines it in this modern sense as “indulging in excessive or unnecessary feeling in response to a negligible stimulus”. (120) Herbert Ross Brown, in 1940, is more severe: “The enlarged heart of sentimentality is a disease to which those who readily respond to the appeal of human nature are peculiarly susceptible. It is the excess of a virtue, the

⁷ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)

⁸ Suzanne Clarke, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1-16.

perversion of an ideal.”⁹ Somehow the offence committed is against an economic law, rather than politics or aesthetics: the sentimental lacks due measure and reserve, responding with too great an enthusiasm.

While I do not intend to give a properly researched history of sentimentality in literature or elsewhere, it will be important to bear these various inflections in mind since they do seem to offer a key to the tension between representation and utility. Similarly, I will be using the term because of its proximity to representations of suffering and charity; they are part of the same aesthetic register.¹⁰

Modern attention to women’s sentimental fiction begins with Ross Brown in the 1940s, whose derisory position sets the tone for what is to follow. The critical history is then an evolution of more sophisticated objections to the genre, gradually countered by attempts to argue its positive merits given the circumstances of its production. Those against have argued principally that sentimentality is complicit with conservative social forces: politically, contributing to the propagation of gender stereotypes, dividing culture into a network of separate spheres of activity, and

⁹ H. Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860* (Durham NC:Duke University Press, 1940), 369.

¹⁰ Renewed interest in the sentimental may be attributed to the prominence of transgression in critical discourse, as well as the camp style, which links emotional aesthetics with political practice in queer culture. It is also to be found in current political theory which deals with the problem of rational critique and protest in a global environment of image and telecommunication. Cf an issue of the journal *Daedalus* (25/1, Winter 1996) dedicated to “Social Suffering”, documenting the growing interest in the intersections between sentimental representation and human rights discourse. Of particular interest is Arthur and Joan Kleinmann’s essay on the photojournalist Kevin Carter, whose sentimentally framed shot of a starving child helped publicize the famine in Sudan and raise funds for charity organizations, but also implicated the photographer as an aesthetic predator. In this tragic story the death of the child was matched by the suicide of her witness. Richard Rorty also joins the debate about human rights and representation, arguing that where conflicts are rationally irreconcilable, literature’s mission is to instruct a moral sensibility within a preserved realm of privacy that may foster the human sympathies lacking in politics (he is as explicitly sentimental as this). Cf “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”, *Yale Review* 81/4 Oct 1993, 1-20. He contends, “These two centuries are most easily understood not as a period of deepening understanding of the nature of rationality or of morality, but rather as one in which there occurred an astonishingly rapid progress of sentiments, in which it has become much easier for us to be moved to action by sad and sentimental stories.” (20)

restricting women's potential above all¹¹; socially, fostering a commercialism that hinders cultural expression and experimentation, a "compensatory" mechanism anaesthetizing the population (women especially) against its oppression.¹² Ann Douglas, for example, berates its banality, an "exaltation of the average" which stultifies readers' demands and soothes their political sensitivity: "sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one has already in part capitulated." (12)

More charitably, other critics have argued from a premise of women's social and economic restriction: either that the literature encapsulates a covert insurrection against male authority, or that it converts the few available spaces for female activity into occasions for a different kind of authority, outreaching patriarchy. Jane Tompkins's affirmation of sentimentality's "cultural work" is the central position: "Instead of rejecting the culture's value system outright, they [ie "domestic novelists"] appropriated it for their own use, subjecting the beliefs and customs that had moulded them to a series of transformations that allowed them both to fulfil and transcend their appointed roles."¹³

Hence one side focuses on the literature's potentialities - its testimony to

¹¹ eg Alexander Cowie's conclusion that sentimental literature was a "benign moral police"; or Barbara Welter's description of the stereotype idealizing a passive woman with "piety, purity, submissiveness, and a dedication to domesticity". (Kelley, 434-5)

¹² eg Leslie Fiedler, and Henry Nash Smith, saying the fiction was "designed to soothe the sensibilities of its readers by fulfilling expectation and expressing only received ideas." (ibid.)

¹³ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 161. Advocates of the subversive elements in the fiction are Helen Papilashvily, Dee Garrison, and Nina Baym, who identifies a discourse of the "triumph of the feminine will" through tales of endurance (Kelley, 435). In a slightly different way Nancy Schnog believes that the fiction portrays a homosocial female support network and enacts it with the reader too; "Inside the Sentimental: the Psychological Work of *The Wide, Wide World*"; *Genders* 4, Spring 1989, 11-25.

lived experience, the strategies of action it offers - given its cultural context, while the other is more preoccupied with fiction's status as commodity within prevailing capitalist structures. The difference is between understanding the reading relation as a cultural context or a cultural object. Thus there is a certain impasse in this debate, which, as Laura Wexler points out, depends on one's assessment of the socioeconomic class of sentimental readership: whether sentimentality's prominence only reflected a rise in middle class reading and the justification of leisure consumption, or whether it also contained elements appealing to working class readers who might be "eavesdropping".¹⁴ More recent new historicist critics, therefore, try to overcome the impasse by thinking in terms of historical function, rather than isolating aesthetic effect or ideological intentions; they look at a text's correspondence with its own cultural inscription, as it reflects or reflects upon the basic assumptions of the period. This usually involves exposing the logical and rhetorical contradictions in strategies of "cultural work". Cathy Davidson shows how the idealist aspirations of sentimental novels are undone by their fidelity to real life - as, for instance, in the problems encountered in the didactic "young wife" plot: "Whereas a tract might extol the virtues of submission in the face of all trials, a novel must *create* trials to which a dedicated heroine then virtuously submits. But those trials fully visualized give us not an inspiring icon of feminine virtue but a perturbing portrait of the young wife as perpetual victim. The tract can lecture in the abstract, but the conservative novel, portraying through concrete example, evokes (quite inappropriately for its own rhetorical purposes) the legal, social, and political

¹⁴ Laura Wexler, "Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform" from *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth Century American Culture* ed. Shirley Samuels (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992).

status of the average female reader, and that reader is not apt to applaud the tortured image of her own condition.” (128) Similarly, Mary Kelley argues that women writers asserted the home environment as an alternative ground of moral values - peace, order, perfection - only to find that it was rotten inside with patriarchal conflict, overwork, and isolation.¹⁵ Also in this vein, Winfried Fluck understands the domestic novel to be providing models of independence which are ultimately undone by the deference to patriarchal power in the narrative of courtship.¹⁶

Currently the strategies of sentimental fiction are being discussed in relation to human rights discourse, which is also concerned with marginalization, the depiction of suffering, and the mobilization of protest. If sentimentality is sometimes seen favourably as the 19th century’s genre for “humanization”, recovering the disenfranchised groups (women, children, blacks, Native Americans) from invisibility, on the other hand it can be criticized from a postcolonial perspective as a mere expression of the dominant culture, more palliative than critical towards its own practices. Reflecting this renewed interest in sentimental rhetoric’s political power, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has once again become a best-seller (only this time amongst academic institutions), because it has a proven record in political intervention, and while by no means a typical sentimental novel it allows critics to examine the strategies and effects of Stowe’s exhortation to “feel right” in a concrete situation.

¹⁵ Mary Kelley, “The Sentimentalists”, 443-5

¹⁶ Winfried Fluck, “Sentimentality and the Changing Functions of Fiction”; from *Sentimentality in Modern Literature and Popular Culture*, ed. Winfried Herget (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1991), 23.

Gillian Brown, for example, argues that the apparently radical representation of slavery's wrongs is founded on market principles: the marginalized slave is *fetishized* instead of being humanized, and is thus possessed once more - an object of emotional expenditure rather than a subject of political power. "...[T]he case for shared humanity and human rights is made, not in terms of equality, but in terms of the humanity vested in a subject by virtue of its possession, through an intimacy and identification developed in the history of a proprietorship. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, sympathy and mutuality arise in property relations."¹⁷ Emily Budick denies the possibility of sentimental human rights altogether, asserting an antagonism within the formal structure itself - "with the best intentions in the world, sympathetic seeing voyeuristically transgresses the distance between self and other, converting others into self-serving allegories of love and affection and human nature."¹⁸ It is not that we require a sentimental recognition of other people to care for their injuries, but an examination of what is violent in ourselves, our institutions, and methods. Laura Wexler adds that far from expanding horizons to incorporate other categories (she lists "the prisoner, the madman, the child, the very old, the animal and the slave"), they remain an object of scrutiny decontextualized from society so that sympathy towards them may seem original and instinctive. The reader "newly discovers in that object the possibility of a primary relation to itself that has been there all along, but must then be denied in history so that the discovery can be made."¹⁹ Thus sentimentality's acceptability as political rhetoric depended on a middle class hegemony which, enjoying a leisure of reading in which the conscience was refined,

¹⁷ Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism*, 41-2.

¹⁸ Emily Budick, *Engendering Romance: Women Writers and the Hawthorne Tradition* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994), 114.

preferred the idea of social change from within to a denunciation of material inequities. Humanity, as such, is not extended to others so much as theatrically reinvented for individual appreciation.

But what, then, of the novel's social function? It seems that the eradication of sentimental responses from a rhetoric of human rights would offer fiction a role no greater than a private mobilization of fantasy, a prophylactic textual practice that does not disseminate its effects into any cultural value system; or it would argue for minimizing emotional address to the advantage of a kind of textuality advancing a rational interpretive vision and, in Wexler's words, an "individual awareness". (This is the textuality of modernism.) Winfried Fluck accounts for the phenomenon of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, given what are today seen as its aesthetic shortcomings and political prejudices, by considering the decline in the power of the sign between then and now. The strength of his approach is that he is thus able to historicize critical responses to sentimentality. He says that Stowe was reacting to a perceived split of the moral from the social, once the fact of slavery had exposed the lie in America's missionary promises; and in order to restore morality, there needed to be a restoration of value in the concept of blackness. Sentimental humanization was, therefore, a "resemanticization" of a discredited sign. In the novel this is first achieved by relating the slave's values to the family, but when the family proves unstable and incapable of sustaining the promise of regeneration, the burden of moral signification moves heavenwards. Tom and Eva both take on typological meanings.¹⁹

¹⁹ Winfried Fluck, "The Power and Failure of Representation in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*", *New Literary History* 23, 1992, 319-338.

Typology's inability to generate creditable metaphors today is what causes problems for a modern sensibility reading such a text; we simply cannot *believe* in the values which Stowe believed were most offended by slavery. The literature seems trite to us because we no longer care for the moral values that its contemporary audience thought they treasured (as, for example, childhood innocence, patriarchal law, the family's haven, or Divine rewards), and so we will not be inspired by their affirmation. Sentimentality's misfortune is its display of an imagery of faith to the faithless. As Fluck suggests,

...sentimental fiction promises to do the impossible: it is still insisting on its ability to represent an invisible order in writing by drawing on a certain system of gestures and narrative devices, while modernism as an avant-garde movement has gone exactly in the opposite direction, namely to question the literary representation of authentic values by creating a carefully controlled system of ambiguities and indeterminacies that, at least in theory, would allow the reader to be part of that process of exploration which literature is supposed to initiate. (333)

Thus the history of the concept - as philosophical discourse, literary genre, and mode of cognition and appreciation - charts a difference not merely in the subject of fiction but in the nature of interpretation. Likewise, it is the interpretive discrepancy between following *The Lamplighter* faithfully, and exploring the ambiguities of *Pierre*, that I shall be considering in the analyses below.

The Body

The problem of sentimentality is therefore a problem of representation, with a decline in the strength of the allegorical system it appeals to. And yet the family

is not the only place where the weaknesses of its metaphors manifest themselves; conflicts and ambiguities are to be found at the heart of the dialectic between pleasure and pain, which is the literature's true subject. When the sentimental novel's form is pleasure and its theme is suffering, it employs a moral rhetoric to mediate the contradictory forces, as we saw at the beginning. But if the mediation is unsuccessful - or if novelistic sympathy does not dovetail with social sympathy, in other words - then the sentimental text reveals a capacity for signification and desire which is profoundly disturbing. Walter Benn Michaels notes, for example, contemporary "perverse" readings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which turned the horrors of slavery into a masturbatory fantasy.²⁰ Or in Rousseau's image of compassion, which Philip Fisher uses as the underlying paradigm of sentimental relations, we can easily detect a potential for "immoral" expression of desire very close to the surface:

the tragic image of an imprisoned man who sees, through his window, a wild beast tearing a child from its mother's arms, breaking its frail limbs with murderous teeth, and clawing its quivering entrails. What a horrible agitation seizes him as he watches the scene which does not concern him personally! What anguish he suffers from being powerless to help the fainting mother and the dying child.²¹

Here the moral outrage is belied by the beauty and vividness of the image - its momentary suspension of comment for the luxury of conjuring violence in language: "breaking its frail limbs with murderous teeth, and clawing its quivering entrails..." Sentimentality is always struggling against this tension, where the spiritual might give way to the sensational, and the role of the reader as sympathetic witness degenerate into voyeurism.

²⁰ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 115-6; 123-4.

²¹ Quoted in Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 105.

A decline in metaphorical unity is also argued by Fred See, in his book *Desire and the Sign*. Rather than consider suffering as a political theme, something that is a matter of concern for the community, he concentrates his attention on what it means as a representation of the body. For him, suffering is part of a religious structure of feeling, as a means of grace (we could think of the erotic iconography of the saints here as well). Sentimental fiction expresses

the theological coherence of textuality, since in “sensibility”, material and spiritual reality engage. Feeling allows brute instinct to escape its brutality, its horror; the body’s sensibility is the sign of something which is as it were always next to itself - the suffering of a mystical body, and of a sacrifice; suffering has an alibi, it is somewhere else: it shares in the sacrificial structure of agony. Suffering is metaphoric, intelligible. Thanks to sensibility, the body transcends its limits, its meaning is displaced into an idea: it becomes a trace, it turns toward an origin - not only of suffering but of signification. The body’s own feelings, and therefore the body itself, become a means of grace, according to this function of the sign.²²

But as I have suggested, the problem arises when sentimentality’s theological framework cannot contain feeling, and it begins to mean other things. For this reason I am interested in *masochism*, as its features are present in the literature, or as it relates to the network of exchanges at the beginning of modernism. I wish to treat the difference between sentimental and masochistic orders as a tension in the evolution of modernist hermeneutics, where representation is no longer seen as a reflection of, or window onto, the world but an integral part of it. Above all, masochism disturbs the coherence of the distinction between pleasure and pain - and therefore, while it may adopt similar formal devices in the representation and narration of suffering as sentimentality, it produces very different values. Masochism foregrounds a kind of suffering which is *contracted*: that is, one which

²² Fred G. See, *Desire and the Sign: 19th Century American Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 11.

is explicit about its human construction instead of experienced on cosmological terms as catastrophe or God's design.²³

The contract pretends to be a fully rationalized exchange intended to reduce the risk and unpredictability of dealing with strangers. Rules prescribe certain behaviour for contracting individuals to the exclusion of personal factors (it assumes equality in the contract regardless of status) and also to the exclusion of continued obligations (there is a fixed period for a contract's validity and beyond this the parties need have no further contact). Thus its impersonality and temporal closure distinguish it from gift-giving practices. However, the contract cannot eliminate the play of trust from exchange: while it formalizes economic behaviour it only displaces trust onto the edges, onto the agreement to abide by the rules of the contract. It is this exile of trust to the borders of exchange, where it still threatens to return and corrode the rationality of economics, which characterizes the literature I want to deal with. Images of contracts being made crop up in all the following texts, as if it is a procedure the 19th century needs to rehearse over and over again in its narratives, to establish its fiction as truth. The contract may be commercial, religious, masochistic or social at various times but the structure and the presence of trust is constant. It appears to be crucial in establishing such things as the concept of individuality, the distribution of power and freedom, the relationship between common groups and foreign parties, and the spaces of privacy and publicity.

²³ See Benn Michaels for a comparable relation of masochism to economic relations: he sees its "perversions" as the consequence of the extension of capitalist logic into other areas of selfhood, deriving the pleasure of being owned from the pleasure of ownership (which Stowe's abolitionism is predicated upon). *Gold Standard*, Ch 3.

The reading contract in sentimental fiction testifies to contesting discourses over the construction of individuality, the relation of private to public spheres of activity, and the morality of exchange between self and others, personal pleasure and social good. Masochism also appears to be founded upon a certain relation of pleasure to the representation of suffering; both involve the enactments of oppression in order to identify, in the realm of fantasy, a moral order distinct from the real. In Gilles Deleuze's analysis, *Coldness and Cruelty*, sentimentality is itself a feature of masochism, one of its mythical principles. In mine, by contrast, masochism and sentimentality are separate syndromes referring to a common aesthetics of the contract, which becomes the central protagonist of symbolic exchange in the second half of the 19th century.

The role that sentimentality plays in Deleuze's theory is somewhat obscure. Briefly stated, he associates it with the "coldness" of the woman who subjugates the masochist - that is, with the oppressor in the relationship, rather than with any compassionate witness. (One of the important functions of masochism is its reconfiguration of the simple dynamic between oppressor, victim and witness.) Her sentimentality, then, is no glorification of feeling in the conventional sense but a neutralization; it renounces the sensuality that constantly threatens, and renders sexual exchange in purely economic terms. In this respect, its refusal of sympathetic nostalgia, it is the bad dream of sentimental fiction.

Deleuze's main task is to extricate masochism from its usual confusion with sadism and articulate it as a structure in its own right, with distinct stylistic,

philosophical, and political dimensions. Both syndromes, he says, propose different methods of apprehending the Death Instinct, the principle of pure negation or expenditure, lying beyond any possible recuperation into the psychological evaluation of pleasure. Whereas the tropes of sadism are demonstrative and accelerated - they deny the communicative element in language, and focus repetitively on a banal restatement of the obscene - masochism is intrinsically *metaphorical* and *dialectic* in its approach. Thus it has an affinity to fiction which sadism does not. Instead of embracing the absolute negation of the Death Instinct in destruction, it prefers to create an imaginary, theatrical, fetishized realm:

Why believe in the idea of a perfect world? asks Masoch in *The Divorced Woman*. What we need to do is to “put on wings” and escape into the world of dreams. He does not believe in negating or destroying the world nor in idealizing it: what he does is to disavow and thus to suspend it, in order to secure an ideal which is itself suspended in fantasy. He questions the validity of existing reality in order to create a pure ideal reality, an operation which is perfectly in line with the judicial spirit of masochism.²⁴

This notion of *disavowal* is a key function in masochism, determining its aesthetic practices (suspense, tableau, myth) and appropriating the sentimental ethic of worldly renunciation and transcendence. Most importantly, the disavowal takes the term of a contract drawn up between the two parties, in which conventional relations of power, ownership and humanity are withheld. The contract marks an attempt to impose order upon what is considered to be a chaos of interpersonal relations in the real world.

Nevertheless, the movement towards transcendence is not the same as the mystical orientation to be found in sentimentality's expressly theological texts.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, “Coldness and Cruelty”, trans. Jean McNeil, from *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 32-3.

Masochism gives quite a different construction of suffering: it does not signify a catastrophic world, or an errant one whose falling evokes a benevolent state elsewhere; it does not have an alibi. In fact, masochistic suffering is a manufactured quantity which is produced from within the artificial conditions of the contract. Pain becomes a bodily currency, the most creditable symbol of exchange between two people. To expand on this point I will briefly refer to Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs* (which is the central text for Deleuze in his essay); this quotation bears a striking resemblance to Rousseau's image of compassion, and will form part of a family of scenes of suffering appearing throughout the thesis (later, for example, George Lippard's key image of democratic corruption in *The Quaker City* draws on the same model). Wanda, the narrator's incarnation of Venus, is whipping him until the blood flows, and exclaims in her ecstasy of torture (although calmly, coldly):

“What a treat to have someone in one's power, especially a man who loves one - for you do love me, do you not? My pleasure grows with each blow; I shall tear you to shreds. Go on, writhe with pain, cry out, scream! You cannot arouse my pity.”²⁵

Masoch imagines the antithesis of compassion: a scene in which the most intimate human exchanges are rendered without affection, there being no reflex to correlate cries of pain with mental anguish nor connect up with the reader's responses. It is, in effect, a world without sympathy. It is absent because the witness and the oppressor are a single person - Wanda is at once the beast who will tear her victim to shreds, *and* the detached observer representing the law. But the same could be said of slavery itself, and this might also be an exclamation from Stowe's villain Simon Legree (the sexual charge is certainly exploited in Frederick

²⁵ Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, trans. Jean McNeil, also included in *Masochism*, 223-4.

Douglass's depiction of slavery), were it not for the strange reciprocation of love for abuse which echoes instead the joyful submission of a sentimental heroine; the difference, of course, is that this suffering is staged in a relationship which the victim has persuaded the torturer to adopt. This is why masochism has a dialectical nature, playing out an internalized, private drama of the law on a level of fantasy. As Deleuze comments, "It is the victim who speaks through the mouth of his torturer, without sparing himself." (22): the witness's moral perspective is compressed into the torturer's pure, blind action, yet the torturer is constructed by the victim through the contract. If sentimentality, then, sacrifices its desire to a moral universe, renounces gratification in the realm of social exchange to promote a theological understanding of pain and pleasure, masochism instead sacrifices gratification to the fictional realm itself.

The question of masochism's own sentimentality still remains. Deleuze uses it to describe the woman who is beyond sensuality, and a sign of the unattainable ideal, concentrating more on the mythical aspect than the economic. But the myth is a strange one:

Masochistic coldness represents the freezing point, the point of dialectical transmutation, a divine latency corresponding to the catastrophe of the Ice Age. But under the cold remains a supersensual sentimentality buried under the ice and protected by fur; this sentimentality radiates in turn through the ice as the generative principle of new order, a specific wrath and a specific cruelty. The coldness is both protective milieu and medium, cocoon and vehicle: it protects supersensual sentimentality as inner life, and expresses it as external order, as wrath and severity. (52)

The interplay of paradoxes in the passage, where sentimentality needs to be protected from the cold and yet radiates through it (as what? heat? light?), are the

product of Deleuze grappling to represent a dialectical impossibility: the mythical realization of the ideal, a point of ultimate synthesis, which he says is performed in the act of disavowal. Embodied in the woman, sentimentality is an *aestheticized sensuality*, where physical interaction becomes a pure system of forms, refined of emotional interference. Thus Deleuze's implication is that the key relation in masochism's philosophy is between its "inner life" and "external order", which is a regeneration after some primeval catastrophe that yet appears no different, at least in signs of feeling, from the wasteland. In the ominous tones of lines like "the generative principle of new order, a specific wrath and a specific cruelty" Deleuze is perhaps proposing Masoch as the herald of a kind of modernist sensibility; this would be quite a revision of the usual narrative describing modernism's repression of feeling, for it understands sentimentality as a sublime state: feeling transformed from a ruined world in which it is no longer appropriate.²⁶

Sentimentality, then, is a transcendence of affective relations that masochism hopes to make reality in a lived fantasy, which is its way of dealing with the Death Drive. In effect, it could be called the "idealization of expenditure", rising above normal exchanges of pleasure and good - these being principles which are enshrined

²⁶ Jane Tompkins finds a similar kind of coldness in the western - which, notably, performs a similar paradoxical function of exposure and protection, in a nature which simultaneously inflicts pain and anaesthetizes:

Encased in freezing air, nature is made inaccessible by the cold. The hero's traditional bedding down in nature, nestling into the land's breast, is thwarted by the frigid temperatures...

... Victory... means becoming insensate - the freezing, a metaphor for the numbness necessary to withstand circumstances so appalling that to *feel* them would be to wipe out consciousness altogether.

(*West of Everything*, 214)

She then reads the western *into* the sentimental tradition - not as a modernist example of the repression of feeling, but as a continuation of the sacrificial ethic that coldness dramatizes:

The numbing of the capacity to feel, which allows the hero to inflict pain on others, requires the sacrifice of his own heart, a sacrifice kept hidden under his own toughness, which is inseparable from his heroic character. ...For the hero, who offers himself as a saviour of his people, sacrificing his heart so that they can live, replicates the Christian ideal of behaviour, giving the self for others, but in a manner that is distorted and disguised so that we do not recognize it. (219-20)

in the contract. (Its political order is renamed “gynocratic”.) For the contract presents itself as the norm, a mode of exchange which has replaced former ways of being: and therefore it stands also for a loss of intimacy between people, to which the imaginary realm provides an increasingly important role as antidote. If the sentimental genre’s response was to recreate sympathy nostalgically, the masochistic genre imagines new life for the interaction of the self from beneath the contract’s coldness.

In Deleuze’s words, “the contract presupposes in principle the free consent of the contracting parties and determines between them a system of reciprocal rights and duties; it cannot affect a third party and is valid for a limited period.” (77) These are the terms that make the contract a supposedly stable social and political mode of exchange: above all, the idea that reciprocal obligations are determined wholly within the parties’ arrangement, because they may then disregard any imbalances of power that come from external obligations (for example in gift-giving, kinship, or hierarchies of prestige). Thus it is meant to have a universal applicability across society, offering the same system for strangers as for friends: the contract appears to minimize the problem of trust by making it a function of its own laws. However, the contract still needs an audience - a judicial point outside it, a publicity, to provide security that the consent given to the terms of the agreement will not be breached. Here the problem of trust returns, and here masochism highlights it, by positing the chance of contracting the entire self into the power of another. It is the conundrum of the life-contract, when the victim agrees to make the limited period unlimited, or it is the compression of space that we saw in Wanda’s exclamation, where the

publicity of the witness is conflated with the privacy of the torturer. Masochism internalizes the contract's audience, and drives home the fundamental inescapability of an undependable trust.

“Untie me!” I cried.

“Are you not my slave, my property?” said Wanda. “Must I show you the contract?”

... “I shall call for help,” I said.

“No one will hear you, and no one will prevent me from abusing your sacred emotions and playing this frivolous game with you...”
(267)

The Wide, Wide World

Susan Warner published her novel in 1850 and saw a kind of success that was to set the standard for sentimental fiction in the mid 19th century; her book ran to fourteen editions in the first two years of its release, reaching an audience on both sides of the Atlantic as never before. It tells the story of a young girl's religious education as she grows up from preadolescence to the point of marriage, detailing her progress through a series of trials, moral dilemmas, and experiences of loss, until she emerges as a paragon of virtue, a true Christian woman. The novel makes full use of the sentimental technique of separation and reunion (obsessively, indeed) but it is also outstanding for its naturalistic detail, meticulously relating the child's daily life, her domestic responsibilities and emotional conflicts, and its awareness of place also give it a particular American flavour, an explicitly nationalistic formulation of the ethics of duty, self-control and generosity. Warner's intention may have been purely didactic, to encourage Christian principles in her readership by rewarding and exalting the behaviour of her heroine, but her picture of what actually constitutes virtuous interaction, I want to argue, gets caught up in the values of the world she describes; her version of piety tries but never quite manages to free itself of its capitalist foundations.

What is most evident here and in the other sentimental text I have chosen, *The Lamplighter*, is a rhetorical construction of the "non-economic" in process, in such sentimental discourses as altruism, sympathy, and self-sacrifice. Their

characteristics of expenditure and loss (eg. in extremes of tears, suffering and mourning, love and generosity, these are all expressions of the same impulse) can be seen as a product of an ideology which has its interests firmly rooted in economic structures. But the very function of excess in their rhetoric throws other sentimental oppositions into free-fall, posing problems where the innocent verges on the obscene, the obedient appears perversely masochistic, love borders on promiscuity and the entire premise of metaphorical transparency on which sentimentality is based is shaken; signs threaten to collapse into a mass of obscurity.

religion and continuity

The first scene in *The Wide, Wide World* is a sentimental stereotype: Ellen Montgomery is tending her sick mother, too young to know that the illness is serious and too innocent to understand the meaning of what she has just heard: that her father has lost his lawsuit, and the family is destitute. Mother explains that they can no longer remain in the city, that Mr Montgomery must travel to Europe to find business, and she accompany him, but Ellen has to be left behind. Thus it is a discrepancy of *money* which sets the story running: financial loss occasions the novel's entire sequence of actions, as the father (conspicuously absent throughout) works to retrieve it and restore the balance in the family once again; money frames the sentimental narrative and the pious discourse altogether. This is important, for it suggests how the religious principles within sentimentality may be often predetermined by, or *indebted to*, economic affairs.

“You know, my dear, that I am not apt to concern myself over-much about the gain or the loss of money. I believe my Heavenly Father will give me what is good for me.”

“Then, mamma, why are you troubled?”

“Because, my child, I cannot carry out this principle in other matters, and leave quietly my *all* in his hands.”²⁷

The dialogue plays out a formal contradiction in sentimentality, which is that its way of stating the ethics of piety is necessarily compromised by the demands of a local, naturalistic discourse: the material conditions it represents will ultimately put the lie to religion’s professed disregard for wealth. Were the ideals of Christian asceticism so unassailable, indeed, there would be hardly a story to tell, as there would be no margin of difference between need and fulfilment in which to inscribe desire or activity.

This is why sentimentality in general seems so preoccupied with the language of excess, abundance, sufficiency and insufficiency, for it is here that religion appears so fundamentally at odds with human action. History and growth imply a perpetual unbalancing of values and quantities, and demand a constant assessment of gain and loss which cannot be reconciled to the rhetoric of the God of All Things. On a different level, the same problem is contained within the Victorian language of motherhood, as we can see here: her piety requires her to deny any kind of need except the spiritual, to empty herself of material concerns, and yet her duty as mother is to provide for her child. The mother is expected to be at once *beyond economy* - disavowing the rational calculation of needs, wealth, and just deserts, above the task of keeping accounts - yet she is the keeper of a household and very

²⁷ Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, afterword Jane Tompkins (New York: Feminist Press, 1987), 11. All subsequent page references from this edition.

much the economic agent. Her nurture crosses the border of this contradiction, and her care, although founded on rational principles of necessity, proves difficult to disassociate from the more “irrational” qualities of comfort and, ultimately, luxury. In this first chapter Ellen’s mother is anxious for her daughter’s welfare, and asks for Psalm 23 to be read to soothe her. The psalm is above all a vision of divine abundance, a fantasy of total protection and sufficiency - “I shall not want”; “My cup runneth over”. The message is clear: where there is scarcity and hardship on earth, the Christian fantasises inexhaustible resources in the Lord.

Ellen’s separation from maternal care initiates her adventure towards maturity and self-sufficiency. But the structure of this novel is not a simple matter of separation that creates suspense before a final, reassuring resolution - Warner’s design is to redirect her heroine toward spiritual values, in which case the family’s fracture must never be resolved and Ellen must learn to transfer her needs to another register. Thus it is that religion first operates as a *substitute* for motherhood - a kind of care by proxy - before the changeover of authority is accomplished. Although mother is only the temporary guardian in place of the Divine Parent, in the rhetoric it appears the other way, that God is a compensation for her absence. When she is called on to explain the idea of trusting in God, she asks Ellen to make the analogy with herself:

Why, mamma, - in the first place I trust every word you say - entirely - I know nothing could be truer; if you were to tell me black is white, mamma, I should think my eyes had been mistaken. Then everything you tell or advise me to do, I know is right, perfectly. And I always feel safe when you are near me, because I know you’ll take care of me. And I am glad to think I belong to you, and you have the management of me entirely, and I needn’t manage myself, because I know I can’t; and if I could, I’d rather you would, mamma.”

If this is sentimentality's construction of selfhood it is easy to see why it should annoy modern readers who are schooled differently; it seems only able to offer a description which is, like the child's relation to its mother, devoid of all responsibility and preferring blind trust to reasoning. This image does not just enshrine an infantilised consciousness, however, since there are male versions of belief which are far less passive and submissive; this is a feminized spectacle, reflecting a division of economic spheres, and here the irrational, irresponsible, self-sacrificial figure of trust can be understood as the flip-side of trust in the masculine domain, a grotesque spectre of the market's principles.

The theme of separation, then, evolves into one of substitution, in which the sense of irretrievable loss encourages a search for other temporary means of resolution; as God "stands in" for maternal care. Hence *The Wide, Wide World* becomes a story of adoptions, and Ellen's quest for the paradise of care evoked in Psalm 23 determines her persistent appeal for affective relations in each successive home she encounters. Her first solo trip to the shops, for example, requires a mysterious old man to champion her against an abusive sales assistant. On her second voyage alone, the journey to her new life with her aunt, she is again taken under her wing by a kind stranger (later turning out to be a member of one of her future homes). Moreover, it means an atmosphere of fetishism is ever present, as Ellen searches for objects and activities that will compensate for the absence of the object of her love. Where the narrative of separation corresponds to a psychological process of deferred gratification (turning the existence beyond death into an absolute value), the narrative of adoption corresponds to the fetish.

The Bible is the novel's principal fetish object: its purpose is to establish a kind of spiritual continuity between mother and child in the absence of maternal guidance, but at the same time it appears always already involved in a problematic of trade and commodities. Ellen is treated to a Bible as a parting gift, but in the scene where they go to buy one far more is happening than a ritual of spiritual teaching; Warner revels in the outing's description, as does Ellen in the abundance of choice in the bookshop: "Such beautiful Bibles she had never seen; she pored in ecstasy over their varieties of type and binding, and was very evidently in love with them all." (29) This is not, of course, a religious ecstasy. I have already mentioned *The Wide, Wide World's* confusion over the status of the book and its dubious combination of education and pleasure, and here even the Bible is caught in the same unacknowledged conflict, having the life of a commodity as well as the life of the Word. Furthermore, the Bible is the object at the centre of female exchanges - the continuity of piety among women is signified by the nature of the Bible as property: this one is bought with the money obtained when Ellen's mother sells her own mother's ring. Finally, Mrs Montgomery writes Ellen's name inside the cover and the following line, "I will be a God to thee, and to thy seed after thee" (42). It is her reminder to God of his promise of nurture. This completes the Bible's sentimental reinscription, where its function as sign of divine truth is overdetermined by its new meanings of ownership and female bonds.

Such a feminization of exchange is the cause of the novel's problems of representation: its inability to maintain a desired distance from the logic of material commerce, and its sanitized, sterile atmosphere. Despite itself, the moral discourse

constantly evokes its opposite - absences engender fetishism, the Book becomes a commodity, the prayer sounds like a contract - and in addition, it becomes very difficult to realize a narrative continuity or a vision of generation when Warner specifically establishes a female tradition away from the male domain. "Seed" has two meanings within male and female registers, providing an image of growth as either insemination or nurture; the confusion of the two symbolizes the rhetorical contradictions within sentimentality itself. This will be clearer in a moment, when I consider the proximity of pious and sexual languages of exchange.

masochism in the family

"I wonder how many times one may be adopted?" thought Ellen that evening; - "but to be sure, my father and my mother have quite given me up here, - that makes a difference; they had a right to give me away if they pleased. I suppose I do belong to my uncle and grandmother in good earnest, and I cannot help myself..." (504)

This section deals with the models of family and kinship presented in *The Wide, Wide World*, and the way they contribute to an understanding of Warner's distinctly American sentimentality. The quotation above shows Ellen's anxieties about her familial status, and is almost ironically self-conscious about the contrived nature of the successive removals and rehousings in the plot. But what is significant most of all is the way that she reconciles herself to her helplessness; she *calls herself property*, an article to be merely disposed of by her parents, having absolutely no rights to self-determination. Here is the masochistic side of sentimentality emerging, where the utmost virtue lies in a total erasure of self, verging on a form of

enslavement which is both horrific and erotic; certainly Ellen's movements seem to mimic the circulation of an heirloom or a household object, passed around within the family.

Most of Ellen's adventures take place around a village called Thirlwall where she learns the hardships of a rural life, suffers the cruelty of Aunt (Miss) Fortune and begins to make friends in the community. Just at the point of becoming part of a new loving home with the Humphreyses, however, she is sent away once more, this time to Scotland, to live with her grandparents; and it is here in lonely isolation that she wonders - cautiously - why she should ever be "given up" in this way. The move to Scotland occasions a separation which is even greater than any before because it involves an entire cultural break; it raises the stakes on the sacrifices Ellen has to make to become an obedient and selfless young woman once more. She is given up as family property, and she also gives up whatever characteristics might constitute an identity differentiated from others in the new environment - her democratic principles, her personal history, and her name: "Forget that you were American, Ellen," says her grandfather, "- you belong to me; your name is not Montgomery any more, - it is Lindsay; and I will not have you call me 'uncle' - I am your father; - you are my own little daughter, and must do precisely what I tell you. Do you understand me?" (510)

What is unusual here is that Mr Lindsay's authority is morally undeserved: he selfishly usurps the place of Ellen's real parents, holds mistaken beliefs and represents reactionary European values, and yet the violence he commits is never

condemned in itself. There is something about his patriarchal force which is appreciated regardless of its goodness, even enjoyed: "She could not help loving her uncle; for the lips that kissed her were very kind as well as very peremptory; and if the hand that pressed her cheek was, as she felt it was, the hand of power, its touch was also exceeding fond" (510). This is a kind of masochism which is *not* circumscribed by piety, as we have previously understood its appearance in sentimentality: there is no notion of Christian virtue in Ellen's submission to him. Mr Lindsay even challenges God's authority by ordering Ellen to give up her Bible - which is the only occasion where she ever asserts herself, otherwise her submission is entirely willing. Her enjoyment of being the object of his power is an unjustifiable reaction, an *enjoyment for its own sake*. Such masochistic undertones - hardly very far from the surface - indicate a point of difference between Christian and sentimental rhetoric, where a certain relation between desire and suffering resists being harnessed by the idea of piety. If there are degrees of reasonableness in such matters, the masochism of religious asceticism may appear more reasonable because rewarded with spiritual prestige - or incorporated back into a reciprocal system of loss and gain, in other words. Here, sentimentality seems to testify to something else besides.

Ellen finds that she is also being used as a bargaining chip between her mother and grandmother, who had fallen out when the former married an American: the child's task is to reconcile the sides of the family though the mother is dead. With these facts in mind, we can redescribe the story now on a mythical level: Warner is concerned with the formulation of private social ties where the real

nuclear family is destitute and crumbling; indeed, there is something already wrong with the family from the start, displaced from former origins and values. It does not communicate: and Ellen's adoption with the Lindsays is an effort to restore the fractures in its internal relations. Because of religious differences, however, it is doomed not to succeed. In contrast, Ellen's earlier adoption into the Humphreys family is a new beginning apparently unencumbered by conflicts of values. It is a vision of Christian fellowship, a community among strangers where former definitions of kinship or property do not apply. This seems to be the focus of Warner's design: to imagine a restructuring of obligation and reciprocity in kinship, switching from "vertical" to "horizontal" relations - from hierarchies between generations to mutual brother-sisterhood. We can compare the two adoption scenes where Ellen is taken into the families, to see how this restructuring occurs. Both are renaming ceremonies, redescribing the categories of family, friend and stranger with a particular performative language of giving.

The crucial point comes when Mr Lindsay demands Ellen call him "father", as if it were a surrender:

Ellen obeyed, trembling, for it seemed to her that it was to set her hand and seal to the deed of gift her father and mother had made. But there was no retreat; it was spoken; and Mr Lindsay folding her close in his arms kissed her again and again. (518)

Warner presents the scene as a *false contract*, since the degree of willing on Ellen's part is not going to affect her relation to Mr Lindsay: she is *already given*, her consent is irrelevant, and she has nothing else to offer in the exchange. Warner implies by Ellen's discomfort that the adoption is somehow unjust or unnatural despite its legitimacy, and that there is a better form of adoption portrayed with the

Humphreys family. In other words, there is an American adoption - a democratic kindness which overcomes the hierarchy of real kinship, where strangers may form stronger and truer bonds.

Ellen is already a friend of Alice Humphreys and on sisterly terms when she is introduced to John, immediately as his own sister:

“Miss Ellen, this sister of mine is giving us away to each other at a great rate, - I should like to know first what you say to it. Are you willing to take a strange brother upon her recommendation?”

Half inclined to laugh, Ellen glanced at the speaker's face, but meeting the grave though somewhat comical look of two very keen eyes, she looked down again, and merely answered “yes”.

“Then if I am to be your brother you must give me a brother's right, you know,” said he, drawing her gently to him, and kissing her gravely on the lips. (274)

This, by contrast, is a real ceremony, creating a meaning for giving where in the other case gift was a mere reenactment of the already-given: the exchanges are mutual and the participants are both property and donor/recipient. John and Ellen both consent to the contract on trust, without force or consideration of parentage (trust is the theme of the quotation heading the chapter too).

Both adoption ceremonies exhibit elements of masochism: the renaming entails a certain loss of former identity, and on both occasions the transaction is eroticised with a kiss. Gravity will also become an integral part of the relationship between Ellen and John, recalling the severity that Deleuze comments on, and having a similar sense of refined emotional expression. In fact, once again on a mythical level, this scene could be paradigmatic of the way human relations are idealized mid 19th century - the point where an over-emotional girl meets a grave

man, where strangers become brothers and sisters by making a contract, one that already sounds like marriage (“are you willing to take...”). The irony of the “strange brother” provokes laughter, and the humour is what the sentimental discourse will struggle to overcome; that the relation of kinship, normally seen as the first cause of society, the thing most proper to culture, that this can be a matter of contractual exchange between strangers (sealed, ambiguously, with a kiss) has a humour which is subversive, threatening the seriousness of kinship and society altogether.

The text, therefore, works to establish an ethic of *strange brotherhood* to substitute for the estranged family, where the principles of association are more lateral. This vision idealizes equality in mutual giving (rather than recognizing differences of power in family hierarchy) and creates a freedom in reciprocity - which, not uncoincidentally, reflects the principles of a free market in which all are equal as proprietors in exchange. Indeed, if masochism is not merely an expression in the voice of piety, as I am arguing, it also indicates a fantasy of abandon(ment)²⁸ and sacrifice which is made possible by the contract and the market, where one’s self is wholly given up to the unwarrantable fair treatment of others, where obligations are replaced by trust. Warner dismisses the incestuous masochism of a former ideology which disrupts the free distribution of oneself; in its place, she installs a religious masochism in which all are subject to the same divine cruelty.

sex and euphemism

²⁸ In both senses: sentimentality’s fantasy of extravagance (abandon) is intimately linked to its selflessness, which is a kind of self-inflicted alienation (abandonment).

“We have eaten up all your grapes, Ellie” said Alice, “...I think I never ate so sweet grapes in my life; John said the reason was because every one tasted of you.” (314)

One of the amusing things about *The Wide, Wide World* for a modern reader is watching its sentimental discourse, in an attitude of total innocence, veer ever closer to obscenity. It never seems able to reach the degree of purity it seeks. If its task is to effect a change in register from the material to the spiritual, converting earthly pleasure into religious ecstasy for instance, its problem lies in the language used to describe value and exchange. Ultimately, sentimentality has to negotiate a tricky path between two central economic discourses, sex and money, needing to refer to them as much as abhor them.

In the previous section we saw Warner creating an ideology of giving in an attempt to displace the idea of self as property. Elsewhere she dramatizes the disavowal of money, to distance virtue from degraded forms of value - to absolve the gift of its wealth, in a sense. For example: Ellen attends a New Year's gathering and is misunderstood to be hoping for money as a present. The following scene demonstrates sentimentality's horror and denial; Mr Marshman, holder of the feast, leaves her present at her table-place:

...there lay a clean bank-note - of what value she could not see, for confusion covered her; the blood rushed to her cheeks and the tears to her eyes. She could not have spoken... She sat with her eyes cast down, fastened upon her plate and the unfortunate bank-bill, which she detested with all her heart. (327)

Sentimentality is visibly horrified by money: it is a failed commodity, unable to be fetishized; served up on a plate but unconsumable, it does not represent a discrete

exchange but the infinite possibilities of others, the pursuits of desire; therefore it is an improper gift. Ellen returns it, relieved of the anxiety of spending:

“...But you make *me* ashamed now - what am I going to do with this? Here you have come and made me a present, and I feel very awkward indeed.”

“I don’t care what you do with it, sir,” said Ellen, laughing, though in imminent danger of bursting into tears; - “I am very glad it is out of *my* hands.”

“But you needn’t think I am going to let you off so,” said he; “you must give me half-a-dozen kisses at least to prove you have forgiven me for making so great a blunder.” (328)

Once again, there is a nervous uncertainty between gravity and humour where transactions mix commercial and symbolic value. As before, the kiss is called upon to ease a complicated knot of obligations and reduce social exchange to a sentimental level of value-free selflessness. But once again the kiss is an ambiguous sign, recalling desire and commerce at the point where it wants to affirm love, fellowship and generosity of spirit.²⁹

The kiss illustrates sentimentality’s other disavowal of the sexual: nowhere in the book is there an erotic kiss, and yet each time one appears it sexualizes the exchange taking place. Warner seems incapable of mentioning sex even when it is inevitable, because she is barred by the language of strange brotherhood; when Alice dies, for example, and a love grows between John and Ellen that is more than fraternal, it cannot be referred to without sounding incestuous. There is one occasion where the couple seem to speak romantically but their words are so euphemistic the reader can hardly tell - Ellen’s thought are anticipated by John alone... ““It is not

²⁹ The tear is the general emblem of sentimentality, whose multiple emotional connotations are always governed by the order of expenditure: they are always copious whatever their meaning. The kiss, however, is at the intersection of general and restricted orders, mediating the value of extravagance within certain moral limits - it is not available to all people, nor is it always a source of pleasure for Ellen (around whom the kisses circulate). The kiss is a conversion from one order into another, hence its common presence at scenes of affective contracts.

wonderful,' said Ellen in a tremulous voice, - 'if I -'"... John replies, "It is not wonderful, Ellie, nor wrong..." and then steers the conversation back to safer topics, "The Joy of the knowledge of Christ!" (481-2)

This euphemistic rhetoric, on the verge of degenerating into nonsense for fear of saying what it means, is the kind of language Melville parodies in *Pierre*, merely accentuating its evasiveness and obscurity. And the unmentionableness of sexual relations also affects the narrative structure, which would conventionally close with the protagonists' marriage. John arrives unexpectedly in Edinburgh and renews the hope that he will rescue our heroine, but the book's final paragraph still gets curiously tangled in the attempt to summarize a "happy ending", and Warner sounds almost begrudging:

For the gratification of those who are never satisfied, one word shall be added, to wit, that

The seed so early sown in little Ellen's mind, and so carefully tended by sundry hands, grew in course of time to all the fair structure and comely perfection it had bid fair to reach - storms and winds that had visited it did but cause the root to take deeper hold; - and at the point of its young maturity it happily fell again into those hands that had of all been most successful in its culture. - In other words, to speak intelligibly, Ellen did in no wise disappoint her brother's wishes, nor he hers. Three or four more years of Scottish discipline wrought her no ill; they did but serve to temper and beautify her Christian character; and then, to her unspeakable joy, she went back to spend her life with the friends and guardians she best loved, and to be to them, still more than she had been to her Scottish relations, "the light of the eyes." (569)

Why this hesitance? Why does Warner recognize her own unintelligibility, only to carry on speaking in sentimental riddles? The narrative appears to repeat the dilemma of deferred gratification that troubles its characters; it is now unable to represent a reunion in a plot which has transformed separation into adoption. It must

remain in suspended animation, in the same way that Ellen herself has an arrested psychological development, because closure would only restore, by gratifying, an earthly economy of desire. Note how the image of the seed returns but without the sexual connotation that made it a symbol of Biblical continuity, which explains the static, stagnant feel to the story; laughably enough, John's potential to inseminate is substituted by his skill at gardening.

the return of wealth

The Feminist Press edition of 1987 also includes for the first time an extra chapter, a second conclusion (which I will refer to as LIII) which raises crucial questions for an interpretation of *The Wide, Wide World*. A note on the text offers the suggestion that it was left out of the first printing and all subsequent editions because it arrived late, and the publisher Mr Putnam thought it “did not contribute substantially to the novel” - though how anyone can read it and think its significance minimal is hard to understand. Putnam must have been extraordinarily unreceptive to the story's “moral” not to notice a very substantial difference in the orientation of the two final chapters.³⁰

LIII is the “happy ending” Warner was so reluctant to write in LII - and as such, it entirely alters the production of moral meaning in the story. It is a

³⁰ Other possibilities are that the novel was considered unfinished as it stood with fifty-two chapters, but Warner could not finish the extra one fast enough to be included (it certainly feels very underwritten); or, conversely, that the second ending was an afterthought that Putnam simply did not like, and he politely exercised an editorial license in this way. See also Mabel Baker, *Light in the Morning: Memories of Susan and Anna Warner* (West Point, NY: Constitution Island Association, 1978).

sumptuary vision which severely undermines the previous ethic of pious asceticism: the heroine returns to America and a home of her own, now married to John (though still nervous about the sexual liaison, it has to be said), and she is bombarded by wealth of all sorts - not only a house and status but an array of cultural trophies, paintings, engravings, sculptures, books, furniture - ludicrously overcompensating for the isolation Ellen has endured in Scotland. She is granted dominion over the house and also a “room of her own” packed with these objects, as if the fetishistic fantasy of ownership has finally come true. As for the young seed’s religious cultivation, it is underplayed here and there is a different kind in its place - the cultivation of taste:

Splendour was not here certainly for the wealth of the room must be found by degrees; and though luxuriously comfortable, luxury was not its characteristic; or if, it was the luxury of the mind. *That* had been catered for. For that nothing had been spared. (574-5)

The poor construction of this sentence and the chapter altogether not only supports the hypothesis that LIII was never integral to the planned novel; it also illustrates Warner’s desperate struggle with the language of value and virtue, the problems involved in straddling the orders of excess and sufficiency. She is trapped wanting to reward her virtuous characters with something other than eternal life, while her religious ethics have implicitly discounted the value of an arena for gratifying desire on earth. For luxury, as we noted at the beginning, is part of a continuum including care and comfort in a femininized discourse of nurture - and as such, it is logically a positive quality within sentimentality, although denied from the start by pious asceticism. The “taste” enshrined in the new home, therefore, is supposed to be a sign of earthly perfection able to mediate the irreconcilable spiritual and material orders, operating as a kind of filter to screen the baser pleasures, and promoting a

“proper” use of objects. But it merely results in shifting the old distinctions of saved and sinning into new categories: the tasteful and tasteless. “How delightfully private this room is - having no entrance but through other rooms where no-one can intrude. Any one else would have put all these beauties downstairs, and so lost half the good of them for the enjoyment of other people’s envy and admiration.” (577) Thus Ellen idealizes her privacy to such an extent that she turns selfishness into a virtue, managing to argue that it would be impious to allow others to indulge their pleasure in appreciating her wealth.

The characters themselves, ironically enough, are uncomfortable with their own luxury and spend a lot of time excusing it to themselves in various ways. “You have given me too much, John!”, Ellen exclaims. Indeed, they struggle obsessively with the language of value, excess and sufficiency in this scene, trying to express wealth within morally acceptable limits, and also trying to reconcile a narrative representing just deserts with the sentimental discourse of expenditure. The general pattern of the dialogue has Ellen calling out in surprise or delight in an object, wondering at its great value and then worried she will not be equal to deserve it, for John then to step in and reassure her that her moral worth justifies such expense - thus reinscribing the sentimental excess within fixed terms. When he presents her with the ultimate trophy, a drawerful of money which will be her unlimited resource, Ellen cries, “The whole expenses of the house! - I should be afraid of doing too much or too little...” John replies, “If your arithmetic gets bewildered, or if anybody gives you trouble, in either case you may come to me.” (582) Thus *accountancy* emerges as the story’s heroic theme, exalting its capacity to rewrite disparate

quantities of value as part of a single economic system - appealing above all to what is adequate and commensurate, rather than what is extravagant.³¹

The chapter concludes in quite the opposite way to LII:

“I am satisfied, “ said Ellen softly, nestling again to his side; - “that is enough. I want no more.” (583)

There are echoes of Psalm 23 but the vision has been transformed into an image of *earthly* abundance which obviates the role of heaven completely; furthermore, Ellen’s satisfaction reflects the reader’s, who is gratified more readily than before with a closure that is agreeable, unambiguous and thus renders the whole narrative more *consumable* as an aesthetic object. Where LII was deliberately suspended, and resistant to the reader’s gratification (gratification being part of an economy of desire which sentimental piety has pit itself against), LIII effectively commodifies the narrative, rewarding the reader alongside the heroine.

³¹ *The Quaker City* also heroises the accountant (see below).

The Lamplighter: Sentimentalizing Capital

“Gertrude has no money in her purse, but her soul is the pure gold, tried in the furnace of sorrow and affliction, and thence come forth bright and unalloyed” (501)

The design behind *The Wide, Wide World*’s project of “strange brotherhood” is to promote the family as the archetypal social unit and model for national identity, determining hierarchy and mutual obligation in a form that has religious sanction. The book’s problem, however, is that the idealized language used to describe the family eliminates the mention of sexual exchange, and therefore it cannot provide a rhetoric of procreation for the community. The narrative’s charged yet stultified feel comes from its lack of erotic release. In contrast, *The Lamplighter* attempts a different social construction: a new communitarian ethic which looks beyond the family for ways to create obligation and responsibility. *The Wide, Wide World*’s narrative is geographically reactionary, moving backwards from city to country and even back to the Old World for more authentic social forms, but *The Lamplighter*’s outlook is more modern: its urban and suburban settings and portrayal of tourism are especially up to date, and show Cummins trying to articulate such new relations between strangers as are produced in a rapidly emerging commercial culture. The specific economic contexts for this novel are suburbia and mercantilism - a new social threshold or a kind of internal national frontier, and an underlying logic of

foreign markets. The tension in this novel will be between Cummins's anticipation of the new forces and her unrelinquished allegiance to former sentimental representations.

Because this text puts a commercial environment closer to centre stage than most "domestic" sentimental novels, one of the questions it raises is the interrelation of religious and commercial sources of value. The novel tries to integrate ideas of good conduct with ideas of good business - in strictly gendered terms, it has to be said - and in so doing its narrative gets caught in a number of contradictions. There is the familiar sight of a novel wanting to have it all, offering readerly satisfaction in a story of visual pleasures, just rewards and an unambiguous closure, while at the same time suggesting that real value lies in their renunciation. But my assertion will be that at the very moment that sentimentality wants to state its difference from commercial values, it only reveals itself to be heavily indebted to them. The following will show how two central sentimental precepts, the virtue of self-sacrifice and the notion of brotherhood, are not in opposition to materialist principles as they are made out to be, but are in fact contributory factors in the legitimation of capitalist practices. Such an approach takes the lead from the work done by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, relating economic developments to changes in the religious frame of mind, and from a later extrapolation of his conjectures by Benjamin Nelson called *The Idea of Usury*. Weber's notion of "worldly asceticism" helps to explain the complex translations between material and spiritual value which informed the early stages of capitalism; Nelson describes how its increase corresponded with shifts in the theological

definition of brotherhood, which distinguished between friends and strangers and authorized the laws governing exchanges internal and external to a community. Both of these concepts, I believe, are to be found in exaggerated form in sentimentality, overstressed as if it is struggling to argue a lost case. Its rhetoric of charity and sympathy is primarily nostalgic, since these are obsolete practices which it pretends to rediscover in modern conditions.

worldly asceticism

Weber's well-known thesis is that the rise of capitalism cannot be explained by the history of its material practices alone - such as the release of capital, the expansion of foreign markets or the specialization of labour - but it also requires a psychological dimension: people needed to be *predisposed* somehow to act in certain practical and rational ways (26). Capitalism required a desire for the systematic on which to establish its principles of rationalization and calculation, and such a desire was to be found in the ethic of what he calls "worldly asceticism", taking hold in the western world from the Middle Ages. Worldly asceticism was a new sensibility, originally deriving from the cloister but then transplanted into a wider public arena, and ultimately reaching into all aspects of social life. It radically changed the complexion of western culture because it was no longer an ethic for the select few, those who pursued a special monastic vocation outside of civil life - it prescribed behaviour for all, and in Weber's eyes it rationalized the "spontaneous" character of community, in the sense that such a domain had not previously been subject to moral

inspection. “[Christian asceticism] strode into the market-place of life, slammed the door of the monastery behind it, and undertook to penetrate just that daily routine of life with its methodicalness, to fashion it into a life in the world, but neither of nor for this world.”³²

The key to the radical nature of this new sensibility is to be found in these apparently paradoxical words - *in but neither of nor for...* Worldly asceticism is both pious and materialist, since it commits individuals wholeheartedly to the world while renouncing the meaning of that world in itself. It places daily life (not only work but wealth, society, nation) in the centre of humanity’s moral vision, as the true focus of its endeavours, and yet since it values endeavour in itself the actual objects of daily life become irrelevant. This is a fundamental contradiction - but fortunately for capitalism, one that is dynamic rather than incapacitating: it constantly impels activity by giving an ethical dimension to business and labour and taking away the importance of their end results. In effect, it represents the priority of productivity over production. As Weber points out, the absence of utilitarian reason in activity maintains the individual in a religious frame of mind:

In fact, the *summum bonum* of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudaemonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture. It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. (53)

At the same time as spiritualizing the world of work, worldly asceticism brought a system of calculation closer to spirituality. Economic assessment

³² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* trans. Talcott Parsons, foreword R.H. Tawney (London: Unwin, 1930), 154.

permeated the discourse of sin, virtue and salvation even while the afterlife seemed increasingly distanced from earthly affairs. This overspill of values from one realm into another Weber traces back to Calvin's problematic of grace and good works, which rendered the individual endlessly morally accountable and incapable of knowing the value of his/her actions in terms of the Divine standard.³³ Puritanism continued the process with its enthusiastic rationalization of the conscience - Weber observes Bunyan's "characteristically tasteless extreme of comparing the relation of a sinner to his God with that of customer and shopkeeper." (124) Ultimately, the capitalist spirit is epitomized in Benjamin Franklin's example of a character divided into constituent sins and virtues which are classified in terms of their profitability. Thrift, industry and self-reliance are moral qualities *because* they are economic. In this way material and spiritual value are now so conflated that the idea of moral conduct becomes a travesty: where the pursuit of gain is equated with virtue, it follows that any method which encourages gain, however unscrupulous, is justifiable. Franklin commends the above virtues only inasmuch as they contribute to a beneficial public image, a personal credit that encourages further profitable dealings with others - "Honesty is useful, because it assures credit; so are punctuality, industry, frugality, and that is the reason they are virtues. A logical deduction from this would be that where, for instance, the appearance of honesty serves the same purpose, that would suffice, and an unnecessary surplus of this virtue would evidently appear to Franklin's eyes as unproductive waste." (52)

³³ Weber explains that the "tremendous tension" Calvinism created was due to its minimization of the sacrament of absolution, central to Catholicism: "The God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single good works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system. There was no place for the very human Catholic cycle of sin, repentance, atonement, release, followed by renewed sin." (117)

So Franklin's emphasis on the utilitarian value of one's actions actually minimizes the degree of individual integrity at the same time as it asserts a sincere religious commitment: as if God were ordering the self to lie to others. Credibility (which is merely the financial concept of *creditability*, worn down over time) replaces trustworthiness as the correct measure of the soul, and the creation of confidence becomes the most important element in social exchanges. From here it is not difficult to see why the confidence man haunts the 19th century: his rationally unscrupulous conduct in the pursuit of gain is ultimately indistinguishable from Franklin's. Contrary to appearances, the conman is not an anomaly in capitalism but its *most logical and virtuous avatar*.

According to the logic of worldly asceticism, it was not wealth as such that posed a problem for society, but gratification. The ethic allowed for no enjoyment of the wealth it produced, and as a consequence it required another means of disposal to avoid the stockpiling of goods. The real enemy, in this sense, was *luxury* - both the indulgence in physical pleasures and the superfluous presence of goods without a use³⁴; and the remedy was charity, which can be seen not so much as a supplementary method of distributing wealth to the unfortunate, as something for the rich ascetics to *do* with their acquisitions. In this period the meanings of the word

³⁴ This is, of course, where Bataille laments "the relegation of mankind to gloryless activity", since such an attitude falls short of the sovereign practices of extravagance and squandering that ought to characterize humanity; he believes that worldly asceticism's concern with the moderate and reserved reduces life from its own sacred proportions. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume I: Consumption* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 124. For Bataille, the significant factor in the history of capitalism is not the new Protestant disposition but the loss of the sacred in human existence, and the consequent divorce of the economy from moral origins. Capitalism being extraordinarily difficult to justify from first principles, it requires a new conception of the religious in order to emerge as a rational structure of its own: the "logic" of production, the "autonomy" of market forces, have to be discovered by a different kind of person. "...[B]y accepting the extreme consequences of a demand for religious purity [the reformist spirit] destroyed the sacred world, the world of non-productive consumption, and handed the earth over to the men of production, to the bourgeois." (126) And Benjamin Franklin is the worst of them.

evolve from “fellowship” into its more modern sense as “giving away” because of this increased economic role: charity becomes morally sanctioned waste disposal.³⁵

If Weber’s paradoxical ethic is the key factor behind capitalism’s success, then it finds its rhetorical champion in sentimental fiction. The same ambivalence in the relation to value underlies the kind of formal problem of *The Wide, Wide World* where the narrative does not know how to deal with the pleasure of gratification, nor how to reward its heroine - and whose closure is consequently “extravagant but insufficient”. *The Lamplighter* will also be seen doing the job of constructing a sacred idea of value while apparently extricating itself from vulgar economic concerns. And if Weber’s lesson is ultimately that the appeal to an autonomous ideal realm in fact provides the *conditions* for a more secure materialism, it will be interesting to look for such a construction in the conceptual geography of Cummins’s novel.

brotherhood / otherhood

The second assertion is that capitalism’s development has been coincident with a shift in the perceived legitimacy of exchange. Trade has always been a moral issue: and as Mauss’s examination of the significance of the gift in different cultures asserts, anxieties over the acceptability of profit testify to a certain violence in all transactions, which is a trace of the primal state of war. If it is unfair to make too

³⁵ Cf. John Wesley’s recommendations to this effect: Weber, 175.

much profit out of another, it suggests that all exchanges are already inherently oppressive in some way, and must be controlled in the interests of social order. Historical differences between tribe and enemy form the basis of moral prescriptions on commerce, and in the following I want to link these with the distinction between friend and stranger that is to be found in sentimental discourse. The argument is that Christianity's idea of fellowship extended to all has an inbuilt expansionism; its aspirations to encompass the globe with its vision of human experience effect a transformation in the notion of the stranger which proves a central factor in capitalism's taking hold. Nelson summarizes:

In short, Western morality after Calvin reaffirmed the vocabulary of universalism, refused to concede that God could authorise or equity allow us to treat the Other differently from the Brother, assimilated the Brother to the Other, and eventuated in the Universal Otherhood.

In modern capitalism, all are "brothers" in being equally "others".³⁶

Nelson's work traces the history of Deuteronomy's prescription on usury, which was used from medieval times to found moral principles of exchange and define Christianity's idea of community. It is a prohibition with an exception: usury is forbidden in the Hebrews' relations with each other, yet permissible outside the tribe in dealings with strangers.

Deut. xxiii, 19: *Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother; usury of money, usury of victuals, usury of any thing that is lent upon usury.*

xxiii, 20: *Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury: that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all that thou settest thine hand to in the land whither thou goest to possess it.*

³⁶ Nelson, *The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood*, 2nd enlarged edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), xxv.

This proves to be another dynamic contradiction, working simultaneously for and against the propagation of commercial principles. It caused a problem for the theologians of an expanding Church, since the exception seemed to undermine the traditional antipathy towards profit (exemplified in Christ's outrage against the money-lenders), and compromise its moral standing by discriminating against aliens. During the Reformation radicals argued that the exception was above all a historical issue, addressed at the Jews' state of persecution; since Christ all people had become part of the same brotherhood and therefore all forms of usury were immoral. The conservatives' strategy was to declare the prohibition obsolete instead, also encouraging a universal vision of society, but this time with the legitimate practice of exploitation *within* it. As a result they promoted the notion of equality as a *common estrangement*, rather than a common brotherhood. The reconception ultimately proved very conducive to capitalism, for which both the preservation of non-economic obligation within communities and the disrespect for the property of the alien was unsuitable.

The evolution of universal otherhood is construed as a positive movement away from clannish belligerence and towards an increased availability in the concept of equality, but sadly it happens at the expense of mutual bonds: it is an equality of reduced intensity. It reflects a simultaneous "universalization and devaluation of friendship", in Nelson's words (142). But his argument is unable to account for the modern phenomenon of philanthropy: why it should be that an increased geographical breadth in the legitimacy of commerce also sees a strengthening of benevolent discourse; according to his theory, one ought to observe a total absence

of “brotherly” relations in global capitalism. Instead of investigating the instances where traces of friendliness can be detected, he concludes rather wistfully that what is needed is a “strong” universalism, a *real* “Brotherhood of Man”. So why are major capitalists also major philanthropists? And in a similar way, why is there a persistent discourse of friendship in the fiction of the 19th century?

My tentative suggestion would be that 19th century culture engages in mass nostalgia when it comes to the morality of commerce, and sentimentality’s versions of brotherhood and self-sacrifice are part of this. The gift’s structure is intrinsically nostalgic, because of its problematic relation to rationalized economies - it refers back to pre-contractual, non-equivalent exchanges³⁷; and therefore wherever there is an occasion of giving (be it in sympathy or charity) it always harks back to former values, evoking a sense of human relations which are past. Likewise, the rhetoric of benevolence in sentimental fiction works to reconstruct a sense of brotherhood from its modern remains.³⁸ *The Wide, Wide World*’s “strange brotherhood” attempts the incorporation of allcomers into a national family - a domain of mutual ownership where alienated property is not allowed to exist. But *The Lamplighter*’s nostalgic rediscovery takes place in the suburban and touristic spaces of a more fluid society. The novel concerns a young girl’s education into Christian values, from vengeance to forgiveness, as she is adopted into a sympathetic community transcending

³⁷ If, as soon as a gift is recognized as such, it passes into rational economies of gratitude or counter-gift and disappears, then for it to retain its nature as gift it must always be *nostalgic*, looking back to the point at which it had not yet been recognized... The gift, we might say, is always already late. (Derrida prefers to understand the gift as logically impossible but his reasoning is similar; see *Given Time, I: Counterfeit Money*)

³⁸ Incidentally, Nelson argues that the Deuteronomic code’s influence “passed into limbo” (132) shortly after 1840. He ends with a sketch of Father O’Callaghan, a Catholic priest who was forced to leave his Irish parish because of his anti-usury protests and found exile in the United States (where the sanction of commercial practices in New York dismayed him even more), dying there in 1861. The period I am dealing with, therefore, has just seen the moral-economic definition of friend and stranger just recently fall into obsolescence, from which it is nostalgically recuperated by sentimental literature.

geographical and social boundaries; but these narratives of self-sacrifice and friendship are nostalgic despite their modern settings - they evoke a kind of middle-class perfection before its downfall. Tourism and suburbia are both represented as pure, authentic modes of living: their signs of labour have been erased so that the individual appears free of social pressures in a more natural relation. At the same time, however, this is a representation of Lifestyle - and the visual pleasures it offers create a powerful fetishism for the reader.

thresholds

The Lamplighter is in fact a character from the opening scene of *The Wide, Wide World* who, though incidental to the action, is central to the way that we first encounter its protagonist and thus indirectly organizes the story's moral tone. Ellen watches him in a daydream by the window in her sick mother's room; he marks the coming of night and represents for the child the dreary yet spellbinding life of the outside world. The tableau reflects the novel's political orientation by prioritizing a domestic perspective; as for the reader, the home is a cosy place from which to observe the rest of the world and somewhere to return to after imaginative engagement with it is over. Maria Susanna Cummins, on the other hand, uses the lamplighter as a figure for the complex intersections between public and private, and the inescapability of a dominant social space where strangers exchange. As he passes out of the sight of Warner's narrative, we could imagine the lamplighter walking a little further on, turning a corner and crossing class boundaries into a

poorer zone where there is nothing so cosy as a windowseat; Cummins's novel presents instead a little girl "upon the wooden door-step of a low-roofed, dark and unwholesome-looking house... gazing up the street with much earnestness." Gerty is also in between domestic and worldly spaces, watching unwatched, but quiet absorption is hard to maintain where the threshold is so thin and insecure: "The house-door, which was open behind her, was close to the side-walk; and the step on which she sat was so low that her little unshod feet rested on the cold bricks." Nor, this time, is there a protective glass pane between the child and the street: thus Cummins is resetting the paradigm in a different economic environment where there is more at stake, and the domestic sphere is compromised greatly by an increased proximity to the world outside. It is the *threshold* which becomes the novel's thematic terrain (from doorstep to suburbs) where social relations are constructed. Here the lamplighter intervenes, a stranger who will ultimately rescue Gerty from a miserable family life:

At this moment Nan Grant came to the door, saw what had happened, and commenced pulling the child into the house, amidst blows, threats, and profane and brutal language. The lamplighter tried to appease her; but she shut the door in his face.³⁹

In the paradigm of sentimental rescue, the stranger is the agent of democratic supervision: s/he forces the principles of a general community onto a family's atomized hierarchy. The threshold where s/he intervenes is a space of constant exchange between public and private where the society's values are tested and contested, and in Cummins's text it provides the site for her new social ethics, transcending the violence within the home and the violence of the street. The lamplighter intervenes with acts of kindness - first the gift of a kitten, then taking

³⁹ Maria Susanna Cummins, *The Lamplighter* ed. Donald A. Koch (New York: Odyssey Press, 1968), 214.

Gerty into his own home - and the kindness becomes a political force; not only does it trigger the child's transformation from miscreant to angel, but it anticipates a series of other compassionate acts between characters which comes to dominate the narrative. It is as if benevolence is contagious.⁴⁰

The rescue awakens a sense of indebtedness in Gerty, and her affection for the lamplighter (called Truman Flint) generates a chain of good intentions: "it was that which made her so submissive and patient in her sickness, so grateful for his care and kindness, so anxious to do something in return. It was that deep love for her first friend, which, never wavering, and growing stronger to the last, proved, in after years, a noble motive for exertion, a worthy incentive to virtue." (240) But Cummins continues, "for the present it was *not enough*": the child will also need God's guidance (a "new light to her soul") to supplement the powers of compassion. The practical moral economy needs Christian sanction in the way that good works need the stamp of grace, although it seems to be producing good naturally; and this tension between worldly and otherworldly will remain throughout the novel. Cummins's use of the lamp image is evidently an attempt to resolve the conflict, for it can refer to both realms: the *narrative* of goodness, a chain of benevolent acts like streetlamps lit up through the city - and the *standard* of goodness, the Divine lamplighter, whom Gerty appeals to from a lonely attic at the end of the first scene. "Who lit it? Somebody lit it! Some good person, I know! O! how could he get up

⁴⁰ For the idea of virtue as contagion, see Jane Tompkins's reading of Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* in *Sensational Designs*, where she sets out her theory of sentimental literature's persuasive cultural work. Nevertheless, it is also noteworthy that the same novel has been read in completely opposite terms, as an early conman's story - illustrating this time on a critical level the unstable rationale at the heart of doing good. Cf James F. Russo, "The Chameleon of Convenient Vice", *Studies in the Novel* 11 (1979), 381-405.

so high!’ And Gerty fell asleep, wondering who lit the star.” (215)⁴¹

So the sentimental economy which includes benevolent action is driven by excess, each action leaving a remainder or creating a surplus which impels the next. Compassion itself is an endless resource which is never used up in its expenditure - Truman, in the reader’s position, is shown “secretly wiping away a tear, when Gerty recounted her childish griefs. He had heard the story before, and he cried then. He often heard it afterwards, but never *without crying*.” (239) Later Gerty will be able to pass on the capacity for emotional response to a blind woman who becomes her closest friend: “The child’s grief was contagious; and, for the first time in years, Emily wept bitterly for her blindness.” (256) In contrast, and representing the general social climate which benevolence is set to displace, there is a more coldhearted and *reserved* kind of exchange - the logic of class, markets and men; its reasoning, although outwardly just, is shown to be soul-destroying; its principles of reciprocal calculation shown to be mean-spirited alongside sentimental generosity; and its narratives are those of vengeance. Mr Graham, Emily’s father and head of Gerty’s second adopted family, embodies these principles. He cannot understand, for example, that Gerty feels a duty to look after her poor and sick friends instead of joining his touring party, thinking only in terms of his rightful claim due to what he has done for her (326). For him, friendship is merely a business arrangement - as a second invitation on an excursion shows: “If you have contracted debts, let me know to what amount, and I will see that all is made right before you leave. Trusting to

⁴¹ When Sarah Jane Hale, editorializing for the nation’s biggest women’s magazine, wanted to complain about the increasing participation of women in commerce, she chose the same trope: “...it is as though a star should strive to come down from its place in the calm sky and take the station of a gas-lamp in a crowded city street.” (“Editor’s Table”, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* Feb 1852; quoted in Brown, *Domestic Individualism*, 179)

your being now come to a sense of your duty, I am ready to subscribe myself your friend..." (361) This "commercial" ethic is the real villain in the story, which must be vanquished before Emily can be reunited with her exiled lover. But from the beginning Gerty has to learn to reject it by transforming her vengeful anger into forgiveness. Ostensibly it is a shift from Old to New Testament doctrines, from the justice of an eye for an eye to the charity of turning the other cheek - but in historical terms it participates in the ideological removal of women from a full participation in the circulation of value. Revenge is unfeminine for conservative Victorians, in the same way as outrage or any raising of voice.⁴²

The challenge to revenge occurs in another threshold scene, when Gerty accompanies Truman on his round of the city's streetlamps. They cross back into *The Wide, Wide World's* territory and Gerty and her friend are mesmerised by the lifestyles they can see inside the houses - it is a kind of domestic window-shopping: "...see what a beautiful fire - What a splendid lady! And look! look at the father's shoes! What is that on the table? I guess it's good! There's a big looking-glass; and O, Willie! an't they dear little handsome children?" (249) But as each streetlamp is lit the two children outside become exposed to the gaze of those inside, and Gerty is scared away. They return to the slum quarters and coincidentally pass Nan Grant's house, where in sudden anger Gerty throws a stone through the window. As

⁴² When Fanny Fern published *Ruth Hall*, a novel about a woman finding commercial success as a writer and getting her own back on those who had consigned her to failure and poverty, *The New York Times* addressed the propriety of a female version of such a narrative:

If Fanny Fern were a man, - a man who believed that the gratification of revenge were a proper occupation for one who has been abused, and that those who have injured us are fair game, *Ruth Hall* would be a natural and excusable book. But we confess that we cannot understand how a delicate, suffering woman can hunt down even her persecutors so remorselessly. We cannot think so highly of [such] an author's womanly gentleness. (Dec 20, 1854)

Women are supposed to be *more than vengeful*, and only men are allowed to settle differences. [*Ruth Hall*, ed/intro Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), ix]

before, the lower-class's private realm is fragile and physically invaded, while the middle-class home is protected and offered for show. But furthermore, the conjunction of the two events links revenge and class voyeurism: Gerty's desire for the higher social level corresponds with her symbolic destruction of her past. The tone here is ambivalent because the narrative wants both to renounce and sanction the violence of justice: on the one hand teaching forgiveness and acceptance while on the other reflecting the novel's social aspirations which require a distancing from poorer conditions in the strongest terms. Gerty does begin to understand the wrong she has done, but nobody makes her pay for the broken window.

As is evident, the trope of sight which began with the lamplighter is carried through the novel due to Emily's blindness, providing a means of correlating material and spiritual worlds; seeing is at once an inner vision and a desiring gaze. Much of the story concentrates on the mutual relationship of the two women: Emily gives Gerty a Christian education while Gerty becomes "eyes to her benefactor" (316), reading aloud to her, and as her guide through the city and abroad. Thus the exchanges between the blind and the sighted not only perform an important role connecting real and ideal values but the relationship also dramatizes the reading position. As Gerty envisages the world for Emily, in the same way the text mediates its fictional world to the reader, who is visually impaired, and therefore construed as the *object of care*. Thus the narrative is able to unite its spectacular display of middle-class lifestyle with a moral perspective, sanitizing the play of desire in the text.

liminal society: suburbia and tourism

The Grahams are a prosperous middle-class family who own a house in the suburbs outside Boston, and it is here that Cummins thematizes her principles of a sympathetic community. Unlike Warner's her vision of social networks extends beyond family into more fluid and transient groups, where relatives and visitors come and go and strangers are accepted with relative openness. The exchanges are as multiple across this new cultural threshold as on the city streets. Cummins clearly states that the suburbs are not an atavistic denial of urban culture because they are in constant communication with the city, so their attraction is a new kind of comfort:

Those who seek retirement and seclusion, however, can nowhere be more sure to find it than in one of these half-country, half-city homes; and many a family will, summer after summer, resort to the same quiet corner, and, undisturbed by visitors or gossip, maintain an independence of life which would be quite impossible either in the crowded streets of the town, where one's acquaintances are forever dropping in, or in the strictly country villages, where every new comer is observed, called upon and talked about. (310)

The move from city to suburbs seems to be a symbolic remove from the pressures of modernity and commerce. But notice how it is characterized by its aversion to embedded community: the city is overcrowded, and the country is likewise afflicted by an oppressive gossipy atmosphere. The suburbs is not so much a dream of a new community as a new independence *from* society, an escape from the pressure of others, reconstructing communal privacy without traditional networks of obligation.⁴³

⁴³ A hundred years later, however, things will have come full circle and the suburbs characterized as the place of utmost conformity and constriction - home of Organization Man... William Whyte describes a sentimental community gone stale: "For it is not the evils of organization life that puzzle him, *but its very beneficence*. He is imprisoned in brotherhood." *The Organization Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), 16.

The tourism that dominates the narrative setting speaks similarly of a new social mobility in which people are constantly on a cultural threshold, discovering for the first time the dialectic of encountering new terrain through an enclosed perspective that means they never leave home. The Grahams and their party travel down to the South, around New York State, and plan trips to Europe; and though the novel begins and ends in the city for the most part the action is always taking place elsewhere, and with many characters off-stage, wandering far beyond America: is as if *The Lamplighter* is midway between the unworldliness of Romance and Realism's new spatial anchoring. Cummins describes tourism's liminal effect on the family physician, an old-fashioned Bostoner struggling to come to terms with modernity's impersonality and lack of social structure. He is frustrated by the changes in travel, no longer conducted with the traditional civility - "...people moved in masses; a single individual was a man of no influence, a mere unit in the great whole"; and yet, in between the worries of embarking and disembarking (where the new breed of functionaries, representing modern labour, hassle him) he finds a dreamlike state of sympathy with strangers:

Thus were these important members of society [the functionaries] stigmatized, and loudly were they railed at by our traveller, who invariably, at the commencement and close of every trip, got wrought up to a high pitch of excitement at the wrongs and indignities to which he was subjected. It was astonishing, however, to see how quickly he cooled down, and grew comfortable and contented, when he was once established in car or steamboat, or had succeeded in obtaining suitable quarters at a hotel. He would then immediately subside into the obliging, friendly and sociable man of the world; would make acquaintance with everybody about him, and talk and behave with such careless unconcern, that one would have supposed he considered himself fixed for life, and was moreover perfectly satisfied with the fate that destiny had assigned to him. (423)

Tourism appears to forget hierarchy and the class matters of dignity and civility: it

seems to recreate a sense of a world community on equal terms regardless of economic differences. But it is this that tourism works to hide away, by eliding the traces of modern industry and creating a vision of “an independence of life”; and as such it provides an ideal setting for Cummins’s nostalgic ethics. Gerty completes her lessons in the principles of self-sacrifice and friendship here, amid the liaisons, jealousies and gossip of the travelling party, which functions as a microcosm of society detached from the forces of the city. The characters enjoy a freedom from economics, and it is on such a freedom that the principles of benevolence are constructed.⁴⁴

the production of benevolence

Up to this point sexual interest has been absent from the narrative - Emily’s lover exiled long ago for an obscure crime, and Gerty’s friend Willie abroad with a colonial enterprise - but a shift occurs in the narrative when they return, and with them the capital that will secure the moral rewards for the heroines. The following examples show how this wealth is cleansed of its economic inscription and virtue, correspondingly, is made to seem spontaneous and unencumbered by social obligations.

Emily’s lover is also, by a stroke of fate which is hardly unpredictable in

⁴⁴ Cf Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976). For an account of the narrative forms accompanying the rise of western tourism, also see James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to ‘Culture’* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Ch.2, esp. 80-97.

sentimental fiction, Gerty's father. He first appears mysteriously, trailing the travelling party and reluctant to reveal his identity. Having accidentally caused Emily's blindness, and then been unjustly blamed for a forgery in her father's bank, his double exile has left him embittered and scornful of humanity. Therefore his restoration to the family coincides with his conversion from cynicism to compassion. In the book's most dramatic and pivotal incident, a ferryboat carrying the party back to New York on the Hudson is wrecked, leaving Emily and Gertrude stranded on a burning stern with Amory (who is still incognito). He has to jump and swim for safety with Emily then return for Gertrude, so he tells her to display her red veil for guidance. They swim away and suddenly Gertrude is grabbed by Isabel, panic-stricken and demanding rescue. Now Isabel is the grand villain who has been plotting against Gertrude all along and has apparently won her childhood sweetheart Willie too. In the utmost selflessness, because she believes Willie would prefer Isabel rescued before herself, she attaches the veil to Isabel and Amory rescues *her* in ignorance.

In this way Amory is put in the position of sentimental rescuer despite himself - for he would not have rescued Isabel deliberately: the *unsympathetic* man is only prompted to action by the hidden affection for his daughter. Therefore the rescue does not count as benevolent, as he asserts when Willie comes to thank him:

“The friends of Isabella Clinton, sir, owe you a debt of gratitude which it would be impossible for them ever to repay.”

“You are mistaken, Mr Sullivan; I have done nothing which places that young lady's friends under a particle of obligation to me.”

“Did you not save her life?”

“Yes; but nothing was further from my intention.” (488)

In refusing repayment of gratitude two things are occurring: Amory refuses to

recognize this as a benevolent event, thereby reinforcing his self-image as a moral utilitarian. However, it also leaves the event *signifying a remainder* - a totally unmotivated, unrewarded act that is superfluous to the system of relationships between the characters. The rescue is an accident out of an accident. So, though conceived in Amory's mind as consistently antisentimental, a rational position to take, in this respect the refusal of gratitude is now converted in the text to a *purier* form of benevolence, more excessive, since a gift unacknowledged even by the giver. Of course, Amory's honour redounds onto Gerty since she is the real source of the gift of selflessness - but the key point is that Amory refuses to reveal what happened to protect his own identity, and thus her act is *kept a secret* within the narrative, only open to the reader (something which is especially notable in a genre which accords value to transparency and the revelation of identity as opposed to villainous deceit). The secret is there to shore up the gift against its disappearance back into a rational, everyday system of social exchanges, and generate a new narrative of sovereign value. With this information withheld, all characters remain strangers between themselves and benevolence, therefore, appears detached from the obligations of kinship. For when Gerty forces an act of rescue on somebody whose only moral values are drawn from family, she is performing a mythical function. In Nelson's terms, she generates the respect of Otherhood out of Brotherhood. She converts the value of family bonds into the virtue of equal treatment for strangers, and thus extends a sense of universal morality. With the real motivation for the ungenerous action suppressed, Cummins creates an impression of independently circulating goodness.

The above scene of gratitude is followed by a private discussion between Amory and Willie in which, almost parodically, Amory tries to disarrange his daughter's marriage; suggesting that Willie should prefer the wealth and status of Isabel to the pity and affection he has for Gerty; "... I only speak from the dictates of common sense, when I bid you beware how you make, in the disposal of yourself, such a very unequal bargain." (498) The ritual of a disguised and supposedly disinterested figure testing the lover's sincerity is standard in classical or chivalrous myths, but there is also a good deal of modern personal risk involved and the reader is meant to appreciate Amory's gamble, staking his family's destiny on true love. In return Willie declares his "voluntary renunciation" of wealth and aristocracy. This takes an entire chapter, and so lengthy is the diatribe against fashionable society in general that one suspects it is performing an important ideological role in the novel. Indeed, it is part of the same rhetorical construction of benevolence, which elides its economic components in order to create a pure realm of exchange on a level of textual consumption: the reader can enjoy a feast of detailed imagery of upper middle class leisure throughout the novel, having now disapproved of its real enjoyment along with the hero. In a telling revision of the tropes of threshold and spectatorship, recalling the young children's voyeuristic window-shopping, Cummins is seen attempting to explain how Willie gained such ascetic insight:

In the unvaried round of pleasure in which my days, and nights even, were frequently passed, there was much to gratify my self-love, foster my ambition, and annihilate every worthier emotion. And here, believe me, *my safety lay in my success*. Had I approached the outskirts of fashionable life, and been compelled to *linger, with longing eyes, at the threshold*, I might, even now, be loitering there, a deceived spectator of joys which it was not permitted to me to enter and share, or, having gained a partial entrance, be eagerly employed in pushing my way onward. (500)

The interesting thing about this remark is its revision of the ethic of worldly asceticism. Willie's virtue is not just certified by his wealth, as Franklin would have had it, but *made possible by it*; he needs to pass into a higher social class in order to gain moral enlightenment. And his spectatorship mediates the reader's own problematic of aesthetic consumption and pious renunciation, for Willie is both attracted and repelled, and ends up recommending the virtue of social mobility at the same time as he denies it: his pious disillusionment with the trappings of fashion occurs *because of his success*, and his success relieves him of the sin of being "eager" in pushing towards it. Gratification, not disavowal, is the cure for desire. It is a very modern disenchantment.

sentimental capital

In an essay called "*The Gift*, the Indian Gift and the 'Indian Gift'", Jonathan Parry sets out to show how western culture has developed a particular *ideology* of altruism along with certain constructions of reciprocity, interest and obligation despite the prevailing assumption that a gift is a universally recognizable phenomenon. He suggests that Mauss's key text on exchange, *The Gift*, has been misinterpreted by those critics who assume a common anthropological subject like the western man of today in all societies - someone who is primarily an individual, voluntarily entering into society by means of rational and reciprocal acts with other individuals. In fact, says Parry, such concepts are merely our own invention and may not mean anything, along with the gift itself, outside our own culture and

history. Mauss's thesis did not assert the gift as a binding force among atomistic and mutually competitive selves: on the contrary, his case studies of Maori, Trobriand and Hindu systems indicate an attention to far more holistic societies in "total prestation" from which the individual and the individual's contract later emerge. So for Parry, Mauss's is the story of humanity's rupture and separation from an earlier state of mutuality and cyclical stability.⁴⁵

Out of the rupture not only do the conditions for a capitalist economy evolve, but the moral oppositions for modern exchange are born. "*Gift-exchange* - in which persons and things, interest and disinterest are merged - has been fractured, leaving gifts *opposed* to exchange, persons *opposed* to things and interest to disinterest. The ideology of a disinterested gift emerges in parallel with an ideology of a purely interested exchange." (458) In a similar way I have argued that sentimentality's construction of benevolence is a function of its disguised but fundamental capitalist logic. After all, the rhetorical drama of the sentimental novel is not so much a conflict between an old ethic of conduct and an emerging modern form of exchange, but a tension between religious and economic discourses that have always been at its core. Both the novels that I have looked at exhibit an ideology of "antieconomic" virtue in parallel with an ideology of consumption; one that extends to the novel as mode of instruction and aesthetic object too. And just like in *The Wide, Wide World*, capital returns with a vengeance in the final chapters of *The Lamplighter*. The ruptured families are restored, sanctified by wealth and comfort (the older couple

⁴⁵ Jonathan Parry, "*The Gift*, The Indian Gift and the 'Indian Gift'", *MAN* 21/3 1986, 453-473. Bataille also refers to a mythical "intimacy" from which we have been alienated and which religion above all is called upon to restore. See *The Accursed Share*, Vol I Part 4, "The Bourgeois World".

retire to Amory's family mansion, the younger to a town house in sight of Gerty's old street).

The return home also signifies a return of economic activity to a "proper" sphere. Both Amory and Willie have been travellers abroad, in exile and on business, gaining their fortunes by various means of trade and prospecting which Cummins glosses over as much as possible. Hence while she attempts to insitute a new benevolent ethics on social thresholds, commerce is taking place on a larger global frontier beyond the frame, gathering the capital necessary to certify the heroes' virtuous selflessness. The narrative is wholly sponsored by foreign markets offstage. And the restoration suggests a nostalgia for a domestic economy affirming family heritage and static community, in the face of the unseen and ungovernable system of global finance. But Amory and Willie present opposing images of global economic culture: Amory is the immoral vagrant, carpet-bagger and speculator, Willie the moral stability within chaos. Amory's vision of *wandering beyond limits* is the nightmare of alienation: "With varied ends in view, following strongly-contrasted employments, and with fluctuating fortune, I have travelled over the world. My feet have trodden almost every land; I have sailed upon every sea, and breathed the air of every clime. I am familiar with the city and the wilderness, the civilized man and the savage. I have leaned the sad lesson that peace is nowhere, and friendship for the most part but a name. If I have taught myself to hate, shun and despise humanity, it is because I know it well." (523) Willie's sentimental values, in contrast, seem quite pathetic - "Among the wanderers, we hope, - ay, we *believe* that there is many a one who is actuated, not by the love of gold, the love of

change, the love of adventure, but by the love he bears his *mother*, - the earnest longing of his heart to save her from a life of toil and poverty.” (299) What is unusual here is not the half-hearted domestication of commerce but the eloquence of Amory’s complaint, articulating a sense of loss which is as Biblical as it is modern.

Parry also observes the differentiation and diffusion of the market in the changing fortunes of gift-exchange. He argues that the ideology of the free gift (that for which a return cannot be given, or “pure benevolence” as I have been calling it) is likely to evolve as a society expands and the degree of complexity in its exchanges diminishes the economy’s immediate relation to the social world: the market acquires a semblance of autonomy, a logic and a moral *neutrality* of its own. Correspondingly, the gift loses its role in the economic distribution of goods and becomes wholly a symbolic phenomenon, as if it were no longer needed by the economy: “... gifts can assume a much more voluntaristic character as their political functions are progressively taken over by state insitutions.” (467) There is an interesting process of obsolescence and recuperation here, in that the death of gift-exchange as an economic undertaking signals its rebirth as rhetoric. The gift is freed from one responsibility to take on other ideological duties and achieve the status of a myth. Hence it does much cultural work in the service of the system that it denies. As Parry concludes, linking the universalist designs of Christian altruism (and of sentimentality’s sympathetic chains, transcending race and class) with the spreading forces of modern capitalism, “The ideology of the pure gift may thus itself promote and entrench the ideological elaboration of a domain in which self-interest rules

supreme.” (469)

So *The Lamplighter*, we may conclude, stages the discovery of altruism as a principle transcending the market, oblivious to the fact that altruism is the market’s own alibi, and merely reinforces its presence as a refined logic. Its charitable ethics of self-sacrifice and friendship are nostalgic reconstructions, produced from the active forgetting of modern economic conditions: as sympathy is generated in suburban and touristic spaces free from the traces of industry, and acts of generosity generated from the suppression of family bonds, in a similar manner the reading relation is purified of its fetishistic gaze.

The Quaker City

“Annihilation! Oh, God, the terrors of hell, the gnawings of eternal torture, anything but this nothingness! To die, to die like a brute of the field, to be thought and soul to-day, dust and worse than dust, reeking corruption, to-morrow!” (536)

The two following texts, *The Quaker City* and *Pierre*, both make the problem of value a matter of representation. Where sentimentality dealt with a perceived moral crisis by reasserting familiar Christian symbols, faithful to the power of the sign, the more sensational mode that these novels are allied to did the opposite, drawing a parallel between a breakdown in the idea of value and a lack of fixed meanings in language, form or narrative. Like its counterpart, sensationalism also attended to extreme states of feeling, the connection between worldly and otherworldly, and the problems of human authority (whether moral, economic or sexual), and it would also trace narratives from individual relations to national constitution, but the main difference was that it had no governing transcendent reference: although sensational novels might make rhetorical appeals to God at various points, He was not at the centre of any universe of signification - their world was heavier, more earthly, its sins and virtues of human invention, and its redemption (or lack of redemption) political rather than theological. Without the feeling of security that typology gave, they were freer to explore fictional potential in other ways, destabilizing the text's imaginary, modes of narration, and disturbing

conventional reading positions all at once.

For instance, the proximity of piety and sexuality (which was identified in *The Wide, Wide World*), and the problematic status of the sentimental witness became far more explicit. As Shelley Streeby notes, “sensational fiction pictured the body in distress more graphically than most sentimental novels did”⁴⁶; and it had different motives for doing so. The body was no longer a simple text to be interpreted in Christian terms: it was other than “graceful”, as Fred See puts it, and in the same way suffering, through which the body signified a transformation from worldly to transcendent being, was no longer divinely “metaphoric” or intelligible.⁴⁷ The more graphic approach highlighted a critical difference between the moral and erotic languages of suffering, between its political signification and its aesthetic consumption. Nowhere is the voyeurism implicit in sentimental witnessing more striking than in *The Quaker City*, in which the portrayal of the female body is at once part of a protest against patriarchal power, a satire of sentimental virtue, and an excuse for prurience. Indeed, the narrator frequently dwells on scenes of half-dressed, sleeping women just too long to be merely appreciating their innocence or vice - and in one episode he even manages to sustain sentimental and erotic registers while contemplating a headless corpse:

The head had been severed and below the purple neck two white globes, the bosom of what had once been woman, were perceptible in the light. And the Rainbow of corruption crept like a foul serpent around that bosom. For Corruption has its Rainbow; and blue and red and purple and grey and pink and orange were mingled together on that trunk in one repulsive mass of decay. And on this fair bosom

⁴⁶ Shelley Streeby, “Opening Up the Story Paper: George Lippard and the Construction of Class”; *boundary 2* 24:1, Spring 1997, 189

⁴⁷ See above, *Desire and the Sign*, 11.

hands of affection had been pressed, or sweet young children had nestled; or maybe the white skin had crimsoned to a lover's kiss!⁴⁸

In this novel the evangelical mingles with the salacious, indicating a tension between exposing corrupt practices and enjoying them.

The relation between the sentimental and the sensational, and the way fiction might be both political and (im)moral, seems to me one of the most interesting issues in the novel, and yet few accounts of *The Quaker City* deal with its formal aspects. Most recent critics give it a fairly reductive treatment as a historical object - either as an example of a literary genre or an illustration of working class protest⁴⁹ - but it is also a very fictive, self-referential work which can be situated within a wider context of representation. As with sentimental fiction, it maintains the themes of feminine virtue, domestic order, and trust, being similarly concerned with a collapse in the social fabric which needs to be restored. But this time its "crisis of value" is related explicitly to the economic sphere, which sentimentality rather prefers to set aside: corruption is simultaneously moral, financial and political.

secret plots

⁴⁸ George Lippard, *The Quaker City; Or, The Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime* ed. David S. Reynolds (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

⁴⁹ David Reynolds, for example, picks out its imagery and stock characters to make it representative of a kind of "radical reformist" literature and then he proceeds to show how they are better deployed in "real" canonical literature; see *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), passim. Michael Denning anticipates Lippard's later political career and reads it back into the novel, to show how its social radicalism is compromised by the author's involvement in the capitalist institutions of hack journalism and dime novels. Cf *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working Class Culture in America* (London & New York: Verso, 1987), 87. Streeby (above) similarly gives a materialist analysis, looking at the novel merely to identify its working class "voices".

The Quaker City; Or, The Monks of Monk Hall first appeared in pamphlet installments between 1844 and 1845, then all together in 1845, to enormous popularity, selling 60,000 in the first year - also causing a whole literary phenomenon with a set of imitations, theatre adaptations, and even associated merchandise. (Popularity also brought notoriety because of the novel's inflammatory insinuations of corruption in Philadelphia: there was nearly a riot at the theatre when the real-life model for one of the characters protested and a mob turned on him; and there was also a long running debate about the novel's morality.) It was George Lippard's second novel, and derived stylistically from his occupation as a journalist writing for penny newspapers in Philadelphia. Being the only cheap printed material, these publications had a wide distribution and provided most families with the only weekly source of news and reading; generally they offered accounts of city events, courtroom scenes, short fiction and satirical sketches of local figures. In addition, the novel was the first American example of a new genre which Michael Denning calls "Mysteries of the City". Beginning with Eugene Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (published in France in 1842), this combined the speed and immediacy of newspaper reportage with gothic settings and plots. Thus the genre represented urban life for the first time, providing narratives for the plural and fragmentary experience of the city which was different from the other available urban discourses, the public rhetoric of civic institutions and technological progress - instead it revealed a corrupt "underground" and a colourful lowlife existing beneath the veneer of daily events.

The Quaker City illustrates the conflict between these forms: on the one hand

its disjointed episodes and its rapid changes of time and place give an impression of the city as the story paper would - and on the other it imagines a “plot”, a secret network of corruption operating from Monk Hall, which makes sense of the city’s fragmentation. As Denning explains, “reading Lippard is like reading a newspaper with a plot; for Lippard’s point is that all these disparate stories connected by calendrical and geographical coincidence are part of a secret plot of Philadelphia’s elite, one figured by Monk Hall but never resolved into one narrative line or climax.”

(91) So what connects the multiple, metonymic images is the paranoid theme of corruption: first of all various there are intertwining seduction narratives, indicating the abuse of power in personal sexual relations; this is then presented as the concerted activity of the urban elite, who indulge their evil pleasures in the secret society of Monk Hall; and by extension the critique of Philadelphia’s apparently spotless institutions indicates a general rot in the Republic’s democratic principles. The narrative begins when the narrator is handed a dossier of unpublished evidence by a dying lawyer, who explains,

They contain a full and terrible development of the Secret Life of Philadelphia. In that paquet, you will find, records of crimes, that never came to trial, murders that have never been divulged; there you will discover the results of secret examinations, held by official personages, in relation to atrocities almost too horrible for belief...
(3)

and then he states the bargain on which the novel shall be based:

Have you courage, to write a book from the materials, which I leave you, which shall be devoted to these objects; to defend the sanctity of female honour; to show how miserable and corrupt is that Pseudo Christianity which tramples on every principle ever preached or practised by the Saviour Jesus; to lay bare vice in high places, and strip gilded crimes of their tinsel. (4)

The origin of the novel, then, is a *secret package* (we shall see this relation

between narrative and secrets over and over) - a hidden remainder, the quantity of information supplementary to a structure that appears well-functioning, and thus maintaining the structure's integrity as long as it is unseen, but which upon its revelation creates the discrepancy between the moral and the social that demands remedial action. The virtue of the republic is produced by keeping its political exchanges secret, as *The Lamplighter's* production of benevolence depends on its keeping its economics secret. (Where there are gifts, or the discourses of virtue and value, secrets are always to be found very close by.⁵⁰) The narrator's subsequent exposée of the Monks' activities also reveals a further plot - that of a conman, operating a credit fraud throughout Pennsylvania. The feeling of fragmentation that impels his paranoid narratives is, therefore, not just the complexity of urban experience but the incomprehensibility of modern finance - it is capital's enormous circulation which needs to be figuratively reined in by the idea of conspiracy. Thus Lippard emphasizes the connection between political and commercial corruption, and sustains what might be called an epistemology *of the secret*: the secret doubly signifies the hidden truth on which the narrative logic is based, and the hidden authority on which capital is based.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Denning, 113. The relation between gifts and secrets has not been sufficiently thought through but I have lately been struck by the number of appearances they make in the "fictions of charity" - not only in *The Lamplighter* but also in Melville's stories "I and My Chimney", "Bartleby", "Jimmy Rose" and the Charlemont episode in *The Confidence Man*. Derrida also notices a secretive function in Baudelaire's story "Counterfeit Money", which is the subject of his attention in *Given Time*. For him, the secret seems to provide the condition for the initial act of trust which validates both ungroundable systems of literature and money (see pp.151-4). Marc Shell's work would also be relevant here: he asserts that the notion of (in)visibility is simultaneously involved in the definitions of political orders and the definitions of economic forms, relating voyeurism to bureaucracy, beauty, money and property to tyranny - all of which are recurrent themes in this dissertation. *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), especially Ch. 1, "The Ring of Gyges".

⁵¹ Denning mentions that Lippard remained faithful to such paranoid structures throughout (even the labour reform organization he founded, The Brotherhood of the Union, was meant to be underground) and it hampered his understanding and representation of social forces: although the intended subject of his next novel *The Nazarene* was the nativist riots in Kensington, 1844, he never quite arrives at the event: "The figurative reduction of urban life to the secrets behind closed doors that we noted earlier as a central trope of the mysteries of the city endlessly displaces and defers the representation of urban violence. Indeed in a convergence of formal convention and ideology, Lippard's narrative of secret conspiracies produces and reproduces his conception of history as the actions of secret societies." It is a paranoid history we have already seen in Joel Taylor Headley's rendition of the Astor Place Riots, which exhibits a desire for a deep agency beneath urban violence, rather than see social

It is hard to do justice to a book so extensive and action-packed but here is a brief summary of the storyline of *The Quaker City*, necessary at least for showing how the different levels of corruption intertwine. There are three basic seduction plots around which all else develops. The first begins with a wager between two libertines, Gus Lorrimer and Bynewood Arlington, that Lorrimer will succeed in seducing a young girl by means of a faked wedding ceremony. The girl turns out to be Bynewood's sister and so he swears revenge, chasing his former partner into the depths of Monk Hall where he spends most of the book trapped, drugged and tortured, until he escapes and murders him. (The murder of a rapist by the victim's brother, and his subsequent acquittal, was the true story that Lippard originally started with; and the murderer was also the one who nearly caused the riot.) The second plot also narrates the revenge on seduction: this time of a businessman on his unfaithful wife who is trying to love her way up society with a supposed English aristocrat called Colonel FitzCowles. He, however, is an impostor, and his own marriage proposal is another fake. Not only is he the president of the Monks of Monk Hall, he is also secretly orchestrating a credit fraud scheme that is debilitating the state economy. Defrauding even the criminal society, he is the book's arch-villain. The third plot concerns a beautiful orphan who has been brought up within the confines of Monk Hall for the pleasure of a lecherous priest, who acts as her father in order to force her to comply with sexual abuse - although it is thought she is the illegitimate daughter of the businessman who is being consequently

disorder as an amalgam of separate and chaotically interacting forces. (Lippard, incidentally, knew Headley - or at least accused him of plagiarising his later work; cf. Reynolds's introduction to *Quaker City*, xvi.)

blackmailed; although the *real* father turns out to be the warden of Monk Hall, a monstrous sadist called Devil-Bug. After her release from Monk Hall, only to fall into the hands of a sinister cult led by a sorcerer called Ravoni, this plot traces the revelation of her true identity and her final restoration to society.

The central trope of degradation is Monk Hall itself, which is not only the locus for all the seductions but is the emblem of the city's rotten core: here, doctors, bankers, priests and newspaper editors meet in a secret society for drinking, gambling and prostitution, making up an illegitimate authority below the level of public visibility. This inversion of public institutions in a secret space is the real American Gothic nightmare, and such a threat to democratic principles is emphasized in the building's architecture and geography. A stranger (read the political subject) may only ever enter once, as a guest, and needs to be accompanied through a confusing maze of streets to get to the House; then once inside, the newcomer is confronted with a vast expanse of unknown spaces - countless levels, trapdoors, secret passages, false walls - making the structure impossible to negotiate without prior knowledge. The only one with such familiarity is Devil-Bug, who has grown up entirely within its walls, and he roams the building controlling others' movements and inflicting what seems to be a random violence. Thus the horror of Monk Hall is both its denial of access and its rational incomprehensibility, reflecting a political system that has alienated its own subjects. Its very architecture is anathema to republican values, removing the rights to free movement and even the principle of expression. At one point, while Lorrimer has Bynewood trapped, Lippard makes the political metaphor explicit: "Scream, yell, cry out, until your

throat cracks!” Lorrimer taunts. “Do you know the thickness of these walls? ... Try your voice - by all means - I should like to hear you cry Murder or Fire, or even hurra for some political candidate, if the humor takes you - “ (102)⁵²

The interior maplessness is complemented by the chaotic plan of the surrounding city, which has evolved in a disturbingly random manner since Monk Hall’s pre-Revolutionary origins. What Lippard seems to be evoking here is an anxiety for the new industrial society, which, though nominally democratic in its market principles, tends only to duplicate hierarchies of wealth from a feudal past which it has been unable to eradicate. For example, he imagines the original owner returning, disorientated, to his mansion, to find “a printing office on one side and a stereotype foundry on the other, while on the opposite side of the way, a mass of miserable frame houses seemed about to commit suicide and fling themselves madly into the gutter, and in the distance a long line of dwellings, offices, and factories, looming in broken perspective, looked as if they wanted to shake hands across the narrow street.” (48) The setting is significant, since it shows the way Lippard is consciously positioning the action within the dual frame of reproduction and commerce - we have the encroachment of the print industry, and also a strange association of suicide and shaking hands, as if he is stressing and surrealizing the connection of death and contracts. Overall, indeed, Lippard evokes a sense of perverted or aborted cycles and flows of exchange, a general

⁵² At this point it is worth reiterating the interrelation of social and political orders in the social contract, for what is a nightmare of democracy here - the powerlessness of voice, the confined space, the absence of sympathy, the lack of appeal to a third party - is the masochist’s ideal lovescene. Cf *Venus in Furs*, 223-4:

‘I am only just beginning to understand you,’ she cried. ‘What a treat to have someone in one’s power, especially a man who loves one - for you do love me, do you not? My pleasure grows with each blow; I shall tear you to shreds. Go on, writhe with pain, cry out, scream! You cannot arouse my pity.’

system out of control in which all kinds of circulation have been either halted or perverted or extend beyond their socially determined limits. Corruption is a problem of circulation: as seduction and rape are crimes to the proper functioning of family economies, so is the body's natural cycle violated, where Devil-Bug traffics in dead bodies for the sorcerer Ravoni, who deals in resurrection; elsewhere forgers, hypocritical priests, and news editors selling slander (for instance, the *Daily Black Mail*) are further examples of the use of words in exchanges beyond legitimate bounds. And in FitzCowles, counterfeit money is placed at the root of all other crimes, upsetting all economic reason; forgery floods the normal restricted notion of economy with an overabundance of false signs. Ultimately, money, words and people are precariously interchangeable throughout the novel: the horror it imagines is a world where the natural has become indistinguishable from the commercial.

naturalizing finance

Once again, Lippard's moral intent is at odds with his textual procedures. His notion of value is founded on a concept of an original relation to nature, like Emerson's; his is a world of scarcity and shortages authenticating the ethics of needs, labour and production. He sees commerce as having violated such values through speculative practices that appear to create something from nothing - and therefore his narrative is the search for a return to the natural, restoring exchanges to their proper spheres. This desire for social and moral unification is just as

nostalgic as sentimentality's, but the representation of a speculative chaos takes the writer into experimental forms far away from the former's rigid metaphorical system. Lippard narrates the death of sympathy, and in the absence of social justice he envisages a sacrificial purification of community; thus the pathway to authenticity is through total destruction (a nihilistic logic which is much more familiar today, the other side of modernism). At the same time, the restoration of the social entails an exorcism of the banking system, whose speculation is emblematic of the crisis of value. Unfortunately, such a commitment to moral authenticity is the more reactionary side of Lippard, and his combination of the figurative purging of finance from society with anti-Semitic characterizations will be depressingly unsurprising to a contemporary reader.

1 The first episode I want to look at dramatizes the loss of the natural economy to speculative practices, and builds its moral grounds by criminalizing the notion of financial credit. It shows FitzCowles hounded by all the people he owes money to - a total of \$3000, to forty different kinds of artisan, upholsterers, perfumers, cobblers etc - whereby he invites them *en masse*, although unbeknown to each, to his home to settle the debts. What ensues is a parody of a bank's relation to its customers. Once they are all gathered in the same room, FitzCowles proposes to satisfy their collective demands by turning the creditors into shareholders of a spurious project in S Mexico, the "Grand Montezuma Gold-Mining Company".⁵³ When this is immediately rejected he admits to his inability

⁵³ A similar scam, the selling of shares in the Black Rapids Coal Company, is to be found in *The Confidence Man*.

to pay all the debts, and soon a fight begins between the creditors over the limited amount of cash available for settlement:

The scene was peculiar. A forest of fists, rising up and down, a mass of angry faces, all mingled together, some four and thirty bodies of all sizes and descriptions, twisting and winding about, with so much rapidity, that they all looked like the different limbs of some strange monster, undergoing a violent epileptic fit. (172)

This monster, the image of a battle of interests over a limited capital, is like a sketch of a stock exchange crash, in which what is lost is not so much the natural economy, where credit refers to a fixed reserve of value somewhere, like the guarantee of a gold standard, or where someone gains credit on the basis of labour and production (like an artisan) and can cash it in for “real value” - what is lost instead is *the illusion that this ever was the case*. The creditors fight over an imaginary wealth, since more credit is mobilized than is translatable into concrete quantities, and it is this perfectly normal scenario of money that Lippard is attempting to demonize. First he makes FitzCowles propose the gold mine venture to establish the idea of credit as a contrick - that it is underhand and unjust merely to convert one type of credit into another. FitzCowles corrupts the gold standard by playing on the goldmine as a *sign* of value, rather than a source of value. Thus Lippard turns the speculative economy into a monstrosity, and by demonizing it, sets the terms for it to be ritually overcome in the apprehension of the villain. So when the forger is arrested at the end, the operation of justice works for the restoration of an image of natural economy and real value.

2 The second episode repeats the creditor versus banker scene in an attempt

to exorcise speculation, but the interesting thing this time is the way the moral tone it sets up, which is the protest of labour against capital, engenders a particular fictional mode necessary for it to be effective and resonant. It is an isolated incident playing no part in the story, and the lack of narrative function both reflects the randomness of urban experience and allows it to help construct a moral perspective for the novel as a whole. In this scene, a mechanic confronts a banker after the bank's collapse has left him destitute; what he cannot understand is the irony that he should suffer for the failure of his investment while the man to whom he has entrusted his savings continues to enjoy the same home comforts and luxuries as if nothing had happened. So absent is the banker's sense of responsibility that he even refuses the smallest act of charity, when the mechanic begs a loan for some firewood. The mechanic is prompted into a short soliloquy which is really the only working-class "accent" (to borrow Denning's term) in the whole book:

"...My hands are hardened to bone by work. Look at these fingers. D'ye see how cramped and crooked they are? Well, Mr Joneson, for six long years have I slaved for that six hundred dollars. And why? Because I wanted to give my wife a home in our old age, because I wished to give some schoolin' to my child. This money Mr Joneson, I placed in your hands last summer. You said you'd invest it in stock, and now, *now*, Sir, my wife has been dead a month, my child lies on her dyin' bed without bread to eat, or a drop of medicine to still a single death-pain. An' I come to you, and ask for my money, an' you tell me that *the Bank is broke!*" (407-8)

First of all this is addressing the loss of a labour theory of value, the disassociation of work from the idea of wealth. The dying family signifies the death of a domestic ideology in which wealth and subsistence are apparently inseparable. But more than this, the episode relates another loss, one that is more disturbing to the 19th century sensibility: the loss of a system of mutual obligation between individuals. Although it may be possible for anyone to be a "creditor" with a little

capital at their disposal, the banking system seems to have replaced the former notion of *personal* credit. As the mechanic notes, the irony in the recent liberalization of debt laws is that they exacerbated the conditions of the poor even further: the abolition of imprisonment for debt meant that the risk on loans to the poor was greatly increased, and in the mechanic's words, "No poor man gets 'trust' nowadays". (407)

But more importantly, this scene does not just describe the elimination of a personal element in economic relations - its dramatic tension also rests on the implicit recognition that any protest against its loss is already irrelevant: the whole idea of justice seems to be obsolete in the face of this system. The drama lies in the realization that the banker may, paradoxically, be *right* to ignore the sentimental claims of poverty. The horror is not his deliberate malice toward the mechanic, or a gratuitous violence, but an utterly *rational indifference*. (It is worth comparing this to Devil-Bug's own murderousness, which always goes accompanied by a sadistically indifferent commentary.⁵⁴) A paradox arises, in which the taking of moral positions only seems to mask the underlying immorality of finance - and this problem extends to the form of the novel too, which needs to retain the notion of justice for its critique of corruption. The danger is that the writer's own satirical protest may only be echoing the ineffectual and outdated protest of the mechanic against the speculator.

From this point, then, the narrative needs to be engaged in resolving this

⁵⁴ Deleuze characterizes the sadist's speech as *demonstrative*, a language of declaration which is clinically descriptive, and devoid of any metaphorical content (as opposed to the masochist's speech which is allusive and inherently dialectical).

paradox, and does it by staging a kind of reappearance of retribution in a different realm from the material world. At the end of the fruitless confrontation the mechanic enters a trance and swears at the banker, “I subpoena you ... to appear at the Bar of Almighty God before daybreak tomorrow!” Very soon, of course, the two figures are found dead according to the prophecy - the banker collapses, from drink, alongside the body of the mechanic who has cut his throat. Such a scene marks a movement from a level of justice and protest into a more imaginary, mystical realm, which occurs constantly throughout the novel, and which is more than merely a gothic flourish. Here the trance, suicide and drunkenness indicate extremes of consciousness which happens elsewhere in dreams, drug hallucinations, torture, and also in the various kinds of sorcery including hypnosis. They are all part of the same order of representation which construes a suspension of reality but *not* to establish spiritual value, as is the case with sentimentality - representation is *surrealized* rather than transcended. Divine justice is *visibly* enacted on earth; hell is graphic and corporeal (as Monk Hall itself imitates the geography of the Inferno, with multiple depths and central drops downward...)

Thus I would argue that the surreal elements of the narrative are produced from a *moral* response to the perceived abandonment of human from economic value systems. As the mechanic’s story demonstrates, a problem of justice forces the search for resolution in a different conceptual space: the surreal mode offers a kind of “underground plot” to reality (in the way that Monk Hall provides a paranoid solution to the incomprehensible city), once reality has become morally senseless. Other examples of this mingling of political and surreal orders can be found towards

the end of the novel in the resolution of the plots; for example, Byrnewood the avenging brother will carry out his mission to restore his personal justice while in an almost constant state of hallucination, even to the extent of doubting the reality of the original violations which set everything in motion. Elsewhere Luke Harvey, who functions simultaneously as the novel's detective figure and moral commentator, constantly sustains an ironic and grotesque discourse on the world around him:

“Then, in God's name, what has this solemn mockery, Justice in the Quaker City, ever accomplished? It has laughed pleasantly while riot after riot, went howling through the town; it has chuckled gaily as it bade assassin after assassin, go scatheless from its bar; it has grown violent in glee, as it beheld its judicial halls, soiled by the footsteps of corruption...” (206)

3 In the third episode, the “surrealization of Justice” reaches its apotheosis. Here Lippard's radical democratic imagination runs riot in an apocalyptic vision experienced by Devil-Bug, in which the corrupt city is finally destroyed. In the future Philadelphia a monarchy has replaced the Republic, the national flag is outlawed, and the gallows are the centerpiece of a merciless regime run by a clergy who proclaim “Eternal Death” as their motto. One bystander comments, “There is no America now. In yonder ruined Hall, America was born, she grew to vigorous youth, and bade fair to live to a good old age, but - alas! Alas! She was massacred by her pretended friends. Priest-craft, and Slave-craft, and Traitor-craft were her murderers...” (388) Devil-Bug dreams he is watching a city parade in which priests and judges lead criminals, debtors and slaves, while the dead rise up from their graves and walk alongside, unnoticed, even clawing the King as he salutes the crowd. Then the apocalypse begins, the dead become visible, and the whole scene is engulfed by fire, steam and thunderbolts.

[F]rom the clear sky leapt a bolt of red thunder; - the King lay on the earth a blackened corpse. Then the long line of houses began to sink into the earth, slowly, slowly, inch by inch, like ships at sea, with the waves creeping over their decks. Then from the earth burst streams of vapour, hissing and whirling as they spouted upward into the blue sky. Around each pillar of vapour, in an instant there lay a circle of blackened corpses. That steam smote the living to the heart, it withered their eye-balls; it crisped the flesh on their bones, like the bark peeling from the log before the flame. (390-1)

The point about this vision is its mass, indiscriminate destruction which hits the good as well as the bad, the victims as well as the perpetrators of corruption. Although Lippard returns to the motif of protest when he parades the poor and victimized, this is soon subsumed into the general annihilation, and the desire for their vengeance is drowned in an all-inclusive revenge on the entire community. Justice thereby moves from a rational to an excessive order, where mere equivalent retribution is not enough - and it is the *just principle itself* which is the main object of the slaughter:

“Look below,” says a voice at the end of the vision, “and behold the wreck of the doomed city... The river burdened with blackened corpses, and the bright sky watching smilingly over all! Look and behold the Massacre of Judgements! The Sacrifice of Justice! The wrongs of ages are avenged at last!” (393)

Recapitulating, then, on the three episodes: 1 showed the way Lippard characterizes the financial system as monstrous, and places it at the heart of all the evils of Philadelphia. 2 depicted the nostalgia for a lost personal credit, and the unconscious realization of the obsolescence of a protest based on labour or domestic values - that is, the irrelevance of the sentimental appeal “have sympathy” - which also problematizes the novel’s overall political satire. Henceforward, justice becomes necessarily surreal. 3 then visualizes the final “sacrifice of justice”, or the ritual obliteration of moral distinctions, so that the narrative (if not the city itself) can

be redeemed. This is the formula: *Justice has to be seen to be killed off for it to be resurrected and reestablished as a governing social principle*. And significantly, the moment of sacrifice is juxtaposed with a symbolic return to the family: the last vision before total destruction is of a father and lover fighting over a woman on top of a towering pedestal of earth - trying to throw each other off because there is no room: “The old man caught him by the throat, he tore the girl from his arms, and then battling over her prostrate form, for a foothold on that dizzy column’s surface, they grappled together, and fought like devils!” (392) Thus they are forced to fight because of limited space, in just the same way that the creditors were forced to fight because of limited capital. In evoking the moral demands of scarcity once more, and at the moment of the fundamental patriarchal exchange (father to husband), Lippard is attempting to restore the validity of a “natural” economy.

From this point, with Justice redeemed, the narrative moves inexorably closer to the natural. The conman FitzCowles is captured so that the money circulation can be drained of its false signs, but the harshest of treatments is reserved for another character, which clearly shows the extent of Lippard’s economic anxieties. This is Fitz-Cowles’s Jewish associate, Gabriel Von Pelt. Despite the often dismaying racial and gender stereotypes in the novel, Reynolds does argue that a certain technique of “role reversal” grants marginalized figures “retributive, even socially redemptive qualities” (xxxviii), mentioning Dora’s sharp-witted opportunism and the ironic remarks of black slaves. But Von Pelt’s portrayal is utterly two-dimensional and were it not for his symbolic role as the spirit of bad money, his only function would be to serve as the butt of anti-Semitic jokes. He is killed off quite

gleefully and without a trace of critical ambiguity for the reader - in fact, oddly, he is killed off twice (like a monster from horror films that refuses to die). First of all he is hanged from a trapdoor into the pit underneath Monk Hall (487), but the rope snaps, and only later is his body found, “crushed into one undistinguishable mass of corruption and blood” (555). Then he is crushed again, in a symbolic union with the other monster, Devil-Bug, when a foundation stone falls on them. Devil-Bug is allowed to die as a tragic hero - redeemed to humanity by his paternity (339), and because he has suicidally arranged his own punishment; as the boulder falls he is lit up by a shaft of light from above. Von Pelt is only sarcastically obliterated (his dead body is as silent as a *lamb*, 555). In this manner the two greatest evil-doers are united and killed with one stone - but, significantly, money is established as a greater evil than murder. It is the one *unredeemable* crime, because it has already strayed beyond the limits of a fixed standard and there is not enough wealth to redeem it; hence it attacks the very principles of justice and redemption. This is why Jewish banking is made the scapegoat for Christian economics.

charisma and blasphemy

The last section before the novel's conclusion concerns the sorcerer Ravoni and his narcissistic cult. He prophecies social regeneration through a new humanist faith, one that looks nostalgically back to a time before political and religious corruption (again, a mythical intimacy); one that also proclaims the death of God: “...the AWFUL SOUL having created us, hath left us all to our salvation or our ruin,

as we shall by our deeds determine; thus we shape our own destinies; ... we are the masters of our own lives; ... we, by developing the mysteries implanted in our bosoms, may walk the earth superior to the clay around us, each man *a GOD in soul!*” (447) Ravoni’s role is crucially ambiguous because on the one hand he is a blasphemer and a procurer of followers - he captures Mabel, the prisoner of Monk Hall, to make her the sect’s Priestess - and on the other the proto-Nietzschean figure he cuts is very attractive. The imperial will in the face of annihilation which he preaches seems at last to debunk the quietistic and compensatory pieties of sentimental rhetoric, and to offer a kind of resolution to the social chaos. But is he revolutionary, or tyrant?

Here Lippard is anticipating the reinscription of sentimental discourses of soul, sympathy and law in a new order of representation, where desire will become a science rather than a theological idea. Ravoni’s faith is a kind of regimented sensuality which evokes masochism (“Every outrage committed against the refinement of the Senses brings its own punishment”, 425.) His version of sympathy is “magnetism”, a doctrine of universal mutual influence which would soon become a science of power, as hypnotism (447). Furthermore, Ravoni is also an expert surgeon and therefore a *modern* magician; he lectures on the new wonders of the self from his dissecting theatre, over whose dead bodies the sentimental meets the erotic (this is where we started); in the words of a medical student, “The Scalpel makes love to [the bosom] now!” (438) Anatomy threatens to replace the metaphoricity of death; the body no longer signifies the soul, and in fact it is nothing more than meat. The soul itself is now also something to be experimented with, as Ravoni shows by

his attempt to resurrect a dead woman - in front of an audience including Byrnewood Arlington, who has long been driven insane and thinks it will be his wronged sister (445). Thus in Lippard's universe there is no transit from earthly to heavenly, only a grotesque interference of the two dimensions of existence.

And yet, throughout, although a trafficker in the dead and curiously able to control other people's wills as if they had none, his evil is nevertheless a benevolent tyranny (as opposed to Devil-Bug's blind violence): he combines kindness and social vision with a hatred of hypocrisy, and it is clear that Lippard admires his blasphemy as well as condemning it (to the extent of adding an amusingly awkward footnote disclaiming responsibility for his character's opinions, 422). While lamenting the blind conviction of Ravoni's disciples, Lippard himself is not immune to his charms (and nor is the reader). "His words uttered in that deep music of tone which mingling with the syllables of speech, can allure the human soul to good or evil, struck the mysterious chords of everyheart. They were no longer the same men. Every face was stamped with an excitement that corded the veins on the forehead, and fired the eyes with a blaze like that which streamed from the dark orbs of Ravoni. It was a terrible picture of fanaticism." (448) What we are dealing with is a problem of *charisma*, always subliminally present in the gift, revealing the link between generosity and tyranny. (*Charisma*: a divinely conferred power or talent; a spiritual gift.) Charisma is a gift that enslaves others, a talent for enforcing brotherhood - signalling the demagogue's threat to democratic principles, the threat to turn the public assembly of multiple voices into a mass of uniformity.

But if Ravoni's portrayal is paradoxical, he does perform a crucial narrative function. His resurrection (which works!) is the key move that Lippard makes to bring the novel finally back to a natural, domestic economy. The revived woman is not the sister Byrnewood has been trying to avenge but Annie, the servant-girl he impregnated and callously abandoned before the story began. *Her* reappearance enables the unacknowledged crime to be amended, and the ethics of love and care to recover their guarantees. From this point the sentimental principle of the morally satisfying dénouement returns: Luke Harvey, the cuckold (are you still following?) Livingstone's business partner and former clerk, delivers the story to its conclusion by a kind of heroic accountancy, tracing the extents of FitzCowles's deceit and restoring property (principally the "lost" women) to rightful owners. Byrnewood and Annie retire from the city, and start a new life in the woods.

***Pierre*: Moral Fictions**

Pierre is a deeply puzzling novel, which has been troubling readers and critics ever since its publication in 1852. Though the objections have been put in various moral and aesthetic terms, the problem has always revolved around deciding what kind of a novel it is supposed to be: whether, for example, it is sentimental, sensational or gothic; whether it is a critique of America's past and the myths it makes, or a timely attempt by the author to write "popular" fiction, or a semiautobiographical work about his (and literature's) relation to society; whether an exploration of the nature and causes of evil, or a more modern psychology that rewrites the conceptions of soul and conscience, or an investigation of the limits of knowledge, through fiction and figuration. While any (or all) of these categories may be applicable, it then remains to assess the degree of success the novel has in achieving them. The only thing that is generally agreed upon is that at no point does Melville make his designs explicit - except, possibly, when he says "I write precisely as I please". What do we make of such an approach, then, which seems to work deliberately within fixed generic terms and yet never fits them; or which asserts a narrative voice as boldly as this only for it to be constantly undercut and lost amid a mass of conflicting points of view? This construction and deconstruction of narrative positions, refusing to establish unambiguous meaningful exchanges with the reader, will be a key issue in the stories to come. Here it will be my concern to chart the positions taken with respect to notions of benevolence and friendship, in

order to understand the wider problem of moral and linguistic value in the novel.

Bemused readers seem to have two questions in mind. First, **What Motivates Pierre?** What accounts for his extraordinary career, which begins in wealth and nobility and ends in incest, murder and suicide? In such a catastrophic descent (which is both lineage and decline), the novel seems to be participating in the apocalyptic tradition which was illustrated in *The Quaker City*, a vision of the sacrificial destruction of American history and all its values. But at the same time the hero is motivated by idealist principles which Melville seems not entirely keen to relinquish; not only are they presented as the forgivable enthusiasm of a youthful mind, but the errors that they precipitate are not set against any more “enlightened” point of view. If, the readers lament, we were to understand the underlying causes of Pierre’s fateful decisions - of his readiness to believe in the existence of an illegitimate sister, and his desire to abandon family and take her as a wife - then we might be able to see the values Melville wants to affirm, and the novel would gain some aesthetic coherence. Ultimately this involves interpreting the enigma of incest at the heart of the narrative - not to decide whether it takes place or not, because the enigma produces effects *as if* incest were fully present - but to determine how its crime is related to the corrosion of other structures (the family, law, and language). For example, Richard Poirier has recently put it that there is no linkage between the hero’s career and the author’s moral intent, identified as his “acts of historical deconstruction”: “Pierre’s incestuous venture... remains from beginning to end dissociated from the social-historical components that surround it.” Without such linkage the novel remains muddled and ultimately fails in its task of communication,

“overloading itself with possibilities of meaning... without managing to bring them into any sufficiently reciprocal or productive relationship.”⁵⁵ This amounts to saying that there is no insight to be gained from the book; Pierre never *learns* from his mistakes, and neither do we.

Unfortunately (and this is the infuriating case with all the critical insights one might hope to make about *Pierre*), such a position is already anticipated throughout the novel itself. It is best illustrated in the episodes where the hero, having moved to the city with Isabel, begins to write his own novel, whose plot bears a notable resemblance to his own experience. Here Melville is duplicating the reader’s experience of the text: he creates another level of narrative which is the hero’s self-fictionalized life, then he asks the character to reflect upon it as a reader of his own story, and consequently, when he invites *us* to have a look at his progress - “Let us peep over the shoulder of Pierre...” - we are viewing, in a hall of mirrors, an endlessly regressing process of interpretation which, characteristically, never seems to yield critical knowledge:

From these random slips, it would seem, that Pierre is quite conscious of much that is so anomalously hard and bitter in his lot, of much that is so black and terrific in his soul. Yet that knowing his fatal condition does not one whit enable him to change or better his condition. Conclusive proof that he has no power over his condition. For in tremendous extremities human souls are like drowning men; well enough they know they are in peril; well enough they know the causes of that peril; - nevertheless, the sea is the sea, and these drowning men do drown.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Richard Poirier, “The Monster In the Milk Bowl”, *London Review of Books* 3 October 1996, 19-22.

⁵⁶ Herman Melville, *Pierre; Or, The Ambiguities* (Evanston & Chicago: Northwestern and Newberry, 1971), 303. It is worth mentioning Hershel Parker’s Kraken Edition of 1995, if only because of the unusually drastic line he has taken as to the “real” novel beneath the standard text. He believes that Melville deliberately sabotaged his own novel after hearing bad reviews of *Moby Dick*, and then receiving unfavourable terms for *Pierre* from the publisher Harpers, by inserting a new narrative about the hero’s failed attempts at writing; therefore he has removed all the references to Pierre as an author in the last third of the book (amounting to approximately 13%). So the Kraken Edition loses the episodes satirising the literary industry (Books

This passage could be taken for a paradigm of the novel's hermeneutics. Literature's capacity to appropriate the world by bringing it to consciousness is defied by a greater force, fate standing for what always will always remain outside of the scope of action and knowledge. It suggests the pointlessness of critical distance (the very thing a drowning man cannot get from the sea) and therefore the limitations of interpretation's claims to power; and it gives an idea of the "slips" that language undergoes in the novel from a defining, referential function to what is mere repetition, and ultimately silence.

Which leads to the second question: **Is It Bad or Parodic?** The confusion over which values Melville wishes to debunk through the apocalyptic narrative and which he wishes to preserve or reconstruct in the defiant hero is repeated on a formal level, and is evident in the linguistic and rhetorical excesses throughout. The prose is deliberately heavy-handed: words are strained to the limits of sense, sentences are endlessly and exhaustingly convoluted, images are persistently overwrought. For example, the first sections of the novel seem to be more than a mere satire on sentimental fiction where the ludicrous pitch of the lovetalk between Pierre and his sweetheart Lucy spills over into the narrator's commentary (once again, not offering critical distance, only reflecting the same tone of the characters' discourse): "No Cornwall miner ever sunk so deep a shaft beneath the sea, as Love will sink beneath the floatings of the eyes." How are we to understand the absurdity of this

XVII and XVIII) and much of the ambience at the Apostles' community (eg. "The Transcendental Flesh-Brush Philosophy", XXII); also the passages about Enceladus and the "empty sarcophagus" of the soul; but what it gains is a sense of a more affirmative *Pierre*, with its author at full imaginative stretch. Given that the novel's own reception confirmed a decline in Melville's fortunes which was only to be revived posthumously, Parker can be seen to be recreating an image of the writer unthreatened by the damnation of dollars in the literary marketplace, and participating in a fantasy of the romantic genius undoomed. The Kraken Edition: introduction and reconstructed text © Hershel Parker, illustrations © Maurice Sendak (N.p.:Harper Collins, 1995)

comparison, which in an attempt to find a commensurate sentimental hyperbole, ends up describing the gaze of someone in love with tin-mining off the coast of Cornwall? The narrator goes on,

Love sees ten million fathoms down, till dazzled by the floor of pearls. The eye is Love's own magic glass, where all things that are not of earth, glide in supernatural light. There are not so many fishes in the sea, as there are sweet images in lovers' eyes. In those miraculous translucencies swim the strange eye-fish with wings, that sometimes leap out, instinct with joy; moist fish-wings wet the lover's cheek. (33)

This particular passage confounds the norms of parody because, once again, its object is not simply a discrete mode of representation but the representative process itself. First of all it constructs an analogy between love and deep water (a metaphor of sight and identity which is archetypal to transcendentalism, as in the trope of Walden's Pond) and then it stretches it too far for comfort, further than the likeness of its parts can hold. The rhetoric of love conventionally uses vocabulary of depth but by lighting up the bottom, depth's boundlessness is suddenly constrained, with the result that the image feels concrete and flat. But then what is specifically parodied is love's own capacity to represent - it is as creative of images, says the narrator, as the sea is hospitable to fish. Thus the imaginative Eye (the Representative I, in transcendentalist philosophy) is belittled in its moment of metaphor-making; the fish slaps the lover's cheek as a kind of rebuke to its overblown figurative powers.

What is important in both the passages I have quoted is their combination of models of deep-seeing with a critique of their textual construction. Profundity, Melville suggests, is only ever an illusion created by the play of surfaces, like a hall

of mirrors. This assertion is crucial to Pierre's actions as he struggles to do what is most right and explore his own psychological depths. But it is also a key to the novel's parodic strategies. Melville does not maintain a simple distinction between the parodic voice and the parodied form, but implicates it along with its object of ridicule. He collapses the critical distance irony would offer. As Sacvan Bercovitch explains, the new object of this kind of parody is the more rarefied, authoritative perspective irony generally presupposes (which is the metacritical position dedicatees of interpretation are looking for): "Indeed, insofar as *Pierre* 'mocks' and 'subverts,' its primary aim is to subvert the models of aesthetic transcendence... which provide the standards for mockery in the first place. The result is parody turned against itself, a satire of the comic *pretensions* of the parodic mode."⁵⁷ Hence the narrative is made up of three voices, in constant exchange: one optimistic and sustaining the naive, sentimental, and idealistic registers; the second disillusioned, defiant and apocalyptic; while the third acknowledges their difference but remains unresolving, unable to proceed to a higher level of consciousness. Thus there is no dialectical progression, no *value* produced from the exchange between two opposing positions. So Bercovitch presents a contrary case against Poirier's. Poirier sees in the lack of linkage between textual strategies and historical consciousness a *romantic failure to be truly parodic* - and Melville finally reluctant to abandon his belief in the power of traditional literary structures, despite their contradictions. Bercovitch, on the other hand, identifies a total *repudiation of parody*, in the refusal to break out of textual inscriptions, which exposes the limits of American symbolism from within: "*Pierre* is the story of contradictory forms of narration seeking their separate voices

⁵⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 253.

and finding instead their common source in a dominant cultural rhetoric” (295).

While I prefer Bercovitch’s observations on the function of parody in *Pierre*, he does fall unnecessarily into the metacritical positions he was arguing against by finally discovering a synthesis in Melville’s corrosion of textual procedures: “...the real unity of the novel lies in its apparent dissonance, a series of divergent voices which are made to correspond by their very contradictions.” (303) In this respect Poirier is right to warn against the “claim in all this to a lonely cultural heroism on the part of the writer” who anticipates modernist aesthetics of linguistic alienation and collapse. Melville’s hyper(bolic)parody does not have to accord with current critical values of the provisional and fragmentary, as it does not have to accord with those of rehistoricization; in another sense, it is an attempt to evade all sorts of value completely (and that includes literary value). What he objects to above all is the *productive* nature of parody; its participation in an evolutionary model of representation. Parody works by declaring the *obsolescence* of a cultural form, and marking its demotion as a hermeneutic advance - thus perpetuating a notion of use-value in literary forms, ever responding to new conditions. Melville inverts parody to envisage the dissolution of all forms of value: not only the ideological valorizations which are warrantably deconstructed (eg the discourses of nobility and the sentimental, self-reliance and progressivism) but all value-producing structures including the novel form. As we have seen, he exaggerates language’s productive powers beyond its uses in metaphorical associations; he raises imagery and rhetorical speech to levels of excess, and renders critical perspectives redundant.

So to comply with the standard critical practice: “*Pierre* is a novel about”

What Novels are About - how they deploy metaphoric and narrative power to construct values so they can be “about” anything at all. Melville portrays the apocalyptic obliteration of all denominations of value, even of the negative tradition that assigns value to apocalyptic obliteration. In the process he reveals structures of value to be no more than structures of belief, which all depend on a primary act of credit for their validation. (This will be reduced nihilistically to the formula Morality is Fiction, as Fiction is a kind of Morality.) Literature begins in a suspension of disbelief, and Pierre’s futile search for moral value begins when his utterly literary universe is suddenly discredited. His tragic career is set in motion by a rash impulse to believe Isabel’s story. The following sections will therefore examine the dissolution of value through the motives of generosity and self-sacrifice - principles which the young hero inherits from his sentimental background but takes to extremes - and the way they are linked with an idea of impulsive belief. For the hero follows a course of action committed to the highest ideals, only to discover that they lead him into a realm beyond morality where murder is the most meaningful thing he can do. His enthusiasm for self-sacrifice develops into a general sacrificial desire; his self-inflicted violence becomes projected outward towards others. Henry Murray offers perhaps the best label for this aspect which many critics note but few place at the centre of the novel: an “altruistic debauch”.⁵⁸

altruistic debauchery

⁵⁸ Henry Murray, intro to *Pierre* 1949 (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), lxxxiv.

Steeped in the borrowed rhetoric of gentility, Pierre is anxious to prove himself worthy of his pedigree. With colonists and revolutionaries for predecessors, his family history has been mythologized into a story of heroic deeds, but traces of their original violence are never far from the surface and are present in the chivalrous rhetoric which inspires the boy from the start. The narrator describes his blessing from Nature: “She lifted her spangled crest of a thickly-starred night, and forth at that glimpse of their divine Captain and Lord, ten thousand mailed thoughts of heroicism started up in Pierre’s soul, and glared round for some insulted cause to defend.” (14) So chivalry’s combination of militarism and righteousness provide his primary motivation and suggest the inherent violence of moral absolutism. But furthermore, it is suggested that Pierre’s actions will stem from his *causelessness*, the lack of a specific object for his desires for virtue. Pierre is tragically causeless, twice over: he is not only without a mission but his search for moral imperatives will implicate the whole myth of origins which grounds individualist conceptions of selfhood.

As Pierre approaches his resolve (which is to protect his father’s name by abandoning the family and for a life in New York with Isabel, who might be his illegitimate sister), he takes on the role of voluntary scapegoat, welcoming the perverse logic that the greater the sins of the father, the more righteous the son’s suffering. “Sin hath its sacredness, not less than holiness. And great Sin calls forth more magnanimity than small Virtue.” (177) Even further, the fact that his actions will not only cause pain to him but also to others inspires him all the more, exposing

the “inevitable keen cruelty” in his motives: “It is not heroism only to stand unflinched ourselves in the hour of suffering; but it is heroism to stand unflinched both at our own and at some loved one’s united suffering; a united suffering, which we could put an instant period to, if we would but renounce the glorious cause for which we ourselves do bleed, and see our most loved one bleed.” (178) In all of this is the ironic suggestion that Pierre is far from the desire to restore justice on rational terms (which might, of course, include establishing Isabel’s right to family recognition) and closer to a far more irrational, sacrificial impulse, a desire to abandon and cast away property and wealth of all kinds, a “dark, mad mystery” which Melville compares with the sailor’s urge to spurn domestic comforts for the “ocean gloom” (181).

And yet, once more to emphasize the point, these ironic remarks about Pierre’s excessive desires for self-sacrifice and altruism do not lead to any profitable critical distance. At the other extreme, Melville gives voice to a rationalization of virtue which is also unattractive (although, arguably, not as violent). This is the problem with interpreting Plinlimmon’s pamphlet: in philosophical terms it offers an examination of Pierre’s very dilemma, and argues a certain resolution of the difference between idealist ethics and practical matters, but once more by placing Pierre in the position of reader and dramatizing his lack of comprehension, the privileged metacritical viewpoint we as now *secondary* readers hope for is ambushed.

Plinlimmon’s pamphlet, discovered in the coach that takes them to the city,

is a philosophical conceit relating religious ethics to a “chronometrical” timekeeper, as a more worldly conduct relates to “horological” principles - the purpose of which is to argue that there can be no correspondence between the two. Christ’s teaching is of a transcendental standard inapplicable to worldly experience, and therefore the individual’s true course of action should be a sort of “virtuous expediency” (or as we might call it today, a liberal pragmatism) finding a middle way between Divine principles and a total lack of endeavour. The target of his discourse is therefore Christianity’s sacrificial propensity: Plinlimmon asserts the absurdity of such maxims as giving one’s *all* or turning the other cheek by a self-defeating logic - “...does aught else completely and unconditionally sacrifice itself for him?” (214) Here, it is true, there is a cogent refutation of Pierre’s deluded heroism, but it is important to recognize that it only works within its own framework of calculation: obviously, if a sacrifice were reciprocated in any way it would be a bargain, and not a sacrifice. This is something that critics miss if they look to the pamphlet for a key, or a “Talismanic Secret” (208), to the novel’s moral complexities. While, for example, James Wilson is right to indicate that “Plinlimmon’s pamphlet *can* be read as an indictment of Pierre and his imprudent behaviour” (my italics), it does not then follow that the *novel* is equally an indictment, as he concludes; Plinlimmon is not Melville.⁵⁹ Plinlimmon’s argument, justifiable only on its own terms, manages to reduce the idea of the gift to such diminutive proportions that it hardly exists at all:

Nevertheless, if a man gives with a certain self-considerate generosity to the poor; abstains from doing downright ill to any man; does his convenient best in a general way to do good to his whole race; takes watchful loving care of his wife and children, relatives, and friends... then... such a man need never lastingly despond,

⁵⁹ James C. Wilson, “The Sentimental Education of Pierre Glendinning: An Exploration of the Causes and Implications of Violence in Melville’s *Pierre*” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 1/3 Sep 1987, 172.

because he is sometimes guilty of some minor offense...” (214)

In this respect Plinlimmon resembles Bartleby’s lawyer, the eminently safe man (a “miraculously self-possessed, non-benevolent man”, 290). And as in that story, the drama is in the conflict between two attitudes towards economy - the excessive versus the calculated, the functional versus the pathologically useless. While Pierre champions the free expenditure of energies without return, Plinlimmon simply cannot speak about the gift, paradoxically affirming a “self-considerate generosity”; and the opposition persists unresolved in *Pierre*. Thus the pamphlet does not offer a superior critical perspective - indeed, it is “more the excellently illustrated restatement of a problem, than the solution of the problem itself” (210). It does not comprehend but only presents the contrary position to Pierre’s, and in this way the narrative continually oscillates between such earthly and heavenly orientations, leaving the reader to hope in vain for a dialectical progression. *The philosopher and the hero are merely opponents in a contest of moral positions whose differing attempts to reconcile the idealist/materialist opposition cannot in turn be reconciled.* Each judgement of the case becomes in its turn another argument to be judged by the next reader (and there is no reason to suppose we should be at the end of this interpretive chain).

The heart of the matter is the question of the function of giving: whether it is the sign of a more ethical, beneficial social exchange or part of a pious hierarchy which, in its desire for moral sovereignty, is socially destructive. Does generosity foster or abandon reciprocity? The next chapter (Book XV) continues to explore the dialectics of giving through the history of the friendship between Pierre and

Glendinning Stanley, his cousin, who comes to represent (to the paranoid hero, at least) his doppelganger, rival in possession of the family estate and in Lucy's affections. By constantly revising the description of their relations and exploring the minuscule and convoluted exchanges that go under the umbrella term "friendship", Melville undermines the distinction between generosity and selfishness, seeing them as mutual terms endlessly possible to generate from the same act. In this way he links the problem of desire with the problem of interpretation, and provides a crucial narrative for the general construction of value in the novel.

The relationship between Pierre and Glen begins as a kind of boyish romance, charged with homoeroticism - "a friendship of fine-hearted, generous boys" (216) which gradually declines as they grow older and find other objects of affection. When Pierre's attentions are transferred to Lucy, it is notable that Melville describes it as a *reduction* of emotions rather than a discovery of "true" or "natural" love: "the love of the most single-eyed lover... is nothing more than the ultimate settling of innumerable wandering glances upon some one specific object" (217). Thus it is a process of filtering and narrowing down, which derives monogamous heterosexuality from more general promiscuous desires unrestricted to either sex. Here Melville is arguing the formation of a self in the *loss* of emotional energies, as an excess of desires are replaced by more reserved behaviour; it is "a strange transition from the generous impulsiveness of youth to the provident circumspectness of age", in which selfishness almost completely eclipses the principle of generosity: the mature adult is now "very slow to feel, deliberate even in love, and statistical even in piety." (218)

The second stage of their relationship is a revival of friendship after Glen returns from abroad and Pierre's engagement to Lucy is announced, but this time it is conducted in very stylized ways, which is reflected in the elaborate formalities of letters and a period of competitive giving: Pierre returns Glen's engagement present, politely insinuating its meagreness, and Glen "returns to the charge", as if in a war of generosity, to offer instead the use of his town-house. Pierre's acceptance, entirely outside the rules of this purely abstract game of exchanging nothing at all, has the unexpected effect of cheating Glen into a real gift: "this very artificial youth was well betrayed into an act of effective kindness, being forced now to drop the empty mask of ostentation, and put on the solid hearty features of a genuine face." (223)

What Melville is getting at here is the assumed relation between gifts and authenticity, the idea that a gift *ought* to be (as if a moral duty) given with the best intentions. Satirically, he argues that the self is defined *in opposition to* generosity, as a development of rational calculation from excess, and then he deconstructs the consequent insight that all gifts are acts of selfishness by showing how they can in fact be most *selfless* when they are false. Pierre's "bluff-minded" acceptance is portrayed ironically as a lack of regard for Glen's true motives and "the thousand inconceivable finicalnesses of small pros and cons about imaginary fitnesses, and proprieties, and self-consistencies" which the gift seems to demand, therefore becoming the greatest generosity of interpretation... This is called giving the benefit of a doubt: "at bottom, common charity steps in to dictate a favourable consideration for all possible profferings" (221).

It is plain (as if it ever need to be said) that Melville is not being serious here, except to show that the conscience that involves itself in such absurdly intricate calculations of motives is not doing it for truth's sake, but either through guilt or to justify its own selfishness. Any position can be rationalized if one spends long enough breaking exchanges down into their parts. Through this excessive procedure of logical argument Melville has demonstrated the possibility of reversing normative definitions, and things as fundamental to moral reasoning as the differences between selfishness and generosity, interest and disinterest, friend and enemy are shown to be ungrounded. In the following passage the obsessive scrutiny of motives for action in the world gives the reader an acute sense of vertigo (this is the really sickening aspect of the book, not its obscenity). However, it also hides away a distinction between forms of knowledge which is a key to the novel's structure. The narrator is talking about the need to make enemies and act cynically:

But into these ulterior refinements of cool Tuscan policy, Pierre as yet had never become initiated; his experiences hitherto not having been varied and ripe enough for that; besides, he had altogether too much generous blood in his heart. Nevertheless, thereafter, in a less immature hour, though still he shall not have the heart to practise upon such maxims as the above, yet he shall have the brain thoroughly to comprehend their practicability; which is not always the case. And generally, in worldly wisdom, men will deny to one the possession of all insight, which one does not by his every-day outward life practically reveal. It is a very common error of some unscrupulously infidel-minded, selfish, unprincipled, or downright knavish men, to suppose that believing men, or benevolent-hearted men, or good men, do not know enough to be unscrupulously selfish, do not know enough to be unscrupulous knaves. And thus - thanks to the world! - are there many spies in the world's camp, who are mistaken for strolling simpletons. And these strolling simpletons seem to act upon the principle, that in certain things, we do not so much learn, by showing that we already know a vast deal, as by negatively seeming rather ignorant. But here we press upon the frontiers of that sort of wisdom, which it is very well to possess, but not sagacious to show that you possess. Still, men there are, who having quite done with the world, all its mere worldly contents are

become so far indifferent, that they care little of what mere worldly imprudence they may be guilty. (222-3)

Part of the (sick) joke is that we have to take prose like the above seriously, after all: its wild excesses may *suggest* a superfluity of meaning, but they hide rational and carefully measured arguments. The passage is saying that if evil men do not suspect good men already know what evil is, they are deceived (by the “strolling simpletons”); and if they are deceived, the good men may not be as good as they make out. In this by now familiar technique, the oppositions collapse. There is a lack of logical grounds at the heart of ethics *if one can be bothered to think the arguments through*, but most people do not (as most people would prefer to skim passages like this); hence, moral oppositions and the very possibility of ethics depend on *forgetting* this abyss, or *acting as if it is not there*. It is well to possess such an insight but not to show it; as in the same way, it may be well for Pierre to learn cynical reasoning as a result of his tragic career, but not well for him to act upon it. An important distinction is being made between knowledge known, and knowledge expressed, and it is one that Melville keeps returning to, not only in the countless prolepses that keep reminding the reader of Pierre’s inescapably fateful end, but also in the sustained interplay between depths and surfaces. Melville is stressing a value residing in the *secret*, in deliberately or unconsciously withheld knowledge, something which circulates but as unavailable meaning, cut off from open interpretation. He will later imply that Pierre has already understood Plinlimmon’s pamphlet even though its meaning eludes him, as it does materially, lost down in the lining of his coat all the time that he is desperate to reread it. The narrator asks ominously

...whether some things men think they do not know, are not for all

that thoroughly comprehended by them; and yet, so to speak, though contained in themselves, are kept a secret from themselves. The idea of death seems such a thing. (294)

Melville is clearly not interested in presenting the gift as part of an abundant or excessive economy otherwise eclipsed, nor as a foundation to reciprocal relations (that is, he takes neither of the paths indicated by the Maussian genealogy). Instead, he argues that it is merely an imaginary concept, dreamt of to transcend the prison of dialectics. Thus giving cannot be thought of as an expression of primary, original needs or intentions - that is, not in terms of a “deep” psychology - but as a product of *superficial* exchanges, on a level of texts and interpretation. So it is that the internalized secret, that which is known but not acted upon, seems to replace the gift’s position of value, motivating exchanges while being kept separate from them; not so much as a sign of what is deep, but of what does not participate in the productive system of interpretation. For if the gift itself is radically unjustifiable, Pierre’s moral integrity at least depends on refusing to acknowledge the fact, and keeping this insight secret within himself.

Hence the secret comes to represent *faith*, the unjustifiable principle that sustains ethical action. It is this - *the gift of credit, the charitable interpretation* - which appears to be at the bottom of the bottomless text, the key to understanding a novel that problematizes the idea of understanding. It is also the subject of the pyramid, one of the primary tropes in the novel, which in a similar way relates a search for identity, a depth in the layers of the self, to the idea of secret knowledge and death. When Pierre begins an autobiographical novel and has to confront the problem of originality, the narrator contemplates,

But, far as any geologist has yet gone down into the world, it is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies. By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid - and no body is there! - appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man! (285)

This passage takes part in an imagery of rocks and stones scattered throughout the narrative: from Greylock, the mountain to which Melville dedicates the book, to the Memnon Stone, into whose “horrible interspace” Pierre crawls; to Enceladus, the rock named after an incestuous titan, on whose face he sees his own nightmarishly reflected; to the granite dungeon that incarcerates him at the very end, where he dies, right after Isabel’s last words, “Oh, ye stony roofs, and seven-fold stony skies!”... Hence it is possible to trace a downward trajectory from signifier to signified, from the ancient majesty of names (Greylock, Pierre Glendinning) to silent and inert rocks (*pierres*). However, this kind of nihilism always goes accompanied in Melville by a religious enquiry, the articulation of a human need for God despite the void (whether God is the origin of sovereign expenditure or reciprocal laws); the need for God is the secret which sustains existence by not being acknowledged.⁶⁰ Thus faith connects the ethical with the figurative. When Melville later experienced the pyramids at first hand in January, 1857 he was to note in his journal, “I shudder at idea of ancient Egyptians. It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah. Terrible mixture of the cunning and awful. Moses learned in all the lore of the Egyptians. The idea of Jehovah born here.” What strikes him is less the void contained within the pyramid than its creative capacity - its sacred power, like fiction, to evoke transcendence; and in this way he suggests that religious and

⁶⁰ Bercovitch points out that rather than nothingness, “something is discovered here by somebody”, just as the disciples’ faith was confirmed by discovering Christ’s absence from his tomb (257).

literary systems are parallel, both founded on a creative act of faith.⁶¹ The pyramid, a collection of stones, man-made copy of a mountain, which conceals the secret of death inside it, symbolizes the architecture of signification itself, as a monument to the represented and the invisible. Language equally functions dependent on acts of creditation, and this is why Melville's critique of the stability of cultural institutions also entails a disruption in the whole operation of the sign.⁶²

incest and language

From the beginning, the incest narrative in *Pierre* is always stressed as the outcome of an uncommon will to read and write; it is part of Pierre's persistent view of his own life in terms of fiction. His desire for a sister is initially an attempt to correct a fault in what is otherwise a family fairy-tale: "only one hiatus was discoverable by him in that sweetly-writ manuscript. A sister had been omitted from

⁶¹ *Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant, October 11, 1856 - May 6, 1857* ed. Howard C. Horsford (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 118. "After seeing the pyramid, all other architecture seems but pastry," he goes on to remark. The pyramid's mystical powers are to do with its vastness, which, like the ocean, gives a sense of transcendence beyond measurement and calculation: "It refuses to be adequately studied or comprehended." Faith, then, is revealed in its symbolic properties, in the art of analogy:

It has been said in panegyric of some extraordinary works of man, that they affect the imagination like the works of Nature. But the pyramid affects one in neither way exactly. To the imagination Man seems to have had as little to do with it as Nature. It was that supernatural creature, the priest. They must needs have been terrible inventors, those Egyptians wise men. And one seems to see that as out of the crude forms of the natural earth they could evoke by art the transcendent novelty [mass & symmetry] of the pyramid so out of the rude elements of the insignificant thoughts that are in all men, they could by analogous art rear the transcendent conception of a God. But for no holy purpose was the pyramid founded. (123-4)

⁶² See Edgar A. Dryden, "The Entangled Text: Melville's *Pierre* and the Problem of Reading", *boundary 2* VII:3 Spring 1979, 145-173. He compares Hegel's observations on the pyramid's semiotic architecture:

On the purpose and meaning of the Pyramids all sorts of hypotheses have been tried for centuries, yet now it seems beyond doubt that they are enclosures for the graves of kings or of sacred animals... In this way the Pyramids put before our eyes the simple prototype of symbolical art itself; they are prodigious crystals which conceal in themselves an inner meaning and, as external shapes produced by art, they so envelope that meaning that it is obvious that they are there for this inner meaning separated from pure nature and only in relation to this meaning. But this realm of death and the invisible, which here constitutes the meaning, possesses only one side, and that a formal one, of the true content of art, namely that of being removed from immediate existence... (n.173)

the text.” (7) Equally, Pierre’s relations with his mother can be said to reflect the perilous confusion of familial and erotic love belonging to the sentimental tradition (as we saw in *The Wide, Wide World*); the narrator himself implies that his actions may have been provoked by their quasi-incestuous wordplay: “possibly the latent germ of Pierre’s proposed extraordinary mode of executing his proposed extraordinary resolve - namely, the nominal conversion of a sister into a wife - might have been found in the previous conversational conversion of a mother into a sister; for hereby he had habituated his voice and manner to a certain fictitiousness in one of the closest domestic relations of life; and since man’s moral texture is very porous, and things assumed on the surface, at last strike in - hence, this outward habituation to the above-named fictitiousness had insensibly disposed his mind to it as it were...” Using the image of the porous substance, Melville proposes that morality be understood not as a strong fabric of embedded values or a natural orientation of the soul, but merely a somewhat unstable point of mediation in the exchanges between the self and language. It does not protect or ground one’s being, but *produces* it out of a range of haphazard occurrences. Hence the horror at the possible dissolution of the difference between seriousness and play, for moral commitment threatens to become indistinguishable from leisurely entertainment: “to Pierre the times of sportfulness were as pregnant with the hours of earnestness; and in sport he learnt the terms of woe”.⁶³

At the point that Pierre begins to question the integrity of his altruistic motives towards Isabel, this textual landscape which surrounds him begins to

⁶³ 176-7; also cf. *The Wide, Wide World*’s instability between tears and laughter.

collapse too, and language itself seems to lose its purchase on the world. “Now Pierre began to see mysteries interpierced with mysteries, and mysteries eluding mysteries; and began to seem to see the mere imaginariness of the so supposed solidest principle of human association.” (142) The words themselves struggle against definition; their own obscurity part of the chaotic “mysteries” that flood in to fill the vacuum of social order. Other than the instances of metaphors stretched beyond their limits of likeness which I have mentioned, Melville’s vocabulary throughout is dense and unwieldy, packed with neologisms like the above, evoking a sense of the excessively material clutter of words. Where Isabel’s guitar-playing is being described, her music representing what is most inarticulable and mysterious, transcending all words, the prose tramples all over it:

Instantly the room was populous with the sounds of melodiousness, and mournfulness, and wonderfulness; the room swarmed with the unintelligible but delicious sounds. The sounds seemed waltzing in the room; the sounds hung pendulous like glittering icicles from the corners of the room; and fell upon him with a ringing silveryness; and were drawn up again to the ceiling, and hung pendulous again, and dropt down upon him again with the ringing silveryness. Fire-flies seemed buzzing in the sounds; summer-lightnings seemed vividly yet softly audible in the sounds. (126)

Melville draws attention to the concrete nature of the words where they ought to be airily evoking abstraction, by making compounds of their parts - so that silver becomes “silveryness”, or melody is replaced by “sounds of melodiousness” (not a very melodious phrase in itself). Adverbs are often constructed from participles (“abandonedly”, further down the page) and the sense of vagueness and awkwardness is compounded with the proliferation of -ings and -nesses, verbal and adjectival nouns, which above all serve to displace the nominative power of the prose. Thus even (or especially) language seems to long for a lost authority of

Name. The general feeling of suffocation one gets from reading prose like the above is due, I believe, to this lack of proper nouns and the extra descriptive work other word-forms have to do in their absence; they create an atmosphere which is simultaneously heavy and insubstantial.

Among the barrage of bad reviews that followed the novel's publication in 1852 - ranging from the considered disapproval of Duyckinck in the *Literary World* to the simpler approach of the *New York Day Book*, "HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY" - George Washington Peck's of the *American Whig Review* focuses on the link between Melville's style and his writing of incest. His special concern is the injury that the novel might cause to social discourse. His argument about the morality of fiction collides with Melville's about the fiction of morality; and the following passage shows the outcome:

Mr Melville has done a very serious thing, a thing which not even unsoundness of intellect could excuse. He might have been mad to the very pinnacle of insanity; he might have torn our poor language into tatters, and made from the shreds a harlequin suit in which to play his tricks; he might have piled up word upon word, and adjective upon adjective, until he had built a pyramid of nonsense, which should last to the admiration of all men; he might have done all this and a great deal more, and we should not have complained. But when he dares to outrage every principle of virtue; *when he strikes with an impious, though, happily, weak hand, at the very foundations of society, we feel it our duty to tear off the veil with which he has thought to soften the hideous features of the idea*, and warn the public against the reception of such atrocious doctrines. If Mr Melville had reflected at all - and certainly we find in him but few traces of reflection - when he was writing this book, his better sense would perhaps have informed him that *there are certain ideas so repulsive to the general mind that they themselves are not alone kept out of sight, but, by a fit ordination of society, every thing that might be supposed to even collaterally suggest them is carefully shrouded in a decorous darkness. Nor has any man the right, in his morbid craving after originality, to strip these horrors of their decent mystery*. But the subject which Mr Melville has taken upon himself

to handle is one of no ordinary depravity; and *however he may endeavour to gloss the idea over with a platonic polish, no matter how energetically he strives to wrap the mystery in a cloud of high-sounding but meaningless words, the main conception remains still unaltered in all its moral deformity.*⁶⁴

Peck is not an unperceptive critic: his images of Melville's style as a "harlequin suit" of shredded language and a "pyramid of nonsense" are themselves impressive. But he is soon caught up in the contradictions surrounding what is forbidden, what is forbidden speech about it, and how properly to indicate the unmentionable - and an utter confusion of metaphors of essence and superficial covering ensues (indicated where italicized). First of all, he considers it his duty to expose the subject of the story (the "idea") for the good of the public, by "tearing off" Melville's deceptive language. Then Peck declares it imperative for there to be a protective "shroud" around not only the thing itself but its set of "collateral" signs - a shroud which should never be stripped, not even for the sake of literary originality, which he accuses Melville of doing. Finally he contradicts himself again by saying that the novel's treatment of incest is so repugnant the language is *not opaque enough* to disguise it - so there must be little need to tear it away after all...

Peck's argument relies on a clear distinction between the seen and the unseen, simply to be able to say that what is evil or injurious or socially counterproductive should be kept out of sight. However, such a distinction is undone by the problem of incest, cutting across definitions of the hidden. The true subject of his outrage is not in fact the exposure of incest (for it is clear after all that Melville's surfaces can be torn away only to reveal others), but the exposure of the

⁶⁴ American Whig Review (unsigned), Nov 1852, in *Melville: The Critical Heritage* ed. Watson G. Branch (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 317.

incest prohibition. The taboo against incest is a law which needs to be denied so that its obedience appears natural, rather than enforced; and consequently, speaking about the prohibition is itself a violation of the naturalness of the family institution. Such morality is inherently unstable - it cannot be both natural *and* good, for if it were natural it would not need to be talked about at all.⁶⁵ The prohibition is therefore the *secret of society* - that which needs to go unacknowledged in order to sustain moral order - and in acknowledging that it exists, so that he can protest against Melville's hideous idea, Peck ends up demonstrating the textual construction of morality despite himself. Ultimately, he has to agree with Melville as to the fictional construction of morality.

So to conclude, *Pierre* is a novel which satirizes sentimentality's rhetoric of love and virtue and its principles of sacrifice in order to explore the extremes of value in its society. Melville imagines the loss of *denomination*, whereby the sign distinguishes and determines value, and through this primarily linguistic corrosion the novel's world is opened up to a chaos of unrestrained energies. It is only through the suppression of the knowledge of the world's fictional foundations (that is, the suppression of the knowledge of the suppression of chaos in the act of denomination), Melville asserts, that any meaningful ethical action is possible at all. The secret place where this knowledge is contained is the one source, not of value itself, but of the act of faith that originates value - the gift of credit.

⁶⁵ Fred See relates incest to the corruption of language in a different way, through the principle of reciprocity. The taboo initiates reciprocal exchange when it sets up a distinction between acceptable and forbidden sexual partners, forcing desire to be deferred from proximate members of one's own group and directed towards strangers. This is the basis of meaningful exchange which is also reflected in the linguistic economy, similarly dependent on establishing difference between signs. So working backwards: "An act of incest, then, returns an absolute opposition, mediated by a principle of reciprocity, to licentious and nonsensical confusion. An ambiguous and enigmatical language would logically follow such a violation." *Desire and the Sign*, 75.

CHAPTER THREE : NOTES ON CHARITY

community - communion - eucharist - charity - charisma

The history of the word *charity* is itself an index of the complex intersections between the religious and the economic. Throughout, it has been used to express a sense of wealth that was other than merely worldly, but its various meanings evolve where it proves impossible to keep Christian terms distinct from the secular world.

Etymologically, the story begins with the Greek word *agape*, which seems to have been first co-opted by a scribe (“the LXX”: translating from Hebrew) in response to a new Christian demand to redescribe transcendent and human relations. In his *Dictionary of the Bible*, James Hastings points out its explicit newness, in contradistinction to language popularly circulating, as a major factor in establishing Christian identity. He says, “When Christianity came, having received the new revelation of the *love of God*, it found this word as yet unspoilt by common use, and adopted it to express the new divine idea.”¹ It appeared one hundred and seventeen times throughout the New Testament. Then when Jerome translated the Greek scriptures into Latin, he introduced a distinction, roughly speaking between active and passive moods, in the form of *dilectio* and *caritas*: “an esteeming, a practice of

¹ James Hastings, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1900).

love towards another” against the latter’s sense of “dearness, kind-heartedness”. Precisely why he should have done this, is not mentioned by Hastings (although he does comment that neither truly convey the emotive strength of the Greek word). In the 1380s, Wyclif then translated the distinction directly into “love” and “charity”, maintaining the initial count where *caritas* predominated by ninety to twenty-four (excepting three occasions of alternative translations).

However, the identity of Christian charity was already being blurred. Early medieval popularizations of the word evolved in forms such as *cartat*, *kierte*, and *cherte*: but these got entangled with secular senses of “dearness of price”, and so to maintain the distinction the Latin was revisited, passing back into popular speech from the language of the Church in forms like *caritet*, and *charite*. (Even so, the *OED* does mention that the distinction was not very strictly adhered to.) The later history of the word is part of a general history of theological protectionism and secular popularization, where The Word was considered under threat from outside by the Church, and in need of releasing to a wider access by the laity. Out of distaste for ecclesiastical vocabulary Tindale’s New Testament of 1526/1534 “discarded charity entirely” (except in one case, *Rom XIV*, 15) according to Hastings², only for it to be restored in the Bishop’s version of 1568. Here its usage was restricted to twenty-six cases, where it stood for the specific Christian grace of “regard for the fellow man”. Then its frequency was increased by the Authorised Version of 1611: “either”, Hastings says, “to avoid ‘the scrupulosity of the Puritans’, or to escape the charge of ‘unequal dealing towards a great number of good English words’”

² but not, confusingly, according to *OED*

(Besides, at the same time concern was growing over the increasingly impure connotations of the word “love”.) Then, the vicissitudes of the word continuing into modern times, “charity” once again fell out of favour: when the Revised Version was published in 1881 it was eradicated altogether - “love” now fulfilling all the senses of *agape* from the Greek scriptures. “*Charity*”, *as such, never occurs in the late Victorian version of the Bible*. This time it was because of its own impure connotations. As Mr Hastings explains, writing from within the discourse of the period, the force of its newness had been lost to secular concerns: “The objections to c. as a tr. of [*agape*] are that it is now obsolete in the sense of ‘love’, suggesting a mild toleration, in place of the noblest and most searching of virtues...”

So here is the story of a religious discourse asserting its language to be transcendentally derived, pure because divine, while seeing a threat to its integrity in the popular circulation of speech on earth. *Agape*’s fitness for naming a new Christian idea consists in its rarer usage relative to other words about love; and this term is further rarefied by the Vulgate’s distinction - with the effect that the separated terms should be more specific to certain meanings only, and less commonly applicable. “Charity” becomes the favoured term in a period distrustful of the secular connotations of love, but subsequent circulation in secular contexts entails its own disfavour. Thus the need to keep the Scriptures current in translation and responsive to language of the time, is accompanied by an anxiety over corruption by usage, resulting in periodic returns to older forms. Thus the two extremes of the process within which charity has acquired its meanings are a fear of over-circulation and a fear of obsolescence.

The story also shows how closely allied are the discourses of religious virtue and commercial value. The form *cherte*, a dead end after which the Latin was revisited, fell obsolete because of confusion with economic concepts of value. The *OED* lists three meanings:

1. Dearness, tenderness, fondness, affection.
2. Dearness in price, dearth³
3. Cheerfulness

In the single word, an evaluation of human sympathy exists alongside an evaluation of resources. An interesting quotation from Caxton of 1481 associates charity not with excess (as in the notion of doing something more than is required) but its opposite, lack: “Ther is plente and good chepe in one yere, In another yere it is had in grete chierte.”

The popular notion of charity as giving develops later, and according to all commentators, charity as an institution, a name for a voluntary organization or an act performed by an individual as part of a noncommercial distribution of resources, most recently of all. Hastings imagines the step from fellowship to almsgiving to have occurred in priestly exhortations to the congregation; for instance, “Good Christian people, we pray you of your charity to give so and so...” but whatever the case, his criticism of the weakening of the term into a “mild toleration” indicates a great shift away from the original sense of sympathy. Charity does not exactly weaken or degenerate in this respect, but is demystified, flattened: cooling from the warmth of God’s love to man, to the cold logic of voluntary practices. Southey’s

³ Formerly “dearth” referred to a famine, a scarcity of food which consequently rendered it dear.

line of 1795 seems to be among the earliest usages of the now common phrase:
“Cold is thy heart and frozen as Charity!”

The following stories illustrate Melville’s continuing interest in charity, though this time more as a problem of social constitution than an individualist ethic of self-sacrifice, as previously in *Pierre*. My readings should be thought of as a collection of notes and observations supplementing the theorization of “charitable fictions” in Chapter I; they pick out a set of themes integral to Melville’s critique of charity which concern ideal and corrupt forms of community, the function of poverty, individual rights and responsibilities towards others, and the displacement of former codes of conduct by increasingly commercial practices. The stories deal in different ways with the representation of economic principles grounding the meaning of charitable action; in various images of circulation involving natural cycles, the life of the city, the movement of wealth through money and heritage, the private or spectacular consumption of food, and most significantly in the trope of the Eucharist, the object is the moral security of the functioning economy, and circulation may represent either the health of the social body or a demonic force of utility and production, alienating and oppressing the individual. Where Lydia Sigourney will be speaking, for example, of a fidelity to circulation, a responsibility to the rest of society phrased as an obligation to keep values in permanent exchange, Melville shall be seen to take up a contrary position, almost obsessively asserting the value of a withdrawal from circulation. (Only with this in mind can he make a hero out of a case of suicide.) Once again, the spectre of obsolescence will come to haunt

the economy, representing what remains within the system of circulation without a function - dead but unburied. While the process of debasement is a factor in the health of the productive economy, Melville will be drawn to the idea of the obsolete in his exploration of the ends of value.

charity of men of the world (speculating on letters)

A story entitled “Charity of Men of the World”, a four-page tale by someone called Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro (of whom I can find no other record and which I imagine is a pseudonym), appeared in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* during the 1840s. *Godey’s* was the first women’s magazine in America and its format is still recognizable in those of today: it contained articles on family and domestic work, fashion, short stories and poems, and brief commentaries on current affairs; as such, it was the first nationwide articulation of middle-class femininity. The stories themselves tended to be moral tales or sentimental vignettes, and the example I want to look at now is not unusual in this respect (except, as I will argue, that its “moral” seems somewhat caught in ambiguity). “Charity of Men of the World” dramatizes the conflicts of the two types of charity that were indicated in the word’s etymology: between sympathetic fellowship and a cold, commercial benevolence. It is about a Charity Ball held at the Guildhall in London, an opulent affair intended to benefit the city’s orphans while also allowing an opportunity for European high society to indulge in a little conspicuous consumption. The satirization of charitable community lies fairly thick here: “The aristocracy of birth, joined hands with the

aristocracy of wealth, in this truly fraternal assemblage, where the sentiments of benevolence and philanthropy expanded all hearts... It was a sight to make one adore philanthropy and charity, and give thanks to Heaven that there were such people as the poor.”⁴

While Lady Fitz Harding is helping to organize the Ball, her husband, a banker, is pressing to collect a debt from a student called M’Farlane which will reduce him and his mother to destitution. This is the basic irony of the tale: the discrepancy between the virtue of institutional benevolence and its heartless business logic which is exposed in individual relations. (“...But your sensibility”- / “You know very well, sir, that there is no such thing in matters of business.”) But the difference between sympathy and cold-hearted business is related to a more general shift of economic principles: from one based on interpersonality to one based on alienated exchange. M’Farlane is a young mathematician patronized by the Earl of Richdale; and when he incurs a small debt the Earl helps out by lending him the money. Their agreement that M’Farlane will pay it back is spoken and informal, but the student insists it be a written IOU. However, when the Earl dies the piece of paper that initially stood for the mutual friendship of student and patron is now transformed into a legally binding contract. Richdale’s heirs demand payment of the debt and Fitz Harding is engaged to extract it. While the bailiff is making an inventory of his property, M’Farlane reflects on this transformation - relations between friends changing to fixed and quantifiable sets of differences between strangers:

⁴ Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro, “Charity of Men of the World”: *Godey’s* XXV-7, 1844 73-76.

“Ah!” exclaimed he mentally, “you who feel tempted to accept of succour from a generous hand, beware, lest your benefactor have sons, or daughters, or sons-in-law, to inherit his fortune, and come after his death to draw you into a reckoning for the benefit. If you have a name that you thought to honour amongst men, by the labours of usefulness, they will record that name in a process! They will have it called over by a sheriff’s officer! They will make it the property of a scribe, who shall speculate upon the number of its letters! They will put up your poverty in the market-place! They will print in the journals, and on your gate, the description of your miserable movables! they will sell them in the public square, and in the evening go to a ball, where they will institute a raffle for the benefit of the poor!”

Thus the written word displaces the authority of character, and what begins in a relation between individuals ends in a relation between names (the debtor’s name in a ledger versus the aristocratic title). Henceforward the story is a protest against the exchangeability of human qualities which have been alienated from a person - evident in the commodification of separate letters in a name, or elsewhere in the banker’s maxim, “They who have unproductive talents should not incur debts.” And henceforward, the story turns into a quite extraordinary revenge melodrama, without a vengeful climax. The mother dies two days after the inventory, and finally, on the night of the Ball, M’Farlane himself appears, in fancy dress...

It was a man clothed in the garb of a *beggar*, carrying a wallet, and on whose garments were pasted innumerable papers of legal process. His breast, his back, his arms, his legs, were covered with them; Mr and Lady Emily Fitz Harding were amongst the first to approach this mysterious personage, and read on a large sheet of stamped paper, which covered his breast, exact copies of the different instruments of legal process on the part of the heirs of the Earl of Richdale, all whose names and descriptions were set out at full length, against the poor student, including the inventory, and ending with the advertisement of sale, which, as I have said before, covered the different parts of the body of the mask. On his hat, which was surrounded with a black crape, was a written paper, with these words, in large characters -

“THE CHARITY OF THE MEN OF THE WORLD.”

A gift for any poststructuralist, here is a picture of a *body which is physically all text*, the commodification that business forges out of writing and accounting having smothered all other features of humanity. It appears as the monstrous creation of a wealthy society attempting to maintain a veneer of fraternity; as the return of repressed economic principles that underwrite modern social morality. And it is called, like the story we read, “The Charity of the Men of the World”; that is, it dramatizes the circulation of the student’s private tale of suffering amongst those who are unwilling to acknowledge it. The scene’s impact derives from the rupture in a stable plutocratic environment, marrying capitalism and heredity, by the object of its own cover-up: the exploitation it chooses to ignore. As such, the rupture takes the form of a reinsertion of the causal logic which has been suspended for the wealthy to maintain their hypocrisy. “The different instruments of the legal process” paraded by M’Farlane are meant to reinstate the causal link between wealth and poverty that implicates the readers of his body/text, and mediates the discrepancy of beggar and fancy costumes. This device of *intrusion/reinsertion* is an element of much of the period’s protest journalism, one commentator has mentioned, whereby two tableaux are set up in mirror-image which invites the reader to reconstruct a forgotten or implied connection. It is, furthermore, a basic element of the diptych form in Melville’s stories, “The Two Temples” and “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs”.⁵

But the scene also enacts the ideal of sentimental representation and response at the same time as it acknowledges their obsolescence. The satire of wealthy

⁵ cf. James Duban, ‘Transatlantic Counterparts: the Diptych and Social Inquiry in Melville’s “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs”’, *NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY* June 1993 66:2, 274-286.

hypocrisy emerges as a protest against the abuse of charity, which invokes a nostalgic return of its “pure” application, a correct way to behave charitably. And in displaying the forcing of reading upon an audience unwilling to accept responsibility for the object represented, the story insists upon duplicating the accusation for its own readership. If this is the case - that the story mourns a parodic abuse of charity in social terms, yet attempts to restore it formally/textually - then its lack of closure is very pertinent. For there is no response from the wealthy, either at the intrusion or upon reading the body/text: so what does it mean to end at this point? Would the student’s appearance be a heroic rupture, or a bitter surrender? The fact that the moral superiority which the narrative has bestowed on M’Farlane from the beginning is not visibly recognized by others, suggests the impossibility of a material resolution in the terms set by the story’s moral principles. And hence, an ultimate supremacy of the commercial articulation of charity where “there is no such thing as sensibility”.

What is at issue with charity in these 19th century texts is not simply a difference between individual and mass, or personal ethics and institutional justice, but the way it is constituted as a virtue in economic terms, and the way spiritual and structural economies interact, with their languages disappearing and reappearing in obsolete or nostalgic or parodied forms. In the commercial context, with its sense of Christian fellowship falling out of circulation, charity represents two distinct economic functions: the disposal of a surplus (which leaves production and distribution of goods unchanged), or a sacrifice of personality, a compassion that costs and is not returned (in the above case, it is M’Farlane’s incautious generosity

which confers his moral sovereignty in the first place). In “Charity of Men of the World”, the attempt is made to restore the ethic of charitable sensibility into a framework of alienated exchange, but because the logic of sentimental representation is itself subject to utility, the failure and the nostalgia are evident when the hero-as-text is unable to produce a response.

Elsewhere in *Godey's*, we can find a different attempt to negotiate a middle ground for charity between waste disposal and self-sacrifice - or in other words between giving away when it does not cost, and giving when it costs too much. In 1840 its editor Lydia H Sigourney advocated that a “mediocrity of fortune, is favourable to virtue”:

Rational economy, while it supplies the means of rendering every man his due, is the basis of true charity. Profuse expenditure is no friend to compassion, and how can he have a right to be liberal, whose undischarged debts are rankling in his conscience? Is not the sweet, inward voice of charity overpowered by the “cry of the labourers whose wages are kept back”? while he whose industry has satisfied the claims of justice, may make glad the hearts of others, while his own reproaches him not.⁶

Sigourney argues that people have above all a responsibility to others before indulging in private matters of virtue, and therefore commendably relegates charity to second place alongside justice. But the kind of justice she considers is rooted firmly in domestic economy: rather than a protest for the rights of others, it is a case of settling debts, or having one's house in order. She stages a similar kind of intrusion in the minds of her readership as we saw in the previous story - as the student M'Farlane interrupts the complacent charity of the banqueters, so the cry of unpaid labourers is meant to impose on her middle-class readers - but once again the

⁶ LH Sigourney, “Self-Educating Teachers”, *Godey's* XX No.9, March 1840, 140.

intrusion is muted by an inability to argue for structural change. Sigourney's "rational economy" is a fidelity to the current system of circulation which comprehends anomalies and imbalances of wealth as something like personal imprudences, not as inherent to production, so she remains merely calling for its better regulation.

Melville also addresses the conflict with justice in these stories, although he is more critical of charity's tendencies towards quietism. The two meet where in the same exchange the idea of a free gift clashes with the idea of what is deserved by rights. He too describes a banquet in "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs", contrasting it with the meagre meal of a poor field worker's family, and here he is concerned to expose the empty rituals of the rich's charity to the poor which go hand in hand with a sentimentalism that bypasses any questions of the justice of poverty. In *Pierre*, Melville calls this attitude "povertiresque": an extreme form of compensatory reasoning which justifies the existence of poverty and suffering as natural circumstances, integral to a total economic cycle which cannot be disturbed. As will be seen, the povertiresque is capable of performing grotesque feats of interpretation.⁷ His own technique of intrusion and reinsertion is performed through narration. Although he does not provide a narrative structurally linking the discrepancies between rich and poor, he does show how the persistence of their obvious inequalities is sustained rhetorically. By presenting liberal reading positions and then implicating them in the object of critique, he denies the production of safe

⁷ "To such a one, not more picturesquely conspicuous is the dismantled thatch in a painted cottage of Gainsborough, than the time-tangled and want-thinned locks of a beggar, *povertiresquely* diversifying those snug little cabinet pictures of the world, which, exquisitely varnished and framed, are hung up in the drawing-room minds of humane men of taste, and amiable philosophers of either the 'compensation', or 'optimist' school. They deny that any misery is in the world, except for the purpose of throwing the fine *povertiresque* element into its general picture. Go to!" *Pierre*, Ch. XX.

liberal insights. He is keen to destabilize this “economizing” impulse of narrative, leaving a space for the uninterpretable, the extravagant, and the unnecessary.

“Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” compares a poor family meal with the Lord Mayor’s charity banquet; in “Jimmy Rose”, the destitute protagonist is forced to do the rounds of the community to receive their “eleemosynary teas”; Bartleby’s refusal to participate in social circulation culminates in his preference not to “dine” in the Tombs; in all of these stories the conflict between charity and justice is set in a context of the sharing and consumption of food. “The Two Temples” explicitly discusses the Eucharist, juxtaposing two scenes of communion; one in a New York church, the other in a London theatre. While Melville does not treat any form of interaction unproblematically, it does appear that he is interested in the Eucharist for its model of social exchange; as if its staged reconstruction of community and the affirmation of ritual repetition suggest alternatives to the forms of exchange Melville is so uneasy with. The Eucharist is a theological resolution to the contrary demands of charity and justice because it is of an entirely different economic order. The idea of performative fellowship (not derived from mythical origins) and ritual repetition take no part in the system of production: their accumulation of value in increased circulation defies principles of debasement and obsolescence.

Catherine Pickstock sees the Eucharist as a form of exchange which integrates human action with transcendence in what she calls a “middle voice”, neither active nor passive and between subject and object, somehow self-reflexive

and divine at once. She uses the concept to critique postmodernity's privilege of death and nothingness, its "necrophilia", where death is the ultimate point of value orienting epistemology and ethics. Postmodern theory, she argues, still maintains modernity's distinction between absence and presence and considers meaning in objectified, spatial terms. Thus she characterizes "the nihilism of deconstruction, in whose attempt to 'lose' the object there lurks a concealed correlate of covetousness which tries too hard to undo itself."⁸ In contrast, the Eucharist implies a more temporal epistemology: operating in a performative mood, it "outwits the distinction between absence and presence, and death and life". Therefore the unknown is not excluded or reified as absence, "the object par excellence", but participates in meaning as mystery: "a genuine open mystery which, by being partially imparted through the sign, and therefore recognizable *as* mystery, has a positive - but not fetishizable - content." (421) Once again, we are close to the epistemology of the secret, and furthermore to an idea of gift-circulation rather than production, since in the outwitting of the distinction between life/presence and death/absence value can no longer be predicated against death, or the end of desire. It opens up to a more temporal realm beyond restricted calculation: "according to a theological reading of the gift, to give is already to receive the return, which is the gift *to be able* to give. The 'giving up' of the gift occurs in trust of a 'return' with a difference, but this return is not something we can earn, nor is it over against the moment of giving up. It is not subject to any calculation and neither is it a giving-away for others to be grateful for the price one has paid." (416)

⁸ Catherine Pickstock, "Necrophilia: The Middle of Modernity; A Study of Death, Signs, and the Eucharist" *Modern Theology* 12:4, October 1996, 405-433; 411. Pickstock does tend to conflate postmodernity and deconstruction in her opposition, and while her analysis of Derrida concentrates almost exclusively on his earlier texts (eg *Speech and Phenomena*) it should be added that later work such as *Given Time* and *The Gift of Death* especially, engage with the theology of exchange (and the epistemology of "mystery") more than she gives credit.

Where Pickstock objects to Derrida's "faithless" theory of the sign (429), she articulates something similar to what I have been arguing is Melville's uneasy position between nihilism and faith. His fascination with the corrosion of social and linguistic structures is persistently accompanied by an investigation of the mysterious human will to trust, and it is this tension that informs the play of death and secrets in his narratives. Pickstock asserts that this mystery on which faith is based is by no means a transcendent thing but entirely situated within language, thereby offering a ground not just for ethics but for all meaning: "the Eucharist underlies all language since in carrying the secrecy, uncertainty and discontinuity which characterize every sign to an extreme (no body appears in the bread), it also delivers a final disclosure, certainty, and continuity (the bread is the Body) which alone makes it possible to trust every sign." (427)

Accounting for Bartleby

1. Law and Responsibility

“At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable.”

“*Prefer not*, eh? ...I’d *prefer* him; I’d give him preferences, the stubborn mule!”

When a man comes before his judges with nothing but his crimes, when he has nothing else to say but “this is what I have done”, when he has nothing to say about himself, when he does not do the tribunal the favour of confiding to them something like the secret of his own being, then the judicial machine ceases to function.

Foucault is not, in fact, commenting on Melville’s story but giving an account of the changing constitution of criminal discourse during the 19th century.⁹ He argues that an increasing interaction between judicial and medical institutions helped to produce new conceptions of an individual’s relation to her crime and a crime’s relation to the social body. If previously the question of liability had rested solely upon a determination of the facts of a case and the nature of a crime, now a “supplementary material” was introduced: “another type of discourse, the one given by the accused about himself, or the one which he makes possible for others, through his confessions, memories, intimate disclosures, etc”(2). In cases that became known as “homicidal mania”, for example, the individual’s discourse supplemented a conclusive body of evidence which often included their own open admission but lacked *explanation*, either by reasonable motives or traces of insanity. For the

⁹ Michel Foucault, “About the Concept of the ‘Dangerous Individual’ in Nineteenth Century Legal Psychiatry”: tr. Alain Baudot & Jane Couchman, *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 1, 1978, 1-18.

dilemma of this kind of murder was not what penalty it incurs, but where did it come from? It was “a maximum of consequences, a minimum of warning. The most effects and fewest signs” - which shook the authority of a law guaranteed by the primacy of material facts. If a crime could no longer be considered the mark of an intending subject, then nor could its punishment be considered the fair maintenance of social order.

This highlights two main issues in the function of 19th century law: the problematic link between intention and consequence, which a supplementary personal discourse attempts to maintain by means of a narrative, rewriting the motives (or causes of motivelessness) missing from the original account of evidence; and the intervention of a therapeutic element in the law's social codes, which requires it to do more than discipline actions, but also minister to well-being and offer curative treatment to individuals. Foucault illustrates by telling the story of a cannibalistic mother from Selestat who was executed because it was proven she was poor, and therefore could have been starving. Had she been rich, hunger could not have been a sufficient motive and her presumed insanity would require care, rather than her crime correction. In such ways a narrative of the criminal subject is summoned not so much to resolve the material undecidability of a case as to acknowledge its presence, which is also acknowledgement of the penal system's dependence on decision, however arbitrary. The psychological uncertainty about criminal intentions must be rendered compatible with democracy's uncertainty about authority, or it will otherwise undermine it; for a democracy depends upon its

citizens' powers of rational decision.¹⁰ So the woman, one could say in this case, had been rationalized into criminality by an effective narrative.

The basic dynamic linking authoritative powers of speech - the enforced bringing-into-discourse of a subject that remains silent - with structures of rationalization, aligning the subject with causal principles, is centralized in Foucault's analysis around the issue of *responsibility*. The purpose of the supplementary discourse is to decide an accused's degree of responsibility: if a coherent narrative of motives can be told, then they can be deemed sufficiently compatible with the system distributing punishment. Foucault believes this is paradoxical, a collision of psychological and judicial narratives:

The more psychologically determined an act is found to be, the more its author can be considered legally responsible. The more the act is, so to speak, gratuitous and undetermined, the more it will tend to be excused. A paradox, then: the legal freedom of a subject is proven by the fact that his act is seen to be necessary, determined; his lack of responsibility proven by the fact that his act is seen to be unnecessary. (11)

Legal responsibility, then, is little more than a mark of narrative competence, signalling the individual's compliance with the forms of community. Where she is found not to comply, responsibility is assumed by some other (the State or a guardian) - this is a specific *removal* of a person's claims to political subjectivity. That taking responsibility has been seen purely as an act of charity, rather than as disenfranchisement, is a masterstroke of ideology. That is, to take it always implies

¹⁰ See Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's description of the transition from earlier theocratically oriented societies, paraphrasing Claude Lefort in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York & London: Verso, 1985), 166: "...the radical difference which democratic society introduces is that the site of power becomes an empty space; the reference to a transcendent guarantor disappears, and with it the representation of the substantial unity of society. As a consequence a split occurs between the instances of power, knowledge and the law, and their foundations are no longer assured. The possibility is thus opened up of an unending process of questioning..."

a taking-from, and this appropriation may be as violent as it is benevolent.

Turning to “Bartleby”, it should be clear that many of the above issues resonate with the story, from a most basic perspective of the silent functionary working within the law, upward. Bartleby may not have committed homicide but his “crime” calls up the same demands for supplement: his conduct is disruptive within the terms of a business contracting him to work, but he is further *criminalized* by his withholding of “the secret of his own being”. In this respect, the lawyer represents the law’s will to provide a narrative on his behalf - and, as in the Selestat case, to see him hungry, desiring and participating in necessary processes. The lawyer’s dealings with Bartleby in the office and later with its new occupants are attempts to establish a commerce of responsibility: first to fix it onto him and then to decide who should assume it from him. Responsibility will therefore be a central theme of the essay since it addresses the relationship of the speaker and the spoken-for, dependent on interpretation of the ambiguous or signless, in a social system characterized by deterministic ideologies and sentimental myths. To recapitulate: in its modern conception the law is no longer a gauge of material consequences but incorporates a personal psychological element, supposedly tending to the health of the whole social body this way. In this reconception a person is responsible if she supplies a coherent account of herself - if not, power steps in to provide one. The conjunction between legal participation and personal discourse may be figured in the term *accountability*, then: where Bartleby’s refusal to be personally accountable provokes the imposition of accountability by the law. This taking of responsibility and rendering into discourse is construed as a generous act (as is, for example, even

the feeding arrangements in prison) masking the appropriative side to its character.

So responsibility stands as a mark of the capital invested in social consensus, an agreement on regulatory laws; and also as accountability, a measure of the self's indebtedness to narrative structures, causality and closure. This doubleness informs the lawyer's desire for "a full and satisfactory biography" of Bartleby, and his final conflation of the individual with humanity: the two inscriptions seemingly indistinguishable. Hence the charitable attitude he adopts is a kind of mediator of Bartleby's resistant otherness to deterministic logic. Much of the following essay therefore hinges on the interrelationship of different models of exchange and circulation, authoritative or marginal. First of all it involves examining charity's attempt to cope with otherness and its consequent unsustainability. Then I shall look towards a reconceptualization of charity in a poststructuralist context, more conscious of the status of rendering account in relation to social discourse, and more cautious over the appropriation of otherness. Gregory Jay uses the story to argue the pragmatic value of deconstruction, focusing on Bartleby's arrival as the law's encounter with the unaccountable, its experience of indeterminacy; then he formulates a notion of the responsibility of play itself, against determination.¹¹ I believe that the charitable might be valuably aligned with such notions of playful responsibility, and furthermore that Melville's texts accommodate and nourish such a reading.

¹¹ Gregory S. Jay, *America the Scrivener: Deconstruction and the Subject of Literary History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 1-27. Jay locates the story's theme of responsibility at the encounter with otherness. It is because of the scrivener's preference not to act reasonably that the lawyer is first confronted with ethical decisions: ones that are not already laid down for him by law. "Only then, by virtue of this interruption of determinism by an equally determined errancy, does the question of responsibility arise at all." (26) Responsibility thus occurs at the point of freedom from determination, not to assert its own determining power but a duty to question the terms of the power doing the determining. What Jay sees dramatized in the story is part of responsibility's larger conscription in knowledge itself: "Theory must be free to speculate, to gamble, to play, and it has a responsibility to that freedom which is equal to its responsibility for the consequences of speculation in practice." (15)

It is worth paying attention to the lawyer's own deliberations over the application of charity and the issue of accountability. He seems to be struggling throughout with a way to conceptualize charitable actions which will satisfy his rational legal economy and his sentimental humanism at the same time. The first problem is recognition of common terms of exchange:

“I prefer not to,” he replied in a flutelike tone. It seemed to me that while I had been addressing him, he careful revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did.¹²

What interests me here is the language of circulation used to describe fantasies of thought. There are two kinds in competition: the first is the lawyer's machine-like rationality, where information is circulated in a space sealed off from intervention, since a single meaning comes out as it went in and leads to a single “irresistible” conclusion. It is the perfect utilitarian communication - direct, efficient, waste-free. But the response is read as the sign of another logic with no relation to the first and yet “paramount”, debasing the former's perfection. Faced with a challenge not just to relations of power in the workplace but to the architecture of rationality itself, the lawyer worries that man “begins to stagger in his own plainest faith. He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side.”(22)

Then the lawyer reflects on possible forms of interaction with a person of such irrationality (or other-rationality), and at this point charity appears to conciliate the opposing sides:

¹² Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860* (Evanston & Chicago: Northwestern and Newberry, 1987), 22.

Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance. If the individual so resisted be of a not inhumane temper, and the resisting one perfectly harmless in his passivity, then, in the better moods of the former, he will endeavour charitably to construe to his imagination what proves impossible to be solved by his judgement.
(23)

However, the sentence is very convoluted because the speaker wants to give an impression of committing himself to an ethic of charity without actually doing so. There are so many conditions that the conclusion is hardly even a statement. It says, effectively, “Charity is a useful sentiment to try to achieve when an already predisposed character in a good mood is not directly challenged by another’s resistance”. It is *almost tautological* - tending towards pointless repetition. Or in other words, the lawyer is pretending to give the benefit of a doubt, but in fact he offers what he cannot lose; the charity he proclaims seems hardly a voluntary option at all - merely a matter of course. So these are the two general types of economy, which keep interfering with each other and exposing their faults. The lawyer tries to construct a virtuous role out of a mean position, then finds that virtue once more incorporated into the rules of commerce. The extent to which extravagance and reserve are confused here is apparent right at the beginning, when he introduces himself as an “eminently safe” man, outstandingly cautious... and the dilemma for Melville then becomes, “How can a safe man, a paragon of accounting, act charitably?” or the other way round, “In a sentimental society idealizing extravagant trust, where is the security for action?”

At this point we might imagine Victorian charity and capitalism as two sides of a coin - on one side it says “Safe” and on the other “Bet”; and one side

guarantees the other, depending which side up it lands. Charity prefers to look like a bet, covering up its careful accounting under the dress of extravagance; while the market prefers to look like a system of securities and mask the risk and speculation at its heart. Melville outlines the interrelationship of sentimental and commercial exchanges to demonstrate that their contradictions are ultimately unresolvable. The coin's "flipping" means that neither attitude will serve as a stable guarantee for a code of conduct - both are always dependent on an assumption of utility which collapses in Bartleby's presence. We cannot say, for example, that the lawyer's error is acting too sentimentally, because he gives up; or too calculating, because he needn't have bothered in the first place; and to say his sentimentality is cynical moves *us* toward an even more sentimental position. Thus Melville's point is that such a dilemma of moral economy is inescapable, and frames all critical positions.

Furthermore, the lawyer goes on to admit his economizing of charity: "Yes. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humour him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience." (23) Having already decided not to dismiss him for business reasons - "He is useful to me. I can get along with him" - once again this benevolence seems a tautological restatement of the fact, and it illustrates the lawyer's preference for the supposedly cautious investment over risky speculation.¹³ He appeals to an external space -

¹³ A similar attitude, the desire "to win paradise economically", is accused of the donor of counterfeit money in Baudelaire's story. See Derrida, *Given Time*.

heaven - for the unlimited enjoyment of the fruits of his moral labours (which are minuscule). A sentimentalist might object to the incorporation of market principles into a supposedly pure eschatology, turning the afterlife into a place of consumption in this way; and a cynic might relish the satirization of religious narratives of heavenly reward; but surely there is more happening here, in the line's uncomfortable frankness, in the fact that it cannot be calculated to impress anyone the lawyer thinks he is addressing. No-one wishing to purchase self-approval cheaply would declare their interests beforehand, unless certain of a like-minded audience. I would consider this to be part of a series of points in the narration where Melville unsettles the distancing processes of narration and complicates identification with characters, and I shall return to this later.

Pity is conceived as a marketable good which can be put into circulation in order to effect some outcome, in the lawyer's eyes: it is supposed to do work. But it also seems to cost, as long as it is in circulation. Reflecting on the change in his feelings towards Bartleby, he remarks,

[Repulsion] rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succour, common sense bids the soul be rid of it.
(29)

This is a kind of desentimentalization of the ethics of sympathy, making no room for the ideal of self-sacrifice. In sentimental discourse the degree of pain felt can mark the amount of virtue in the act of pity, and that higher pleasure of virtue overcompensates the renunciation of pleasure involved in putting pity to utilitarian

effect.¹⁴ Desentimentalizing removes altogether that external space, heaven, where virtue can be enjoyed - where excessive acts that have no return or outcome in the material world will finally be reciprocated. Naturally, after this conclusion the lawyer feels unable to go to church.

2. Commerce and Space

The breakdown in charity's material practicability, and the proliferation of gaps in a rational economy which goes with it, is also paralleled by a breakdown of clearly defined spaces which constitute the subjects of 19th century American urban society. The office's enclosure within the walls of Wall Street and the partitioning of its interior form part of an imagery of division and spatialization of subjectivity, where an individual obtains identifications due to their situation within public or private, domestic and commercial spaces. Bartleby effects much of his "resistance" by challenging the identifications of each space and disrupting their demarcations. Melville dramatizes this conflict, I believe, to expose the limitations of given orders of subjectivity and investigate alternative social relations - much in the same way as I have argued Cummins attempted to relocate social relations between conventional distinctions of public and private. For her, the threshold, doorstep, street and suburbs were signs of a new space for sympathetic transactions between friends or strangers, mediating newly experienced alienation with nostalgic expressions of community.

¹⁴ See Gregg Camfield's discussion of Catherine Beecher's sentimental philosophy in *Sentimental Twain: Samuel Clemens in the Maze of Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 38-42.

The play of spaces in the story illustrates the mutually dependent discourses of domestic and commercial economy. The domestic functions as a haven for humane social values in order to support commerce's alienation of the self; or in other words, the domestic environment has a humanizing effect which is its main economic *use*. Bartleby's domestication of the office space therefore strikes at the heart of the comfortable distinction between social and commercial principles of conduct. Leisure also functions as a domestic mental space which the lawyer reserves for dealing with Bartleby, and the supreme value of his final offer of charity is signified by its combination of home and leisure: "'Bartleby', said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, 'will you go home with me now - not to my office, but my dwelling - and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure?'"(41) This is the most benevolent act sentimentality can conceive - the kind of thing possible to find throughout domestic literature epitomizing heroism - since it transgresses boundaries of social decorum and opens up the most hallowed of spaces to a foreign disruptive presence. But the scrivener's refusal, like his homemaking in the office, undermines economic differentiations, and totally upsets the lawyer's world. Unable to retain a sense of public and private, he finds himself voicing his personal anxieties out loud in the middle of a political debate in the street, and later needs to escape both from home and office, commenting, "I almost lived in my rockaway for the time".

Gillian Brown argues that Melville's critique of spatial prescriptions is part of a general resistance to commerce; Bartleby perversely representing a kind of heroic immobility in a culture where everything is required to enter cycles of

exchange. She calls him a “radical agoraphobic” who, rather than work through a fear of the marketplace by assimilating its relations into a naturalized concept of the domestic, resists outright. “What the lawyer recognizes as Bartleby’s complete self-possession... obviates the notion of exchange or intercourse, denies any form of commerce, including the conversation and charity the lawyer would readily extend.”¹⁵ In other words, not agoraphobia but anorexia (before its naming as such): he stages the domestic subject’s *reductio ad absurdum* by perfecting a state of non-commerce - neither participating in legal processes nor articulating his preferences nor, finally, sustaining the body’s own cycle. Therefore the division of social space is taken apart in a different way: letting all circulations and exchange be subsumed into a domestic sphere, then to represent the sphere as no circulation at all. If the lawyer domesticates business, Bartleby empties the domestic of economic relations.

The identification of Bartleby’s motivation with that of the anorectic gives Brown the odd position of arguing suicide as radical critique - “despite the obvious disadvantages of the disappearing self”(193) - or offering no better remedy than reintegrating the individual into society (teaching them to eat again). It does not in fact give much room for reading alternative economic and intersubjective principles. She recognizes the problem of idealizing signlessness, the ultimate form of non-participation which the anorectic exemplifies in suicide - being the fact that it can never remain free of signification but is submitted to “the sentimentality of interpretation”... Thus Bartleby’s disappearance from the social text makes his presence in the biographical narrative all the more concrete, since the form is all the

¹⁵ Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism*, 187.

lawyer's, the interpretation of his death all society's, and Bartleby-as-textual-sign passes into circulation far more freely than the figure ever did in life. Ultimately, of course, the lawyer ends up equating him with all humanity. "The narrator's attempt to find a transcendent meaning to the Bartleby enigma is precisely the triumph of sentimentalism and consumerism..."(195)

What Brown does not recognize, however, is that the lawyer's sentimentalization can all too easily be the critic's as well (who, after all, is in the same business of tracing narratives for the law and interpreting obscure texts). Her own transcendent meaning is Bartleby's disavowal of commerce which she lets stand for Melville's idealization of immobility, a place entirely withdrawn from interaction: "Melville's tale predicts and protests the circulation of the stationary"(177). So intent is she to cast Bartleby as the archetypal anorectic, prophesying the tragedy of circulation, that she reads his death as a "mission" and criticizes the lawyer for misinterpreting its "intended enunciation"(194). The focus on intention as opposed to its material signification once more indicates a sentimental terrain, and I believe is also insufficiently attentive to the story's pragmatic questions elsewhere: for example, what should we have done with Bartleby? How might social and economic structures be organized for the better, *if* one would understand this story as a tragedy? The lack of self-consciousness of the fact of commercializing that all readings and articulations undertake leads Brown to reproduce the discourses that she considers the object of Melville's critique. The critic's interpretation of a historical text to their own culture seems to be as necessary as the lawyer's to his; hence it is not Brown's desire to reinterpret that I

wish to “expose”, but rather question her assumption that Bartleby’s apparent signlessness is an ideal and its commercialization debasement. The lawyer ultimately evokes a model of commerce which assimilates and encloses human activity despite the ruptures it incurs, dreaming a place beyond itself for escape; Brown seems to reproduce this logic critically - Bartleby made to occupy the commercial *and* the space beyond by representing the radical anorectic.

3. Sympathies and Reading Positions

Melville exploits the dual reading position throughout the story, in a distancing procedure that I touched upon earlier. Where the lawyer fully declares his motives - purchasing approval through charity, or the lack of endurance in his pity - it seems the lawyer is assuming the reader’s congress in his own principles, or simply revealing his brutal rationality, and the reader will recoil from any association with him. But the distance from the narration leads us nowhere, except to anti-rational positions that are themselves Christian and sentimental (wanting charity to purchase nothing, or pity to endure forever); and ultimately we cannot shift identification to any other character unless it is Bartleby, which is what the lawyer tries to do after all and contravenes the logic of the distancing. This is hyperparody again: a refusal to let the grounds reached through distancing become *safe* grounds of reading and reveal a preferable position. Perhaps it also closes down the fantasized sense of space beyond the textuality of narration, and of accountability, furthermore.

In fact, our access to the story is already constructed in two ways; we are, in effect, two kinds of juries. In one sense the lawyer's address makes us *his* jury - "loquaciously attempting to explain, justify, exonerate, and otherwise plead his case", as Jay describes him (22): and with this perspective he interprets the story to be staging a trial of the law itself, challenging the epistemological foundations of determination. In another sense, the supplementary discourse that Foucault argued centrally for 19th century rewritings of criminality, for determining legal responsibility - *this* is the same narrative that the lawyer puts before us, as if we were Bartleby's jury needing an account of his motives. Thus we find ourselves already implicated in a system of rationalizing that needs narrative to validate its processes, creating causality and expecting conclusion. Here the reader is asked to examine their complicity as desirer of narrative; the irony of it is that the lawyer believes his account to be undertaken out of feeling, and we likewise can only "sympathize" with Bartleby's fate through a mediation which itself is part of the means of condemning him in the first place.

In the absence of a preferable reading position we are left with sympathies that oscillate between the figure and the victim of authority: attracted to Bartleby's pathos or the lawyer's sentimentality, driven away by his overassuming nature or Bartleby's unknowability, by turns. The one association leads us back toward the other, testing the limits of a reader's identification. The final tableau shows such ambiguated sympathy. It is constructed to evoke maximum pathos at the close of the lawyer's narrative: Bartleby dies, curled up and "wasted", on a patch of grass inside the prison which appears like the growth of a seed dropped into a pyramid.

The picture of the consumptive, and the image of natural regeneration within the inorganic walls of culture, are of course two major sentimental tropes. But other meanings proliferate at the intersection of these two and accidentally challenge the pathos. The unacknowledged pun in “wasted” testifies to another cycle which is not the body’s but culture’s: that is, rather than lie at the end of a closed cycle of nourishment (consumed, exhausted) the dead man signifies the excess discarded from a social cycle - a wasted and pointless life. *He is both overused and without use.* In turn, this complication doubles back on the natural image, as the curled Bartleby himself resembles a seed: questioning the point of a continuous generative cycle.

In the final passage the assumptions of utility and production are implicated in the structure of narrative itself. The lawyer recounts a rumour about Bartleby’s previous employment in a Dead Letter Office in the hope of giving a satisfactory resolution to the enigma of his life - and this material is supplementary, both superfluous and necessary: although the lawyer declares there is no more to say, he says more, driven by the desire for meaning over against the unknown, the need to appropriate. On one hand Bartleby still demands a narrative of motives to solve the problem of responsibility and restore the law’s validity; on the other it is a lack of accountability which creates a need for analogical meaning. The irony which sets up the key distance between narrator and reader lies in the degree of satisfaction of these desires for meaning: if the reader refuses to accept the final analogy conflating Bartleby’s predicament with the human condition (Ah! Bartleby!) then they will still remain unconvinced about the system of justice that condemns him.

One can read the passage as a kind of machine for interpretation, showing the way the lawyer presents his conclusion as a commodity for our consumption. First he creates a market for closure by evoking a feeling of incompleteness; then he offers the rumour as a raw material, which he fashions into a satisfactory analogous meaning. Either side of the rumour (which is given in the middle of the paragraph) there is an imbalance of caution and conviction which dramatizes the “leap of faith” initiating fiction. The rumour’s presentation is, once again, semi-tautological, creating an expectation in a long conditional clause which goes unfulfilled. The sense runs: *there is no more to say; but if you want to know more/ (then) so do I/ but I don’t/ but I have a rumour/ but it may be untrue/ but it has “a certain suggestive interest”*... If the rumour is the key to the story, then the narrator sells it poorly. In trying to present his narrative as the work of an eminently safe man, he has minimized the speculative trust required from the reader and undermined the strength of his story. The other side of the rumour the appeal “Does it not sound like dead men?” seems somewhat desperate, but this is the basis of the lawyer’s analogy. For him, the circulation of mail represents a network of sympathy between individuals, a model of reciprocal exchange, whose rupture implies death: “pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities”. And now that the lawyer can imagine Bartleby as an overseer of failed sympathy, protagonist, narrator, and reader all collapse into the same identity, as overseers of failures in sympathy on different levels. That is, the lawyer makes his own inability to sympathize with Bartleby, and his inability to lead the reader to sympathize fully with his story, into a condition which he projects onto Bartleby himself, so that it becomes the story’s central

totalizing fact.

The final line is not so much one which divides readers into those who accept its conflation, and those who realize its trickery, but again a point of uncomfortable reflection upon divided sympathies within every reader. For the desire for closure is strong enough to remain even after the offer has been frustrated. Closure acts as the completion of sale, and thereby the gulling of a reader: the passing off of faith as certainty which sustains the economies of goods and texts equally well. In this case, a divided attitude to the closure is enough to allow some attention to the things suppressed by its promise of certainty. The theme of failed sympathy sidelines the story's particular difficulties: those of narration, of sustaining a coherent morality, and of the realtions of power that condemn the scrivener to death. In this respect the greatest horror of the story is the narrator's achievement in converting a tale of silences and barriers to communication, so resistant to closure, into a grand sentimental finale: the ultimate recycling of the useless into the useful.

But to add my own epilogue, and reinterpret a sign in the lawyer's text which *I* believe explains mysteries... It might be interesting to note that a "dead letter" does not just sound like a failure on the mail system. It is also an *obsolete law*: a written ordinance which has become inoperative although not yet repealed.¹⁶ Interesting that a lawyer misses such a connotation: especially since this is in fact the primary meaning - the *OED* mentions that the Dead Letter Office had to change its name in

¹⁶ Its meaning was later extended to anything defunct and still in existence; cf *OED* entry for Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, 1926: "What was never a regulation but has gone or is going out of use, as quill pens, horse-traction, amateur football, etc..."

the 1880s because the public were confused and thought it was a legal office...¹⁷ An obsolete object is one that has lost its value in use or exchange, and yet continues in circulation. This connotation, therefore, offers an intriguing correlative to the lawyer's tautological thinking - both pretend to be functional merely because they are circulating - and it also refers to the two characters' jobs: remember that both scrivener and narrator have suffered *redundancies* from their previous posts. It would suggest (were this a full narrative sign, and not just a *rumour of a sign*) that underneath the system of production articulated by the lawyer, lies its waste; the illusion of productive and meaningful cycles maintained by defunct lives and values; the principle of obsolescence, although a necessary element in the process, an abhorrent reminder of the end of utility, the unusable, unrecyclable and incombustible.

This unacknowledged meaning derives originally from the New Testament writers' wish to distinguish themselves from the Old; cf. *II Corinthians* 3,6: "[God] also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." So the letter is opposed to the spirit, as the written (copied) law is opposed to the new ethics of Christs' apostles; cf also *Romans* 7,6: "But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter." The deliverance from the law - which is *the deliverance of New Testament charity from Old Testament authority, at the same time as the*

¹⁷ Cf *OED*'s entry from *The Standard*, 1881: "The old name, 'Dead Letter Office', has had to be altered to the present appellation, 'Returned Letter Office', partly in consequence of the fatuity of the public, who would insist upon associating the title 'Dead' letter with the 'land of the leal'."

deliverance of the analogical from the literal - is, ultimately, the story's Christian and Romantic dream, cleverly occulted.

“Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs”

Melville’s story “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” picks up on the discrepancy between religious ideals and commercial practices. Its diptych format depicts two scenes of charity: in the first the narrator is offered a meal from a farm labouring couple, and in the second he attends a display of institutionalized benevolence. The system of production and circulation is viewed from two perspectives: for the poor it is a matter of the immediate satisfaction of material needs, and for the rich a matter of conspicuous consumption and useful waste disposal.

The narrator is travelling abroad for the good of his health, first in the American countryside and then in London. In the first part he is hosted by a poet named Blandmour - a caricature of the self-reliant transcendentalist, a kind of Thoreauvian perversion, who in his enthusiasm for doctrines of personal economy and natural compensation, manages to voice an idea of community which is sentimental, quietistic and offensive: “...through kind Nature, the poor, out of their very poverty, extract comfort”.¹⁸ For example, he renames snow “Poor Man’s Manure” because of its moisturizing properties: “Distilling from kind heaven upon the soil, by a gentle penetration it nourishes every clod, ridge, and furrow. To the poor farmer it is as good as the rich farmer’s farm-yard enrichments. And the poor man has no trouble to spread it, while the rich man has to spread his.”(289) Or rather, this attitude is most despicable precisely because it does *not* voice an idea of

¹⁸ *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, 291. “PMPRMC” was first published in *Putnam’s* in 1854.

community - instead it obviates the need for one, because by redescribing other people's lack in terms of a natural sufficiency Blandmour does away with imbalances of wealth, and therefore any momentum towards exchange, altogether. There is no reason for people to come together to share and redistribute. Thus when Blandmour suggests that snow can double up as "Poor Man's Eye-Water" the poor do not gain any extra benefit - merely shit to rub into their eyes. Ignorant of the scatology, he remarks "And what could be more economically contrived? One thing answering two ends - ends so very distinct."

Under Blandmour's insistence that he go to sample Poor Man's Pudding, the narrator invites himself to a meal at the Coulters' house where he is awakened to the true severity of their condition and the scandal of Blandmour's "povertiresque" arguments. He witnesses their lack of comfort and health, the husband's exhaustion and the wife's infirmity; also their squire's vigilance, his paltry allowances of rancid meat and damp fuel, and his equivocal generosity in giving what is described as "a Sunday ride" to the wife. Most demeaning of all, in order to cope with their condition they draw on the same Christian doctrines as Blandmour. When the wife complains to the narrator about the deaths of her children one can see the well-learned sentimental pieties of self-sacrifice and heavenly reward, although they do not quite match up to the degree of grief she bears; in a lament which inverts the idea of fellowship she describes motherhood as a perpetual nursing of strangers, who die on their soon becoming friends:

"Ah, sir, if those little ones yet to enter the world were the same little ones which so sadly have left it; returning friends, not strangers, strangers, always strangers! yet does a mother soon learn to love them; for certain, sir, they come from where the others have gone.

Don't you believe that, sir? Yes, I know all good people must..."(295)

Melville presents this as the disturbing counterpart to Blandmour's rosy version of universal compensation; he presses the case throughout that the rich and poor have entirely different registers of evaluation which make it almost impossible to find the ground for a discourse of justice. Even the sharing of food does not provide a sense of common values, for when they sit down to eat, what is sustenance for the Coulters is inedible for the narrator. The pudding is bitter and mouldy, and the piece of pork impossible to eat - "not being ravenous, but only a little hungry at the time", he mentions. The two hungers are incommensurate. He leaves without finishing the meal and comments on his feeling of helplessness in words that recall Bartleby's lawyer: "I could stay no longer to hear of sorrows for which the sincerest sympathies could give no adequate relief..."

In London, his host is a civic functionary who takes him to watch the Lord Mayor's Charity at the Guildhall. This is the annual distribution of the leftovers from the previous night's banquet. The host, wearing spectacles as colourful as Blandmour's, proudly presents as a paragon of charity and civilization what turns out to be a near riot of famine. Only the presence of armed guards prevents it from becoming revolutionary violence: "A line of liveried men kept back with their staves the impatient jam of the mob, who, otherwise, might have instantaneously converted the Charity into a Pillage." Once again the performance of charity is a repulsive parody of the Eucharist, food and hunger incapable of proving a common ground. The narrator wonders, "...do you really think that jellies are the best sort of relief you can furnish to beggars? Would not plain beef and bread, with something to do, and

be paid for, be better?” The host replies, “But plain beef and bread were not eaten here. Emperors, and prince-regents, and kings, and field-m Marshals don’t often dine on plain beef and bread. So the leavings are according...”

Since the sketch is set at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the banquet being an official celebration of victory over Republican France, we could interpret the narrator’s portrayal of such violent charity as a declamation of the Old World’s political economy against which republican values might appear more humane and just. “The leavings are according” betrays the deep injustice of a hierarchical social order, and exposes what the narrator calls “the intrinsic contempt of the alms”. However, in the first section we have already seen a critique of American ideology, in particular the doctrine of self-sufficiency, which exposes a similar incommensurability of values of luxury and necessity between those above and below the poverty line. Both sides of the diptych, therefore, present us with pictures of societies whose way of rationalizing and confronting the existence of poverty is quietistic and contemptible. Once again, Melville is playing with narrative positions such that the reader is denied a productive interpretation of the text. Here he does it by creating a liberal-minded narrator, whose own outrage at Blandmour and veiled sarcasm at the guide in London takes up the kinds of critical positions anticipated in his readership; then he compromises the insights the narrator gains from them.

For instance, at the end of the first sketch the narrator points out the discrepancy between the national rhetoric of equality and individualism, and the hard economic realities of the underprivileged:

Those peculiar social sensibilities nourished by our own political principles, while they enhance the true dignity of a prosperous American, do but minister to the added wretchedness of the unfortunate; first, by prohibiting their acceptance of what little random relief charity may offer; and, second, by furnishing them with the keenest appreciation of the smarting distinction between their ideal of universal equality and their grind-stone experience of the practical misery and infamy of poverty... (296)

As a standard materialist critique of republican values, this would square with other critics' interpretations of the story: to take an example, Marvin Fisher says in *Going Under*, "American values do not recognize poverty, except as the consequence of a lack of virtue and industry".¹⁹ Because he performs a fairly sensible critique, there is a temptation to let our conclusions dovetail with his own. Certainly his final comment is acute enough: "of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity over humanity, nothing exceeds most of the criticisms made on the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed, and well-fed." Nonetheless, this insight is entirely redundant within the narrative, as it does not affect the narrator's behaviour in any way. While only appearing critical, the narrator is incapable of questioning his conduct at the very moment it is undercut. The sketch ends as follows:

"Blandmour," said I that evening, as after tea I sat on his comfortable sofa, before a blazing fire, with one of his two ruddy little children on my knee, "you are not what may rightly be called a rich man; you have a fair competence; no more. Is it not so? Well then, I do not include *you*, when I say, that if ever a Rich Man speaks prosperously to me of a Poor Man, I shall set it down as - I won't mention the word."

At the point of confrontation, a curious inarticulacy: Blandmour is clearly well housed and warmed and fed and guilty of making preposterous assumptions about

¹⁹ Marvin Fisher, *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 64. Also see James Duban's conflation of the narrator's voice and that of the text: "Although we may question the narrator's assumption that an impoverished American suffers more in spirit than does a European pauper, the passage nonetheless succeeds in detailing the dissonance between the American dream of egalitarianism and the harsh reality of an impoverished class..." [op.cit. 282-3]

the poor - yet the narrator backs off from speaking out against him. Of course this is because he is sharing his hospitality, and his critical position is not “free”. Melville compromises critical values by making the narrator a guest and a tourist in both situations - where he is off home turf and already *indebted* in some way to his host. Maybe, then the point Melville is making is one about the difference between interpretive and practical ethics. It is only in the retrospective voice of the commentary that the narrator has the freedom to be outspoken, and the political conclusions he reaches are betrayed by his action in the narrative. In actual fact, the story is being told forty years after the events, and the insights have been inserted as if they were immediate reactions - as if to simulate an unmediated relation between experience, ethical understanding, and action.

In the second sketch, there is a similar confusion in the narrator's indebtedness to the figure he would oppose. While deeply upset by the chaotic scene and incensed by his guide's blind admiration of the charity being administered, the narrator is still reliant upon his services and protection. Moreover, the narrator's sympathies for the poor are revealed to be no less sentimental than the guide's vision of charity - his horror at being accidentally identified with the mob of beggars (because his clothes have become tattered in the ruck) signifies an unwillingness actually to take up the common ground which he assumes in theory: “‘Surely he does not mean *me*’, said I to my guide, ‘he has not confounded me with the rest’”(300). After such a threatening association with the object of his concern - which is after all a physical association of the identification he would feel theoretically - the narrator has not been enlightened by his experiences, only

awakened to the shock of what is utterly different. The diptych's claim to a meaning from the synthesis of the two parts collapses at this point. Where there may have been a moral conclusion, the narrator's remarks amount to little more than "pew!"

"Now, Heaven in its kind mercy save me from the noble charities of London," sighed I, as that night I lay bruised and battered on my bed; "and Heaven save me equally from the 'Poor Man's Pudding' and the 'Rich Man's Crumbs.'"

"The Two Temples"

Of all the stories, it is "The Two Temples" that most directly concerns itself with the problems of constructing community, and the way principles of community derived from religious texts come to blows with other discourses, specifically aristocratic or democratic. In this context charity once more serves as a reminder of former Christian values that have been corrupted, but its nostalgia is recuperated through an alliance with a purely secular, and consciously artificial, scene. The interpretive difficulty of this story, it seems to me, is to work out to what degree the artificiality of the community being evoked is a point of critique or an affirmation.

In keeping with the diptych form of "PMPRMC", the narrator of "The Two Temples" presents two episodes in order to draw on their parallel and contrasting features. In Temple First, he is barred from taking communion at a high society church in New York, but he steals up inside the tower to observe and participate; in

Temple Second he is given a ticket to a theatre in London, where he discovers a “truer” communion among the spectators in the gallery. The diptych technique initially invites a series of closed comparisons, mirroring each other, such as “excluded from the religious community, the narrator is accepted into a secular version”; or “maltreated when only poorly dressed in New York, he is well treated when truly penniless in London”; or “The Priest takes on a sinister aspect in the dim light of the church, yet the play’s actor is a sincere and convincing Priest”. Thus the suggestion is - from the narrator, at least - that each contrast is an opposition which makes a preference for the values of the second episode, so that in effect we move from corrupt religion to ideal, sincere humanity.

However, Melville ensures that any preference for the second scene over the first is taken at a certain price. Notwithstanding the fact that the vision of ideal community is found in a theatre, we might also be alerted by the fact that the movement from corruption to renewal is backwards, from new to old worlds, inverting the Pilgrims’ similarly principled voyages. Indeed, the apparently straightforward preference becomes exceedingly compromised when considering the laws of social movement that enable the narrator to gain his perspectives on community in the first place. Faced with the travesty of public worship that the church represents, the narrator justifies his intrusion by invoking the first republican principle: ie where an institution is seen to be corrupt any individual has the right to declare its laws invalid. “Though an insider in one respect, yet I am but an outsider in another. But for all that, I will not be defrauded of my natural rights.” (305) The deeper contrast is now between America’s corruption of democratic community and

a strict social hierarchy in the old world which allows a greater illusion of community. The theatre gallery is a segregated place for the working class, cramped and poorly provisioned (“The height of the gallery was in truth appalling. The rail was low.”); held within a muted but still detectable presence of repressive force: “Such was the decorum of this special theatre, that nothing objectionable was admitted within its walls.” (314)²⁰

The narrator’s attitude in the second episode reveals a further problem that the discourse of republicanism has with the practice of charity. Rather than see it in Christian terms as primarily a bond of fellowship, democratic principles can only treat charity as an offence against the pride of individual agency, since they assume an equality of resources and ability to which the idea of giving to another seems anathema. Before coming across the theatre, the narrator wanders through London in search of comfort, having been made unfortunately penniless (he is careful to represent himself as an innocent victim of circumstances and others’ mistreatment). When a stranger offers him a ticket he hesitates, “bewildered and ashamed”: and he requires an enormous amount of sophistry to enable himself to accept the gift after all.

Shall I use it? mused I. - What? It’s charity. - But if it be gloriously right to do a charitable deed, can it be ingloriously wrong to receive its benefit? - No one knows you; go boldly in. - Charity. - Why these unvanquishable scruples? All your life, nought but charity

²⁰ To strengthen the case, there is a veiled reference to an event involving hierarchy and social repression which would not have been lost on a contemporary readership. The actor so praised for creating the illusion of community is none other than William MacReady: who, five years prior to Melville writing the story, was at the centre of nationalistic tensions which ultimately led to the Astor Place Riots. At the time Melville was living on 4th Avenue, two doors away from the sexton of the church he satirized in Temple First. The story was never published for fear of offence: but in the light of this local history and the memory of the riots, a contemporary reader might have thought otherwise about the following “innocent” praise for MacReady: “...an amiable gentleman, combining the finest qualities of social and Christian respectability, with the highest excellence in his particular profession; for which last he had conscientiously done much, in many ways, to *refine, elevate, and chasten*.” (314; mine)

sustains you, and all others in the world. Maternal charity nursed you as a babe, paternal charity fed you as a child; friendly charity got you your profession; and to the charity of every man you meet this night in London, are you indebted for your unattempted life. Any knife, any hand of all the millions of knives and hands in London, has you this night at its mercy. You, and all mortals, live but by sufferance of your charitable kind, charitable by omission, not performance. - Stush for your self-upbraidings, and pitiful, poor, shabby pride, you friendless man without a purse. - Go in. (312)

This soliloquy ironises the deep-rooted assumptions of possessive individualism. The narrator invokes an image of fellowship in an healthily exchanging community, and then he brings into play an entirely contrary definition: “charitable by omission, not performance.” This means that one’s greatest charity to others is to leave them alone; such “negative charity” - like negative freedom - refers to a model of a society of separate individuals, where the first act of human association is taken to be violence against the person. It is a fallacy of individuality which fits well with the republican double standard of virtue: the individual has no needs to be discovered from society, only from within; and the virtuous person ought only give charity, never receive it. Exchange violates the mythical integrity of the self.

The acceptance of charity marks the narrator’s entry to an experience of community, the “genial humane assembly” he was looking for, inside the theatre. However, we now know that it is engendered not only at the cost of the pride of self-help, which might be a worthy price to pay, but also at the cost of the model of possessive individualism at the core of republican political economy. There is sufficient capability for the reader to gain a critical distance from the narrator here - only it doesn’t seem to last long: in the subsequent experience, there is something

that hinders the readability of that distance. Once inside, the narrator is made to feel comfortable by the general cheer of the gallery audience and then by a boy who gives him some ale in honour of America where his father is working. Finally MacReady, acting the part of Cardinal Richelieu, brings the cheer(s) of the assembly together: "Starting to their feet, the enraptured thousands sound their responses, deafeningly; unmistakably sincere. Right from the undoubted heart." (315) Then the narrator asks, "And hath mere mimicry done this? What is it then to act a part?"

At this point the narrator is praising the warmth of feeling among the people congregated in the theatre, the individual joy and the unity of responses - while at the same time acknowledging it as an effect of theatricality. Therefore, the distance the reader has assumed from him - which effectively comes from viewing him as conned by his own nationalistic ideology - appears to be compromised, having to take into account this indicator of a certain self-awareness. That this remark causes problems for conventional strategies of interpretation is suggested by one critic's reluctance to consider it altogether. Marvin Fisher reads "The Two Temples" as a critique of the American dream of spiritual republicanism, followed by its sentimental reconstruction away from home. "The symbolic strength of the dream survives," he says.²¹ Then he dismisses the final inflection given by mimicry as a "side-issue". The reason is that his materialist critique is made possible by the ironic distance levered away from the narrator's perspective, and it must remain intact; the critique can allow for the narrator's own powers of judgement in the first episode (as also in "PMPRMC") but in order to question the supposed structure of

²¹ *Going Under*, 61.

corruption/renewal it relies on the narrator's mystification to the deeper ideological assumptions of his culture. Fisher avoids the extra stress on theatre because it would throw his reading. The question is, where does it throw it to?

To my mind, the effect the theatrical element has as narrative sign on the story's interpretation is closely associated with its effect on an understanding of social formation: the two concerns run parallel. In terms of the construction of an experience of community, this scene is part of a number of public rituals in the short stories, often involving the consumption of food, where the Christian Eucharist is the central referent. In "PMPRMC" the charity banquet is contrasted with the "humble" meal at the Coulters'; Jimmy Rose remains in society on account of the free meals his former friends offer him; and Bartleby's tragedy is manifested in the incommunicability of kinds of hunger, culminating in his starvation. Here, fellowship is animated by a boy with a flask of ale. Considering for a moment the kinds of exchange these rituals set up with respect to the Eucharist, may also illuminate the kinds of narrative exchange in "The Two Temples". I will outline three cases: the religious ideal, the materialistic corruption and the secular ideal.

Theologically, Eucharist primarily signifies "thanksgiving" (reference to a communal meal or "charity feast" is secondary). The basis of the principle of community that Eucharist entails, then, is not the mere presence of people around a table but a symbolic one: it looks to God for the origin of human relations, as the origin of all exchanges. It points to a very different economy than capitalism's contract-based exchange because it suggests the prior existence of a gift-exchange

into which relation humanity arrives. Thus the basis of religious subjectivity on which future social exchanges are founded is the person cast in an “already-thankful” state - rather than as owner of resources and property, as possessive individualism would have it - and the thankfulness enables symbolic union. The Eucharist says of its meal, in effect, “this consumption is not material but symbolic, and this fellowship is not a sharing of resources but an extension of the state of thankfulness to others”. (In this sense one might say that the Eucharist is an image of a community in “total prestation”).)

However, the Guildhall’s charity banquet and the community of Temple First belie the principles of such gift-circulation: for they replace the transcendent element with a symbolism of prestige - a sublimation of commodity exchange which, idealizing the disposal of surplus as charity, only serves to naturalize the economy of the wealthy and formalize real inequities along with the individualist subject. Then there is the example of the theatre, which still contains elements of gathering and ceremony, performance and reciprocity, but without any transcendent or prestigious conversion. Furthermore, what the narrator’s question articulates is the way ritual presents an alternative relation between truth and representation. While a traditional aesthetic considers mimicry a secondary reproduction of the original object, the theatre exemplifies a mimicry which is not debasement - indeed, one that gains in aesthetic value through its repetition.

The vision in the theatre, therefore, aims to recuperate a religious subjectivity and exchange from a religion which has become corrupted by material wealth.

When, at the end, the narrator finds the two forms of communion almost indistinguishable - “He looks every inch to be the self-same, stately priest I saw... from my high tower-pew” - the main difference is one of authenticity: the theatre’s mimicry summons an “earnestness of response” and a sense of community in “sterling charity”. The problem for Melville is that it has been gained at the expense of democratic principles; a sense of immediacy in relation to community only appears possible to him as illusion, suspending concerns of hierarchy and economic reality. “What is it then to act a part?” is an ambiguous question, referring equally to the democratic ideal of a community of “actors” (whose values are constructed and relative truths), as it refers to the undemocratic effect of a charismatic “leading actor” on the spectating public.

“Jimmy Rose”

“Jimmy Rose” can be most profitably compared to “Bartleby”, of all the short stories that concern themselves with charity and forms of circulation and exchange. For it, too, foregrounds the position of the narrator in the telling of the story as a sympathetic act whose ideological construction marks a deeper and more suspect complicity in a dominant general economy. On simple terms, it is the story of a wealthy community’s failure to be charitable towards the protagonist in his poverty, a failure which is all the more poignant because of his own generosity in earlier days. In this respect, the narrator’s lament is a complaint at the lack of return

for generous gifts, an economic principle which he suggests is part of the disappearing social ethics of a more genteel past. But once again, through an ironic perspective cast toward the narrator and only seen in retrospect, Melville implicates the relationship of sympathy in the very construction of the concept of charity that is believed to be passing away, and thus addresses the moment of nostalgia as a symptom of the economic discourse it seeks to oppose.

Without question, the story's key word is "poor": one that simultaneously signifies a material poverty and a relation of sympathy. Throughout, the narrator reiterates the phrase "Poor, poor Jimmy - God guard us all - poor Jimmy Rose!"; which does not act as a mere summary exclamation (as, for example, in the endings to "Bartleby" and "PMPRMC") but rather anticipates the tale itself, immediately introducing Jimmy Rose as a figure for pity before the account is given. Thus from the beginning is a sentimental narrative, in which an amount of sympathy on the reader's behalf is invested to be returned in an emotional payback at the climax, exaggerated to an extent that casts suspicion on the very nature of the narrative's sympathetic exchange. To make the point a little clearer: as soon as the protagonist is mentioned, the narrator preempts the reader's response with an exclamation "poor Jimmy Rose!", and the same insistence on a sentimental response occurs at exasperatingly frequent intervals, such that it becomes, in a sense, debased, worn out through overuse - and a reader may find herself disassociating completely from the sympathetic relation, resisting the narrator's intrusiveness, looking for another position with respect to the protagonist in his poverty, which may not be at all charitable.

The suspicion of sympathy derives from the procedure of the narrative, from within, being a repetition of certain signs that do not accumulate interpretive/responsive interest with their persistence, but lose it. As such, the notion of “distance” from the narrator is immediately present. But the ironic perspective is retrospectively fixed, thus framing this particular suspect circulation of signs, at the end in a brief episode that is supposedly irrelevant to the understanding of the moral conclusion. In this respect it resembles “Bartleby”, where a final passage superfluous to the narrative has a structural significance for the overall reception of the story. But there, the incident (or rumour, more precisely) is part of an economy of explanation which intends to gather disparate and fragmented signs into a singular system productive of final meaning. Here, the episode is meant to complement the already-determined meaning as another reiteration of the sympathetic demand; only it disperses it.

According to the narrator, Jimmy Rose’s life has been a decline from great prestige into the humiliation of begging charity from his previous beneficiaries - still managing to conserve a genial spirit despite the shame - until finally experiencing true charity at the hands of a young girl who cares for him in his last days. In the final incident, tagged on to the end of the story - and which he says, like Bartleby’s lawyer, “I hardly know that I should mention here...” - the old man suddenly speaks out against the girl’s kindness. Among the things she has brought him are several books, “of such a sort as are sent by serious-minded well-wishers to invalids in a serious crisis”, which we may presume are pious texts. The narrator recounts, “Jimmy, with what small remains of strength were his, pitched the books into the

furthest corner, murmuring ‘Why will she bring me this sad old stuff? Thinks she to salve a gentleman’s heart with Poor Man’s Plaster?’” The narrator tries to put it down to “natural peevishness” or offence taken at mentioning death, but for the reader it may function differently. Jimmy has been good-natured in the face of what the narrator assumes to be maltreatment, and instead has rejected the treatment considered to be most respectful of all. Equally, when the narrator first presents himself as Rose’s one true friend, he is repulsed by a gun pointed through the keyhole of a locked door. Rose resists all assumptions about the relation between poverty and suffering, and between the victim and others. To an extent this is a Christian practice: to turn the cheek to humiliation and make wealth out of poverty; but his rejection of piety at the end denies the possibility of such an affirmation. With the conventions of the relations between true/false kindness and adequate appreciation thus reversed, the reader is once more (as in “Bartleby”) in a defamiliarized territory of sympathy and moral values.

What is the nature of a “true” gift refused, in comparison to a false (cynical) gift accepted? This seems to be at the centre of the text’s ironic reading - for it is a question the narrator himself, having raised, never thinks to address, dismissing Rose’s refusals of sympathy and construing his geniality as a sign of old-fashioned honour.

And what necessitates the story’s telling? Is it, as for Bartleby’s lawyer, the combination of a lack of psychological knowledge with a suspicion of alien values that challenge one’s own? For the lawyer appears to need to understand the

scrivener in his rational terms to dispel the threat of otherness in conceptions of desire, need and social relations. This story appears at first sight to be a salutary testimony to a man whose principles of dignity and generosity are fast becoming obsolete. It erects a monument to honour to substitute for its real disappearance. But then it too addresses its own need for explanation, as if the quantity of honour does not sufficiently compensate for Rose's humiliation, nor therefore account for his behaviour. The narrator's problem, he identifies at the end, still remains: "how after that gay, dashing, nobleman's career, he could be content to crawl through life, and peep about among the marbles and mahoganies for contumelious tea and toast" (345).

One possible trajectory for the narrative, then, in terms of its signifying economy, is thus: a reiterated, anticipated sympathy for the abject in Jimmy Rose exists alongside a salutation to his good-naturedness - which recuperates him from the abjection into honour. (This is, of course, the Christian virtue conceded to the self-sacrificial.) But the recuperation is difficult: Rose attains a degree of abjection that no virtue in self-sacrifice will compensate (especially after denying a Christian dimension.) The point of such an exchange between humiliation and honour is indicated in a curious remark from the narrator: "It is evident that no man could with impunity be allowed to lead this life unless regarded as one who, free from vice, was by fortune brought so low that the plummet of pity alone could reach him." Therefore, the remainder of abjection requires further conversion into positive value - it needs to be explained in rational terms, and this explanation can only be effected through the retelling of the same narrative. Hence the story concludes in stagnation,

the constant unregenerative cycle of sympathy for suffering, and hopeful (religious) reinterpretation:

And every time I look at the wilted resplendence of those proud peacocks on the wall, I bethink me of the withering change in Jimmy's once resplendent pride of state. But still again, every time I gaze upon those festoons of perpetual roses, mid which the faded peacocks hang, I bethink me of those undying roses which bloomed in ruined Jimmy's cheek. (345)

The wallpaper, setting the scene for the narrator's telling of the story, initially holds forth an ambiguous allegorical reading: cross-cutting light and shade which is reminiscent of Hawthorne. But this is the story's perpetual resting-place, not a point of departure: "every time" restated as "still again". Then also notable is the resemblance of such circularity to the changeless immortality of heaven to which the narrator leaps in search of a fitting resolution - one which Rose has already denied himself, however: "Transplanted to another soil, all the unkind past forgot, God grant that Jimmy's roses may immortally survive!"

What Melville is describing is a nostalgic discourse that has a particularly retentive economic aspect; its stagnant narrative structure reflects the attitude and involvement of the narrator at the point that he tries to criticise his culture most. From his resistance to redecorating the deteriorating rooms of the old townhouse to his admiration of Rose's continued gallantry, though his compliments are out of date, to his view of historical change as mere "plagiarism of the seasons", there is a general unwillingness to recognize obsolescence. The insistence on playing with the symbolism of such a cliché as "rose" is itself indicative of his refusal to let worn signs go.

And most of all, Melville is describing the function of nostalgia not as the preservation of former values but the exploitation of their image alone, to mask new values that would rather not be spoken about. For what launches the narrator in a lament for the past is the state of the house which he inherits, once a fashionable property and since used as a warehouse. Commerce, he feels, is encroaching upon the last vestiges of gentility. “For many years the old house had been unoccupied by an owner”, he says; “those into whose hands it from time to time had passed having let it out to various shifting tenants; decayed old towns-people, mysterious recluses, or transient, ambiguous-looking foreigners.” However, the narrator’s positioning is suspicious. His narrative seems intended to inaugurate a new period of occupation, and once more continue a lineage of which he had been made “unexpected heir”. Only later do we learn that the property had belonged to Rose himself - and in the light of this dubious heritage certain other statements, such as the narrator’s claim to be the one true friend, his presence at the funeral with only two others, and the possible connection of the young nurse with his wife (who is “too young” for him), begin to take on different meanings. In such a way, the high degree of erasure of the narrator’s own participation in the circumstances bringing him to the point of narration closely associates with the nostalgic denial of commitment to current economic structures. The ironic suggestion is clearly that sympathy is not merely a neutral form of exchange nor a pure form of charity against which others are mere debasements, but it has its own not-so-unexpected profitability.

In many of these stories, Melville seems to be choosing a theme of charity

in order to explore different types of social exchange for their relative virtues, which he does through a narrator already beholden to a particular economic thinking which itself instructs the narrative form. Bartleby's lawyer unconsciously reveals the conflict of his will-to-sympathy with the forces of rational utility his storytelling assumes. Here the rational assessment of suffering upon which the narrator's sympathy is based (ie protesting his material poverty) is problematized: not only by the muted involvement in capitalist practices, but also by signs of other principles of exchange whereby the distinction of material and other definitions of wealth is somewhat blurred. On the one hand, suffering demands concrete material resolution - "Some merit had been theirs [Rose's almsgivers'] had they clubbed together and provided him, at small cost enough, with a sufficient income to make him, in point of small cost enough, independent of the daily dole of charity..." On the other hand the dependency is a form of circulation for Rose, which he would otherwise be completely denied; and the narrator recognizes some sort of translatability between his material condition and other forms of assessment, from which perspective Rose is "a pauper with a wealth of polished words; a courteous, smiling, shivering gentleman." That Rose's attributable principles cannot be comprehended by the conventional discourse blurring material and "symbolic" (Christianity) causes the problems of narration mentioned above, and fixes hierarchies of exchange - all of which pressures are collected in the following, disconcerting conclusion:

Though in thy own need thou hadst no pence to give to the poor, thou, Jimmy, still hadst alms to give to the rich. For not the beggar chattering at the corner pines more after bread than the vain heart after compliment. The rich in their craving glut, as the poor in their craving want, we have with us always. So, I suppose, thought Jimmy Rose.

Rather than turn geniality-in-poverty into a virtue which renounces all other

economies in the appeal to a greater morality, as Christianity might, the narrator is left drawing a dangerous commensurability between them, *thus equating the poor's hunger for necessity with the rich's hunger for excess*. And without the irony one might expect in the equation.

Certainly, part of the critique Melville is outlining here is directed at sentimentality, tending to produce images of suffering which are strictly decontextualized from the general matrix of social exchanges, and which favour an individualized, victimized subjectivity. Within such an aesthetic the narrator cannot begin to comprehend structural injustice; nor can he any possibility of change. He may only waver between representational forces of individuation and generalization, which are incapable of sustaining a vision of a fairly distributing and exchanging community. The underlying assumption that he makes is that the rich man's charity to society automatically entails an equal principle of charity the other way.

So from the initial question, "What is the nature of a true/false gift refused/accepted?" to a more complicated reformulation; one that shifts emphasis from the actions of the recipient (who is already forced into a position as the designated sufferer, or needy, and therefore already constituted as a certain type of individual according to the sentimental aesthetic) to a point before the offering, before the gift is constituted as such, in order to understand more fully the structures of power that bring parties into exchange, and define the relative virtues of the exchanges.

“I and My Chimney”

Allan Moore Emery has divided criticism of “I and My Chimney” into the “private” and “public” camps: first of all there is a tradition of readings, beginning with Merton Sealts, which emphasize autobiographical material and see the chimney as a symbol of Melville’s psychological condition; then comes a line which takes the story as a political allegory of the conflict between conservatism and progressivism. In this camp the chimney can alternately stand for American institutions such as slavery or Christianity, or more general concepts like those chosen by Stuart Woodruff: “the forces of ‘time’, ‘process’ and ‘accumulated history’”.²²

The autobiographical approach ultimately assumes writing to be expiatory, therapeutic: that the publication of the story generates equal exchanges between the individual subject and others, as a form of revenge, an ironic payback for the psychiatric identity impressed upon Melville at the time. The political approach is a form of old historicism whereby literary details are “matched” to a materialist context, and in Emery’s own case the translation is so equivalent one wonders why Melville wrote a story at all, and not an article on politics. (In his analysis the narrator equals Daniel Webster, his wife equals the feminist abolitionist Maria Chapman, the architect is a combination of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips and the disunionist James Mason, and the chimney equals the Constitution.) To me, it seems that the story considers the nature of explication itself, and the

²² Allan Moore Emery, “The Political Significance of Melville’s Chimney”, *New England Quarterly* LV/2 June 1982, 201-228.

without a significant covering of space. Rambling is the trope of the narrative itself - the contests over domestic space presenting one of its origins, the exploitation of land around this plot, one of its political referents; and above all the semantic ambiguity of the narrator's expatiation (what constitutes the allusive core and what may be diversionary or unnecessary) presents a main epistemological theme. My reading will therefore encircle the following four terms, different sites of economy: *extravagance*, *expansiveness*, *expatiation*, and *expansionism*. These identify a critical locus which is not specifically political, nor domestic/autobiographical nor textual, but involves a radical scepticism towards all three.

domestic economy

Derrida's enquiry into the nature of gifts and the relation of the fictional to the economic describes a "poetics of tobacco" with respect to Baudelaire's story "La Fausse Monnaie". He shows it to have two narrative origins (or sites of production) where meaning is put into circulation (he will ultimately claim the story testifies to "the moment of a naturalization of literature", that it exposes the means by which fiction is accepted as natural, rather than an institution of exchanges between users of language). There is the offering of a "counterfeit coin" which will engage its recipient in a string of events, for better or worse, by virtue of its being taken for good or bad money; and which engages the narrator in flights of speculation that posit another narrative departing from the events narrated. But prior to this a purchase of tobacco begins the story, since it provides the narrator's companion

with the counterfeit coin in his change. Thus a key device is the *circulation of a remnant*, fictionality standing at the passage from a realm of calculation to a realm of excess.²³

Furthermore, Derrida views tobacco as a symbolic trope, over and above its role as a trope of 19th century narrativity (as it functions similarly in Poe's "Purloin'd Letter") - that is, it initiates a realm of exchanges beyond the circulation of finance. It is, foremost, a luxury, a commodity which is used up entirely in its enjoyment, and which marks an enjoyment so far from the body's supposed natural needs that it is seen as positively harmful: "it seems to open onto the scene of desire beyond need" (113). Apparently, tobacco affords the smoker "time out" from the cycle of labour and production (only apparently, however: since it will always remain subject to economic regulation and the calculation of pleasure) - a duration which is coded in 19th century modernity as non-domestic, beyond the time of women. In a society of men, smoking seals the ritual moment of alliance outside of questions of economy; it reflects the social contract:

Tobacco symbolizes the symbolic: It seems to consist at once in a consumption (ingestion) and a purely sumptuary expenditure of which nothing natural remains. But the fact that nothing natural remains does not mean, on the contrary, that nothing symbolic remains. The annihilation of the remainder, as ashes can sometimes testify, recalls a pact and performs the role of memory. One is never sure that this annihilation does not partake of offering and sacrifice. (112)

From such a perspective we can begin to understand the unusual strategy of "I and My Chimney". Rather than depict an alliance between people in the mutual

²³ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 169.

disposal of a surplus, Melville characterizes the chimney itself as the second smoker and companion. The pact between the chimney and the narrator, likewise, is an entry to the symbolic where the consumption of material quantities creates nonmaterial values, but it does not open up to a social contract; the chimney is *at once a consumer and the process of consumption*, so the social relation is compressed, doubled up on itself, with the effect of creating a lone and unassailable, even masturbatory authority. That is, the narrator's "desire beyond need" is not projected toward fulfilment with another and turns compulsively inward. What ensues is the ironic tale of a narrator's attempt to preserve a society of one.

The characterization of the two smokers, anticipating and displacing the scene of human alliance, thus corrupts the distinction between economy and society from the start. The hearth, chief sign of *oikos*, the producer of heat at the heart of the home, is transformed into a consumer of luxuries in its own right.

space: architecture and nature

On one level, "I and My Chimney" tells of a family's disputes over its domestic arrangements, which centre on the chimney as the contested (phallic) emblem of authority. The narrator's wife and daughters object to its cumbersome size and make plans for its alteration, then its removal, calling on an architect to strengthen their case; besieged by such demands, the narrator's nonchalant attitude changes into stubborn entrenchment and he finally buys out the architect's opinion

to settle the affair, though inconclusively. In this sense it is a story of alliances forged and broken which link the domestic and the commercial worlds, and the oppositions they create are thematized in different ways.²⁴

In the extent to which it is figured as an opposition between indolence and industry, the contest of husband and wife can be read as an analogy of conflicting conservative and progressive forces in political culture. The narrator's leisure is complete satisfaction, which denies changing times because it conceives of no future necessities: "Content with the years that are gone, taking no thought for the morrow, and looking for no new thing from any person or quarter whatever, I have not a single scheme or expectation on earth, save in unequal resistance of the undue encroachment of hers." (361) His wife represents innovation, growth, and an energy which he considers as excessive as she his restfulness. "Her maxim is, Whatever is, is wrong; and what is more, must be altered; and what is still more, must be altered right away." (360) From her point of view, alterations are necessary because the chimney takes up too much space, imposes itself disruptively on the shape of every room, and confuses the floor-plan enough to leave visitors disorientated: "...almost every room, like a philosophical system, was in itself an entry, or passage-way to other rooms, and systems of rooms - a whole suite of entries, in fact. Going through the house, you seem to be forever going somewhere, and getting nowhere." (364) In effect, the chimney has lost its usefulness for the household's present activities.

²⁴ If we are to find any word on the formation of community at all, it will be here, in the nature of the alliances, whose fragility rather puts the lie to Emery's rosy conclusion of political compromise: "In effect, 'I and My Chimney' is not the story of two destructively polarized perspectives but instead a tale which pictures for us the symbiotic and well-ordered relationship that has often come to exist between the conservative and progressive minds". (227)

While admitting these points, the narrator's defence is mainly on grounds of tradition. It is not wise, he believes, to tamper with a construction that bears the authority of so many years, making it as much of a historical landmark as the Bunker Hill monument (365). But here the question arises as to the chimney's political symbolism, for it is described in contrary ways, and one is tempted to ask whether the narrator's conservatism is a republican or anti-republican trait. Though an emblem of revolution, the "constitution" of the chimney also makes the house considerably inaccessible to newcomers. And though he admits this disruptive effect on the communal life of the house, the narrator also sees its overbearing central presence as a unifying factor: "though at the time [family and guests] may not be thinking so, all their faces mutually look towards each other, yea, all their feet point to one centre; and, when they go to sleep in their beds, they all sleep round one warm chimney, like so many Iroquois Indians, in the woods, round their one heap of embers." (358) It is for such reasons that Emery believes Melville is referring to America's federal designs, under threat of collapse. But overall, the virtues of the chimney are not seen to derive from its democratic functions - quite the reverse: to the narrator it is a figure of Old World autocracy, likened to Henry VIII, the Russian Tsar, the Pope, Julius Caesar, and others. The chimney's symbolism is thus contradictory because it seems to be a product of a person's willful and artificial (that is, fictional) assertion of non-democratic values in a democratic, above all commercially democratic, context. Reaching out for the most creditable signs of authority, the narrator finds that such credit is unacceptable in such a land.

... in this house, as in this country at large, there is abundance of

space, and to spare, for us both.

One of the sources of the chimney's grandeur, the narrator asserts, is its command of land. He scoffs at the pretensions of urban architecture whose elevation is due less to intrinsic worth than to the lack of space - thus subordinating it to economy; by contrast, the country is the seat of gentry because it is apparently free of economic concerns, and its architecture reflects its abundance. The narrator remarks in a smug fashion, "Any man can buy a square foot of land and plant a liberty-pole on it; but it takes a king to set apart whole acres for a grand Trianon."

(354) But we would do well to ask how such munificence is afforded: for this, being America, is not the place where land is property by entitlement, a supposedly natural familial relation; from the beginning the relation has been commercial, and the narrator's claim to an authority of name is a mere naturalization of the economic mediation. As, indeed, the political significance of the term "settler" is naturalized by metaphorical association in the second line: "We are, I may say, old settlers here; particularly my old chimney, which settles more and more every day." (352)

It is in such a way that the seemingly neutral or universal virtue of expansiveness is linked to the ideological practice of expansionism. The chimney's size does not express the splendour of what is the narrator's by rights: he accidentally reveals it to be the result of an act of appropriation at the time of settlement, making the land "dirt cheap" (with a double sense of the natural and the commercially degraded). With a backhanded salute to Thoreau, Melville subtly goes on to stress the basis of the narrator's virtues of freedom and bounty in the

economic: “As for the hills, especially where the roads cross them, the supervisors of our various towns have given notice to all concerned, that they can come and dig them down and cart them off, and never a cent to pay, no more than for the privilege of picking blackberries.” In the light of such associations the next sentence has a particularly sombre note, heavily weighting the definitions of the nouns and possessives...

The *stranger* who is buried here, what *liberal-hearted landed proprietor* among *us* grudges him *his* six feet of rocky pasture? (355)

Who is the stranger? Does the “among us” extend to us: are we included in this society of liberal hearted proprietors? And why should an evocation of the wealth of the nation return to the graves of strangers? We (we as readers, as well as liberal inheritors) ought to bear this in place of unknown death in mind, with respect to other grave-sites in the story; the pyramid-like chimney, and its secret closet.

authority and utility

If the narrator elides the history of exchange in his understanding of property, and maintains a sovereign extravagance only by naturalizing the economic relation of people to land, then in the architect he confronts an entirely different position. The architect manifests a relation to land which is only ever commercial, a matter of contract - first called upon by the wife to advise the chimney’s removal and then switching allegiance to the husband, his opinion “bought out”, to certify the chimney inviolable. He sees space in terms of capital, not freedom. Their opposition is made clear when they inspect the foundations - “the root of the matter” - in the cellar.

Asked to appreciate the “famous chimney” the architect can only respond,

“I wouldn’t have it in a house of mine, sir, for a gift.”

He can only understand its size as a waste of valuable space and bricks: “Do you know, sir, that in retaining this chimney, you are losing, not only one hundred and forty-four square feet of good ground, but likewise a considerable interest upon a considerable principal?” (366)

Why does the idea of a gift arise at such a moment? What kinds of question and belief about economy and value does such a statement infer? The architect shows his difference of opinion by implying that the narrator appreciates the chimney on false grounds, that it should only ever be a question of commercial value. A gift, for him, is a luxury which does not compensate for its waste of possible revenue; in other words, it is not even worth having for free (which is a remark that relegates gratuity to the lowest form of exchange, below the dignity of contract and investment). His objection opposes the accumulated history contained in “fame” to the time of future transactions.

Hence Melville indicates the economic issue at the core of his investigation of historical process and nostalgia: that the relation to value is also a relation to time, the time of an object’s participation in a dynamic currency. The narrator’s criteria of appreciation reside in his leisure, where he believes economic processes do not operate, and in the same sense the gift, and extravagant practices, are part of the imaginary concept of “time out” mentioned before. The architect appears to reveal the mistaken premises of the narrator’s idealized, timeless virtues, although he does

this at the expense of any recognition of other kinds of value, any positive definition of excess. We reach an impasse in the characterization of extravagance and expansiveness: either freedom, or waste.

The other difference between the men splits the identity of textual authority, as they contend over the representation of the chimney. Both have a creative role in the relation to the structure and articulation of texts; to underline the fact, the architect is called Mr Scribe. Here we seem to be dealing with a difference between speech and writing, or narration and scripture; the possible implication being that Melville is bitterly contrasting creative freedom to professional writing. But the more interesting contrast is between linguistic practices. The architect works by rule and measurement, understanding space in terms of limits and containment while the narrator expatiates without plan; likewise, one lays claim to authority over the chimney through a knowledge of its structural relations, and the other by an appropriation of its associative powers. From the beginning the narrator has identified authority in fictional terms: in the manner of an Ishmael he calls attention to the “I” as “this egotistic way of speaking”, and reiterating the title he comments, “in everything, except the above phrase, my chimney taking precedence over me” (352). Then throughout he explores the house’s metaphorical potential and asserts a wealth of meaning going far beyond what would be “useful” for one interpretation. In addition to the autocratic and republican references, the chimney signifies philosophy (the endless circular system); an Egyptian pyramid (primeval, tomblike); an “anvil-headed whale”; slavery (what is to be “abolished”); lost revenue or leisurely expenditure; true friendship or the “broken pledge” between husband and

wife... it is very much a multiple “tropic” (360).

Thus the narrator establishes his fictional authority by indicating a linguistic field in which no one person may have an authoritative position. He asserts the primary condition of abundance, within which calculations of utility and expenditure take place. At the same time, he claims the right not to perform in such restricted economies - a fantasy of non-economic sovereignty, echoing Bartleby's desire to be *beyond* “desire beyond need”.

the secret closet

When the architect alleges the discovery of a secret closet within the chimney, which accounts for its inordinate size and irregularities as well as promising to cast light on the house's history, the text opens up to a new order of enquiry, and the contest over the chimney's construction becomes more than a question of aesthetics and the management of social space. With regard to the tale's images of circulation, abundance which represses exchange, commerce which denies the legitimacy of other kinds of value, a domestic economy which is coded in terms of industry and indolence, the mystery raises the stakes on the ethics of respective positions. When the architect first communicates his suspicions he speculates on the possibility of treasure in the closet, and *consciously or not* (for it is never clear how much he knows of the family's history, as indeed the extent of everyone's knowledge and interest in the matter is never clear; and this withholding of

information, such that the reader never fully understands the nature of the relations between the characters, is vital in creating a demand for a certain kind of fictional trust), he awakens old ghosts. The narrator admits the house had been a family property, first belonging to

... my late kinsman, Captain Julian Dacres, long a ship-master and merchant in the Indian trade, who, about thirty years ago, and at the ripe age of ninety, died a bachelor, and in this very house, which he had built. He was supposed to have retired into this country with a large fortune. But to the general surprise, after being at great cost in building himself this mansion, he settled down into a sedate, reserved, and inexpensive old age, which by the neighbours was thought all the better for his heirs: but lo! upon opening the will, his property was found to consist but of the house and the grounds, and some ten thousand dollars in stocks; but the place, being found heavily mortgaged, was in consequence sold. Gossip had its day, and left the grass quietly to creep over the captain's grave, where he still slumbers in a privacy as unmolested as if the billows of the Indian Ocean, instead of the billows of inland verdure, rolled over him. Still, I remembered long ago, hearing strange solutions whispered by the country people for the mystery involving his will, and, by reflex, himself; and that, too, as well in conscience as in purse. *But people who could circulate the report (which they did), that Captain Julian Dacres had, in his day, been a Borneo pirate, surely were not worthy of credence in their collateral notions. It is queer what wild whimsies of rumours will, like toadstools, spring up about any eccentric stranger, who, settling down among a rustic population, keeps quietly to himself.* With some, inoffensiveness would seem a prime cause of offense. But what chiefly had led me to scout at these rumours, particularly as referring to concealed treasure, was the circumstance, that the stranger (the same who razed the roof and the chimney) into whose hands the estate had passed on my kinsman's death, was that sort of character, that had there been the least ground for those reports, he would speedily have tested them, by tearing down and rummaging the walls. (369-70)

This passage reveals the extent to which the narrator's claim to authority, depending on his connections with land and entitlement, is founded on a system of *credit*. He regains his kinsman's estate not through inheritance but *mortgage*, after a series of sales. Indeed, the passage describes the movement of credit in general, as a concept bridging social and verbal and financial economies, and the key factor

that links Melville's political critique to his investigation of narrative. Here he shows the operation of credit (or creditability) at the root of literature and history; where credit signifies the absence of certainties and the presence of risk, risk as an invitation to exchange. Credit exists not only in the financial contracts that enable the man to recuperate his family heritage, but also in the stories that grow from within the breaks in its history; it fuels the rumours and the attempts to verify or deny them.

To trace the production of the narrative which we read from its origins, then, we might begin in the manner of Derrida, looking for a remnant to be put into circulation - and in this case what is striking is the *absence* of a remnant: Captain Dacres' mysterious lack of wealth to pass onto his heirs. The rumoured fortune and empty will create an imbalance of accounts where interest in stories grows; in addition the captain's "eccentricity", his lack of conformity to social circles, fosters new rumours about past crimes, to explain the rumour of unaccountable fortune; those rumours of piracy in turn demand substantiation, which is provided by the dream of treasure, in the alleged secret closet. At every stage of development the story's creditability is unverifiable, and thus merely reproduced on another level. As Melville cleverly asserts, people provide a kind of "collateral" to give weight to the reports they circulate: and though it may resolve the initial mystery, it brings others alongside, which demand further "credence". For *collateral* is at once security and excess, what stabilizes and what accompanies (and so, ironically, it can never be simply stable). In the system of credit which this passage brings into relief, then, everything searches for, but never discovers, a verification which is closure -

a settlement. Even the narrator's reluctance to credit the rumours about his kinsman is based on an equally uncreditable circumstance: the previous owner's lack of discovery of any verification.

death and money

*And our obsessional compulsion for security can be interpreted as a gigantic collective ascesis, an anticipation of death in life itself: from protection into protection, from defence to defence, crossing all jurisdictions, institutions and modern material apparatuses, life is no longer anything but a doleful, defensive book-keeping, locking every risk into its sarcophagus.*²⁵

What is most interesting in this discourse or narrative procedure, is that the phenomenon of credit appears also to be a place of death - a gravesite, in a sense, recalling the "six feet of rocky pasture" granted to the other stranger by this liberal community. Once again an excursion into expanses of gentility reveals a trace of crime underneath; the story of patrimony turns into a skeleton-in-the-closet tale. The secret closet still may not exist, but as a possibility it signifies the point of passing from one economy to another, across death: from a history of self-creation and self-expression into a text of others' remembrance, a commerce of epitaph; as Dacres' death initiates rumours about his identity because they cannot be denied or certified in person. When the architect first alleges the closet's existence he calls it "*a reserved space, hermetically closed*" (369) - sealed off from history and yet at its

²⁵ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 178.

core, it creates effects of speculation and action as long as its truth is inaccessible.

The mystery of a stranger's death is like the "secret" of counterfeit money that Derrida is preoccupied with in Baudelaire's fiction. Along with the circulation of a remnant, it is the casting of doubt in a token of exchange that generates narrative, he says; the counterfeit coin is something that circulates *as real* while its authenticity cannot be decided. The impossibility of exposure assures its continued operation while the doubt opens up to other possible events or effects. He argues this tension in credit to be a structural quality of fiction itself.

What we are saying here about literature could also be said of the money that, in this case, it talks about and makes into its theme: As long as the monetary *specie* functions, as long as one can reckon with its phenomenality, as long as one can *count with and on cash money* to produce effects ... as long as money passes for (real) money, it is simply not different from the money that, perhaps, it counterfeits. There is in any case no possible sense, no possible place, no possible mark for this difference, at least when the situation is framed thus, that is, in the contextual frame of this convention or of this institution. But beyond this frame, assuring thereby finite possibilities of decision and judgment, other contexts are delimited and opened up in their turn. They are more powerful but they are not infinitely powerful, and they inscribe effects of reference, of reality, and of truth in conventional or institutional devices. In structures of belief, of credit, of the supposition of knowledge.²⁶

It seems remarkably fitting that death and money are so closely associated, as two types of capital whose inaccessibility produces the credit which dynamizes circulation - just as the narrator remarks "vague flashings of ingots united in my mind with vague gleamings of skulls" (370). Perhaps it points towards a general truth about the structures of belief in history and epistemology, of the strange incidence of death at the heart of human exchanges: certainly it reflects a

²⁶ *Given Time*, 153-4

preoccupation we have seen elsewhere in Melville's fiction, where the narration of a death is complicated by partially suppressed and partially intrusive financial values (cf "Jimmy Rose", "Bartleby"). We might also note the concurrence in the concept of mortgage itself, literally translating as "dead pledge": a form of credit where the life or death of the contract, and the life or death of the estate, are reversible and predicated on each other.²⁷

And perhaps for such a reason, Melville registers two anxieties about this credit system - or, one might say, two "misgivings": first of all is the epistemological problem which the chimney monumentalises, that knowledge of the secret is dependent on the destruction of the system the secret generates, as the chimney can only stand upon the non-exploration of the closet: "how to get to the secret closet, or how to have any certainty about it at all, without making such fell work with the chimney as to render its set destruction superfluous?" (371) However, a moral suspicion also surrounds the intention to leave the chimney unexplored, voiced by the architect wondering "whether it is Christian-like knowingly to reside in a house, hidden in which is a secret closet" (369). Leaving alone somehow feels like a crime; possibly like the neglect to commemorate a death, or possibly like the sin of buried treasure in the parable of the talents: its wilful neglect of economy. Whether death or money, the misgivings suggest the proximity of the secret to the sacred and occult, and its threat to their contradistinction - in which regard the investigation of the chimney would be a *deseccration*, or the preservation of its remaining doubt a

²⁷ Here is Coke's definition from the *OED*: "It seemeth that the cause why it is called mortgage is, for that it is doubtful whether the Feoffor [mortgagor] will pay at the day limited such summe or not, & if he doth not pay, then the hand which is put in pledge upon condition for the payment of money, is taken from him for ever, and so dead to him upon condition, &c. And if he doth pay the money, then the pledge is dead as to the Tenant [mortgagee], &c." (1628, *On Litt.* 205)

sacrilege. Upon the architect's final survey the narrator scornfully offers him the aid of a divining-rod, a "witch-hazel wand", prompting the equally flippant demand for a crow-bar. (374)

So what begins in a deconstruction of the notion of economy which sees the distinctions of domestic, political and symbolic effaced, ends here: the quasi-religious phenomenon of faith, a version of the system of credit which underwrites all exchange. Melville implies that a supposedly ideal realm beyond the corruption of commerce (it may be a psychological transcendence of needs, or an austere conservatism seen to hold off against the pressures of financial speculation) protects and obscures a *false legitimacy* (the piracy behind patrimony, the expansionism behind expansiveness).

All forms of authority - whether in certainty of knowledge, social entitlement, narrative authority - are subject to the same baseless operation of credit which is most articulately, and ironically, expressed in the circulation of money.²⁸ Ultimately, of course, we must also think of the nature of political authority, legitimated by an act of faith in the democratic system (rather than exercised absolutely in autocracy). This is why a critique of economy at this level must entail a deep scepticism toward political structures - Melville having raised the possibility of credit being predicated not on abundance, a limitlessness of resources or an

²⁸ Derrida makes a similar point in his discussion of "La Fausse Monnaie":

Everything is act of faith, phenomenon of credit or credence, of belief and conventional authority in this text which perhaps says something essential about what here links literature to belief, to credit and thus to capital, to economy and thus to politics. Authority is constituted by accreditation, both in the sense of legitimation as effect of belief or credulity, and of bank credit, of capitalized interest.

Given Time, 97

infinite human capacity to trust, but on death. If we needed confirmation of this fear, let us regard the story's final scenes and the disturbing nihilism they reflect: as both husband and wife return obsessively to their redundant positions, in a perpetual suspension of conflict and resolution:

But seeing that, despite all, I and my chimney still smoke our pipes, my wife reoccupies the ground of the secret closet, enlarging upon what wonders are there, and what a shame it is, not to seek it out and explore it.

In this way both characters, nostalgic and progressive, are caught in a pathetic search for security for their respective beliefs, in the face of its impossibility. Not only does the narrator bribe the architect to certify the chimney's inviolability (and thus preserve its transcendence of economy by financial means); he is also caricatured at the end resolutely defending his monument at the expense of all society: "Some say that I have become a sort of mossy old misanthrope, while all the time the fact is, I am simply standing guard over my mossy old chimney; for it is resolved between me and my chimney, that I and my chimney will never surrender." (377) His wife is reduced to playing victim of the sickest joke, tapping obsessively round and round the chimney, looking for a hollow space in a structure whose entire function is to be hollow.

CHAPTER FOUR : CONTRICKS AND CONTRACTS

The Confidence-Man

Seek not out the things that are too hard for thee, neither search the things that are above thy strength.

But what is commanded thee, think thereupon with reverence; for it is not needful for thee to see with thine eyes the things that are in secret.

Be not curious in unnecessary matters: for more things are shewed unto thee than men understand.

For many are deceived by their own vain opinion; and an evil suspicion hath overthrown their judgement.

Ecclesiasticus 3:21-24

reading the novel: charitable interpretation

A crowd of passengers mills about the deck of the *Fidèle* at the opening of *The Confidence-Man*, facing various public notices. A placard advertising the possible presence of a “mysterious impostor” and offering a reward for his capture has attracted their attention. Into their midst steps a stranger eager to protest against the mood of distrust the placard encourages; he holds up a slate next to it, “so that they who read the one might read the other”, pleading St Paul’s lessons on charity. The crowd receive him, however, with hostility, considering his innocent appearance “inappropriate to the time and place”, and they begin to jostle and deride him as if

agitated by the words he writes on the slate; while in the meantime, a third sign is being hung up by a barber above the door of his shop: “a gaudy sort of illuminated pasteboard sign, skilfully executed by himself, gilt with the likeness of a razor elbowed in readiness to shave”. Although distinctly more antisocial in sentiment than the words on charity, the crowd in comparison is quite unalarmed by this other notice, which reads “NO TRUST”.¹

Already we might bring the scenes of Astor Place, May 1849 back to mind - which also saw people gathered around signs, negotiating the difference between a singular voice of authority and the numerous voices of popular representation in the public arena; scenes which may have suggested to Melville the complex and intimate relations between the democratic and the theatrical, between social order, national narratives and performance, all of which will be key issues in this novel. We should note that the crowd have been attracted to the wanted poster “as if it had been a theatre-bill”. The signs here lay claim to different kinds of authority in commerce, religion and the law, and they command the public’s attention on the basis of the security they offer, as the Opera House offered security to its silent audiences: be it a security against crime, the promise of divine salvation, or the dependability of strict, credit-free business. Each claim, therefore, offers a kind of guarantee for individual conduct - lawful, ethical conduct - by appealing to different systems of values; and it will be seen that as the claims for authority become inextricable from each other, their self-justification and security is undermined. Once the possibility of imposture has been introduced, even the notices of the security systems become

¹ Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (Evanston & Chicago: Northwestern University Press & Newberry Library, 1984).

Just how difficult it is to find any meaning in a text whose main character is an impostor can be shown already by the uncertainty of even talking about such a thing as a “main character”; nobody is exposed as a conman in the novel, nobody admits that they are one (and if they did?), so our assumption that the novel is about a series of figures playing confidence-tricks - let alone the idea that they are one character in a series of guises - is already suspect, and not much more than a compound of the suspicions of other characters in the narrative, with the added indications of the wanted poster and the novel’s title. *There is no proven or explicit link between any of the signs in the narrative*: there is nothing to suggest that the action on the boat is any more than a collection of arbitrary incidents, without theme, merely held together by the fact of common travel. For instance, the epithet “Quite an Original”, the same as applied to the impostor on the placard, will later be granted to the Cosmopolitan (the figure who becomes the focus of the second half of the novel) - and this provides the occasion for Melville to expand upon the presence of original characters in fiction. Are we to assume, therefore, that the Cosmopolitan and the impostor are one and the same, or separate identities? Melville responds archly that two different cases of originality are unlikely: “there can be but one such original character to one work of invention. Two would conflict to chaos.” Can we say that this novel does *not* conflict to chaos? He continues, “In this view, to say that there are more than one to a book, is good presumption there is none at all.”(239) To read this with a desire to identify a single conman, it would appear that one’s suspicions (or hopes) have been confirmed; and then again, the narrator calls the use of the term an “impropriety”, and once more we are returned to an absence of originality: *wherein his originality consisted was not clearly given...*

Though it may appear, topologically as it were, that what the wanted poster warns against is flanked on either side by the signs of total trust and total distrust, as if to represent the distinct limits between which the conman would operate, it should not be forgotten that this announcement is *prior* to the others, who are now no longer secure from the question of deceit. That is, both doctrines of confidence and suspicion are themselves subject to suspicion. The barber's suspicion is subject to the suspicion of belief: his principle of no trust is, as Kamuf has pointed out, only itself a belief in the prime value of cash as the governing medium of exchange between people.³ At the same time, the mute carrier of the slate may of course have ulterior motives for encouraging charity between people; and while much of the language used to describe him - his "lamb-like figure", the "fleecy nap" of his hat, his sleeping at the foot of a ladder - has Christian associations, these are never fully confirmed. Indeed, the word "fleecy" not only "connects" (we must still talk *as if* signs connect, even though the connections may be entirely arbitrary) the man in cream colours to Black Guinea, the next possible conman (who has a "black fleece" for hair and circulates amongst the crowd like a black sheep in a white flock); it is itself part of a vocabulary of sheep/ishness which ambiguously implies both virtue and wrongdoing - from lamblike to black sheep, or the sense of a con in "fleecing" (as, similarly, in "shaving"; both forms of skinning another), or the notion of *gregariousness* which informs the discussion about geniality ("it is as much according to natural law that men are social as sheep gregarious", 137). The puns insist on the instability in the signs of Christliness, at the same time as they compromise the invitation to see a "natural" depravity in signs of evil or blackness.

³ *The Division of Literature*, 211.

In all of this one needs to ask, how far can we take any of these sign at face value? Is it also, therefore, a fictional con that Melville is perpetrating on us, when we attempt to read some sort of coherence out of the signs scattered throughout the narrative? If so, with how much confidence or how much distrust ought we make critical comments on the text? As in his previous texts, Melville doubles the scene of reading, making his overall subject the *interpretation of interpretation*: through the notices the reader is introduced to a world of readers, a community being made aware of the possibility of imposture and presented with the two limits of conduct in order to apprehend it. How significant then, that the crowd is being deceived at the very moment it reads the warning; *as the passengers are being put on guard, their guard is down*: “among them [were] certain chevaliers, whose eyes, it was plain, were on the capitals, or, at least, earnestly seeking a sight of them from behind intervening coats; but as for their fingers, they were enveloped in some myth...” Fingering by myths, fleeced by these wolves, the readers on deck are gullible in their eagerness to believe in distrustfulness as their society’s main safety regulation. If this figures anything at all for the reader, then, it is the danger of trusting in the written word even as it proposes distrust.

The question that *The Confidence-Man* immediately poses, then, is not simply how to read the text, but how to read it in the knowledge of the provisional and compromised position one has no option but to take up. By stressing the lack of security, Melville shows what might normally be called a “reading contract” to be more of a *gamble*: it is an invitation to extend credit to the text, by choosing to read it, in the absence of any guarantee that one might “gain” from the reading of it.

Not only is there a “suspension of disbelief”, as is commonly understood to be the pre-requisite in an approach to any imaginative work - this novel demands a conscious *investment* of belief, or a *putting belief at stake*, from the outset. In previous chapters I have begun to explore the significance of secrets as instances of the acknowledgement of a lack of knowledge, which seems to mark a point of faith (as in *Pierre*) or is somehow at the core of structures of fiction and value (for example, in “I and my Chimney”); and the same thing occurs here with the confidence-man, a counterfeit, of undetectable originality. The difference is that in doubling the scene of reading, this secretive structure imposes itself on us more than ever and makes us aware of the necessity of action in the absence of knowledge (which is a fact that the artifice of narrative closure and its false teleology of a “moral” to the story operates to cover up, as Melville showed in “Jimmy Rose”, for example) - that is, it makes us aware of the role of “accreditation”: a kind of gift of oneself, in interpretation, to the possibility of being deceived. Above all, this text concerns, or *deals with* (since it has become a matter of gambling) the act of faith, which is both the gift of oneself into reading and the primary basis for all systems of meaning and value.

For Peggy Kamuf, the novel deals with a kind of interpretive credit which implicates history, endlessly defers the text’s meaning to the future (as the principle of credit is always oriented towards a payback at a later date). As such, she reads it for a critique of the logic of institution, which always attempts to forget its historical constitution in order to claim a permanence for the values it represents. *The Confidence-Man* “engages not only writing and fiction in general, literature in

particular, but the general structure of credit and its institutions: the institution of literature, to be sure, but also other political institutions as these come to be inscribed by the conventions of credit.” (173) In *The Division of Literature: The University in Deconstruction*, she discusses the way the general category of literature has been demarcated, or “divided”, in order to reserve a body of texts as a privileged object of culture, a (First) “Division” called Literature. She argues that where modern colleges and universities have become more “scientific”, operating on principles of accuracy, objectivity and exploration, the apprehension of the Literary is increasingly a question of identifying an object of knowledge, and thus fixing the meaning of a text, at the expense of its ability to signify differently in other conditions of history or cultures. It will be worth quoting her at length on this point:

A literary work has a historical context, as we call it, but no more nor less than any document or artifact produced in the past; but the work, if it is still read and studied when this “context” will have subsided into archival compost, has a relation as well to a future, by which it remains always to some extent incomprehensible by any given present. This is the dimension of the work’s *historicality*, which is therefore not to be simply confused or conflated with historical “context”. It is likewise this historicality of what we call literature that the institutionalization of literary studies has largely and necessarily misrecognized, for it withholds from the putative object of that discipline the stability required of an object of knowledge. What we still call literature (but perhaps for not much longer) would be one means of this withheld stability of meaning, or to put it differently, it would be the *reserve* of every present, instituted meaning and thus the possibility of its transformation, that is, the possibility of a future. (164)

Melville’s novel, then, is situated notoriously and problematically on the borders of such a process of institution, since its central concern, in the theme of imposture and the contrick, is the reserve of the unknown from the known. Holding out explicitly against any attempt to identify a definitive meaning, Kamuf argues that it mobilizes a sense of openness to future possibilities which is also an openness to

the other, a deference to the figure who suddenly appears as a stranger, “in the extremest sense of the word”. In this regard, she interprets the crowd scene as an exemplary moment of irony which, in dragging even the author into its instabilities, gestures towards otherness. At this point of undermining trust in the written word, Melville himself loses control of the ironic device he has set up, so that the position from which the ironies can be appreciated has to be somewhere else: “Laugh as we might at the congress of mistrust that can never be too mistrustful, that nevertheless places trust in safeguards of all sorts, the last laugh is held indefinitely in reserve and returns to no one - least of all, perhaps, to Melville, who shows his hand here more than anyone else.” (204)

In effect, what Kamuf is saying is that *The Confidence-Man* resists the idea of formal utility, both in the sense of a “moral” that texts of the period were assumed to have, and in the more modern sense of aesthetic coherence, a kind of spatial unity. It abandons devices such as characterization and closure which normally work to produce a text’s internal reference or meaning; thus it is a hermeneutically unprofitable system. Kamuf remarks on its lack of “deferred revelation”, which in the mode of suspense (integral to stories like “Benito Cereno”, “The Bell-Tower”, and also “Jimmy Rose”) treats the conjunction of a character’s achievement of knowledge or judgement with the reader’s experience of narrative closure; the device thus compresses narrative time and critical perspective to form an illusion of history with a moral content, naturalizing the law’s pretence to instantaneous and permanent (that is, instituted) judgement. When the placard’s suggestion of a deferred revelation (that an impostor will finally be identified) is left unaccomplished, the

narrative is denied its artificial appropriation of history. The frustration of narrative closure is thus a demystification of the key fictional device whereby literature gets its morality.

However, in what is characteristic of deconstructive ethics, such thinking accords a sublime privilege to the openness against moral closure, which is therefore turned into a moral principle itself; the freedom from utility becomes the text's ideal function. This is evident in the way Kamuf understands charity as it figures in the novel. She sees its movement from definition to practice, from the words written on the slate to the first instance of charity begged by Black Guinea, as a kind of debasement, the law's passage into history being always accompanied by violence. Thus charity remains meaningful only in as far as it is oriented towards a future and an otherness beyond knowledge. "This crippling event seems to befall the Other, that is, Charity, as soon as it repeats its step, as soon as its eventness or singular firstness is doubled or simulated in a second appearance." (219) But to my mind, Melville's text on charity can be read for something other than a proto-deconstructive ethics. Charity as a mode of exchange among many others, already an action in history, seems to signify something other than an ideal value which has been corrupted. It seems to present an element of expenditure which cannot be rendered accountable to any future petition: a sign of pure loss, like the impulse to gamble which is more about waste than an extension of credit. Melville does stress that charity is violence, not only where Black Guinea is humiliated at the hands of passengers who throw money at him but also where the possibility of extending charity is predicated on a position of superiority (as later, with the gentleman with

gold sleeve-buttons); and yet it is also an act in the face of this violence, *granted this violence* as a primary condition of society. Therefore it will be worth looking again at the instances of charity in the narrative, which will prove inextricable from the instances of contricks, alternate sides of the same coin, in being both beyond calculation of the levels of deceit and sincerity.

*Charity thinketh no evil / Charity suffereth long, and is kind
Charity endureth all things
Charity believeth all things / Charity never faileth*

Another formulation of the problem of reading *The Confidence-Man* comes from Peter Bellis, in an essay “Melville’s *Confidence-Man*: An Uncharitable Interpretation”. He draws on St Augustine’s definition of the charitable, which combines interpretation with the idea of Christian fellowship, in the search for a “preexisting and essential unity” in the Biblical text. Summarizing Augustine, he says: “Charity, ‘the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one’s self and of one’s neighbour for the sake of God,’ requires that any apparent ambiguities or inconsistencies in God’s word be clarified and reconciled: ‘what is read should be subjected to diligent scrutiny until an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity is produced.’”⁴ Seen in this light, charitable interpretation is not very different from the objectives of literary criticism, which would also like to read a text in search of a certain integrity (whether in relation to generic structures, a historical context or authorial intentions). Critical practice is necessarily charitable, indeed, insofar as it strives towards consistency.

⁴ Peter J. Bellis, “Melville’s *Confidence Man*: An Uncharitable Interpretation” *American Literature* 59:4 December 1987, 548-569.

So where the novel raises hopes of a stable position outside its frame of reference - beyond the multiple voices and reflexive discourses and inversions within the text - only to have them frustrated, it is to emphasize the will to interpret as a temptation to charity, as if it were a kind of religious desire. “In the end *The Confidence-Man* endorses neither belief nor disbelief; instead it plays on our desire to escape from the ‘mysterious’ and difficult realm of interpretation, our longing for the faith with which Augustine begins and ends.” (551)

Bellis notices how the search for interpretive consistency in the narrative is further problematized by Melville’s stress on the inconsistency of human character; the self is seen to be continually differing from itself, far more than it differs from others. Thus even identity seems to be a product of faith: characters themselves alternately invoke textual and physical evidence in the hope of some guarantee of selfhood, which is unforthcoming. Then the corrosion of charitable consistency even doubles back on the Biblical text itself, supposedly its ground in the first place. The Bible’s validation of charity occurs at the expense of certain books preaching a more cynical, distrustful disposition, which are the subject of discussion in the final chapter of the novel: these are the Apocrypha, the “unwarranted”, “of uncertain credit”. Therefore the Bible’s integrity as a text concerning Faith, Hope and Charity is itself compromised because it is found to be based on not an act of faith, but of *distrust*. Bellis comments, “Biblical scholars use interpretive distrust to advance the cause of charity; literary critics use interpretive charity to argue the case for distrust.” (568) Both strategies depend on the exclusion of what is contradictory or inconsistent.

Whether oriented towards textual coherence or the space of otherness, both Bellis and Kamuf hold to an idea of the charitable as a productive mechanism; a kind of creative faith. Kamuf's anticipation of the imminent advent of the stranger, the entry of the foreign into the same, is still in the service of an ethical future; while Bellis likewise sees charity beholden to an ideal of unity, stressing its meanings of fellowship and reconstitution. But there may also be a sense in which faith is simply a wasteful impulse, a need to give oneself away to unverifiable authorities regardless of consequences, in the same way that charity would signify a free expenditure which is not compensated. Looking back at the words on the slate, "endureth all", "believeth all", "never faileth" may certainly be principles of totality, in their assertion of all-encompassing capacity; but moreover, with respect to the normal consideration of endurance, belief and continuity as reserved quantities - that is, limited, or *only having meaning in relation to a threshold or finality* - they are also instances of excess. The movement from the restricted to the general, from the finite to the excessive, already exists within charity. Thus charitable interpretation may involve not just an impulse towards structural unity (the authority of the total view, which is God's) but also one of waste, a mere semiotic expenditure which pays no respect to coherence.

charity and society

A crowd mills about the deck of the *Fidèle*, a public grouped around the signs of religious, commercial and civil authority, in danger of being robbed as they

read unsuspecting. But what kind of a public do these people make up: what image of society is being presented in the novel? Their interest in the placard as if it were a theatre-bill indicates the theatrical nature of the conman's activities, but it also points more generally to the role of performance in the foundation of identity; and in this public arena, it is the trust elicited from others in performance which operates as the ground for political exchanges. As for community itself, Melville seems to stress the dissolute and fragmentary nature of the interaction among those on board, whose society is not so much a model of multicultural diversity as a perpetual and renewed strangeness and lack of association: "...the huge *Fidèle* still receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark; so that, though always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange..." (8). In this way we lose sight of the bearer of the slate - "he himself, not unlikely, waked up and landed ere now" - and it is this turnover of people, this accelerated human circulation which constitutes both the nature of the community on board and the novel's "present tense", undermining characters' continuity and protagonism.

Melville, indeed, goes to special pains to assert the absence of community on board, refusing to allow even casual familiarity to flourish. The crowd's settling into smaller groups is not seen as a discovery of differentiated affinities, but a further fragmentation:

The crowd, as is usual, began in all parts to break up from a concourse into various clusters or squads, which in some cases disintegrated again into quartettes, trios, and couples, and even solitaires; involuntarily submitting to *that natural law which ordains dissolution equally to the mass, as in time to the member.* (9)

There are no families travelling on the *Fidèle* - no ties of kinship at all, nor visible chains of authority, nothing to suggest preestablished, instituted relations of moral obligation between people. Common interests and mutual dependency are not guaranteed by fixed structures and will therefore have to be manufactured for any such community to arise. Such a relation between social bonds and the conditions of production - a situation where association and obligation are no longer political capital but commodities themselves, and subject to an alienating economic system, moreover - is one of the key issues in the novel. For this reason I will focus later on a discourse of friendship, the creation of lateral bonds in the absence of kinship, looking at a group of chapters 33-41 which contain the stories of Charlemont and China Aster and the dialogues of the “hypothetical friends”. Here friendship is put at stake by the pressures of money and indebtedness, and the social and commercial meanings of the word “trust” become very confused.

First of all we must investigate the process of disintegration which Melville assumes, and ask what is the nature of this “natural law”? The description is played off against a positivist notion of the melting-pot, evoked in “the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself” - so social constitution takes place in the absence of a natural community, ambiguously hailed as “one cosmopolitan and confident tide.” The entropic image, a dissolution into individual parts, alongside the promise of restoration in political culture is the departure point for Melville’s ethics here and elsewhere, and can be related to his general concern with faith and its formation of communal bonds. In a significant phrase, he also refers to the passengers as “a piebald parliament, an Anarchasis Cloots congress of

all kind of that multiform pilgrim species, man.” (9) They seem to be merely a collection of wanderers, but as pilgrims, sharing a common quest for a confirmation of faith; and furthermore it is a quest undertaken in foreign territory (cf. the Latin root *peregrinus*, foreign, across fields). Hence it is the will to a proof of faith, towards guarantee, that makes the subject necessarily a stranger. Charity, likewise, is a kind of expression or search for faith (can an expression of faith ever be anything but a search for its acknowledgement?) which demands foreign contact, whose motivation and consequences must be unknowable, to remain a gift.⁵ The reference to Anarchasis Cloots also complicates the sense of pluralism: Cloots being a Prussian nobleman who presented a delegation of foreigners as ambassadors of the human race before the first French Assembly after the revolution (and was later executed). Also appearing in *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd*, its affirmation of democratic representation is compromised each time: in *Moby Dick*, by the stress on each member as an “isolato”, petitioning for a common justice but at the expense of the black representative, Pip; in *Billy Budd*, the Cloots congress of shipmates surrounds the Handsome Sailor, whose “natural regality” is the focus of their common interests. As in *The Confidence-Man*, the tension is between democratic principles and the role of the charismatic individual - the one who, like a play’s leading actor, commands the attention of the public and holds their trust. That this issue is a problem for Melville and not a nostalgic reaction to Old World hierarchies is indicated by his backhanded comparison of the Handsome Sailor to a false idol.⁶

⁵ It is this questing function of charity which is crucial to its value as a “heretical” strategy: it constantly interacts with the unknown, the strange, forming new networks of obligation which later become instituted in civil and economic structures.

⁶ *Moby Dick* (Evanston & Chicago: Northwestern and Newberry, 1988), 121: “[T]he motley retinue showed that they took that sort of pride in the evoker of [tributes] which the Assyrian priests doubtless showed for their grand sculptured Bull when the faithful prostrated themselves.” See also *Billy Budd*, 322.

Melville's vision of democratic scenes will always be haunted by the charismatic figure, conman or demagogue, whose demand for trust takes away the will of individuals.

These three terms keep cropping up in *The Confidence-Man*'s description of community, its society of strangers, on board the *Fidèle*: *faith* or *trust*, the capacity to believe or the search for belief, characteristic of all the passengers; the encounter with the *stranger* and the unknown which is integral to faith and to charity; and the question of *performance*, which is demanded of all participants in public, and which introduces the danger of deception. Both charity and the contrick are, in a sense, *performances of trust with strangers*: they play with a sense of intimacy in exchanges that are normally conducted with unknown individuals, disrupting the opposition between public and private. And fundamentally, they are both involved with justice, positioned against justice in some way: charitable action addresses itself to situations not sufficiently understood by authority, and works to create values besides those of instituted law; the contrick disrupts the rules of exchange and questions the justice of contractual relations.

In the following, then, I will detail the forms that the contrick takes in the novel and highlight its relation to, and difference from, the commercial transactions which it pretends to replicate. The conman could be called a "merchant of trust", in the way that she brings back trust into an economic form that has attempted to

eliminate it; and with its return, the contrick disrupts all kinds of exchange⁷. As we have seen, its imposture intervenes in the distinction between the foreign and the same, and thus it spoils the process of narrative depending on the repetition of the same with difference. Moreover, as an economic transaction, it returns the matter of public obligation on whose repression the modern contract has been based.⁸

Commentators on the conman's history stress the liminal nature of her existence and activities. In the archetypal case which Karen Halttunen describes, the encounter with the conman happens on the edge of the city, as a youth, fresh from the country and full of ambitions for fame and fortune, is about to enter. She, the conman, befriends the youth, eases her way into his confidence, and leads him on a path to corruption during which he will be removed of his possessions and abandoned. But it is the occupation of the threshold that makes her so culturally powerful. As Halttunen says, like the trickster figure in other cultures she is marginal and protean, moving in and out of social divisions, and threatening because of this placelessness. She is "a source of contamination because [s]he dwells in the less structured or inarticulated areas of the social system." But not only is the

⁷ Gary Lindberg calls him, in a similar way, a "creator of belief", and outlines the various types that come under this description. "If his motive for making belief is illicit gain, we recognize the professional criminal, the official version of the con man. If the motive is to spread the air of belief itself, we are dealing with the booster. If the motive is to experience the pleasures of control and self-conscious dexterity, we are up against the gamesman. When the motive is self-creation, the agent is the familiar self-made man. There are even some who make belief deliberately because belief will enhance other people's lives - prophets, healers, political idealists, Thomas Jefferson and William James." *The Confidence Man in American Literature*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 7. My intention is slightly different, to identify the relation between charity and confidence, and therefore I am working with a more restricted sense of the contrick as a pseudo-contractual exchange.

⁸ Baudrillard talks about the stifling of the "symbolic" relation, the principle of reversibility or "countergift" which maintains a sense of personal obligation in exchange. He argues that one of capitalism's main offensives has been to suppress the symbolic by instituting exchange in isolated transactions - contracts - in which the social relation is completed each time without a residue of further responsibility. "When this reversibility is broken, precisely by the unilateral possibility of giving (which presupposes the possibility of stockpiling value and transferring it in one direction only), then the properly symbolic relation is dead and power makes an appearance: it will merely be deployed thereafter throughout the economic apparatus of the contract." *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, n.48. Consequently, from this reinscription of exchange derive new fictions of the social self, the notion of individualism, commercial fairness, and rational calculation.

conman a liminal figure; so is her victim, who is also on the borders of urban life and a new independence from the family, and anticipating social and economic advancement; indeed, liminality is the condition of a whole sector of society, the emerging middle-class, which in this period was in the process of formation, lacking fixed status, experiencing life as a permanent transition.⁹ The conman is a key cultural symbol of these new conditions, and the affairs on board the ship, whose passengers are in constant movement and yet never arriving or departing, reflect the same uncertain mobility.

What the contrick does is to mimic the form of the contract while confusing it with non-commercial exchanges. It assumes the autonomy and isolation of strangers, recognizing the danger of not knowing the other, but it adopts a pose of intimacy to bridge the gap maintained by the contract's universal rules. Thus the contrick speaks explicitly of the problem of the lack of trust which the terms of a contract implicitly safeguard against. ("Trust me...") Befriending a youth in the city, or offering kindly advice, or begging sympathy, are all tactics which appeal to affective relations which have been eliminated from the public realm. Similarly the false business deal will often hinge on a tip-off or a piece of personal advice which the conman makes clear (by whispering, as if in secret) is not a part of her usual way of doing business. ("I shouldn't be telling you this, but...") The humiliation of being conned stems, therefore, from not from the theft that may have taken place but the mockery of the relation of intimacy, which is a kind of theft of self-possession.

⁹ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 24, 27-30.

Later in the book, the cosmopolitan enters the barber's shop to be shaved, and they discuss the meaning of his sign. It is here that the contrick's corrosion of the principles of commerce is made evident. The cosmopolitan persuades the barber to take down his sign for a trial period of confidence in his customers - but on the condition that he is insured against any loss incurred by the abuse of his credit. To secure the agreement they draw up a contract, which is a parody of a contract, setting in rational terms an act of faith which can only ever be irrational and beyond calculation:

AGREEMENT

Between

FRANK GOODMAN, Philanthropist, and Citizen of the World,
and

WILLIAM CREAM, Barber of the Mississippi steamer, Fidèle.

The first hereby agrees to make good to the last any loss that may come from his trusting mankind, in the way of his vocation, for the residue of the present trip; PROVIDED that William Cream keep out of sight, for the given term, his notification of "No Trust", and by no other mode convey any, the least hint or intimation, tending to discourage men from soliciting trust from him, in the way of his vocation, for the time above specified; but, on the contrary, he do, by all proper and reasonable words, gestures, manners, and looks, evince a perfect confidence in all men, especially strangers; otherwise, this agreement to be void.

Done, in good faith, this 1st day of April, 18—, at a quarter to twelve o'clock, P.M., in the shop of said William Cream, on board the said boat, Fidèle.

The absurdity of this arrangement is that the barber's decision to trust is distrustful insofar as it needs the security of a contract: and yet, the contract itself is an expression of trust in the other party to abide by its rules of "fair play". The conman's invitation "trust me" is merely reiterated as "trust me, in a contract, to insure you for trusting others". Thus the contract is shown not to eliminate the problem of trust from exchanges between strangers - only to raise it to a level of trust in the rationality of law. The equal fragility of this kind of trust is shown when the cosmopolitan departs without leaving a monetary guarantee for the arrangement, nor paying for his own shave. Once more, someone is fleeced in their eagerness to

believe in the written word.

But it should also be recognized that the operation of belief does not end here, when the barber decides he has been tricked (whether or not this is so “does not appear”; it being kept a secret of the narrative like most of the possible cons), and rehangs his sign. He turns the encounter into a story, once more depending on the act of belief: “But in after days, telling the night’s adventure to his friends, the worthy barber always spoke of his queer customer as the man-charmer - as certain East Indians are called snake-charmers - and all his friends united in thinking him **QUITE AN ORIGINAL.**” (237) We return to the matter of the original genius, which is at once an attempt to fix and identify the confidence-man, and a reference to the primary act of faith in fiction: “there follows upon the adequate conception of such a character, an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things.” (239)

charity and justice

So Melville’s treatment is a generalization of the con into commercial, political, religious and fictional systems of credit, in which it is no longer alien but integral to human relations. It accentuates elements normally latent in exchange, such as the lack of absolute guarantees and the risk in the investment of self, or the dependency of self on the credit extended to it by others. It also has an interesting correspondence with charity, both activities imposing intimacy on conduct between

unfamiliar individuals, and dispensing with public-private distinctions. Charity can be a conman's strategy, encouraging a sense of fellowship to obscure the dubious motives of her demands; or it can be a response to the con-trick, a way of neutralizing the power at stake in the confrontation, by acting in the knowledge of the possibility of being conned. For example, a wealthy gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons donates to a spurious "World's Charity", although doubtful of the scheme itself: he "remained proof to such eloquence; though not, as it turned out, to such pleadings. For, after listening a while longer with pleasant incredulity, presently, as the boat touched his place of destination, the gentleman, with a look half humour, half pity, put another bank-note into his hands; charitable to the last, if only to the dreams of enthusiasm." (42) In a second example Frank Goodman tells the story of an indiscriminate wine-drinker, from which someone else had drawn the moral "how that a man of a disposition ungovernably good-natured might still familiarly associate with men, though, at the same time, he believed the greater part of men false-hearted - accounting society so sweet a thing that even the spurious sort was better than none at all." (162)

Nevertheless, both examples are undercut in the narrative. The gentleman's generosity is mitigated by his wealth, as his impeccable appearance is compromised by his command of a black servant who does all his "dirty work": the money he handles is virgin, uncirculated, and his charity is "in one sense not an effort, but a luxury" (37). In the other case Frank Goodman disapproves of the distrust accommodated in the story's moral, which he says is only redeemed by a degree of humour; "for a kind of drollery in it, charity might, perhaps, overlook something of

the wickedness.” (165) Humour, indeed, seems to haunt charity here and elsewhere. The ambiguity of the charitable gesture, half in pity, half in humour, seems to correspond with the conman’s own enigmatic smile, suggesting that humour overlaps the border between kindness and violence.¹⁰ That is, joking can be both sympathetic and cruel, as laughter may be simultaneously infectious and disconcerting: its curative properties are checked by its scorn of absolute grounds. Goodman’s companion responds to his thoughts with a different kind of laughter, again with an ambiguous mixture of pity and humour:

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed the other, pointing to the figure of a pale pauper-boy on the deck below, whose pitiableness was touched, as it were, with ludicrousness by a pair of monstrous boots, apparently some mason’s discarded ones, cracked with drouth, half eaten by lime, and curled up about the toe like a bassoon. “Look - ha, ha, ha!” (163)

This brings us to another key concern of the novel, alongside the act of faith. Charity, as a sympathetic response, is a relation to suffering and injustice, which is relentlessly problematized by the play of confidence. Sustaining the above instability between pity and cruelty in humour, it is as if the contrick dissolves the grounds from which to identify suffering and injustice, and their absence compromises all systems of political economy. In an atmosphere of imposture, where an individual seeks charity on the basis of their suffering - that is, *where the cry of pain may be the song of a conman* - there are no guaranteed signs of injustice. Ethics must depend to some extent on a natural economy of pain, oppression and need, the identity of violence being what is most at stake, and it is precisely this

¹⁰ Contrast the conman’s genial smile in public with the secret grin with which Poe characterizes the diddler in 1843: “Your *true* diddler winds up all with a grin. But this nobody sees but himself... He goes home. He locks his door. He divests himself of his clothes. He puts out his candle. He goes to bed. He places his head upon the pillow. All this done, and your diddler grins.” “Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences”, *Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1938), 368.

identification which is unavailable in *The Confidence-Man*. So what can we do with the accumulated documentation of violence in the novel - the beggary, the slavery, the destitution, the law's victimization... how do we interpret its dubious petitions? This question is raised from the very beginning by Black Guinea, and later by another crippled beggar called Happy Tom.

“Black Guinea”: identity and origin, or false money? Appearing to be a crippled ex-slave begging for subsistence, he takes money from spectators by playing a dog, catching their tossed coins in his mouth. It is a game of charity which is itself subjected to various charitable and uncharitable interpretations from the crowd. The doubling up of the begging bowl and the hungry mouth uncomfortably dramatizes the politics of charity (throwing money at a problem) and the recipient's humiliation.¹¹ “To be the subject of alms-giving is trying, and to feel in duty bound to appear cheerfully grateful under the trial, must be still more so; but whatever his secret emotions, he swallowed them, while still retaining each copper this side the oesophagus.” (11) The consumption of pride also resonates with the trope of the Eucharist in earlier stories. Who is fooling whom, in this game? Is Black Guinea perpetrating a fraud on his disability and his colour, as one of the crowd suspects, any more than those who throw buttons instead of coins which crack on his teeth? Whose money is falser? What complicates the principles of exchange here is Black Guinea's trading on a *wilfully adopted abject position*: instead of begging compensation for a previous injury he stages a performance of abjection. This

¹¹ See Derrida in *The Gift of Death*, where the open mouth is itself a sign of an epistemological abyss, a claim of human need which is impossible to accommodate; upon which impossibility is founded the speech of responsibility. *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 84.

performance, regardless of whether it restages an authentic injury or not, is itself a *real* degradation. Black Guinea may well be a conman, but he only wins the trick by his voluntary humiliation. If a conman goes down on all fours like a dog, how can one maintain a simple opposition of swindler and dupe? Who is to say that the voluntary degradation is less such?

As I have mentioned, ethical responses are constructed around an assumption of the identity of violence, within which abjection is an absolute sign of need - never voluntary, immediately visible, and impossible to fake. Black Guinea's actions and those of others in the novel ask whether a kind of "performed abjection" is a degraded reproduction of the sign of suffering or its equal substitute. As the crowd ejects the one suspicious voice only to replace it with a suspicion of its own, the scene of charity suddenly becomes a court scene; the law steps in to pronounce over a gap of certainty. They ask the beggar to testify for himself with written proofs of identification. But in the absence of such documents he can only offer descriptions of nameless friends who will speak for him: and thus the list he gives turns out to be a kind of key for reading the novel, a guide for identifying later characters (although already faulty). So while the narrative may be seen to begin on an act of faith, its interpretation begins with an act of law. But the shift from "plain paper" to the "good word" (the reverse of that seen in the story "Charity of Men of the World") is beguiling: the reader's progress through the text is a kind of quest for Black Guinea's sympathetic credit among the boat's passengers, which is never released from the ambiguities of language. "Oh, find 'em, find 'em... and let 'em come quick, and show you all, ge'mmen, dat dis poor ole darkie is werry well wordy of all

you kind ge'mmen's kind confidence." (13) "Wordiness" is the only worthiness that will appear on the *Fidèle*.

In another episode the beggar Happy Tom - nicknamed for his good humour, now turned ironic, "the laugh being strangely startling" - substitutes his apparently true story of suffering for a false one which is more marketable. "Hardly anybody believes my story, and so to most I tell a different one," he says to the herb-doctor (97). A bystander who overhears objects to this strategic approach to charity. As with *Black Guinea*, the hostility derives from a perceived offence against the authenticity of injustice - the two beggars treating it like any text, reproducible as fiction. The herb-doctor's response is curiously abrupt at this point: "Shame upon you. Dare to expose that poor unfortunate, and by heaven - don't you do it, sir." (98) This is a rare moment of non-discursive confrontation in the novel where, perhaps, there is a hint of a charity more radical than genial, as if an ethical position is taken by at last dropping the playfulness of language. (Only for a moment though... the herb-doctor will take up his kindly speech again with Happy Tom and eventually come away with some of the beggar's earnings.)

So which is the greater injustice: the crippling or the duping? These crippled figures represent the longing to identify an injury outside the text, something which is physical or historical, to which an ethical response may be made. Kamuf, as we have seen, assumes a basic injustice in the crippling, interpreting the charity *Black Guinea* is subjected to as a correlative of the violence of slavery and racism. But for Melville the case seems permanently irresolvable - and maybe this is the key issue

in his later work: the dissolution of grounds for ethical positions, the necessary violence of the law, and the inevitable inarticulacy or muteness of the charitable protest against it. His detailed analysis of the textual nature of reality is constantly led to the problems of representing and interpreting suffering, where no objective or guaranteed judgement can be made. The persistent flickering between positions towards justice, each one undercut, may be the only kind of resolution; one that seems reflected in the outcome to Happy Tom's encounter with the herb-doctor. He buys some "bone-setting liniment", much to the other's reluctance to accept money, *so that it is unclear to the last whether or not a contrick has taken place at all*; and as if to reflect this uncertainty between the apparent opposites of deceiving and being deceived, the beggar is pictured at the close in a mood of nervous consolation: "As the herb-doctor withdrew, the cripple gradually subsided from his hard rocking into a gentle oscillation. It expressed, perhaps, the soothed mood of his reverie." (100)

In tribal feasts, in ceremonies of rival clans, allied families or those that assist at each other's initiation, groups visit each other; and with the development of the law of hospitality in more advanced societies, the rules of friendship and the contract are present - along with the gods - to ensure the peace of markets and villages; at these times men meet in *a curious frame of mind with exaggerated fear and an equally exaggerated generosity* which appear stupid in no one's eyes but our own. In these primitive and archaic societies there is no middle path. There is either complete trust or mistrust.¹²

from trust to interest

¹² *The Gift*, 79; my italics.

Mauss's understanding of social evolution rests on the same sort of opposition that animates *The Confidence-Man*, and like Melville he seeks to understand how the difference between trust and mistrust manifests itself in public institutions and private practices, across various cultures and periods. In the historical narrative he works with, there is broadly speaking a development from the "hard rocking" - a volatile state of affairs, always between fear and generosity, where trade and war are present in the same moment as contrary forms of human interaction - towards a "gentle oscillation" in society, a stability set in place by the contract. It is through the formalized laws of giving, receiving and reciprocating that exchange may finally displace hostility, providing people with the wherewithal to "oppose one another without slaughter and to give without sacrificing themselves to others." Mauss's concluding hopes, however, have a tone of conciliation and reserve that could not have been Melville's:

There is no need to seek far for goodness and happiness. It is to be found in the imposed peace, in the rhythm of communal and private labour, in wealth amassed and redistributed, in the mutual respect and reciprocal generosity that education can impart.¹³

For this reason Marshall Sahlins has called *The Gift* "a kind of social contract for the primitives": since it seems to assert a certain power in the gift not only to reflect social bonds but also to create them, its laws of reciprocation generating chains of indebtedness from which derive modes of cooperation and peace. "Reciprocity is a 'between' relation," he says. "It does not dissolve the separate parties within a higher unity, but on the contrary, in correlating their opposition, perpetuates it. Neither does the gift specify a third party standing over and above the separate interests of those who contract. Most important, it does not withdraw their

¹³ *ibid.*, 81.

force, for the gift affects only will and not right.” So it is the decision to trust in the fear of another’s hostility that allows for exchange; the gift is a sign of that decision being made, and its obligation to reciprocate creates networks of peaceable relations between people. What is more important, the relations are horizontal, maintaining the parties’ identities, rather than subsuming them in a corporate mass. So, for Sahlins, the primitives’ social contract becomes the modernists’ liberal manifesto - a means of restoring an ethics of community to a disintegrated social fabric.¹⁴

Melville also investigates the relation of formal economic exchanges to the deeper human impulses of friendship and hostility, but he does not see the contract as socially restorative in the same way. For him, the genial success of the conman signifies an ambiguous play deep in the structures of community, which the law struggles to control only at the cost of a certain violence. As I have already suggested, the contrick can be seen as an *ironization of the contract*: where the contract universalizes relationships between people so that strangers can safely transact using explicit rules, the contrick mimics kinship relations, and resurrects the personal element in the interested exchange. It plays on the *desire to trust*, where the contract pretends to have done away with the need to trust. One might go even further and say that trust itself is a sign of expenditure, since it is a quality supplementary to the contract which invites its own loss (trust always lives on the probability of its own breakage, or it is not trust). But it is supplementary in a

¹⁴ Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1972) 169, 170. It should be noted that Sahlins’s is not the line I have generally taken through the thesis, preferring Jonathan Parry’s more critical approach to the gift. Reading Mauss’s evidence against his own conclusions, Parry argues that exchange is not premised on its difference from war, its rationalization of chaotic impulses: the notion of the “total prestation” implies instead an original unitary society, which later breaks up and leaves only traces of unity scattered amongst the various kinds of exchanges and contracts. This alternative evolution is a story of *alienation*, “from ‘total prestations’ consisting of an exchange between groups in which material goods are only one item amongst a whole range of non-economic transfers, to gift exchange between persons as representative of groups, to modern market exchange between individuals.” “*The Gift*, the Indian Gift and the ‘Indian Gift’”, 457.

nostalgic sense, having previously atrophied from the total prestation as the contract was formalized.

In a cluster of chapters toward the end of the novel (29-41) the cosmopolitan goes around the boat in search of a particular kind of faith, having assumed a condition of financial need. His wager, if it is a contrick at all, is that no one can be friends with a stranger in need. Begging not for a gift but a loan, he introduces the additional factor of time in exchange, and addresses the durability of the structures in which trust is instituted. Thus the question of trust shifts to one of *interest*, marking the amount of delay in reciprocating, and signifying the motion of history in matters of confidence and value. Through his petitions for a loan, and in two stories told to illustrate examples of friendship (the stories of Charlemont and China Aster), Melville examines the relationship between time and value; where the weight of history is brought to bear on friendship's desire for permanence. Again, this is a problem of institution. At the same time Melville continues the theme of performance, both in the practice of friendship and in the priority of fiction over reality. It is as if in sending the cosmopolitan in search of a loan, Melville wants to test the durability of myths of economy; myths that provide society with instituted ways of understanding morality and value.

The Boon Companions:

The cosmopolitan, calling himself Frank Goodman, meets a stranger called Charlie Noble and over a bottle of port they fall into a conversation about geniality, both a natural sociable impulse and a measure of cultural progress. Charlie is led

helpless through the conversation since he is overanxious to prove his affability by agreeing, and it soon becomes clear that his wordy affirmation of friendship is far too excessive to be descriptive of his actions. In his Eulogy of the Press, they pun significantly. Frank, misunderstanding, commends a trust in words, the press being for him “defender of the faith in the final triumph of truth over error, metaphysics over superstition, theory over falsehood, machinery over nature, and the good man over the bad.” (166) In fact, Charlie eulogizes the wine press, for its aid to frankness and conviviality. But Charlie himself *will not* drink, apparently worried about losing his self-control. And when the cosmopolitan asks for money, his mask of generosity falls: “Beggar, impostor! - never so deceived a man in my life.” (179)

Then, in a ritual of friendship, Charlie is “restored” by the cosmopolitan, who conjures back the former friend out of a ring of coins (being the amount he had initially asked for). What is at stake in the game is confidence, of course: one that will prove either the value of trust without a guarantee, or the suspicions of hostility from a stranger. But in another sense it is a game between the temptation to exchange and the self-control maintained by not committing, which is in danger of being lost in interaction with others. For once the cosmopolitan’s ritual is completed, and Charlie steps out of the coin circle genially once more, he emerges “with regained self-possession regaining lost identity” (180); claiming afterward that he too was acting.

So as Happy Tom traded on a fictitious tragedy, and as Black Guinea’s act conflated suffering with a spectacle of abjection, here friendship itself exists on a

level of performance. Then in the next chapter the notion of the theatrical is carried into a brief discourse on the nature of fiction itself, where Melville comments on his method and ironically excuses himself for the surreal tone of events. (Even its title suggests relative value over intrinsic qualities: *Which may pass for whatever it may prove to be worth...*) Anticipating the charge of exaggeration, he asserts the priority of a simulated reality:

And as, in real life, the proprieties will not allow people to act out themselves with that unreserve permitted to the stage; so, in books of fiction, they look not only for more entertainment, but, at bottom, even for more reality, than real life itself can show. Thus, though they want novelty, they want nature, too; but nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed. (182-3)

Thus he claims for fiction a kind of “hyperreal” status: this and the various modes of performance are more authentic than reality itself, because of the repressed, “fettered” nature of reality. Raising all to another index of representation, even relations of sympathy and friendship, suggests an order of value far removed from the real.

Charlemont:

The following stories of Charlemont and China Aster are, in a sense, revisions of Biblical narratives, asking about the continued cultural value of narratives of Christ or stories like the Parable of the Talents. As I have said, these are stories of absence and exile, narrating a tension between a given economy and a subject who withdraws from exchange.¹⁵ In “Jimmy Rose”, for example, the

¹⁵ This tension between the visible and invisible parts of an economy can be found in many 19th century narratives. Apart from Melville’s short stories and “Charity of Men of the World”, whose plot describes the resurrection of a forgotten debt, Hawthorne’s story “Wakefield” concerns a man who steps outside of daily circulation, living secretly for years in the next street to his wife, to return as if nothing had happened; Poe’s story “The Man of the Crowd” tells a different horror, that of invisibility in the *midst* of circulation.

protagonist's mysterious absence suggests a social bankruptcy corresponding to his poverty which, through time, is converted to an ironic form of trust back in the community. Exile indicates not merely the points at which social circulation cannot go on, but a more profound doubt about the moral values agreed by commerce in general.

Conjuring up his friend Charlie from the magic circle of money, the cosmopolitan proceeds to tell the story of Charlemont, ostensibly for entertainment, but also to test him about its moral of friendship. Charlemont is rich and gregarious but one day abandons his friends, disappearing when he falls bankrupt, to return years later with a restored fortune and restored sociability. The enigma of his absence is never explained - Charlemont requesting that it be kept secret, *like the secret of death*: "when by art, and care, and time, flowers are made to bloom over a grave, who would seek to dig all up again only to know the mystery?" (185) Nonetheless, it is hinted that his decision was to disappear rather than test the strength of his friendships while poor - in his own words, "to be beforehand with the world, and save it from a sin by prospectively taking that sin to yourself" (185-6). The bargain seems to be a voluntary exile to save his friends the potential sin of abandonment. So, just as Jimmy Rose suspends the "real" relation between society and wealth by continuing to socialize *as if* rich, Charlemont simulates his former friendship by reproducing its economic foundation.

The cosmopolitan asks Charlie "whether such a motive... were a sort of one justified by the nature of human society?" (187) In effect, he is asking about the

meaning of salvation stories like Christ's. (In Christ's own story, there is also a secret disappearance which constructs his saving power: this is the three days' descent into hell, the exile from saintly eschatology.) His question addresses the need for such sacrificial myths: whether it is right to rely on a collective absolution or put human responsibility to the test. But although one would suspect Frank is telling the story to criticize Charlie's hesitant sociability, he himself withdraws from argument when Charlie is flustered by the moral: "don't apologize - don't explain - go, go - I understand you exactly." (188) Thus Melville *returns* to the value of the sacrificial; the suspension of social exchange to prolong the illusion of friendship is reproduced in the narration. It becomes a cautionary tale without a caution.

The Hypothetical Friends:

Following on after Charlie's departure the cosmopolitan meets a transcendentalist philosopher called Mark Winsome and his disciple, Egbert. These two appear to be fairly undisguised satires of Emerson and Thoreau¹⁶, and they provide an opportunity for Melville to try out his plea for confidence against a pragmatic philosophy - one that claims credit for its practical application. (As Winsome declares, "I am a man of serviceable knowledge, and a man of the world," 198) Frank proposes a roleplay with Egbert, who takes the part of "Charlie", in which he seeks a loan from a boyhood friend. Upon his request, and its immediate refusal, the "hypothetical" dispute begins.

Frank asks, "What is friendship, if it be not the helping hand and the feeling

¹⁶ See the "Historical Note" in the Northwestern-Newberry Edition, 290.

heart, the good Samaritan pouring out at need the purse as the vial!" (205) His view is that it exists only in practical manifestations; whereas Egbert/Charlie argues away such generosity on the grounds that it violates the true spiritual value of friendship, which is always a "delicate connection". The concept of the charitable need to bridge this antithesis. But Egbert's position maintains an ideal freedom from exchange, which is reflected in his method of argument. He does little more than reiterate his initial maxim absolutely separating friendship and business: "I give away money, but never loan it; and of course the man who calls myself his friend is above receiving alms. The negotiation of a loan is a business transaction. And I will transact no business with a friend." (202) Its only conclusion, since helping a friend is logically impossible, is that no friend ever needs help, and their expression of need is proof of their ineligibility for society. "Help? to say nothing of the friend, there is something wrong about the man who wants help. There is somewhere a defect, a want, in brief, a need, a crying need, somewhere about that man." (206)

Egbert's is an ideology of possessive individualism in which the friend holds a special place of honour: one who is in total self-possession and does not need to enter into exchange. Defining identity in terms of property, it also implies that economic necessity signifies individual inferiority: he refuses to give charity because of the indignity it forces on those who receive it. Similarly, the loan is discounted because its interest assumes a lack of trust between the parties which again degrades the friendship. In time, interest will convert trust into a cold-hearted and exploitative settling of dues: "The enmity lies couched in the friendship, just as the ruin in the relief." But the obvious solution is also discounted - a loan without interest,

satisfying needs without subtracting from self-possession: Egbert calls it “an alms, not of the principal, but of the interest.”(204)

What this demonstrates is the transcendentalist’s affinity to hierarchical power structures in his suppression of time. Where interest stands for a continued relation beyond the instantaneous contract, Egbert calls it “an enmity in reserve”; it causes him discomfort because it represents the obligation to comply with another’s demands in the future. Making “an alms of the interest” would not in fact degrade, but instead restore a notion of extended exchange as trust (common sense, after all); it is such an equation that commerce suppresses in the first place. To refer back to Jonathan Parry, both religion and capitalism establish sovereign power when they elide reciprocity in exchange: a commercial contract is completed on the spot (contracted, indeed) so that neither party feels further obligation to the other, and religion defers the idea of a return on one’s deeds to the afterlife. In both cases there is an elimination of the time of circulation, time that would define the strength and extent of social relations. If, therefore, religion and capitalism become the two monoliths of moral authority then *interest* will haunt them, a spectre of the circulating time lost in the contract and in Christian virtue; interest returns as the extension of a contract, reintroducing time and reproducing the deferral of reciprocity.

In financial terms, interest would be a means of shoring up a consistency of value against time’s instability, a way of securing a creditor against loss; thus it is

a kind of narrative motif of itself.¹⁷ Interest accounts for the time of repayment in a transaction, and in this respect stands opposed to the gift, whose meaning depends on a certain time of non-repayment. (The gift exists in the amount of time it spends in circulation before being reciprocated, at which point it is annulled. Its definition lies, impossibly, *in between the return it demands, and the return it must not achieve*.¹⁸) In Melville's stories it is interest that puts friendship at stake, the time factor intervening in every assumption of trust between people; symbolizing, on a general level, the motion of history in value.

China Aster:

The Biblical analogue for the concept of interest is the Parable of the Talents, where the absence of the master of a household initiates a moral obligation to circulate his property; the unfaithful servant is the one who reserves wealth by burying it. "Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury." (*Matt 25, 14-30*) Weber mentions that the parable was easily turned into a lesson on private enterprise by the Victorians, but it is notably about speculation and not property.¹⁹ The real moral force of the story (and why it must have been particularly topical) is its image of a masterless economy; interest

¹⁷ According to the OED, interest derives from the Latin *interesse*, "to differ, be of importance"; in its indicative form *interest* meant "it makes a difference". Its legal senses take a route through the Old French term for damage or loss, evolving in medieval usage as "compensation for a debtor's defaulting". The combination of the sentimental and economic in this word - that it signifies a personal involvement or share in a greater concern, and a control on value - is worth emphasizing. Interest marks the value of what might be lost over time, against the inevitable expenditure and injury of history, *making a difference*.

¹⁸ See Derrida, *Given Time*, 12.

¹⁹ *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 163.

functioning as the palimpsest of trust, a sign of the return of what is absent.

Egbert tells the story of China Aster to illustrate the dangers of doing business with friends. Like “Charity of Men of the World”, it pictures the decline into poverty after receipt of a “friendly loan”. The protagonist is a candle-maker (symbolic relative of the lamplighter) who accepts a loan despite warnings, watches his business venture fail, and is trapped into destitution by the increments of the loan and its interest. But this is not a tale of the corruption of pure social relations by the written contract, as was the case before; this time there is no ideal state to begin with. The capital which provides the loan, and motivates the plot, is lottery winnings (and the kindhearted offer is a product of the benefactor’s newly-won optimism); this gestures toward a more uncertain speculative economy. Indeed, everything is *shifty* in this story, from the money that circulates to the character’s motives and movements. Orchis (the benefactor) disappears on a voyage, and in his absence the interest on the loan goes to work, while the friendly terms cannot be called upon to mitigate the pressure on Aster. When Orchis returns he is married and a member of a religious sect - the Come Outers - and mysteriously changed: to the extent that the trust on which the original transaction was based has been lost. The personal loan becomes impersonal by the pressure of interest and the eventual demand of the principal. Thus the absence is not so much a withdrawal from the social economy as an entry to other types of commerce offstage - like marriage and religion - which distribute property differently, complicating the home system which is supposedly immutable. It is a nightmare of multiple, ungovernable circulations - as the sect’s name indicates: “for, if some men knew what was their inmost natures,

instead of coming out with it, they would try their best to keep it in..." (217)

A large proportion of the narrative describes China Aster's efforts to pay the interest and the evolution of the one debt into a whole network of secondary debts, involving the sale of assets, the mortgage of his business and even the appropriation of property belonging to his wife and children. Part of the emphasis is on the total human involvement in such a speculative economy, the number of losses and gains to be made although nothing is produced - and this is, ironically, the only image of a community bonded by its relations of exchange. Furthermore, the story seems to stress the epistemological implications of such an escalation of interest, where everything is raised to another level beyond production. In the following passage, note the insistent rhythm of the indirect speech, creating the impression of a tireless and inescapable pressure of value:

Feebly dragging himself to Orchis' agent, he met him in the street, told him just how it was; upon which the agent, with a grave enough face, said that he had instructions from his employer not to crowd him about the interest at present, but to say to him that about the time that the note would mature, Orchis would have heavy liabilities to meet, and therefore the note must at that time be certainly paid, and, of course, the back interest with it; and not only so, but, as Orchis had had to allow the interest for good part of the time, he hoped that, for the back interest, China Aster would, in reciprocation, have no objections to allowing interest on the interest annually. To be sure, this was not the law; but, between friends who accommodate each other, it was the custom. (257)

Interest on interest gestures toward a new horror, an economy having evolved in which it is no longer possible to trace simple chains of exchanges (one which allows the willed property of a wife's uncle to pass out of kinship to an old farmer who has lent livestock); nor to trace personal trust in the time deferral to which interest used to correspond. That is, trust and friendship, like the iterable word and the

commodity, is liable to reproduction which divorces it from source and other limits which determine moral quantities. In the same way, the “moral” of the candle-maker’s life is reproduced over and again. Aster writes his own epitaph, but it is considered too long and subjected to “verbal retrenchments” by his friends; then its authenticity is doubted in public, and finally a friend adds a postscript to reinterpret the moral: “The root of it all was a friendly loan”. Thus, and in countless examples in the novel, interpretations are revised until it is impossible to follow the dialectical courses of the revisions, or return to the original text. Egbert associates himself with the moral drawn by Aster’s friends, but not Aster’s own conclusion, and he disavows the spirit of their style in the way that they disavow Aster’s.

The tragic reading of the story would see the trust in human relations destroyed by a commercial system out of control; this is why Egbert objects to the style, for he intends no criticism of business but wishes instead to stress the contingency on which trust is based, that makes friendship inadequate for commerce. In effect, he is implying that an alienated economy is more rational and dependable than any system of social relations - and interest therefore figures as his saviour of community, taking over from trust as a stable measure of time. Thus the story produces both sentimental and economic meanings at the same time, whether through differences of style and moral or multivocal perspectives: and deciding on the authority of one will always involve an active blindness to others. In a sense, Melville is making a case for the ultimate non-utility of fiction: it cannot be illustrative, nor prove a point, it may pass for anything as exchange-value but does not have a “natural” moral referent. The story of China Aster does not produce

argument for Egbert as the ironic reading does not further the satire of his position; all ends in contradiction: for as Frank points out, the message of contingency does not square with Egbert's previous statements about the trustfulness of friends which is beyond contingency. The dialogue stops dead: "Inconsistency? Bah!" (222)

Melville constantly prefers to end dialectical exchanges at points of general contradiction. The overall pattern which is replicated throughout the novel, making it less of a narrative than a series of dialectical eddies, caught in their circular logic, is a movement from a *specific example* (the challenge of a con, the direct request for money, or the illustrative tale) to a debate over *universal truths* (as in the dialogue of the hypothetical friends, or the interpretive extrapolations from stories) to an *epistemological halt* - a logical aporia or reductio ad absurdum. Meaning is exhausted in pursuit of truth; dialogue and circulation come to an end. The point is that this pattern is not by force of economic necessity but is a choice that Melville makes - to sail into the maelstrom of an aporia rather than motion out towards contextually specific epistemology. Both in his textual practice and in his characterization, authority is generally accorded to moments *beyond exchange*: to silences of voice, stoppages in argument, withdrawals from circulation. Charlemont claims sovereignty by his refusal to imagine a return on the generosity he had shown while rich. The cosmopolitan also constructs friendship on the basis of unreciprocal power by excusing Charlie's confusion. And, while a satire is provided of the isolationism that possessive individualism teaches, there is no indication of other possible social relations.

Where the contract stands for the establishment of rights and interests in a market culture, a kind of formalized trust, the contrick incessantly undermines it with a nostalgic appeal to personal trust; where business might not be conducted on indifferent terms of fairness but with personal privilege and secret advantage. If capitalism looks like a society of discrete, self-interested individuals connected by contracts, Melville shows an entropic, decentred society - whose members are not wholly governed by rational motives, but other more unpredictable forces of giving and loss. His examination of charity, friendship and other institutions of the gift highlights a nostalgic, rather than creative, function (as Mauss does). For each time the gift is called upon, it is a complaint about the inescapability of exchange, a recognition of the limits of utilitarian thinking, and a dream of uncorrupted social meanings of trust and interest abiding before contractual relations.

CONCLUSION

Billy Budd

Two last instances of charity before the final sacrifice. Billy Budd has been sentenced to death, and while awaiting execution he is visited twice, first by the captain who has condemned him, then by the ship's priest. At such a point when someone is shortly to die, there is little use in talking: dialogue takes on a more symbolic or poetic function, and what is said, although superfluous to the moment, because of the lack of time, acquires a value out of the ordinary, above the terms generally operating around the boat. In a kind of lulled suspension of narrative, between Claggart's devious plotting and the inexorable judicial machine about to reach its fulfilment, these scenes with the prisoner contrast the public enactment of ethical values with others more spiritual and sentimental, dramatizing the psychological effects of a sacrifice which is undertaken on behalf of the community. It is in the contrast between these two private scenes that Melville intends the moral dimension of the coming ethical sacrifice to be portrayed. They are moments of reconciliation, therefore, not simply where Billy is enabled to die peacefully, but where his antagonism is reunited with the system of values to which he has been sacrificed. Whether or not we, as readers, accept his final utterance "God bless Captain Vere!" depends on our response to the justice of the reconciliation here.

But of the two attempts at reconciliation, only one works. When the priest comes to Billy to perform absolution, there is almost no response; it is as if he has no need of consolation. Their exchange - a mixture of mutual respect and mutual incomprehension, of generosity and violence - epitomizes the radical ambiguity of the gift, reflected in all that has been going on in the politics of charity in the texts I have dealt with.

Billy listened, but less out of awe or reverence, perhaps, than from a certain natural politeness, doubtless at bottom regarding all that in much the same way that most mariners of his class take any discourse abstract or out of the common tone of the workaday world. And this sailor way of taking clerical discourse is not wholly unlike the way in which the primer of Christianity, full of transcendent miracles, was received long ago on tropic isles by any superior *savage*, so called - a Tahitian, say, of Captain Cook's time or shortly after that time. Out of natural courtesy he received, but did not appropriate. It was like a gift placed in the palm of an outreached hand upon which the fingers do not close.¹

What is the nature of this gift the priest offers, and what is the nature of the receipt? The priest's role, of course, is to offer absolution. More than this, as a military functionary his office is to mediate the moral tensions between war and justice. That he serves the interests of earthly power, Melville's narrator makes abundantly clear: "he lends the sanction of the religion of the meek to that which practically is the abrogation of everything but brute Force." (399) Therefore, in rendering the condemned man to God he must effect a transfer of the values of justice to those of heaven. At the point where justice determines an ending with an act that settles all debts, religion would then step in to continue the procession of value into the afterlife, and connect up worldly and transcendent economies. Hence Christian eschatology is used as a kind of *moral impressment*, in keeping with the

¹ Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*, in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* ed. Harold Beaver (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 398.

war machine's enforcement of values. "The good chaplain sought to impress the young barbarian with ideas of death..." (397) Christianity claims to know death as an object with determinable features; its principles of reward and punishment construct moral values which form the basis of ethical conduct on earth. The desire for and against death accords ethical value to life. This is Christianity's gift, a gift of death, not in the sense of pure sacrifice but a *security* for sacrifice.

However, when Billy fails to respond accordingly, these apparently fundamental values are unsettled. Suddenly the most private act of absolution (one that would ratify the violent course of justice) has been exploded into the most public of events, an encounter between two cultures - and furthermore, one that presents the primal scene of moral colonization. What has been an exchange *within* religion becomes an exchange *of* religion; and thereby, Christianity is unseated from its position of moral authority to the level of a mere commodity, itself subject to the relations of use- and exchange- value. What is interesting is the way Melville reverses the terms of appropriation here - or rather creates, nostalgically, the last moment before those terms are reversed by the power of the colonizers, and the gift of Christianity is no longer offered but enforced. This receipt which is not appropriation does not suspend exchange or break the interaction between the parties, but it defamiliarizes, in just the same way as Bartleby's response does not negate, but does not affirm either ("the silhouette of a content haunts this response," says Derrida²; the outstretched palm similarly holds the silhouette of property).

² Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 75.

This is a “failed” exchange, then, signifying religion’s incapacity to underwrite ethical problems. For Billy is somehow beyond religion; his moral turmoil has already been resolved, indeed, during the visit from Captain Vere. “...Billy’s agony, mainly proceeding from a generous young heart’s virgin experience of the diabolical incarnate and effective in some men - the tension of that agony was over now. *It survived not the something healing in the closeted interview with Captain Vere.*” (396) The strange pacing of this last sentence, its rhythm holding up the flow of the narrative, calls attention to the gap in representation: for the key moment of reconciliation, the “something healing”, is kept out of sight. The narrative hesitates, declines where commentary is possible, choosing to keep secret what goes on between Vere and Billy - and this is all the more significant when compared to the priest’s visit: the one whose private hearings are more conventionally held in secret, beyond the bounds of visibility. We see *his* every movement; even as he himself spies on the prisoner’s privacy, even as he performs the most unwarranted act: “Stooping over, he kissed on the fair cheek his fellow man, a felon in martial law, one whom though on the confines of death he felt he could never convert to a dogma...” (398) With the captain, by contrast, all is kept shut in the closet of narrative. “Beyond the communication of the sentence, what took place at this interview was never known.” (391) Why? What is so precious here that it must be kept out of sight?

As we have seen before, the closeting device generates narrative, speculating on a range of possibilities out of the unknown event:

Even more may have been. Captain Vere in end may have developed the passion sometimes latent under an exterior stoical or indifferent.

He was old enough to have been Billy's father. The austere devotee of military duty, letting himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity, may in end have caught Billy to his heart, even as Abraham may have caught young Isaac on the brink of resolutely offering him up in obedience to the exacting behest. But there is no telling the sacrament, seldom if in any case revealed to the gadding world, wherever under circumstances at all akin to those here attempted to be set forth two of great Nature's nobler order embrace. There is privacy at the time, inviolable to the survivor; and holy oblivion, the sequel to each diviner magnanimity, providentially covers all at last. (392)

The first thing to be said here is that Melville's diction is extraordinarily awkward: almost to the extent that one wonders whether this passage was ever more than hastily sketched out. Even when the matter is only speculated, there is a great deal of resistance at the point of describing a possible embrace between Vere and Billy. "There is no telling the sacrament," the narrator insists, and he makes sure of it by scattering a load of syntactic obstacles in the way: "wherever under circumstances at all akin to those here attempted to be set forth..." The second thing to be ventured is that the hesitation concerns the *sentimental* quality of the moment. Vere has already declared to the other members of the condemning drumhead court that sentiment is to be excluded from the case; and it is referred to precisely in its literary terms, as the plea of a weeping woman touching a judge's arm: "Well, the heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as that piteous woman, and hard though it be, she must here be ruled out." (388) So the closet is the only place for it (not forgetting to compare it with the other closet, in which Claggart may have kept his banned feelings for Billy) - as it is also the only place for the domestic relations implied in the reference to Abraham and Isaac. For this is *not* the same kind of sacrifice, however much the narrative may suggest a paternal bond between Vere and Billy. The crew and officers are only a model of family under the conditions of war, and

it is rather the sympathy between strangers - which, after all, is what is meant by “what remains primeval in our formalized humanity”; this quality of sympathy having been so elusive from *The Confidence-Man* four decades earlier - that is the thing we are not allowed to see here. Where the text proposes a specific politics, predicating justice upon the sacrifice of sympathy, is also where the sentimental will be submerged, at the same time inaugurating a new, colder, literary sensibility. “The agony of the strong” is the lasting impression we have of Vere as he leaves the chamber (and is it not the expression of a western hero, the figure Jane Tompkins sees as successor to the sentimental tradition?): and it is one that structures our interpretation of the law hereafter. For the law can be absolved of its violence, so long as it contains a trace of the agony felt by its perpetrators.

Billy Budd’s main topic is the violent content within forms that establish peace - something that is forecast at the very beginning, in the lieutenant’s comment on his newly impressed sailor: “blessed are the peacemakers, especially the fighting peacemakers.” (326) Thus the enactment of forms always seems to recognize this sacrifice. The ethics of deconstruction takes it as its theme; Barbara Johnson, for instance, interprets the story as dramatizing the relation between cognition and force, between “hitting” one’s object with language and a fist. In the end, she says, the two are not differentiable, force operating *within* understanding: “Judgement is cognition functioning as an act.”³ More recently, Derrida has postulated the presence of a logic of sacrifice integral to ethics: a logic that involves crossing an aporia of responsibility (like the “deadly space” that has to be crossed in representation): “I

³ Barbara Johnson, “Melville’s Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*”, from *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 102.

am responsible to any one (that is to say any other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice, I must always hold my peace about it.”⁴ And Hannah Arendt has also seen politics predicated on sacrifice: its location in argumentative and persuasive reasoning compromises ideal qualities of good and evil into socially debatable values of virtue and vice. Against this necessary and insistent public discourse, goodness, and compassion, must fall silent.

Such talkative and argumentative interest in the world is entirely alien to compassion, which is directed solely, and with passionate intensity, toward suffering man himself; compassion speaks only to the extent that it has to reply directly to the sheer expressionist sound and gestures through which suffering becomes audible and visible in the world.⁵

The difference between American revolutionary thought and its French counterpart, she argues, is its absence of a *political* principle of compassion: from its beginnings, the American struggle had been “against tyranny and oppression, not against exploitation and poverty” (68), and therefore, a means of identification with the physical and economic suffering of others was less urgent. Reading *Billy Budd*, she notes that the strong suffer more than the weak, and it is the *victim*, not the political agent, who shows compassion. But it seems that Melville acknowledges the fact, albeit unconsciously, in the failed gifts of charity throughout his later work, and here in the frozen offering of a religion in the service of war. If the fist represents the law’s necessary sacrifice, it is the open hand which registers these political ambiguities in the social question: where the complexities of suffering,

⁴ *The Gift of Death*, 70.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (London: Faber, 1963), 81-2.

solidarity and justice coalesce, as if to fill the silhouette of a content. The outstretched palm is the appeal of a sufferer as well as the mark of a lack of common values: it is the hand that begs assistance, receives, but does not recognize.

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