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Melville's Montaigne: Essayism, Anamnesis and Allegories of Reading

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Literature

by

Alexander B. Cargol

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Abstract

Melville's Montaigne: Essayism, Anamnesis and Allegories of Reading

by Alexander B. Cargol

“Montaigne” or its derivatives appear throughout Herman Melville’s writings as the rhetorical trope anamnesis. The effect is an allegorization of the reading process, which foregrounds other texts either in the case of or in relation to the French essayist Michel Eyquem de Montaigne. Whether imagining reading as polyphonic disputation or meditating upon the violence of misreading within semantic and narrative ambiguity, these increasingly complex allegories disrupt notions of simple, straightforward interpretation. However, the content of specific allegories is less significant than how they require and produce ever more intervening interpretation. Beyond biographical parallels, historical events, and questions of intention, these allegories lead readers to consider their own interpretive processes. This thesis concludes by considering the essayism of literary critics John Bryant and Claire de Obaldia, respectively, moving toward how the reader might adopt a more conscious and conscientious reading practice: a readerly essayism.

Acknowledgments

This thesis is the final product of several attempts at approaching the question of Melville's Montaigne. Over several drafts it grew and transformed along with my own thinking while I completed graduate coursework at UC Santa Cruz. The problem of thinking how one author invokes another can be approached from several avenues, and I could not have found my way without the guidance, expertise, and support of my committee Wlad Godzich, Rob Wilson, and my advisor Susan Gilman. Several other professors were also instrumental to the development of this project and my understanding of Montaigne, Melville, the essay, and the responsibilities of the reader: Kirsten Gruesz, Jody Greene, Richard Terdiman, Sharon Kinoshita, Huter Bivens, Bali Sahota, Micah Perks, and David Marriott. My colleagues, who became my friends, are too numerous to mention, but deserve thanks for their insight, encouragement, and criticism. I'd like to specifically recognize Joe Darda, Will Jameson, and Cathy Thomas for keeping me on course.

To my parents, Owen and Dai-Lih, words cannot express my gratitude for their continued support. And to my partner Ayesha, who patiently waited through many long nights and waded through many teetering paper piles, I could not have completed this thesis without her.

Finally, despite my enormous gratitude for all those who have supported my efforts, I admit that the paper's shortcomings are my own.

for my teachers, my parents, and my friends

Introduction

This thesis considers allusions to the sixteenth-century French essayist Michel Eyquem de Montaigne in the work of American author Herman Melville (1819-1891). Montaigne's *Essais* (1580), from which the genre gets its name, were both literary and philosophical works of the Renaissance, which bridged the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages with the humanism of the Age of Enlightenment. Montaigne's skeptical, subjective, searching essays profoundly influenced thinkers such as Descartes, Pascal, and Nietzsche; Leonard Woolf called Montaigne the "first completely modern man." "Montaigne" or its derivatives appear seven different times in Melville's work, beginning with his third novel *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither* and ending with final novella, unpublished at the time of his death, *Billy Budd, Sailor*. As eminent Melville scholar John Bryant notes, Melville was "very much a rhetorician" (*Melville and Repose* 19), and through a reading of these allusions as the rhetorical trope anamnesis—that is, a recollection of past matters, especially citing an author from past memory, as an appeal to both *ethos* (credibility) and *logos* (received wisdom)—I argue Melville constructs various allegories of reading, foregrounding reading of other texts either in the case of, or in relation to, Montaigne. That is, these allegories of reading lead the reader to what I call a "Montaignian" readerly essayism. The import of these instances rests not so much in the name Montaigne itself, or the contents of the allegories, but in the Montaignian process that the name presupposes in regards to reading practices as a discursive, readerly mode of being. Bryant and others argue that Melville continually tries to teach his readers how to read him,

adopting a Montaignian framework to support their characterizations. In order to understand this process, Bryant especially advocates a type of essayism within a style of romancing. After developing the Montaignian anamnestic allusions within Melville as allegories of reading, I expand on Bryant's notion of essayism through a comparison with what Claire de Obaldia calls the *essayistic*.

Initially, Melville may not have come to Montaigne through the *Essays* at all, but rather through Shakespeare in 1835 while attending the Albany Academy (*Biography V.1* 107). The most well-known passage of Shakespeare's Montaigne derives from the latter's "Of Cannibals," where Gonzalo, the advisor to King Alonso, describes his ideal society.¹ Around this time Melville's sister Helen recalls seventeen-year-old Melville terrorizing young girls with the witches' spell from *Macbeth*: "Eye of newt, and toe of frog" (*Biography V.1* 107). If not then, biographer Hershel Parker says Melville once again read Shakespeare in 1839, just as he published his first noteworthy juvenilia, "Fragments from a Writing Desk" (*Biography V.1* 137-138). Only after the successes of his first two novels, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847), does Melville specifically seek out Montaigne. On 18 January 1848, publisher John Wiley notes in his account ledger that Melville purchased on credit "1

¹ The bard's contentious relationship with the essayist has recently been covered in *Shakespeare's Montaigne*, where parallels are drawn between Montaigne's *Essays*, in their 1603 John Florio translation, to *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *King Lear*, and to a lesser extent *Richard III*, *Henry V*, and *All's Well that Ends Well*. Further scholarship on Melville and Montaigne might look to these plays as intertext.

² References to Montaigne's *Essays* will draw from this translation, specifically the Harvard Library copy. I maintain the original spelling and punctuation as they appear in this edition. See Stevens' "The Edition of Montaigne Read by Melville."

³ In quotes from Melville's text, I maintain the spelling as they appear in the Northwestern-Newberry editions, unless otherwise noted. It is widely known that Melville did not burden himself with a strict

Montagne” and “1 Shakespear cf” for \$9.25 (Stevens 130). This was likely the 1845 Cotton translation, edited by William Registrar Hazlitt.² In 1849, in London, attempting to sell proofs of *White-Jacket*, Melville “noted Shakespere’s autograph (in Montaigne)”); this was Florio’s 1603 translation at the British Museum (*Biography V.I* 679).³ Although scholars now consider the autograph inauthentic, the entry suggests the significance of both authors to Melville. The same year, while Melville read Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, he noted in the margins: “Here is forcibly shown the great Montaignism of Hamlet” (*Biography V.I* 617). Finally, a year before retirement, he mentions his poem “Montaigne and his Kitten” in an 1885 letter to his cousin-in-law Ellen Gifford (*Correspondence* 490). More circumstantial parallels exist, but the above historical instances suggest Melville in his personal life sustained a life-long engagement and interests in Montaigne and the *Essays*.

It may seem that Melville’s Montaigne is inextricably linked with Melville’s Shakespeare, and clearly the bard plays a significant role in Melville’s relationship to the essayist; however, while much has been written on Melville’s reading of Shakespeare, there has been relatively little substantive discussion of Melville’s relationship to Montaigne. Scholarship, in my view, often comments upon Montaigne briefly and without sustained attention to the rhetorical effect of his allusions. That is,

² References to Montaigne’s *Essays* will draw from this translation, specifically the Harvard Library copy. I maintain the original spelling and punctuation as they appear in this edition. See Stevens’ “The Edition of Montaigne Read by Melville.”

³ In quotes from Melville’s text, I maintain the spelling as they appear in the Northwestern-Newberry editions, unless otherwise noted. It is widely known that Melville did not burden himself with a strict adherence to conventional grammar, spelling, or conjugation of words. Whether misspelt words were missed by copy-editors (Melville’s or the NN editors) or are merely anachronisms, I have endeavored to remain consistent with the NN editions.

while I am certainly not the first to notice the seven literary allusions and biographical parallels, very few articles have attempted a synthetic reading of Melville's Montaigne. Some explanation for this phenomenon may be provided.

Given the abundant autobiographical parallels between the author Melville and his narrators, scholarship tends to approach Melville through biography and intention, and while his writing clearly draws from his personal life, this has often led to limited interest in the rhetorical effect of Melville's Montaigne. For example, scholarship has often noted that Melville read Montaigne during his expansive, frenzied reading in 1848 prior to writing *Mardi*.⁴ However, neither the only author alluded to in Melville's work, nor so obviously a literary influence from the biographical perspective, Montaigne's authorial voice is lost among others such as Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante. But the justification for focusing on the figure of Montaigne will emerge from the analysis: where the text mentions Montaigne, the text also allegorizes the reading process.

Where the essayist does appear, scholarship most often discusses homologies between Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" and Melville's treatment of the uncivilized, the "noble savage," the unspoiled paradise, and the pretensions of Western thought and civilization. Here, *Moby-Dick*, *Benito Cereno*, *Typee* appear most often.⁵ As such, this paper avoids Melville's Montaigne from this perspective. Other Montaignian

⁴ Melville would write Hawthorne in June 1851, "Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life" (*Correspondence* 193). This means Melville's serious study of literature and the writing craft would begin around 1844, two years before he published *Typee*. In the context of the letter, Melville sadly notes how quickly his literary star had fallen.

⁵ However, as I've suggested, Melville read Montaigne in 1848, prior to writing *Typee*. Rousseau is perhaps a more likely source for these themes in Melville's early novels (see Scorza 235).

allusions in scholarship have with few exceptions received brief reference, or at most, paragraphs, and rarely placed passages in conversation with one another. Parallel instances are noted, but seldom discussed in depth. Another common approach has been to juxtapose similar passages, structural or thematic, in Montaigne and Melville. However, given the skeptical and digressive style of Melville and Montaigne's fictional personas, transversal readings and paraphrase seem fraught. That is, a part of the text cannot necessarily be taken as representative of the whole novel. Melville's narrators, like the voice of the essays, avoid yoking themselves to any single ideological position. Melville's works constantly shift between autodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration without comment, varying focalization and distance. Simply put, it is not so easy to "strike through the mask" of either the real Melville or Montaigne.⁶ Where readings expand beyond the explicit mention of Montaigne, strong correlations exist within the texts. Finally, while biographical notes are included throughout, they serve to only point out further, though less concrete, correspondences between Melville and Montaigne.

Further complications also present themselves through the digressive and skeptical nature of the essay itself. For example, attempts to analyze the use of the word "essay" in Melville, along with the role of the "essayism" or "essayistic" as a writing style, leads to few definitive insights.⁷ Although Melville rarely used the word "essay" in his private correspondence and journals, the word appears with some

⁶ One may say with some certainty that Melville is clearly against flogging.

⁷ Appearances of "Essay" or derivations in Melville's novels: *Typee* (x2), *Omoo* (x3), *Mardi* (x6), *Redburn* (x2), *White-Jacket* (x7), *Moby-Dick* (x6), *Pierre* (x6), *Israel Potter* (x2), *The Confidence-Man* (x5). "Essay" appears before *Mardi*, but there is a notable increase in novels covered here.

frequency from *Typee* to *Clarel*. It may be that Melville attributed a poetic aura to the word, but relatively little else. The applicability of an essayism or essayistic style to his prose is also fraught. As a “fourth genre,” that is perhaps less a genre than a mode, the essay has always been difficult to define, even if reduced to a modal essayism or essayistic style. Alternatively, Bryant’s essayism refers both to a writerly and to a readerly practice; the latter being the primary concern of this thesis. Beginning with *Mardi* (1848), Melville’s prose adopts an especially non-linear approach not present in the more straightforward narratives of *Typee* and *Omoo*: discursive simultaneously in the sense of being expansive in subject and establishing new discourses within the text. To the extent that Melville’s works, beginning with *Mardi*, hold themselves to a rational narrative development, discursive seems less appropriate. His narratives divert course and digress into other topics. They question their own telling. They play with conventional genres and sub-genres; speak in lyric voices or dramatic dialogues, and halt, all too often, in contradiction and ambiguity. Thus, this study allows the interpretation of anamnesis to emerge from the local or immanent context outward through the text, and forgo imposing a strict coherence or narrative between the allegories.

In regards to the essay genre, many of Melville’s shorter works also would have been understood during the nineteenth-century as within an American essay tradition, of more immediate British periodical influence than French, as evinced by such aspects as the genial bachelor narrators, the use of pseudonyms, and the scenes, fragments, and sketches of characters and everyday life. Although little other

scholarship appears to approach Melville through the generic or stylistic lens of the essay, the author undoubtedly read many essays.⁸ In addition to Montaigne, Sealts' *Melville Reading* indicates the author read British essayists such as Francis Bacon, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, and Addison and Steele;⁹ in 1849, he purchased the eight volume *Modern British Essayists*;¹⁰ Melville's reading of American essayists included Benjamin Franklin, Washington Irving, E. A. Poe, Emerson, and Thoreau;¹¹

⁸ Aside from Sealts' *Melville's Reading* (1966), the website *Melville's Marginalia Online*, edited by Boise State University, manages a current directory and virtual archive of Melville's reading (<http://melvillemarginalia.org>).

⁹ Lamb, Bacon, and Hazlitt appear to have the largest influence of the British essayists on Melville. He underlined in his edition of Hazlitt's *The Round Table*, "The turmoil and final nothingness of the understanding." In "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville refers readers to Lamb's "Specimens," in order to see "Fortune has more to do with fame than merit." The implication being that a Melville is the "young man of poor attire, with no insignia of rank or acknowledged eminence," may come to represent the "Shiloh of America" (*Prose Pieces* 253). In *Moby-Dick*'s "Extracts," Melville quotes Lamb's poem "Triumph of the Whale," a political satire. The third example presents quite the opposite of Melville's self-serving literary nationalism. In his lecture "The South Seas," Melville evokes Lamb's "The South-Sea House" as a "quaint" and "fine" sketch in which the decrepit London office building, a former site of employment for Lamb, which the writer equates with the "Balclutha-like desolation" of the Pacific Ocean (*Prose Pieces* 411). Although he praised Bacon in *Mardi*, in *Pierre*'s philosophical fragment "Chronometricals and Horologicals" contains the line "Bacon's brains were mere watchmaker's brains, but Christ was a chronometer" (*Pierre* 221). His references to "Lord Bacon" in *Redburn* and *Moby-Dick* are also sardonic. In understanding Melville's relation to the essay, his readings of Matthew Arnold, Samuel Johnson, Sir Thomas Browne, and William Goldsmith, as well as *The Rambler*, *Looker-On*, *The Tatler*, and *The Spectator*, must also be considered.

¹⁰ Included works by Archibald Alison, Babington Macaulay, Sydney Smith, John Wilson (Christopher North), Thomas Carlyle, Francis Jeffery, Thomas Talfourd, James Stephen, and James Mackintosh.

¹¹ Melville's relationships with Irving and Emerson were particularly dynamic. Melville read Irving's *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819) early in life, and the influence of the latter's bachelor narrators and character sketches is evident in the former's juvenilia, and may even have served as model for Melville's *Redburn*. In fact, Irving would recommend Melville's first novel to publishers Wiley and Putnam (*Biography V.1* 109, 397). As Parker writes, "Washington Irving had been his literary model and obstacle, the literary parent [Melville] had to surpass and repudiate..." (*Biography V.2* 37). Even Melville's editor Evert Duyckinck wrote in his journal, and then effaced, that Melville's "writing evidently [shared] a great deal on Washington Irving" (qtd. in *Biography V.1* 540). A reviewer drew a similar comparison, "Herman Melville...discourses as pleasantly and humorously of Nature in her hundred aspects as the gentle Washington Irving himself, the Prince of story-tellers, the most delicate and touching of painters" (*Biography V.1* 506). Though later he praised Hawthorne's originality at the expense of "graceful writer" Irving's derivativeness (his "self-acknowledged imitation of a foreign model, and...studied avoidance of all topics but smooth ones") in "Hawthorne and his Mosses" (*Prose Pieces* 247). This critique caused Irving "acute distress" (*Biography V.2* 559). However, Melville

he would read philosophical essayists such as Descartes, Pascal, and Schopenhauer; and he read “classical” essayist such as Augustine, Plutarch, Cicero, Seneca, Solomon, and Ecclesiastes. Even Melville’s celebrated skepticism cannot be solely attributed to Montaigne; Melville read in translation classical sources such as Sextus

would acknowledged Irving in his 1859 lecture, “Traveling: Its pleasures, Pains, and Profits,” for recognizing “the sea-voyage, with its excitements, its discomforts, and its enforced self-discipline, is a good preparation for foreign travel,” and in his elegiac prose poem, “Rip Van Winkle’s Lilac,” self-published near the end of his life, Melville thanks the “happiest Irving,” reclining “with those mellowing Immortals who as men were not only excellent in their works but pleasant and love-worthy in their lives” for letting him “[poach] something in that literary manner... to render something tributary to the story of that child of they heart—Rip Van Winkle” (*Biography* V.2 412; Vincent 281, 292). Melville’s marginalia reveals a conflicted opinion of Emerson. He read Emerson’s *Representative Men* in 1850, and his *First Series* (1841), *Second Series* (1844), and *Conduct of Life* (1860) in the early 1860s. At one point he writes, “Nothing can be truer or better said,” and at another “God help the poor fellow who squares his life according to this.” He also saw Emerson lecture: “I had heard of him as full of transcendentalisms, myths & oracular gibberish; I had only glanced at a book of his once in Putnam’s store—that was all I knew of him, till I heard him lecture.—To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible, tho; to say truth, they told me that that night he was unusually plain” (*Correspondence* 121). He writes, “Look squarely at this, & what is it but mere Theology... The brook shows the stain of the banks it has passed thru. Still, these essays are noble.” Though he never saw himself in “Emerson’s rainbow... [preferring] rather to hang myself in mine own halter than swing in any other man’s swing,” he still thought Emerson a “brilliant fellow” and an “uncommon man” (*Correspondence* 121). And if “for the sake of the argument... a fool;—then had I rather be a fool than a wise man.—I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more... I’m not talking of Mr. Emerson now—but of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began.” The “gaping flaw” of this “Plato who talks thro’ his nose” is his “insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions” (*Correspondence* 121). F.O. Matthiesson argues, Melville “was instinctively unwilling to allow a gap between the spheres of thought and experiences, but determined to make each stand the scrutiny of the other” (184); “For whereas Emerson could quietly accept the illusory nature of every event... Melville was tortured at being immersed in the flux” (Matthiesson 476). Melville believed, “the trouble with most of Emerson’s young transcendentalists was not that they had thought too much, but that, swept along by a clutter of diverse enthusiasms, they had never really learned... how to think at all” (467). Melville would lampoon Emerson and Thoreau in *The Confidence-Man*, and the short stories “Bartleby, The Scrivener,” and “Cock-a-Doodle-Do!” See also Egbert Oliver’s “‘Cock-A-Doodle-Do!’ and Transcendental Hocus-Pocus” and “Melville’s Picture of Emerson and Thoreau in *The Confidence-Man*”; W.B. Stein’s “Melville Roasts Thoreau’s Cock”; and Hershel Parker’s “Melville’s Satire of Emerson and Thoreau: An Evaluation of the Evidence.” Further scholarship might compare this study of Melville’s Montaigne with W. Lee Ustick’s *Emerson’s Debt to Montaigne* (1922) and Charles Young’s *Emerson’s Montaigne* (1941). In *Representative Men*, Emerson’s “Montaigne; or the Skeptic,” in three movements, justifies the need for skepticism, describes Montaigne’s contribution, and characterizes the limitations of skepticism. But the conclusion is still a transcendence of thought and the calcification of providence; the “world-spirit” swims in the “Eternal Cause.” Melville’s wrote nothing explicit on Thoreau. Melville irreverently portrays Franklin as a figure of contradiction in *The Confidence-Man*.

Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius on the skeptic Pyrrho, as well as skeptical Pierre Bayle in *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*.¹² Finally, as with Montaigne, Melville read widely, drawing quotations, anecdotes, and ideas from a vast array of texts. Although linguistic, structural, and thematic parallels may be found between Melville and Montaigne, in many cases it is far from certain that Montaigne provided the source for Melville's examples; however, I do believe an extended study would prove a generative endeavor.

Given these currents and complications, this study attempts to limit itself to Melville's language, and a slightly narrower set of questions: who is Melville's Montaigne? How does Melville's anamnestic allusion Montaigne "work," and how does this usage change over time? And, what, if anything, can this usage tell us about how Melville's texts teach his audience to read? This study includes readings of four of his novels, *Mardi*, *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, the short story "I and My Chimney," the poem mentioned in Melville's letter to Ellen Gifford: "Montaigne and his Kitten," and, finally, his short story *Billy Budd*. To my knowledge, only one article attempts an analysis of anamnesis in Melville, William Engel's "Patterns of Recollections in Montaigne and Melville." However, Engel approaches anamnesis through Plato's theory "that all knowledge is predicated on remembrance" (335). Conversely, this study, in considering the rhetorical appeals intrinsic to anamnesis,

¹² "...he picked up in a Boston bookshop the English translation of Pierre Bayle's historical and critical *Dictionary*, planning, as he wrote Duyckinck, 'to lay the great old folios side by side and go to sleep on them through the summer with Phaedon in one hand and Tom Brown in the other'" (Howard 131). In translation, he read other continental essayists such as Italian Vasari Giorgio's *Lives of the Most Eminent Painter, Sculptors, and Architects* (1851) and French author François de La Rochefoucauld's *Reflections and Moral Maxims* (1871).

looks toward Edward Said's critique of citation practices within Orientalist discourse and Foucault's notion of the "author function" to help establish the rhetorical significance of anamnesis. For example, Said writes,

Far from being merely additive or cumulative, the growth of knowledge is a process of selective accumulation, displacement, deletion, rearrangement, and insistence within what has been called a research consensus. The legitimacy of such knowledge...stemmed not from religious authority...but from what we can call the restorative citation of antecedent authority.

...

What we shall see is that for all its eccentric individuality, this narrative consciousness will end up by being aware...that pilgrimage is after all a form of copying. (176-177)

The use of authors in Melville, I argue, takes on a similar valence. Montaigne and the names of other authors accumulated and cited by Melville collectively impart a self-conscious selective knowledge. Legitimacy and authority exists in each allusion: the Latin *auctoritas* (authority) itself deriving from *auctor* (author). More to the point, Foucault, in "What is an Author?" writes, "the author's name...seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being...[It] manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture...it is located in the break that founds a certain discursive construct and its very particular mode of being" (211). This study characterizes, then, the "Montaigne" discourse of nineteenth-century

America as depicted through Melville's usage. Foucault summarizes the discourse surrounding the author function as follows:

(1) The author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses; (2) it does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization (3) it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but, rather, by a series of specific and complex operations; (4) it does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects—positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals.” (216)

Maintaining this manifold consideration of the author as we move forward is crucial to our *allegoresis*. Along with legitimizing, authorizing, and promoting a selective “research consensus,” understanding the author function “as characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society,” suggests anamnesis establishes or anticipates, through its appeals to *ethos* and *logos*, a discourse and mode of being (211). That is, discourse *is* a mode of being. However, this is a complex and problematic realization to internalize. This difficult conception of the author function is complicated in *Mardi*'s “Dreams” chapter.¹³ If discourse is a mode of being, the narrator, known only as Taji, wonders to which discourse he should subscribe.

¹³ *Mardi* is the first of Melville's novels to use the preposition “Of” in the chapter titles. This essay motif appears six times.

Reading as Polyphonic Worlds: *Mardi*, and a *Voyage Thither*

In *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither* (1848), the tragic death of Jarl the “faithful follower” throws Taji into a sea of confusion. It is the second murder for which Taji bears responsibility in his desperate search for the kidnapped maiden Yillah, the first being Samoa. Taji’s “soul [is] sobbed out,” but the search party—King Media, Babbalanja the philosopher, Mohi the historian, and Yoomy the poet—convince Taji to continue questing. Before departing, the witch Hautia’s heralds, a Mardian version of the three Fates, over take their craft speaking a prophetic “language of flowers.” Taji refuses to interpret their message, or accept Hautia’s invitation to visit her island, but this tragic and foreboding episode leads the reader into the chapter with “dreams innumerable” as an allegory of reading (*Mardi* 365).¹⁴

In “Dreams,” the prose becomes heavily rhapsodic and highly figurative. In “golden dreams” “prairies like rounded eternities,” “dreams like buffaloes,” passing time “like Oriental empires in history” (366). Taji’s consciousness traverses time and space, through forests and over mountains, among empires and epic figures. Like the “Catskill eagle” of *Moby-Dick*, Taji’s “soul sinks down to the depths, and soars to the skies” (*Mardi* 367). In this moment, Taji is the world and not: a dual existence inside and outside historic temporality. “Comet-like,” he thinks, “all the worlds are my kin, and I invoked them to stay in their course” (367). Jarl’s traumatic death disembodies Taji, and consequently, Taji seeks to remake his world. True to his demigod name, he imagines maintaining a plurality of worlds within him. However, his vessel

¹⁴ Referencing the symbolic value of flowers, a Victorian “romantic conceit” (Rollyson 299).

consciousness remains tethered to a previous self that he “fain would cast off the cables that hamper.” “Like a frigate,” he is “full with a thousand souls.” They are “shouting across [his] decks,” “boisterous speaking—trumpets are heard,” but offer “contending orders to save the good ship from the shoals.”¹⁵ For Taji, “Shoals, like nebulous vapors, shoreing the white reef of the Milky Way, against which the wrecked worlds are dashed; strowing all the strand, with their Himmaleh keels and ribs.” The vessel consciousness has grown to planetary size, but this shipwrecking image of shouting souls is that of competing discourses, philosophies, and worlds within a universe of knowledge; of authors and authorities at work in preserving the world (being) from tragedy. The voices, “speaking in one at a time, then all with one voice: an orchestra...rising, and falling, and saying in golden calls and responses.” This cacophony of authorial voices overwhelms Taji. He can barely hear one voice among the choir. He is the “eagle at the world’s end,” but is now “tossed skyward, on the horns of the tempest. Yet, again, [Taji will] descend, and list to the concert.”¹⁶ In a synecdoche of metaphors, within an orchestra within a sea within a universe of dreams, Taji recalls, selects, and arranges his authors.

Like a grand, ground swell, Homer’s old organ rolls its vast volumes under the light frothy wave-crests of Anacreon and Hafiz; and high over my ocean, sweet Shakespeare soars, like all the larks of the spring. Throned on my sea-side, like Canute, bearded Ossian smites his hoar harp, wreathed with wild-

¹⁵ The image repeats in *White-Jacket* when the Lieutenant Mad Jack countermands the orders of a drunk Captain Claret while the *Neversink* passes through the straits of Cape Horn in a storm.

¹⁶ The eagle image recalls, and perhaps anticipates, Benjamin’s reading of Klee’s *Angelus Novus*.

flowers, in which warble my Wallers; blind Milton sings bass to my Petrarchs and Priors, and laureats crown me with bays.

In me, many worthies recline, and converse. I list to St. Paul who argues the doubts of Montaigne; Julian the Apostate cross-questions Augustine; and Thomas-a-Kempis unrolls his old black letters for all to decipher. Zeno murmurs maxims beneath the hoarse shout of Democritus; and though Democritus laugh loud and long, and the sneer of Pyrrho be seen; yet, divine Plato, and Proclus, and Verulam [Bacon] are of my counsel; and Zoroaster whispered me before I was born. I walk a world that is mine; and enter many nations, as Mungo Park rested in African cots; I am served like Bajazet: Bacchus my butler, Virgil my minstrel, Philip Sidney my page. My memory is a life beyond birth; my memory, my library of the Vatican, its alcoves all endless perspectives, eve-tinted by cross-lights from Middle-Age oriels. (*Mardi* 367-8)¹⁷

In this alliterative passage authors abound, and anamnestic examples are manifold. While contemporary reviews found it “a tedious, floundering work of uncertain meaning or no meaning at all” and a “hodgepodge” (Foster 668), scholarship points out this passage in particular evinces Melville’s 1948 reading, and as making possible *Moby-Dick* (Foster 657). Indeed, Melville’s ecstasy is palpable. First, Melville

¹⁷ Cf. Montaigne in the “Apology”: “I do not easily change, for fear of losing by the bargain, and as I am not capable of choosing, I take other men’s choice...I could not otherwise keep myself from perpetual rolling...The writings of the ancients, the best authors I mean, being full and solid, tempt and carry me which way almost they will: he that I am reading seems always to have the most force; and I find that every one in his turn is in the right, though they contradict one another” (II.12 266-65).

engages the poets, then the philosophers. The poets comprise an oceanic orchestra of received wisdom. They are playing, not words but music, complimenting and supplementing each other. Shakespeare in particular undergoes another figuration as songbirds. However, the “my” implies a kind ownership of their song; the reader serves as conductor of past poetry. He possesses these authors. They are musical instruments to be played and played with. But in this sea of authors and allusion, readers are also presented two new metaphoric modes of reading: the meeting place and the expedition. The philosophers take the reader down to the Piraeus, the agora, the public house, and the salon. Montaigne’s voice is one among many philosophers in repose. However, instead of music, there is disputation and contemplation. Taji is the passive listener, not actively engaged in debate. Here, Montaigne’s skepticism is placed politely next to the fervent belief in revealed truth of St. Paul. But if he “list” toward St. Paul, Julian the Apostate returns the balance between faith and skepticism. This second instance of “list” carries several interesting meanings: a listening, a limiting, a leaning. It connotes a land prepared for agriculture. Melville recalls previous metaphors, the galaxy, the ocean, and vessel, while anticipating an agricultural America beyond the Mississippi in the following paragraph. An advisory “counsel” seeps into an explorative, if not colonial, project of reading. However, “Hafiz” and “Zoroaster” suggest perspectives not entirely western. The “walk” becomes an imperial march, Taji a crusader. Author exploration gives way to exploitation. The paragraph ends contemplating memory itself as a timeless library of “endless perspectives.” This collection of authors placed together, as an ocean, an

orchestra, a meeting place, a continent, a home, a library, suggests an overall process diminishing in size, from the cosmic to a return to the material reality of the individual reading in the library. Yet at each step in this chain of metaphors, the text presents different modes of reading. Each author represents a discourse and mode of being to aid Taji cope with tragedy. The passage itself does not advocate any single philosophy or mode of reading, but juxtaposes various possible readerly practices that function as modes of being.

From the global perspective, Taji's consciousness turns to the wild waters of the United States personified as "clans of the highland" and "tartar[s]," with Taji himself, as a "billow" or "great wave," entering into a divine temporality: "all past and present pouring in" him. Here the subject itself has become a natural force. With, "Yet not I, but another: God is my Lord," Taji begins waking up from his dream, and returns to his proper place in the universe: "though many satellites revolve around me [thus, as a world], I and all mine revolve round the great central Truth, sun-like, fixed and luminous forever in the foundationless firmament." The chapter ends with a turn toward the writing process described as immolation, sickness, devouring, and torture. It is unclear whether this writing "I" is Taji (and if so how did he escape immanent death) or the voice of the paratextual preface, which challenges the reader to determine fact from fiction, "to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity: in some degree the reverse of my previous experience" (xvii).¹⁸

¹⁸ The novel concludes with his search party abandoning Taji for Serenia, an idealized Christian paradise founded on agape love. However, Taji rejects this literal and figural *topos*, The final image is

The narrative picks up without comment on “Dreams” in the following chapter; the god-king Media warns the philosopher Babbalanja of free-thinking. Media discourages discourses that are “the least frank and friendly”: “mostly formulas, or prevarications, or hollow assumption of philosophical indifference, or urbane hypocrisies, or a cool, civil deference to the dominant belief; or still worse, but less common, a brutality of indiscriminate skepticism” (370). Melville had much admired the ability in Shakespeare and Hawthorne. In “Hawthorne and his Mosses,” he writes, “Through the mouths of the dark characters...[they] craftily [say], or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true” (*Prose Pieces* 244). But if Media reminds readers that the “free, airy robe of...philosophy is but a dream,” that “mortals dwell in Mardi, and it is impossible to get elsewhere” (370), White-Jacket will attempt to escape the “mortal” limitations.

Reading as Friendship: *White-Jacket; or, The World on a Man-of-War*

Following the poor sales of *Mardi*, Melville wrote *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849) and *White-Jacket; or, The World on a Man-of-War* (1850) in quick succession, which, to his father-in-law Evert Duyckinck, he called them, “two *jobs*, which I have done for money—being forced to it” (*Biography V.1* 650). Like his earlier work, the novel “blends sea adventure with social commentary” (Rollyson 250). In the early chapter, “A Man-of-War Hermit in a Mob,” the eponymous narrator of *White-Jacket*

Taji, having never found Yillah, being pursued by immanent death in the form of the murderers of Jarl and Samoa, the three sons of priest Aleema, “And thus, pursuers and pursued flew on, over an endless sea” (654). The search for truth, and the need for new practices, continues despite the possibility of the skeptic’s goal of *ataraxia*: peace or tranquility, and the happiness that supposedly follows. Taji will not accept appearances as such, and thus cannot achieve the equipollence between appearances. This prevents him from suspension of judgment that leads to tranquility.

introduces a pair of sailors, Nord and Williams, whom along with the heroic Jack Chase and the comically dramatic poet Lemsford, make up narrator's coterie of friends. The chapter follows the character sketch of Lemsford and the chapter: "The Good or Bad Temper of Men-of-War's Men, in a Great Degree Attributable to Their Particular Stations and Duties Aboard the Ship," in which White-Jacket attempts an ethnology, which includes "taciturn" authors, "taken as a race" (46). For example, White-Jacket's post as main-top-man enables "such a free, broad, off-hand, bird's eye, and, more than all, impartial account of our man-of-war world...meeting out to all...their precise descriptions and deserts" (47).¹⁹ But with the chapter "Man-of-war Hermit," White-Jacket notes, "For I had not been long on board on ere I found that it would not do to be intimate with every body" (50). As in *Mardi's* meeting place,

¹⁹ In a semi-autobiographical moment, Melville writes how a "thunder will sour the best nut-brown ever brewed," in his recommendation that "all people should be very careful in selecting their callings and vocations; very careful in seeing to it, that they surrounded themselves by good-humored, pleasant-looking objects; and agreeable, tempered-soothing sounds" and "It would be advisable for any man, who from an unlucky choice of a profession, which it is too late to change for another, should find this temper souring, to endeavor to counteract that misfortune, by filling his private chamber with amiable, pleasurable sights and sounds" (46). The narrator regrettably jokes that one of these "chamber furniture"—along with books, beer steins, and Aeolian harps—would be a "lovely wife." But, here, Melville is satirizing Irving's genial and henpecked bachelors. This passage will anticipate Ishmael's ecstatic, and utopic-minded groping in *Moby-Dick's* "A Squeeze of the Hand": "For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" (416). Parker notes that Melville came to believe these were "incompatible with the highest life of the intellect and the imagination" (*Clarel* 642). Likewise, Walter E. Bezanson has argued the "the profusion of compound words built on 'self'" in Melville's *Clarel*: "If abdication from family, community, country, and creed has set most of the pilgrims loose from the institutions which ordinarily give men definable social roles, what is left? Personality, character, self, soul—these suggest the remnant. The preferred term of the poem is 'self,' and the profusion of compound words built on 'self' defines one of the energy centers of the poem" (*Clarel* 579). One current that has run throughout this paper is that Melville's use of the Montaigne suggests a continual process of self-making: "For Montaigne, his *Essais* were less a literary form created by a self-conscious artist than 'attempts' (the original meaning of the word) at 'trying himself' in writing against a great number of challenges, with the practical goal of living more wisely" (Chadbourne 295).

conversation and discourse link within the realm of friendship. The presence of something romantic, if not physically erotic, implied by this “indiscriminate” intimate consortion of bodies and “all hands” is not lost upon the reader. This relationship takes on a literary valence in the context of the chapter’s opening line: “The allusion to the poet...leads me to speak of our mutual friends.” The allusive quality of reference link together in a network of exchange bodies and literature. The knowing of names, voices, and beings becomes a transformative experience. And yet, juxtaposed to this is the silence of “scores of men who to the last remained perfect strangers.” As Said suggests, “the growth of knowledge is a selective process,” and for all the voices within Taji, there are still many more silenced. If White-Jacket converses through his allusions with his literary friends, he simultaneously recognizes that other voices must be muted. Heteroglossia leads to “sundry annoyances and scrapes,” and a “crowding of the gang-way” (50). The reading process becomes an intimate conversation between friends, and perhaps lovers, and naturally much more selective. The notion of reading as a vessel carries over from *Mardi*, but its juxtaposition with the stable ground is new and suggests the unknown, and not tragedy, inspires White-Jacket’s search.

The “Hermit” of the chapter refers to the sailor Nord.²⁰ However, onboard the *Neversink*, Nord is “remarkable,” “romantic,” and “mysterious,” and anticipates

²⁰ Melville bases Nord in part upon an actual sailor-friend Oliver Russ, who shipped with the author on the *USS United States* in 1843. Rollyson et al. notes that Russ “for mysterious reasons, enlisted as ‘Edward Norton,’” and thought highly enough of Melville’s conversation to name his first child Herman Melville Russ (254). Dillingham points out, that Williams may have been based on “an actual

Moby-Dick's Bulkington (51). White-Jacket "had often marked his tall, spare, upright figure stalking like Don Quixote among the pigmies of the After-guard," or a Coleridge among the troops, implying within the author's persona both nobility and pretense (51). Nord is an object of repeated contemplation: a text to be read.

At first I found him exceedingly reserved and taciturn; his saturnine brow wore a scowl; he was almost repelling in his demeanor. In a word, he seemed desirous of hinting, that his list of man-of-war friends was already made up, complete, and full; and there was no room for more. I had too much magnanimity, by going off in a pique at his coldness, to let him lose forever the chance of making so capital an acquaintance as myself. (51)

The jocose high-valuation of White-Jacket's own company aside, White-Jacket describes a process of reading the author being. The difficulty he perceives in "demeanor," being "reserved" and "taciturn," both otherworldly and gloomy in its scowling brow, is the imposing quality of a difficult text. Moreover, the description recalls Taji's shipmate companion, the "lockjawed," Viking-king Jarl, though illiterate, his soul was "more inscrutable than the subtle workings of Spinoza's (*Mardi* 13). This passage allegorizes the misanthropic quality of a text that, though written, appears as though wishing not to be read. The list of "friends," other authors, is "made up, complete, and full." As a text, the man only *hints* at meaning. White-

friend of Melville's on board the *United States*, Griffith Williams...He, too, had been a 'peddler' in his brother's store, and for a while he was a teacher" (59n2).

Jacket gives himself to the reading as much as the reading gives him. The passage continues,

Besides, I saw that in his eye, that the man had been a reader of good books; I would have staked my life on it, *that he seized the right meaning of Montaigne*. I saw that he was an earnest thinker; I more than suspected that he had been bolted in the mill of adversity. For all these things, my heart yearned toward him; I determined to know him. (emphasis added, 51)

What connects White-Jacket to Nord is the act of reading “good books.” He was an “earnest thinker.” He had faced adversity. Reading as an intimate merging of subjectivities carries over from *Mardi*: “We scoured all the prairies of reading; dived into the bosoms of authors, and tore out their hearts; and that night White-Jacket learned more than he has done in any single night since.” That he should engage Nord while walking is not insignificant, connecting it to the same ambulatory tradition of the essay, as Thoreau would in “Walking” (1863).²¹ The textual field becomes a figural field, a “prairie” to walk. The same disembodiment of reading in *Mardi* repeats; however, there is also violence in the pursuit of knowledge—the heart, the true, the “right meaning” must be torn out. White-Jacket seems positive such things exist within a text, and may be found through reading, but true knowledge is never explicitly stated, only hinted at. White-Jacket writes, “The man was a marvel. He amazed me,” what captivates the sailor is “how he managed to preserve his dignity, as

²¹ In “Of Vanity,” Montaigne writes, “‘But, at such an age, you will never return from so long a journey.’ What care I for that? I neither undertake it to return, nor to finish it my business is only to keep myself in motion, whilst motion pleases me; I only walk for the walk’s sake” (III:9 451). Walking, like the essay, is undertaken for its own benefit.

he did, among such a rabble rout.” That is, among the lesser authors of the marketplace. Melville, concerned about his own dignity, would write, “So far as I am individually concerned, and independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to fail,” *White-Jacket* was not “the kind of book [he] would wish to [write]” (*Correspondence* 138). Melville would have read a brief biography in his copy of the *Essays*, and may be considering in this analogy between Nord and Montaigne how the latter (recalling the question of temperament and the right profession) “faithfully discharged whatever special duties devolved upon him” and never “[ran] the risk of the scourge” (51). *White-Jacket* adds to this dutiful attention that Nord, like Montaigne, also affected some “incommunicable grief,” which “made Nord such a wandering recluse.” *White-Jacket* believes that in order to avoid flogging Nord had to “turn a manhater, and socially expatriate himself from many things, which might have rendered his situation more tolerable.” That is, to “isolate and entomb” himself. This suggests the popular myth of Montaigne isolating himself within his tower, “overtaken by what he most dreaded” (*White-Jacket* 52).²² We may speculate, that the essayist, when he famously wrote, “That To Study Philosophy Is To Learn To Die,” was perhaps considering his own near death experience, witnessing the painful death of his friend Étienne de La Boétie, or considering the plague and religious wars that raged around him. Here, notably, it is

²² Montaigne was hardly the hermit a reading of the essays might suggest. However, the way he characterizes himself as removed from society, one might understand Melville’s comparison. In “Of Three Commerces,” Montaigne writes, “let who will speak his thoughts, I sit mute, meditating and shut up in my closet, without any offence to my guests,” and “‘Tis in the third story of a tower, of which the ground-room is my chapel, the second story an apartment with a withdrawing-room and closet, where I often lie, to be more retired” (III.3 380, 382).

not tragedy that turns the reader toward books, but fear of life's punishment and torture, a fear that sends readers into the libraries of the world. A subdued, intimate friendship of reading forms, but only out of a hopeless necessity.

The intimate "intercourse" with Nord reveals no "tales" of reckless and "youthful indiscretions." He keeps his own past locked up "like the specie vault of the Bank of England." So much so that none of the other sailors "could be sure that he had ever existed till now." But juxtaposed to Nord is the sailor Williams, given only a paragraph: "a thorough-going Yankee from Maine, who had been both a peddler and a pedagogue in his day," with "all manner of stories to tell about nice little country frolics, and would run over an endless list of his sweet-hearts. He was honest, acute, witty, full of mirth, and good humor—a laughing philosopher. He was invaluable as a pill against the spleen" (52). Whereas Nord has a short list of friends, Williams has sexual conquests. White-Jacket, in his magnanimity, introduces Williams to Nord, for the former's salubrious effect, but in the terse concluding sentences of the chapter the latter "cut [Williams] dead." Dillingham interprets this scene as figuring Melville's own maturation from boy to man, and a separation of the individual from tradition and familial ties (59-61). The "earnest" "right meaning" of Nord's Montaigne is then "depth where Williams has wit, dignity instead of boyishness, seriousness in place of mirth, a certain hardness instead of youthful bounce, and a mysterious independence as opposed to William's ties with his past...in short, all that White-Jacket came to admire and respect" (Dillingham 59). However, the maturation is perhaps less biographical than intellectual. The violence implied by the idiom, the abrupt cutting

off of speech or scornful disregarded of Williams' tales, serves to silence a type of literature, a mode of reading, and a mode of being. If Montaigne, in his function, serves to connect the narrator to the indeterminacy of essayism, the "right meaning" is a list toward the Heraclitean Nord away from the "laughing philosopher," the Democritean Williams; or, as characterized in Melville's literary essay, "Hawthorne and his Mosses," the "mystical blackness" of Hawthorne over the levity of the "American Goldsmith" Washington Irving. As a mature relationship—whether a platonic friendship or sexual—reading resolves a doubt, and the fear that emerges from such uncertainty.

Both Nord and Williams each appear once more in the novel, which makes their presence all the more curious. They are representative men, but only two of many. The latter as a skill for White-Jacket attempt to auction off his white jacket shroud; the former, in the penultimate chapter, as the sailors exit the ship back to their homeport, to the stability of land, as "the magnifico in disguise, refusing all companionship, stalk[ing] off into the woods, like the ghost of an old Calif of Bagdad" (395). This is likely a reference to the Abbasid Caliph Harun Al-Rashid's practice of inspecting the city at night in disguise.²³ The departure of the author-figure Nord resembles Taji's. Instead of paddling off into the greater ocean beyond the Mardi atoll, Nord stalks off into the unknown woods. The subsequent chapter returns to the thin narrative that runs through *White-Jacket*. The novel ends somber, but less

²³ Melville likely read either Jonathon Scott translation of *The Arabian Nights* (1811) or Edward Forster (1812) (Finkelstein 26-27). See also Jalal Kahn's "*The Arabian Nights: An Oriental Resource for Herman Melville.*"

foreboding than the conclusion to *Mardi*: “far out of sight of land, for ages and ages we continue to sail with sealed orders, and our last destination remains a secret to ourselves...yet our final haven was predestined ere we shipped from the stocks of Creation” (398). If there “are no mysteries out of [besides] ourselves,” then “we blindly inflict upon ourselves,” and “From the last ills no being can save another; therein each man must be his own saviour” (398-400). This is the “right meaning” of Montaigne. In reading others, we read ourselves. This is the process by which humanity achieves salvation.

In the chapter “A Man-of-War Library,” White-Jacket asserts reading was one of his “principle antidotes against *ennui*”; however, the library was filled with “numerous invaluable but unreadable tomes,” except for a “few choice old authors” like “St. Shakespeare” (168). He opines, “imposing” public libraries “doubtless contain invaluable volumes, yet, somehow, the books that prove most agreeable, grateful, and companionable, are those we pick up by chance here and there... those which pretend to little, but abound in much” (168). Though such a characterization seems apt, it is left to wonder if Melville was thinking of the *Essays* in this line, but he would engage the library again, “long Vaticans and street-stalls,” and “whatever random allusions” in *Moby-Dick*’s “Extracts” (xvii).

Reading as Whale Dialectic in *Moby-Dick*; or *The Whale*

Following *White-Jacket*, Melville’s next book would be *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* (1851). Although the novel is familiar to many now, it would not gain in popularity until the 1920s. Prior to that Melville was known primarily for his first

novel *Typee*, and being the “man who lived among the cannibals” (*Prose Pieces* 510). Montaigne’s name passes without much notice. It appears in the “Extracts: Supplied by a Sub-Sub Librarian” along with the paratextual “Etymology” that precede the main novel. But the Montaignian extract seems to carry particular significance for Melville. Two details draw the readers’ attention to this specific extract. First, Montaigne’s name is the only name typed in majuscules, and distinguished with an em-dash. Second, the image of the pilot-fish or “sea-gudgeon” is a recurring *topos* throughout Melville’s writing.²⁴

As in both *Mardi* and *White-Jacket*, the “Extracts” represent a citation practice, a collective wisdom. But as the narrator warns the reader must not “take the higgledy-piggledy whale statements in these extracts, however authentic, for veritable gospel cetology.” They are “solely valuable or entertaining, as affording a glancing bird’s eye view of what has been promiscuously said, thought, fancied, and sung of Leviathan, by many nations and generations, including my own” (xvii). The narrator warns against reading too much in the extracts. The Montaigne quote reads:

And whereas all the other things, whether beast or vessel, that enter into the dreadful gulf of this monster’s (whale’s) mouth, are immediately lost and swallowed up, the sea-gudgeon retires into it in great security, and there sleeps. MONTAIGNE—Apology for Raimond Sebond. (*Moby-Dick* xix)²⁵

²⁴ See the chapter “My Lord Shark and His Pages” in *Mardi*, the short story “Benito Cereno” (1855), and the poem “The Maldive Shark” (1888).

²⁵ Stevens notes that Melville made the several modifications to the text. First, he inserted “(whale)” into the extract. Montaigne mentions the whale earlier. Melville’s use of shark elsewhere is his own invention. Second, he replaced the more general designator “little fish” with sea-gudgeon, a pilot fish.

The extract derives originally from Plutarch, but Melville modifies the actual quotation found in Montaigne. As Leroux points out, “the head and tail of Plutarch’s relation are clipped...to omit any reference to the pilot-fish or hegemon (Greek for ‘captain or leader’)” (Leroux 53). The true subject of the quote is the pilot-fish, not the monstrosity and dreadfulness of the whale’s mouth. In Plutarch and Montaigne, the example is meant to signify a “natural order” (Leroux 54). Indeed, in Montaigne’s “Apology,” the anecdote illustrates the intelligence, reason, and magnanimity with which animals cooperate; the “particular offices that we receive from one another for the service of life” (II.12 219). The conflation between whale and monstrosity reoccurs throughout the novel; however, in resisting the narrative voice of the “Extracts,” in which Ishmael is always hinting, unstable, unreliable, we read more closely to find that the example suggests a possible harmony with the whale, in all its significations, prior to the crew zealously devoting themselves to Ahab’s self-destructive, monomaniacal mission.²⁶ But are readers the pilot-fish or the whale? I suggest the former.

In Montaigne, the quote stipulates that the whale is lost without the pilot fish: “if by accident he loses the sight of his little guide, he goes wandering here and there, and strikes his sides against the rocks like a ship that has lost her helm” (II.12 219).

Third, he used the spelling of “Raimond Sebond,” rather than “Raymond,” consistent with the Hazlitt edition (Stevens 131).

²⁶ In the chapter “The Grand Armada,” for example, “Like household dogs they came snuffling round us, right up to our gunwales, and touching them; till it almost seemed that some spell had suddenly domesticated them. Queequeg patted their foreheads; Starbuck scratched their backs with his lance; but fearful of the consequences, for the time refrained from darting it” (*Moby-Dick* 387). But the amity of the scene never quite escapes the potential for slaughter.

The pilot fish pursues dangerous questions, just as Ahab searches for true knowledge: “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate.” Ahab must know whether “the white whale [be] agent, or be the white whale principal,” whether motivated by “inscrutable malice” or “blindest instinct” (164). The reader in approaching the whale must be careful to not be consumed by their inquisitive search for meaning: he or she must only essay. The reader is no longer the vessel, but the gudgeon that feeds off bits and pieces: fragments of knowledge.²⁷ Like Montaigne, Ishmael writes and thinks through in margins of other texts. On the other hand, the pilot-fish guides the text itself. Textual interpretation requires a prior intention towards what will be read. And without the reader, without the being to ask the questions, the interpretation is meaningless and abstract. However, unlike the previous two examples, this allegory foregrounds the reader’s own agency within the reading process. The reader neither passively observes, nor is carried away by a symphony of authors, nor is the reader a conquering hero, nor engaged in an intimate friendship; rather there exists a symbiotic relationship. As an allegory for reading, the reader adopts an intention, or a theory, which helps navigate the reader through the text. Without this intention, interpretation is “like a ship that has lost her helm.” The text provides the possibility of stable meaning, of the retiring beyond the “dreadful gulf” into a “great security.” The symbiotic relationship of the pilot-fish and whale is like a circular dialectic.

²⁷ In “Of Three Commerces,” Montaigne writes, “I turn over now one book, and then another, of various subjects, without method or design” (III.3 382). Or, as Donald Frame translates, “I leaf through now one book, now another, without order and without plan, by disconnected fragments.” This is not entirely true. Montaigne read works closely, if he deemed them worth the effort (Bakewell 69).

Interpretation moves back and forth between intention (theory) and text: an oceanic hermeneutic circle. Moreover, the reader must continue this interpretive process.

Scholarship most often cites Montaigne's "Apology for Raimond Sebond," and his "Of Cannibals." The "Apology" is Montaigne's longest, most self-consciously philosophical essay, to the extent that any of Montaigne's essays contain an argument. Montaigne and Melville scholarship tend to discuss the essay most commonly in relation to the authors' skepticism, faith, and critique of reason. Space does not afford an extended discussion of these themes in either Montaigne or Melville (though existing studies are numerous), but because the "Apology" has been cited as both the source of Melville's atheism and his faith, I will offer a third alternative that to my knowledge has been absent. Melville scholarship tends to focus on Montaigne's longer critique of Western civilization's faith in reason in the second section of the essay rather than the much shorter critique of reason in faith in the first section. However, as Montaignian scholar Anne Hartle argues, both must be weighed equally:

If we see the two objections in their relation to each other and follow the movement of Montaigne's thought as he works his way through the objections and their shared understandings of reason and faith, we find that he is in fact defending a transformed version of Sebond's assumption. Montaigne calls this essay an apology for Sebond because he *does* affirm the harmony of faith and reason—but not faith as defined in the first objection and not reason as assumed in the second objection. Faith as defined in the first objection is

incomplete, imperfect, and even presumptuous: it is unexamined belief and it must be completed and in some way transformed in its dialectic with faith.

The autonomous reason of the second objection is proud and presumptuous: it must be reformed in its [circular] dialectic with faith.

...

He ends up in a kind of middle position that transcends both simple credulity and learned presumption, and that, in philosophical terms, would be called “learned ignorance.” (emphasis original, 144-145)

“Learned ignorance” is the doubt that persists, especially humanity’s knowledge of divine works, despite the accumulation of knowledge.²⁸ Despite the reader’s whole dialectic of interpretation between intention and text, this relationship can never remain stable. In “Of Vain Subtleties, Montaigne asserts,” “an Abecedarian ignorance...precedes knowledge, and a doctoral [learned] ignorance...comes after it; an ignorance which knowledge creates and begets, as she dispatches and destroys the first” (I.54 145). A “learned ignorance” never provides a final interpretation. We remain in ignorance, and thus require both reason and faith. All that is left, subsequently, is to submit to a divine will. In other words, while a *docta ignorantia* supplants a rudimentary knowledge, and creates “new” knowledge, this knowledge is never complete. Here, Montaigne draws on a philosophical tradition that includes

²⁸ Montaigne writes, “‘tis more by the mediation of our ignorance than of our knowledge that we know any thing of the divine wisdom” (II.12 230).

Socrates, St. Augustine, Nicolaus of Cusa, and influences Pascal.²⁹ Knowledge must constantly test itself, and remain humble and skeptical of its foundations.³⁰

Ultimately, this position undermines what may be learned through reading. Floyd Gray argues, the “Apology” is “fundamentally an attack on the ‘nouveaux docteurs’ whose intellectual presumption had spawned destructive doubt, and Montaigne wrote against this opinion, advocating instead a kind of learned ignorance” (31). Gray continues,

His father’s generation had held in great reverence the “hommes doctes,” but their “science” already contained the seeds of dissension which were to proliferate during Montaigne’s own generation. Whereas they had considered knowledge a virtue, Montaigne had lived to see it become a vice...In its stead he proposes an ignorance which would deprive knowledge of its destructive force, and permit a return to civil and religious obedience. (31-32)³¹

It remains to be shown with Melville’s Captain Vere that Gray might misread this “return to civil and religious obedience” in Montaigne, but the critique of dogmatic

²⁹ In “Apology,” Montaigne writes, “The wisest man that ever was being asked what he knew, made answer, ‘He knew this, that he knew nothing.’ By which he verified what has been said, that the greatest part of what we know is the least of what we do not; that is to say, that even what we think we know is but a piece, and a very little one, of our ignorance” (II.12 230). This flips the traditional understanding of knowledge on its head. For Socrates, the unknown takes precedence over the known. From this perspective, knowledge must be pursued, but pursued through a skeptical methodology that critiques what is *presumed to be known* and *yet to be known* rather than simply how best to catalog knowledge. Montaigne purchased Nicolaus’ *De Docta Ignorantia*, but the influence the text had on his writing is unclear (see Gray 34n15).

³⁰ In “Apology,” Montaigne writes, skepticism is to remain a “last fencing trick...never to be made use of but as an extreme remedy.” It is “a desperate thrust, wherein you are to quit your own arms to make your adversary abandon his; and a secret sleight, which must be very rarely, and then very reservedly, put in practice. ‘Tis great temerity to lose yourself that you may destroy another” (II.12 260).

³¹ Gray writes earlier that “...Montaigne adopted *Ignorantia* to counter their *Sapientia* for [which], by extension, his ‘Que sçay-je?’ implies not only what do I know, but what do *you* know” (emphasis original 31). The challenge is thrown back upon the reader.

knowledge is echoed and taken one step further in what Hartle calls Montaigne's circular dialectic. On the one hand, Hartle concludes, "Montaigne's circular dialectic reveals the strange in the familiar, the extraordinary in the ordinary... The world is restored through true faith to its astonishing strangeness" (148).³² In this sense, the "circular dialectic" (between strange and familiar, between struggle and failure, between faith and reason) is found in many chapters, in their constant, detailed digressions: of ropes, of whiteness, of gams, of pictures and descriptions of the body of the whale, and so on. Where Melville digresses from the main plot, Ishmael seeks out the strange in the familiar in order to make sense of his experience. On the other hand, this search for an origin appears as the traumatic recollection of surviving

³² Hartle's circular dialectic is fundamental to her understanding of Montaigne's "accidental philosophy." According to Hartle, Montaigne's accidental philosophy counters deliberate philosophy, which teaches, rules, and "conforms thought and action to a rational principle" (33). Conversely, "nonauthoritative" accidental philosophy "simply sees the truth that was there all along, before philosophy came on the scene," leaving everything "just as it is" (34). Thus, "Truth...resists the pull toward [philosophical] system building and thus remains open to the whole (34). Accidental philosophy is "mode of thought that discovers the truth that was already there in prephilosophical," that is, the prereflective "everywhere and common." It is "completely and radically human," but provides nothing new since the knowledge was already known beforehand (34, 36). It remains open. According to Hartle, the circular dialectic manifests itself "in the kind of struggle and failure that is involved in the ascent to knowledge."

Thought comes back to its starting point after having gone through a dialectic of trial and failure. It is surprised to find that when it fails, it actually sees the truth it was seeking all along, without knowing that that was what it was seeking, that is, the truth that was always there. (Hartle 35)

Montaigne realizes that contradiction exists within truth, and is fine with it. The circular dialectic resolves these contradictions by going beyond the "appearance of the first sense" to a second sense, which cannot be known in advance except through a genuine process of discovery i.e. the essay form (35-36). The "struggle with error," is to Hartle, "the most fundamental meaning of the title" *Essays* are a trial and a test, but also and a temptation: "his way of living with the inescapable human condition of temptation, especially the temptations of the intellect"; he "struggles with and resists the philosophical desire for the divinity of the mind" (36). Accidental philosophy "implies a radically contingent (i.e., created) world" for being, and is the *telos* of accidental philosophy, as opposed to the divine *stasis* of deliberate philosophy or the *ataraxia* of skepticism (38). As a "dialectic of self-knowledge," accidental philosophy "ends in wonder" (38). And for Hartle, the "essay is the perfect form of...[the] circular dialectic," which "arrives at the truth that was already there" (38).

Moby Dick that can never be recovered. Despite his obsessive studies, Ishmael recognizes the discrepancy between what his knowledge and his experience remains. He doubts his own knowledge. But instead of becoming dogmatic like Ahab in regards to what he does know, he learns he knows nothing, and must constantly assay it. The circular dialectic is a recollection that returns to one's original doubt, albeit expanded and more robust. An essay into a knowledge becomes an essay into self-knowledge. This recollected self-knowledge provides an emergent, discursive mode of being. In other words, while testing out knowledge, Ishmael tests himself. Like Taji, Ishmael must remake his world, and only a continual essayism allows him to avoid madness and dogmatism. The whale dialectic reminds the reader to constantly navigate his interpretation between intention and text, but with a "learned ignorance," he can only be "the architect, not the builder" of epistemologies. Ishmael realizes that his book-and-folio cetological system is necessarily unfinished and may contain mere "sounds, full of Leviathanism, but signifying nothing" (145). He writes, "any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty" (136). Indeed, the whole book is "but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught," which De Obaldia understands as the link between the essay and novel (145). A skeptical doubt must always persist, and the reader must intentionally, as the pilot-fish, seek out more secure interpretations. For Ishmael, this looks like finding the universal in the particular, the meaning in the "mystic hieroglyphics." Ishmael, reading his own fragmented self finds within himself a "learned ignorance." If the whale dialectic, as an allegory of reading, works through a cooperative, symbiotic circular dialectic—

that is, if the pilot-fish reader's intention to interpret whale texts rests on balancing faith and reason, trial and error, and remaining skeptical and rejecting dogmatic knowledge—the difficult struggle in which the reader attempts to make sense of what is already known through further study reveals in the end only that they knew the answer all along. This is the essence of Montaigne's "accidental philosophy."³³ What is required, after all Ishmael's searching, is the very essayism he began with. His own discursive mode of being is justified through its own pursuit of validation. In a shift from the previous two instances, *Moby-Dick* suspends the possibility of knowledge through reading. Knowledge is neither possible nor impossible. The question becomes less about knowledge, but how being pursues knowledge. Or knowledge itself is supplanted by the more malleable essayistic understanding, which is also a self-understanding. In other words, epistemology gives way to ontology.

Moby-Dick's "strategy of exhaustion" is actually a learning process, learning not be bored by the prosaic or deterred by the foreign ("Melville Essays the Romance" 305). This interpretation is still skeptical of itself. It is wary of reading a "veritable gospel cetology," of too strongly suggesting Melville's own reading of Montaigne. However, Hartle's commentary on Montaigne sheds some light on how the the Montaigne extract guides readers to an essaying of being; our interpretation

³³ In "Apology," Montaigne writes, "My manners are natural, I have not called in the assistance of any discipline to erect them but, weak as they are, when it came into my head to lay them open to the world's view, and that to expose them to the light in a little more decent garb I went to adorn them with reasons and examples, it was a wonder to myself accidentally to find them conformable to so many philosophical discourses and examples. I never knew what regimen my life was of till it was near worn out and spent: a new figure—an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher" (II:12 254). Or, as the Mardi philosopher Babbalanja states, "May you not possibly mistake my lord? For I do not so much quote Bardianna, as Bardianna quoted me..." (397).

rests itself in circular dialectic, a “middle position,” requiring both faith and reason, where we might read the particulars of the texts toward a universal interpretation that never quite fully convinces, even ourselves. However, in understanding ourselves as readers outside the text engaged in the process of reading we might adopt an “accidental philosophy.” We reject a learned dogmatism, and wait for the emergent. We must not too combative or too casual in our approach to the text. The alternative is the *Pegoud*’s fate, consumed by “the yet yawning gulf” (572). Perhaps it is only Ishmael’s skepticism, “turn idolater,” and his marriage to Queequeg that saves him. That is, wed to a different narrative carved in “all manner of grotesque figures and drawings...[by] a departed prophet and seer [who]...by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on [Queequeg’s] body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth” (480). Like Jarl, Queequeg’s “person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last” (480). Ishmael too will adopt this approach, “[his] body to remain a blank page for a poem [he] was then composing” (451). Similarly, in the absence of true knowledge, Bryant argues, “our only human recourse is not in *questing*, as though objective reality can be touched, but in *questioning* it, talking toward it, ‘essaying’ its reality. Herein lies the difference between the futile quester Ahab and the resolvent questioner Ishmael” (*Melville and Repose* 19). Ishmael learns “knowledge is utterly experimental;

knowing exists solely in essaying, the trying out of self and idea. It is forever contingent, hence marginal and picturesque; always unpredictable, hence comic” (*Melville and Repose* 186). If Ishmael finds a way to adopt a whale dialectic through reading inscrutable pagan texts, the narrator of Melville’s next novel will follow Ahab in his reading, to disastrous consequence.

Reading as Rejection: *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*

In *Pierre: Or, The Ambiguities* (1852), after the appearance of his sister Isabel, the revelation of his father’s infidelity, and an argument with his beloved mother, the eponymous narrator “plunge[s] deep” into the surrounding woods, where he comes upon a immense boulder, “huge as a barn,” balancing upon another rock (131).³⁴ This plunging will recall Melville’s repeated metaphor for strenuous philosophical engagement: “I love all men who dive.” Pierre (French for stone) in a self-reflexive gesture christens it the Memnon Stone, after the Ethiopian King killed by Achilles at Troy, and immortalized in the Egyptian “Colossi of Memnon.”

Underneath this the rock is a cavity in which “no mortal being had ever been known to have the intrepid heart to crawl there.” According to Pierre, “cottagers” had no reason to venture so deep into the woods to find the stone; “Few could be bribed to climb its giddy height, and crawl out upon its more hovering end.” The rock, too, is “like Captain Kidd’s sunken hull.” This juxtaposition of the cottagers and the divers

³⁴ The Balance Rock of Pittsfield, MA serves as a likely model for the Memnon Stone.

suggests once again the recurrent theme of striving for knowledge.³⁵ Though many are content with what is close to hand, Melville's narrators constantly search out knowledge: further and "deeper" truths. The image, however, is more precise. The cottagers, "in their hood-winked unappreciativeness, would not have accounted it any marvelous sight": "This wondrous Memnon Stone could be no Memnon Stone to them; nothing but a huge stumbling-block deeply to be regretted as a vast prospective obstacle in the way of running a handy little cross-road through the wild part of the Manor."³⁶ Thus, Pierre distinguishes not just between those who roam and those who stay home, but also the necessity for an *openness* to interpretation: a readerly essayism. "Cottagers" cannot read what is right in front of them. This is an inversion

³⁵ Questions of the will and striving dominant much of Melville's work, whether the clenched-fish of Ahab and Pierre or the open receptivity of Taji, White-Jacket, and Ishmael. In an 1849 letter to Duyckinck, Melville writes, "Would that a man could do something & then say—It is finished.—not that one thing only, but all others—that he has reached his uttermost, & can never exceed it. But live & push—tho' we put one leg forward ten miles—its no reason the other leg must lag behind—no, *that* must again distance the other—and so we go till we get the cramp & die" (*Correspondence* 128). Similarly, in 1856, Hawthorne recalls in his journal, "Herman Melville came to see me at the Consulate, looking much as he used to do (a little paler, and perhaps a little sadder), in a rough outside coat, and with his characteristic gravity and reserve of manner.... [W]e soon found ourselves on pretty much our former terms of sociability and confidence. Melville has not been well, of late;...and no doubt has suffered from too constant literary occupation, pursued without much success, latterly; and his writings, for a long while past, have indicated a morbid state of mind...Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated"; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us" (*Journals* 628-29). By now Melville's ceaseless striving had begun to take its toll. The "annihilation" refers to the Christian belief that the soul is mortal, and "annihilated" upon death.

³⁶ This same image of "obstacle" repeats in "I and my Chimney" in order to symbolizes a superficial contentment with ease and convenience in the activity of reading.

of the whale dialectic. Instead of developing an awareness of intention, the cottagers are the whale that blindly follows.

However, while Pierre condescends to the cottagers, and is proud to say he first reported on the stone, he nevertheless finds in the initials “S. y^e [the] W.” As a metaphor for the act of reading, this recognition suggests to the young author Pierre that the same thematic ground has been covered before: “long and long ago, in quite another age, the stone had been beheld, and its wonderfulness fully appreciated” (133). This understanding repeats the same visions of Melville’s narrators, who place themselves, perhaps too sentimentally, within a historic tradition of great authors rather than among contemporaries. A “white-haired old gentleman,” interprets these initials as “Solomon the Wise,” which Pierre ignores. The gentleman is himself an allegorical reader of “particulars,” “critical impendings,” and “prolonged cogitation.” He finds “great solace in the Old Testament,” especially “certain verses in Ecclesiastes.” The conclusion of the Ecclesiastes’ author comes to mind, “Meaningless! Meaningless! All is meaningless!”³⁷ This warning, like Hautia and her maidens, and Starbuck’s pleas, unsuccessfully attempts to dissuade Melville’s narrator from his futile search.

Rejecting the process of interpretation for the truth of interpretation is not merely Pierre’s condescension, but his tragic flaw. Pierre cannot reconcile the old man’s view with his own. Pierre morbidly wishes the rock for a headstone, but at the

³⁷ Melville writes, “The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon’s, and *Ecclesiastes* is the fine hammered steel of woe. ‘All is vanity.’ This wilful world hath not got hold of unchristian Solomon’s wisdom yet” (*Moby-Dick* 328).

same time notices lurking in the rock “some mournful and lamenting plaint, as for some sweet boy long since departed in the antediluvian time.” This is the fate of innocent Memnon, the mode of being of Williams, but also foreshadows Pierre’s own brief life. The rock is in fact a “Terror Stone.” Like Ahab’s White Whale, with its “inscrutable malice” and “unspeakable terrors,” the rock has a “ponderous inscrutableness.” Ahab and Pierre wish to resolve “infinite perspectives” (*Moby-Dick* 247) and the “endless significancies” of “endless halls of hell and night” (*Pierre* 294, 178), lest the ambiguity leave them “weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing” (*Moby-Dick* 24). The younger Pierre had the courage to climb the “forehead-like summit” of the stone, but not to crawl into the ground beneath.³⁸ But after the traumatic revelations, Pierre “slid himself straight into the horrible interspace, and lay there as dead.” This uterine space serves as his grave. “He spoke not, for speechless thoughts were in him.” He soliloquizes:

if Life be cheating dream, and Virtue as unmeaning and unsequed with any blessing as the midnight mirth of wine; if by sacrificing myself for Duty’s sake, my own mother re-sacrifices me; if Duty’s self be but a bugbear, and all things are allowable and unpunishable to man;—then do thou, Mute Massiveness, fall on me! Ages thou hast waited; and if these things be thus, then wait no more; for whom better canst thou crush than him who now lies here invoking thee? (134)

³⁸ Montaigne uses similar metaphors of mountain climbing, diving, and caves for the search for truth and the possibility of true knowledge. The forehead receives extended treatment by Ishmael. It is “nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles; dumbly lowering with the doom of boats, and ships, and men” (346). Full of “pyramidal silence,” “read it if you can” (347).

In this challenge to the principles of Victorian morality: truth, virtue, duty, fate, and God, Pierre emerges “haughtily upon his feet, as he owed thanks to none, and went his moody way” (135). Pierre, contemplating his “imaginative ruminating moods of early youth” and his desire for a monolith headstone, and “innumerable fanciful notions, tinged with dreamy painless melancholy, which are frequently suggested to the mind of a poetic boy,” believes these earlier thoughts “seemed now prophetic to him, and allegorically verified by the subsequent events.” Here, Pierre employs his own accidental philosophy. Though the “immense significance” and “unconscious movements of his then youthful heart” remain unstated, and thus the reader is left to interpret the ambiguity, Pierre the author narrativizes his life, sees a prophetic unfolding of his fate. The passage hints at “other and subtler meanings which lie crouching behind the colossal haunches” of the “menacingly impending Terror Stone.”³⁹ Pierre extrapolates upon this reading of Memnon,

that dewey, royal boy, son of Aurora, and born King of Egypt, who, with enthusiastic rashness flinging himself on another’s account into a rightful quarrel, fought hand to hand with his overmatch, and met his boyish and most dolorous death beneath the walls of Troy. His wailing subjects built a monument in Egypt to commemorate his untimely fate...[which] every morning gave forth a mournful broken sound, as of a harpstring suddenly sundered, being too harshly wound. (135)

³⁹ Henry James will repeat this image of an animal of prey in his novella “Beast in the Jungle.”

This myth, the image of the statue, and the sundered harp string lead into Melville's Montaigne:

Herein lies an unsummed world of grief. For in this plaintive fable we find embodied the Hamletism of the antique world; the Hamletism of three thousand years ago: 'The flower of virtue cropped by a too rare mischance.' And the English Tragedy is but Egyptian Memnon, Montaignized and modernized; for being but a mortal man Shakespeare had his fathers too. (135)

Thus, Pierre provides his headstone's epitaph. This allusively dense passage draws its quotation from Francis Bacon's *Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609).⁴⁰ The parallel to Bacon's reading of the fable is obvious. It is "meant to apply to the unfortunate deaths of young men of high promise." Similarly, Melville underlines and annotates in his copy of *Hamlet*: "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so," writing in the margin, "Here is forcibly shown the great Montaigneism of Hamlet." However, his allusion to the Prince of Denmark works on several levels.

In the scene the three friends Hamlet, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern engage in playful philosophical debate (II.2). Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pretend they are just visiting their friend, King Claudius actually has sent for them. They eventually admit this to Hamlet, though the prince does not appear offended by the deception. In their conversation, Hamlet argues the world is a prison. To which Rosencrantz responds it is because Hamlet's ambition makes it so. But the prince

⁴⁰ Though Melville may have also become aware of the Colossi of Memnon through mentions and references in Thomas Carlyle's "Sign of the Times," Shelly's *Ozymandias*, or Tennyson's "The Palace of Art," in addition to classical sources such as Homer and Herodotus.

corrects him. It is actually his dreams (anxiety over his father's murder), and subsequent depression. "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so," emphasizes the way in which judgments construct reality. Reality itself is neutral until a subject, or reader, sets a question to be asked. The reader either achieves such a goal or confronts the limits of his or her own knowledge in which the formulation of the question must be revisited. The reader must confront the limits of knowledge in order to broaden their understanding. It is a return to the pilot-fish in the whale dialectic; the setting of intention spurring Montaigne's "accidental philosophy." Hamlet and Pierre strive toward knowledge, but unlike Montaigne, they are unable to resolve their understanding, and thus their being, through an examination of what is most familiar, themselves. Hamlet's further ironic suggestion that, "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals. And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" Hamlet points out the fallibility of reason itself despite humanity's lofty pretensions regarding its cognitive ability. We are *only* the "paragon of animals." Thus, Melville emphasizes Montaigne's own desire to undermine this arrogance and faith in reason. All belief stems from judgments without ground. Readers are easily misled, and even intention is not quite what it seems to be.⁴¹

⁴¹ From the "Apology," "It is very easy, upon approved foundations, to build whatever we please; for, according to the law and ordering of this beginning, the other parts of the structure are easily carried on without any failure...every science has its principle presupposed, by which human judgment is everywhere kept in check" (II:12 251).

In his influential *American Renaissance*, F.O. Matthiessen reads this allusion to Shakespeare and Montaigne as an “ironic commentary upon” the “thinking age”: it’s an “exaggeration of ignorance,” “reckless and unforeseeing impulsiveness” (467). He argues “the driven confusions of Pierre’s thought actually seem a better mirror of our eighteen-forties and fifties than would the skepticism which had drawn Shakespeare to Montaigne, and which had sicklied his Renaissance prince” (467). Matthiessen also points out the image of Enceladus in the Mount of Titans represents Pierre’s “unequal struggle against the gods” to “live a life of truth” (406).

However, I argue this passage is less a critique of reason as Matthiessen suggests, and more indicative of a turning of the critical analysis inward into the “modernized” human subject; that is, given the way in which a subject constructs reality through judgment and intention, then what? Pierre’s anxiety mirrors Hamlets over what responsibility he has to genetic influence or “fathers.”⁴² I find Arsić interpretation more persuasive here,

“Montaignized” means that he is doubled, caught in the “logic” of Montaigne’s essay. For the essay...is a practice of living disconnected from itself; a writing written by a thought that cannot solve itself. The writing of it serves as the trace of what it has been but is no longer. The essay functions as a mirror that preserves all the images that were ever reflected in it but only in order to reflect back the fact that the “now of the face” is not reflected. By

⁴² Melville writes, “The truth is that we are all sons, grandsons, or nephews or great-nephews of those who go before us. No one is his own sire” (*Correspondence* 121).

“preserving” the past the essay at the same time disconnects it from the present. Yet only such a present can serve as the terra firma upon which an action will be based. In this way, as Montaigne, suggests, the essay has the paradoxical structure of a nonreflecting mirror before which every face becomes the face of a ghost, invisible to itself. It reveals to the self the horrible truth of its facelessness. (Arsic 111-112)

Thus, a radical skepticism undermines or understanding even of what we believe is most familiar. We cannot even know if we return to ourselves. And thus, the optimistic possibility of the whole dialectic, an essayism, is darkened. Although the essayism provides a guide, it also becomes its own prison. There is no escaping it. Shulman argues similarly that a Montaignian skeptical paralysis “darkens and elaborates” *Pierre* (“Cotton’s Montaigne” 191). But as Memnon is not exactly a precise enough analogy, being the son of a god, “Montaignized” is a humanization of the story, emphasizing the turning inward of the reading process. Melville employs both the figurative weight of comparison through Montaigne’s own love of his father (“the best father that ever was,” II.12 199), as well as Hamlet’s turmoil over how to avenge his father. However, this reveals the boundaries of human experience and knowledge. The intentioned circular dialectic of the reading process is hollow. *Pierre* rejects Hartle’s conclusion that what is particular and familiar, the self, is familiar at all. An all-encompassing ambiguity and uncertainty rises. The anamnestic Montaigne allegorizes the reading process into which the reader also reads his or her own inner

turmoil. This same realization repeats in the later chapter, “Pierre Immaturely Attempts a Mature Work.”

Needing money and desiring to write, “what he thought to be new, or at least miserably neglected Truth to the world” (283). The “profound events” lead him to a “varied scope of reading,” the “most grand productions ever...built round a circle, as atolls,” protecting a lagoon, an image reminiscent of the Mardi atoll (283). However, the narrator notes, Pierre was ignorant that “cursory acquisition” of “all mere reading” is an obstacle, “not an accelerator” to producing “some thoughtful thing of absolute Truth” (283). The narrator intervenes, “He did not see...[that] the heavy unmalleable element of mere book-knowledge would not congenially weld with the wide fluidness and ethereal airiness or spontaneous creative thought” (283):

that there is no such thing as a standard for the creative spirit; that no one great book must ever be separately regarded, and permitted to domineer with its own uniqueness upon the creative mind; but that all existing great works must be federated in the fancy...as a miscellaneous and Pantheistic whole...[but] even when thus combined, all was but one small mite,⁴³ compared to the latent infiniteness and inexhaustibility in himself: that all the great books in the world are but the mutilated shadowings-forth of invisible

⁴³ In “Pierre, as a Juvenile Author, Reconsidered,” the narrator writes, “There is infinite nonsense in the world on all of these matters; hence blame me not if I contribute my mite. It is impossible to talk or to write without apparently throwing oneself helplessly open; the Invulnerable Knight wears his visor down. Still, it is pleasant to chat; for it passes the time ere we go to our beds; and speech is farther incited, when like strolling *improvisatores* of Italy, we are paid for our breath. And we are only too thankful when the gapes of the audience dismiss us with the few ducats we earn” (259). Thus, the novel is nevertheless a contribution. A mite, but a contribution.

and eternally unembodied images in the soul; so that they are but the mirrors, distortedly reflecting to us our own things; and never mind what the mirror may be, if we would see the object, we must look at the object itself, and not at its reflection.

...

[but] man shall not at once perceive its tremendous immensity... Only by judicious degrees, appointed of God, does man come at last to gain his Mont Blanc and take an overtopping view of these Alps; and even then, the tithe is not shown. (284)

Melville clearly invokes St Paul's "We see through a glass, darkly," but the subject, the self, as object is all Montaigne. This passage, autobiographical or not, signals a strong departure from the collection of authors endemic to the first three examples. In addition to no longer being able to study or understand the most familiar, to follow one's intention, the narrator also does not see any benefit in reading widely. In fact, he sees reading as doing harm to the individual "creative spirit." For instance, after Pierre's mother's death, the narrator writes, "no stoicism, no philosophy, that a mortal man can possibly evoke, which will stand the final test of a real impassioned onset of Life and Passion upon him" (289). The conservative narrator criticizes Pierre, whether the young man was conscious of it or not, for believing reading might lead to true knowledge. Rather, Pierre believed in "Beauty and Power," without seeing he was "but in one of the stages of the transition" toward the "ultimate element" (283). He cannot "master the pivot-idea" of the philosopher Plotinus Plinlimmon's essay on

virtue “Chronometricals and Horologicals.”⁴⁴ He strives to “unwrap this Egyptian King,” but “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). Pierre clings to books, especially Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Dante’s *Inferno*, until he tears them apart and tramples them, finally beginning “to see that after all he had been finely juggling with himself, and postponing with himself, and in meditative sentimentalities wasting the moments consecrated to instant action” (170).⁴⁵ Thus, it is neither in the self nor the text, that the reader finds ground for interpretation. There is only the silence of the Memnon Stone. The Memnon Statue is as enduring as the “nobly-striving but ever-shipwrecked character in some royal youths.” Although it “survives down to this present day,” of the once singing statue, “all is mute”: “Fit emblem that of old, poetry a consecration and an obsequy to all hapless modes of human life; but in a bantering, barren, and prosaic, heartless age, Aurora’s music-moan is lost among our drifting sands, which whelm alike the monument and the dirge” (136). The Montaigne

⁴⁴ Plinlimmon advocates a relative “terrestrial” (“horological”) virtue over an unattainable absolute “celestial” (“chronometrical” and Christian) virtue.

⁴⁵ In “Of Experience,” Montaigne says, “There is more ado to interpret interpretations than to interpret the things, and more books upon books than upon all other subjects; we do nothing but comment upon one another. Every where commentaries abound: of authors there is great scarcity” (III.13 495). Montaigne recommends, “let him, at least, know that he does know. ‘Tis for him to imbibe their knowledge, but to adopt their dogmas; and no matter if he forget where he had his learning, provided he know how to apply it to his own use; truth and reason are common to every one, and are no more his who spoke them first than his who spake them after...so the several fragments the pupil borrows from others he will transform and blend together to compile a work that shall be absolutely his own...He is not obliged to discover whence he had his materials but only to produce what he had done with them...The advantages of our study are to become better and wiser...A mere bookish learning is a poor stock to go upon: though it may serve for some kind of ornament there is yet no foundation for any superstructure to be built upon it...” (I:26 62).

allusion once again returns to the legacy of the author, and his function within the literary market place. Despite being a great work once, the sands of time (a somewhat cliché image for Melville) engulf it. In the Montaigne allusion, Pierre is simultaneously reflecting upon the transience of his own human existence, and the memory of both individuals and their work.⁴⁶ The effect of the anamnestic Montaigne allusion here is complex. Though Pierre may recall, and worries about being remembered (just as he struggles over the memory of his father), he realizes that memory itself will eventually fail. It is the very basis of anamnesis, the necessity of recollection, which foregrounds this concern.

The Montaigne passage ends with Pierre wandering the woods, striving to “condense [Isabel’s] mysterious haze into some definite and comprehensible shape.” Disturbed by her discordant narrative, the morning itself seems “indefinite and interminable” (136). Like Nord, he becomes misanthropic. He rejects the “common and general humanity.” Unable to “find one single agreeable twig of thought whereon to perch his weary soul,” he continues to debate within himself “the blackest self-insinuated suppositions,” “pursu[ing] them forth again into the wide Taratrean realm from which they had emerged” (138). Isabel’s narrative presents the problem of if “this world we live in is brimmed with wonders, and I and all mankind, beneath our garbs of common-placeness, conceal enigmas that the stars themselves, and perhaps the highest seraphim can not resolve?” (139). Amidst both “certainty and

⁴⁶ The passage reminds readers of *Mardi*’s “They Go Down into the Catacombs,” in which the philosopher Babbalanja despairs at the disintegrating quality of “Oh-Oh’s collection of ancient and curious manuscripts.” In requesting a fragment of the Mardian (Shakespeare) Bardianna’s “A Happy Life,” Oh-Oh responds ““Oh, rubbish! rubbish! take it for nothing”” (*Mardi* 386).

insolubleness,” he wonders how he could still “fail to acknowledge the existence of that all-controlling and all-permeating wonderfulness” of the Finger of God: “He holdeth all of us in the hollow of his hand?—a Hollow, truly!” Pierre relies on “his novel-lessons,” to make sense of the world:

but their false, inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystemizable elements; their audacious, intermeddling impotency, in trying to unravel, and spread out, and classify, the more thin than goassamer threads which make up the complex web of life; these things over Pierre had no power now. (141)

Their “helpless miserableness he pierced...like beetles all the speculative lies in them.” The “one sensational truth” is that “human life...partakes of the unravelable inscrutableness of God” (141). He rails against how

the countless tribes of common novels laboriously spin veils of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last; and while the countless tribe of common dramas do but repeat the same; yet the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all that can be humanly known of human life; these never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings; but in imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels (as mutilated stumps), hurry to abrupt intermergings with the eternal tides of time and fate. (141)

In rejection of the truth of narrative, he “determined to pry not at all into this sacred problem” (141). Pierre renounces “all thought of ever having Isabel’s dark-lantern illuminated to him” (141); Pierre sees, “mysteries interpierced with mysteries, and mysteries eluding mysteries...mere imaginariness of the so supposed solidest

principle of human association” (142). He comes to see Isabel “transfigured in the highest heaven of uncorrupted love” (142). Thus, Pierre rejects all previous ethics—of fate, virtue, truth, duty, filial piety—for “uncorrupted love.” The novel unravels from this decisive moment. Pierre marries his step-sister Isabel over his fiancé Lucy. The mystery of whether or not Pierre and Isabel are actually related is never solved, though moments imply incest. A desire to share his family’s wealth with Isabel, and to protect Lucy and his mother from embarrassment of his father’s infidelity, motivates his decision to marry Isabel, but his mother’s cuts him out of her will. With the failure of self-knowledge and memory, the aware of the detriment of reading, the only possibility left, is, as the narrator suggests, to hope Pierre did understand, but was unable to articulate: “And here it may be randomly suggested, by way of bagatelle, whether some things that 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). This appears a corruption of Montaigne’s accidental philosophy. The circular dialectic may never lead back to oneself. Readers remain suspended in a confounding silence: a secret they unknowingly keep from themselves. The narrator hints at what is known, but unlike Montaigne, Pierre can neither accept a learned ignorance, nor find his way back to a prior knowledge, and is thus unable to expand his understanding. This allegory of reading demonstrates that there is something more connecting early and later experience. That the movement between them is not so smooth or easy as Hartle suggests. Moreover, despite the study of the familiar, even

death only *seems* to fit the description. The reader is left just as confused by the ambiguity as Pierre. But if Pierre could not live in ambiguity, can the reader? Essayism, with its dynamic approach to understanding truth, provides a solution.

The Memnon Stone scene describes Pierre's own strained thinking so granularly that one cannot see how the inexperienced, yet self-satisfied Pierre's flawed ratiocination leads to his inability to understand his situation. Pierre continues to struggle with notions of fate and striving. If Taji gives himself over to striving, his end is intimated, being pursued by fate and impending death; if White-Jacket becomes his own savior through recognizing "Life's a voyage that's homeward-bound"; if Ahab commits himself in his endless questing of fate and intention over chance, his death is quick, arbitrary, and provides no answers; Ishmael's own fate is ambiguous, and only can be gleaned from strange and fragmented comments; then Pierre, faced with ambiguity (the impossibility of making himself whole, of returning and recollecting a former self), chooses to circumvent fate and reject convention (i.e. his marriage to Lucy), despite the consequences. But in his ceaseless striving for a true interpretation, and in his inability to adapt to changing circumstances (and texts), he, too, destroys himself.

Reading *as* Resentment: "I and my Chimney"

Melville's "I and My Chimney" (1855) lampoons a Victorian American obsession with the hearth and genteel essay tradition. As Ned Stuckey-French writes, "the hearth was where the most unencumbered and intimate conversations took place...where people could be themselves, but by midcentury both the hearth and

those selves were changing” (16). As more serious examples, Stuckey-French points to Hawthorne’s “Fire Worship” and Thoreau’s “House-warming” chapter in *Walden* (16-17). The conflict of Melville’s story centers around a genial, old bachelor attempting to defend his great chimney from his young wife’s desire to remove it, and replace it with hallway. According to Richard Fogle, a Melville bachelor “is a man who has not wedded reality, a man who sees half of life but not the whole” (14n1). The self-satisfied narrator appears blissfully unaware of his own folly; thus, he is unreliable.⁴⁷ The size of the chimney is emphasized again and again, and “fulsomenly suggest homoeroticism, onanism, and backwardness” (Stuckey-French 17). To this extent, the language also suggests a competitive concern over comparative sizes of chimneys (“observ[ing] how his sixth story soars beyond his neighbor’s fifth—not till then does he retire to his rest with satisfaction”), a search for a “secret ash-hole,” and threat of castration/emasculatation: the phallic chimney replaced with a uterine “grand entrance-hall.” The narrator notes, “my chimney taking precedence of me.” It is “a huge, corpulent old Harry VII.” The sentimental bachelor rambles:

Old myself, I take to oldness in things; for that cause mainly loving old Montaigne, and old Cheese, and old wine; and eschewing young people, hot rolls, new books and early potatoes, and very fond of my old claw-footed chair, and old club-footed Deacon White, my neighbor, and that still nigher old neighbor, my betwisted old grape-vine, that of a summer evening leans in

⁴⁷ Several of its characters will resemble those in “The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations” (1856). The two tales appear stylistically and thematically similar (Rollyson 100).

his elbow for a cosy company at my window-sill, while I, within doors, lean over mine to meet his; and above all, high above all, a found of my high-mantled old chimney. (*Prose Pieces* 361)

What is satirized in this prolix passage is the bachelor's appreciation for antiquity and genteel essay. His preoccupation with "old" evinces a near senility that mirrors Melville's earlier narrators' admiration for literary fathers. However, the romantic, wandering syntax models the discursive nature of Montaigne's prose while maintaining a loose thematic relation. The sentences focalize the immediate surroundings, to a "betwisted old grape-vine...at my window-sill," finally turning upwards the "high-mantled old chimney." The chimney suggests an ascendance of thought toward a higher, greater knowing. But as Stuckey-French points out, Melville "feeling a failure as a novelist and deeply ambivalent about his success with short magazines pieces...His narrator turns to the past (as represented by the essays of Montaigne, and his wife turns to the magazines of the time; Melville seems to have felt caught between the two" (18). That is, she turns to the "Ladies' Magazine for the fashions" (362). Unlike the other examples this text moves from a discussion within the realm of literature as art to a struggle between genres, between literature and the "common." Different genres require different reading practices. Like Pierre's Terror Stone, "I and my Chimney" meditates upon obstacles in literature. The chimney itself "breaks...the ridge-pole of the roof, like an anvil-headed whale" (355). To his critics who "wonder how such a brick-kiln, as they call it, is supported upon mere joists and rafters? What care I?...Men of cultivated minds see, in my old house and chimney, a

goodly old elephant-and-castle” (356). The narrator will repeatedly dismiss the opinions and criticism of others. A “surgical operation” suggesting both castration and harsh editing left the chimney exposed, and open to mockery. The “man who has a mortgage on the house” (the publishing house) threatened to void the policy on account of the chimney.⁴⁸ Sadly, the “mortgagee” notes, “All the world over, the picturesque yields to the pocketesque,” artistic to the convenient (357). The wife perhaps then is to be understood less as the narrator’s domestic partner, but as the author’s editor: “How often my wife ruefully told me, that my chimney, like the English aristocracy, casts a contracting shade all round it. She avers that endless domestic inconveniences arise—more particularly from the chimney’s stubborn central locality”—whether this is Yillah, the white jacket, the white whale, or the “inscrutable dark glance of Isabel.”⁴⁹ Of Melville’s novels, thus, “there is no hall whatever to the house—nothing but a sort of square landing-place, as you enter from a wide door.” The wife/editor proposes a “grand entrance hall...to be knocked clean through the chimney,” and her maxim is “Whatever is, is wrong; and what is more,

⁴⁸ In John Bryant’s review of the 1995 Kraken edition of *Pierre*, he notes Hershel Parker argues that Melville was so angered by negative reviews of *Moby-Dick* and “the insulting royalty terms proposed for *Pierre* that he inserted into his work in progress an aesthetically ruinous, satiric attack on the literary establishment” (337). This resulted in an “eleventh-hour recharacterization of *Pierre*.” As Bryant notes, Parker, hoping to return to Melville’s initially intended text, removed several chapters detailing the author’s career much to the outrage of some. This would certainly alter my reading of the text as allegory of reading. On the other hand, without suggesting that Melville thought one version would be more successful than another, he nevertheless decided to publish the expanded version. It’s a decision that should be regarded with serious consideration. What the reader loses in the novel’s narrative coherence, they gain in insight into Melville’s own philosophy of art.

⁴⁹ For contemporary readers, the narrator’s misogyny is likely jarring. While the narrator is himself the joke, and not the joker, for a more complex view of Melville’s portrayal of women, readers might look to the diptych “Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” the poem “After the Pleasure Party,” or “Norfolk Isle and the Chola Widow,” the eighth Sketch of *The Encantadas*. One might also consider Melville’s interest in the “Agatha story” (*Biography V.2* 114-16).

must be altered; and what is still more, must be altered right away,” to which the narrator responds, “if you demolish the foundation, what is to support the superstructure?...The truth is, women [editors] know next to nothing about the realities of architecture.” The narrator continues, describing the structure of his house:

On all its four sides, nearly all the chambers sidled up to the chimney for the benefit of a fire-place. The chimney would not go to them; they must needs go to it. The consequence was, 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. It is like losing one’s self in the woods; round and round the chimney you go, and if you arrive at all, it is just where you started, and so you begin again, and again get nowhere. (364)

The passage is reminiscent of Melville’s comments on *Moby-Dick*, in an 8 January 1852 letter to Sophia Hawthorne, “I had some vague idea while writing it, that the whole book was susceptible of an allegoric construction, & also that parts of it were—but the specialty of many of the particular subordinate allegories, which, without citing any particular examples, yet intimated the part-parcel allegoricalness of the whole” (*Correspondence* 219). When the “ciphering” master-mason architect Hiram Scribe, hired by the narrator’s wife to plan the removal of the chimney, suggests the chimney contains a secret chamber, it at least stays his wife’s demands. However, despite the critical Mr. Scribe’s measured attempts to locate the “secret closet,” he eventually fails. The narrator begins to conclude his tale,

The truth is, my wife, like all the rest of the world, cares not a fig for my philosophical jabber. In dearth of other philosophical companionship, I and my chimney have to smoke and philosophize together. And sitting up so late as we do at it, a might smoke it is that we two smoky old philosophers make.

...

[S]he herself is incessantly answering, incessantly besetting me with her terrible alacrity for improvement, which is a softer name for destruction...Assailed on all sides, and in all ways, small peace have I and my chimney. (376)

Editors, critics, and readers search for answers within Melville's texts, and finding none, they would demolish his text altogether. They hurl "brickbats," insults, from above him (377). In his final paragraph, the narrator writes, "It is not seven years since I have stirred from home...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). The year is added to piece: 1856. Seven years ago would have been the year in which Melville began *Mardi*.⁵⁰ His first attempt at something greater than what he derisively refers to as "popular reading" enjoyed by that "tribe" of general readers.⁵¹

⁵⁰ As Melville writes, "But Time, which is the solver of all riddles, will solve *Mardi*" (*Correspondence* 130).

⁵¹ In a letter to John Murray, from 15 July 1846, Melville writes of *Typee*, "The book is certainly calculated for popular reading, or for none at all" (*Correspondence* 56). For Melville, general readers "shake and tremor" interpreting difficult work (*Correspondence* 192). Melville writes to Hawthorne in

However, returning to Melville's Montaigne: in addition to the scurrilous and parodic treatment of the essay tradition, Emery argues that the narrator's reference to Montaigne suggests a resistance to innovation (209-10n19). However, the absurd and unreliable narrator cannot be trusted as a reader, and such a reading disregards the historically innovative *Essays*. For Bryant, the reference symbolizes "ripeness and repose," but, while this is true, Melville's strong satire suggests the reading does not go far enough ("Melville's Comical Debate" 169). Woodruff suggests that the story meditates upon, "themes of maturity and immaturity, experience and naïve innocence" (289). He writes, "the chimney's main lessons ('sober, substantial fact' it is) is itself a kind of death or non-being far more sinister than the natural exhaustion contemplated by the husband" (289). And thus,

the thematic weight borne by illusions [sic] to a post-storm Lear and skeptical Montaigne becomes perfectly clear. They represent a maturity or breadth of vision defined by their willingness to accept fully the consequences of history and the temporal dimension to which alone we are accountable. (290)

However, I think there is more levity than Woodruff admits. I argue that Melville self-consciously plays with allegorical and symbolic meaning. The narrator is much

1851, "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches" (*Correspondence* 191). In 1857, bitter and exasperated, Melville mockingly asked *Putnam's* editor and fellow lecturer George W. Curtis as to an appropriate lecture subject: "What is a good and earnest subject? 'Daily progress of man towards a state of intellectual and moral perfection, as evidenced in history of 5th Avenue and 5 Points'" (*Correspondence* 314). Curtis wrote "The Editor's Easy Chair," an essay column for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, but later joined the "Putnam Group," which also included the essayist Ik Marvel (Donald G. Mitchell), author of *Reveries of a Bachelor*. The irony of Melville's statement lay in "the first [being] a very wealthy area of New York City and the second a notorious slum on the city's lower east side" (*Correspondence* 313).

closer to White-Jacket in his exuberance and folly. He remains unreliable while thematizing for the reader the debates between literary and the “popular,” between author and editor, and the essay tradition, of which we are intended reader. In doing so, Melville shifts from allegorizing the ideal process of reading to more actively constructing narratives that require skeptical reading. This will be seen again in *Billy Budd*'s Captain Vere. The bachelor narrator, in his own misreading of Montaigne, his own unwillingness to change, to adapt, to be skeptical, runs contrary to the very spirit of Montaigne, as demonstrated in Melville's poem on the essayist. The essayist must learn to adapt new genres and texts. In its brevity, “My Chimney and I” illustrates how Melville combines the symbolic ambiguity of “obstacles” in his previous work, with an allegorical ambiguity. The reader knows what the words are saying, but must essay an interpretation of the text in order to understand its meaning.

Reading as Folly: “Montaigne and His Kitten”

Hither, Blanche! 'Tis you and I.
Now that not a fool is by
To say we fool it—let us fool!
We, you know, in mind are one,
Alumni of no fagging school;
Superfluous business still we shun;
And ambition we let go,
The while poor dizzards strain and strive,
Rave and slave, drudge and drive,
Chasing ever, to and fro,
After ends that seldom gain
Scant exemption from life's pain.

But preachment proses, and so I.
Blanche, round your furred neck let me tie
This Order, with brave ribbon, see,—
The King he pinned it upon me.

But, hark ye, sweeting—well-a-day!
Forever shall ye purr this way—
Forever comfortable be?
Don't you wish now 'twas for ye,
Our grandiose eternity?
Pish! what fops we humans here,
Won't admit within our sphere
The whitest doe, nor even thee —
We, the spotless humans, we!

Preaching, prosing—scud and run,
Earnestness is far from fun.
Bless me, Blanche; we'll frisk to-night,
Hearts be ours lilt and light—
Gambol, skip, and frolic, play:
Wise ones fool it while they may!
(*Collected Poems* 381-382)

In the posthumously published poem “Montaigne and His Kitten” (~1885), the author presents a particularly divergent case of Melville’s Montaigne.⁵² Melville adopts the voice of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne speaking to his kitten, Blanche.⁵³ Here, Melville foregrounds a formal prosodic ambiguity rather than a narrative ambiguity. Like *Clarel* (1876), this poem is primarily written in iambic tetrameter, and yet, as might be expected, it hardly holds itself to form. With no consistent pattern, the syllabic count varies primarily between seven and eight syllables; the line that begins “superfluous” is extra a syllable, while the line that ends with “light” is missing a syllable. Internal rhymes use both assonance and consonance. The poem

⁵² Antoine Compagnon’s *Chat en Poche: Montaigne et l’allégorie* [The Cat in the Pocket: Montaigne and Allegory] describes Montaigne’s conception of allegory and allegories of reading in Montaigne. Although in French, this text would no doubt provide Melville scholars further insight into Melville’s own allegories of reading, and which, if any, may have been derived from Montaigne.

⁵³ Although the quote from the “Apology for Raimond Sebond” is famous, “When I play with my cat who knows whether I do not make her more sport than she makes me?” (II:12 206). I can find no record of Montaigne’s cat named Blanche. It remains a mystery to me where Melville found the name.

utilizes masculine rhyme only occasionally and seemingly without any intention. End-rhymed couplets are most common throughout the poem, with parallel couplets scattered across the poem, causing the eye to bound back and forth. The dashes further contribute to this effect. But the poem also includes an instance of an alternating rhyme, an enclosed rhyme, and a rhymed triplet. I have been unable to determine any clear tradition or precedent for the stanza form, though it resembles something of a Pindaric ode, with the uneven division of its stanza structure. Though Melville, like Montaigne, may have been thinking of classical sources, he seemed simultaneously interested in circumventing traditions. While it does not lock itself into a pattern, the poem nevertheless appears to play with form. A thematic approach provides an alternative reading.

Henning Cohen places the poem in the tradition of Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly* (Cohen 257).⁵⁴ And clearly, the speaker Montaigne, in conversation with his kitten, resists the "fool" who would advise against fooling. But out of the public eye, and away from scrutiny, the speaker is able to do as he pleases. As "one," he and his kitten, reject identifying themselves with any other exhausting and binding "school." Within the first stanza, the rhyming pairs emphasize Montaigne's rejection of a type of clenched-fist willing ("ambition we let go") that characterizes Taji, Ahab, and Pierre: no more "strain and strive, / rave and slave, drudge and drive." These back-and-forth *lilting* rhymes also emphasize the play of the couplets. "Chasing ever, to

⁵⁴ In the "Apology," Montaigne writes, "They may, if they please, accuse my project, but not my progress: so it is, that without any body's needing to tell me, I sufficiently see of how little weight and value all this is, and the folly of my design: 'tis enough that my judgment does not contradict itself, of which these are the essays" (II:12 305).

and for / After ends that seldom gain / Scant exemption from life's pain." Ceaseless striving thus does not ever cure "Life's pain," or "the spleen," which affects Taji, White-Jacket, Ishmael, and Pierre. But if this seems like wisdom, the speaker undermines his own message, like the real Montaigne, to point out that he is preaching. In tying the Order of St. Michael around Blanche's neck, the speaker repudiates accolades, those that award them ("The King"), and whatever deeds merited them.⁵⁵ Cohen suggests this line puts "such temporal rewards in their proper perspective" (257). The third stanza opens with two confusing rhetorical questions. Montaigne asks his beloved kitten ("sweeting") if she thinks she will be comfortable forever? Would she not desire a human eternity? The lament "well-a-day" suggests not. And yet the question is not directed so much as to the kitten as to the reader in order to undermine both religious belief and anthropocentrism: "Pish! What fops we humans here." For Montaigne, humans are anything but "spotless." And yet, by the next stanza, he undermines his "preaching" once more. "Earnestness is far from fun," so the speaker turns to play, a bouncing cadence of the alliteration and assonance to levity, and silence, while they are still able: "Wise ones fool it while they may!"

"Poetry was a lifelong interest of Melville's," suggests Vincent (vii). Indeed, Yoomy the poet scatters *Mardi* (1849) with short poems, and it is easy to imagine earlier poems written by the author. By 1859, following the failures of Melville's later novels and his failure to acquire a consular post, his wife wrote "Herman [had] taken to writing poetry"; a later letter suggest Melville used these unsuccessful poems

⁵⁵ Charles IX awarded Montaigne the Order of St. Michael by in 1571 (Cohen 257).

to line a traveling trunk (*Correspondence* 377). Melville would continue to study and write poetry for the remainder of his life, including the longest American epic poem *Clarel*. In fact, the narrative *Billy Budd* first emerged as a preface to the poem “Billy in the Darbies.” All this suggests that despite the jocular nature of the citation of Montaigne, Melville took his poetry very seriously.

Melville left some forty poems unpublished at the time of his death (Rollyson 162). And “Montaigne and His Kitten” did not find a publisher until 1947 in Vincent’s *Collected Poems of Herman Melville*, and then once again in Henning Cohen’s *Selected Poems of Herman Melville* (1964). While Vincent filed “Montaigne” under the section “Miscellaneous Poems,” Cohen organized them into somewhat misleading section entitled “A Fate Subdued,” as if Melville himself had intended. Much of the silence surrounding Melville scholarship stems from Raymond Weaver’s characterization in his seminal *Herman Melville: Mariner & Mystic* (1921) that Melville’s later life was “a long quietus” (qtd. in Renker 128). But as Elizabeth Renker writes,

These early scholars, often mystified by the poetry that was marginal to their interest in Melville’s prose, judged the poems to be the failed efforts of a burned-out genius... To call all those years of writing many thousands of lines a ‘long quietus’ is to treat those many volumes and many unpublished poems as if they had never been written. And that is mostly how literary history treated them thereafter. Melville the poet became a disaffected ‘isolato,’ a hermit alone in his room. Bitter, disappointed, a failure, he withdrew from the

world and lived in his own head, in his books, and on his pages. He communed with artists of the past, creating a private art because the marketplace of his time had rejected him. (127)

Renker continues that contemporary scholars have begun to challenge this view. In fact, Bryant points out that, “Melville’s compiled a volume of poetry in 1860 but, failing to secure a publisher, filed the poems away, revising them over the years, publishing some in one slim volume of poetry or another, leaving the rest among his miscellaneous papers” (“Writer in Process” xviii). In 1964, Cohen, in his note to the poem suggests it “belongs to [Melville’s] old age, when he professed to cherish simple pleasures and to enjoy foolishness” (257). Whereas, more recently, William Shurr believes, “[the poems] project the interior world of a writer growing old, feeling his age, wondering about the shape of his life, comparing his own with the finished and whole lives of other writers, discovering analogues for his feelings in literary authors and characters. Thus Montaigne in his retirement, two phases in the life of a Portuguese national poet Camões, the deserted Falstaff, the aging Quixote, the enduring reality of Shakespeare—these are figures that loom meaningful before him” (“Melville’s Poems: The Late Agenda” 370). Elsewhere, he writes of the poem, “Again the genius finds himself alone in a world of ‘fools,’ but the great French essayist maintains himself with aloofness from the world, trifling with the honors that have been granted by the king, far more content to spend an evening playing with his cat than living up to the expectations of high seriousness from his public. This, however, is rarely achieved immunity” (*Mystery of Iniquity* 232). Thomas Rountree

notes, “the largest group among these unpublished pieces attacks the utilitarian spirit of the age from various points of view, nostalgic, idealistic, hedonist, charitable” (120). Biographer Laurie Robertson-Lorant describes the poem as “a variation on the *carpe diem* theme, this lighthearted lyric portrays work as purgatorial drudgery and play as a way of attaining paradise.” (573). However, while all these interpretations might contribute to the poems as an allegory of reading, its “to and fro,” they perhaps overstate the “earnestness.”

These are the relatively few scholarly explications on the poem itself. In a letter dated 5 October 1885, Melville refers to the poem. The letter is addressed his wife’s cousin Ellen Marett Gifford, a semi-invalid and close correspondent of the Melvilles (*Correspondence* 490). The letter accompanies a photograph, of which Melville writes,

Well, here it is at least, the veritable face (at least, so says the Sun that never lied in his life) of your now venerable friend—venerable in years.—What the deuse makes him look so serious, I wonder. I thought he was of a gay and frolicsome nature, judging from a little rhyme of his about a kitten, which you once showed me. But is this the same man? Pray, explain the inconsistency, or I shall begin to suspect your venerable friend of being a two-faced old fellow and not to be trusted. (*Correspondence* 190)

Melville’s tone here is humorous and crafty. In this private moment, he plays up his persona as deceiver. It is clear that Gifford read the poem, thus indicating it having been written at least by October 1885. It is possible that Melville, in commenting on

his serious look, was also struck by the somber portrait of Montaigne, and perhaps the lithograph of the essayist's tower and chateau included in the Hazlitt's edition.

Montaigne is only one author among many within Melville's later poems, but his voice seems reserved, possibly even dejected. One has a hard time believing Montaigne's injunctions to play. Melville's anamnesis ponders life and death, art and craft, fame and fortune. By December 1885, Melville would retire from his post as a customs inspector, and live for another six years at his home in Manhattan. The portrait Hershel Parker portrays of the elder Melville is one resigned, content to play with his grandchildren, to avoid discussing his previous work (*Biography* V.2 916). He is no longer interested in teaching his readers. He would just as soon undermine his own preaching. While the reader may enjoy (or scratch their head) at his poetic invention in "Montaigne and his Kitten" (as Montaigne's readers might have his candid *Essays*), Melville is more interested in frolicking while he may. The formal elements of the poem require an attentive reader. More than advocating folly, Melville's Montaigne essays it as a discursive mode of being, and asks the reader to participate. Parker suggest that Melville was aware that a new generation of readers were beginning to discover his early work, and that Melville may have finally found some peace in this. However, if this image suggests Melville resigned himself to repose, it is worth turning to the final example, the novella *Billy Budd* to find Melville engaged with serious questions of ethics, aesthetics, and reading.

Reading as the Violence of Misreading: *Billy Budd, Sailor*

As much as *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative* (1924) regards the problems of ethics and law, military duty and discipline, flawed reason, repressed desire, or simply “depravity according to nature” (476), it also stages its own textuality, placing into question as to what exactly is being read. From the outset, Billy Budd “is not presented as a conventional hero, but also that the story in which he is the main figure is no romance” (458). The character and narrative bear a strong resemblance to Steelkilt from *Moby-Dick*’s “Town-Ho’s Story” and to *White-Jacket*’s Jack Chase, to whom the story is dedicated. The narrative is punctuated by misreading: both Captain Vere’s and Billy’s. Billy does not follow the Dansker’s warning about Claggart, Billy’s antagonist, of whom even the narrator writes, “His portrait I essay, but shall never hit it” (466). Billy looks to Vere during his trial, “taking a hint from that aspect,” and chooses silence when it clear he should speak (501). However, while Billy’s misunderstanding derives from his inexperience and innocence, Captain Vere presents a much more interesting case. Like Pierre, Vere cannot read what is in front of his eyes. But while Billy shares a similar end (“oozy weeds about me twist”) to Pierre’s (“arboresced him in ebon vines”), their ends described in rich detail, Vere’s death is sparsely narrated. It is an unheroic death. This has as much to do with Vere’s own reading as the textuality of the story itself.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ As mentioned above, scholarship has perhaps paid the most attention to this instance of Melville’s Montaigne. Captain Vere’s Montaigne (and thus Vere himself) is at once “honest and self-reliant” (Rathburn 29); maintaining a “realistic, not a dreamy, attitude” (Evans 348) with “stored and resolute pragmatic intelligence” (Reid 541); along with a gregarious and having “instinctive wisdom,” “utter openness,” and “bluntness,” being “interested in confronting the ‘realities’ he is so avid to read about

Before the “sketch” of “scenes” that portray Vere as “an exceptional character” (464), the narrator establishes his own presence and aesthetics as a character along with Billy, Claggart, and Vere. Notably, all other officers and sailors are “not necessary here to particularize” (466). The narrator writes, “In this matter of writing, resolve as one may to keep to the main road, some bypaths have an enticement not readily to be withstood. I am going to err into such a bypath. If the reader will keep me company I shall be glad. At the least, we can promise ourselves

without flinching and without a trace of deception” (Miller 175); Kilbourne offered one of the first extended analysis of the Montaigne-Vere relation, “For Montaigne, as for Vere, the state was supreme; for each of them it was necessary, for the greatest common good, to preserve the order of the state even at the expense of the individual and of ideal justice... And in condemning Billy even though it was emotionally painful to him personally, Vere acted in exact accord with Montaigne’s rule for the wise man” (516). Rosenberry, adding to this: Montaigne, and thus Vere, had “a mind not lacking in principles, but proof against convictions resulting from habit thinking and interested motives,” “an attitude—honest, realistic”; “Montaigne had an overriding respect for law, however fallible, as against personal judgment, which he held to be still more fallible” and law and custom, were the “current of civilization, the organized movement of society, which out to define the general course of a man’s moral life through the laws which describe it. The alternative was ethical anarchy” (Rosenberry 494-95). These readings place Montaigne stiffly in the camp of rationalism, philosophical realism, and devotion to the tradition and the state. Here, it seems that several scholars have taken Vere, or the narrator’s characterization, at face value. However, as shown, Melville’s narrators are not to be trusted, using an ironic narratized speech (free indirect speech), the narration highlights Vere’s misreading.

However, several other scholars have noticed this discrepancy. Cunningham offers the different view that despite reading Montaigne, Vere’s preference for the “unconventional writer” does not prepare him for the “unconventional moral situation”; “Vere reacts most conventionally” (Cunningham 53). And Shulman argues most strongly and persuasively against the view that Vere gets his reason and his respect for law from Montaigne: “Kilbourne... makes Vere a spokesman for science, private integrity, and personal loyalty... Montaigne is ‘an almost Machiavellian’ ‘pragmatist’... who subordinates everything to the state and to the coercive claims of ‘use’” (Shulman 323n2). Instead, Shulman argues that Melville, in order to purposefully establish a “sympathetic attitude toward Captain Vere,” “uses Montaigne to help [show] his good sense and high regard for the *Essays*. Montaigne appealed to educated readers... enlisting Montaigne... [won] initial approval for a character who will later strain that acceptance,” Vere attributed Montaigne’s “independence and irreverence” (Shulman 323). Ultimately,

Vere’s personal style is not “free”—he sees himself totally bound by the legal code—and he is so far from being “unconventional” that he fatally subordinates himself to established convention. (323)

To Shulman, Vere “substituted the letter for the spirit of Montaigne on law” (328). That is, “He can choose to interpret the law so as to defer court-martial until a later time, or to override the laws in favor of other values—and in either case, to risk the consequences of his choice... Vere, however, chooses to subordinate ‘private conscience’ and personal obligation to the claims of ‘the imperial... code’ and his sense of the demands of social order” (330).

that pleasure which is wickedly said to be in sinning, for a literary sin the divergence will be” (460). The narrator thus points out to the reader Melville’s own common practice of digression, and incites the reader to follow along despite being a literary sin. However, alongside the need for digression is recollection. That the past is an “eclipsing menace mysterious and prodigious” (468), and requires that the present and past be understood in distinct relation: “hold the Present at its worth without being inappreciative of the Past” (460). The attention to this distinction is itself a warning about future action: “But the *might-have-been* is but boggy ground to build on” (461). The attention to recollection and action is repeated: “Forty years after a battle it is easy for a noncombatant to reason about how it ought to have been fought. It is another thing to personally and under fire to have to direct the fighting while involved in the obscuring smoke of it” (506). These comments lend themselves to a biographical reading of Melville’s own reflection on his life, but their collective effect on the reader is to caution against too strong a reaction or interpretation. That is, to be carried away by the events that they are about to read. The narrator will also attempt to modify the reader’s understanding of experience, human nature, and the world itself.

As the narrator opines, “I am not certain whether to know the world and to know human nature be not two distinct branches of knowledge, which while they may coexist in the same heart, yet either may exist with little or nothing of the other” (475). Thus, the narrator tries to illustrate separate discourses or differentiate between spheres of knowledge. That one’s capacity for understanding, and thus reading, does

not necessarily result in the same interpretation of events, or that one's approach is even applicable to other contexts. The narrator continues, "Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violent tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the color, but where exactly does the one first blindingly enter into the other? So with sanity and insanity" (496). This is really a question of whether Vere's reason or Claggart's unreason is really the more insane, but the rhetorical effect is to draw the reader's attention to the process in which knowledge is differentiated and hierarchized.

And finally, the narrator considers interpretation itself, "With an added hint or two in connection," the narrator writes, "narrative must be left to vindicate, as it may, its own credibility" (*Tales* 476). After Billy's execution, "The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact. Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial" (517). This recalls the narrator's criticism in *Pierre* about "common novels" that "spin veils of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last." The narrator here is more somber and reserved, unlike the genial bachelor of "I and my chimney." After Billy's death, the narrator offers a "sequel," "Three brief chapters will suffice" (517). The narrator is more self-consciously a writer here than in any other text. These epistemological questions about recollection, legitimate action, human nature, and the differentiation and transference of knowledge and skills, are tied up with aesthetic questions of digression and

interpretation. He reminds us to not trust experience; he asks that we judge charitably. With these provisos the reader is asked to consider Captain Vere.

Prior to his characterization, Vere himself is compared with the Lord Admiral Nelson, of “poetic reproach, softened by its picturesqueness” (460). The narrator writes, “Nelson’s ornate publication of his person in battle was not only unnecessary, but...savored of foolhardiness and vanity” (461). Nelson’s presentation was “more heroic in line the great epics and dramas, since in such lines the poet but embodies in verse those exaltations of sentiment...” (462). The heroic figure to which Vere aspires is chiefly constructed as a literary figure. However, Vere’s first act is a misreading.

Billy’s first lines, “good-bye to you too, old *Rights-of-man*,” “was by no means of a satirical turn,” though Vere misreads it as such (454). This allegory of reading continues through the introduction of “Captain the Honorable Edward Fairfax Vere.” A homonymic relationship contrasts the very same “fair facts” that Vere is unable to consider. Both a “bachelor,” recalling Fogle’s assertion mentioned earlier, and a “sailor of distinction.” He is experienced, learned, intrepid, gallant, unpretentious, modest, practical, and intellectual. Though these are “sterling qualities,” he lacks “brilliant ones” (464). But, like Billy’s stutter, the narrator admits Vere’s one fault: a “dreaminess of mood,” earning the appellation “Starry Vere,” named for an Andrew Marvell poem (464). However, the presentation is largely positive. Vere is a constant reader, “never going to sea without a newly replenished library.” Of his reading, the narrator writes,

With nothing of that literary taste which less heeds the thing conveyed than the vehicle, his bias toward those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world naturally inclines: books treating of actual men and events no matter of what era—history, biography, and unconventional writers like Montaigne, who, free from cant and convention, honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities. In this line of reading he found confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts—confirmation which he had vainly sought in social converse, so that as touching most fundamental topics, there had got to be established in him some positive convictions which he forefelt would abide in him essentially unmodified so long as his intelligent part remained unimpaired. (465)⁵⁷

This portrait is ironic, perhaps even sliding into free indirect discourse. That is, it is how Captain Vere himself would characterize his reading. This notable portrait contrasts starkly with the illiterate, singer-composer Billy Budd. The passage continues:

In view of the troubled period in which his lot was cast, this was well for him. His settled convictions were as a dike against those invading waters of novel opinion social, political, and otherwise, which carried away as in a torrent no

⁵⁷ The phrase “free from cant” echoes the Melville fragment “Shakespeare was so phenomenal a modern that not yet have we come up to him—utterly without secular hypocrisy superstition or secular cant” (*Tales* 601). Conversely, Melville would also write in an 1849 letter, “Even Shakespeare...was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant universe is, or can be?” (*Correspondence* 122).

few minds in those days, minds by nature not inferior to his own. While other members of that aristocracy to which by birth he belonged were incensed at the innovators mainly because their theories were inimical to privileged classes, Captain Vere disinterestedly opposed them not alone because they seemed to him insusceptible of embodiment in lasting institutions, but at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind. (465)

With his “settled convictions,” and opposition to “novel opinion,” Vere hardly seems to have grasped the “right meaning” of Montaigne. The essayist was never so sure of himself, and disliked those who were.⁵⁸ Moreover, Vere lacked “companionable quality,” was a “dry and bookish gentlemen” who was never “jocosely familiar”; he was “apt to cite some historic character or incident of antiquity as he would be to cite from the moderns” (466); though a “noble fellow,” there is a “queer streak of the pedantic running through him”: the “unmindful” “honesty” of his “pertinent,” but “remote allusions” “were altogether alien to men whose reading was mainly confined to the journals”: according to Vere’s nature, his “honesty prescribes [Vere] to directness, sometimes far-reaching like that of a migratory fowl that in its fight never heeds when it crosses a frontier” (465). This characterization seems vastly different not only from Montaigne, but also Melville’s other narrators, who read Montaigne in a vastly different spirit. Vere as pedantic, dry, settled, reserved is an unusually harsh

⁵⁸ In “Of the Art of the Conference,” Montaigne writes, “my imagination so often contradicts and condemns itself, that ‘tis all one to me if another do it, especially considering that I give his reprehension no greater authority than I admit. But I break with him, who carries himself so high, as I know some do, that regrets his advice if not believed, and takes it for an affront if it be not immediately followed” (III:8 428).

characterization for Melville. Even his “remote allusions” appear to be taken in a spirit different from previous text. That is, without humor or a sense of folly. The description stages the drama of misreading. Vere is not only unable to consider alternatives, but his worldview seems fundamentally closed off to any other conception. His allusions are always and only “pertinent.” He has “settled” on the question of the “peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind.” This is beyond the simple unreliability of the narrator of “I and my Chimney,” but it appears as though Vere has stopped reading, or stopped reading with imagination, altogether. There are no more dreams, no more questions; even the thematization of the problematically violent or sententious appropriation of authors is silenced. He has only “positive convictions,” without the skepticism, that for better or worse, was at work in the previous narrators. Like the Pierre’s “cottagers,” Vere cannot interpret what is in front of him. He reads Montaigne “free from cant and convention,” philosophizing upon “realities,” but cannot understanding how Montaigne himself engages with convention and utilizes rhetoric, or how Montaigne struggles with his own doubt, though in an honest and common sense way. For Vere, there is no room for interpretation.

However, while the “illiterate” Billy consistently misreads Claggart’s machinations, Vere not only reads Claggart’s deception correctly, but also Billy’s “vocal impediment.” Protocol would have led Vere to hear Claggart’s other witness, but he decides to bring the two together, allowing the incident to occur. Vere’s “fatherly” tone sets Billy off, who fatally strikes Claggart, in inarticulate anger.

Vere's response, now, is to act as a strict "military disciplinarian." However, on the doctor's confirmation of Claggart's death, Vere "convulsively" grabbed the doctor and "vehemently exclaimed" in an "excited manner": "Struck Dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" (495). Vere recollects himself, but not after more "passionate interjections" and "mere incoherences" (495). Compared with *White-Jacket*, Vere's reaction is not the drunken incompetence of severe Captain Claret, but the cool, but ultimately misguided rationalism and self-satisfied resolve of the Surgeon Cuticle, who unnecessarily amputates the leg off an already weak sailor, leading to, or at least precipitating, the sailor's death. From then on Vere, in his "wonted manner" sets off on his own fated course. The passionate outburst, often overlooked in scholarship, reveal Vere's own limitations. Once again, *Pierre* provides a parallel, when the narrator writes, "no stoicism... will stand the final test of a real impassioned onset" (289). In over-compensation of his misreading of the situation, as a corrective to "fatherly" bias and emotional outburst, of his own complicity in bringing Billy and Claggart together, he decides beforehand Billy's fate (the angel *must* hang), with reason and justification only following afterwards. The surgeon, the first made aware of the event, views Vere's command for a drumhead court as "excited" and "unhinged," as though Vere "was suddenly affected in his mind." Vere does not consider the alternate, and more appropriate response, of relating the incident to the admiral. The narrator notes for a second time that suppressed insurrections (the 1797 Spithead and Nore mutinies) had diminished the ability of "naval authority" to exercise "prudence and rigor" (497). Context, as the narrator tries

to suggest, is important, but so is interpretative adaptability it will appear. In guarding “as much as possible against publicity,” Vere, the narrator leaves open, “may or may not have erred” (497).

The maintenance of secrecy in the matter, the confining all knowledge of it for a time to the place where the homicide occurred, the quarter-deck cabin; in these particulars lurked some resemblance to the policy adopted in those tragedies of the palace which have occurred more than once in the capital founded by Peter the Barbarian. (498)

An “allegiance to martial duty” and a “sense of urgency overruled in Captain Vere every other consideration” (498). Vere calls a court of his officers, where Vere plays the witness. Vere remains Billy’s advocate until the interrogation comes to the question of motivation, that is, the intention. In the absence of intention, Claggart’s motives being of an unaccountable “depravity according to nature,”⁵⁹ the court is unable to account for context, and without context, they are bound by reason and the law to condemn Billy Budd: Vere states, “a martial court must needs in the present case confine its attention to the blow’s consequence, which consequence justly is to be deemed not otherwise than as the striker’s deed” (501).⁶⁰ This utterance has a “marked effect upon the three officers, more especially the soldier. Couched in it seemed to them a meaning unanticipated, involving a prejudgment on the speaker’s

⁵⁹ In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Iago refuses to explain his motives, “Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word.”

⁶⁰ In “That it is Folly to Measure Truth and Error by Our Own Capacity,” Montaigne writes, “Why do we not consider what contradictions we find in our own judgments, how many things were yesterday articles of our faith, that to-day appear no other than fables?” (I:26 78).

part. It served to augment a mental disturbance previously evident enough” (501). Vere, himself, stands “in one of his absent fits, gazing...upon the monotonous blank of the twilight sea” (502). The pathetic fallacy effects an imagined reality, where Billy’s fate has already been decided. The narration once again adopts free indirect discourse, but in being “necessary to demonstrate certain principles that were axioms to himself,” Vere’s shows “the influence of unshared studies modifying and tempering the practical training”; his “efficient” “phraseology” evinces the alleged “pedantry” of the “wholly practical cast” of naval men (502). Vere’s condescending rhetoric serves to wall himself in from the objections of his selected jury. Though he accepts responsibility, he, either consciously or unconsciously, also commits himself to be the final judge. For Vere, “however pitilessly that law may operate, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it,” despite “feminine” “warm hearts” or “private conscience” (503).

Yet, despite his reading, condescension and fear underlie Vere’s interpretation. On the one hand, Vere believes sailors, with “native sense,” “long molded by arbitrary discipline” “have not that kind of intelligent responsiveness...to comprehend and discriminate”; on the other hand, Vere believes clemency would be seen as “pusillanimous,” and the sailors would mutiny as a result (506). By Vere’s own rhetoric the officers were “brought to...that harassed frame of mind” in which mutiny loomed (505). Once again, the narrator introduces ambiguity in order to complicate the reading: “But the urgency felt, well-warranted or otherwise, was much the same” (506). In Vere and Billy’s meeting after the judgment, while much

surmised by the narrator, ultimately, “what took place was never known” (506-7). The same might be said of Vere’s reading. Though perfectly reasonable, his fundamental premises are flawed, and so he never comes to understand the extent of Claggart’s role or offer Billy a reprieve.

In the end, the reader is given no clear moral or ethical principle to follow: only a feeling of injustice.⁶¹ In response to Billy’s “God Bless Captain Vere,” the captain “stood erected rigid as a musket in the ship-armorers rack” though the narrator ambiguously states, “either through stoic self-control or...paralysis induced by emotional shock” (514). Here, the narrator begins to open the interpretation more to the reader. After ordering Billy’s execution, Vere, “a martinet as some deemed him,” would say, “With Mankind, ‘forms, measured forms, are everything; and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood.’ And this he once applied to the disruption of forms going on across the Channel and the consequences thereof” (517). Given this fear of social change, of revolution “across the Channel,” it is all the more ironic that the single shot that lays him down came from the main cabin porthole of the French Directory’s *Athée* (the *Atheist*). His death is tersely narrated in relation to Billy. It is neither heroic, nor tragic, merely reported in the very style Vere would prefer to read. In his dying words, Vere would murmur “Billy Budd, Billy Budd,” though without “the accents of remorse” (518). The narrator offers no easy solutions, and suggests,

⁶¹ In “Of Experience,” “Do but consider the form of this justice that governs us; ‘tis a true testimony of human weakness, so full is it of error and contradiction!” (III.13 495).

“Whether Captain Vere...was really the sudden victim of any degree of aberration, every one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford” (497). Thus, in the last instance of the text’s anamnestic allusion to Montaigne, *Billy Budd* presents two allegories of reading. First, Vere’s misreading, or rather, his stubborn, if ethically misguided, adherence to his interpretation allegorizes the way in which all interpretations may be hijacked. This is not to say a “right meaning” exists or not, but to challenge the reader to be more careful in his or her own reading. That is, to be careful to not make the same mistakes—whether being swept away by emotions, pretensions, social or philosophic dogmatism, prior knowledge or experience—during interpretation and the reading process. Second, while on the one hand the narrator continually attempts to hint at the luxury of hindsight, the limits of recollection, the provisional and discrete nature of knowledge, and the rhetorical construction of a literary text; on the other hand, the narrator constantly incites the reader to more actively engage in the process of interpretation.⁶² Where Vere failed in his misreading, the narrator guides us to be more charitable in our own reading of others. To consider context and question our own rhetoric, as misreading leads to a real violence. Reading is thus as much about ethics as aesthetics. This need for ethical intervention then begins with *Mardi*, and becomes progressively more pronounced through the Melville texts examined here. However, although it appears anamnestic allusions to Montaigne in Melville’s earlier novels draw the reader’s attention to

⁶² Melville laments, “What a madness & anguish it is, that an author can never—under no conceivable circumstances—be at all frank with his readers” (*Correspondence* 149).

metaphors for the reading process, the text's own writing becomes more and more ambiguous, while simultaneously yoking the reader with the task of ever more intervening interpretation of allegories of reading.

Toward a Theory of Readerly Essayism: Beyond Montaigne

What similarities to do the writings of Montaigne and Melville share? A consideration of fate and free will, faith and reason, the presence or absence of God, the savage and the civilized, a questioning of the subject, an interest in art, style, and the creative process; they both share a familiarity with ancient philosophy, especially skepticism; they use historical allusions, citation, and discursive prose; their works resist transversal or “totalizing” readings; they appreciate bawdy, priapic and peptic humor. Though Melville was much more the cosmopolitan, Montaigne traveled throughout Europe and spoke with “cannibals.”⁶³ Four months before the publication of *Moby-Dick*, Melville wrote Hawthorne, “I have been building some shanties of houses (connected with the old one) and likewise some shanties of chapters and essays” (*Correspondence* 195).⁶⁴ It is perhaps worth clarifying then that Montaigne's book was the *Essays*, and each essay was a chapter. The title designates “not a genre but a procedure for exploring and revealing the self” (Frame 34). Or, as Montaignian

⁶³ “In Rouen, France, in 1562, the French essayist Michel de Montaigne met and evidently spoke through a translator with Tupinamba Indians from Brazil who had been brought to France by the French explorer Nicholas Durand de Villegaignon” (Edwards 64).

⁶⁴ The tone of the letter from 29 June 1951 is familiar and takes some poetic license. Melville notes he had recently left the “heat and dust of the babylonish brick-kiln of New York,” where he was seeing the “half-cooked” whale through the press. Retreating to his family's farm in the Berkshires, Melville had alleviated a “certain crotchety and over doleful chimaeras.” Melville offers to send Hawthorne “a fin” as a “specimen mouthful” though “the tail is not yet cooked.” Melville ends the famous letter with the book's partial motto: *Ego non baptiso te in nomine*—“but make out the rest yourself” (*Correspondence* 195).

scholar and translator Donald Frame notes, the full title *Essais de Michel de Montaigne* implies the “self-testings of Michel de Montaigne” (34). In the halcyon days of 1850, Melville told Sophia Hawthorne he “dreamed he was going to build a real towered house—an actual tower” (*Biography V.1* 780). Like Montaigne, he dreamed off a place to spend the rest of his days writing. It even appears as though their libraries were roughly the same size at the time of their death.⁶⁵

Further textual parallels between the authors are left to pursue. In the *Moby-Dick* chapter “The Whale as a Dish,” several scholars point out the similarities between Ishmael’s assertion, “who is not a cannibal? I tell you it will be more tolerable for the Fejee that salted down a lean missionary in his cellar against a coming famine...than for thee, civilized and enlightened gourmand, who nailest geese to the ground and featest on their bloated livers in thy paté-de-foie-gras” (*Moby-Dick* 300). And Montaigne’s, “I conceive there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than when he is dead; in tearing a body limb from limb by racks and torments...in roasting it by degrees; in causing it to be bitten and worried by dogs and swine...than to roast and eat him after he is dead” (I:3 91). Tom Quirk suggests that the “acutest sage” of *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* refers to Montaigne, noting several other parallels between the novel and the essays (“Two sources in *The Confidence-Man*” 12). Indeed, the lines recall Montaigne, “But if the acutest sage be often at his wits’ ends to understand living character, shall those who are not sages expect to run and

⁶⁵ *The Consolations of Philosophy* (De Botton 116); “The blank pages following the binding inscriptions record not a single title from Melville’s library, which numbered some 1,000 volumes at the time of his death in 1891” (“Introduction to Catalog”, <http://melvillemarginalia.org/>).

read character in those mere phantoms which flit along a page, like shadows along a wall?" (*The Confidence-Man* 69). Richard Shulman also argues "The Great Montaignism of Ahab," the Captain's pursuit of the whale being a Montaigne-inspired "last act of bravery and defiance" ("Cotton's Montaigne" 196). If we agree with Said that "pilgrimage is after all a form of copying," how might we read Melville's *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876)? Would it only confirm contemporary criticism that the poem was an "overwhelming tide of mediocrity" (*Clarel* 543)? The poem concludes, "But through such strange illusions have they passed / Who in life's pilgrimage have baffled striven— / Even death may prove unreal at the last" (*Clarel* 498); "Then keep thy heart, though yet but ill-resigned—Clarel, thy heart, the issues there but mind... / Emerge thou mayst from the last whelming sea, / And prove that death but routs life into victory" (*Clarel* 498). *Clarel*, perhaps a poem to a younger self or a fellow traveler, says to keep on questioning. Life then is a pilgrimage, a continual evolvment and adaption of self.

Of the essay, in Merton M. Sealts's writes in his historical note to the *Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, that as a member of the Albany Young Men's Association, Melville would have been encouraged to writes essays (461), that Melville's reviewers called "I and my Chimney" "a quaintly humorous essay," "a humorous sketch, and "thoroughly magazinish" (510), and a reviewer wrote of Melville's lecture "Statues in Rome," "an admirable literary essay suitable for

publication....” (514).⁶⁶ Indeed, “Hawthorne and his Mosses,” by a “Virginian Spending July in Vermont,” is both literary criticism and a personal essay. Reading through Melville’s lesser-known prose pieces, including his juvenilia, tales, sketches, and speeches, Melville’s awareness of the nineteenth-century essay genre is even more apparent. By 1922, his portrait of Ahab was anthologized in a collection of essays; and “Hawthorne and his Mosses” by 1960.⁶⁷ Bryant, in his preface to *A Companion to Melville Studies* (1986), notes, “Ideas loom large in Melville’s work; it is curious that he did not write more essays or treatises” (“Introduction” xi).

This study offers less a guide on how to read than an impetus to contemplation, on the part of the reader, of the metaphors and allegories for reading in Melville’s Montaigne. I hope, then, it justifies a slight further discussion of Melville’s readerly essayism in the tradition of Montaigne.⁶⁸ Malhoney argues,

⁶⁶ Melville will write of Captain Vere’s silence during deliberation in *Billy Budd*, “Similar impatience as to talking is perhaps one reason that deters some minds from addressing any popular assemblies” (*Tales* 502). He was not a successful lecturer.

⁶⁷ See Smith, *Essays and Studies*; and, Leary, *American Literary Essays*.

⁶⁸ An *essayism* was first proposed by the protagonist Ulrich in Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* (1940) as “living hypothetically.” And was first theorized in Thomas Harrison’s study, *Essayism: Conrad, Musil and Pirandello* (1992). He writes, “*Essayism* ultimately seeks to describe more than... aesthetic and ontological positions—namely, a conscious bearing toward experience which those ontologies and aesthetics imply. This bearing is concerned above all with the logic of action, with reasons for living in one way or another, with the possibility of enhancing *those* reasons. (Harrison xii). Harrison’s study of Essayism seeks out the “solution to the absence of a solution” But the differentiation does not appear clarified as a readerly practice. My own formulation may recall De Man’s *Allegories of Reading* and Barthes’ “readerly.” For De Man, a “process of reading in which rhetoric is a disruptive intertwining of trope and persuasion” emerges from allegories of reading (ix). While I certainly agree that Melville’s allegories are disruptive, I am more interested in how they interpellate the reader than how they deconstruct the text itself. And, unlike Barthes, I am not attempting to differentiate between readerly and writerly text for the reader—that is, text in which the reader merely consumes text and text in which the reader produces further text (4). Rather, the intervention exists outside this structural binary in order to momentarily suspend the metacritical question of reading: What do we think we are doing when we read literature? Prior to reading, what is our intention? Our expectation? This is not to say I am advocating any fixed notion of subject or self, or even to imply a mastery of reflection. Only that Melville as an epistemology-oriented writer,

“Melville has used *Pierre* to make a last futile assault on the reading public’s inability to act as critical readers” (134); and La Bossière suggests Melville was the pilot fish, and in *The Confidence-Man*, after demonstrating that “wisdom or understanding and the expression of that wisdom are vain,” “silence was all the truth that remained for the blind pilot-prophet to teach” (“Melville’s Mute Glass” 84). However, following Renker’s diagnosis, both scholars devalue Melville’s later writing. Nicholls argues, Montaigne’s essays are not just about a topic, but are “above all about the *experience* of thinking about [a] topic,” and while “most contemporary critics and readers would come to regard Melville’s essayistic impulse as a sign of mere self-indulgence and eccentricity, his cultivation of it was in fact purposeful and intensive” (emphasis original, 48, 50); Melville learned from Montaigne “that the skeptical resources of prose provide a means of putting possibilities into play without resolving them or organizing them hierarchically...” (49-50). Melville’s essayism, “typically celebrates the recondite ‘fact’ at the same time as it puts it under an imaginative and often humorous pressure that renders its facticity open to question” (50). Bryant has similarly adopted Montaigne’s essayism as a way of reading Melville. In *Melville and Repose*, he writes:

Writers are always “essaying.” At the same time, an author creates structures that ask, demand, tease, or trick us as readers to “play along” with the text.

through allegories of reading, provides ground to consider these questions. On the other hand, following both De Man and Barthes, as well, I recognize the prescriptive ideological dimensions of what I am proposing with a readerly essayism. To which Wittgenstein’s insight seems apropos: ethics and aesthetics are one. But an essayism is not to answer these questions; it only suggests that we might yet more fully appreciate how we are only always trying to read.

This vital relation to the reader, then, is as exploratory and experimental as the relations to self and ideology. Any critical approach that attempts to freeze either sides of the author's creative act (both his or her writing and our reading) necessarily misrepresents the "facts" of the literary process. For Melville, writing and reading must in equivalent fashion be pluralistic; it must enlighten the rhetorical conditions of the author's creativity. (ix)

This notion of essaying as both a process of writing and reading repeats itself in Bryant's conception of Melville as "a writer in process": "the Writer who never stopped writing, and never stopped growing" ("Writer in Process" 1). Or that writing "was a function of his being" ("Melville Essays the Romance" 277). However, more recently, Bryant elaborates his concept of essayism by juxtaposing Montaigne's cautious "bank-side negotiations" of the abyss, with Melville's "romancing" as "a more precarious form of essaying" that was "not only a discovery of the relation of self and other; [but] it was a strategy for reaching an audience" to the extent that the "whale is we" (285, 306). That is, we study our inscrutable self. He wishes to "underscore the inadequacy of genres such as 'Letter' and 'Romance' in reaching an understanding of Melville's use of writing in confronting the problem of being" ("Melville Essays the Romance" 279); instead he argues, "Romance is not a genre, it is Melville's trying out of his sense of Being, a process that generates versions of the self" (280). Although this sounds much like the essayism presented here, Bryant's discussion is relatively brief. My disagreement is less with how Bryant's essayism diminishes the innovativeness and importance of Montaigne's *Essays* nor that he

neglects how Montaigne's essayism emerged from the suffering and tragedies of life.⁶⁹ Nor necessarily with his concept of Melville "romancing" in *Moby-Dick* per se, which he expands beyond the "essay" function to include the characteristics "doubling (of author and reader)," "strangeness," "voice," "sexuality," "comedy," all as ways of attracting and stimulating readers. My contention, rather, is that while readerly essayism underlies Bryant's conception of romancing, he dehistoricizes the tradition of the essayism since Montaigne. For Bryant, Montaigne is a romancer, whose behavior consists only in "trying out" and a restrained "skepticism." And while he mentions the influence of Poe and Hawthorne, and through comparison Emerson and Whitman, Bryant does so only briefly. Montaigne is not Melville's only

⁶⁹ Melville certainly bore witness to violence of western imperialism, the "scourge" aboard naval battleships, the fratricide of the Civil War, and may possibly even have had a half-sister born of his father's infidelity. On the other hand, Montaigne was deeply affected by the death of his beloved father—"the best father that ever was"—his brother's sudden death after being struck by a tennis ball, witnessing the painful death of his best friend, consular, poet, and philosopher Étienne de La Boétie, and his own near death experience while horseback riding—not to mention the death of five of his six children, and an estranged relationship with both his wife and mother. I believe Stephen Greenblatt concisely demonstrates Montaigne was hardly the reclusive, genteel bachelor with which the narrator of "I and my chimney" so strongly identifies,

Yet even in the wake of this decision [to retire in 1571 at the age of thirty-eight], he remained far more involved in the public realm than the tone of his essays suggests. He tried unsuccessfully, after the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, to mediate between the Catholic Henri de Guise and the Protestant Henri de Navarre; he served two two-year terms as the major of Bordeaux; he acted as an informal, confidential adviser to successive kings and to important men and women in the court. He took part in the siege by Catholic forces of the Protestant stronghold of La Fère; he was arrested in Paris in 1588 on order of the Catholic League and then quickly released; constantly attempting to moderate murderous religious passions, he was distrusted and attacked by zealots on both sides. And in the midst of these public affairs, he continued to manage his large, complex estate with its extensive landholdings; he tried to protect his family and dependents from the periodic outbreaks of bubonic plague (which during one of his terms of office killed nearly half the inhabitants of Bordeaux); he visited the mineral baths of Germany, Switzerland, and Italy in hope of some relief from the excruciating pain of the kidney stones by which he was afflicted. His was not an untroubled life of solitary meditation. (xii)

Of course, the point is not to merely exalt Montaigne essays, or even suggest Melville came to view Montaigne as merely a genial bachelor. As Greenblatt suggests of Shakespeare, so as perhaps with Melville, "[his] borrowing here... is an act not of homage but of aggression" (Greenblatt xxviii). Melville's relationship, as the range of anamnestic allusion show, was dynamic, if not just as fraught.

author, but like Montaigne, Melville writes in the margins of other texts. Melville's Montaigne is not a reference to the *real* author, but a reference to allegories of reading which present essayistic readerly practices that simultaneously function as discursive modes of being. Bryant's Montaignian readerly essayism is a much narrower consideration of the author and essay. Simply put, Melville's relation to essayism is neither reducible to the influence of Montaigne, nor is his essayism merely stylistic. Rather, the anamnestic allusion to Montaigne figures and authorizes throughout Melville's work a broader conception of a readerly essayism as discursive mode of being. For Bryant, essayism works for both writers and reader. The latter is lead to self-examination through the reflection of the former. While this conclusion is desirable, the process does not quite stand to reason. It lacks a robust conception of literary history, intention, and the ambiguity of language, which is also our inability to ever fully understand one another or ourselves.

Thus, we turn to Claire de Obaldia's *The Esssayistic Spirit*, which attempts to survey American, Insular, and Continental traditions and scholarship of the essay.⁷⁰ This study casts a wide net necessarily because, as de Obaldia explains, the "striking lack of co-ordination that exists (i) within specialized studies on the essay and between them (both within one country and *a fortiori* between countries (ii) between studies on the essay and studies on particular essayists, and, overlapping with this; (iii) between studies on the essay, studies on genre, and literary criticism in general"

⁷⁰ In addition to the well-known works on the essay by Lukács, Adorno, Barthes, and Borges, she also considers theoretical works well-known in the US: Graham Good's *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (1988) and Thomas Harrison's *Essayism: Conrad, Musil & Pirandello* (1992).

(58-59). As such, summarizing her approach presents a similar challenge. However, given this very issue, and possibility of misinterpretation, her argument requires some elaboration. For de Obaldia, the essay as genre begins with the conception that “indeterminacy is germane to its essence,” an “essentially ambulatory and fragmentary prose form,” and points out the commonly rehearsed etymological evidence (2).⁷¹ Leading in turn to “a randomness which seems to elude the unifying conception—syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic—of a recognizable generic identity,” disorienting the reader’s horizon of expectations, and subverting the authority and authenticity of the very “someone who claims to speak in his or her own name” (2-3). Moreover, the essay is a mixture (narrative, dramatic, and poetic) of literary characteristics: the lyric or “poetic” provides the fragmentary/paratactic structure and the self “overheard”; the dramatic of dialogue as “indirect imitation”; and from the epic, its story-telling form, especially as providing *exempla*, which in turn give rise to the author as didactic narrator (3). However, its differentiation from the novel is primarily one of central and “marginal (un- or sub-literary) genre” (4). Here de Obaldia and Bryant diverge. Where Bryant rejects the essay as Romance genre, and attributes a Montaignian essayism (viz. skeptical, testing, “fictive”) as writerly/readerly mode to Melville, de Obaldia sustains the dual distinction, while noting the essay also suffers from the inherent logic of genre itself. It is between

⁷¹ The definitions of the essay are manifold: to try, to test, to weigh, to discuss, to expel, to examine, an examination, an experiment, a trial. Used as a form of self-effacement, a beginner’s attempt, there are as many commentaries on the essay as there are definitions. The term “essayist” is an English invention, though originally an *essayuer* certified the authenticity and value of coins. Michel Eyquem de Montaigne celebrated the word’s polysemy.

literary and extraliterary, but also neither literary or philosophic (critical) enough, and thus belongs to the Alastair Fowler's category of literature *in potentia*, along with, and simultaneously drawing from, other marginal genres such as memoir, history, dialogue, epistolary (5).⁷² Thus, the essay remains both in and marginal to non-fiction, essay-relatives, precursor forms or antecedents, and Literature as such (i.e. the category meriting literary status), which de Obaldia articulates through synchronic and diachronic dimensions (7).

The synchronic approach seeks to characterize the essay primarily through the Montaignian tradition (though not reducible to Montaigne, and in contrast to the more argumentative Baconian tradition), which suggests, a "fusion of thought and style," "judicious use of dramatic, narrative, poetic" and rhetorical devices, and striking a balance between stylistic self-indulgence and imaginative artistic purity, which Lukács describes as akin to portrait painting (9). According to de Obaldia, Lukács adds that criticism itself is the essence of the essay, which combines with a poetic

⁷² However, he could at times be rhapsodic, especially in his letters to Hawthorne. As one Lynn Horth notes, "a single letter to a receptive correspondent far outweighed the value of a book sold to a wide audience of dull and uncomprehending readers...[Melville] wished all of his writing could simply be in the form of such letters" (*Correspondence* 794). However, later in life a more cynical Melville wrote in response to a British admirer, "But a letter on almost any theme, is but an inadequate vehicle, so I will say no more" (*Correspondence* 489). Montaigne adapted the art of conversation to his prose. Montaigne writes, "You will recognize in [the *Essais*] the same bearing and the same air that you have seen in [my] conversation" (qtd. in Stuckey-French 16). Casarino argues, through a Benjaminian conception of the novel, that though Melville was a "solitary individual," he linked the epic with the conversational (*conférence*) of Montaigne and the drama of Shakespeare (56). He followed Montaigne's model, and used "examples of his most important concerns" to "counsel others." Thus, Melville united the essay and epic, and achieved a "side of truth." Walter Benjamin's writes, "The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out" ("The Storyteller" 87). Benjamin draws a link between orality and the epic. If "the birthplace of the novel [in modernity] is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others" ("The Storyteller" 87). Benjamin continues, "What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it" ("The Storyteller" 87).

intertextuality in which primary and secondary discourse remain on one level rather than hierarchized (11). But this poetic license itself sparks, and indeed requires, speculation and imagination in the reader, as most obvious in the “quasi-fictional compositions...of a quasi-narrator” in English periodical essays (11). De Obaldia writes, “the exploitation of fictional resources and strategies” of the essay’s “apparent emancipation from mimeticism” motivates an acute, and possibly more intense, perception of reality (12). For de Obaldia, this fictiveness is central to her understanding of the essay in diachronic relation to the novel. That is, de Obaldia maintains the distinction between the essay (and the essayistic intrinsic to it) and other genres, while Bryant would seek to cut all ties with genre. This may explain in part why his essayism seems out of place, and somewhat arbitrarily imposed.⁷³

De Obaldia maintains the distinction between essay and novel, in that they share a capacity to “combine literary modes,” but also demonstrates how they interpenetrate one another. Both simultaneously emerge from the same historical moment: for the essay in Continental (Montaigne) and Insular (Bacon)⁷⁴ context. That

⁷³ Coincidentally, Bryant’s points out romance is a genre that “leads to implosion,” because it deconstructs itself through “elemental strangeness,” “formal exceptionalism,” and being “not a fully recognized nineteenth-century form” (“Melville Essays the Romance” 281). For the last reason, Bryant writes, “Romance...was the word that a writer might use to describe poetic extraction, the ‘working up’ of an idea, brainstorming, or just plain writing.” He notes this leads to a tautology where a “Romance is nothing more than that which writers write when they are romancing” (282). On the one hand, while, “any writer’s performance is accordingly the result of an interpenetration of that artist’s singular alienation and the dominate ideology of a culture”; on the other hand, artists “attempt to articulate some alien other in his, her, and our own personal or social being” and “writers may not write to fulfill generic conventions; they may simply write, and rarely end up with precisely the structures or symbols with which they began” (280-282). The parallels to de Obaldia’s understanding of the essay seem to abound.

⁷⁴ “The more elusive essayistic mode or ‘spirit’ privileged by the etymological meaning of the word, on the other hand, remains more directly based on the ‘Montaignian’ essay than on the Baconian

is, during the Renaissance, with the rise of a bourgeois individualism (the possibility of the subject and subjectivization), the “philosophical shift from universal to particulars,” and the “transition from a collective tradition to the focus on individuality and originality,” which yet inescapably remains reflexively critical of the very same collective, canonical literary and philosophic tradition that it seeks to differentiate itself from (13-14).⁷⁵ Both genres must suffer the sins of their parents. The essay especially translates these cultural shifts into literary structures attract a wider readership (15). The essay becomes neither so technical, nor without style. However, by subordinating everything to the “self-definition” of the essayist, the essay differentiates itself from the novel: “ill-defined” plot, continuity of characters, or incongruity of experience together serve as pretexts for essayists to discuss themselves (15). Readers must continually adjust to the emerging fictional self (16). While Bryant’s “romancing” offers in its “doubling” or “sexuality,” as an exchange of minds, de Obaldia believes the same. But she also adds that the “emerging fictional self” foregrounds not just the a more robust analysis of the discrepancy within synchronic (generic/systemic) epistemologies, but also the diachronic (historical/temporal) element, and thus dynamic difference of the essay as “not yet” literature (16). As with the recollection of previous authors, the relativism and perspectivalism evinced by the temporal element results in a much deeper skepticism

equivalent, independently of the fact that Montaigne is the first practitioner and the first theorist of the genre” (de Obaldia 38).

⁷⁵ Here, de Obaldia draws primarily upon Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel: Studies of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*.

than Bryant suggests. At the level of genre, what occurs, according to de Obaldia, is the idea of the essays comes to be seen as

“preparing for the novel” or conversely of the novel trying itself out in the essay, [which] implies a shift of perspective from an autonomous literary genre to an act (the act of essaying) that is only justified by its leading up to something else: the genre is presented in terms of what it is not, or not yet. The shift from the “essay” to “essaying: recognizably operates simultaneously at the level of literary history and of the individual writer’s work when the latter comprises essays written before the literature “proper.” (17)

This is why the skeptic can only try or test appearances. On the other hand, the dogmatist accepts the “point of view of a linear progression which leads from incoherence and incompleteness to the totalizing mastery of meaning, to a final(ized) text that materializes through the filling in of gaps or the reduction of the play of differences” (18). A marginal or periphery status constitutes the essay as paratext, to use Genette’s term: “to be found immediately within the periphery of the literary work” or “as a development of notes or glosses in the margins of the existing intertext” (20).⁷⁶ There is no equivalent of this idea in Bryant. Given the dual meaning of para (against/alongside), or inside and outside the text, de Obaldia views the essay’s relationship between the center and the periphery as one of both homogeneity (continuity) and heterogeneity: “not only is the paratext an ‘aspect of all textuality’ and a class of text; it is a genre in its own right” (27). De Obaldia then

⁷⁶ De Obaldia, too, notes the tendency in which prefaces are often recasts as essays (20).

recognizes in this the “paradoxical logic of the fragment as a genre, as theorized and practiced by the German Romantics” (27).⁷⁷ It is worth noting that in the fall of the formative year 1849, on a trip to London to sell proofs of *White-Jacket*, Melville would befriend the New York University Professor George Adler, a scholar of German philosophy and literature, and “talked metaphysics constantly, & Hegel, Schlegel, Kant &c” (*Journals* 8). De Obaldia writes,

The fragment can be part of a whole which exists; or part of a whole which it does not yet—or no longer—belong to; alternatively, there can be an absolute hiatus between fragment and whole. The relationship between draft and “completed” text is not to be regarded (only) as a linear progression leading to a finalized text through the filling in of gaps or the reduction of the play of differences. The drafts are not so much residues as different versions of the

⁷⁷ De Obaldia, citing Michel Beaujour and R. Lane Kauffman, suggests continuity between the German Romanticism period and the current post-romantic period. The very twentieth-century German theorists, including Lukács, Benjamin, and Adorno, that identified the diachronic “essayistic” as the essence of the essay, also drew on the work of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and Jean Paul (39). They believed the essay is “bound to rise and prosper in times of generic transitions and crises, which (always) makes evanescence and obsolesce a part of its very nature” (39). From there, she charts a trajectory through Schlegel’s work on the fragment and the novel, embodied in the *Bildungsroman* (viz. Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*), to Hegel’s *Phenomenology* as a “journey of enlightenment,” to the responses by the “Continental essayism,” primarily the Frankfurt School, viz. their critique of Cartesian “scholasticism” (philosophy as science), and support for anti-systemic, non-totalizing approaches, and French post-structuralism viz. their interests in the autonomous operation of “writing” or “textuality,” and the philosophy of margins. She writes, “For [modern] Continental essayism at large, the rejection of self-reflection in those terms [self-reflection as foundation for all systems of knowledge] concerns not least the claim to linguistic transparency, to the transparence of the spoken or the oral made by a context-free, ‘genre-less’ philosophy which passes itself off as science” (51). Hartle argues that Montaignian “accidental” is consistent with “Adorno’s description of the essay as a kind of phenomenology” that takes the most familiar, embodied, unnecessary particular as a claim to truth (rejecting the generalizing deliberate philosophy), and anticipates Adorno’s anti-systematic thinking (34): “The essay takes the Hegalian logic at its word: neither may the truth of the totality be played off immediately against individual judgments, nor may truth be reduced to individual judgments; rather, the claim of the particular to truth is taken literally to the point where there is evidence of its untruth...” (Adorno qtd. in Hartle 35-36).

text outside the chronological rationale of “before” and “after,” “cause and effect” (27)

While the dogmatist reads (misreads) the linear progression of the essay, the skeptic perceives a nonlinear fragmentariness. Where it is most fragmentary the essay confounds the dogmatist. What does this suggest for the reader? “It is precisely because the paratext stand for or ‘re-presents’ the text,” de Obaldia, writes, “that the text is made accessible to the reader without his or her having to read it” (27-28). This is the same conclusion of *Pierre*. The fragment is the prenumbra of the textual world, our experience mediated by language. We understand even if we do not know we know: the unknown known. How does understanding emerge then? She writes, “the essay’s resistance to a ‘neutralist model’ is illustrated by its interest in revealing the author’s process of thinking unconstrained by any forgone conclusions. Instead of leading the passive reader ‘step-by-step, in clarity,’ the essayist requires the reader’s active participation in the form of a constantly renewed evaluation, deduction, and interpretation of the mater at hand” (33). Though even that knowledge is non-authoritative, inauthentic, and incomplete. In any case, not only does Bryant’s romance reader seem fully in control of their faculties and comprehension, but, as he omits the contradictions of generic thinking (and we are always thinking in genre), the transference of knowledge is equally unproblematized. The message is always received *in toto*. However, Melville was well aware of the gulf between writer and reader. Taji, White-Jacket, and Ishmael, despite their reading, struggle with knowing the correct direction to take, and perhaps never achieve an understanding of what they

are actually searching for. On the other hand, Pierre, Vere, and the “Chimney” bachelor *know*; they have become dogmatic in their knowledge, and thus do not understand the need for skepticism, adaptation, essayism, to their own folly. They lack awareness of their own limits, openness to other interpretations, and appreciation of historical context; they cannot see beyond their own narrow epistemology and discursive mode of being. Only Billy Budd and Melville’s Montaigne adopt an accidental philosophy that is a learned ignorance. They attempt to recollect their former self, and the trace of their original intention. Through experience they transcend knowledge, for understanding of what they knew all along, and in doing so, they intentionally adopt virtues in spite of the absences of universal truth and reason. These positions seem similar, and appear to take place in the momentary context of a single essay; however, the passage of time, the process of reading within what Bergson calls the “thick present,” leads to a new, slightly altered awareness.⁷⁸ On the other hand, the dogmatist stagnates. De Obaldia captures this contest of will, reading, and knowledge, when she writes, the “concession of the reader’s leverage on the interpretation of the world, like that of the author’s, also coincides with the recognition of his or her relative powerlessness. For the essaying of the writer and reader’s ideas necessarily goes hand in hand with the essaying—and therefore with the continuous revision—of his understanding” (33). Readerly essayism adopts the flux. She continues, the “ultimate consequence of Montaignian skepticism...results in

⁷⁸ Thus, Wittgenstein’s claim in the *Philosophical Investigations*, the “concept of understanding” comprises both “the sense in which [a sentence] can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by another” (143-44 §531-32).

the completely autonomous operation of 'writing' or 'textuality' with no conscious subject in control, and so to the total abolition of the subjective principle" (51-52).

This is recognition of how we are determined, though without reason or purpose, by the limits of language. De Obaldia concludes,

In short, the space ascribed to the active reader (as writer) ultimately bears out "the experience of a prose that undermines certainty and moves away from clarity, complicating what had at first sight seemed perfectly simple, raising more problems than it solves." If answers are not only not provided in advance, but, more usually, not provided at all this is because the reader's invitation to interpret is an invitation to the deeply "unsettling" experience of having his conclusions then declared premature or invalid, and in the end of having "the very possibility of understanding itself called into question." (34)

She describes the resulting ambiguity for both writer and reader later as,

The explicitly "immanent" position of paratextual criticism between the inside and outside of the work establishes a relationship of contamination whereby self-identity, determinacy, and closure are undermined on both sides of the margin. The adequation of parts and whole traditionally confirmed by an "absolute," Hegelian reading thus becomes impossible both "intratextually" and intertextually: whether in the form of self-reflection or external reflection, "difference" opens up every text, which, by definition, is always "beside itself." (56-57)

The result is a reading that is not sure what it has read: an aporia. The paratextual

fragment of the essay keeps understanding of “self-identity, determinacy, and closure” always just out of reach. While Bryant and de Obaldia certainly draw similar conclusions about essayism, ultimately, de Obaldia is more robust for maintaining the tension between genre/mode and paratext/novel. Moreover, her essayism more directly confronts the problematics of interpretation, the impossibility of understanding. This requires that we clarify the applicability of Hartle’s reading of Montaigne’s “Apology” (as circular dialectic between faith and reason) to *Moby-Dick*’s pilot-fish and whale dialectic of text (between the particular intention and universal interpretation, between reader and text). Hartle argues that, “Montaigne’s ‘self’ is not present in the *Essays* as ‘substance’ or as modern ‘subjectivity.’ It is present just as the most familiar. That is why the circular dialectic comes back to himself” (38). However, as illustrated through Melville’s allegories of reading, there is no original text, and certainly no original self to which one may return. Thus, “learned ignorance” does not simply appear as a contradiction as Hartle suggests; the effect of the oxymoron is not merely to imply a clarifying second glance. In other words, the anamnestic recollection is not to return to either an original or a modified understanding, but to suggest an aporia whose rhetorical effect goes beyond, outside the text. An aporia that inculcates the reader attuned to rhetorical effects, leading them to begin questioning themselves: an effect which is not ornamental, but ontological. The paradox of readers continually reading in new ways while remaining ignorant is suspended. Thus, now, a readerly essayism as a discursive mode of being is a willingness on the part of the reader to stay suspended within the aporia. This is

not illogical, but a suspension of logic within the textual field of rhetoric.⁷⁹ And though what emerges from the text is unclear, the conditions for emergence are nevertheless present in the traces, the recollection, of a unified self, other, author, object, experience, and intention. The reader must struggle with the trace of recollection. To clarify, this is not to suggest that I agree with La Bossière argument that “Wisdom is vain,” and Melville ends in a “final testament to silence” (83, 85). In both cases, Melville’s texts reveal quite the opposite. La Bossière remains committed to a singular universal, and intentioned meaning behind Melville’s text without considering how the reading process must nevertheless continually. Wisdom and silence no longer apply as epistemological categories. Nor am I suggesting that Bryant’s romancing does not open new, valuable pathways for scholarship. Rather, my goal is to offer a more robust conception of Montaignian readerly essayism. De Obaldia maintains, most importantly, that “dialogue between writer and reader...replaces scientific monologism...” (54). For “Romantic essayists,” says de Obaldia, “champion the use of paradox, self-contradiction, and indirection, thwarting the potential reader’s easy, immediate comprehension, his ‘passive acquiescing’ and ‘parroting’ of other’s labors and insights, and stimulating him instead to ‘creative engagement’” (55). At the very least, Bryant’s romancing relationship is love/hate. But a readerly essayism conceived here, suspended within aporia, is certainly non-totalizing, nor leading to anything, nor ever quite understanding.

⁷⁹ Melville’s allegories of reading are rhetorical suspensions. They are not meant to be logical, and yet cohere without self-contradiction. Further analysis might consider how tropes such as anapodoton (the absence of the main subject), anacoluthon (an interruption), ellipsis (an omission), ellipses (a trailing off), and aposiopesis (a sudden breaking off) figure in Melville.

If, as Bryant suggests, the Montaignian call is *Que sçais-je?*—what do I know? Montaigne’s response is *encore ne sçay-je*—though I don’t know (285).⁸⁰ This suspension seems fundamental to Melville’s Montaigne as allegories of reading, and to the Montaignian readerly essayism suggested by these allegories. It is not surprising perhaps that both Bryant and de Obaldia arrive at a similar place. As Bryant writes, “Always revising, Melville died an inveterate essayer. His search for voice was never complete, but the search itself was all that mattered; it was the warm sparking of his artful repose” (*Melville and Repose* 267). In his introduction to *A Companion to Melville Studies*, Bryant also writes, “knowing how we read Melville illuminates the equally creative process of reading,” that interpretations are “hypotheses designed to stimulate thought not put an end to it” (xxi, xxiii). Even in *Moby-Dick*’s romancing, Bryant writes, “Melville essays Ishmael; he tries him out, and, in doing so, moves on” (“Melville Essays the Romance” 309). While, if I may paraphrase de Obaldia, the essayistic utopia is “by definition unrealizable,” and ideally so, but in drawing the reader’s attention to the curious potential of the essay, which is grounded in the very questions of literature itself, one may turn toward the notion of what can be written, rather than merely what has or *should* have been written (64). Conversely, Melville’s Montaigne, his anamnestic allusions as allegories of reading, will always be about the potential of reading: of what can be read. But is this enough?

⁸⁰ In *How to Live*, Sarah Bakewell suggests “though I do not know” operates as a “final coda” to all Montaigne’s work, and should be imagined as appended “to almost everything he wrote” (43). Melville’s allegories of reading also lead to such a suspension.

It is not necessarily to impose a *telos* upon Melville's anamnestic allegories of reading, nor to manipulate them into a coherent system leading to a discursive mode of being that remains in an readerly essayistic aporetic suspension. From *Mardi* to *Billy Budd*, Melville's Montaigne transforms to address different problematics of reading. One is no more the right way to read than the other. Where does this voyage end then? Like Taji's quest or Nord's journey, we cannot know. As Melville himself writes, "Truth is the silliest thing under the sun," and "what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion" (*Correspondence* 191, 194). *Mardi* and *White-Jacket* allegorize the search for a static, true knowledge only to demonstrate the need for constant searching and questioning adaptation. This is a shift from epistemology to skeptical ontology, from defining what *is* true knowledge to a discursive mode of being. However, this position itself—being in constant flux, ever searching and striving—is hardly sustainable, if even achievable. Nothing stays suspended. In 1851, Melville wrote Hawthorne, "though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter" (*Correspondence* 192). Even Melville could not quite bring himself to internalize what he had discovered. He laments, "Lord, when shall we be done growing? As long as we have anything more to do, we have done nothing... Lord, when shall we be down changing?" (*Correspondence* 213). This study has noted, on the one hand, how Melville's works following *Moby-Dick* are more difficult, and thus require closer reading—a intervening interpretation—by the reader, which makes sense of the allegory. On the other hand, as allegories of reading, they problematize the position of

the reader. A circular dialectic leads Montaigne to realize what he knew already, his accidental philosophy, and a learned ignorance steered him away from dogmatism, and a “whale” dialectic clarified the reader’s challenging navigation of textual interpretation between faith and reason, trail and error, intention and text. Ishmael’s plight shows that recollection, understanding, and study, even of what is most familiar, the self, does not lead necessarily to greater awareness either of the world or the self. Both remain inaccessible. Even recognition of one’s intention does not imply understanding. Or, as in the case of Pierre, readers can neither rely on iconoclastic, willful rejection nor find solace in inscrutable silence. Reading itself is not to be exalted, and the bachelor shows how even this metaphilosophy of reading must learn to adapt to different genres and contexts. Though worth trying, folly is ultimately cynical, and cannot sustain the reader either. A prescriptive virtue ethics too easily produces dogmatism. The reader must still endeavor to interpret the text and be open to interpretation; the gravity of this task is allegorized in both narrative and semantic ambiguity of *Billy Budd*. The wrong interpretation, a misreading, has fatal consequences. Reading aesthetics is always ethical. If Melville’s Montaigne makes us aware of the problematics of reading, what alternatives, what readerly essayism, can we adopt? Ultimately, Bryant’s essayism, although totalizing, lacks a material historicity. It maintains no pretense to authority or authenticity, and is granted none. As such, the limitations of our experience lived through language remain unquestioned. De Obaldia addresses this lacuna, and suggests the paratextual, fragmentariness of the essay results in an a myriad of contradictions, which have the

rhetorical effect of interpellating the reader, inculcating a recognition of the powerlessness of the reader and the impossibility of understanding. The consequence is that the aporias that emerge from each subsequent rhetorical reading require ever more intervening interpretation from the reader, and while they suspend the reading process within the rhetorical, if not logical field, they can never escape it. Aporia creates a *mise en abyme*. Ambiguity and uncertainty *ad infinitum*. But the epistemological and ontological consequences of how we read are nevertheless made real. A readerly essayism, then, requires a zeugmatic formation; an imaginative bridging of these disparate aporia under a new name to makes new discursive modes of reading, and thus of being, possible. For Montaigne, “the Pyrrhonian philosophers...cannot express their general conception in any kind of speaking; for they would require a new language” (II:12 244).⁸¹ An imaginative interpretation must create this new language. Readers cannot rest suspended in aporia, nor more than in contradiction as Fitzgerald realized,⁸² but must yoke them together, and create new

⁸¹ Montaigne continues, “ours is all formed of affirmative propositions, which are totally antarctic [a polar extreme] to them; insomuch that when they say ‘I doubt,’ they are presently taken by the throat, to make them confess that at least they know and are assured that they do doubt. By which means they have been compelled to shelter themselves under this medical comparison, without which their humour would be inexplicable: when they pronounce, ‘I know not,’ or, ‘I doubt,’ they say that this proposition carries off itself with the rest, no more nor less than rhubarb, that drives out the ill humours, and carries itself off with them. This fancy will be more certainly understood by interrogation: “What do I know?” as I bear it with the emblem of a balance” (II:12 244). Thus, Montaigne criticizes weak arguments against Pyrrhonian skepticism, and notes his own adoption of the motto as his family crest.

⁸² Cf. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s essay “The Crack-Up.” “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines,” Emerson suggests. We must adopt something less dogmatic, like Keats’s negative capability, the quality of a humanity being “capable of being in uncertainties.” An essayism like Whitman’s “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.” A final parallel: Starbuck’s plea to Ahab “Oh Captain, my captain! noble soul! grand old heart, after all! why should any one give chase to that hated fish!” would appear in the opening line of Whitman’s poem “Oh Captain! My Captain!” (*Moby-Dick* 406). Fortunately, as Sir Philip Sidney notes, “the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth.”

words, new writing, which expresses what was impossible to say. Such are powers of imagination and fiction, so that, as Montaigne writes in “Of Repentance,” “I may contradict truth, but...never myself” (III:2 371). Melville’s Montaigne, his allegories of reading, demonstrates how this might be done: for “never will the pullers-down be able to cope with the builders-up” (*Correspondence* 121).

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