

Reading Melville: A Note on the Difficulties of His Style

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Phillipe Sollers wrote about twenty years ago that "today the essential question is no longer that of the writer and the work, but that of writing and reading."¹ Developments in the academic landscape over the past few decades give substance to his words. The concept suggested in his words introduced us to a literary study focused on "writing as an institution and reading as an activity."² Consequently, it is by now well known, even outside academic circles, that "the question of 'reading' has become a central issue in literary study, along with the equally vexed question of 'writing.'"³

This change in the landscape has resulted in a movement in literary study towards the new concept of the so-called New Historicism. This movement, which has appeared as "the emerging emphasis in literary and American cultural studies,"⁴ seems to be bolstering its power all the more in the current academic scene. The resulting shift in the landscape, however, should not devalue the former one, of 'writing and reading,' as old and exhausted, as the achievements attained during the past decades remain viable.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the question of "reading" Melville. Reading Melville is a singular experience, particularly for a foreign reader without the benefit of competence in English. The well-known difficulties, as well as the exhausting length of some of his works, are surely challenges to such readers. With this in mind, the question of "reading," that is, the question of why reading Melville is a difficult task, and what is the structure and the meaning of its difficulty, has to be considered. Determining the answer will lead to an increase in the understanding of his work, since reading is an act with direct relation to written text, not only with respect to the question of reading Melville but also of writing in Melville.

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Difficulty is a significant feature in Melville's works. Perhaps one of its most striking instances occurs in chapter 97 of *Mardi* (1849). In this chapter, entitled "Faith and Knowledge," the narrator comments on the incredible story about the operation of the brain as told by one of the characters, a savage named Samoa. The entire chapter consists of four paragraphs, and reads as follows:

A thing incredible is about to be related; but a thing may be incredible and still be true; sometimes it is incredible because it is true. And many infidels but disbelieve the least incredible things; and many bigots reject the most obvious. But let us hold fast to all we have; and stop all leaks in our faith; lest an opening, but of a hand's breadth, should sink our seventy-fours. The wide Atlantic can rush in at one port-hole; and if we surrender a plank, we surrender the fleet. Panoplied in all the armor of St. Paul, morion, hauberk, and greaves, let us fight the Turks inch by inch, and yield them naught but our corpse.

But let us not turn round upon friends, confounding them with foes. For dissenters only assent to more than we. Though Milton was a heretic to the creed of Athanasius, his faith exceeded that of Athanasius himself; and the faith of Athanasius that of Thomas, the disciple, who with his own eyes beheld the mark of the nails. Whence it comes that though we be all Christians now, the best of us had perhaps been otherwise in the days of Thomas.

The higher the intelligence, the more faith, and the less credulity: Gabriel rejects more than we, but out-believes us all. The greatest marvels are first truths; and first truths the last unto which we attain. Things nearest are furthest off. Though your ear be next-door to your brain, it is forever removed from your sight. Man has a more comprehensive view of the moon, than the man in the moon himself. We know the moon is round; he only infers it. It is because we ourselves are in ourselves, that we know ourselves not. And it is only of our easy faith, that we are not infidels throughout; and only of our lack of faith, that we believe what we do.

In some universe-old truths, all mankind are disbelievers. Do you believe that you lived three thousand years ago? That you were at the taking of Tyre, were overwhelmed in Gomorrah? No. But for me, I was at the subsiding of the Deluge, and helped swab the ground, and build the first house. With the Israelites, I fainted in the wilderness; was in court, when Solomon outdid all the judges before him. I, it was, who suppressed the lost work of Manetho, on the Egyptian theology, as containing mysteries not

to be revealed to posterity, and things at war with the canonical scriptures; I, who originated the conspiracy against that purple murderer, Domitian; I, who in the senate moved, that great and good Aurelian be emperor. I instigated the abdication of Diocletian, and Charles the Fifth; I touched Isabella's heart, that she hearkened to Columbus. I am he, that from the king's minions hid the Charter in the old oak at Hartford; I harbored Goffe and Whalley: I am the leader of the Mohawk masks, who in the Old Commonwealth's harbor, overboard threw the East India Company's Souchong; I am the Vailed Persian Prophet; I, the man in the iron mask; I, Junius.

Difficulty in reading can be found in each paragraph. The first paragraph, for example, contains five sentences, and the semantic connection between them does not seem sufficiently clear. The first sentence tells about the paradoxical relationship between things "incredible" and things "true." But the second sentence, with ambiguous parallelism of nouns such as "infidels" and "bigots," and also with the crooked phrase of negatives like "disbelieve the least incredible things," does not help to give the reader a clear understanding of the message in connection with the one conveyed in the former sentence. This vagueness is further reinforced in the following sentences. The third sentence does not give a clear idea of what "all we have" means, and, moreover, words like "seventy-fours," "morion," "hauberk," and "greaves," which would sound unfamiliar to the average native English reader, add to the vagueness.

In the second paragraph, the reference is made by the narrator to Milton, Athanasius, and Thomas. But it is not easy to make out the narrator's intention for this reference. In the first sentence, where he seems to give what appears to be a concluding remark of the paragraph, he advises the reader not to confound "friends" with "foes." But his explication does not seem clear enough. It is not easy for the reader to decide, at least at first reading, whether Milton is one of the "dissenters" or not. Moreover, it is also difficult to identify Athanasius and Thomas either with "friends" or "foes." According to the narrator, the faith of Athanasius was inferior to that of Milton, while the faith of Thomas was inferior to that of Athanasius.

In the third paragraph, the narrator suggests that "intelligence" and "faith" are the barometer of "credulity" and that the former is inversely proportional to the latter. But vagueness occurs again. What the narrator means by the words "Gabriel rejects" is not clear, and the relation between "marvels" and "truths" is not clearly suggested, either. The illustration of the paradox "things nearest are furthest off" is also vague. The non-native reader of English cannot have a clear concept of the relationship between "ear," "brain," and

"sight." Furthermore, the relationship between "he" and "we" is also vague; it is confusing whether it is the man in the moon or a man on the earth that cannot see himself. Besides, the concluding message in the final sentence is again not easily understandable.

The fourth paragraph contains at least two types of difficulties: one concerning the general import of the paragraph, and the other concerning the narrator's references to characters. As to the former, it is difficult to guess the narrator's real intention when he states in the first sentence that "all mankind are disbelievers" and later confesses that he was and has been concerned with many unbelievable facts. As to the latter, the repetitive references to the historical, religious, or mythological figures such as "Manetho," "the purple murderer, Domitian," "Goffe and Whalley," "the Vailed Persian Prophet," and "Junius," refuse the reader easy access to the meaning. Unless assisted by the dictionaries or encyclopaedias, it would surely be difficult for the average reader to reach the deeper, almost esoteric meanings expressed through these references.

Final difficulties still await. After having read all four paragraphs, the reader is still at a loss. It is not easy to gain a logical understanding of the relationship between subject and content, that is, between the title of the chapter and its contents. Much has been told in the paragraphs about "faith," yet the question of "knowledge" remains unspecified; consequently, the reader is again left in the world of vagueness.

The sources of this vagueness, or these ambiguities or opacities, may be either the inadequacy of explanation, the looseness of logic, the incoherency of reference, or the employment of unfamiliar words or references, and might certainly be a combination of these. Whatever they may be, it comes out that the entire chapter 97 of *Mardi* stands as a good example for the reader of confronting the problem of difficulty of reading Melville's prose.

II

The difficulty in reading would of course differ between individual readers. It would depend on reading competency, on the amount of vocabulary, or the stock of information that is held on the part of the reader. The difficulty found in the above chapter is in this sense a very relative one. But the repetitiveness of the occurrences of similar difficulties in many texts other than *Mardi* suggests that this is perhaps indicative of Melville's style in general, in the writing of his prose. If so, further analysis of the aspect of difficulty in his prose would provide perhaps a clearer understanding of the structure of writing in Melville and the meaning it has.

The difficulty found in chapter 97 of *Mardi* seems to be caused by at least three factors; vocabulary, rhetoric, and logic. In the first paragraph, for example, we come across words like "seventy-fours," "hauberk," and "greaves." These are terms too technical and unfamiliar for the reader without military experience or background. However, this is very often the case with Melville's works. The reader is very often met with unfamiliar words, often technical, employed to give information about various things and phenomena. Words like "faith," "knowledge," or "credulity" may also cause such difficulty. These words may not sound so difficult, but when employed in the context of philosophy or religion the level of their difficulty increases with deep connotations of their meaning. The richness in vocabulary is sometimes helpful in presenting the richness in expression. But, at the same time, it may have become an obstacle to reading. The rich vocabulary can be a reflection of the writer's wide range of interest, but it may end in bringing about difficulty and confusion to the reader.

Another factor of difficulty is rhetoric, by which is meant the use of rich imagery or the use of rich rhetorical expressions. In the second and fourth paragraphs of chapter 97, for example, we find repeated references to figures in history, mythology, and religion. The references in the fourth paragraph seem to be made by the narrator who appears to be in a state of reverie. He seems absorbed even in the act of telling itself, by which he seems naturally driven to use rich rhetorical imagery. This is again one of many examples found in Melville's prose. References made to numerous facts or figures in history, religion, mythology, etc., may sometimes be rhetorically effective, but may also mar the natural flow of understanding for the reader. The very richness and breadth of the frame of references may invite a negative reaction by the reader as pedantism or immaturity of the writer.

Another example of rhetorical difficulty can be seen in the use of Shakespearean rhetoric. For a normal reader, Shakespearean English with Shakespearean style would not be easy to read. Although we cannot find an example in the above quotation from *Mardi*, which would be particularly Shakespearean, in such works as *Moby-Dick* (1851) or *Billy Budd* (1891), for example, this is not the case. Here the Shakespearean aspects seem very conspicuous. F.O. Matthiessen, for example, cites passage from *Moby-Dick*, in which Captain Ahab speaks almost like a hero in one of Shakespeare's tragedies. According to Matthiessen, Ahab's monologue can be rearranged almost in Shakespearean blank verse:

But look ye, Starbuck, what is said in heat,
That thing unsays itself. There are men

From whom warm words are indignity.
 I mean not to incense thee. Let it go.
 Look! see yonder Turkish cheeks of spotted tawn—
 Living, breathing pictures painted by the sun.
 The pagan leopards—the unrecking and
 Unworshipping things, that live; and seek and give
 No reasons for the torrid life they feel!"

The third factor is the difficulty in logic, by which is meant the difficulty caused by diction and reasoning. By 'diction' is meant the difficulty found in such expressions as "Many infidels but disbelieve the least incredible things," "dissenters only assent more than we," or "Things nearest are furthest off." With double negatives and paradoxes, each of these expressions, which occurs respectively in the first, second, and third paragraphs of the passage from *Mardi*, denies the reader an easy grasp of the message and forces him either to stop or to read it again. Indeed the use of double negatives and paradoxes often destroys the logical flow of meaning, and although it is likely to cause confusion for the reader, this is not an uncommon problem in Melville. In *Moby-Dick*, for example, Captain Ahab says, "I am madness maddened," "I will dismember my dismemberer" (Chap. 37), and "In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here" (Chap. 119). To grasp the logical meaning expressed through such phrases as "madness maddened," "dismember my dismemberer," or "personified impersonal" does not seem by any means an easy task.

Ambiguous or illogical reasoning also invites difficulty. As seen in *Mardi*, the narrator's reference to Milton, Athanasius, and Thomas in the second paragraph does not give a clear picture of their relationship. Milton seems to have been introduced as a dissenter with faith, and Athanasius as his antithesis, while in the next sentence Thomas seems to be introduced as an antithesis of Athanasius. The question, therefore, of distinguishing "friend" from "foe" posed at the very beginning seems to be abandoned without being clearly answered.

The same is true with the relationship among ear, brain, and sight. The fact that "Though your ear be next-door to your brain, it is forever removed from your sight" seems cited as an illustration of the definition that "Things nearest are furthest off." But the narrator does not provide an answer to the possible question from the reader of what, then, is the relation between brain and sight. In both cases the correlation that should exist among related figures or objects are not explicated enough for the reader to understand. In brief, there is an illogical leap in the narrator's way of explication, and the reader is at a loss in reaching a logical understanding of the precise import of

the message.

Many such instances can be cited other than from *Mardi*. In *Pierre* (1852), for example, there is a paragraph in which the narrator defends America against attack from the Old World, but in which the development of his apologia does not seem logical enough:

The monarchical world very generally imagines, that in demagogical America the sacred Past hath no fixed statues erected to it, but all things irreverently seethe and boil in the vulgar caldron of an everlasting uncrystalizing Present. This conceit would seem peculiarly applicable to the social condition. With no chartered aristocracy, and no law of entail, how can any family in America imposingly perpetuate itself? Certainly that common saying among us, which declares, that be a family conspicuous as it may, a single half-century shall see it abased; that maxim undoubtedly holds true with the commonalty. In our cities families rise and burst like bubbles in a vat. For indeed the democratic element operates as a subtle acid among us; forever producing new things by corroding the old; as in the south of France verdigris, the primitive material of one kind of green paint, is produced by grape-vinegar poured upon copper plates. Now in general nothing can be more significant of decay than the idea of corrosion; yet on the other hand, nothing can more vividly suggest luxuriance of life, than the idea of green as a color; for green is the peculiar signet of all-fertile Nature herself. Herein by apt analogy we behold the marked anomalousness of America; whose character abroad, we need not be surprised, is misconceived, when we consider how strangely she contradicts all prior notions of human things; and how wonderfully to her, Death itself becomes transmuted into Life. So that political institutions, which in other lands seem above all things intensely artificial, with America seem to possess the divine virtue of a natural law; for the most mighty of nature's law is this, that out of Death she brings Life. (Book I)

This paragraph consists of nine sentences. In the first sentence the narrator makes clear that the Old (monarchical) World takes a negative view of the New (demagogical) World, saying that the latter, unlike the former, lacks Past and has only Present. In the second sentence the narrator seems to admit it in terms of "social condition," and in the third sentence he seems to justify it. His apologia so far may be all right, except that a sufficient explanation is not given about the applicability of the "conceit" to the condition other than "social." However, from the fourth sentence on, the apologia seems to swerve from the course and takes on even an illogical or joking reasoning. He

takes up the instance of verdigris as an example to show the operative power of the democratic element, goes on to the subject of color symbolism, links it to the problem of "Nature," sees it in the light of the "anomalousness" of America, explains it through the image of "Death" and "Life," and finally, makes a concluding reference to "political institutions" in terms of their relation to the "natural law" and the paradox of "Death" and "Life."

The narrator seems to be trying here to champion Life, Nature, and democracy in America, and it is not so hard to catch the intended message. But the development of the argument does not seem easy to understand. The reference to corrosion and life in terms of verdigris and color symbolism seems weak in its power to persuade the reader, nor is the relation between political institution and natural law persuasive enough. Patterns of this kind, however, are found numerously in Melville's works. *The Confidence-Man* (1857), his last novel, is perhaps the most typical of this. It is notorious for its difficulty, and most of the difficulty seems to come from obscure passages often made up of sentences with illogical reasoning.⁶

These are the three basic factors of the difficulty of Melville's style. But another factor has to be added here: the syntactic or structural difficulty often found in many of his sentences. The following sentences in a passage in Chapter 2 of *The Confidence-Man* are cited as examples:

- (1) Meditation over kindness received seemed to have softened him something, too, it may be, beyond what might, perhaps, have been looked for from one whose unwonted self-respect in the hour of need, and in the act of being aided, might have appeared to some not wholly unlike pride out of place; and pride, in any place, is seldom very feeling.
- (2) See what sad work they make of it, who ignorant of this, flame out in Irish enthusiasm and with Irish sincerity, to a benefactor, who, if a man of sense and respectability, as well as kindliness, can but be more or less annoyed by it; and, if of a nervously fastidious nature, as some are, may be led to think almost as much less favorably of the beneficiary paining him by his gratitude, as if he had been guilty of its contrary, instead only of an indiscretion.

In the passage that includes these sentences the narrator sums up rather analytically the incidental meeting of two characters on a steamboat on the Mississippi. But the import of these sentences is difficult to grasp. This difficulty seems to come from syntactical characteristics. The length of sentences, the repeated use of parentheses, the inclusion of numerous modifiers

and clauses and inversions—all these seem to help give rise to difficulty. What seems to be the narrator's characteristic usage also helps produce difficulties. As if to purposely avoid a clear and concrete signification, the narrator employs what seems to be round about expressions using such words and phrases as "seemed," "something," "might," "perhaps," "appeared," "some," and "not wholly." As a result of these periphrastic dictions, difficulty is again brought before the reader.

III

Difficulty indeed characterizes Melville's prose; but, of course, this is not its only aspect. If it were the only characteristic of his prose, his work would have been rejected as bad style or poor writing. But such has not been necessarily the case. There are many who actually give high praise to his style. Newton Arvin, for example, admits of "an idiosyncrasy of the most unmistakable sort" in Melville's language in *Moby-Dick*, and takes it in the light of "Melvillian language in the same intense and special sense in which one speaks of Virgilian language, of Shakespearean, or Miltonic."

Examples can be cited which show another aspect of difficult style in Melville's prose, an aspect which suggests the coexistence of difficulty with artifice. The narrator Ishmael of *Moby-Dick* unfolds a startling analysis of the "whiteness" in chapter 42, a very celebrated chapter entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale." One of the opening paragraphs reads as follows:

Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in marbles, japonicas, and pearls: and *though* various nations have in some way recognised a certain royal pre-eminence in this hue; even the barbaric, grand old kings of Pegu placing the title "Lord of the White Elephants" above all their other magniloquent ascriptions of dominion; and the modern kings of Siam unfurling the same snow-white quadruped in the royal standard; and the Hanoverian flag bearing the one figure of a snow-white charger; and the great Austrian Empire, Caesarian heir to overlording Rome, having for the imperial color the same imperial hue; and *though* this pre-eminence in it applies to the human race itself, giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe; and *though*, besides all this, whiteness has been even made significant of gladness, for among the Romans a white stone marked a joyful day; and *though* in other mortal sympathies and symbolizings, this same hue is made the emblem of many touching, noble things—the innocence of brides, the benignity of age; *though* among the Red Men of America the giving of the

white belt of wampum was the deepest pledge of honour; *though* in many climes, whiteness typifies the majesty of Justice in the ermine of the Judge, and contributes to the daily state of kings and queens drawn by milk-white steeds; *though* even in the higher mysteries of the most august religions it has been made the symbol of the divine spotlessness and power; by the Persian fire worshippers, the white forked flame being held the holiest on the altar; and in the Greek mythologies, Great Jove himself being made incarnate in a snow-white bull; and *though* to the noble Iroquois, the midwinter sacrifice of the sacred White Dog was by far the holiest festival of their theology, that spotless, faithful creature being held the purest envoy they could send to the Great Spirit with the annual tidings of their own fidelity; and *though* directly from the Latin word for white, all Christian priests derive the name of one part of their sacred vesture, the alb or tunic, worn beneath the cassock, and *though* among the holy pomps of the Romish faith, white is specially employed in the celebration of the Passion of our Lord; *though* in the Vision of St. John, white robes are given to the redeemed, and the four-and-twenty elders stand clothed in white before the great white throne, and the Holy One that sitteth there white like wool; *yet* for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there *yet* lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood. (*My italics*)

Seen in its totality, it can be seen that the entire paragraph consists of just a single sentence. Although at first glance there seem to be many sentences, there is actually one complex sentence with many subordinated clauses, each headed by the conjunction "though" linked in juxtaposition with numerous semi-colons. This long paragraph is again Melvillian. With many references to encyclopaedic things and phenomena of this world, this long paragraph resembles the fourth paragraph of chapter 97 of *Mardi*. In this sense, this paragraph again reflects the aspect of difficulty of Melville's prose.

But, at the same time, we cannot fail to admit the rhetorical power of the entire passage, which seems to be taken as a *bona fide* artifice. The variety of references and repetitiveness of expression both help increase the reader's interest in the message conveyed, and so the final conclusion expressed through the main clause, that is, the message that "there lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than the redness which affrights in blood," affects the heart of the reader all the more powerfully. Indeed, the rhetorical artifice in this paragraph, as well as in the entire chapter, is such that critics admit that this chapter "moves with

muted beauty and paragraph," and that this chapter alone would entitle Melville "to be called a great poet."⁸

Billy Budd (1891) offers another such example. The following passage, which consists of three sentences, tells about the nature and character of the innocent young hero of the story:

And here be it submitted that apparently going to corroborate the doctrine of man's Fall, a doctrine now popularly ignored, it is observable that where certain virtues pristine and unadulterate peculiarly characterize anybody in the external uniform of civilization, they will upon scrutiny seem not to be derived from custom or convention, but rather to be out of keeping with these, as if indeed exceptionally transmitted from a period prior to Cain's city and civilized man. The character marked by such qualities has to an unvitiated taste an untampered-with flavor like that of berries, while the man thoroughly civilized, even in a fair specimen of the breed, has to the same moral palate a questionable smack as of a compounded wine. To any stray inheritor of these primitive qualities found, like Caspar Hauser, wandering dazed in any Christian capital of our time, the good-natured poet's famous invocation, near two thousand years ago, of the good rustic out of his latitude in the Rome of the Caesars, still appropriately holds:

Honest and poor, faithful in word and thought,
What hath thee, Fabian, to the city brought?

Again, the message of these three sentences does not seem easy to grasp. The length of sentences, use of parentheses, archaic style, quotation from poetry—these work as a stumbling block to the normal reader and disturb the natural flow of meaning. The Melvillian difficulty occurs once again.

Nevertheless, difficulty does not seem to be the only one feature in this passage. Read aloud, each sentence shows the poetic flow of rhythm and meter, and each sentence seems to converge powerfully into the final couplet which is quoted from some anonymous poet. In this sense, this paragraph is another example of Ahab's monologue, which, according to Matthiessen as seen above, can be analyzed as an example of Shakespearean blank verse. So this is a paragraph, in brief, which can be taken as an illustrative example of the successful mediation between difficulty and artifice.

Given such examples of successful mediation between difficulty and artifice, the stylistic analysis of the difficulty of Melville's prose raises another question. It is a question about the relevance of a reader's evaluation of difficulty. But, once again, the evaluation is an activity quite personal and

depends largely upon the reader's capacity for reading. Moreover, it ought to change according to the set standard of judgement. In the present case, the set standard is the fact that the reader is a non-native speaker/reader of English, and that the standard prose style for him is that of the writers of the mid-nineteenth century, like Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Generally speaking, it would not be a popular undertaking to try to analyze the stylistic characteristics of Melville's prose. The examples of F.O. Matthiessen and Newton Arvin mentioned above would be among the acceptable few. Even so, both Matthiessen and Arvin lay emphasis not on the difficulty of his prose but rather on the similarity with Shakespeare's rhetoric and on the "idiosyncrasy" of his use of language.

In his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1924), D. H. Lawrence sets his eye on the style of *Moby-Dick*. His analysis may be read as a rare example that focuses, to some extent, on the question of difficulty of style. He admits that Melville's style is spurious, clownish, clumsy, and even amateurish:

It is a great book.

At first you are put off by the style. It reads like journalism. It seems spurious. You feel Melville is trying to put something over you. It won't do. And Melville really is a bit sententious: aware of himself, self-conscious, putting something over even himself. But then it's not easy to get into the swing of a piece of deep mysticism when you just set out with a story.

Nobody can be more clownish, more clumsy and sententiously in bad taste, than Herman Melville, even in a great book like *Moby Dick*. He preaches and holds forth because he is not sure of himself. And he holds forth, often, so amateurishly.⁹

It must be noted that Lawrence does not necessarily deny Melville's style. Though amateurishly spurious, clownish, and clumsy, it is chiefly the result of his being "a real American" who cannot but feel "his audience in front of him."¹⁰ When he ceases to be an American of this kind and gives us his sheer apprehension of the world, Lawrence goes on to say, "then he is wonderful, his book commands a stillness in the soul, an awe."¹¹ This polarity in Lawrence's view presents a common denominator with Matthiessen's. Matthiessen admits both the power of Melville's style as "a bold and nervous lofty language"¹² and the danger and weakness of such a style. It is liable, he points out, to break down into "ejaculatory prose" and "ventriloquist's trick," and it may also occur that the "sum of the parts does not make a greater whole."¹³

These views by Lawrence and Matthiessen would perhaps give support to the

view of Melville's style mentioned above. There are indeed difficulties found here and there in his works, but these difficulties do not necessarily work as a barrier for the reader. As a peculiar Melvillian style, they also serve the reader as a stylistic merit worthy of attention.

IV

Since all we read is what is written by some writer, the question of reading is the question of writing. So the final question here should be why Melville, the writer, often writes in such a difficult style, with such illogical reasonings, incoherencies, parentheses, inversions, encyclopaedic references, Shakespearean rhetoric, and so on. If it is a reflection of his artifice, then the question is what his view of art is, and how it can be explained in terms of difficulties, and why he takes such a stand.

Fortunately, it is not so difficult to find materials which might shed light, to whatever extent, on the question about Melville's view of art; we can find them in his works, essays, and in his letters. *Mardi* is not an exception. In chapter 180, for example, we find a heated discussion by four characters about a literary work called *Koxtanza*. This discussion can be read as a reflection of the author's view of art, since the said work is presented as one which has resemblance to *Mardi* itself. Interestingly enough, the discussion can be read as an apologia for difficulties in style. Against Abrazza who criticizes the work saying that "the *Koxtanza* lacks cohesion; it is wild, unconnected, all episode," Babbalanja, who may be taken as a mouthpiece of the author, thus defends it: "And so is *Mardi* itself:—nothing but episodes; valleys and hills; rivers, digressing from plains; vines, roving all over; boulders and diamonds; flowers and thistles; forests and thickets; and, here and there, fens and moors. And so, the world in the *Koxtanza*." In Babbalanja's view, cohesion is not so important and the co-existence of opposites like "boulders and diamonds" can be tolerated as natural.

Free and unrestrained style that invites difficulty through its encyclopaediac references would also have to be tolerated in *Mardi*. In the chapter entitled "Dream," the narrator tells about his "dream," and his story is very much like a confession of the writer himself about in what state he often writes his sentences. According to his description, the writer who is engaged in the act of writing is far from being restrained and calm, but rather absorbed in the almost instinctive and frantic act of writing, where it seems difficult to expect a calm, clear, logical, and coherent style: "My cheek blanches white while I write; I start at the scratch of my pen; my own mad brood of eagles devours me; fain would I unsay this audacity; but an iron-mailed hand clenches

mine in a vice, and prints down every letter in my spite" (Chap. 119).

These are, of course, views representing basically Babbalanja or the narrator, and not the author himself. However, the view expressed by Melville in his "anonymous" essay almost overlaps these. His essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" is a eulogy to Hawthorne as a contemporary genius long expected in America, and his words show very clearly his strong affinity with Shakespeare as well as with Hawthorne. According to Melville, it is "those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive *Truth* in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality; —these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare" (my italics).¹⁴ He further declares:

In Shakespeare's tomb lies infinitely more than Shakespeare ever wrote. And if I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do, as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing. For in this world of lies, *Truth* is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the *Truth*, —even though it be covertly, and by snatches. (My italics)¹⁵

The repeated reference to "Truth" should be of special note here. For Melville, "Art" should be first of all the means to tell "Truth," and its value should be judged always as such. If so, the problem the writer should solve is not the question of avoiding the difficult style, but rather to avoid the style that lacks "Truth." So long as the "Truth" lies in the written expression, then the way of expression, the illogical reasonings, incoherencies, vagueness, etc., all must be tolerated.

This is a view which is found almost consistently in Melville's works. The protagonist of *Pierre*, a promising young American writer, almost reiterates the view of fiction of this kind. According to the narrator, the protagonist's ideal is not to create the fictions "which must undoubtedly go to the worm" but the fiction as "the larger book, and infinitely better" which would be produced through "the primitive elementalizing of the strange stuff, which in the act of attempting that book, has upheaved and upgushed in his soul" (Book XXII). The frantic absorption of this writer reminds us quite naturally of the image of the writer in *Mardi*.

The Confidence-Man, on the other hand, gives an apologia for writing fiction which lacks coherencies, vagueness, and ambiguities. According to the narrator of this romance, the writer can write fiction in any way he likes, so long as it succeeds in presenting reality. Unnatural writing is also tolerable. In his view, people tend to look for "reality" more than "entertainment," so "the

people in a fiction, like the people in a play, must dress as nobody exactly dresses, talk as nobody exactly talks, act as nobody exactly acts" (Chap. 33).

The words in *Billy Budd* would perhaps best summarize the Melvillian view of art. The following apologia for "a narration" which uncompromisingly tells the "Truth" but lacks the "symmetry of form" and "architectural finial" can be read as an apologia for the "difficulty" of his style:

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.¹⁶

V

Melville is a writer whose work falls within the category of so-called Romanticism. Of course, the definition of Romanticism is not a simple one. Arthur O. Lovejoy's use of plural for the word "Romanticism" in his now famous essay "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms" (1924)¹⁷ gives proof of the difficulty of this problem. Indeed, there are arguments for "negative" and "positive" Romanticism as distinct phenomena: we have Romantic agony and Romantic exultation; Romantic sincerity and Romantic irony; heaven and hell; the abyss and the empyrean.¹⁸ Or, we have Goethe, a Romantic, who said, "Classicism is health, Romanticism is disease."¹⁹ We have also Stendhal who pronounced himself a "furious romantic, which is to say I am for Shakespeare and against Racine, for Lord Byron and against Boileau."²⁰

Like Goethe and Stendhal, Melville, an American, was perhaps inclined to "disease" rather than to "health," and he was more for Shakespeare and Byron rather than for Racine and Boileau. So reading Melville is an experience of being immersed in the world of Romanticism and Romantic writing, and the difficulty of his style serves as the appropriate clue with which to grasp it.

Notes

- 1 Joel Porte, *In Respect to Egotism: Studies in American Romantic Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 5.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 4 H. Aram Veesser (ed.), *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. ix.
- 5 F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of*

- Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 426.
- 6 Cf. "Mr. Melville cannot write badly, it is true, but he appears to have adopted a quaint, unnatural style, of late, which has little of the sparkling vigor and freshness of his early works.... It has all the faults of style peculiar to 'Mardi,' without the romance which attaches itself to that stange book," *New York Dispatch*, quoted in Hershel Parker (ed.), *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 269.
 - 7 Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972), p. 162.
 - 8 Howard P. Vincent, *The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick* (London: Feffer & Simons, 1965), p. 177.
 - 9 D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Penguin Books, 1971), p. 153.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
 - 12 Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, pp. 421-431.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 426.
 - 14 Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University and the Newberry Library, 1987), p. 244.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, p. 244.
 - 16 Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 128.
 - 17 Arthur O. Lovejoy, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," *PMLA* (June, 1924), Vol. XXXIX, No. 2, pp. 229-253.
 - 18 Port, *In Respect to Egotism*, p. 10.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, p. 11.