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*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*

Ingrid D. Lelos

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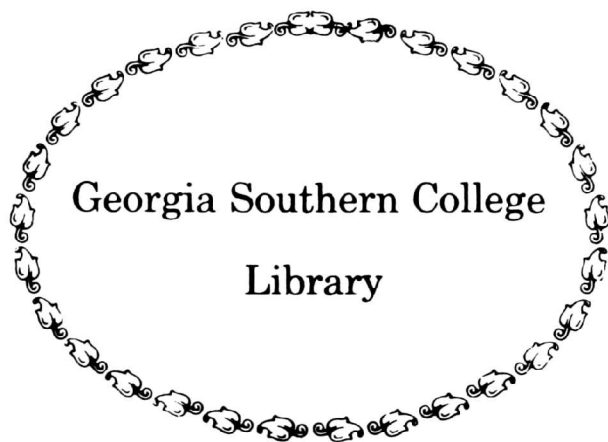
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THE PATH TO EQUILIBRIUM:  
MELVILLE, EMERSON, AND GOETHE'S  
WILHELM MEISTER'S APPRENTICESHIP

Ingrid D. Lelos



**THE PATH TO EQUILIBRIUM: MELVILLE, EMERSON, AND GOETHE'S  
*WILHELM MEISTER'S APPRENTICESHIP***

A Thesis

Presented to

the College of Graduate Studies of

Georgia Southern University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master's of Arts

In the Department of

Literature and Philosophy

by

Ingrid D. Lelos

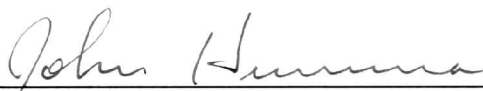
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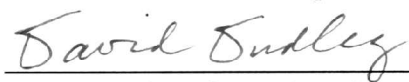
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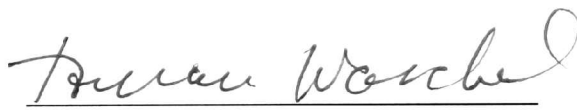
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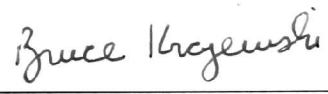
This thesis, entitled "The Path to Equilibrium: Melville, Emerson, and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*," and written by Ingrid D. Lelos is presented to the College of Graduate Studies of Georgia Southern University. I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master's Degree in English.

  
John Humma, Supervising Committee Chair


We have reviewed this thesis  
and recommend its acceptance:

  
David Dudley, Committee Member

  
Tomasz Warchol, Committee Member

  
Bruce Krajewski, Department Chair

Accepted for the College of Graduate Studies

  
G. Lane Van Tassell  
Dean, College of Graduate Studies

## **DEDICATION**

In recognition of their constant support and intellectual inspirator

I hereby dedicate this thesis to my husband,

Vasileios Lelos,

and to my parents,

Dianne and Thomas Goggan

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I wish to thank Dr. John Humma, Professor in the Literature and Philosophy Department, for his timely assistance and complete dedication to my project. I could not have concluded this study without his enthusiasm and encouragement and wish to thank him for always maintaining an Ishmaeleian equilibrium. I would also like to thank Dr. David Dudley and Dr. Tomasz Warchol, members of my committee and professors in the Literature and Philosophy Department, for their time and insightful contributions to this work. I greatly appreciate their sincere assistance and suggestions for further research. Without Cynthia Frost's help with interlibrary loan materials, I could not have conducted the necessary, extensive research required for this project. Finally, I would like to thank my husband for his daily patience, encouragement, and interest in my topic and my sister, Rachel Goggan, and my friend, Vlora Krasniqi, for their constant emotional support.

## VITA

Ingrid Dianne Lelos was born the daughter of Dianne and Thomas Goggan on July 7, 1973 in Austin, Texas. She began the Master of Arts program in English at Georgia Southern University in August 1999. While pursuing her Bachelor of Arts in German at the University of Texas at Austin, she received the Normandy Scholarship for World War Two study in France and the Federation of German-American Clubs scholarship for one year of study at a German university. Studying history and political science at the Eberhard-Karls Universitaet in Tuebingen, Germany, she interviewed 12 German women who lived through World War Two and recorded their oral histories in her senior thesis. Upon her return, she was named a Junior Fellow at the University of Texas at Austin, was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, and graduated Suma Cum Laude. The following year she pursued a Master of Arts in German literature and theory from King's College, University of London, England. She studied under Professor John White and wrote her master's thesis on the fragmentation of the female figure in modern German drama under the direction of Professor Martin Swales. Before returning to graduate school, she worked as a financial representative and a high school English and history teacher in Savannah, Georgia.

Ingrid Lelos began graduate studies in English at Georgia Southern University in August 1999. In October 2000 she presented a seminar paper on drama and gender

performativity at the annual conference of the Pop Culture Association/American Culture Association of the South in Nashville, Tennessee. A revised version of this paper will be published this year by the Popular Press in a collection of articles entitled: *Gender and Cinema: Myth, Power, and Change*. In December, she received funding from the Graduate School to present a paper at an academic conference in Dublin, Ireland on German Romantic literature and music. After completing her course of studies at Georgia Southern University, she will begin a doctoral program in Comparative Literature.



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## INTRODUCTION

The complex relationship between Emerson's philosophy and Melville's vision as portrayed in his fictional texts is a reflection of Melville's ambivalent response to Emerson as recorded in his correspondence with Duyckinck. In a letter dated February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1849, Melville writes positively about Emerson: "I have heard Emerson since I have been here. Say what they will, he's a great man" (*Correspondence* 119). Distinguishing himself from the Transcendentalists, Melville continues his praise for the philosopher on March 3, 1849:

Nay, I do not oscillate in Emerson's rainbow, but prefer rather to hang myself in mine own halter than swing in any other man's swing. Yet I think Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow. . . I was very agreeably disappointed in Mr. Emerson. 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.—Now, there is a something about every man elevated above mediocrity, which is, for the most part, instinctuly [sic] perceptible. This I see in Mr. Emerson. And frankly, for the sake of the argument, let us call him a fool; --then had I

rather be a fool than a wise man. —I love all men who dive.

(*Correspondence* 121)

Despite this praise of Emerson, in the same letter to Duyckinck, Melville criticizes him for his arrogance:

I could readily see in Emerson, notwithstanding his merit, a gaping flaw.

It was, the insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions. These men are all cracked right across the bow. And never will the pullers-down be able to cope with the builders-up. And this pulling down is easy enough—a keg of powder blew up Block’s Monument—but the man who applied the match, could not, alone, build such a pile to save his soul from the shark-maw of the Devil. (*Correspondence* 121-22)

Melville’s criticism of Emerson as a “builder-up” is a critique of those who assign spiritual meaning to the world from the human perspective, as opposed to the “pullers-down” (like Melville), who accept the meaning of the world as it descends from God and appears to human beings. The “builders-up” tend to dismiss evil as a force in the world, and only assign benign significance to the universe. Melville equates Emerson with the original “builder-up,” Plato: “But enough of this Plato who talks thro’ his nose.” He criticizes transcendentalism as a system as flawed as Platonic idealism. Finally, Melville points out Emerson’s disengagement with fellow human beings and criticizes him as anti-social: “You complain that Emerson tho’ a denizen of the land of gingerbread, is above

munching a plain cake in company of jolly fellows, & swinging off his ale like you & me. Ah, my dear sir, that's his misfortune, not his fault" (*Correspondence* 122). Melville's appreciation of Emerson as a diver and criticism of him as an arrogant, anti-social "builder-up" illustrates Melville's own ambiguous response to Emerson as documented in his correspondence, which reflects the complex relationship to Emerson's philosophy he portrays in his fictional works.

F. O. Matthiessen states in the preface to his 1941 *American Renaissance* that "Emerson's theory of expression was that on which Thoreau built, to which Whitman gave extension, and to which Hawthorne and Melville were indebted to being forced to react against its philosophical assumptions" (xii). As a model or one to react against, Emerson significantly impacted the writers of the American Romantic movement. R.W.B. Lewis' 1955 *The American Adam* reinforces the division of the American Romantic movement and uses Emerson's terms to delineate between the "party of Hope" comprised of Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau and the "party of Memory," Hawthorne and Melville (7). The scholarly emphasis on the differences between Emerson and Melville begins with the earliest scholars of American literature and continues to be one of the basic assumptions made in current criticism.

Matthiessen finds Melville's "reaction against transcendentalism and other current optimisms" in *Moby-Dick* in Ishmael's recognition of evil (436), in Melville's instinctive "knowledge of the demonism in the world" (440), and in Melville's distortion of Emerson's hero, a man of will, who "swept his whole crew to destruction" (456).

Howard P. Vincent adds in his 1949 *The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick* that the novel is among other interpretations “a satire of New England Transcendentalism” (8). In “The Mast-Head” chapter he argues that “transcendental harmony, in which the personal identity is lost in infinity, is deceptively seductive” (151) but will have consequences in the brute, material facts of life, the “Descartian vortices” (157). Vincent also demonstrates Melville’s association of transcendentalism with Platonism: “To Melville, the Transcendentalist and his ancestor Plato were pure absolutists, men sidestepping the intrusive fact of evil” (256-7). Michael J. Hoffman’s 1969 “The Anti-Transcendentalism of *Moby-Dick*” asserts that “though anti-Transcendental, it is written in the Transcendental style” and “is ultimately a parody of the Transcendentalist ‘great man’” (3). He finds much of Melville’s response to Emerson in Ahab, who is also one of the dangerous “builders-up” in the world who “project their own values onto the universe” (5).

Reflecting later 20<sup>th</sup> century trends in criticism, Michael Vannoy Adams’ 1983 “Whaling and Difference: *Moby-Dick* Deconstructed” attributes the difference between Emerson’s transparent eyeball and Melville’s pasteboard mask to “the difference between transcendentalist and deconstructor” (60). Like Hoffman, Adams is mainly concerned with the correspondence between nature (signifier) and the spiritual realm (signified). Restating the difference between Emerson as one whose natural world corresponds directly to the spiritual (as individual projection) and Melville, whose natural world corresponds to the spiritual but cannot be deciphered by humankind, Adams simply



restates the prior criticism in the new terms of deconstruction theory. The 1986 publication of *A Companion to Melville Studies* finds critics still engaging with the Emerson-Melville relationship and affirming Melville's position as anti-transcendental.. Finally, in the 1998 *Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, Paul Giles notes that "one of the tendencies Melville takes from Emerson . . . is an intellectual proclivity to run different objects or ideas into one another. This is the transcendental style of embracing disparate entities within one all encompassing circle; in Melville's case, though, these mirrors lack the metaphysical idealism with which they are endowed by Emerson" (231). Critics continue to note the pivotal difference between Emerson's idealism and Melville's realism as Melville's acknowledgement of human limitations that precludes a transparent vision of nature's exact correspondence to the spiritual realm.

Although some critics do account for Emerson's later essays and change in vision from pure optimism to a more skeptical vision, the vast majority remain devoted to presenting Melville and Emerson as antithetical, proving Melville's anti-transcendentalism in his portrayal of romantic absolutism in Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, in Pierre in *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*, and in Mark Winsome and Egbert in *The Confidence-Man*. In my analysis of these three novels, I hope to demonstrate the similarities between Melville's vision of equilibrium and Emerson's later skepticism as recorded in his essays "Experience," "The Skeptic," and "Fate." My contribution addresses Melville's agreement with Emerson's modified theory of correspondences, his

flashes of intuition as a path to balance between the spiritual and physical worlds, and his conception of fate as the determinant factor in human activity and knowledge.

In Chapter I, “‘Call Me a Post-Transcendentalist’: Spiritual Correspondence and Inscrutability in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Emerson’s Later Essays,” I argue against critics Hoffman and Adams and demonstrate Melville’s inability to determine distinct meaning as similar to Emerson’s later, nebulous position. In Chapter II, “Melville’s *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* and Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*: Distinct Paths to Equilibrium,” I examine Emerson’s and Melville’s similar paths to equilibrium by analyzing Melville’s use of the *Bildungsroman* form in *Pierre*. The incipient expression of the *Bildungsroman* tradition, a book Melville borrowed from Duyckinck in 1850 before writing *Pierre* in 1851, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* serves as a foil to highlight the similarities between Goethe’s, Melville’s and Emerson’s later affirmation of balance and the differences between Goethe’s gradual educational path and Melville’s and Emerson’s circular path of intuition, experience, and skepticism. Finally, in Chapter III, “Melville’s Parody of Early Emersonian Beliefs in *The Confidence-Man*,” I examine Melville’s only direct portrayal of Emerson as philosopher in *The Confidence-Man* and suggest the similarities between Melville’s critique and Emerson’s more conservative stance in his later essays, specifically his altered belief in the power of fate over human will. This study brings to light the similarities between Melville and the later Emerson that most critics dismiss or ignore in their attempts to prove Melville’s anti-transcendentalism. Melville and the more mature Emerson open the door to the

American Realism movement by questioning the absolute idealism of the Transcendental movement. The idealistic movement Emerson initiated with the 1836 publication of "Nature" he tempers with the 1840s publications of his later essays, in which his skepticism allows for a more realistic perception of the world.

## CHAPTER I

### **‘Call Me a Post-Transcendentalist’: Spiritual Correspondence and Inscrutability in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Emerson’s Later Essays**

“How may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale’s brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can” (*Moby-Dick* 449).

Attempting for decades to interpret the meaning of the white whale in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, most critics read the whale’s significance as specific and certain, whether it be as an analogue for the heavenly God or the demonic, Ahab’s id, or as a projection resulting from an “unindividuated” animus. Representing the other end of the critical spectrum, Hoffman claims that Melville’s *Moby-Dick* is a “transcendental parody,” a symbolic tale devoid of any real meaning that proves that “the world exists,” that “physical reality is nothing more nor less than what it is,” and that “nature has no value” (3). In other words, he asserts that Melville’s novel is completely ironic and that the white whale and the novel itself mean nothing. Generating a large volume of criticism with ever-contradicting interpretations of the whale’s meaning or lack thereof, the critics have unconsciously and unintentionally proved Melville’s contention that humankind cannot ascertain the meaning of *Moby Dick* or any other part of the natural world. As Melville addresses the reader directly about the existence of the prodigious whale, one can substitute “critics” for “landsmen”:

So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts,

historical and otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory. (276)

Despite the numerous chapters dedicated to specific details of Moby Dick's physical existence, most "landsmen" or critics cannot help analyzing the tale as symbolical, metaphorical, or intolerably allegorical. Encouraging such interpretations, the author presents paradoxical illustrations of the whale as both a "grand god" (691) and one with a "malicious intelligence" (692). While not able to be interpreted definitively one way or another, the whale ambiguously suggests a greater poignancy than that which the author, any of the characters, or the reader may be able to ascertain. In short, the text invites multiple interpretations of Moby Dick and concludes that absolute meaning is not determinable. Much more provocative and feasible than an analysis of the whale's "meaning" is an examination of Melville's belief in a higher, spiritual significance of objects in the natural world. In spite of his mythmaking, Melville ultimately affirms a spiritual, "certain significance" in the world and questions only humanity's ability to grasp it in *Moby-Dick*.

While critics like Hoffman and Vincent assert the anti-transcendentalism of *Moby-Dick* and explicate the text as a parody of the pantheistic American Romantic movement, the deficiencies of such critical analyses become apparent in two pivotal respects. First, the main crux of Melville's philosophy, namely the belief that the physical world signifies the spiritual realm beyond the "pasteboard masks" (220), is



greatly indebted to Emerson's early theory of correspondences. In "Nature" Emerson suggests that "spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols" (33), the equivalent of Melville's pasteboard masks and what lies beyond them. Second, the older, more mature Emerson continued to believe in the theory of correspondences, but doubted the human ability to extract true knowledge of the spirit world from natural surroundings. In "Montaigne; or The Skeptic" Emerson's transcendentalism includes the often restricted faculties of humankind in which "knowledge is the knowing that we can not know" (295). Accepting Emerson's early premise of the theory of correspondence and concurring with his later skepticism, Melville portrays Emerson's philosophy concerning the corresponding physical and spiritual worlds and humankind's limited insights into the world beyond in *Moby-Dick*, rendering the novel both a parody of Emerson's idealistic transcendentalism and an affirmation of Emerson's later skeptical temperament.

Unlike Ahab who considers "there's naught beyond . . . pasteboard masks" (220-21), Ishmael insists upon the existence of the spiritual world. Explaining our blindness to that world, Ishmael affirms the afterlife with conviction: "Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being" (66). Rather than the purely good deity Starbuck sees reflected in the universe or the evil Ahab projects onto Moby Dick, Ishmael questions the limited human capacity for perception of the spiritual. Rendering spiritual knowledge impossible to comprehend until this life is over, he explains that "we, too, who look on the loom are

deafened, and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it” (573). Ishmael’s inability to comprehend the physical world explains his perception of the deity as one of indifference: “The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice” (573). The weal and woe of human emotion projected onto the natural world cannot determine the certain spiritual significance of the universe outside the realm of human consciousness. In other words, Ahab’s projection of hatred onto the white whale does not determine the white whale’s meaning as such; despite Ahab’s emotional creation of a universe inside his mind, the celestial meaning of the material world will forever elude him.

Once he establishes the existence of the spiritual realm, Ishmael asserts Emerson’s theory of correspondences and maintains the connection between objects in the physical world and their significance in the world beyond. “The Doubloon” chapter begins with Ishmael’s concern that “some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth” (549). In other words, all things in the physical world must have a definite, fixed, correspondent meaning in the spiritual world, or the physical world has no value. If the physical world had no value, Ahab’s monomaniac quest would be as valid as Ishmael’s equilibrium. If nature does not correspond to the spiritual realm and has no meaning at all, Ahab’s insistent, fixed definition of natural symbols would be no less incorrect than Ishmael’s vision of paradoxical values in nature. Melville’s vision of equilibrium between the spiritual and physical worlds requires a “certain significance” of a material world of worth and value. For the perceptually limited crew of the *Pequod*, the

doubloon only “mirrors back [their] own mysterious sel[ves],” a fact which precludes their ability to see any relationship between objects in the physical world and their spiritual meaning (551). It follows that when gazing upon the doubloon Ahab sees pains and pangs, Starbuck sees the Trinity, Stubb sees the jolly life, and Flask sees 960 cigars. From his privileged view of the universe after falling into the infinite ocean of thought, Pip, in his grammar exercise, emphasizes the various and limited perceptions of men: “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look” (555). At the end of the chapter, Pip has the last word and interprets the gold coin in gibberish or “heaven’s sense” (530), affirming Ishmael’s spiritually correspondent natural world.

Accepting human perception of the natural world as fallible, Melville privileges Ishmael’s ability to see the paradoxical, ultimately irreconcilable spiritual significance of *Moby Dick* as the highest possible achievement of humanity in a fallen world. Contrarily, Ahab’s desire to reach beyond the capabilities of humankind and obtain knowledge of the universe prefaces his downfall. The shaggy sea captain endorses Emerson’s theory of correspondences but cannot accept human ignorance:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks . . . If man strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside by thrusting through the wall? To me, the *white* whale is the wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond . . . I see in [Moby Dick] outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. *That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate.* (my emphasis 220-1)

Unable to accept the indeterminacy of *Moby Dick* as Ishmael can, Ahab equates the whiteness of the whale with the world's "inscrutability." Powerless to see all with a transparent eyeball, as Emerson's early transcendental reveries would accomplish, Ahab cannot see through the opaque whale. Gene Bluestein concurs and suggests that Ahab, "unwilling to rest satisfied with the limited knowledge Emerson's esthetic would provide, . . . wants Paradise itself" (113). He argues that Emerson's momentary transcendental intuitions will not satiate Ahab's desire to permanently reside in the realm of absolute truth. Contrasting the all-seeing transcendental eyeball and the transparency of the natural world during such intuitions, Melville depicts the permanent, ungraspable, unknowable meaning of the physical world through the opaque whiteness of the whale.

Like Emerson's early depiction of a disunited man whose "axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things," and sees the world not as "transparent but opaque" ("Nature" 55), the opaque whiteness of the whale portrays both ambiguity and human limitation. Emerson's early aesthetic lays the groundwork for Melville's and Emerson's later conclusion that humankind exists in a constant state of opaqueness in which the once all-knowing intuitions occur less and less frequently and reveal less and less about the spiritual world. The color white suggests the ambiguity of good and evil and human inability to attach certain spiritual significance to physical objects. The squid, the "unearthly, formless, chance-like apparition of life" (366), produces the same horror of nothingness as the whiteness of the whale: "The great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all

objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge” (264). The “blank tinge” like the blank forehead of the whale cannot be deciphered beyond humankind’s fallible projections. The “medium” that “touch[es] all objects” is the moods and thoughts of the human mind that color the white essence of all physical objects. Not suggesting a lack of inherent, spiritual meaning, the whiteness reveals humankind’s inability to determine that meaning and attempt to project meaning onto that blank, white surface.

Ahab, like the critics of *Moby-Dick*, cannot resist assigning definite meaning to the whale. His frustration with human ignorance culminates in his projection of all things negative onto Moby Dick’s white, blank forehead and body. Following Emerson’s lead in “Experience” in which he asserts that “temperament also enters fully into the system of illusions and shuts us in a prison of glass which we cannot see” (258), Melville explores the negative consequences of a natural world that reflects only human mood and thought. Ahab sees the whale as a reflection of his own unified hatred and bitterness:

The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies . . . all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down.  
(246-7)

The tragic end of the Pequod and its crew results from Ahab’s subjective perceptions of Moby Dick. The false, unreliable human projections of meaning onto the physical world



bring Ahab no closer to understanding the correspondent spirit-realm that both Melville and Emerson envisioned.

Through Ahab's monomaniac, subjective projections of meaning onto Moby Dick, Melville explores the Emersonian notion of a world that exists only in the mind. For Ahab no object truly exists outside of his hatred for the white whale: "Oh! How immaterial are all materials! What things real are there, but imponderable thoughts?" (666). The whale's signifying "imponderable thoughts" is the only thing that exists for a man "so far gone . . . in the dark side of the earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one seems but uncertain twilight to [him]" (667). Not able to appreciate the paradoxical significance of the dark and light or the physical and spiritual, Ahab cannot observe the existence of a world outside of his mind. Unlike Melville and Ishmael, Ahab assigns only dark spiritual meanings to objects, cannot see beyond the physical reality of death, and therefore identifies Queequeg's coffin as a symbol of physical death. Affirming an objective reality outside of subjective perception, the author expresses two possible meanings of the coffin. He says that in the "spiritual sense" the coffin could be an "immortality preserver" (667), demonstrating the paradoxical, physical death and spiritual life that the coffin/life-buoy could represent to a balanced mind such as Ishmael's. The destructive capacity of Ahab's limited vision allows him to see the coffin as only a symbol of physical death; this limited vision Emerson warns against in "Experience": "Perhaps these subject lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects" (269). In his later essays Emerson acknowledges the limited power of perception and affirms the

existence of the palpable world. In “The Skeptic” he acknowledges the existence of a physical world completely outside of and undetermined by his mind: “I can reason down or deny every thing, except this perpetual Belly: feed he must and will, and I cannot make him respectable” (297). Emerson’s acknowledgement of a physical world beyond the control of his intellect concurs with Melville’s depiction of the existence of an ambiguous, indeterminable one.

Melville and Emerson believe in a correspondent spiritual realm and humanity’s inability to decipher the spiritual significance of natural objects. Adams notes that any multiplicity for Emerson is “grounded in what he calls . . . ‘that Over-Soul’,” whereas Melville “defines ambiguity not as multiplicity of meaning but as indeterminacy of meaning” (59). Despite the allowance for evil and pessimism in his later essays, Emerson still finds comfort in the overriding presence of the divine: “Into every intelligence there is a door which is never closed through which the creator passes” (“Experience” 259). Even though the physical world remains connected to the Over-Soul or the creator, Emerson articulates the inability to ascertain the certain spiritual correspondence between the physical and the spiritual in his later essays. While Adams articulates the difference “between the transparent eyeball and the pasteboard mask” as the difference “between [Emerson’s] transcendentalist and [Melville’s] deconstructor” (60), his assessment of Melville’s indeterminacy of meaning as deconstructionist ignores Melville’s belief in the spiritual significance of the material world. Although to human beings the physical world may appear to be an infinite deferment of meaning to an endless chain of signifiers, for

Melville those signifiers do correspond to a celestial realm. Whereas Emerson sees one unifying “signified” in nature that corresponds to the Over-Soul of the spiritual realm but cannot decipher the signifiers, Melville sees a divide between the physical and spiritual so slippery that humanity’s various perspectives and projections simply prove humanity’s inability to grasp the spiritual knowledge of life.

Even though Melville paradoxically represents the ungraspable deity as good and evil, he grounds this multiplicity in a divine unity similar to Emerson’s philosophy.

Michael Strelow asserts that an Emersonian, spiritually grounded centering can be found in Melville’s apparent multiplicity: “*Moby-Dick* is full of balances, meditations, centers defined by extremes” (138). The false dichotomy set up by many critics to comprehend the differences between Emerson’s Over-soul and Melville’s pluralities and the objective and subjective states of the physical world falters in light of their shared belief in determinism. Emerson abandons such terms as the Over-Soul and the Eternal Cause in his essay “Fate” and suggests that we “build altars to the Beautiful Necessity” of humanity’s limited ability to intervene with what has been predetermined by fate (352). Fate is a limitation “impassable by any insight of man. In its last and loftiest ascensions, insight itself and the freedom of the will is one of its obedient members” (“Fate” 339). Both Emerson and Melville believe in predetermination by fate, destiny, or the divinity, something beyond the control of man’s subjective thoughts. In spite of all the illusory meanings projected onto *Moby Dick*, Melville ultimately leaves the significance of the whale ambiguous and independent of human thought. The whale’s “predestinating head”

suggests the presence of the creator, a whale determined by God (720). Ishmael also describes the craft as “predestinated” (526) and states that “we are all in the hands of the Gods” (529). Emerson also speaks of life as “predetermined” with one future that “all the privilege and all the legislation of the world cannot meddle or help” (“Fate” 334). Daryl Lott links Melville’s and Emerson’s philosophy in their “quest for truth” and asserts that both “believed that inspiration for such inquiry came from beyond the self” (58). Ultimately, their shared deterministic, essential conception of a spiritual realm stems from a deity beyond human comprehension.

Cognizant of both good and evil and aware of the physical and its ungraspable spiritual significance, Ishmael portrays the healthy, balanced spirit espoused by both Melville and Emerson. Calling Ishmael a post-transcendentalist, I distinguish Ishmael’s position as commensurate with Emerson’s later skepticism, tempering the “all knowing” capacity of the fleeting, momentary insights of Emerson’s more idealistic, transcendental phase with the knowledge of both good and evil and “knowing that we can not know” (“The Skeptic” 295). Unlike Gregory Grewell, who bravely asserts that “Melville’s *Moby-Dick* pursues, tests, and proves the transcendental ideas expounded in Emerson’s “Nature” (138), Peter Quigley suggests Melville criticizes Ishmael as a traditional transcendentalist commensurate with Emerson’s early philosophy. Quigley argues that Ishmael represents a transcendentalist in terms of Emerson’s early definitions. He challenges Melville’s philosophical alignment with Ishmael and reads his portrayal as “precisely the coopted Romantic mythology that Melville portrays as helping to drive

expansionist politics” (48). Quigley’s desire to find political motivations in *Moby-Dick* depend upon a tenuous assumption that Melville is strictly an anti-transcendentalist and that Ishmael is a transcendentalist in terms of the definitions in Emerson’s early essays.

Ishmael’s combined vision of good and evil in the world intimated through intuitions and questioned by doubts demonstrates Melville’s approbation of a later, more balanced Emersonian post-transcendentalism. Despite the constant evil influence of Ahab’s monomania, Ishmael can see both the demonic and the heavenly potential in Moby Dick:

So in dreams, have I seen majestic Satan thrusting forth his tormented colossal claw from the flame Baltic of Hell. But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the archangels. (485)

It is the ultimately ambiguous meaning of natural objects that encourages Ishmael to see both the material and the spiritual significance in the vapor from the White Whale’s spout: “Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye” (480). Ishmael’s balancing of transcendental intuitions of spirituality via the natural world and the sobering doubts of the mind confronted by the contradictory physical world directly affirm Emerson’s “new statement” in “Experience” which “will comprise the skepticisms as well as the faiths of society” (269). While Melville’s “dark side . . . is two thirds of this earth” (542), and Emerson’s world contains the good in

“heaping measures” (“Experience” 263), humankind must acknowledge evil and affirm the good as Ishmael does. Melville’s Ishmael is a literary manifestation of Emerson’s skeptic, one whose “beliefs consist in accepting the affirmations of the soul; unbelief, in denying them” (299).

Ishmael’s wisdom extends beyond his balanced temperament and acknowledgement of both good and evil; he recognizes his own limitations and accepts the inscrutability of Moby Dick and the rest of the natural, physical world, a concurrent theme in Emerson’s later essays. Confirming his own limitations as the narrator of events and as a human being, Ishmael astutely states that “all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go” (251). He proclaims Moby Dick the exemplar of the indecipherable natural world imbued with spiritual significance:

But in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature. For you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed. (447-8)

Equating Moby Dick with the ungraspable, Ishmael refers to the decapitated head of the Sperm Whale as “the Sphynx’s in the desert” (405) and as “a dead, blind wall” (436).

Ishmael not only recognizes Moby Dick as paradoxical, indecipherable, and yet spiritually significant, but he also recognizes human fallibility in interpreting this grand symbol:

“Phrenologically the head of this Leviathan . . . is an entire delusion. . . . The whale, like

all things that are mighty, wears a false brow to the common world” (450). Ultimately unable to read the false brow, Ishmael exclaims his perception of the world and Moby Dick: “Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will” (486). Melville and the older Emerson agreed upon humanity’s inability to punch through the pasteboard masks and truly know the world beyond. Amending the image of the all-knowing transcendental eyeball, Emerson’s later essay “The Skeptic” defines knowledge as “the knowing that we can not know” (295).

Emerson’s later skeptical regard for human knowledge of the infinite and his theory of correspondences exemplify the qualified post-transcendentalism he and Melville ultimately shared. Both Melville and the later Emerson found significance in momentary intuitions as proof of a spiritual realm that will not divulge its secrets to humankind. Far from Emerson’s early transparent world, the paradoxical, corresponding palpable world reveals the human condition: ignorance of the divine. Keeping one foot in the natural world at all times, the balanced soul recognizes the ambiguity of spiritual significance and concedes the dangerous consequences of the “unbalanced” mind insistent upon a fixed, correspondent reality. Believing in a spiritual world that lies beyond the “pasteboard masks,” Melville and the skeptical Emerson applaud the individual who can see evil, still affirm the good, and can glimpse the spiritual without losing footing in the physical world and falling from the mast head. Ishmael, who maintains an “insular Tahiti” (364) and exemplifies this philosophy, concedes his own restricted knowledge of Moby Dick as the narrator and as a human being who “know[s]

him not and never will” (486). Emerson admits as much about himself in “Experience” and says he would be “very content with knowing, if only [he] could know” (273).

Melville both challenges the reader of *Moby-Dick* to seek the “ungraspable” mystery of the world and humanity, “this solitary jet,” that “seem[s] for ever alluring us on,” as he continuously warns against the search for the unknowable knowledge of the divine (311). Emerson states the situation less paradoxically at the close of “The Skeptic”:

Let a man learn to look for the permanent in the mutable and fleeting; let him learn to bear the disappearance of things he was wont to reverence without losing his reverence; let him learn that he is here, not to work but to be worked upon; and that, though abyss open under abyss, and opinion displace opinion, all are at last contained in the Eternal Cause:-- (301)

Melville and Emerson as post-transcendentalists accept the paradox of believing in the spiritual significance of the universe without being able to decipher its exact meaning. Believing in the determination by the “Eternal Cause,” Emerson still finds that cause more benevolent than Melville’s ambiguous one. Not abandoning the belief in things spiritual, the ideal hero for Melville or ideal human being for the older Emerson observes evidence of the celestial realm without losing his or her grip on the tangible, knowable existence of the physical world in which he or she must live.

Melville and the later Emerson aver post-transcendentalism, or realism, as the goal of the individual’s search and formulate similar paths to achieve this harmony between the spiritual and earthly worlds. Melville leaves behind the travel narrative form



of *Moby-Dick* and continues his “truth seeking” in the form of the *Bildungsroman* in his subsequent novel, *Pierre*. Aborting the form at the end of the novel, Melville rejects *Bildung* or the gradual educational development as the path to equilibrium and favors Emerson’s path consisting of momentary spiritual insights tempered by skepticism. Unfortunately, his absolutist protagonist, Pierre, despairs in the face of doubt coupled with the fear of demonic forces or, even worse, an abyss of nothing at all. Like Ahab, Pierre cannot balance intuitions of things celestial and doubts as Ishmael can.

## CHAPTER II

### **Melville's *Pierre, or The Ambiguities* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*: Distinct Paths to Equilibrium**

Henry A. Murray's introduction to the Hendricks House 1949 edition of *Pierre, or The Ambiguities*, attributes Melville's "spiritual autobiography in the form of a novel" to his reading in 1849 of "Rousseau's *Confessions*, Goethe's *Autobiography*, De Quincey's *Autobiographical Sketches* and *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, Sartor Resartus, and there are reasons to believe, *Pendennis* and *Lavengro*, both of which are partial self-revelations" (xxiv). Certainly not the first to speculate on the effects of Melville's extensive reading on his writings, Murray misses a potential source for Pierre's "spiritual autobiography," Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, a book Melville borrowed from Duyckinck in 1850 just before writing *Pierre* in 1851-2 (Sealts 179). Commonly considered the archetypal *Bildungsroman* and the initiator of the German tradition, Goethe's novel addresses the cultural and educational development of the hero and the dichotomous tensions between the temporary and the eternal, the individual and the infinite, and the earthly and the spiritual, parallel themes in *Pierre*.

Whereas the influence of Goethe's *Faust* and *Autobiography* upon Melville's *Moby-Dick* have been thoroughly analyzed, the specific impact of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* on *Pierre* remains unacknowledged. James McIntosh asserts the influence of Goethe's Weaver-Gods in *Faust* on Melville's *Moby-Dick*; Walter Reed draws parallels between the "Midnight Forecastle" chapter in *Moby-Dick* and the

Walpurgisnight in *Faust*. Robert Milder asserts the impact of Goethe's description of demonism as a force in the world in his *Autobiography* on Melville's *Moby-Dick* and, to a lesser extent, on *Pierre* in "Nemo Contra Deum . . . : Melville and Goethe's Demonic." Melville's direct quote from Goethe's *Autobiography* at the end of chapter IV in *Pierre*, "Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse" (Nobody is against God unless it be God Himself) and the numerous indictments of Goethe's idealistic philosophic vision in the text directly connect Goethe with *Pierre*.

Although no substantive study of the relationship between Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and Melville's *Pierre* exists, many scholars and critics read Melville's *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man* as novels modeled after the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Milder believes that Melville himself developed as an author while writing *Mardi*, and claimed that "Mardi . . . was his *Bildungsroman*" (209). Martin Christadler challenges comparative scholars to assess the relationship between Melville's fiction and the *Bildungsroman* tradition, suggesting Melville's use of *Bildungsgeschichte* (educational/developmental history) in the narrative of Ishmael's journey from alienation to integration in *Moby-Dick*. Walter Reed connects the German tradition with *Pierre*, "an almost stereo-typed interweaving of the Gothic novel and *Bildungsroman*" (*An Exemplary History of the Novel* 202), and reads it as an "abortive *Bildungsroman*" (*Meditations on the Hero* 181). Proceeding from Reed's passing observations, I suggest that in *Pierre* Melville writes within Goethe's narrative form in order to demonstrate the fallible assumptions made by the *Bildungsroman* tradition.

Comparing Melville's abortive *Bildungsroman* with the incipient expression of that tradition, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, illuminates Goethe's and Melville's shared goal of equilibrium between the spiritual and physical realm and the disparate paths each endorses to achieve that harmonious balance.

In Melville's rejection of Goethe's theory of *Bildung* as the path to equilibrium, he unconsciously aligns himself with Emerson whose sporadic, transcendent intuition, eventually leads to a skeptical balance in his later essays. In *Pierre* Melville intimates the connection between Goethe and Emerson (the Yankee disciple of Greek and German philosophy), who purport to have deciphered the greater mysteries in life: "Plato, and Spinoza, and Goethe, and many more belong to this guild of self-imposters, with a preposterous rabble of Muggletonian Scots and Yankees, whose vile brogue still the more bestreaks the stripedness of their Greek or German Neoplatonic originals" (290). Melville equates Goethe's philosophy with Romantic idealism and fails to acknowledge the similarities between Goethe's mature vision of equilibrium and his own. Contrasting Emerson's path to enlightenment through momentary flashes of intuition with Goethe's gradual, evolutionary path, Christadler suggests that Melville's and Goethe's paths to truth converge in the gradual education and socialization of the hero through *Bildung*. Arguing against Christadler's theory, I shall demonstrate that Emerson's early spiritual intuition that culminates in a skeptical equilibrium between the terrestrial and celestial worlds more closely resembles Melville's ideal path to harmony than Goethe's gradual educational development.

The German narrative tradition of the *Bildungsroman* begins with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, and all subsequent attempts in German literature to write within the genre are compared to this benchmark. Due to contemporary and modern critical attention to Goethe's novel as the initial expression of the *Bildungsroman* tradition, the abstract qualities found in the tradition and the specific characteristics of *Wilhelm Meister* are the same. Although modern critics like Martin Swales identifies Wieland's 1767 *Agathon* as the "first of the great *Bildungsromane*," the term was first coined by Karl Morgenstern in the early 1820s, who identified *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* as its incipient realization and defined the genre as follows:

It will justly bear the name *Bildungsroman* firstly and primarily on account of its thematic material, because it portrays the *Bildung* of the hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain stage of completeness; and also secondly because it is by virtue of this portrayal that it furthers the reader's *Bildung* to a much greater extent than any other kind of novel. (Swales 12)

Occupied with the growth process, or *Werden* (becoming), of the protagonist, the *Bildungsroman* concerns itself with the process rather than a specific goal (Swales 34). If one were to extract a goal, it would be to find inner harmony with the outer world, to reach an equilibrium of activity and contemplation, or to achieve socialization after a process of cultural education. The end of Goethe's novel remains unresolved and continues long after the protagonist has achieved any specific goal. This irresolution

prompted discussions about the novel in the correspondence between Goethe and Schiller and in countless critical debates involving Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Hegel and others (Swales 26-8). The problem of theory and practice or inward contemplation of the soul and the experience of palpable reality plagued contemporary critics and continues to defy modern readers. That very irresolution of contentious dichotomies Melville addresses in his chapter on “chronometrical” and “horological” time and directly confronts with his more decisive and tragic ending in *Pierre*.

*Pierre* can be read as a novel with the outward trappings of the *Bildungsroman* tradition that rejects the theory of gradual educational and experiential development, the crux of Goethe’s theory of *Bildung*. The following analysis of plot, theme, form, and theory as they appear in *Pierre* and *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* demonstrates significant analogues and disparities between the two works. Such a study reveals the similar goals but varied paths to achieve that goal. Even though the mature Goethe that wrote the *Bildungsroman*, the later Emerson, and Melville agree that equilibrium is the goal of spiritual enlightenment, Goethe’s gradual path to truth and harmony differs from both Melville’s and Emerson’s circular path of insight, experience, and skepticism. Using Goethe’s novel and the *Bildungsroman* tradition as a foil, I will illuminate the similarities between Melville’s and Emerson’s paths.

Goethe’s young Wilhelm leaves the comforts of his bourgeois surroundings and takes up life in the theater, enacting the role of Hamlet both on and off the stage. He falls in love several times, meets and loses companions, errs and finds his way with the help of

“fate.” Erroneously remaining too long in the company of actors, he takes a message to a nobleman, stays at his castle, and falls in love with the nobleman’s sister, Natalia. He discovers that he is an apprentice in the secret Society of the Tower, a group of philosophers seeking to observe and better the experiences and education of people. Once the philosophers determine the end of his apprenticeship, Wilhelm marries Natalia, who has purchased from Wilhelm’s father his grandfather’s art collection. Towards the end of the novel, the hero reintegrates into society through the Society of the Tower, marriage and the inheritance of his lost “kingdom,” his grandfather’s cultural pieces. The novel does not end there. Wilhelm engages in more philosophical discussions and plans a trip to Italy with his son. This problematic, irresolute ending leaves the reader with an open-ended narrative in which one assumes that Wilhelm has just started down the path of a lifelong process and will keep contemplating inner truths and learning about the natural world, achieving greater and greater harmony along the way.

Also turning to Hamlet as his guide, Melville’s Pierre chooses to act upon the letter he receives and leave the comforts of his bourgeois surroundings to right his father’s wrong and care for his illegitimate sister, Isabel, by declaring her to be his wife. Estranged from his mother and cousin, Pierre is left to enact this noble deed without help from society or God. He and Isabel live in the Church of the Apostles, home to a group of young philosophers who are disciples of Kant and other German philosophers. Attempting to write a novel he is too immature to write about truths he, as a human being, cannot grasp, he reacts to the elusiveness of truth with despair and damages his physical

and emotional health trying to attain it. Reunited with his former fiancée, Lucy, Pierre and the two women live together isolated from society and kill themselves out of desperation at the end of the novel.

*Pierre*, like *Wilhelm Meister*, employs the plot and themes common in the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Pierre, like Wilhelm, finds guidance in literary works and leaves home to go on a quest. Addressing the contradictions of nurturing the inward soul and interacting in society, both protagonists acknowledge the dangers of over-contemplation as exemplified by Hamlet. Towards the end of the novel, Pierre finds himself in a society of philosophers, in the company of his sister, and reunited with his former love. Wilhelm also enters a philosophical society, discovers kinship with his son, and reunites with Natalia, the object of his affection. Although the similar thumbnail sketches reveal superficial similarities between the two novels, a closer analysis of Karl Morgenstern's definition of the *Bildungsroman* and how each novel either fulfills or rejects those concerns betrays *Pierre* as the imposter posing within the form.

Both protagonists appear to engage in the major components of *Bildung*, educational and experiential development through learning. Pierre and Wilhelm quote the same two lines from Hamlet,

The time is out of joint;--Oh cursed spite,

That ever I was born to set it right! (*Pierre* 235; *Wilhelm Meister* 231)

They view their own situations as analogous to Hamlet's, learn from literary works, and apply that knowledge to their experience in the world. Pierre's and Wilhelm's similar



responses to *Hamlet* and disparate results from such literary-inspired action illuminate the authors' different views on literary study's value and effect on life. Wilhelm learns from Hamlet's over-contemplation, alters his response to uncertainty with action, and appreciates the play as a dramatic performance of life in an aesthetic whole. Wilhelm argues that human beings cannot make judgments about their own lives, presented to them in fragments, when they cannot even make judgments about an action presented in its entirety in the theater:

How can men judge rightly of our actions, which appear but singly or in fragments to them; of which they see the smallest portion; while good and bad takes place in secret, and for most part nothing comes to light but an indifferent show? Are not the actors and actresses in a play set up on boards before them; lamps are lit on every side; the whole transaction is comprised within three hours; yet scarcely one of them knows rightly what to make of it. (75)

The privileged perspective of the whole action in the theater results from taking the fragmentary pieces of an action out of real time and arranging them in quick succession. Goethe applies this theory of art to Wilhelm's *Bildung*, in which he must gain knowledge gradually through cultural education and experience, and only after the passage of time may he rightly understand and judge the past. Much as literature reflects life's fragmentary parts in one whole as Aristotle outlines in the *Poetics*, Wilhelm acknowledges how the theater can take a series of seemingly disconnected incidents in

life, arrange them into a coherent sequence, and demonstrate an action in its entirety. Wilhelm believes that art's aesthetic privilege over actual life, not succumbing to the same measure of time, has didactic purposes for the viewer or reader. Karl Morgenstern finds *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* in full compliance with his prescriptive characteristics of the *Bildungsroman* genre. He believes that Goethe's novel primarily portrays the cultural development of his hero and thereby educates the reader as well.

Melville's *Pierre* falls short of Morgenstern's definition because it fails to portray the development of the hero and thereby educate the reader, despite its use of certain *Bildungsroman* narrative techniques. Pierre decides to act instead of fall into the over-contemplation that ruined Hamlet. Acting on information morally ambiguous due to his father's death, Pierre declares himself married to his illegitimate sister, Isabel, an action that causes the expulsion from his family estate, his fall into social disrepute, and his struggle to survive in the world. Once his literary-inspired action causes social distress for him and his family, he becomes discontent with the limited practical applications of literature and its failure to reveal the spiritual truths he seeks. Pierre realizes that "not always doth life's beginning gloom conclude in gladness; that wedding-bells peal not ever in the last scene of life's fifth act" and that even

the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all  
that can be humanly known of human life . . . 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. (199)

Not only the protagonist expresses discontent with literature's limitations, but also Melville's own cynicism about the power of books to educate and reveal any spiritual truths can be heard through the voice of the narrator, who tells us that Pierre has not yet learned that

in reality to a mind bent on producing some thoughtful thing of absolute Truth, all mere reading is apt to prove but an obstacle hard to overcome; and not an accelerator helpfully pushing him along. . . . [Pierre] did not see, that even when [all existing great works] thus combined, all was but one small mite, 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 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. (394-6)

Melville's narrator tells the reader directly that literature has no power to educate or reveal celestial truths. Melville also demonstrates this fact through the tragic results of Pierre's literary-inspired action and the failure to glean any truth from the books he reads. Coining the phrase *Bildungsroman*, Karl Morgenstern emphasized the educational development of both the novel's hero and the reader; Melville's pseudo-*Bildungsroman*

fails in both respects. The reader does not develop or learn from Pierre's failure to progress and is explicitly told and shown the failure of any books, including *Pierre*, to contribute to a reader's development or education.

Melville writes within the superficial form of the *Bildungsroman* tradition and addresses the same ambiguities that *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* does. The dichotomies addressed in Goethe's novel and taken up by Melville include the earthly and the heavenly, the actual and the potential, the fragmentary and the whole, the individual and the infinite, and the "horological" and "chronometrical" –the temporary and the eternal. The most obvious connection between all of these dichotomous elements is the function of time. For Goethe the passage of chronological time is necessary to gain a holistic perspective on life and to learn from both the study of culture through education and the physical experience of life. For Melville and Emerson curiosity about the spiritual realm occurs instantaneously through momentary insights; with the passage of time and experience, skepticism tempers those insights to create an equilibrium between the spiritual and the material worlds, the same goal Goethe's *Bildung* achieves. Pierre's absolutist, idealist course appears similar to Emerson's "phase of idealism," but his inference of evil in the universe does not allow him to emerge from his idealistic phase unscathed as Emerson did.

In Melville's portrayal of an absolute idealist gone too far, Pierre represents a parody of Emerson's early transcendentalism. The author uses the Emersonian path to truth through intuition and idealism to expose its inherent dangers in his portrayal of

Pierre's tragedy, but to say that Melville finds no value in this path to truth would be an overstatement. Ishmael, Melville's ideal hero, shares his momentary insights with the reader and discusses his participation in transcendental reveries. Ishmael's insights never cause an abandonment of material existence and are portrayed as fruitful and engaging when tempered by a secure footing in physical reality. Emerson's phase of idealistic transcendentalism as espoused in his essays entitled "Self-Reliance" and "Transcendentalism" preface Pierre's (and Ahab's) fall. When Pierre neglects the physical world for his pursuit of truth in a novel, Melville fills this section of the book with obvious parodies of the early beliefs and practices of Emerson and his followers. Once Emerson's own experience in the world tempers his idealism with a skeptical acknowledgement of both the physical and spiritual realms and the human inability to grasp celestial truths, Melville and Emerson once again see eye to eye. Unfortunately, Pierre never recovers from his absolute idealism.

Had Pierre not been so quickly overcome with insights and actively pursued them in a quest to attain celestial truths at the expense of his physical existence in the world, he might have been able to achieve an equilibrium not unlike that of Goethe's Wilhelm. Rather than tell the reader what *Bildung* consists of, Goethe conveys this process through Wilhelm's experiences and the eventual judgment of decisions as "errors" or "progressions." At the end of the novel, privileged with hindsight, Wilhelm learns of his first love's fidelity and realizes his decision to leave her was a mistake. When he meets his true love, Natalia, his former attraction to her sister, the Countess, becomes more

understandable. However, even at the end of the novel the reader feels that this first insight or looking back with clarity is only the beginning of a lifelong process. The day his apprenticeship ends and nature pronounces him free “did his own cultivation seem to have commenced: he felt the necessity of learning, being called upon to teach” his son (73). Wilhelm also realizes the human limitations of knowledge and “wished to understand how far man may venture with his thoughts, and what things he may hope ever to give account of to himself or others” (77). Rather than a discovery that leads to suicide as in *Pierre*, Wilhelm’s recognition of his own limitations simply mark another point in his gradual path to self-knowledge. Finally, he emphasizes the path rather than the goal of his development:

O needless strictness of morality . . . while Nature in her own kindly manner trains us to all that we require to be. O strange demands of civil society, which first perplexes and misleads us, then asks of us more than Nature herself! Woe to every sort of culture which destroys the most effectual means of all true culture, and directs us to the end, instead of rendering us happy on the way! (77)

*Bildung* does not emphasize the attainment of spiritual truths as its goal; rather it stresses living harmoniously with thought and action, the inward self and the external world. Moreover, one may be able to understand the significance of past experiences only from the distance afforded by the passing of chronological, earthly time.

Melville's concern with earthly time and spiritual time, the "horological" and "chronometrical," respectively, are outlined by Plotinus Plinlimmon, a philosopher living in the Church of the Apostles. Pierre reads a discarded copy of Plinlimmon's "Lecture First" on his way to the city. The pamphlet first explains that human beings concerned with "things provisional" must also "hold that all our so-called wisdom is likewise but provisional" (293). Melville's vision of an inscrutable God deaf and mute to human concerns concurs with the philosophy of the pamphlet thus far. To explain the difference between heavenly time and earthly time, he uses the analogy of a boat set to Greenwich time travelling to China. Although the boat is perfectly attuned to Greenwich (heavenly) time, keeping that time in China is quite useless and will cause peculiar behavior: sleeping during the day and getting up at night. He concludes that "in an artificial world like ours, the soul of a man is further removed from its God and the Heavenly Truth, than the chronometer carried to China, is from Greenwich" (294). One attuned to Greenwich or eternal time will always contradict the local standards in China or on this earth. The central message of Plinlimmon lecture is this:

That in things terrestrial (horological) a man must not be governed by ideas celestial (chronometrical); that certain minor self-renunciations in this life his own mere instinct for his everyday general well-being will teach him to make, but he must by no means make a complete unconditional sacrifice of himself in behalf of any other being, or any cause, or any conceit. (298-9)

Pierre's unconditional sacrifice of himself on behalf of Isabel and his cause (to discover and record celestial truth) places him in violation with Plinlimmon's philosophy. Since Pierre's attempt to be a "chronometer" fails due to his physical and mental limitations as a human being, Plinlimmon's promotion of the "horologes" appears to reflect Melville's vision of balance between the spiritual and material worlds.

Melville's portrayal of Pierre's failed attempt as a "chronometer" and Ishmael's success as a "horologe" demonstrates the alignment of his vision with Plinlimmon's philosophy. The pamphlet seems to ask Pierre directly, "What man who carries a heavenly soul in him, has not groaned to perceive, that unless he committed a sort of suicide as to the practical things of this world, he never can hope to regulate his earthly conduct by the same heavenly soul?" (297). Pursuing unknowable truths, Pierre attunes himself to the "chronometrical," eternal time, commits "a sort of suicide as to the practical things of this world" leaving his bride, mother and estate behind, ruining many lives, and ultimately commits an actual, physical suicide. Since Melville does not aver Pierre's absolutist attuning to the "chronometrical," eternal time, are we to believe that he agrees with the philosopher's "horological" conclusion, that "a virtuous expediency, then, seems the highest desirable or attainable earthly excellence for the mass of men, and is the only earthly excellence that their Creator intended for them" (299)? Lawrance Thompson points out that to accept that as a suitable model for life would be to live according to a nominal Christianity, characterized by Pierre's mother's and Reverend Falsgrave's unchristian abandonment of Delly, the single mother in desperate need of



help (276). But Plinlimmon's horologes are essentially good, virtuous, compassionate people who acknowledge God, but also accept their human limitations and allow for "checked" selfishness and other liabilities. Neither Pierre's bad, hypocritical mother nor Reverend Falsgrave qualify as a "horologe," an "earnest man, who, among all his human frailties, is still agonisingly conscious of the beauty of chronometrical excellence" such as Christ's (300). Melville favors the horological balancing act between acknowledging the spiritual and trying to be good and virtuous within practical reason as characterized by Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* and as affirmed by Emerson in his later essays like "The Skeptic."

Melville presents Pierre's path to find the truth as one that begins with insights or momentary revelations like Ishmael's and Emerson's all-knowing reveries. Pierre's first intuitions come to him as a vision of an unknown face and as disturbing feelings he describes as "airy devils." Lucy also senses the demonic forces as "some nameless sadness, faintness, strangely" come to her (50) and as an "evil spell" (51). Reflecting Melville's ambiguous representation of God, Pierre's and Lucy's intuitions are imbued with an evil significance. Like flashes, these sensations come and go almost momentarily and open a window between the soul and the divine:

. . . in these flashing revelations of grief's wonderful fire, we see all things as they are; and though, when the electric element is gone, the shadows once more descend, and the false outlines of objects again return; yet not with their former power to deceive . . . (123)

An insight into truth leaves the protagonist unable to retreat into his former naïve view of the physical world as the absolute, fixed representation of truth. Now he feels compelled to search for the truth lurking beyond the earthly shadows. Pierre's strange, "almost supernatural" feelings that "transcend all verbal renderings" awaken the most important questions in him: "With the lightning's flash, the query is spontaneously propounded—chance, or God?" (155) Never denying the presence of God, Melville's primary query is more likely to address the ambiguous nature of God than it is to question the existence of a divine being. The significance of these passages is how Pierre glimpses the presence of a spiritual world and its elusive truths. It is the momentary intuition that awakens curiosity and the acknowledgement of evil in the world rather than the steady progression of experience as in the process of *Bildung*.

Pierre's initial awakening to the spiritual world via momentary insights, his quest for spiritual truth, and his eventual skepticism about the ability to attain truth follow a pattern similar to the beginning and development of Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendental philosophy. A momentary insight leading to a spiritual awakening recorded in "Nature" occurs in natural surroundings: "When in fortunate hours we ponder this miracle, the wise man doubts if at all other times he is not blind and deaf . . . for the universe becomes transparent, and the light of higher laws than its own shines through it" (35). Pierre's first flashes of insight occur outdoors and are similar to Emerson's—with a dark twist. Following the initial spiritual reveries recorded in "Nature," Emerson adopts the idealist or transcendentalist philosophy of life:

As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, The senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell” (“The Transcendentalist” 192-3).

Like Emerson, Pierre leaves behind his safe, material reality relying on experience and the senses to look for the spiritual significance beyond the material world away from his family’s estate, becoming an idealist or transcendentalist who ignores and neglects the material world of experience. Pierre’s absorption in his own thoughts and the world inside his head and his book bear a striking resemblance to Emerson’s transcendentalist: “His thought, --that is the Universe” (195).

Chasing after vague intimations of the celestial world, Pierre proceeds in a manner that only *appears* consistent with the hero of the *Bildungsroman*. Awakened by passing insights and circumstantial knowledge of his father’s questionable past, Pierre hastily decides to act on his desire to save Isabel from ruin. “Saving” Isabel and Delly, he jumps into a routine of active writing and truth seeking, ruining the lives of every major figure in the novel. Actively treading the path of experience and making decisions without understanding their paramount significance or consequences as outlined in the *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist realizes the fruitlessness of his efforts: “For the more and more that he wrote, and the deeper and deeper that he dived, Pierre saw the everlasting

elusiveness of Truth; the universal lurking insincerity of even the greatest and purest written thoughts” (472). Not only truth itself but also attempts at truth written down by human hands in the form of literature or philosophy do not come close to striking beyond that paste-board mask in *Moby-Dick*. And like Ahab, Pierre is not content with Emersonian flashes of intuition—he wants Paradise itself.

The balanced hero of the *Bildungsroman* does not actively seek truth or any specific goal, but seeks cultural learning and experience that over time will indirectly lead him to a truth and harmony between the spiritual and material world attainable by humankind. Unlike Wilhelm, whose indirect path to equilibrium culminates in his acceptance of human limitations, Pierre directly searches for the unattainable truth and despairs when confronted by his own limitations, doubting the existence of God and truth beyond the terrestrial world. Describing Pierre’s desperation at finding absolute truth, the narrator makes a statement that would seem consistent with the theory of the *Bildungsroman*: “so hath heaven wisely ordained, that on first entering into the Switzerland of his soul, man shall not at once perceive its tremendous immensity” (396). What seems a sincere belief in the gradual *Bildungsprozess* the narrator undermines in the analogy between the soul of man and the Egyptian mummy: “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 not body is there!--appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man” (397). Unable to grasp the inscrutability of God and the truths of the celestial world, the narrator suggests that under the first superficial layer, the world “is

found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface” (397). Writing the “godliest things” “with the soul of an Atheist” (472), Pierre assumes that his inability to attain truth unknowable by human beings necessitates the absence of such truth, an excess similar to Ahab’s.

As Pierre’s continued search for truth leads him through an idealistic phase to one of fatal doubts, Emerson’s continued truth-seeking in time reveals less and less about the spiritual world and more and more about the limitations of human consciousness bound to a material reality. Emerson can no longer deny the omnipresence of the material world in “Experience”: “We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them” (261). The narrator’s comment in *Pierre* that the world “is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface” bears a striking resemblance to Emerson’s parallel development and marks Pierre’s first doubt of spiritual existence at all beyond the material surface of reality (397). Instead of facing his mature skepticism with despair, Emerson affirms human limitation and suggests we “build altars to the Beautiful Necessity” (“Fate” 352). In other words, let us find joy in what we cannot understand and trust in the inner harmony of nature without full comprehension of its inner workings. Unfortunately, Pierre’s discovery that he cannot forever neglect the material world and still cannot attain the elusive, ultimate truth of the spiritual world overwhelms him with despair and leads to his suicide. His doubts of spiritual existence coincide with his breakdown in the material world. He no longer has a way to provide for himself and the women, will be taken to court for misrepresentation by his publisher, and will be

assaulted by his cousin and friend for being a liar. The timing of his loss of faith in the celestial and failure in the terrestrial results in a crisis precluding equilibrium praised by both Emerson and Goethe's Wilhelm.

The balancing of the spiritual and the material by virtuous "horologes," an Ishmaeleian equilibrium, becomes Emerson's vision and the final force of his philosophy in the later essays. He discourages absolutism and over-extension of the human mind in "The Skeptic":

I know that human strength is not in extremes, but in avoiding extremes.

I, at least, will shun the weakness of philosophizing beyond my depth.

What is the use of pretending to assurances we have not? . . . Why be an angel before your time? These strings, wound up too high, will snap.

(287)

Written around five years prior to Melville's composition of *Pierre*, this passage sounds as if Emerson had read the work and zeroed in on the protagonist's problem. Tormented by what he cannot know, Pierre's strings snap and Plinlimmon's warnings against being "an angel, a chronometer" fall on deaf ears. Emerson does not explain his transition from youthful idealism to "keep[ing] the balance" ("The Skeptic" 287). Whereas Melville's protagonist and the philosopher both follow a path from initial insights to idealism to skepticism, Emerson's new outlook in "Experience" evolves from the passing of time and actual experiences, something denied young Pierre. In "The Skeptic" Emerson admires one of Melville's favorite authors, Montaigne, who "took and kept this position of

equilibrium” (292) and asserts that “every superior mind will pass through this domain of equilibration” (294). Melville’s affirmation of Ishmael’s balanced soul and ruin of Ahab and Pierre, unbalanced absolutists bent on attaining heavenly truth, confirm the similarity between Melville’s and Emerson’s later visions: equilibrium negotiating between the intimations of a spiritual significance and the limitations of that knowledge grounded in a material existence.

Melville, Emerson, and Goethe affirm equilibrium as necessary for human beings whose consciousness can tap into the infinite, but whose minds and bodies experience the temporal, physical world. Wilhelm believes that what “keeps men in continual discontent and agitation . . . is that they cannot make realities correspond with their conceptions”; Jarno, a member of the Society of the Tower, finds that “in the conduct of poor mortals, equilibrium cannot be restored except by contraries,” the contradiction of celestial musings and terrestrial activity (134). *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* is full of warnings and examples of people who do not achieve such equilibrium. A minor character in Goethe’s novel addresses Pierre’s problem directly: “It is always a misfortune for him when he is induced to struggle after anything with which he cannot connect himself by some regular exertion of his powers” (385). Pierre’s struggle after heavenly truths beyond human capabilities causes his own misfortune and that of the other characters in the novel. Characters like Mignon and the Harper, introverted souls estranged from society, come to tragic ends, and the characters only chasing after material goods like Werner are held in little esteem. Wilhelm maintains a healthy, balanced

equilibrium by experiencing the external world, contemplating his inner world, and never being aware of a particular goal or path or directly searching for celestial truths.

The difference between Goethe's idea of equilibrium and the one espoused by both Melville and the later Emerson is the *path* the individual takes. Goethe's *Bildungsroman* emphasizes the path over any specific goal, allows the hero's path to divert away from a progressive movement, and requires the passage of time for proper insight into physical experience and spiritual truths. The process toward a perfect harmony of terrestrial and celestial is a gradual one over time that is not privileged with any momentary reveries or insights into the higher truths of the heavens. Melville rejects Goethe's gradual development and employs a path closer to Emerson's, while demonstrating its inherent flaws as well. In Emerson's series of lectures, the path to truth is represented as almost circular, beginning with flashes of insight and intimations of things spiritual, followed by the adoption of idealism and neglect of the material world, eventually informed by skepticism, and concluding with the peaceful coexistence of the unattainable realm of the infinite and an acceptance of human limitation informed by experience. Melville's portrayal of this process in *Pierre* is similar to Emerson's. Pierre glimpses intuitions of things spiritual, becomes an idealist who neglects the material world, but ultimately confronts the elusiveness of truth and his own human inability to grasp it with despair, depression, and suicide. Pierre takes Emerson's path and demonstrates the inherent dangers in the "idealistic phase" for a person less optimistic than Emerson who may see the dark side as well as the light. Melville's pseudo-



*Bildungsroman* fails not only because he rejects the notion of *Bildung* as a gradual and steady progression toward harmony, but also because in embracing Emerson's path toward a balanced equilibrium, Melville's less optimistic, absolutist Pierre lacks the balance to interpret skepticism and human limitation as "Beautiful Necessity" ("Fate" 352).

Melville and Emerson affirm similar paths and goals of healthy harmony between the spiritual and earthly worlds and agree upon the certain spiritual significance of the physical world and humanity's inability to grasp it. Their congruent belief in the fundamental opposition between the belief of a philosophical ideal on the one hand and the practice of that belief in the physical world on the other surfaces in Melville's 1857 novel, *The Confidence-Man*. Although Melville's attack upon Emerson's beliefs and practices in *The Confidence-Man* seems a severe culmination of the overt criticism of Emerson found in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Melville again proves himself to be more sympathetic to Emerson's vision than a cursory reading of his works intimates.

## CHAPTER III

### **Melville's Parody of Early Emersonian Beliefs in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade***

“The brush between the Confidence-Man and Emerson perhaps was the nucleus around which the rest of the story took shape in Melville's mind” (*The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Ed. Elizabeth S. Foster. New York: Hendricks House, lxxix).

Just as Pierre's tragic end results from his strict adherence to the “chronometrical” (celestial) at the expense of the “horological” (terrestrial), Melville continues his critique of early Emersonian absolutism in his portrayal of Mark Winsome, a “mystic” philosopher in *The Confidence-Man*. In 1922 Carl Van Vechten made a significant link between Melville's text and Emersonian philosophy, proposing that Emerson was the Confidence-Man (Higgins 285). Following a somewhat different path, Egbert S. Oliver asserted that Melville satirized Emerson in the character of Winsome; but for Hershel Parker “it remained for Elizabeth S. Foster to relate the mystic-and-disciple section to the rest of the book and to prove beyond any doubt . . . that Winsome was indeed a portrait of Emerson” (63). Affirming Mark Winsome as a portrayal of Emerson and denying Oliver's claim that his disciple Egbert was a portrayal of Thoreau, Foster asserts that

the difference between Winsome and Egbert, however, is not so much the difference between an originator and a disciple as between a mystic and a practical man, between the man of theory who confines himself to words and the man of action who puts that theory to work. (352)

Making her case for Melville's satire of Emerson in both Winsome and Egbert, Foster cites essays written at the height of Emerson's idealism: "Self-Reliance," "Circles," "Napoleon," and "Friendship." Unacknowledged by scholars and critics that otherwise concur with Foster's evaluation is the similarity between Melville's critique of Emerson's idealism and the mindset of an older, more mature Emerson who came to acknowledge the practical shortcomings of his transcendental philosophy as recorded in his later essays.

Emerson's later essays, including "Experience," "The Skeptic," and "Fate," all written before Melville's publication of *The Confidence-Man* in 1857, address the subjects of Melville's critique: absolutism, the impracticability of idealism, and the inconsistency between the individual will and the powers of fate. Even though in 1862 Melville annotated copies of Emerson's *Essays, First Series* and *Second Series*, which included "Self-Reliance" and "Experience," this dated annotation lends no support to his knowledge of these essays while writing *The Confidence-Man* in 1857. While a published letter from Sophia Hawthorne to Elizabeth Peabody of October 1850 records that Melville "one morning . . . shut himself into the boudoir and read Mr. Emerson's Essays" (Sealts 176), it is difficult to determine which collection of essays he read or which essays from that collection he may have read. Merton Sealts' "Melville and Emerson's Rainbow" argues that *Representative Men*, which included "The Skeptic," was probably the collection Melville read at the Hawthornes' and if not on that particular morning, the collection was at least among the books he probably read at that time (176). Whether

Melville read any of Emerson's later essays or not, Emerson's mature vision reflects the same concerns with absolute idealism and posits the same balance that Melville affirmed.

Splitting Emerson's philosophy into Winsome (the metaphysics) and Egbert (the ethics) (Foster lxxiii), Melville centers his critique of Emersonian transcendentalism around the artificial, absolute severance of the celestial and terrestrial worlds. Through this split he exposes the cold-hearted, inhuman self-indulgence at the heart of transcendental philosophy, the neglect and denial of the material world, and the impractical implementation of this philosophy in the physical world. Before criticizing the divide between the physical and the spiritual necessitated by Emerson's philosophical denying of the palpable world, Melville attacks Emerson's naïve belief that his abstract philosophy may be implemented in the physical world. The Confidence-Man as "the cosmopolitan" and Mark Winsome discuss the practical applications of his philosophy, reflecting Emerson's initial belief in a harmonious union of thought and action. The Confidence-Man says: "You speak of a certain philosophy and a more or less occult one it may be, and hint of its bearing upon practical life; pray, tell me, if the study of this philosophy tends to the same formation of character with the experiences of the world?" (170) Mark Winsome affirms the practicality of his abstract philosophy: "It does; and that is the test of its truth; for any philosophy that, being in operation contradictory to the ways of the world, tends to produce a character at odds with it, such a philosophy must necessarily be but a cheat and a dream" (170). In this exchange Melville challenges

Emerson's lectures on transcendental philosophy as both a mental, thinking exercise and as a practical code by which to live.

Whereas Emerson's idealistic essays proclaim the congruity of transcendental thought and action, his later essays acknowledge the essential divide between the metaphysical thoughts of a higher realm and the reality of action in a physical existence. In his early lecture "The American Scholar" Emerson calls for action: "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential" (70); and the education of a scholar is "by nature, by books, and by action" (72). "Self-Reliance" demands a "great responsible Thinker and Actor" to break the cycle of mediocrity and shape history (154). Establishing Winsome as the founder of a metaphysical philosophy who believes in its practical applications in the material world, Melville satirizes Emerson's paradoxical belief that a metaphysical philosophy that denies the existence of the physical world can have practical applications in that material existence. Emerson's shift in vision recorded in his later essay "Experience" acknowledges the same philosophical shortcomings for which Melville accused him. After years of experience living in the world, Emerson acquiesces: "But I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought" ("Experience" 273). He finally concedes the incongruity of metaphysical thought and practical action, a division which his idealistic philosophy necessitates. A result of the division of thought and action, Emerson's necessary adherence to the idealistic and neglect of the material prompts an even more scathing critique from Melville.

Melville demonstrates that applying Winsome's philosophy requires a denial and neglect of the material world, an act that has consequences for the individual and society. Privileging a healthy equilibrium and rewarding characters who negotiate between the spiritual and physical worlds on an even keel, Melville portrays the physical consequences of an individual's excessive metaphysical reveries and disregard for the material world. Not only could a man fall off the mast-head and drown during a prolonged transcendental reverie in *Moby-Dick*, but also Starbuck's unwavering belief in the Christian God prevents him from intervening with Ahab's monomaniac quest, costing him his life and the lives of most of the Pequod's crew. Pierre also suffers at the hands of debtors and angry familial and social acquaintances for neglecting important material considerations of the tangible world. Devoting all of his time and energy to his search for celestial truths, he pays for dismissing social reality with his own life, his mother's, Lucy's and Isabelle's.

Emerson's later essays address the dangers of absolutism and aver Melville's vision of individual equilibrium. Gary Lindberg posits Emerson as the immediate target of Melville's critique in *The Confidence-Man*, distinguishing between the primary and secondary or the inner and outer selves:

Severed from the circumstantial world of human relations, the inward self becomes blandly vague and uncertain, like the utterances of Mark Winsome, or it may fall into dangerous obsessions, unchecked by an

acknowledgement of human limitations and frailty—Ahab and Colonel Moredock. (38)

As Ahab obsessively identifies all evil with Moby Dick, Colonel Moredock, the Indian killer, obsessively identifies all evil with Indians. In “The Skeptic” Emerson proposes a “third party to occupy the middle ground between [the abstractionist and the materialist], the skeptic, namely” (“The Skeptic” 286). Emerson leaves behind the absolutism of the categories of the “idealists” and the “materialists” from his earlier essay “The Transcendentalist,” giving up his own self-portrait as an idealist who must, as a consequence, deny the existence of the material world. Just like Melville’s vision of equilibrium, Emerson’s skeptic “finds both wrong by being in extremes” and “labors to plant his feet, to be the beam of the balance” (286-87). In a self-critique of his former absolutism, Emerson acknowledges the dangers inherent in incessantly aspiring to the unattainable truth, a danger Melville portrays in Ahab, Pierre, and Col. Moredock. Although Melville criticizes the effects of an absolute Emersonian idealism on the individual, his central target in *The Confidence-Man* is the effects such philosophy has on society at large.

Melville illustrates the social ramifications of Emersonian philosophy devoid of practical applications in a neglected physical world and its effects on society at large in *The Confidence-Man*. Placing Emerson’s philosophy in the mouth of Mark Winsome and setting it on the *Fidele*, Melville represents American society so that the consequences of such practices assume a grander scale than the crew of the Pequod or a single social circle

in *Pierre*. All of the passengers on board practice a “nominal Christianity” affected by the enlightened self-interest preached by Emerson in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. As none of the passengers is eager to act as true Christians and give money to philanthropic causes and believe in the goodness of their fellow human beings, the effects of Emerson’s rejection of philanthropic practices on American society are easily observable. Unfortunately, each “enlightened” passenger is vulnerable to the Confidence-Man, demonstrating how evil can more easily operate in such a society that ignores social reality. By neglecting social interaction, the stage is set for swindlers, con men and the devil incarnate, the Confidence-Man. Ultimately, Emerson’s disciples, each passenger with whom the Confidence-Man interacts, demonstrate their naïve ignorance of evil and their vulnerability caused by neglecting the material world. Melville represents the effects of Emerson’s philosophy on American society that allows evil swindlers to run free unchecked by a society that ignores society itself.

Lindberg supports my view that Emerson’s philosophy promotes a social atmosphere conducive to the Confidence-Man’s success: “The philosophical cult of the innermost man coexists with its complement, a practical cult that celebrates pure, disengaged outward manipulation, and the Confidence-Man is its unacknowledged hero” (43). The Confidence-Man, who manifests his identity through social interaction alone, derives his identity from Emerson’s disregard for society. As long as “enlightened” Emersonian disciples ignore the social context of identity through human interaction, a Confidence-Man will remain free to manipulate others. Lindberg posits Emerson’s



philosophy as the catalyst for the Confidence-Man's success, acknowledging a direct relationship of interdependence.

Melody Graulich takes the relationship between Emerson and the Confidence-Man a step further and suggests that the Confidence-Man observes deceptive attributes similar to his own in Mark Winsome/Emerson:

Through his use of the fascinating rattlesnake, he implies that Emerson himself is a con man, not simply because of his cold, selfish heart and shallow optimism (though these are traits shared by various avatars of the confidence man), but because he too inspires and even elicits a misplaced trust . . . .(230)

Both the Confidence-Man and Emerson's transcendental philosophy blind men to "humanity's essential vulnerability," making them equal partners in manipulation (230). Emerson sets the stage by arguing that human nature is benign and society can be ignored, and the Confidence-Man easily snatches people's souls from them. I concur with Graulich and find similarities between the Confidence-Man as head of the Philosophical Intelligence Office and Emerson. Convincing the skeptical man that all boys, even badly behaved boys, are good at heart, the Confidence-Man echoes Emerson's naïve belief that all nature is essentially good as documented in his early essays. A closer study of similarities between Emerson and the Confidence-Man in various disguises could be fertile ground for future research.

Neglecting social responsibilities and instigating an environment ripe for con men is the necessary social consequence of a philosophy that espouses not only a disregard for social existence, but the denial of any actual material world. At the height of his idealism Emerson asserts in the “The Transcendentalist” that the “mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors” (194). In such a world that does not exist outside of the mind, human beings shouldn’t feel any sense of responsibility to the outside world and be forced to act charitably to it:

Expect me not to show cause why I seek or why I exclude company. Then again, do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. . . . –though I do confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar, which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.

(“Self-Reliance” 150)

The “wicked dollar” Emerson gives to charity echoes the exchange of souls to the devil by “the philanthropist” in *The Confidence-Man*. Emerson’s denial of any responsible action in the material world and his ignorance of any evil in that world leave him as vulnerable to Melville’s critique as Winsome’s followers are to the evil rhetoric of the Confidence-Man.

Winsome practices Emerson's disregard for the material world, revealing an inconsistency between the human application of his metaphysical philosophy and his theory of correspondences between the natural and spiritual world. As a "crazy beggar asking alms under the form of peddling a rhapsodical tract" approaches Winsome, he "sat more like a cold prism than ever . . . his whole air said 'Nothing from me'" (167). The Confidence-Man's reproach, "you ought to have sympathized with that man; tell me, did you feel no fellow-feeling? Look at this tract here, quite in the transcendental vein" (167), only provokes Winsome to reveal the ultimate inconsistency in the practical application of his own philosophy: "I detected in him, sir, a damning peep of sense—damning, I say; for sense in a seeming madman is scoundrelism. I take him for a cunning vagabond, who picks up a vagabond living by adroitly playing the madman" (168). Melville cleverly exposes the contradictory nature of Emerson's own practice in life, his practical monetary compensation for selling transcendental tracts and by "playing the madman" who "to the men of practical power . . . the man of ideas appears out of his reason" ("The Skeptic" 285). Refusing to patronize his own double in the narrative because the "sense" of the mind of the "vagabond" did not correspond to his outward appearance as a "madman," Winsome exemplifies Emerson's refusal to practice philanthropy. Melville mocks Emerson's limited theory of correspondences, in which the direct correlation between object and spirit can be observed in all of nature except in human beings.

Mark Winsome's philosophy concerning the outward appearances or "labels" on people and creatures both affirms the reliability of labels of creatures and challenges their validity in human beings. In reference to the rattlesnake, Winsome asserts, "When any creature is by its make inimical to other creatures, nature in effect labels that creature, much as an apothecary does a poison," implying the reliability of outward labels and a transparent relationship between an object and its spiritual significance obvious to any transcendentalist observer (163). Referring to the cosmopolitan's recently departed acquaintance, Winsome contradicts his earlier statement: "Nobody knows who anybody is. The data which life furnishes, toward forming a true estimate of being, are as insufficient to that end as in geometry one side given would be to determine the triangle" (165). The Confidence-Man astutely accuses the philosopher's beliefs in both labels and his "doctrine of triangles" or the indeterminacy of meaning in physical objects as inconsistent. Emerson's theory of correspondences must be inherently flawed if it applies only to the natural world, which includes all inanimate objects and animate creatures in nature and does not account for human beings. Espousing the theory of correspondences, Emerson's transcendental philosophy requires only humanity to be blind, cold, and unengaged on the surface in order to align the spirit with a higher truth. Winsome's insistence that the rattlesnake, the symbol of evil, has a label that determines his certain true significance, but that a human cannot be so easily judged, makes him vulnerable to Melville's criticism of inconsistency and the denial of evil.

Able to see less and less of the direct correlation of natural objects to their spiritual significance, Emerson concedes the limitations of his theory of correspondences and recognizes the existence of evil in his later essay "Experience." Amending his contention in "Nature" that "spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols," Emerson concedes the opacity of his former transparent world and demonstrates the weaknesses of his theory: "The new molecular philosophy shows astronomical interspaces betwixt atom and atom, shows that the world is all outside; it has no inside" ("Experience" 263). He doesn't suggest that a correspondence does not exist, but that human beings are not privy to that knowledge; he would be "very content with knowing, if only [he] could know" ("Experience" 273). Since the object in nature Mark Winsome identifies as spiritually labeled is a rattlesnake, the analogue for evil or the devil, Melville's criticism of Emerson includes his denial of evil in the world. In "Experience" Emerson awakes to find "the dear old devil not far off" (262-3), admits that "Nature, as we know her, is no saint," and remarks on the "objective existence" of "essential evil" (271), demonstrating his later acknowledgement of evil in the world.

In response to the inconsistencies Emerson's philosophy raised at the height of his idealistic vision, Melville questions the fundamental human ability to attain spiritual truth. The Confidence-Man questions Winsome's inconsistency in his alternate doctrines on "labels" for natural objects and the indeterminacy of human identity based on outward appearances. Winsome responds to the Confidence Man's confusion: "I seldom care to be consistent," blames the hill and dale of nature, and asks "how can one keep naturally

advancing in knowledge without submitting to the natural inequalities in the progress?"

(165) Winsome's comment refers to Emerson's statement in "Self-Reliance" that

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. . . . Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today.—“Ah, so you shall be misunderstood.”—Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus . . . To be great is to be misunderstood. (153)

Not only is Winsome “misunderstood” by the Confidence-Man, but the Confidence-Man accuses him of not saying anything concrete at all and more deceptively “bewitching” him with refined rhetorical skills. In response to the philosopher's analogy between the ups and downs of knowledge prone to natural progress and the locks of the Eerie canal, the Confidence-Man challenges him: “For, after all these weary lockings-up and lockings-down, upon how much of a higher plain do you finally stand? Enough to make it an object? . . . you somehow bewitch me with your tempting discourse” (165). The stab at Emerson reveals the impracticability of chasing after elusive truths in the physical world and criticizes the unintelligibility of his discourse, a usual attack against the Transcendentalist circle. If such truth is eventually unattainable as Melville believes, no reason remains to ignore the physical world.

Emerson's significant change in vision, also recorded in his essays entitled "The Skeptic" and "Fate," reflects a change in attitude toward the dangers of chasing after an elusive truth at the expense of the physical world. Because his intuitions become less transparent and less frequent, Emerson concedes the existence of the material world and no longer sees life as an escape from physical reality to a higher truth, but as experiencing the surfaces of the material world and accepting the unintelligibility of the celestial or spiritual realm. Recognizing both the physical and inner world, he proposes the solution of a "double consciousness" and believes that "a man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and his public nature" ("Fate" 351). Leaving the elusive spiritual truths behind, Emerson suggests a physically active life based on what humanity can know with certainty:

Let us go abroad; let us mix in affairs; let us learn and get and have and climb. "Men are a sort of moving plants, and, like trees, receive a great part of their nourishment from the air. If they keep too much at home, they pine." Let us have a robust, manly life; let us know what we know, for certain; what we have, let it be solid and seasonable and our own. A world in the hand is worth two in the bush. Let us have to do with real men and women, and not with skipping ghosts. ("The Skeptic" 288-9)

Instead of supporting a philosophy of thought wherein the practical application requires a neglect of society as the early essays did, Emerson's new vision marries thought and

action, the celestial and the terrestrial, in a balanced equilibrium that Melville would surely affirm.

Emerson's shift from idealistic absolutism to skeptical equilibrium affected his conception of the power of the individual and the power of fate. The early Emerson of "Self-Reliance" deemed all possible by individual will alone, whereas the later Emerson of "Fate" found that "in its loftiest ascensions, insight itself and the freedom of the will is one of its obedient members" (339). The same shift occurs in Egbert's philosophy in *The Confidence-Man*, presenting the possibility that Melville may have been familiar with both "Self-Reliance" and at least the fatalistic passages of "The Skeptic" if not with the essay "Fate," in which his changing vision is more completely expounded. While the Confidence-Man and Egbert assume the characters of Frank and Charlie, respectively, they engage in the hypothetical discussion of a friend in need, Frank, who wants to borrow money from his friend Charlie, who flatly refuses based on the philosophy of Mark Winsome. The Confidence-Man, or Frank begs: "O Charlie! You talk not to a god, a being who in himself holds his own estate, but to a man who, being a man, is the sport of fate's wind and wave, and who mounts towards heaven or sinks towards hell, as the billows roll him trough or on crest." To which Charlie, or Egbert replies: "Tut! Frank. Man is no such poor devil as that comes to—no poor drifting sea-weed of the universe. Man has a soul; which, if he will, puts him beyond fortune's finger and the future's spite. Don't whine like fortune's whipped dog, Frank . . ." (176). Identical to Emerson's philosophy in "Self-Reliance" in which the individual will can control fate and is like a



god, Egbert's strict adherence to Winsome's philosophy reflects Emerson's vision at the height of his idealism. To explain the dangers of lending money to a celestial friend, Egbert or Charlie tells the story of China Aster, a candle-maker whose ruin comes from taking money from a friend, who initially does not wish to be repaid and eventually collects the principle and interest on the "loan." Before telling this story, Egbert will not give his celestial friend a loan, because one must keep business out of celestial friendships and true celestial intercourse out of business friendships. Keeping the celestial and terrestrial separate is the philosophy behind his refusal to lend money to his dear, true, celestial friend.

After telling the story of China Aster, Egbert will not lend his friend money due to the potential mutability of character, representative of Emerson's change in belief from individual will to the power of fate. Egbert now maintains that one may borrow money from a friend one trusts, but the difference between a man who would collect interest and take the mortgaged homestead "is not so great a difference between what the same man be to-day and what he may be in the days to come" (191). Basically, a man's nature may change from "some chance tip of Fate's elbow in throwing her dice" (191). At the suggestion of fate's interference, the Confidence-Man accuses Winsome's practical disciple Egbert (in the guise of Charlie) of espousing inconsistent ideas of free will and fate:

But Charlie, dear Charlie, what new notions are these? I thought that man was no poor drifting weed of the universe, as you phrased it; that, if so

minded, he could have a will, a way, a thought, and a heart of his own.

But now you have turned everything upside down again, with an inconsistency that amazes and shocks me. (191)

Egbert's change from a belief in man's self-determination and free will to a world determined by fate elucidates the change in Emerson's philosophic vision between such works as "Self-Reliance," written at the height of his idealism, and later works like "The Skeptic," written with a diminished idealistic tone from the perspective of experience.

Since Melville could easily have been acquainted with the central idea of "Self-Reliance" without actually having read the essay, and since Merton Sealts believes that Melville may have read "The Skeptic" at the Hawthornes' in 1850, a closer look at the change in vision represented in these two works is useful. A drastic displacement of "Self-Reliance," his most individualistic essay in which the human will alone determines history, "The Skeptic" records Emerson's acceptance of humanity's limited power:

We have too little power of resistance against this ferocity which champs us up. What front can we make against these unavoidable, victorious, maleficent forces? What can I do against the influence of Race, in my history? What can I do against hereditary and constitutional habits; against scrofula, lymph, impotence? Against climate, against barbarism, in my country? (297)

No longer assured of the invincible power of individual will and self-determination, Emerson gives full credit to the powers of fate, heredity, and history, just as Egbert does.

Emerson's views on the power of fate come to fruition in his later essay "Fate" in which he encourages humanity to "build altars to the Beautiful Necessity," (352) necessity that is alterable only by human thought or power: "If Fate follows and limits Power, Power attends and antagonizes Fate" (339). However small a role power or human thought usually plays in life, when exerted it can alter the course of history. Emerson's belief in fate also alters his early enlightened self-interest to a less selfish harmony with other human beings and the universe: "When souls reach a certain clearness of perception they accept a knowledge and motive above selfishness. A breath of will blows eternally through the universe of souls in the direction of the Right and Necessary" (342). This lingering belief in the order behind a benign universe still differs from Melville's belief in a more ambiguous deity.

The cause of Emerson's change in philosophic vision from the all-powerful human will to the powers of fate, from the certain knowledge of the spiritual realm to an acknowledgement of the human incapacity to attain spiritual truth, and from the neglect of the material world to an affirmation of the physical realm is portrayed by Egbert in Melville's *The Confidence-Man* as the result of the experience of a narrative. Telling the story and indirectly experiencing the dim fate of China Aster causes Egbert to reconsider the motives for not lending his friend the money he requires. After turning over "day and night, with indefatigable pains, the sublime pages of [his] master," Egbert concludes that "in this matter the experience of China Aster teaches a moral more to the point than anything Mark Winsome can offer, or I either" (191). It is experience, not written,

abstract philosophy, that is the true teacher. And it is the experience of telling China Aster's story that changes Egbert's philosophical vision. As Emerson's real experience in the world teaches him to look to the predetermined powers of fate, Egbert's secondary experience of China Aster's story alters his former idealistic belief in the power of human will and prompts him to accept the inevitability of the power of fate.

Whether or not Melville was familiar with Emerson's later essays, I believe the older, more mature Emerson would have agreed with Melville's critique of his former unchecked idealism. Melville satirizes young Emerson's conviction that thought and action combine in his practical metaphysical philosophy; the older Emerson writing "Experience" acknowledges the discrepancy between thought and action and the impracticability of most thoughts. Melville critiques Emerson's early uncompromising divide between the celestial and terrestrial worlds, privileging all things spiritual at the expense of all things material and even denying the existence of the physical world outside the mind. The Emerson who wrote "The Skeptic" can "reason down or deny every thing, except [his] perpetual belly" (297), recognizing not only the existence and significance of physical reality, but the limited access human beings have to spiritual knowledge. The late Emersonian vision of the skeptic who occupies the middle ground between idealists and materialists is the embodiment of Melville's ideal hero who maintains an equilibrium between the reality of this world and the one beyond.

## CONCLUSION

While most critics ignore the relationship between Melville's vision and Emerson's later essays, at least two critics do cite his later essays to further prove the disparity between them. Matthiessen argues that Melville highlights the conception of fate in *Moby-Dick* as part of his reaction against Emerson's later essay "Fate." He argues that Ahab represents Emerson's thinking man who is bound in the eternal without knowing so: "So far as a man thinks, he is free." Since Melville takes Emerson's thinking man connected to fate and the eternal and has him destroy his crew, Matthiessen concludes that the author is mocking Emerson's philosophical assumptions about fate. Emerson takes for granted that humankind will accept a motive above selfishness and inevitably align itself with the Right and Necessary ("Fate" 342). He also allows thought an elastic capacity to change the course of fate, more tame yet still reminiscent of "Self-Reliance." Certainly Emerson's lingering belief in a benevolent universe is at odds with Melville's more ambiguous one, but Emerson's change in belief reflects a more Melvillian acknowledgement of human limitation. Admitting that the individual is at the mercy of powers greater than himself or herself, Emerson steps closer to Melville as a "puller-down."

Milton R. Stern's "Melville, Society and Language" shows the disparity between the realistic goals of Transcendentalism and its lingering idealism, one he believes remained to the end. Although the movement insisted on the "physical, the experiential,

the quotidian, 'the meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan' (Emerson, "American Scholar" 61)" the emphasis on realism acquiesced to idealism to the end: "For all that Emerson insisted on 'Experience,' and wrestled with 'Fate' and 'Montaigne,' with illusion and the 'lords of life,' he relocated, but did not abandon, a certitude about universal Divine purpose" (436). This statement does not contrast with Melville, who never abandoned certitude about the universal Divine purpose, but simply did not know whether that force was belligerent or benign. Acknowledging a Divine purpose is not equivalent to idealism, nor is it excluded from realism. Stern goes on to argue that for Melville "realism" did not leave him with "the philosophical escape hatch of the Transcendentalists" out of the world of despair into an idealistic paradise (437). But that escape hatch was all but closed for the Emerson who proposed that we "have to do with real men and women, and not with skipping ghosts" ("The Skeptic" 289). The older Emerson can finally be read as a Melvillian realist with a little more faith in goodness.

The tempering of young idealism with the skepticism brought about by age and experience was a phenomenon Emerson shared with many European thinkers, including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The excessive introversion of his protagonist at odds with the physical world portrayed in his 1774 *Sufferings of Young Werther* differs greatly from his more conservative, more mature work of 1795-6, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. The most important connection between the mature Goethe, the mature Emerson, and Melville is their shared belief in equilibrium. Maintaining a balance between the material and spiritual worlds transforms Goethe into a Classicist and allows for a more realistic

understanding of Melville and the later Emerson. Just as Goethe is still regarded as a Romantic outside of Germany, Emerson's name is still synonymous with idealistic transcendentalism, despite his mature, conservative leanings. It is no surprise, then, that Melville's realism continues to be pitted against Emerson's "transcendentalism," and that Melville associated Goethe with his Romantic idealism and criticized him for it.

Similar to his ambivalent response to Emerson, Melville felt both drawn to Goethe and repelled by his idealistic philosophy. Melville equates Goethe's phrase, "live in the all," to the transcendental loss of identity in the multiplicity as described in "The Mast-Head" chapter of *Moby-Dick*. Discussing Goethe's phrase in a letter to Hawthorne, June, 1851, Melville satirizes Goethe's concept:

That is to say, your separate identity is but a wretched one,--good; but get out of yourself, spread and expand yourself, and bring to yourself the tinglings of life that are felt in the flowers and the wood, that are felt in the planet Saturn and Venus, and the Fixed Stars. What nonsense! Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. "My dear boy," Goethe says to him, "you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must live in the all, and then you will be happy!" As with all great genius there is an immense deal of flummery in Goethe, and in proportion to my own contact with him, a monstrous deal of it in me. (*Correspondence* 193-94)

Although Melville attacks Goethe's position, he admits the influence Goethe's philosophy has had on him, even if it is "flummery." Melville changes his sarcastic tone and gives Goethe credit for his "live in the all" feeling in the postscript of the letter:

This "all" feeling, though, there is some truth in. You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the all feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion.

(*Correspondence* 194)

Like Melville's ambiguous reaction to Emersonian idealism, in which he was both drawn to his "diving" and repelled by his arrogance and anti-social behavior, Melville finds merit in Goethe's idealistic phrase and recognizes its shortcomings and inherent dangers. The "universal application of a temporary feeling of opinion" is exactly what Melville demonstrates in Ahab and Pierre, what most critics have termed his "anti-transcendentalism." Connecting Goethe and Emerson to Platonic idealism and criticizing them for their shared philosophy, Melville misses the congruity of his own vision with the later Emerson and later Goethe. They all eventually come to appreciate the balance of celestial truths and material reality in a calm, mature equilibrium.



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