

The Power of Nothingness:
Destruction and Reconstruction of
American Ideals in Herman Melville's Writings

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Letters

Keio University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Literature

by

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July 2019

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Acknowledgements

I am writing these acknowledgements in a dorm room in Palladium Hall, New York University. I came here to deliver my paper at the 12th International Melville Conference. While hearing the mild rain and the noisy construction of New York City, I look back over the “origins” of my ten-year study of Melville’s massive and elusive writings, which started in 2009 when I first encountered Melville as an undergraduate student at Keio University.

It was at the 10th International Melville Conference, held at Keio University in 2015, that I decided upon the theme of my dissertation: “the power of nothingness” in Melville’s writings. While working as a staff member at the host university, I delivered my paper on Melville’s posthumous writing, *Billy Budd*. When I first read this novel, I wondered about the strange scene of the protagonist’s death, in which Billy ascends as if he were disappearing into the sky. In the nothingness of *Billy Budd*, I (as a Zen Buddhist) examined the connection between Melville and Buddhism.

Nevertheless, my paper on *Billy Budd* is not included in this dissertation. In a sense, it literally became nothing. Yet, the omission of the chapter on Melville’s posthumous work can be seen as an origin of my research. When writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville felt that his talent as a writer, compared to “one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian Pyramids,” came to bloom. The same thing may be said of my study. In other words, it has come into existence out of a void, or me, through various encounters with brilliant people.

First, I would like to thank Professor Takayuki Tatsumi at Keio University. He encouraged me with comments that were sometimes severe, but always insightful. He once urged me to destroy my tiny and trivial ideas and to recreate them into more

significant ones. For more than ten years, he not only has read my papers and given me comments, but also taught me how to live as a scholar. I am likewise deeply indebted to Professor Hisayo Ogushi and Professor Yoshiko Uzawa at Keio University. Professor Ogushi has carefully read my papers since I was an undergraduate student. She excels in gender and sexuality studies as well as in the ability to construct a paper. Professor Uzawa has taught me how to investigate literary works through their historical contexts. She suggested to me the viewpoint of transnational studies, which became one theme of my dissertation.

At the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), where I studied for one year, I was lucky to learn under Yunte Huang, one of the representative scholars of transpacific literary studies. His fluid reading and encyclopedic knowledge inspired me to pursue new ideas and topics of research that I will treat after this dissertation. Jannine Delombard helped develop my understanding about nineteenth century American literature. She also gave me a precious opportunity to read my paper by organizing a panel at the 11th International Melville Conference held in London, 2017, and inviting me to participate on it.

My genuine gratitude goes to two respected young scholars: Yoshiaki Furui of Rikkyo University and Ryoichi Yamane of Tokyo Institute of Technology. Furui has read my papers and given me insightful suggestions. His sincere attitude as a scholar leads me to shape the future path. Yamane organizes a reading club, from which I get inspiration as we read classical studies of American literature, from F. O. Matthiessen through Edward Widmer to Cody Mars. I also thank Arimichi Makino, Michiko Shimokobe, Tomoyuki Zettsu, Takuya Nishitani, Masaki Horiuchi, Mikayo Sakuma, Ikuno Saiki, Shoko Tsuji, Maki Sadahiro, Rie Makino, Tomonori Tsuchida, Rieko Oki, Hinako Oki, Naoto Kojima, Daisuke Kiriya, Shunsuke Shiga, Yumiko

Koizumi, Kaori Hosono, Yu Uchida, Kazuki Ochiai, Yuta Ito, Yui Kasane, Akira Miura, Hiroko Sato, Yuki Goi.

I owe special thanks to my friends. Especially, my close friend, Ryo Hida, who studies Oscar Wilde's writings and works as a high school teacher, takes an objective view of my work. The teammates of my volleyball club help me to change my mind and to relax: Hideo Asaka, Suga Chie, Muneo Kuroiwa, Nao Oikawa, and Ayano Inuyama. When I felt homesick while studying abroad, Chie-san kindly sent me Japanese food. At UCSB, I made a bosom friend, Momoko Irie. I will never forget the taste of bubble teas and phos that we had together in our tough times.

I am grateful to my family. More than ten years have passed since I left my home. My father, Naonobu, and my mother, Hatsumi, always worry about my health and support my study. My brother, Taigo, inspires me with his wide range of cultural and literary interests. Serving in the same field, Seigo shares with me sufferings about studying foreign literature in foreign lands. Last is my wife, Mayumi. We had dated for more than seven years before finally marrying last year. She is always by my side. She sometimes galvanized me and other times calmed me down when I was lost in the woods of study and daily work. *The Power of Nothingness: Destruction and Reconstruction of American Ideals in Herman Melville's Writings* would not have been completed without the kind support and inspiring suggestions of these splendid teachers, friends, and family.

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Introduction

Creating Something out of Nothing

Does the White Whale Shed Blood?

“I am reading Moby Dick,” D. H. Lawrence wrote to his friend from the Bloomsbury Group, Ottoline Morrell, on February 7, 1916, touching on Herman Melville’s masterpiece: “It is a very odd, interesting book” and “I wish I were going on a long voyage, far into the Pacific” (*The Cambridge Edition of the Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence* 528). His agreeable impressions of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) were later crystallized in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923). There, Lawrence cherishes his ideal of superiority of the sensual human body over the idealistic mind. While Ahab and his whaling ship, the *Pequod*, embody “the idealist” spirit of the white race, Moby Dick symbolizes its “deepest blood-being” (160). Lawrence stresses the motif of blood to examine the sensual self: “The last phallic being of the white man. Hunted into the death of upper consciousness and the ideal will. Our blood-consciousness sapped by a parasitic mental or ideal consciousness” (160). Lawrence delightfully accepts Ahab’s “doom” as “a sign of the greatness which is more than [he is]” (160). For him, Moby Dick is “warm-blooded” and “loveable” and reminds the idealistic whites of their neglected and forgotten body (145).

However, what I would like to emphasize is that Moby Dick in Melville’s original text is depicted as a creature without blood. Certainly, Melville depicts whales as warm-blooded with cetological explanations. In “Extracts,” for example, he cites the Scottish anatomist John Hunter’s account of the dissection of a whale: “Ten or fifteen gallons of blood are thrown out of the heart at a stroke, with immense velocity” (13). In chapter 61, “Stubb Kills a Whale,” Melville impresses the readers

with the reality of whale hunting through grotesque but vivid descriptions of a whale's bleeding. After the crew's attack on a whale, "[t]he red tide" of blood pours from him "like brooks down a hill"; all the whalers' faces "glow[] to each other like red men" in the "crimson pond in the sea" (232). Ishmael narrates the moment of a whale's death as follows: "At last, gush after gush of clotted red gore, as if it had been the purple lees of red wine, shot into the frightened air; and falling back again, ran dripping down his motionless flanks into the sea. His heart had burst!" (232-33). Yet, this is applied to ordinary whales, not to Moby Dick. Regarding this bleeding, Melville deliberately differentiates the white whale from ordinary ones.

In chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab declares the aim of the *Pequod* not to get whale oil but to carry out his revenge on the white whale: "[T]his is what ye have shipped for, men! To chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out" (139). Although being anxious to have "the White Whale [spout] thick blood," the monomaniacal captain cannot realize his wish (368). Throughout the novel, the battles with Moby Dick are narrated several times, but Moby Dick never sheds blood. The most impressive scene appears in "The Chase: Third Day." After fierce battles for three days, Ahab finally gets the chance to have Moby Dick spout his black blood:

[W]hen, with body arched back, and both arms lengthwise high-lifted to the poise, he [Ahab] darted his fierce iron, and his far fiercer curse into the hated whale. As both steel and curse sank to the socket, as if sucked into a morass, Moby Dick sideways writhed; spasmodically rolled his nigh flank against the bow, and, without staving a hole in it, so suddenly canted the boat over, that had it not been for the elevated part of the gunwale to which he then clung, Ahab would once more have been

tossed into the sea. (424)

Ahab's blistering attack seems to hurt Moby Dick since the whale struggles and "spasmodically" rolls its flank. Yet, there is no actual description that the white whale does shed blood. Moby Dick's bloodlessness impresses on the readers his phantasmagoric power, or God-like mightiness. The superstitious sailors consider Moby Dick "not only ubiquitous, but immortal": "if indeed he should ever be made to spout thick blood, such a sight would be but a ghastly deception" (155). Even when the white whale apparently gets a mortal wound, his "unsullied jet" is seen after he disappears once more into the sea (155). In this sense, Melville's text deliberately illustrates the "grand hooded phantom" as a creature without blood (22).

Then, back to Lawrence, why does he do such a misreading of *Moby-Dick*? Why does he imagine warm blood in the white whale without blood? Here, I do not want to point out his reading as a mere misunderstanding of Melville's text. "Lawrence's book is," Michael J. Colacurcio suggests, "somehow wrong yet somehow brilliant" (487). Rather, I would like to present the perspective of my dissertation which is informed by Lawrence's transfiguration of the white whale from one hooded phantom without blood to a loveable warm-blooded creature. Lawrence's background as a failed writer helps us to guess one reason for his misreading. Although having brought off a splendid success with *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Lawrence lost his reputation with *The Rainbow*, which was prosecuted in an obscenity and banned in 1915. As Earl Ingersoll investigates, "[t]he avalanche of recriminations" might have made Lawrence "turn[] his back on his traduced novel as well as on his hopeless nation" (23). Lawrence indeed expressed his acute depression in a letter to John Middleton Murry on January 9, 1916:

Oh, my God, the horrible hopelessness of life! . . . I don't know what to

do nor how to go on: like a man pushing an empty barrow up an endless slope. . . . There is nothing but betrayal and denial, nothing at all: no trust, no faith, no hope from anybody, only betrayal and denial. (*The Cambridge Edition of the Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence* 500)

As Ishmael went out to the sea with his “hypos” (*Moby-Dick* 118), Lawrence found solace in reading classic American literature. Evaluating classic American literature was, for him, a privileged strategy for confirming his ideal of the deep self, or the sensuality of human beings.

The preface to *Studies*, “The Spirit of Place,” reviews the U.S. history of independence to “pull the democratic and idealistic clothes off American utterance” (8). For Lawrence, the Americans now naively believe that freedom and liberty will be established only through the complete denying of masters. To be true, the sires of the Americans, the Pilgrim Fathers, crossed the Atlantic Ocean with “revulsion from Europe and from the confinements of the European ways of life” and found the “half-truth” of liberty and equality (3-4, 7). Yet, people can achieve true freedom when “obeying some deep, inward voice of religious belief” and “belong[ing] to a living, or organic, *believing* community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose” (6; italics original). For Lawrence, America is the country of “the escaped slaves,” who have lived in a “frictional opposition to the master they wish to undermine” and hesitated to believe in his or her own sense and become a master by him or herself (7, 4). In “the old-fashioned American classics,” Lawrence aims to bring out the other half truth of liberty and freedom, or “the deepest self” of “the American whole soul” (1, 6, 8). For the purpose of reminding the people of his age about their “deepest self,” or the sensuality of the human body, Lawrence might have transformed *Moby Dick* from one bloodless phantom into a loveable and

warm-blooded creature.

What needs to be stressed here is that Lawrence's recreation of the white whale could well stem from the Melville Revival of the 1920s. Influenced by his Columbia University colleague Carl Van Doren's four-page essay on Melville's writings in the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917), Raymond Weaver published his epoch-making biography, *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic*, in 1921. According to Weaver, the American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Melville longed for insanity against the age of "sanity," when the "outstanding symptoms of materialism and conformity" were predominant (18). In *Moby-Dick*, Ahab obsessively believes in the white whale as "the symbol and embodiment of unconquerable evil," attempting to strike down "the sum of all the rage and hate of mankind from the days of Eden" upon Moby Dick's humped back (118). Yet, the "mad" Captain's hunt culminates in "the final destruction of himself and his ship by its savage onslaught" (25). Interestingly, however, Weaver creatively imagines what would happen after this tragic end. He cites a long quotation from the poet laureate, John Edward Masefield, to indicate the resurrection of the crews of the *Pequod*:

Each whale will have raised a wreck from among the coral, and the sea will be thick with them—row-ships and sail ships, and great big seventy fours, and big White Star boats, and battleships, all of them green with the ooze, but all of them manned by singing sailors. And ahead of them will go Moby-Dick, towing the ship our Lord was in, with all the sweet apostles aboard of her. And Moby-Dick will give a great bellow, like a fog-horn blowing, and stretch 'fin-out' for the sun away in the west. And all the drowned sailors will sing their chanties, and beat the bell into a

music. And the whole fleet of them will start towing at full speed towards the sun, at the edge of the sky and water. . . . Nothing will be to do except singing and beating on the bell. And all the poor sailors who went in patched rags, my son, they'll be all fine in white and gold. And shores, among the palm-trees, there'll be fine inns for the seamen. (qtd. in Weaver 31-32)

Along with Masfield's prediction, Weaver expects resurrection of Melville's ruined characters such as Ahab, Fedallah, Tashetego, and Queequeg, as well as Fayaway, Doctor Long Ghost, and Pierre of his other writings, which would be led by Moby Dick (32).

Weaver makes the heavenly resurrection convincing by mentioning Melville's letter to Hawthorne on July 1, 1851. Melville wrote that self-affirmation should be accomplished even in relentless pessimism. For him, "all men who say yes, lie"; "those yes-gentry . . . travel with heaps of baggage" and "will never get through the Custom House!" (*Correspondence* 186). On the contrary, "all men who say no" like "judicious, unencumbered travellers in Europe" can "cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet bag,—that is to say, the Ego" (186). Weaver analyzes Melville's ambiguous view of pessimism: "the exclamation point and the triumphant perpendicular pronoun were interchangeable signs" (30). The ego "I" sees the ecstatic rise of the self after declaring "No!" to everything. Considering the creativity of Melville's pessimism, Weaver concludes that "[a]t the final crack of doom, this dead and disappointed mariner [in *Moby-Dick*] may yet rise to an unexpected rejoicing" (30). Given the fact that Lawrence asked Thomas Seltzer to send Weaver's biography on September 22, 1921, and received it the next month, it is highly probable that Lawrence was inspired by Weaver's study and reconstruct the ambiguity of Melville's

pessimism in his own way.

Having read these definitive works of the earliest Melville studies, I would like to clarify the point that I will treat in my dissertation. As symbolized in the figuration of the white whale as a bloodless creature and Ahab and his crew's tragic ruin, nothingness in *Moby-Dick* cannot help but inspire the readers to imagine something would be followed and created. Its seemingly pessimistic nothingness includes a sort of creativity or futurity to see blood in the whale without bleeding and resurrect the ruined characters. The later readers, such as Weaver and Lawrence, would have been consciously or unconsciously influenced by the ambiguity of nothingness in Melville's writing. My dissertation aims to examine what I call "the power of nothingness" in Melville's writings. Thus, I will initially analyze how Melville formed the destructive but creative aesthetics of nothingness in *Moby-Dick* and "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853). Next, I will trace Melville's wide variety of readings to contextualize his idea of nothingness. Finally, I will show the significance of examining nothingness in Melville's writings in the field of American literary studies.

"Tragedies" of Interpreting Nothingness

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "nothing" is defined as "not any (material or immaterial) thing" or "not anything, or anybody, of importance, significance, value, or concern" ("Nothing." def. 1, 3). This term tends to be understood negatively because of the prefix "no." For Melville, however, "nothing" is considered positive and creative, as well as negative and destructive. His seventh book *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* (1852), which I will closely examine in chapter 1, ascribes double meanings to it: "a nothing is the substance, it casts one shadow one

way, and another the other way; and these two shadows cast from one nothing; these, [it] seems to me [Pierre], are Virtue and Vice” (274). For the protagonist, “a nothing” refuses to include the ethical hierarchy between “Virtue and Vice.” Yet, it does not mean nihilistic rejection of anything; rather, he notices, nothingness serves as a foundation on which to create such values. Pierre curiously goes on to identify himself with nothingness: “a nothing should torment a nothing; for I am a nothing” (274). Here, I would like to argue how Melville has formed the ambiguous idea of nothingness by discussing his two representative tragedies, *Moby-Dick* and “Bartleby.”

While writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville issued his remarkable essay, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” in *The Literary World* on August 17 and 24, 1850. This is a review of Hawthorne’s collection of short stories, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846). Melville praises Hawthorne as a “Master Genius,” whose talent is not very much inferior to Shakespeare (252). Melville locates Hawthorne’s talent in the “great power of blackness”: his works superficially seem to express “the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of [his] soul,” while appealing to the “Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin” (243). Deeply attracted by the duality of Hawthorne’s works, Melville’s narrator feels that “this Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into [his] soul. . . . and further, and further, shoots his strong New England roots into the hot soil of [his] Southern soul” (250).

Although admiring Hawthorne’s literary talent that uncovers the dark side of human nature, in *Moby-Dick*, Melville distortedly transforms the power of blackness into that of nothingness. Ahab’s obsessive pursuit of the white whale displays his monomaniacal will to interpret nothingness, which is ambivalently devoid of or filled with meaning. Melville accentuates the importance of the whaling industry of the

nineteenth century. He emphasizes that the risky and bloody slaughter, which was usually underestimated, had formed the basis of America and European countries. Yet, sperm whales themselves are symbolized as being of nothingness, whose inability to utter words, or their silence, rejects any interpretation. In chapter 79, Ishmael attempts to take a physiognomist's approach to understand whales, but this comes to naught since a whale does not contain any "distinct feature" on its brow: it has "no nose, eyes, ears, or, mouth; no face" (274). Instead of the emptiness of a whale's visage, Ishmael suggests that its "broad firmament of a forehead," which is "pleased with riddles," keeps "high and mighty god-like dignity" (274). Ishmael evaluates the "tongueless" mouth of a whale as its "great genius": "Has the Sperm Whale ever written a book, spoken a speech? No, his great genius is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it. It is moreover declared in his pyramidal silence" (274).

Ishmael and Ahab adopt opposing attitudes toward the meaningful or meaningless silence of a whale. The former accepts its ambiguous silence as it is; the latter desperately attempts to comprehend it with only one interpretation. In chapter 42, Ishmael describes "vague, nameless horror" about the whiteness of Moby Dick with encyclopedic explanations (159). For him, while dropping "the very veil of the Christian's Deity," the whiteness is "the most appalling to mankind":

Is it that by its indefiniteness it [the whiteness] shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour; and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colourless, all-colour of

atheism from which we shrink? (165)

People cannot identify the color white as “the visible absence of colour” or “the concrete of all colours.” Such “colourless, all-colour of atheism” associates Ishmael with “the heartless voids and immensities of the universe.” Haunted by “the thought of annihilation” represented by the whiteness, Ishmael’s narration itself comes to be infused with pessimism. He remembers “the great principle of light” that every hue arises through the perception, or illusion, of light, and colors themselves do not exist (165). As “wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear coloured and colouring glasses,” Ishmael feels as if he is the “wretched infidel [who] gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him” (165).

Whereas Ishmael notices the multi-layered meaningfulness or meaninglessness of the white whale, Ahab tries to understand it with only one meaning. As Ishmael’s narration ventriloquizes Ahab’s mind, we see that the captain cannot endure pessimistic nothingness and leave things without meanings: “some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way” (331-32). Ahab’s fear of leaving things “an empty cipher” is seen in his monomaniacal interpretation of Moby Dick. Ahab’s revenge is driven by his understanding of the white whale as an incarnation of “inscrutable malice” (140). In the famous chapter, “The Quarter-Deck,” Starbuck tries to deter Ahab from his vengeance, calling his “vengeance on a dumb brute” “blasphemous” (139). Yet, Ahab tells Starbuck to see through “the little lower lawyer”:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but

still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. (140)

The white whale, for Ahab, is not a mere animal or commodity from which to extract oil, but it embodies “an inscrutable malice” that controls and obeys him.

What is of significance is that Ahab's speech reveals his fear of pessimistic nothingness. Ahab, saying that “Sometimes I think there's naught beyond” the pasteboard mask of Moby Dick, worries that his pursuit of the white whale will be in vain. Such an anxiety is perceived by Stubb through the empty sounds from Ahab: “He [Ahab] smites his chest. . . . what's that for? methinks it rings most vast, but hollow” (139). Speculating that there would be nothing behind the grand hooded phantom, Ahab adheres to his conception of the white whale as the incarnation of vicious evil until the very end of his chase:

Towards thee I [Ahab] roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. . . . let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear! (426)

In a way, the tragic end of *Moby-Dick* can be read as Ahab's failure to interpret the ambiguity of nothingness with or without meanings.

After *Moby-Dick*, Melville's works continued to revolve around the theme of nothingness. The most notable example is given in his eminent short piece, “Bartleby.” There, Melville's idea of nothingness appears in Bartleby's passivity. The scrivener at

first does “an extraordinary quantity of writing” (19), but he gradually rejects any jobs such as copying and even simple chores, only saying “I would prefer not to.” He stays just as “harmless and noiseless as any of [the] old chairs” in the office (37). The narrator calls his peculiar attitude “a passive resistance” and depicts its influence on him:

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

In “Bartleby,” Melville investigates influences of nothingness more closely than in *Moby-Dick*. As the story continues, Melville’s text narrates in detail how Bartleby’s passivity has gradually affected the narrator and his clerk. First, the scrivener’s strange phrase gets inflected into their languages. In fact, Turkey states “I think that if [Bartleby] would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day, it would do much towards mending him, and enabling him to assist in examining his papers” (31). The narrator also uses a version of the phrase to remonstrate Nippers: “I’d prefer that you would withdraw for the present” (31). The narrator is deeply shocked by the fact that he and his clerks “involuntarily” use Bartleby’s phrase and that the scrivener “already has in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads of [the narrator] and [his] clerks” (31).

Next, and more importantly, Bartleby’s passive resistance has enormous impacts on the narrator’s mind. The lawyer at first introduces himself as “an eminently *safe* man,” who likes to be “in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat” and lacks “poetic enthusiasm” (14; italics original). However, it is Bartleby who reveals

the lawyer's hidden mind in various manners. For instance, Bartleby's "passiveness" gets the peaceful man angry and uncovers his "evil impulse" to be rebelled against (24). At the same time, Bartleby's resistance "strangely disarmed" him and "in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted [him]" (21). The scrivener's passivity lets him realize his own errand. On a Sunday morning, he happens to know that Bartleby lives in his office and "keep[s] his bachelor's hall all by himself" (27). Bartleby's "miserable friendliness and loneliness" causes "[f]or the first time in [his] life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy" (28). "The bond of a common humanity," as the narrator sensationally remarks, "now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam" (28). The psychological influences of Bartleby's nothingness prompt the narrator to realize "the predestinated purpose of [his] life" is to "furnish [Bartleby] with office-room for such period as [he] may see fit to remain" (37).

Yet, the narrator's errand is not ultimately accomplished since maintaining of social status is important for him. Thus, even by sympathizing with Bartleby's "miserable friendliness and loneliness," he cannot wipe out his anger as the employer of his office. Indeed, he sharply rebukes Bartleby when the inactive employee refuses to quit his job: "What earthly right have you stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?" (35). The narrator decides to get rid of him when observing the scrivener's strange but crucial influence on him and his clerks:

[A] long-lived man, and keep occupying my chambers, and denying my authority; and perplexing my visitors; and scandalizing my professional reputation; and casting a general gloom over the premises; . . . and in the end perhaps outlive me, and claim possession of my office by right of his perpetual occupancy. (38)

Melville's short story vividly describes how the narrator's imagination is subject to Bartleby's passive resistance: his mind is drastically influenced by Bartleby's nothingness, suspended between antipathy and sympathy for him. At the end, the narrator's adherence to his social position turns his "pure melancholy and sincerest pity" into "fear" and "repulsion" that leads to Bartleby's death as well as the narrator's losing of his errand (29). Thus, *Moby-Dick* and "Bartleby" perform "tragedies" of interpreting nothingness. Melville's characters suffer pessimistic nihilism of nothingness and lose what they count as valuable: the monomaniacal captain falls into ruin because of his misinterpretation of the white whale's meaningfulness or meaninglessness; the lawyer cannot endure his employee's passive denials and misses his errand due to his adherence to his social status as an employer.

Melville's stories, illustrating various effects of nothingness, seem to be tragic and pessimistic because they result in Ahab's defeat against Moby Dick and Bartleby's death in the New York City prison. However, Yoshiaki Furui's argument regarding "Bartleby" allows us to examine the creative possibility in such an apparently tragic ending. Building on Philip K. Koch's definition of solitude and loneliness, Furui examines "the narrator's misinterpretation of Bartleby's solitude": he "rush[es] to attach a negative sense of loneliness to Bartleby's aloneness, thereby rendering Bartleby the object of his sentimental sympathy" (90). However, closely historicizing Melville's idea of dead letters, Furui indicates that Melville's text leaves the "possibility of [Bartleby's] resurrection": "It is only by being morphed into print and disseminated through the communication media—the very thing that Bartleby defies—that his life can escape the fate of death" (93). Instead of his misinterpretation, the narrator "does a certain amount of good to Bartleby" to "save[] him from death by perpetuating him in print form" (93). My study will examine such a possibility of

nothingness in Melville's writings. I would like to suggest that Melville somehow maintains creativity and futurity in the pessimistic and destructive stories.

Contextualizing Nothingness in Mid-nineteenth Century America

After publishing his early novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), Melville immersed himself in reading a wide range of literary works. He was willing to read the English authors of the Renaissance, such as William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbs, John Bunyan, and John Milton. In addition, Melville's intimate friendship with the central figure of New York literary milieu, Evert A. Duyckinck, led him to know the contemporary American writers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, James Fenimore Copper, Richard Henry Dana, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Here, I would like to examine how Melville constructed the ambiguous view of nothingness through his extensive readings.¹

First of all, Melville could have received some inspiration from his dedicated reading of the Bible. Genesis narrates the first day of the universe when God created "the heavens and the earth" as follows:

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day, I am reading Moby Dick" and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day. (1. 2-5)

According to Harry Levin, "the primal darkness" in the Bible later resulted in the

¹ About Melville's readings, see Sealts; Grey 250.

Puritan dichotomy between good and evil, with which the Puritans “distinguish[ed] themselves from the other sect” (35). Levin regards the darkness, or “the void that God shaped by creating light and dividing night from day,” as “the very beginnings of things” (35). Demonstrating that God created both light and day on the “formless and empty” earth, the Scriptures show the creative possibility of emptiness to generate light and day and work as the founding of the universe.

Shakespeare is the author who had the greatest influence of Melville and whose plays aided Melville in developing nothingness as his aesthetic theme. In February 1849, he purchased a copy of volume 7 of *The Dramatic Works of William Shakspeare* (sic); *with A Life of the Poet, and Notes, Original and Selected*, published by Hilliard, Gray & Company of Boston in 1841. Being absorbed in Shakespeare’s four great tragedies, Melville reported to Duyckinck that he for the first time got a “close acquaintance with the divine William” and “exult[ed] over [his plays], page after page” (*Correspondence* 119). Due to his biographical background, literary critics have argued that Melville wrote his works based on Shakespeare’s plays.² Melville, Robin Grey briefly states, learns from Shakespeare’s tragedies “the nature of human suffering, the complexity of human morality, the dangers of kings who misjudge their powers, the poignancy of being betrayed by friends, and the folly of relying on prophecy” (253).

Melville’s favorite was *King Lear*. Like *Moby-Dick* and “Bartleby,” Shakespeare’s representative tragedy pursues the theme of whether or not the human mind could be completely expressed with words. King Lear decides to cede his power and his territory to his three daughters, depending on how they express respect and

² For Shakespeare’s influences on Melville and his writings, see Matthiessen; Olson 35-73.

love for him through their words. While the two elder daughters inherit vast territory and huge power with their flowery words, the youngest, Cordelia, cannot express her love for his father and remains silent: when asked about her love, Cordelia just says “Nothing, my Lord” (12). Her silence enrages Lear, and he drives his daughter out of his country. Lear interprets nothing as it is, stating “[n]othing can come of nothing” and “nothing can be made out of nothing” (12, 32). For him, the human mind should be described with words; if there are no words, there is no passion. However, Shakespeare’s play also shows the opposite in the Earl of Kent’s remark to Lear: “The youngest daughter does not love thee [Lear] least; / Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound / Reverbs no hollowness” (14). Cordelia actually loses her relationship with his loving father since she “cannot heave / [her] heart into [her] mouth” (12). However, she is proud of such a deficiency in the “glib and oily art” to speak of what she does not really feel and think about: “even for want of that for which I am richer, / A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue / As I am glad I have not, though not to have it / Hath lost me in your liking” (17).

At the end of the play, Lear drastically changes his mind about the relationship between the human mind and words. His elder daughters’ betrayals arouse his doubt about words: “they [Goneril and Regan] are not men o’ their words. They told me I was every thing; ‘tis a lie; I am not ague proof” (105). When Cordelia is strangled to death because of Edmund’s vicious plot, Lear becomes deranged and desperately tries to listen to her voice again:

I might have saved her [Cordelia]; now she’s gone for ever!

Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!

What is’t thou say’st? Her voice was ever soft,

Gentle, and low; an excellent thing in woman.—

I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.

...

And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life;

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,

And thou no breath at all? O, though wilt come no more,

Never, never, never, never, never!—

Pray you, undo this button: thank you, sir—

Do you see this?—Look on her,—look,—her lips, —

Look there, look there! (130-31, 132).

Lear firmly believed that nothing could be produced out of nothing. Yet, his beloved daughter's death changes his mind: he wishes to hear voices from Cordelia's dead body, or her silence, and confirm life in death. In this sense, Shakespeare's tragedy demonstrates transformation of nothing into something, although a fruitless attempt.

In addition to Shakespeare, Thomas Carlyle's works might have offered inspiration for Melville's idea of nothingness. From Duyckinck, he borrowed Carlyle's famous writings, such as *Sartar Resartus* (1834) and *Heroes and Hero-Worships* (1841), when he was writing *Moby-Dick*. Scholars have specifically assessed the enormous impact of *Sartar Resartus* on *Moby-Dick*. In the last chapter of Book I, "Prospective," Carlyle's protagonist Teufelsdröckh realizes his philosophy of Clothes, which has been said to be the prominent motif of "pasteboard masks" in *Moby-Dick*. While being seen as "despicable," clothes are "unspeakably significant" since they not only cover human nakedness but unveil the roots of the universe: "All visible things are emblems; what thou seest is not there on its own account; strictly taken, is not there at all; matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some idea, and *body* it forth" (77; italics original). Teufelsdröckh considers the human body an

emblem: “all objects are as windows, through which the philosophic eye looks into infinitude itself” (77). A person’s body is “a clothing or visible garment for that divine ME of his, cast hither, like a light particle, down from heaven” (78). Whereas Ahab wishes to strike through Moby Dick’s pasteboard mask to beat its “inscrutable malice,” Teufelsdröckh confirms the divine intention and ideal through clothes as emblems.

Sartor Resartus artfully shows the spiritual progress of the human mind in the sequent three chapters of Book II: “The Everlasting No,” “Centre of Indifference,” and “The Everlasting Yea.” By building his philosophy of Clothes, Teufelsdröckh experiences the drastic progress of his mind from pessimistic nihilism to self-affirmation and acceptance of God. In the ultimate moment of his disbelief, Teufelsdröckh desperately stands against God:

[I]n our age of downpulling and disbelief . . . the Universe was all void of life, of purpose, of volition, even of hostility. . . . was it that my whole ME stood up, in native, God-created majesty, and with emphasis recorded its protest. Such a protest, the most important transaction in Life, may that same indignation and defiance, in a psychological point of view, be fitly called. The Everlasting No had said: “Behold, thou art fatherless, outcast, and the Universe is mine (the Devil’s)”; to which my whole ME now made answer: “I am not thine, but free, and forever hate thee!” (172, 175)

In the state of “the Everlasting No,” Teufelsdröckh curiously sees his “spiritual new-birth,” where he “[begins] to be a man” (175). The sense of disillusioned negation leads to Teufelsdröckh’s condition of indifference, through which he “travels from the negative pole to the positive” (189). Instead of introspection and

self-reflection, Teufelsdröckh chooses to read books and goes travelling about ancient cities and battlefields.

After nihilistic depression and indifference that causes annihilation of his self, Teufelsdröckh finds “a new heaven and a new earth” (192):

[T]he self in thee needed to be annihilated. By benignant fever-paroxysms is life rooting out the deep-seated chronic disease, and triumphs over death. On the roaring billows of time, thou art not engulfed, but borne aloft into the azure of eternity. Love not pleasure; love God. This is the EVERLASTING YEA, wherein all contradiction is solved: wherein whoso walks and works, it is well with him. (198)

For him, the “annihilation of self” is “[t]he first preliminary moral act” for self-affirmation and acceptance of God, which he has ever denied (192). Carlylian progress of the human mind could well have influenced Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Indeed, Stephen Matterson sees Teufelsdröckh’s spiritual progress from No to Yea in the characterization of Ahab and Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*. Ahab is “the defiant Promethean No-sayer,” who does not “accept that the world cannot be shaped to his will” (52). By contrast, Ishmael, suspended in indifference between “No and Yea,” cannot find something to interest him on shore and goes to the sea: “while [Ishmael’s] indifference is countered by his relationship with Queequeg and his absorption in whaling, it remains Ishmael’s fundamental state” (52).

Another writer, who dealt with the idea of nothingness, is Ralph Waldo Emerson. In *Nature* (1836), Emerson ascertains the importance of the state of nothingness. He narrates his experience of a transcendental leap of imagination in the woods: “I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (12). In the

“plantations of God,” his head was “bathed by the blithe air” and he felt that “all mean egotism vanishes” (12). In the moment of becoming “a transparent eye-ball,” a person’s individuality dissolves: “[t]o be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is . . . a trifle and disturbance” (12-13). A sort of perfect solitude is required for the transcendental unity with “the Universal Being,” in which a person does not do anything, including intellectual activities: he is “not solitary” when he “read[s] and write[s], though nobody is with [him]” (9). Examining Emerson’s idea of “a transparent eye-ball” in the context of U.S. capitalism, Carolyn Porter calls attention to a drastic change of subjectivity: the “I” in the second clause “has just been voided by the first” and its “material self disappears” by being “[s]wallowed up by its role as seer” (203). To become “nothing” is indispensable to Emerson’s philosophy. Once a person erases his self, he experiences the unity with the divine being as the whole.

Emerson’s masterpiece *Representative Men* (1850), written under the influence of Carlyle’s *Heroes and Hero-Worships*, addresses the theme of abolishing the self. A person is usually deemed to be admirable due to his ability to do something. Yet, Emerson points out six men, Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe, as “great men” since they lack such an ability:

I find him greater, when he can abolish himself, and all heroes, by letting in this element of reason, irrespective of persons; this subtilizer, and irresistible upward force, into our thought, destroying individualism; the power so great, that the potentate is nothing. Then he is a monarch, who gives a constitution to his people; a pontiff, who preaches the equality of souls, and releases his servants from their barbarous homages; an emperor, who can spare his empire. (14)

Here, Takayuki Tatsumi points out the difference between Emerson and Carlyle:

“While Carlyle’s hero is based upon the concept of the great man as an entity, Emerson’s representative man is no more than the sign of any idea” (29). For Emerson, “[t]o be an individual is to confront a limitation,” and his work provides the readers with “an opportunity to become ‘another’” through “abolishing ourselves” (30).³

To be honest, it is difficult to clarify the literary connection between Emerson and Melville because there is no evidence that he read Emerson’s *Nature* and *Representative Men* which treat nothingness.⁴ Yet, some scholars have made attempts to show that Melville reflects in his writings Emerson’s transcendental ideas. Shannon L. Mariotti, for instance, suggests that Melville criticizes the transcendental idea of self-annihilation in “Bartleby.” The scrivener’s motionlessness and ghostly existence without subjectivity make the protagonist assume that he is watching behind the screen: “behind his screen he must be standing in one of those dead-wall reveries of his” (93). Here, Melville’s text satirizes Emerson’s notion of “a transparent eye-ball,” with which an individual sees the infinite scenery and expands himself without borders: “The scrivener may be trying to take Emerson’s advice to avoid being ‘near-sighted,’ to look past his immediate realm and focus his gaze on the more harmonious distant horizon that lies beyond it” (Mariotti 173). Melville’s story, in

³ Sharon Cameron discusses contradiction of “the Emersonian self,” which is suspended between “self-trust” and “self-abolition” (95). Tracing his essays such as “The Over-Soul,” “Circles,” and “The Poet,” she examines Emerson’s aesthetics of abandonment (79-107).

⁴ Melville procured Emerson’s *Essays, Essays: Second Series, The Conduct of Life, and Poems* after publication of his last novel, *The Confidence-Man* (1857) (Sealts 59). However, Melville actually knew Emerson before reading his writings in the later years. In fact, after hearing Emerson’s lecture, Melville wrote to Duyckinck on March 3, 1849, expressing his ambiguous attitude toward the representative philosopher of his age. For Melville, Emerson was “quite intelligible” and “more than a brilliant fellow,” not a mere fraud who speaks of “oracular gibberish” (*Correspondence* 121). Yet, Melville, who would be a “thought-diver[er]” unlike optimistic Emerson, wished to be free from his influence: “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” (121).

which Bartleby's seeing is blocked by one of the walls of Wall Street, demonstrates "something that Emerson sees as a pathway to awakening [that] seems like a dead end" (173). By contextualizing the idea of nothingness in mid-nineteenth century America, we can determine that the power of nothingness in Melville's writings could well have stemmed from his wide range of readings from the Bible to Shakespeare and Carlyle to Emerson. These writings imagine that something is out of nothing and describe the drastic change of human mind from nay-saying to everything to acceptance of God and self-affirmation.

Between Nothingness and Americanness

Sharon Cameron examines nothingness in American literature from the perspective of impersonality. According to her, personality is constructed through the conduct of "self-ownership": "To be a person or agent, . . . it is not sufficient to consider yourself a person; you must also be considered as possessing agency. In distinction, *personality* stresses self-ownership, the *of* or possessive through which individuality is identified as one's own" (viii; italics original). In contrast, impersonality, coined by T. S. Eliot, shows "the extinction of personality that defines artist" (viii). Elaborating on Eliot's idea, Cameron redefines impersonality not as "the negation of the person," but as a means for disrupting "the boundary of the human peculiar," or "elementary categories we supposed to be fundamental to specifying human distinctiveness" (ix). My idea of "the power of nothingness" owes some debt to Cameron's argument of impersonality that undermines the stability of human identity based on self-possession and explores the fluidity of human subjectivity. Yet, my study will focus on the point that Cameron does not emphasize: while stating her book is "a collection of essays on impersonality in the writings of major figures in

American literature,” Cameron does not survey the relationship between impersonality and Americanness (vii). Here, reviewing the classic studies on *Moby-Dick* from F. O. Matthiessen to John Bryant, I would like to argue that these literary scholars have investigated in it the connection between nothingness and Americanness.

F. O. Matthiessen’s still influential study, *American Renaissance* (1941), selects five authors—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman—as American classics, whose works are distinguished by “their devotion to the possibilities of democracy” (ix). The chapter on *Moby-Dick* analyzes Melville’s suspended mind between belief and disbelief on “the Man-God, the self-appointed Messiah,” as well as on “the dying Calvinism” (459, 458). Melville tries to ascertain “the significance of Original Sin,” but at last concedes the doubt that “there was no possibility of regeneration since there remained no effectual faith in the existence of divine grace” (458). Still, he cannot be enraptured with “the god-like man,” since the transcendental self without any restriction sets up a paradox: “[i]f the will was free, . . . it was free to do evil as well as to do good” (458). In Ahab’s ruin, Melville symbolizes the catastrophe of “the strong-willed individual” without reverence for the higher being. Ahab’s tragic end is “the fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism” that hopelessly manipulates other crews for his maniacal aim (459). Matthiessen concludes that Melville expresses in Ahab’s tragic end “his intense concern with the precariously maintained values of democratic Christianity” (459).

Like Matthiessen, Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael* (1949), investigating Shakespeare’s influences on Melville, demonstrates that *Moby-Dick* performs “tragedy in terms of democracy” (69). Instead of his earnest worship for the “just Spirit of Equality” (*Moby-Dick* 106), Melville’s text is forced to reproduce

aristocratic hierarchy between Ahab and his crew: “Melville couldn’t help but give the ‘people’ a larger part because in the life around him they played a larger part” (70). However, Olson indicates that *Moby-Dick* hints at the possibility of democracy in Ishmael’s passivity. Although being a “passive and detached” observer and “inactive to the plot,” Ishmael democratically keeps in his narration the polyphonic voices not only of Ahab but also of the crew (56). Ishmael alone hears Father Mapple’s sermon and Elija’s prophecy, sees the handsome sailor Bulkington, notices the importance of Pip’s madness, and builds an inter-racial friendship with Queequeg. With his passivity, Ishmael “creates the *Moby-Dick* universe in which the Ahab-world is, by the necessity of life—or the Declaration of Independence—included” (58).

In *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (1985), Donald Pease scrutinizes the importance of doing nothing, or indecisiveness, in *Moby-Dick*. Melville’s masterpiece, Pease astutely observes, has been read in the Cold War paradigm, where “all the complications, doubts, and conflicts of modern existence” are reduced into a simple opposition of “Us against them” (115). In the dualistic paradigm, Ishmael represents democracy, who “proves his freedom by opposing Ahab’s totalitarianism” (113). However, Pease proposes the new method of “cultural persuasion” to avoid such a reductive reading (113). According to him, Ahab is not a symbol of totalitarianism but a skillful persuader. As seen in “The Quarter-Deck” chapter, Ahab persists less in expressing his personal will than deliberately articulating a wide range of conviction to show the limits of commercialism and Christianity. Pease interestingly defines freedom as the state of indecision, not as being free from totalitarianism: “the individual’s freedom” exists in “a realm emptied of actantial,

judgmental, determinate energies” (122).⁵ Whereas the decisive Captain Ahab turns words into deeds, Ishmael recovers his freedom in “a realm in which the indeterminate play of endless possible actions overdetermines his indecision” (147). Ishmael’s narration turns Ahab into “both the *definitive third-person* victim and the *perfect first-person* victimizer” (146; italics original). Although avoiding any decisions and actions like Ahab, the indecisive Ishmael recomposes Ahab’s terrible legends into what are known as “tall tales” (145).

Leo Bersani’s *The Culture of Redemption* (1990) reads into *Moby-Dick* an irony that “democracy produces the greatest kings” (142). Self-expression and self-assertion in *Moby-Dick*, while configuring the democratic discourse of individuality, paradoxically reinforce the imperial will to power. Melville’s text describes “the antidemocratic consequences inherent in the democratic ideal,” by revealing that Ahab’s absolute control on the *Pequod* causes “a democratic sanction of despotism” (146, 141). For Bersani, however, the homosexual relations in *Moby-Dick* imply a social bond other than aristocracy and democracy.⁶ Melville’s text simply implies the possibility of homosexual bonds but never describes them concretely:

Melville proposes a social bond not on subordination to the greater personality embodied by Ahab, not on the democratic ideal of power distributed according to intrinsic worth, not on those feelings binding either two friends or the partners in a marriage, not, finally, on the transgressed homage to all such legitimated social bonds in conventional

⁵ Another American Renaissance writer, Emerson, similarly evaluated the state of being indecisive. According to Pease, Emerson “does not encourage the individual either to act in the world or to will action. Instead he encourages the individual to discover his power in his ability to act” (132). Pease cites Emerson’s saying: “If I am true . . . my very impotency shall secure a greater excellency than all skill and toil” (qtd. in Pease 132).

⁶ See the scenes of Ishmael’s sleeping with Queequeg in chapter 4 and his homoerotic imagination of the crews in the midst of oil expression in chapter 94.

images of homosexual desire. (147)

With the repetition of “not,” Bersani emphasizes the importance of denial in *Moby-Dick* as a strategy. By implicating the possibility of a homosexual relationship without any specific actions, Melville indicates an ideal social unity “neither autocratic nor democratic” (147).

Most remarkably, John Bryant’s “*Moby-Dick* as Revolution” (2016) speculates on the power of nothingness. For Bryant, both Ahab and Ishmael struggle with the fear that “there is nothing beyond our shell of existence; there is no ideal reality beyond the material; there is nothing” (72). Yet, Bryant underlines their different postures toward pessimistic nothingness. On the one hand, Ahab’s fear of nihilism can be seen in his pain in chapter 38: “Naught’s an obstacle” to “the iron way” (*Moby-Dick* 143). Apparently meaning that “nothing can get in my way,” Ahab’s pain also can be interpreted as “the ‘Ideal of Nothingness’ is an obstacle” (74). To deal with his fear of nothingness, Ahab makes a “pathological denial of the possibility of nothingness” (74). On the other hand, Ishmael, saying “Nothing exists in itself” (*Moby-Dick* 58), believes that “[n]othingness is a something, beyond which a higher reality may in fact be operating” (73). Nothing, for Ishmael, serves as “the seed of salvation” that causes his connections with others: “not only does everything take its being and meaning from everything else, but each thing—you, me, a whale—also connects to a higher reality—the idea of Us” (72). Ishmael’s positive attitude toward nothingness leads him to establish the inter-racial relation with Queequeg, even in despair. Bryant suggests that *Moby-Dick* illustrates “how being emerges out of nothingness,” reading it as a book about “a revolution” that keeps the readers in the entanglement “between deeply felt but conflicting ideologies” (76, 71). Looking over passivity, indecisiveness, and deeds without any specific actions, the classical

arguments from Matthiessen to Bryant have made it clear that the power of nothingness in *Moby-Dick* is essentially connected to the ideal about democracy and individualism.

Here, we cannot forget that the discipline of American literature itself, as John Carlos Rowe analyzes in *Through the Custom-House* (1982), has been characterized with its formlessness. Rowe combines Harold Bloom's theory of "anxiety of influence" with Paul de Man's view of the irony of modernity. Bloom in *A Map of Misreading* (1975) unveils the anxiety of "American psychopoetics," arguing that the writers have emphasized "an American difference from European patterns of the imagination's struggle with its own origins" (52). In "Literary History and Literary Modernity" (1970), de Man also figures out the irony of the modern writers, who have been driven by an "antiliterary" impulse: "Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure" (388-89). Nevertheless, de Man noticed, "[t]he more radical the rejection of anything that came before, the greater dependence on the past" (400). Taking into consideration these arguments, Rowe supposes that the mid-nineteenth century American writers were motivated by "the desire to escape or repress a past that would overwhelm [their] own lust for original power" (18). These writers attempted to "produce new and original forms to express a distinctively American subject and theme" (24). Rowe evaluates the writers' desire to be "anti-formal" against European literary conventions as the form of American literature: "the very formlessness of American prose . . . is a strategy that evolves into a form in its own right" (24).

Stimulated by these studies, my study will argue that nothingness in Melville's writings is inextricably linked with the issue of Americanness, with which he dealt

throughout his writing career. According to Robert S. Levine, “Americanness” in Melville’s writings uncovers “the fundamental contradiction” of his society: although having pursued democratic equality from its foundation, the United States “committed to democratic ideals was equally committed to slavery” (“Melville and Americanness” 10). Melville’s “Americanness” serves as “a diptych,” which joins “an American Hamlet” with “an American Inferno” (16, 17). In other words, criticism and reevaluation of the U.S. society are ambiguously interconnected in Melville’s writings. In response to Levine’s suggestion, I would like to interpret nothingness in his writings as an aesthetic strategy for critically but creatively rethinking the contradictions of the U.S. society and its ideals. Melville, on the one hand, expresses his destructive criticism of his society and its hypocrisies through the depiction of passivity, indecisiveness, self-fashioning, and self-annihilation. On the other hand, more importantly, nothingness in Melville’s writings maintains the possibility that the U.S. ideals would be resurrected in his apparently pessimistic descriptions. Thus, my study will particularly focus on his writings after *Moby-Dick*, in which Melville begins to treat the ambiguous power of nothingness. Closely reviewing and contextualizing Melville’s later works, I will analyze how these writings reflect his mind, which was suspended between criticism and reconstruction of the American ideals of democratic equality, self-reliant individuality, and the white subjectivity.

My dissertation on the power of nothingness in Melville’s post-*Pierre* writings will consist of four chapters. Chapter 1 on *Pierre* analyzes Melville’s ambiguous attitudes toward the idea of democratic equality from the point of authorship. The novel, which ends with the adolescent protagonist’s suicide, has been interpreted as Melville’s political satire on American democracy. It clarifies his harsh criticism of the hypocrisies of the Young America Movement, in which Melville earnestly

participated: while Young Americans longed for the Revolutionary sires and tried to realize universal equality inside and outside America, the hierarchical relationship between the ruler and the ruled survived slavery and Manifest Destiny. Wai Chee Dimock points out Melville's severe criticism of the failure of American democracy in young Pierre's "sovereign authorship" (*Empire for Liberty* 76). Instead of his longing for equality, his writing ironically reproduces the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed in that of Pierre and Isabel. Yet, by closely examining the ambiguity of Pierre's and Isabel's deaths, we can find that Melville's text explores the possibility of a world without hierarchy. By focusing on Isabel's authorship, not only on Pierre's, I would like to read *Pierre* as a novel that witnesses the destruction and re-creation of Young American democracy.

To consider how Melville demonstrates the American ideals, we cannot miss that his works repeatedly make reference to the Founding Fathers, who Young Americans had deified. Chapters 2 and 3 will pick up *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855) and *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), respectively, showing that these texts survey the themes of self-reliant individuality and regional equality after the Civil War by deliberately articulating the contemporary discourses of the Founding Fathers. *Israel Potter* describes the strange life of a soldier of the American Revolution. Although he fought at Bunker Hill, the protagonist cannot be considered as a Revolutionary War hero and accept his salary. Rather, he is sent to England as a war prisoner; after being released, he wanders by falsifying his identity as an American. Israel's descent from a Revolutionary soldier to an anonymous vagrant in the enemy country makes him realize the philosophy of "vanity and clay" (157). Israel's philosophy of nothingness has been interpreted as a criticism on "Americanism" (149), or the American individuality, founded on Benjamin Franklin's

philosophy of self-help. However, *Israel Potter* does not merely criticize the Revolutionary ideal of self-reliant individuality. Tracing how Israel builds his philosophy by critically inheriting Franklin's idea of self-help, chapter 2 will show that Israel's rejection of self-reliant individuality ironically forms an alternate way for an individual, who overcomes the national hate for the enemy of England.

Chapter 3 looks at *Battle-Pieces* in the context of the Revolutionary discourse around the Civil War period. This war, in James M. McPherson's analysis, had been assessed as "the Second American Revolution," in which both of Union and Confederate states appropriated the Revolutionary ideals to justify their policies and causes. Melville's *Battle-Pieces* can be read as a reaction to such controversies. As a Northerner, Melville's war poetry exposes the hypocrisy of the Southern states' manipulation of the Revolutionary ideals. For him, "the most sensitive love of liberty was entrapped" to continue slavery (182). But, Melville's poetry does not simply glorify the Union's victory. The power of nothingness in *Battle-Pieces*, expressed in the ventriloquism of Robert E. Lee, criticizes the partisan patriotism that would perpetuate hate toward other states and help to construct the Union-centered hierarchy. Superimposing the defeated Confederate commander over the iconic George Washington, Melville's poetry sings for the lost voices of the dead soldiers and the ruined South. In keeping with one major sourcebook, Frank Moore's *The Rebellion Record* (1861-68), I would like to propose that Melville's trans-regional imagination seeks for a way to rebuild the divided nation after the fratricidal war.

Chapter 4 will examine the issue of the white subjectivity by focusing on the figuration of Asian junks in Melville's writings. In *Moby-Dick*, at first seeing of the *Pequod*, Ishmael's curious gaze stresses the antiqueness and strangeness of the whaling vessel by referring to these foreign ships of "square-toed luggers[.]

mountainous Japanese junks[, and] butter-box galliots” (69). As Elizabeth Schultz finds, the motif of Japanese junks triggers Ishmael to express his “derogatory and demonic racist representation of Asians” such as Fedallah and his crew (206). Yet, written after the opening of China and Japan, Melville’s writings on Chinese and Japanese junks complicatedly represent the Asia-Pacific region to displace the imperialist gaze of whites. By scrutinizing Melville’s depiction of Asian junks in the antebellum exhibition culture, chapter 4 aims to investigate the complex relationship in Melville’s writings between the colonizer (the United States) and the colonized (the Asia-Pacific). Especially, Melville’s last prose, “The Piazza,” while reproducing the racial stereotypes of Asia, destabilizes the dichotomy between the imperial spectator and the colonized curiosities.

My study will end with an argument on how the power of nothingness in Melville’s writings has been handed down to later generations. For one example, I will discuss contemporary Japanese playwright Yoji Sakate’s adaptation of “Bartleby.” In 2015, Sakate and his theatre company, Rin Ko Gun (Phosphorescence Troupe), performed *Bartlebies* to deal with the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011. The devastating earthquake and tsunami not only resulted in numerous deaths and created many refugees, but also caused severe radioactive leakage and environmental hazards from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Portraying the people of the affected area as Bartleby-like figures without “vital feeling,” or a will to live, Sakate’s play shows his political anger toward the institutions that had run the nuclear plant, since they were negligent in their preparation of countermeasures for severe disasters. At the same time, however, Sakate’s adaptation of “Bartleby” imagines resurrection of lost humanities for the future by deliberately compiling ambiguous meanings for the famous phrase of “I would prefer not to.” Sakate’s

adaptation enables us to think that in the more than 200 years that have passed since Melville's birth, nothingness in his writings has continued to attract readers beyond his time and space.

Chapter 1

A Dead Author to Be Resurrected:

The Ambiguity of American Democracy in *Pierre: or, the Ambiguities*

“Herman Melville Crazy.” This was the notorious headline of the *New York Day Book* regarding Melville’s seventh novel, *Pierre: or, the Ambiguities* (1852). Criticizing *Pierre* as a book of “the ravings and reveries of a madman,” the reviewer recommended that Melville be kept “stringently secluded from pen and ink” (Higgins and Parker 436). Contemporary reviewers saw it as the book that led to Melville’s death as an author. Melville experienced rejection and debt because of the harsh failure of his book and began to anonymously publish short stories.¹ Along with the parallel between Melville and Pierre’s ruin as writers, scholars have conventionally interpreted the protagonist’s death as a nihilistic end. F. O. Matthiessen notes that “nothing rises to take its place [“Pierre’s world”] and assert continuity” (469) after his death in New York City’s prison, “the Tombs.”

Pierre’s death seems to be pessimistic. After his encounter with Isabel Banford, who introduces herself as his half-blood sister, and the discovery of his father’s adultery, the protagonist abandons his rich family and huge estate, Saddle Meadows. He becomes a writer to make a living with Isabel and an ill-fated maid, Delly, and to “deliver . . . miserably neglected Truth to the world” (283). Yet, his aim cannot be achieved. Just before Pierre’s death, his publisher criticizes his book as “a blasphemous rhapsody,” in which he plagiarizes “the vile Atheists, Lucian and Voltaire” (356). Charged as “a swindler” (356), Pierre keeps his work in his study and

¹ Bad writing and the anti-social themes in *Pierre* caused a firestorm of criticism that led to the deterioration of Melville’s authorship. See Howard and Parker 379-92.

refuses to publish. The ambiguity of his death, however, encourages reconsideration of his ruin. Pierre regards his end as a living death, saying “now to live is death, and now to die is life” (360). Several scholars have noted that his end can be interpreted from many perspectives, not just nihilism. For instance, Sacvan Bercovitch points out that Pierre’s death in prison does not mean “existential nothingness” because “something is discovered here by somebody” (257). Masaki Horiuchi notes that “even if Melville could not understand the hidden meanings of Isabel when he had finished the novel, he succeeded in leaving her body as a corpse, waiting for a careful listening reader” (74).

Building on these studies, this chapter argues that Pierre’s apparently tragic death reflects Melville’s ambiguous attitudes toward mid-nineteenth century American politics. His seventh novel was written during a period known as the Young America Movement. Driven by an ardor for the Revolutionary Fathers, people made attempts at complete independence from the Old World and to realize democratic equality inside and outside of the country. Young American democracy, however, had been inherently hypocritical: while the Young Americans tried to realize universal equality, the hierarchical relationship between the ruler and the ruled survived in the United States through slavery and Manifest Destiny. Melville expresses such conflict through Pierre’s “sovereign authorship” (Dimock 76). Instead of Pierre’s longing for equality, his writing reproduces the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. But, if we focus on Isabel’s authorship, not only on Pierre’s, we can shed new light on *Pierre* as a destructive satire of American politics. Examining what I call “the power of nothingness” in the protagonist’s ambiguous ruin, I would like to read *Pierre* as a novel in which the destruction and re-creation of Young American democracy proceed together. Pierre’s pessimistic ruin does critique the hypocrisy of

American democracy. More importantly, however, Pierre and Isabel's deaths explore the possibility of a world without hierarchy.

Searching for the Revolutionary Ideals

On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress adopted "The Declaration of Independence" drafted by Thomas Jefferson. His passages expressed the Jeffersonian ideal of democracy as "self-evident" "Truths" that "all Men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness" (n. pag.). The declaration emphasized the need for dissolving "the Political Bands" which had connected the Thirteen Colonies in America with England (n. pag.). It suggested the role of government and the right of revolution. A government is instituted by consensus of the people to protect their rights. If the government becomes "destructive" to them, the people have the right to "alter or abolish it, and to institute new government" (n. pag.). Based on the right of revolution, Jefferson appealed to the world for the rightfulness of independence of the Thirteen Colonies in America from England by repeatedly stressing the "absolute despotism" of George III (n. pag.).

After about half a century had passed, the Revolutionary discourses of democracy and independence were reproduced in the age of the Young America Movement. The victory in the War of 1812 and a string of deaths of the Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in the 1820s led the post-Revolutionary generation to sanctify the achievements of their fathers. The younger generation ardently aimed to reestablish their sires' great works of "universal democracy, equality, and the overthrow of European kings" (Rogin 73). According to Edward L. Widmer, the Young America Movement can be divided into two periods,

before and after the Compromise of 1850. Led by John O'Sullivan and Evert A. Duyckinck mainly in New York City around 1845, "Young America I" was a cultural and literary movement that "strove for the flowering of democracy" (15). The literary Young Americans were made up of those who were against "the expansion of slavery and had misgivings about the Mexican War" (61). Having expanded its territory through the annexation of Texas in 1845 and the Mexican cession in 1848, the United States confronted the serious problem of slavery and passed the Compromise of 1850, which enacted the Fugitive Slave Law. Along with the presidential campaign of Stephen Douglass, "Young America II" appeared around 1852 as the political movement that "stood for its deflowering, misleading people through empty promises and slogans designed to steal land and treat human beings like chattel" (15). Political Young Americans consisted of "southern and western expansionists" who supported interventions outside of the country to promote the cause of democratic freedom (15). However, the Young Americans experienced the drastic fall from "an ecstasy of expectation" to "an agony of despair" because of slavery and Manifest Destiny (17).

Social reformists of the time adapted Jefferson's revolutionary document to express their thoughts and ideas. The English-born immigrant, George Henry Evans, issued its radical parody, "The Working Men's Declaration of Independence" (1829), and Seneca Falls Convention in New York in July 1848 adopted "Declaration of Sentiments" (1848) criticized patriarchal authority in the United States. In resonance with such a nationalistic current, Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous lecture "The American Scholar," which was called the "intellectual Declaration of Independence" by Oliver Wendell Homes, deliberately articulates the discourse of

independence.² Presented before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge on August 31, 1834, Emerson's lecture builds a model of the genuine intellect, "Man Thinking," who quits over-reliance on Europe and realizes "the spirit of American freedom" (57, 68). He promotes three ways to become the self-reliant American intellect: (1) to study Nature, (2) to read books properly, and (3) to do actions, or to be practical. Emerson foretells the U.S. intellectual independence in the near future: "our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close" (56). Yet, Emerson's lecture ironically proves the difficulty of American cultural independence. In fact, his emphasis on studying nature originates in the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg's philosophy of correspondence. Emerson describes Swedenborg as a "man of genius," who discovers "the connection between nature and the affection of the soul" (68). His desire for independence from the Old World ironically uncovers his reliance on it. For Emerson, as Perry Miller argues, "[t]he American independence had to be achieved *through* dependence" (125; italics original). He finds "a resolution to achieve independence," not in denial of European culture, but in "a voluminous absorption of the new learning of Romantic Europe" (126).

Emerson's ambiguous attitude toward independence could well make him stress the importance of unity in divided things. When young, people see everything as "individual" and "stand[ing] by itself" (58). Yet, their intellectual maturity follows discovering "one root" among these individual phenomena: "discovering roots running under ground, whereby contrary and remote things cohere, and flower out from one stem" (58). They come to have a sympathetic vision that puts separated

² Although a Boston intellectual, Emerson asserted great influence over Young Americans of New York City. Duyckicnk, after hearing of his lecture on "Representative Men," wanted to include Emerson's work in his Library of American Books: "my desire for a genuine book for the series of American books he [Emerson] has placed under my charge is like the thirst of the parched traveller in the wilderness" (qtd. in Widmer 106).

things together:

[T]o this school-boy under the bending dome of day, is suggested, that he and it proceed from one root; one is leaf and one is flower; relation, sympathy, stirring in every vein. And what is that Root? Is not that the soul of his soul? . . . He shall see, that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. (58)

The people in the modern society “have suffered amputation from the trunk,” and there only exist “so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow” (57). But, it is “Man Thinking,” who “take[s] the whole society to find the whole man” (57). Although wishing to be self-reliant and autonomous, Emerson describes the literary genius as the person who intuits the wholeness of human society.

In addition to Emerson’s “The American Scholar,” Melville’s “Hawthorne and His Mosses” could be viewed as another “intellectual Declaration of Independence.” In it, Melville also promotes the Revolutionary ideals of independence and equality. Reviewing Hawthorne’s *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Melville praises Hawthorne as the “Master Genius” of American literature, whose texts appeal to the “Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin” (252, 243). In his essay, like Emerson, he recommends contemporary American writers to be self-reliant: “Let us away with this leaven of literary flunkyism towards England. If either we must play the flunky in this thing, let England do it, not us” (248). Melville gives a warning against the contemporary literary market publishing without adherence to any international copyright law, in which the publishers had preferentially reprinted European writings:

[W]e [Americans] should refrain from unduly lauding foreign writers and, at the same time, duly recognize the meritorious writers that are our own;—those writers, who breathe that unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity in all things, which now takes the practical lead in this world, though at the same time led by ourselves—us Americans. (248)

Melville encourages the American writers to tell “the Truth” “in this world of lies” (244). They should “carry republican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life” to fulfill the “unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity in all things” (248).

Melville’s aspiration for independence and equality later reappeared in a letter to Hawthorne in June 1851. Melville wrote about “a ruthless democracy on all sides” (*Correspondence* 190). His ideal of “unconditional democracy” denied any hierarchy among men through subversions: “a thief in a jail is as honorable a person as Gen. George Washington” (190-91). While considering that identification of a thief with the Founding Father is “ludicrous,” Melville regarded such a fraudulence comparison as true (191). For him, “truth is the silliest thing under the sun” (191). Such view of “a ruthless democracy” is also seen in chapter 26, “Knights and Squires,” of *Moby-Dick*:

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I [Ishmael] shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman’s arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou Just Spirit of Equality (103-04)

In Ishmael’s idealistic world of a “Just Spirit of Equality,” there would still happen to be subversions between the master and the slave, or between the

authoritative and the subordinate. Due to the “ludicrous” ideal of democracy, Ishmael equates a representative Founding Father with a cannibalistic “savage” from the South Pacific: “Queequeg was George Washington cannibalistically developed” (55). Thus, echoing the Young America Movement, Melville expressed his radical view of democracy that aimed to realize a world of complete equality, in which “no man was less than another man” (Stauffer 220).

However, Melville was also aware of the internal contradiction of Young America Movement. Instead of embodying equality, inequality in the U.S. survived through its Manifest Destiny and slavery in the form of conqueror-conquered and master-slave relationships. As Wai Chee Dimock suggests, Andrew Jackson, one notable Young American, reproduced Jefferson’s discourse on America as an “empire for liberty” to sanctify the Texas annexation in 1843 as “extending the area of freedom” (qtd. in Dimock 9). Jackson also justified his expansionist policy to dispossess territories of the Florida Seminoles in the name of “pacification” (Robertson-Lorant 81). In addition, the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act permitted slavery in the country and postponed achievement of legal equality. When an escaped slave, Thomas Sims, was arrested in Boston, Melville’s father-in-law, Judge Lemuel Shaw, ordered Sims to be remitted to Georgia in compliance with the Fugitive Slave Law. Melville’s *Mardi* (1849) portrays the contradiction of American democracy through a fictionalized version of the U.S., Vivenza: “In-this-re-publi-can-land-all-men-are-born-free-and-equal. . . . Except-the-tribe-of-Hamo [African Americans]” (512-13). Implying the hypocrisy of the institution of slavery in the South, *Mardi* sarcastically reveals the true nature of Jeffersonian equality. Furthermore, Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* laments over the omnipotence of the hierarchy in the democratic nation, saying “Who ain’t a slave?”

Tell me that” (21).³ Melville in his writings, Timothy B. Powell notes, assumes the two-facedness of American democracy: racial equality exposes “ruthless racism” under the U.S. rhetoric of “eternal democracy” (167).⁴

According to Michael Paul Rogin, by the time of writing *Pierre*, Melville believed in the power of “the literary romance” to reveal “the bloody truths” of American democracy, its Manifest Destiny and slavery, “masked and implied by the political rhetoric of celebration” (75). Yet, *Pierre* reflects, Rogin concludes, Melville’s disillusionment with the Young America Movement, whose authors can no longer “offer[] access to the nation’s interior” (76). Indeed, in the novel’s central chapter, “Young America in Literature,” the protagonist fails to produce subversive work because his literary environment is “concerned only with adoring his poems” and “ignore[s] the poet’s inner meaning” (76). Melville’s text expresses disbelief against his age through the depiction of Saddle Meadows and Pierre’s naïve worship of his sire. Examining the issue of authorship throughout *Pierre*, however, enables us to see that, in addition to critiquing the Young America Movement, the novel seeks for a way to realize the Revolutionary ideal of equality among men.

³ Melville’s works have explored the U.S.’s dispossession and exploitation of Native Americans and African Americans. For more on *Pierre* and Andrew Jackson’s hypocritical policy regarding the Creek Nations, see Otter 200-01. On *Moby-Dick* and the discourse on the Compromise of 1850, see Heimert.

⁴ David S. Reynolds also argues that Melville’s longing for democracy causes his subversive attitude toward the society permitting inequality. Reading “Hawthorne and His Mosses” and his letter of “ruthless democracy,” Reynolds points out that Melville’s ideal of democracy paradoxically “fuse[s] criminality and goodness, iconoclasm and patriotism” (289). For him, being “a fully American democrat” means being “a rebel against what seemed a corrupt society,” not being a seemingly pious and good man, whose hypocrisy may reproduce inequities in the society (288).

Pierre's Failed Authorship

Melville's *Pierre* makes a fundamental criticism of U.S. society through the problem of possession that had retained the hierarchy between the ruler and ruled since its foundation. The beginning of the novel narrates the history of possession of American land through the portrayal of Saddle Meadows. Pierre enjoys the beauty of Saddle Meadows and feels proud of it. His estate reminds him of "the historic line of Glendinning," proving the "very long uninterrupted possession by his race" (5, 8). In the earlier days of the colony, Pierre's paternal great-grandfather continued to cheer his subordinates "with his dying voice" even after he was "mortally wounded" (6, 5). In the Revolutionary War, his grandfather defended the "rude but all-important stockaded fort" against "the repeated combined assaults of Indians, Tories, and Regulars" (6). Saddle Meadows is "a dream world," where Pierre has confirmed that "the world is a good place and cannot bring him any experience he will not be able to master" (Baym 918).

While young Pierre idealizes the "uninterrupted possession" of the land by his family, the narrator is compelled to reveal its dark history (8). Mentioning the two-facedness of Pierre's grandfather, who was the Revolutionary hero of Saddle Meadows, the narrator discloses that the mastership of his race was established through violence and exploitation of other races: "[I]n a night-scuffle in the wilderness before the Revolutionary War," Pierre's grandfather "annihilated two Indian savages by making reciprocal bludgeons of their heads" (29-30). Moreover, the anti-democratic nature of the Revolutionary sire is also unveiled: "[T]he mildest hearted, and most blue-eyed gentleman" was "the kindest of masters to his slaves" (30). The story of Old Pierre as "a great lover of horses" subtly hints at his oppressive control of black slaves (30). Each day, he made "a ceremonious call at his stables"

(30). His horses loved his special visits, as did his black slaves. Yet, their affection was indeed based on fear:

Woe to Cranz, Kit, Douw, or any other of his stable slaves, if grand old Pierre found one horse unblanketed Not that he ever had Cranz, Kit, Douw, or any of them flogged . . . but he would refuse to say his wonted pleasant word to them; and that was very bitter to them, for Cranz, Kit, Douw, and all of them, loved grand old Pierre. (30)

At Saddle Meadows, slaves and horses are closely linked. Old Pierre's benign mastery results in the aristocratic authority of the Glendinnings, according to which "man and horse are both hereditary" (32).⁵

Young Pierre ironically romanticizes the domination of his race. While taking a ride with his fiancé, Lucy, Pierre feels proud because he is "seated where his own ancestor had sat, and reining steeds, whose great-great-great-grandfathers grand old Pierre had reined before" (32). The young protagonist is so fascinated by his position as a descendant of a Revolutionary Father that he imitates his grandfather's actions:

[H]ow think you it would be, if sometimes of a mild meditative Fourth of July morning in the country, he carried out with him into the garden by way of ceremonial cane, a long, majestic, silver-tipped staff, a Major-General's baton, once wielded on the plume-nodding and musket-flashing review by the same grandfather . . . ? (12-13)

In addition to the fact that he shares the same name of Pierre Glendinning with his father and grandfather, the protagonist repeats the actions of his ancestor at Saddle

⁵ On chattel slavery in Old Pierre's story, see Levine, "Pierre's Blackened Hand"; Greeson 198-207. Focusing on the implied sexual relationship between Pierre's grandfather and his horses and black slaves, they examine the possibility that Pierre is a descendant of miscegenation.

Meadows. His mimesis historicizes the problem of his family's oppressive mastership, which has been reproduced from the past to the present.

Furthermore, the usage of biblical discourse emphasizes that the despotic authority of Pierre's family will continue into the future: "Out of some past Egypt, we have come to this new Canaan; and from this new Canaan, we press on to some Circassia" (33). Pierre's naïve imitation describes how the republican ideal of the Founding Fathers has been and will be changed into empty representations. Myra Jehlen interprets Pierre as the heir of the American Revolution, which "left its children no future but the fulfillment of the founding vision" and "left no way for future generations to define themselves through the difference they made" (198). Yet Pierre does not make any difference; the same oppression will continue to occur at Saddle Meadows. Although it produced a Revolutionary hero, Saddle Meadows is far from revolutionary. The republican ideal of equality has been and will be lost because of the aristocratic authority of the Glendinnings.

On the gap between young Pierre's naïveté and the narrator's astuteness, Bercovitch proposes that Melville mirrors "the anxiety of succession" of the post-Revolutionary generation, who are "self-aware" of the ambiguities between "duty and desire, virtue and truth," but "cannot resolve it" (293, 254). Melville's double-tongued text is conscious of the problematic mastery of his race, but cannot reconcile it. Yet, we cannot miss that *Pierre* imagines the rise of democratic equality out of the ruin of oppressive aristocracy. While foretelling young Pierre's inheritance of his aristocratic background, the beginning of the novel also hints at the possibility of achieving a democratic world after the ruin of the aristocratic hierarchy:

Now in general nothing can be more significant of decay than the idea of corrosion; yet on the other hand, nothing can more vividly suggest

luxuriance of life, than the idea of green as a color; for green is the peculiar signet of all-fertile Nature herself. Herein by apt analogy we behold the marked anomalousness of America; whose character abroad, we need not be surprised, is misconceived, when we consider how strangely she contradicts all prior notions of human things; and how wonderfully to her, Death itself becomes transmuted into Life. So that political institutions, which in other lands seem above all things intensely artificial, with America seem to possess the divine virtue of a natural law; for the most mighty of nature's laws is this, that out of Death she brings Life. (9)

“[B]y apt analogy,” the narrator links the “luxuriance of life” in Saddle Meadows to “the marked anomalousness” of American politics. “[A] subtle acid” of Saddle Meadows “produc[es] new things by corroding the old” (9). For Melville’s narrator, death and decay are not an end: “Death itself becomes transmuted into Life.” The transformative power of Saddle Meadows includes “the democratic element,” which causes the emergence of democracy after the corrosion of aristocratic authority (9). Reading the beginning of *Pierre*, we can see that Melville satirizes the dilemma of American democracy by depicting the problem of possession. Since the Revolution, the oppressive authority of Pierre’s family has been guaranteed by its tyrannical rule over its land and people. Yet, beyond critiquing this contradiction, Melville’s text seeks a way to create a world without hierarchy by predicting the fall of aristocratic authority, which will create democratic equality.

According to Matthiessen, Pierre’s “social background becomes . . . something he can reject and ignore” by his leaving “the patrician life of Saddle Meadows” and “flee[ing] to the city” (469). Yet, Saddle Meadows prefigures Pierre’s imitation of the

hierarchical past of his race through his authorship and the failure of his writing. The land demonstrates how the mastership of the Glendinnings has been established through their authorship:

The Glendinning deeds by which their estate had so long been held, bore the cyphers of three Indian kings, the aboriginal and only conveyancers of those noble woods and plains. Thus loftily, in the days of his circumscribed youth, did Pierre glance along the background of his race; little recking of that maturer and larger interior development, which should forever deprive these things of their full power of pride in his soul.

(6)

John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* states "the *labour* of his body, and the *work* of his hands . . . are properly his" (19; italics original). The landownership of Pierre's family has been proved by "the Glendinning deeds," which list the names of "the cyphers of three Indian kings." They serve as the "conveyancers of those noble woods and plains." Here, the term "deed" embodies the colonial authorship of Pierre's race. According to the *OED*, "deed" means a "thing to be done" as well as "[a]n instrument in writing, purporting to effect some legal disposition" ("Deed." def. 1, 4). Pierre narrates the heroic and patriotic deeds (achievements) of his ancestors while justifying their landownership with deeds (legal documents). Thus, Pierre's naïve imagination certifies the inalienable landownership of the Glendinnings by equating the double meaning of "deeds" (achievements and legal documents).

The protagonist's eyes change Saddle Meadows into an unending document of his race: "[O]verspread[ing] adjacent countries . . . so long as grass grows and water runs," Saddle Meadows "seems to make lawyer's ink unobliterable as the sea," declaring "a surprising eternity for a deed" (11). This foretells that his authorship will

reproduce his race's mastery. Although Pierre tries to be independent from his family, or to escape from his past by writing, his authorship ironically makes him a part of his family. However, Saddle Meadows, which asserts its corrosive power like "a subtle acid," predicts the subversion of Pierre's authorship. The Glendinnings become written objects, not writing subjects, because their deeds are recorded on the documents of Saddle Meadows. In fact, when the narrator finishes introducing the heroic history of the Glendinnings, he analogizes Pierre's brilliant life to a paper: "So perfect to Pierre had long seemed the illuminated scroll of his life thus far, that only one hiatus was discoverable by him in that sweetly-writ manuscript" (7). Pierre's family stabilizes their ownership by making themselves the authorial subject and Saddle Meadows their textual object. However, the descendant of the Glendinnings will not become an author like his ancestors, but a "manuscript" that is "illuminated" and "sweetly-writ" by someone. And, it is Isabel, another descendant of Saddle Meadows, who has the capacity to subvert Pierre's authorship.

Isabel's bodily features have led to several interpretations of her racial identity. Some scholars have read her as a Native American because of the aboriginality of her "immemorial face" (47). Others have interpreted her as an African American due to "the Nubian power in [her] eyes" (145).⁶ Yet, I would like to focus less on clarification of her racial identity and more on her representative role as the displaced at Saddle Meadows. After exposing Pierre's father's adultery, she informs Pierre that she has suffered from the injustice of his family, even though she is his half-sister and, thus, a descendant of Saddle Meadows. She asks him to realize equality between them: "Let not my hapless condition extinguish in me, the nobleness which I equally inherit with thee" (64). "Isabel's claim of equality," as Nancy F. Sweet describes,

⁶ For the former reading, see Oshima; on the latter, see Freeburg 61-92.

“throw[s] the nobility of Pierre’s entire inherited world into question” (10). Abandoning his family and Saddle Meadows, Pierre becomes a writer to make a living with Isabel and Delly, and to “deliver . . . miserably neglected Truth to the world” (283). In his “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” as I have discussed, Melville equates “the Truth” with the “democratic spirit of Christianity in all things” (244, 248). Similarly, Pierre is drastically motivated by Isabel’s claim of equality, launching his sublime project as an author to deliver the Truth to the world and to realize equality between Isabel and himself.

For Pierre, writing is the means to vindicate Isabel from the injustice of his family. When he first earned money from his writing, Pierre felt independent: “[H]e would not be forced to turn resurrectionist, and dig up his grandfather’s Indian-chief grave for the ancestral sword and shield, ignominiously to pawn them for a living” (261). Because of his work, Pierre does not need to rely on the profits of Saddle Meadows and can be independent from his aristocratic past. Nonetheless, Pierre’s adherence to his status as the descendant of a Revolutionary hero ironically re-creates a hierarchical relationship in his authorship. As a writer, he swears to fight against the “three fierce allies [of] Woe and Scorn and Want” in New York, as his grandfather did against “Indians, Tories, and Regulars” at Saddle Meadows (270, 6).

Pierre’s relation with Isabel embodies the “one rule” in the master-slave relationship to “objectify the other at any cost” (Gunn 68). Pierre’s hand allegorically serves as “the caster’s ladle” that “mold[s] [her] anew” by folding “fluid” Isabel into his “forms and slightest moods of thought” (324). His “desire to know all” of Isabel, which drives his writing, makes Isabel an object to be known and possessed (145). He overstresses “the burning fact, that Isabel was his sister,” which is recorded “[a]gainst the wall of the thick darkness of the mystery of Isabel” (170). In line with Dimock’s

suggestion that “the knowable identity . . . is the mark of the Other,” Pierre’s attempt to know Isabel becomes a supervision of her as “the subjugated” (*Empire for Liberty* 156). Pierre acknowledges something hidden about Isabel, but he remains ignorant and continues to act as a brother by loftily swearing to “[c]omfort thee [Isabel], and stand by thee, and fight for thee” (205).

Pierre, as I have seen, revolves around the Revolutionary discourses of independence and equality. While longing to be independent from his family and realizing an equal relationship with Isabel, Pierre stays blind to the dark side of his family’s past and continues to reproduce the hierarchical oppression of her through his writing. However, we cannot overlook the instability of Pierre’s “sovereign authorship.” For example, Book XVII, “Young America in Literature,” portrays his troubled identity in the literary marketplace. Melville duplicates his refusal of Duyckinck’s request to take a daguerreotype for *Holden’s Dollar Magazine* in 1851 (Howard and Parker 376). Pierre’s editor requested that he take a daguerreotype for a magazine. Pierre refused the offer because mass production of his portrait would make him a nobody: “For if you are published along with Tom, Dick, and Harry, and wear a coat of their cut, how then are you distinct from Tom, Dick, Harry?” (254). It is noteworthy that the magazine’s name is “Captain Kidd Monthly” (254). As it implies, Pierre finds himself in a literary marketplace in which writers are exploited by pirate-editors. When the “chief mate of Captain Kidd” calls Pierre “[p]ublic property” and takes him away forcefully, Pierre tells the editor ironically that his expression “may do very well for the ‘Captain Kidd Monthly’” (254). Pierre is no longer the owner of his own words; he had his words stolen by his piratical editor,

becoming a stolen object.⁷

Moreover, Pierre's desire to know Isabel subverts his authority as a writer. In other words, his yearning for Isabel's guitar and its melody leads to his ruin. Acquired from a peddler at Saddle Meadows, Isabel's guitar translates "[a]ll the wonders that are unimaginable and unspeakable," and embodies "the atmosphere of primeval forests" of the land (125, 139). Pierre wishes to possess and express the melody in his work; he "[feels] chapter after chapter born of its wondrous suggestiveness" (282). But, Pierre fails to capture "the deepest words" of her guitar (282). The melody, which is "eternally incapable of being translated into words," ironically captivates him (282). Thus, he is caught and bound by the "supersensuous and all-confounding intimations" of her guitar, eventually becoming her "captive" (282, 307). He states that "all words are thine, Isabel; words and worlds with all their containings, shall be slaves to thee, Isabel" (313). In the middle of his work, Pierre abandons his domineering position as a writer and acknowledges Isabel, not himself, as an authoritative owner of words. Although he initially becomes a writer to protect Isabel from the injustice of his family and realize equality, his authorship nevertheless survives the tyrannical relationship between them. The novel, at the same time, describes the instability of his authorship, showing the possibility of its fall. Yet, Pierre's failure as a writer does not mean falling into pessimistic nothingness, as Matthiessen has said. Pierre will be deposed as a sovereign writer, but, I think, he leaves the authority to Isabel, another author, whose words can make him her slave.

⁷ Pierre's critique could stem from Duyckinck's review of *Moby-Dick*, in which he described the novel as the "piratical running down of creeds and opinions" (Higgins and Parker 385). By adopting Duyckinck's critical phrase, Melville could blame the literary market, where pirate editions of foreign works prevailed because of the lack of international copyright laws. See Widmer 99, 106.

Isabel as a Crypto-Author

The end of *Pierre* is set in New York City's prison, called "The Tombs," which John Haviland constructed in an Egyptian style in 1838. The protagonist dies in the pyramid-like jail. In this novel, the pyramid represents nothingness and denotes the nihilistic failure of writing: "By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and no body is there!—appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man!" (285). Despite his endeavors, the geologist-author cannot discover the mummy-truth, because it has already been stolen and lost. From this perspective, Pierre's death in the Tombs can be interpreted as the nihilistic failure of his project to realize the Truth and equality in the world.

However, it is of significance that his death symbolically refills the empty sarcophagus. Called "flesh-brushes," Pierre's ascetic writing abominates "the merest ribs" of his body and "forever cut[s] it dead," making his body "dry" like a mummy (298, 299, 360). The structure of his dungeon is similar to a sarcophagus: "The cumbersome stone ceiling almost rested on his brow" (360). Isabel's embrace completes his figuration as a mummified corpse. At the moment of his death, Pierre's body is covered by her dark hair: "[H]er whole form sloped sideways, and she fell upon Pierre's heart, and her long hair ran over him, and arbored him in ebon vines" (362). Pierre's dead body returns to the empty sarcophagus as the lost mummy, longing for revival: "[N]ow to live is death, and now to die is life" (360).

In mid-nineteenth century America, the Egyptian pyramid was regarded as a place of conversion that translated "the meaninglessness of death" into "the

meaningfulness of death” (Irvin 147).⁸ Melville’s letter to Hawthorne in 1851 noted that the pyramid preserved the seeds of writers’ talents, which wait for the day to bloom: “I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian Pyramids, which, after being three thousand years a seed nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, it developed itself, grew to greenness, and then fell to mould” (*Correspondence* 193). Working on *Moby-Dick*, Melville felt his own seed-talent as a writer came to “the inmost leaf of the bulb,” and “shortly the flower must fall to the mould” (193). By reinterpreting his ruin as a writer from the perspective of Isabel’s authorship, we can examine how his ambiguous death exemplifies the cycle of destruction and re-creation of his identity through Isabel’s writing. Serving as a crypto-author, Isabel translates pessimistic nothingness at the end of the novel, or Pierre’s meaningless death as a writer, into his meaningful revival as her text. Although destructive, Pierre and Isabel’s deaths can be considered an attempt to realize the Truth, or a world without hierarchy.

Melville’s text has consistently described Isabel as a writer. Her authorship can be seen in the effect of her letters on Pierre. At first, the protagonist does not believe her story, but her letters gradually change his mind, and he comes to admit that she “spake true” (155). Her letters “assumed a strange and reddish hue” and were “almost illegible,” but “moved [Pierre’s] inmost soul” (64, 159). Her story strikes his heart like a dagger: “[H]is hand, clutching the letter, was pressed against his heart, as if some assassin had stabbed him and fled; and Pierre was now holding the dagger in the wound, to stanch the outgushing of the blood” (65). Isabel’s letters “had

⁸ Scott Trafton investigates the ambiguous function of the New York City prison in which *Pierre* ends. The “separation system” of the prison aimed to keep prisoners in complete solitude to control their contamination of the outside world. However, the Tombs also expected “Christian conversion” of the prisoners, changing their minds with “rational repentance” (155, 154).

unconsciously left their ineffaceable impressions on him” (173). The expression “their ineffaceable impressions” evokes an image of Pierre as a text, and Isabel as the author. Her letters illustrate Pierre’s ambiguous identity as “both subject and object, externalizing self as both narrator and text” (Robertson-Lorant 318).

Pierre’s authorship, I have argued, permits a hierarchy between him and Isabel, despite his attempt to realize equality. This insincerity could have caused his ruin as a writer. He acknowledges the duplicity of his writing and regards his work as the “coiner’s book” (357). Yet, by paying attention to Pierre himself, not his work, we notice that Isabel endeavors to rewrite Pierre’s mind with her words:

[A]ll this time, there was the latent suspicion of folly; but I [Pierre] would not admit it; I shut my soul’s door in its face. Yet now, the ten thousand universal revealings brand me on the forehead with fool! and like protested notes at the Bankers, all those written things of mine, are jaggingly cut through and through with the protesting hammer of Truth!—Oh, I am sick, sick, sick! (273)

Isabel’s story “brand[s] [him] on the forehead with fool,” leaving an impression on him with her “protesting hammer of Truth.” Hidden behind her obedience to Pierre, Isabel makes him feel guilty about his family’s past. As an advocate of the Truth and equality, Isabel’s authorship stigmatizes Pierre as a text filled with lies that fails to establish equality and remains an inequality between them. As his sickness becomes evident, Isabel produces a radical change in young and naïve Pierre. Feeling embarrassed about his family’s past, he at once has a desire to seek out equality. Although Pierre’s writing itself cannot establish his aim, Isabel continues to consult on the project to realize equality between them by remaking Pierre as a text of the Truth and equality until their deaths.

Isabel's authorship is completed in Pierre's prison cell. Embracing his body with her dark hair, Isabel figuratively re-creates it as her book. Before moving to New York City, Isabel presents her desire to compile records of Pierre's heroic actions. After hearing that he decided to protect Isabel and Delly and bring both of them to New York, she praises his heroic acts: "[t]hy noble heart hath many chambers, Pierre; the records of thy wealth, I see, are not bound up in the one poor book of Isabel" (156). While indicating that "the writer's life is encased in a book" in *Pierre*, Wyn Kelley stresses Pierre's stable role as a reader that "has perused" Isabel's book ("*Pierre*, Life History, and the Obscure" 95). Nevertheless, such a relation is frustrated by their deaths. At the moment when Isabel's body falls upon "Pierre's heart," and "her long hair . . . arbore[s] him in ebon vines" (362), Isabel accomplishes her aim to change Pierre into her book by covering his body-texts with her hair-book cover. Interestingly, Isabel's embrace realizes her mysteries, which Pierre's writing failed to express. Isabel states that she is shrouded in "the circumambient mysteries" (274). Her authorship transmutes Pierre from the authorial subject of a writer into the written object of a book.

We cannot ascertain the result of Isabel's attempt to realize the Truth and equality because the novel ends ambiguously. As Pierre pessimistically narrates his "[l]ife's last chapter," he rejects any conclusion: "Nor book, nor author of the book, hath any sequel, though each hath its last lettering!—It is ambiguous still" (360). Still, I think, it is in such an ambiguous rejection that Pierre and Isabel demonstrate the possibility of achieving equality. In *Pierre*, the issue of possession is embodied

through characters' desire to occupy positions that establish their identities.⁹ Pierre is obsessed with authoritative positions such as the descendant of a Revolutionary hero and a heroic brother that must protect his poor sister. This obsession becomes an obstacle to realize equality because it inescapably constructs a hierarchy between him and Isabel. However, Pierre and Isabel's aspiration for nothingness, or self-effacement, encourages us to rethink their deaths as a way to realize equality. Contrary to possession, their deaths offer a solution of non-possession through which they can avoid reproducing the hierarchical positions of ruler and ruled.

In Book XIV, "The Journey and the Pamphlet," Pierre reads Plotinus Plinlimmon's pamphlet on his way to New York City, which argues that the issue of possession is the original sin of America. The narrator analyzes the "startling solecism" of Christian lessons: while Christianity "calls upon all men to renounce this world," "Christian nations" of "Europe and America" glorify their "Mammonish" ownership of land (207). Addressing such an irreconcilable contradiction between "God's truth" and "man's truth," Plinlimmon gives superficial advice: "[I]n things terrestrial (horological)," as Plinlimmon warns, "a man must not be governed by ideas celestial (chronometrical)" (212, 214). He states that by adhering to the Christian ideal, people will bring upon themselves only "woe and death" (212). Contrary to Plinlimmon, Pierre tries to face the contradiction, seeing the world as "saturated and soaking with lies" (208). He atheistically denies the world, even himself: he "refuse[s] the evidence of his own senses" (208).

⁹ Cindy Weinstein discusses positionality in *Pierre* from the viewpoint of kinship. She reads the novel as a narrative of repetition in which "[t]he conclusion is the origin repeated a bit later" (164). By focusing on the "logic of relatedness," she points out an ironic repetition (171). Instead of his "attempted decimation of family ties," Pierre's desire for "self-sufficiency marks its own insufficiency," reproducing a familial relationship between him and Isabel (172).

As the end of the novel suggests, Pierre's radicalism seems to cause nothing but his pessimistic death. Yet, Pierre and Isabel's longing for nothingness and motionlessness enables us to view their deaths as a way to deal with troublesome possession. The atheistic youth evaluates nothingness as a means to step away from solecism: ". . . a nothing is the substance, it casts one shadow one way, and another the other way; and these two shadows cast from one nothing; these, [it] seems to me [Pierre], are Virtue and Vice" (274). A "nothing" refuses to include the ethical hierarchy between "Virtue and Vice," but it does not mean nihilistic rejection of anything. Rather, as Pierre notices, nothingness serves as a foundation on which to create such values. He goes on to assert that "a nothing should torment a nothing; for I am a nothing," expressing his passive desire for nothingness. Isabel also prays for a state of "motionlessness" (274, 119). Thinking that "there can be no perfect peace in individualness," she wishes to absorb life "without individual sensation" (119). Like Pierre, Isabel wants to eliminate her "individual sensation" to have "motionlessness . . . as of some plant" (119). As Pierre believes in the creativity of nothingness as an origin, Isabel admits the originative ability of motionlessness, in which she can "animat[e] all things" by abolishing her individuality and melting into "the pervading spirit" (119). Isabel carries out her ideal at the moment of their death, transfiguring Pierre's body into a plant with her hair of "ebon vines" (362).

Sharon Cameron observes how Melville's art of "effacements," abolishing the distinction between "the human and nonhuman," has the capacity to "nullify what has been identified as an independent phenomenon" (x, 184). While indicating how characters in *Pierre* establish their identities by taking positions, Cameron proposes that such positions are "subject to reversal" (193). Pierre and Isabel's self-effacing deaths, however, do not lead to mere reversal or reproduction of hierarchical positions.

By erasing their problematic individuality, they avoid creating a ruler-ruled relationship. By her death, Isabel, unlike Pierre, rejects the hierarchical position of an authentic author. Isabel's authorship ends without subverting the supervision of Pierre and the subjugation of Isabel. In line with her ideal of non-possession, Isabel refuses to become a controlling subject that rules Pierre as a slave. Pierre and Isabel's deaths seriously embody the "silliest" Truth that people can indeed realize equality if they renounce everything, including their own selves.

While destructive, their deaths do not fall into mere nihilism. Rather, their dead bodies hope to be resurrected in the future. In his prison cell, Pierre "long[s] to die, to be rid of [his] dishonored cheek" (360). Pierre's suicide destroys his body, as his friend, Charlie Millthorpe, sadly laments, "[his] dark vein's burst" (362). However, Pierre yearns for reincarnation after his death: "[G]ive me first another body . . . now to live is death, and now to die is life" (360). Isabel gives him "another body," that of a plant, by embracing him with her dark hair of "ebon vines" (362). Ellen Weinauer refers to what Melville had termed "the power of blackness" in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," interpreting Pierre's blackened body, due to Isabel's embrace, as reflecting "anxieties about the threatening inescapability of 'blackness,'" or the original sin of the nation (339). But, Pierre and Isabel's ruin explores the possibility of escaping from America's original sin of possession. Through his self-effacing death, Pierre denies the inheritance of his race's oppressive past by draining his "black" blood. And, Isabel's embrace translates his nihilistic death into a productive one that embodies a peaceful state of equality. Instead of renouncing any possessions, including their individuality, Pierre and Isabel arrive at an ideal realm of nothingness and motionlessness in which they serve, like a seed, as the origin for accomplishing equality in the future.

In the opening chapter of *Pierre*, the narrator mocks Pierre's naïve radicalism and predicts his subsequent tragedy: "[B]elieve me you will pronounce Pierre a thorough-going Democrat in time; perhaps a little too Radical altogether to your fancy" (13). Matthiessen determines that "his radicalism is entirely a matter of personal conduct" and "his tragedy has really very little to do with political or social values" (469). However, as this chapter has examined, if reconsidering Pierre's ambiguous death from the perspective of authorship, we can see *Pierre* as a narrative of the destruction and re-creation of American democracy. In this novel, two authors, Pierre and Isabel, deal with the problem of possession, America's original sin, in a century of conquest and enslavement. On the one hand, Pierre's ruin as a writer criticizes the hypocrisy of American politics, in which the post-Revolutionary generation longed for universal equality while maintaining hierarchical oppression. Instead of attempting to ensure equality, Pierre's "sovereign authorship" produces inequality between him and Isabel. However, Isabel, the crypto-author of this novel, destabilizes his authorship, remaking him as her own text to accomplish the Truth and equality between them. Although they are social outsiders in prison, Pierre and Isabel serve as "thorough-going Democrat[s]" who present a "little too Radical" way to realize American democracy. Contrary to the problem of possession, their deaths embody the ideal of non-possession. The ambiguous ending of *Pierre* does not ensure the result of their project. Still, they explore the possibility of realizing equality in their deaths, through which they erase their individuality and avoid reproducing a ruler-ruled hierarchy. At the heart of the New York City prison, their dead bodies are preserved as a seed of democratic equality, which waits for the day to achieve a world without hierarchy.

Chapter 2

A Revolutionary Hero's Transatlantic Crossings:

Destruction and Reconstruction of "Americanism" in *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*

On December 18, 1849, Melville bought an old map of London and wrote in his diary "I want to use it in case I serve up the Revolutionary Narrative of the beggar" (*Journals* 43). After more than five years, his plan was finally realized in *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855). This novel narrates the strange life of a Revolutionary soldier who fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill. While fighting hard for the independence of his native country, Israel Potter was captured by the enemy and sent to England. After about fifty years of exile in England, Israel returns to his native land. Yet, he dies in total oblivion without getting acknowledgement as a Revolutionary soldier and receiving his salary. Although Melville had lost his reputation as a writer because of the sequential failures of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, his Revolutionary narrative of the beggar was relatively well-received. *Israel Potter* was reprinted three times, and its pirated edition was issued in London.¹ In addition, the New York literati positively evaluated Melville's eighth book. As a review in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* noted, it is "thoroughly saturated with American sentiment [and it] will be, for its patriotic interest, most popular in the community" (Higgins and Parker 458).

The cordial reception of *Israel Potter* could have been the result of the contemporary circumstance of its publication. Many Revolutionary narratives had been published from the time of U.S. independence to the early nineteenth century,

¹ For assessment of *Israel Potter*, see "Historical Note" of *Israel Potter* 211-33.

when Melville was writing his books. On the one hand, they sanctified the heroic deeds of the Founding Fathers, such as Benjamin Franklin, John Paul Jones, and Ethan Allen. With the rise of the nationalistic tendency after the War of 1812, writings on Franklin, which narrated an individual's progress from dependence to independence, were read as a national narrative that would foresee complete independence of America from England (Mulford 419). On the other hand, the Revolutionary narratives led common soldiers to confirm the American identity. One example is Melville's sourcebook, *Henry Trumbull's Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter* (1824). The readers saw a Yankee soldier as "the foundation for a national patriotic identity," in which "citizens could ground their sense of the past and take pride as the cornerstone for a future based on liberty and equality not just for secret elite, but for all Americans" (Dorson 4). These writings about the Founding Fathers and the common soldiers of the American Revolution helped to build the national identity by determining the U.S. ideals of independence, liberty, and freedom in personal lives.

Melville's *Israel Potter* illustrates the "true" "Americanism," or the American individuality evident in Ethan Allen: the hero of Ticonderoga "was frank; bluff; companionable as a Pagan; convivial; a Roman; hearty as a harvest. His spirit was essentially Western; and herein is his peculiar Americanism; for the Western spirit is, or will yet be . . . the true American one" (149). In common with the Revolutionary narratives, *Israel Potter* also describes the national spirit in an individual's nature. But, Melville's "Revolutionary narrative of the beggar" has traditionally been interpreted against the patriotic currency of the time. *Israel Potter* makes a fundamental criticism on "Americanism" through the satirical depiction of the Founding Fathers: Benjamin Franklin's philosophy of self-help, while having formed the base of the American

individuality, caused the national hate against England, as seen in John Paul Jones and his naval battle with the *Serapis*. Along with these opposing views, I would like to examine the destruction and reconstruction of “Americanism” in the protagonist’s philosophy of “vanity and clay” (157). I so doing, I will demonstrate how Israel critically, but creatively, inherits Franklin’s idea of self-help to build his philosophy of nothingness. I will show that Israel’s rejection of self-reliant individuality ironically forms an alternate path for an individual who overcomes the national hate for the enemy of England.

Israel as an American Self-made Man

The rise of the Revolutionary narratives appeared in the nationalistic atmosphere of the Young America Movement of the early nineteenth century. The Young Americans had mythologized the history of U.S. independence through biographies, historical books, poems, novels, and paintings to “establish [them] as the foundation for a national patriotic identity” (Temple 454). Such deification of the Founding Fathers was also seen in commemoration culture.² One representative example was the Bunker Hill Monument in Charlestown, Massachusetts. The surface of the 221-foot granite obelisk, divided in a grid shape, looks like a compilation of stones (Fig. 1). The monument had been constructed from 1825 to 1843 to celebrate the first fierce battle of the American Revolution on June 17, 1775. As the fiftieth anniversary of the battle had approached, Kenneth Foote argues, the work to build the Bunker Hill Monument began in earnest with the nationalistic desire to celebrate the Founding Fathers’ achievement. The monument as “a symbol of the values of the new republic” served not so much to mourn the dead soldiers as to announce the American

² On the rise of the U.S. nationalism and commemoration culture, see Mayo’s *War Memorials as Political Landscape* (1988) and Edward Linenthal’s *Sacred Ground* (1991).

ideal of liberty and freedom to the world (Foote 120). In fact, its cornerstone put stress on the ancestors' sacrifice to the U.S. cause: "to testify the gratitude of the present generation to their Fathers, who, on the 17th June, 1775, here fought in the cause of their country, and of free institutions, the memorable battle of Bunker Hill, and with their blood vindicated for their posterity the privileges and happiness this land has since enjoyed." (qtd. in Foote 120).



Fig. 1. The Bunker Hill Monument. June 17, 1843.

Nathaniel Currier. Library of Congress.

Daniel Webster, a well-known federalist politician, gave a speech at the laying of the Bunker Hill Monument cornerstone on June 17, 1827. His speech superimposed the glorious history of the U.S. independence on the monument. Whereas he had criticized European monarchism, Webster recounted a nationalist history of how the American Revolution heroically brought an end to it. Quoting Louis XIV's remark, "I am the state," he stated that European kings had treated the people as their subjects. In such a situation, the people were "disconnected from the state," and gradually came to

reveal the “fundamental and manifest truth” that “the powers of government are but a trust” and “they cannot lawfully exercised but for the good of the community” (67, 68). They rose up against such sovereignty and started a riot, which was the American Revolution. Webster celebrated the Founding Fathers’ great achievement through which “[t]he principle of free government adhere[d] to the American soil” (70). Webster patriotically called his ancestors “our fathers” and prompted the audience to inherit their sire’s business for the future: “Our proper business is improvement. Let our age be the age of improvement” (70). His oration’s ending reminds us of John Winthrop’s “The City upon a Hill” (1630): “by blessing of God, may that country [the United States] itself become a vast and splendid Monument, not of oppression and terror, but of Wisdom, of Peace, and of Liberty, upon which the world may gaze, with admiration, forever” (70). Webster configures America itself as the “splendid Monument,” which symbolizes the U.S. ideology of liberty.

Melville’s historical novel, *Israel Potter*, starts with a dedication to the Bunker Hill Monument. As a “[m]ost devoted and obsequious” editor, the narrator dedicates the story about an “anonymous private[] of June 17, 1775,” Israel Potter, to “[h]is highness The Bunker Hill Monument” (vi). The narrator laments Israel’s adverse fate. Instead of appreciation for “his faithful services” in fighting courageously at Bunker Hill, he did not receive “a posthumous pension” and was “promoted to a still deeper privacy under the ground” (v). Rather, he “may never have received other requital than the solid reward of [the Monument’s] granite” (vi). Seeing the monument as “the Great Biographer” of the dead soldiers, the narrator swears to uncover Israel’s secret story with the “general fidelity to the main drift of the original narrative” (vi). Melville’s *Israel Potter* is “a reprint” of Trumble’s original account which introduces the anonymous soldier’s autobiography without “any artistic recompense of poetical

justice” (v,vi).

Following the dedication, the opening chapters of *Israel Potter* portray the protagonist’s birthplace and career with a nationalistic tone. Israel is born in mountains of East Berkshire, Massachusetts, near the Housatonic River, where “[n]or could a fitter country be found for the birthplace of the devoted patriot” (5). Melville’s text sanctifies Israel as an ideal self-made man, who makes his living and survives in the cruel wilderness. When Israel turns eighteen, he falls in love with a “not only beautiful, but amiable” lady, Jenny, whose family is respectable, but unfortunately poor (7). Israel’s father, however, does not consent to their marriage and plots to break up their relationship. Israel considers “his father’s conduct unreasonable and oppressive,” deciding to leave his home and lover “for another home and other friends” (7). Yet, his innate industriousness enables him to survive in the harsh wilderness: he first becomes a farmer and expands his land; he later travels to Canada as a peddler dealing with “Indian blankets, pigments, and other showy articles”; after going back home once and finding that his father has not changed his mind and Jenny has married another man, Israel as a whaler begins “a long voyage to distant and barbarous waters” of the South Pacific (9, 11). The narrator proudly sees the same disposition of the Founding Fathers in Israel, whose career gives him “fearless self-reliance and independence which conducted our forefathers to national freedom” (9). Moreover, the heroic history of American independence from England is figuratively portrayed by Israel’s escaping from his “oppressive” father: “on just principles throwing off the yoke of his king, Israel, on equally excusable grounds, emancipated himself from his sire” (7). Perhaps, Melville’s text was accepted by the contemporary readers as a nationalistic narrative, which witnesses in Israel’s life the Revolutionary virtues such as independence from his oppressive father and

industriousness to survive in a harsh condition.

Echoing the nationalistic mood of the Young America Movement, *Israel Potter* was accepted as “thoroughly saturated with American sentiment.” Tracing the U.S. history of independence from England, Melville’s text represents the ideal individuality of the self-made man in the protagonist. However, we cannot overlook criticism on the Revolutionary heroes, who those of the Young America Movement had defied. As scholars pointed out, Melville wrote *Israel Potter*, based on several sources about the Founding Fathers such as Benjamin Franklin, John Paul Jones, and Ethan Allen. While stating at the beginning that he does not make “any artistic recompense of poetical justice,” Melville’s text drastically changes the originals.³ Next, I would like to suggest that Melville’s text critically describes degradation of the Revolutionary idea of self-help by investigating the figuration of the Founding Fathers, especially of Franklin.

Israel’s Vacant Repetition

According to Charles Watson, *Israel Potter*, while seeking for “a proper father-son relationship,” cannot achieve an ideal encounter between them (563). The novel is based on the conflict between father and son. In the novel, the father “command[s] the allegiance and service of the son and yet finally to abandon him to an unhappy life,” while the son is suspended in “a state of uneasy tension between submission and rebellion” (Watson 563). Even after his departure from his oppressive father, Israel repeatedly meets the figurative fathers of American history, including Franklin, John Jones, and Allen. Among them, his meeting with Franklin is important. When comparing Melville’s text with Trumble’s original, we can see that Melville’s

³ For Melville’s modification of the original works, see “Historical Note” of *Israel Potter* 184-205.

adaptation reflects his satire on the representative Founding Father. In the original, the protagonist works as a secret courier to deliver a letter to Franklin in Paris and has an interview with him. For Israel, it was “a pleasing” encounter (50). “[I]n the most agreeable and instructive manner,” Franklin carefully listens to “the tale of [Israel’s] sufferings with much apparent interest” (50-51). Israel laments not being acknowledged and remunerated as a soldier by his native country. Yet, his interview with the “great and good” Franklin makes him see his own selfishness (51). America is still in the process of achieving the “grand object” to “firmly establish their independence . . . from England”; his “fellow soldiers” are courageously fighting for “the cause of their country,” even though they are not paid (51). Being sure that other soldiers’ “hardships and deprivations” could not “have been half so great as mine,” Israel considers that he “should not have petitioned my country in vain,” and at last decides to stop regretting his situation (51).

Melville’s depictions of Franklin are clearly different from Trumbull’s original. As in the original, Melville’s protagonist also meets Franklin with “the kindest and most familiar manner” as a secret courier (41). For instance, when Israel wishes to see the sites of Paris, Franklin dissuades Israel with his wisdom: “where a poor man dines out at his own charge, it is bad policy” (43). Getting grounded in his room, Israel finds solace in a French chambermaid with “exceeding grace, and trim, bewitching figure” (52). But, again, saying “Arsenic is sweeter than sugar,” Franklin suggests that she could be a prostitute and decides to waive her visits without asking (53). Instead, he recommends the young protagonist to study “sense” with his *Poor Richard’s Almanac* (41). Complaining that “[e]very time he comes in he robs me,” Israel finds himself “a prisoner” of Franklin and his words (53). The protagonist finally notices the oppressiveness of Franklin’s wisdom: Franklin “patriarchically” makes Israel

disciplined with “a paternal detailed lesson,” or what he calls “sense” (41). For Israel, Franklin is “one of those old gentlemen who say a vast deal of, but hint a world more,” and he indignantly states that Franklin “is sly, sly, sly” (54). Some scholars have read that the “sly” characterization of Franklin assumes that Franklinian virtues of industry, tolerance, and thrift formed the base of capitalistic American society.⁴

What I would like to stress here is that Melville’s text criticizes Franklin by actually citing the well-known passage from *Poor Richard’s Almanac*:

“So what signifies wishing and hoping for better times? We may make these times better, if we bestir ourselves. Industry need not wish, and he that lives upon hope will die fasting, as Poor Richard says. There are no gains, without pains. Then help hands, for I have no lands, as Poor Richard says.” Oh confound all this wisdom! It’s a sort of insulting to talk wisdom to a man like me. It’s wisdom that’s cheap, and it’s fortune that’s dear. That ain’t in Poor Richard; but it ought to be,” concluded Israel, suddenly slamming down the pamphlet. . . . Somehow, the old gentleman has an amazing sly look—a sort of mild slyness—about him, seems to me. His wisdom seems a sort of sly, too. But all in honor, though. I rather think he’s one of those old gentlemen who say a vast deal of sense, but hint a world more. Depend upon it, he’s sly, sly, sly. Ah, what’s this Poor Richard says: “God helps those that help themselves.” Let’s consider that. . . . I’ll just mark that saw, and leave the pamphlet open to refer to again.—Ah!” (53; italics original)

Israel cites Franklin’s idea of self-help from “The Way to Wealth,” which was collected in the 1758 edition of *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. Israel refutes it from the

⁴ See Adler 81.

perspective of his own miserable experiences. As I have argued, it is Israel himself who was the ideal man of self-help when he was in his native land; he has left his home and survived in the harsh wilderness with his efforts and industry. Still, his dramatic fall from a heroic soldier of Bunker Hill to an impoverished exile proves that Franklin's practical wisdom of self-help does not necessarily bear fruit. For Israel, Franklin's words become more "hollow clichés than meaningful forms of self-improvement" since "they provide him with little actual material reward" (Gale 454).

Throughout Melville's writings, such vacant repetitions serve as the privileged means to demystify the Founding Fathers and their ideals. For example, *Mardi* quotes from the Declaration of Independence and implies the dark side of American democracy: "In-this-re-publi-can-land-all-men-are-born-free-and-equal. . . . Except-the-tribe-of-Hamo [African Americans]" (512-13). In addition, as I have already pointed out in chapter 1, *Pierre* uncovers what Bercovitch calls the post-Revolutionary generation's "anxiety of succession" (256) in the protagonist's naïve imitation of the Revolutionary sire. On the Independence Day, young Pierre flaunts the vast estate of his family, carrying his grandfather's baton as the "ceremonial cane" (12). Pierre's superficial repetitions of his grandfather's deeds imply that the Revolutionary ideas gradually become emasculated. These vacant repetitions in Melville's texts critically historicize contradictions of the U.S.: although seeking for liberty and freedom, America had kept the hierarchical relationship since its foundation.

Vacant repetitions of the Revolutionary sires' deeds and words are also seen in *Israel Potter*. Another Founding Father, John Paul Jones, appears as a sincere heir of Franklin's wisdom. When Jones shows that he knows Franklin's proverb about

self-help in the first meeting with Israel, he praises him as “the wise man all over” and puts the pamphlet “around [his] neck for a charm” (61). Jones’s worship for Franklin lets him rename his battleship as the *Bonhomme Richard*. In Jones’s renaming of his battleship, Kurt Muller examines “a symbolic connection” between Jones’s “savagery” and Franklin’s “more subtle inhumanity of the self-help philosophy,” concluding that *Israel Potter* “identifies the very spirit which engendered the Revolution as the true source of corruption” (263, 236). Indeed, Jones, expressing his earnest worship for Franklin, comes to have the national hate for the enemy under the cause of “American freedom” (92). He wants to “kidnap[] a British King” as hostage and treat him like “any slave up at auction in Charleston” (93). For Melville, the first naval battle between the *Serapis* and the *Bonhomme Richard*, which advanced the cause of the U.S. independence, is “not as an inaugural moment of national honor but rather as an emblem of the savagery” (159). His text uncovers Jones’s savage nature as the fundamental spirit of his nation: “intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart, America is, or may yet be, the Paul Jones of nations” (120). Significantly enough, Jones’s savagery is handed down to the protagonist. Israel, acknowledged as “my confidential man” by Jones, commits brutal killing of the British enemies: he kills “[m]ore than twenty men” and wounds “nearly forty” with a grenade (92, 127). Melville’s text reflects the generational anxiety of Young Americans by suggesting that the young protagonist might inherit oppressive and violent savagery of his fathers.⁵

In his argument of Israel’s critical citation of Franklin’s proverb, Kevin J.

⁵ Alexander Keyssar also finds the U.S. imperialist discourse in Jones’s repetition of Franklin’s words: “In Franklin’s terms, Captain Paul and the *Richard* are vindicated, as are any holy crusaders for whom success sanctions both motive and means. With this type of thinking, . . . the Mexican War and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny are also justified” (31).

Hayes suggests that “Franklin’s text renders the Bible powerless” and that “Potter’s experience, in turn, questions the validity of Franklin’s proverbial text.” (33). Hayes concludes that “[d]erived of both Scripture and proverbs, Potter is left with no text to guide his behavior” (33). Yet, I think, Israel’s repetition of Franklin’s wisdom should be evaluated in another way because of his ambiguous attitude toward Franklin. Just after criticizing Franklin’s sly nature, Israel wants to bring back home his plan for yoking oxen. He is “very much struck with [Franklin’s] improvement” and thinks that “he would immediately introduce it among the farmers” (54). The protagonist’s ambivalent feelings toward Franklin enable readers to guess that Israel, noticing the danger of naïve worship for the Revolutionary sires, makes attempts to critically inherit their ideals and thoughts. In the last section, I would like to examine Israel’s transatlantic wandering as a project to creatively reconstruct Franklin’s philosophy of self-help to show alternate “Americanism,” or the American individuality that is free from the national hate for the enemy.

Founding a New Monument of “Americanism”

Having long wandered in the foreign country, the protagonist neither receives his salary as a war soldier nor meets his father again. William Dillingham maintains that Israel’s journey results in “emptiness and death” because of his misinterpretation of Franklin’s philosophy (249). According to Dillingham, Israel misunderstands Franklin’s philosophy that achievements are carried out only through self-retrospection. Being distressed by his adverse destiny, Israel “goes outward and away from self-understanding” (249). However, Israel’s life should not be considered only tragic and pessimistic. In fact, Israel does not perish in some hellish town like Pierre and Bartleby. Rather, he survives through abject poverty and marries a wife

with whom he has eleven children. Even after losing his wife and ten of his children, Israel extricates himself from London and finally returns to his native land with his son. In *Melville's City* (1996), Wyn Kelley interestingly suggests Israel can survive in the enemy country due to his passivity. His virtue of "humility" leads him to pursue less "glory for himself" than "the liberty to gain an honest living": "Vagrant but sinless, destitute but happy, propertyless but resourceful, Potter achieves his greatest triumph in becoming anonymous" (232, 226). With his passivity, Israel becomes "a democratic American hero [of] a common man" (226). Building on these opposing views of Israel's passive life, I argue that Israel's survival as an anonymous exile promotes critical reconstruction of Franklin's philosophy of self-help. Throughout his passive life, Israel not only reveals problems of "Americanism," but also demonstrates an alternate ideal of an individual.

As in *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and "Bartleby," Melville examines the power of nothingness in *Israel Potter*. His text, in fact, shows the ambiguous possibility of Israel's passive life. As scholars have already pointed out, Israel is a passive person without active opposition and self-assertion: he protests his oppressive father by fleeing from him, and he frequently changes his clothes to survive in the enemy country.⁶ Melville's idea of nothingness is most impressively represented in the protagonist's philosophy of "vanity and clay" (157). The typological chapter, "Israel in Egypt," narrates how Israel becomes a brickmaker in a suburb of London. He contemplates the "enigmatic fate" of his patriotism: his "love of country made a hater of her foes" (157). Although fighting "to kill and destroy" the enemy, now Israel is "serving that very people as a slave" and "better succeeding in making their bricks

⁶ On various arguments about passivity in *Israel Potter*, see Rosenberg, "Israel Potter: Melville's Anti-History," 179-81; Dillingham 295-96; Watson 564-65.

than firing their ships” (157). Due to his love for his nation, Israel ironically becomes a “bondsmen in the Egypt [London],” who helps “to extend the walls of the Thebes of the oppressor” (157). Making bricks, Israel bewails his misfortune: “‘What signifies who we be, or where we are, or what we do?’ Slap-dash! ‘Kings as clowns are codgers—who ain’t a nobody?’ Splash! ‘All is vanity and clay’” (157). According to Paul Giles, Israel’s enslavement as an anonymous laborer not only entangles “his personal identity,” but also corrodes “the very notion of a sovereign state” (239). With a resonance of Ishmael’s crying of “Who ain’t a slave?” (*Moby-Dick* 21), Israel’s philosophy of “vanity and clay” displays Melville’s lament for the transatlantic connection between the Old and New World, industrial and racial slavery (Giles 241).

However, we cannot overlook the positive and creative connotation in Israel’s philosophy. Certainly, Israel’s brickmaking implies emptiness of his life as a slave-like laborer: like “some grave digger, or church-yard man, tucking away dead little innocents in their coffins,” Israel works as if “cunningly disinterring them again to resurrectionists stationed” (155). Melville’s narrator, however, hints at the creative possibility of Israel’s philosophy with biblical references. According to the Scriptures, the narrator says, “men and bricks were equally of clay,” and “brick is no bad name for any son of Adam; Eden was a brick-yard” (155). The narrator interestingly compares brick-made buildings such as “the great wall of China” with human society (156). Human beings, like bricks, get the meanings of life from the whole, not as an individual: “Man attains not to the nobility of a brick, unless taken in the aggregate” (156). Here, *Israel Potter* shows a close affinity with *Pierre*. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, Pierre evaluates nothingness as a foundation on which to create ethical values such as “Virtue and Vice” and wishes to become nothingness itself (274). Similarly, Israel’s philosophy of nothingness, or “vanity and clay,” shows some

creativity: an individual gains his or her value by abandoning individuality and being passively “built into communities just like bricks into a wall” (157).

In the last chapter, “Requiescat in Pace,” Israel’s philosophy of “vanity and clay” is figuratively incarnated. After more than forty years of exile, he finally returns to his home and finds that the site of his house has become “a little heap of ruinous burnt masonry” (169). He remembers the bygone days when he and his parents gathered around the fireplace: “my father would sit, and here, my mother, and here I, little infant, would totter between, even as now, once again, on the very same spot, but in the unroofed air, I do” (169). Saying “the ends meet,” Israel implicates that his life, beginning with the conflict with his father, ends with their imaginative reunion (169). It is important that Israel’s returning to his home completes the figuration of Israel as a part of his stony home. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is characterized with the motif of stone: Israel notices the analogy between human beings and bricks; his mind that stiffens in the midst of his sufferings is likened to “the hardest stones” (163). Israel’s “masonry” has “the immense chimney, of light gray stone,” and its fences and walls consist of huge “blocks,” with which “the very Titans seemed to have at work” (4). Israel’s identity as stone and the stony structure of his home appears to the readers that, at the moment when Israel goes back to his home, he as a stone becomes a part of his home. In this sense, it can be said, while starting with the dedication to the Bunker Hill Monument, whose surface looks like complication of bricks and stones, *Israel Potter* ends with the figuration of founding a new monument.

John Hay sees the process of monumentalization in *Israel Potter*, arguing that it is “neither a jingoistic celebration of national progress nor a cynical complaint about America’s failure to achieve its ideals” (220). Stressing the point that Israel asks a farmer to plow away through the hearthstone of his home, Hay argues that Melville’s

text suggests that “the soil, not the stone, will bring forth fruit for the future ages” (220). However, instead of constructing and insightful interpretation, Hay’s argument digresses from the theme of “Americanism” that Melville’s has primarily dealt with. Hay reduces the futurity of the novel’s ending to Melville’s authorial change from a writer to a poet. Yet, the complex figuration of Israel’s stony home enables us to guess that *Israel Potter*, until the very end, examines the futurity of “Americanism” in the protagonist’s passive life. To be sure, Israel’s life seems to be tragic and pessimistic: he cannot accept his pension because of “certain caprices of law”; his autobiography was once published, but “long ago it faded out of print—himself out of being—his name out of memory”; and he dies in oblivion the very day when “the oldest oak on his native hills was blown down” (169). Oaks in the novel symbolize Israel and his life because they keep “the vital nerve of the tap-root alive” even when “wantonly maimed by the passing woodman” (165). Melville’s text, culminating with the portrayal of the fallen oak, apparently leaves us with nothing after Israel’s death.

Nonetheless, another botanical motif of mosses indicates that Melville’s text keeps futurity in the denouncement. As seen in “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” these plants play a special role in Melville’s writings. His essay compares Hawthorne with the “most excellent Man of Mosses” or the “Mossy Man,” and his works to “these Mosses” (240, 241, 250). Feeling “the soft ravishments of the man [Hawthorne] spun me round in a web of dreams,” Melville’s narrator compares his experience of receiving inspiration from the “Mossy Man” to being seeded: Hawthorne “has dropped germinous seeds into my soul” (250). Properly speaking, mosses do not have seeds. However, mosses with seeds, Melville imagines, would be flowering to express his growth as an author. Thus, in *Israel Potter*, the protagonist sees “thin, clinging, round prohibitory mosses” gather around “[t]he jams of fire-place” of his home (169).

For Israel, the state of being mossed does not merely mean “oblivious decay” (168). Rather, some messages appear to be implied by Israel’s neglected mossy home. Israel indeed finds “forever arrested intentions” on “a strange, mouldy pile” of woods near his home; his home, composed of “bemossed” stones, is compared to “executor’s wafers” (169). According to the *OED*, an “executor” means a person who carry out “a law, vengeance, etc.,” or “a purpose, design, command, work, etc” (“Executor.” def. 1). Israel’s mossy home, which serves as “executor’s wafers,” leaves some messages for the future. Then, what are these messages that Israel’s mossy home delivers? What are “forever arrested intentions” of his neglected home? Again, the circular structure of *Israel Potter* is helpful in answering these questions. While coming to an end with his neglected mossy home, Israel’s biography opens with the dedication to the Bunker Hill Monument, which flowers “ever-new mosses” over the dead soldiers (v). In this sense, “executor’s wafers” or “forever arrested intentions” of Israel’s mossy home could well be connected to the theme of the novel, “Americanism.”

Melville’s text, I would like to emphasize, does not merely criticize “Americanism,” or the American individuality. Rather, it makes an attempt to show a resurrection of it in Israel’s passive life. It is Israel’s son who leads the readers to imagine in his father’s passive life the reconstruction of “Americanism,” or American individuality, which had been formed with Franklin’s philosophy of self-help. The narrator interestingly calls Israel’s son “Benjamin” (166). Thus, the text makes a biblical allusion in the name of “Benjamin,” who was the only child in Book of Genesis who had survived among Israel’s eleven children. According to Michiko Shimokobe, the scene where Israel imaginatively meets his father suggests that Israel “returns to the origin of ‘Father’ by putting himself in the continuity of his father, himself, and his son” (50). Given Simokobe’s suggestion, we can figure out the

succession of “Americanism” in the continuity from Benjamin (the Founding Father) through Israel to “Benjamin” (Israel’s son). Moreover, when Israel first sees Franklin, the Founding Father, in Paris, his chamber is “buzzed with flies” (39). This implies that Franklin’s wisdom of self-help has been emasculated, or has figuratively become rotten and decayed. Yet, in the continuity between Benjamin and “Benjamin,” Melville’s text predicts resurrection of the Revolutionary ideal through Israel’s passive but critical life.

Scholars have stressed the differences between Franklin and Israel. Franklin was good at flexibly changing his identity depending on the situation. During the American Revolution, for instance, Franklin pretended to be “a country bumpkin in a raccoon skin cap” and articulated the image of Americans as “an enlightened savage figure” to ask France to support America (Maloney 145). His *Autobiography* (1777-1790) also shows that he was aware about identity as constructed through performance. Franklin compares human life to a book, whose “errata” should be edited and corrected with the purpose of his life. “One’s life,” as seen in Franklin’s art of “self-objectification,” “can be repeated in the form of a book because life is already understood to have some of the features of books” (Warner 75). As his episodes and writings demonstrated, Franklin assumed that a self should be recomposed according to the context. By contrast, Israel’s passive life represents his “disappearing self” without the ability “to manage and sustain a self” and his frequent self-fashioning probes “a set of costumes with no identity within” (Matterson 151).

By tracing the story of *Israel Potter* in detail, we can see that Israel inherits Franklin’s philosophy throughout his exile. In spite of his harsh criticism of Franklin’s slyness and his philosophy of self-help, Israel admires the Founding Father. In addition to his praise of Franklin’s agricultural knowledge, Israel’s ambiguous

attitudes are also reflected in his mixture of admiration and criticism of Franklin. As noted earlier, Israel expresses his anger for Franklin's philosophy by actually citing from "The Way to Wealth." However, Israel's criticism significantly prompts him to create his own proverb by imitating Franklin's plain style: "It's wisdom that's cheap, and it's fortune that's dear. That ain't in Poor Richard; but it ought to be" (53). Israel does not completely reject Franklin's words. Rather, his despair over Franklin's wisdom lets him remake it for expressing his own thought.

More importantly, Israel's philosophy of "vanity and clay" is established with a critical reconstruction of Franklin's idea of self-help. After his engagement in the sea battle with the *Serapis*, Israel encounters Ethan Allen, another Founding Father of Vermont. This episode of Israel's encounter with the hero of Ticonderoga was taken from Allen's autobiography, *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity* (1838). In it, Allen narrated his experience of imprisonment and mistreatment by the British soldiers. Yet, Captain Smith of HMS Lark, although being an enemy, kindly treated Allen as "a gentlemen" (84). Smith said to Allen that "this is a mutable world, and one gentleman never knows but that it may be in his power to help another" (84). Allen was so moved by the British officer's kindness that he rejected to connive with his imprisoned friend to carry out a revolt to take over the frigate for their freedom. Melville re-narrates this episode in his novel. Whereas his "essentially Western" spirit embodies "true" "Americanism," the hero of Ticonderoga, like the protagonist, falls from a war hero to a miserable prisoner and discovers "the instability of the world": "ours is an unstable world; so that one gentleman never knows when it may be his turn to be helped of another" (149, 148). By changing the active voice into the passive, Melville's text transforms Allen's realization of "the mutual world" into that of "the instability of the world," where people cannot retain the ability to help another and are

required to abandon stable subjectivity. Stimulated by Allen's realization of "the instability of the world," Israel comes to gain his philosophy of "vanity and clay," which literally subverts Franklin's motto of "God helps those that help themselves" into that of "being helped of another."

Yet again, Israel in Melville's novel departs from Allen as he did from Franklin and Jones. This is because the protagonist witnesses Allen's fierce opposition to the British enemy that mistreats him as a war prisoner. His "exasperating tendency to self-assertion" stems not from his innate character but from his experience of imprisonment: "by assuming the part of a jocular, reckless, and even braggart barbarian, he would better sustain himself against bullying turnkeys than by submissive quietude" (150). Against Allen, Israel rejects repeating Allen's protest against his enemy and chooses to live in passivity, or what Allen calls "submissive quietude." In fact, Israel survives as a laborer in London and suffers from poverty; he cannot get the salary as a war soldier and meet his father again; and he sadly dies in oblivion. However, Israel's life in "submissive quietude" should not be read as a mere pessimistic result of his patriotism. Rather, Israel in his passive life continues to criticize and reconstruct the ideal of U.S. nationalism, which had been fundamentally built on savage hate for the enemy: England.

Hiding his own identity with repeated self-fashioning, Israel critically rethinks the U.S. hate for England. Being a combat experienced soldier of Bunker Hill, Israel becomes suspicious about the monolithic nationality of America through his encounter with George III. Historically speaking, the British king had been the symbol of tyrannical monarchism since American Independence. The latter part of the Declaration of Independence denounced George III as the oppressor of the New World: "The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated

injuries and usurpations” (n. pag.). Israel as “the devoted patriot” also has had the “popular prejudice throughout New England” that the American War “was imputed more to the self-will of the King than to the willingness of parliament or the nation” (5). For Israel, it is George III that caused “all his own sufferings growing out of that war” and “all the calamities of his country” (30).

However, Israel’s encounter with George III drastically changes such a prejudice. While noticing that Israel was an ex-soldier at Bunker Hill, the British king does not expel him and decides to protect him. Israel is deeply moved by the king’s deed and changes his mind: “it could not be the warm heart of the king, but the cold heads of his lords in council, that persuaded him so tyrannically to persecute America” (31-32). When Israel realizes that even the king can be influenced by his surroundings, he comes to have “very favorable views of that monarch” (31). Here, Melville’s changing of Trumbull’s original version is important, since Israel’s “favorable views” of George III enable him to get over the national hate for the enemy country, which was the “popular” feeling of his country. Melville’s narrator describes the sea battle with the *Serapis* as the war driven by “the contrary passion” of love for England. Whereas, “[s]haring the same blood with England,” America fights with England “as if the Siamese Twins, oblivious of their fraternal bond, should rage in unnatural fight” (120, 125). While Jones led the naval battle motivated by the strong hate for the British king, Israel speaks in support of the king: “the king behaved handsomely towards me . . . like a true man” (92).⁷ Thus, Israel in his passivity can escape from the savage hate for the enemy country of England.

⁷ Israel’s departure from Jones is shown in the scene of their failure of sleeping in the same bed. Melville superimposes multi-racial characteristics on Jones, as he did on Queequeg. Yet, unlike Ishmael and Queequeg, Israel’s sleeping with Jones is not achieved. Carolyn Karcher points out that Melville’s text implicates the failure of racial equality (*Shadows over the Promised Land* 106).

Until the very end, Melville's *Israel Potter* continues to warn about the danger of the nationalist discourse. On "a Fourth-of-July," 1826, Israel comes back through Boston to his home of the Housatonic River. Just when coming back to his native land, Israel "narrowly escaped being run over by a patriot triumphal car" (167). The banner of the patriotic car, embroidered with "gilt letters," celebrates the brilliant history of U.S. independence from England: "Bunker-Hill. 1775. Glory to the Heroes that fought" (167). On the adjective "gilt," Melville could well imply his satire on Young Americans, who had superficially defied their fathers' achievements. What is notable is that the place for Israel to take a spiritual rest is "Copp's Hill," "one of the enemy's positions" during the American War (167). Israel sits on "a mound in the grave-yard" and finds "his best repose that day," stating, "I shall get no fitter rest than here by the mounds" (168). This is because Melville's narrator considers Copp's Hill the "true Potter's field" (168). From "one of the enemy's positions," Israel looks out on the Bunker Hill Monument, which at the time in 1826 was just an "incipient monument" and "hard to see" (167). At first, Melville's narrator pledges his fidelity to the Bunker Hill monument as the "[m]ost devoted and obsequious" editor. Yet, he finally refuses to allow Israel's life and history to become a part of the nationalistic monument.

This chapter has examined the power of nothingness in *Israel Potter*. Melville's "Revolutionary narrative of the beggar" ambiguously traces the history of U.S. independence through retelling of the Founding Fathers such as Franklin, Jones, and Allen. In this, Melville uncovers the oppressive and savage nature of "Americanism," or the American individuality. His protagonist witnesses Franklin's wisdom of self-help manipulated into Jones's hate against the enemy of England as a common feeling since the founding of the nation. Yet, Israel's long wandering as an anonymous exile in England helps him to escape from such a national antipathy. His

philosophy of nothingness, or “vanity and clay,” leads him to critically reconstruct the epitome of self-reliant individuality. At the end of his passive life, Israel figuratively founds a new monument other than the Bunker Hill to represent an alternate individuality. Israel in “submissive quietude” rejects succession of the national hate and hopes to recover fraternity between the U.S. and England. And, Israel’s son, called “Benjamin,” takes over his father’s task to critically inherit the Franklinian ideal of self-help and to recover the fraternal bond with the national foe in the future.

Chapter 3

The Revolutionary Ideals Manipulated:

Re-figuration of the Founding Fathers in *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*

Keeping silence for a decade after the publication of *The Confidence-Man* (1857), Melville drastically changed his career from a novelist to a poet to publish *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) from Harper & Brothers Company, New York. Based on earlier volumes of Frank Moore's *The Rebellion Record* (1861-68), Melville's *Battle-Pieces* treats the American Civil War in 72 poems, notes, and a prose supplement. The poems are grouped into two sections: (1) 52 poems, beginning with "The Portent (1859)" and ending with "America," center on the battles of the war and its personalities; (2) 19 poems, subtitled as "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial," consist of elegies, epitaphs, and requiems. *Battle-Pieces* chronologically depicts events and personalities of the Civil War. It urges the Northerners to launch reconstruction of the defeated South with benevolent Christianity, not with hatred and hostility; it also gives a warning that the North's victory was brought about only with material superiority and an immense numbers of soldier, and that does not prove that the Northern soldiers had more "skill and bravery" (184) than the Southern soldiers did.

Scholars of the earlier period of Melville studies underestimated his shift from a prosaist to a bard in his later years. In fact, Raymond Weaver's pioneering study, *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic*, sees Melville's three decades of writing poems as "the long quietus," in which "he turned his back upon the world, and in his recoil from life absorbed himself in metaphysics" (350). Melville studies in the last two decades, however, have paid more attention to his collections of poetry from

various standpoints, largely from politics to poetics. As regards *Battle-Pieces*, scholars have studied its political and cultural dimensions: nationalism and transnationalism; slavery and the issue of reconciliation; the chronological order of the poems; contemporary arts; and the tradition of English poetry. Most of these previous studies have evaluated Melville's war poetry by focusing mainly on the contemporary matters around the Civil War. Reading Melville's war poetry from contemporary perspectives has helped us to investigate the connection between his earlier prose and later poems.

Revolving around these studies, this chapter will read Melville's *Battle-Pieces* in the context of the Revolutionary discourses around the Civil War period. As James M. Mcpherson argues, the war had been assessed as "the Second American Revolution," in which both of the Union and the Confederate states appropriated the Revolutionary ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to justify their policies and causes. Melville's war poetry can be seen as a reaction to such controversies. As a Northerner, Melville's war poetry criticizes the Southern states' manipulation of the Revolutionary ideals: for him, "the most sensitive love of liberty was entrapped" to continue slavery (182). Yet, Melville's poetry does not simply glorify the Union's victory. The power of nothingness in *Battle-Pieces*, seen in the ventriloquism of the Southern soldiers and officers, criticizes the partisan patriotism of the North that would engender hate toward other states and help to construct the North-centered hierarchy. Melville's poetry, which superimposes the image of the defeated Confederate commander Robert E. Lee over that of George Washington, sings the lost voices of the dead soldiers and the ruined South. Along with one major sourcebook, Frank Moore's *The Rebellion Record* (1861-68), I would like to suggest that Melville's lifelong project to embody democratic equality in his

works consistently continued from his earlier novels to late poems. Melville tries to evaluate the Civil War as a “revolution” (182), not as a mere rebellion, which makes a fundamental counterstatement against the North-centered hierarchy after the war.¹

Melville’s Southern Masquerade

In *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849), Melville integrates the issue of U.S. slavery in his transatlantic narrative. When seeing a mulatto crew member walking “arm in arm with a good-looking English woman,” the young protagonist says with surprise: “in New York such a couple would have been mobbed in three minutes” (202). *Redburn* does not merely portray black slavery as an issue that is either good or bad, but importantly, it shows a more complex problem: the relationship between the victor (master) and the loser (slave). There, Redburn sees the monument dedicated to Lord Nelson, who won the brilliant victory at Battle of Trafalgar. The bronze statue describes Nelson’s death “in the arms of Victory” (155). While “[v]ictory is dropping a wreath” on him, the “hideous skeleton” of death “is insinuating his bony hand under the hero’s robe” (155). Although these bronze statues are “emblematic of Nelson’s principal victory,” Redburn pays more attention to “four marked figures in chain,” which are bound to “seat[] in various attitudes of humanization and despair” (155). The young American sailor superimposes the “woe-begone figures” with “four American slaves in the market-place” (155). According to Eliza Tamarkin, “Redburn’s sympathies remain curiously suspended between critique and veneration” of heroes (189). A hero’s brilliant victory will bring praise to his splendid virtues for

¹ My study is inspired by Elizabeth Renker’s argument of *Battle-Pieces*. Renker criticizes the conventional “source studies,” in which scholars have considered “the sources are inferior” to the literary works. They regard Melville as “the great author,” who “pulls ‘sources’ into his rarefied field of artistic production” (“Melville and the World of Civil War Poetry” 137). But, in his war poetry, as Renker shows, Melville performs “active dialogue[s] with his contemporary world” through “his differences, his objections, his talking back” (140).

future generations, becoming the foundation for a human community such as a nation. But, at the same time, it marks the defeated and captivated as well as the victor, bringing about the hierarchical relationship between the master and slaves.

Melville's ambiguous hero worship is later crystalized in his depiction of the Founding Fathers. As I have already mentioned, *Mardi* reveals a fundamental contradiction of the Jeffersonian ideal: "In-this-re-publi-can-land-all-men-are-born-free-and-equal" (512). The narrator in *Pierre* also unveils the anti-democratic nature of the Revolutionary sire: "[T]he mildest hearted, and most blue-eyed gentleman" was "the kindest of masters to his slaves" (30). Yet, Melville's hero worship cannot be interpreted as his mere criticism of democratic equality. Rather, it is inextricably connected to his longing for the American ideal. As seen in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville sought for the way to realize the "unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity in all things," or to "carry republican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life" (248, 241).

Here, I would like to emphasize the fact that the patriotic narrator in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" designs himself as a Southerner. In effect, Melville depicts the narrator as "a Virginian Spending July in Vermont" (239). Several scholars have argued the reasons for such a Southern masquerade. For example, Melville's southern masquerade is a strategy for him to criticize the Northern writers and their literary world from an outsider's viewpoint. The narrator mocks both Boston and New York critics because of their misunderstanding of Hawthorne. Boston critics merely read the surface of Hawthorne's work, regarding him as "a pleasant writer, with a pleasant style" whose works are far "from any deep and weighty thing" (242). Melville's Virginian narrator also blames the Northern writers for their "literary flunkyism" in respect to foreign literature. The narrator considers Washington Irving, one

representative figure in the New York literary circle, to be “a very popular and amiable writer” and “good, and self-reliant in many things,” but he “perhaps owes his chief reputation to the self-acknowledged imitation of a foreign model” (242).

Nonetheless, Melville’s Southern masquerade does not completely displace the Northern perspectives; rather, his enthusiastic praise of Hawthorne ironically leads him to reinforce North-centered hierarchy. Melville’s masquerade as a Southerner is linked with the main theme of his essay: founding the national literature of America. Melville’s Virginian narrator celebrates the birth of national, not regional, literature: “So all that day, half-buried in the new clover, I watched this Hawthorne’s ‘Assyrian dawn, and paphian sunset and moonrise, from the summit of our Eastern Hill’” (241). The Southern narrator feels cultivated by Hawthorne’s splendid literary talent:

I feel that this Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul. He expands and deepens down, the more I contemplate him; and further, and further, shoots his strong New England roots into the hot soil of my Southern soul. (250)

We can guess the importance of Melville’s Southern masquerade, given that the essay was written on the eve of the Compromise of 1850, which radically promoted the division between the North and South, moving them toward the Civil War. Readers of the essay, issued in Evert Duyckinck’s *The Literary World*, could foresee the establishment of the national literature through the civilization and enlightenment of Melville’s narrator (the South) with Hawthorne’s light of democracy (the North).

However, in *Battle-Pieces*, published after the bloodshed of war between the North and South, Melville’s North-centered thought is replaced by an ambiguous view of the combatants. One notable example can be seen in “Supplement,” located at the end of the work. Certainly, Melville considers the cause of the South as evil and

wrong. The war taught the South “to feel that Secession, like Slavery, is against Destiny” and that “both now [are] buried in one grave” (182). However, Melville convinces the readers that the North and the South are in the same boat: “her [the South’s] fate is linked with ours; and . . . together we comprise the Nation” (182). Melville’s ambiguous view of the Civil War becomes a warning to the North about its attitude as victor. Unlike “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” he requires the “patriotic” Northern writers to “revolt from acting on paper a part any way akin to that of the live dog to the dead lion” (184). In their publications, “the emotion of victory” is confused with “an exultation as ungenerous as unwise” (183). The publications, motivated by hatred for and hostility toward the South, help stigmatize it with “[b]arbarities,” which “the Southern people collectively can hardly be held responsible” (183). If such publications are to be issued, the posterity of the North, which “sympathizes with our conviction, but removed from our passions,” may inherit only hate for the South (183). As the result, “it [is] probable that the grandchildren of General Grant will pursue with rancor, or slur neglect, the memory of the Stonewall Jackson,” the distinguished commander of the South (184). Such Northern patriotism could “pervert the national victory into oppression for the vanquished” (186).

On the contrary, Melville suggests that “[p]atriotism is not baseness, neither is it inhumanity” (183). He urges the readers to become “thoughtful patriots,” who evaluate the Civil War and the Southerners with “the truth”: the Southerners are “a people for years politically misled by designing men” who “sought to perpetuate the curse of slavery,” whereas they are not “the authors” of slavery and just its “fated inheritors” (184). Melville’s speaker employs a non-sectionalist attitude to establish national unity between the North and South. The Southerners have “a like origin” with the Northerners, sharing “essentially in whatever worthy qualities we may

possess” (184). Such a non-partisan view leads Melville to relativize the victory of the North. It was achieved merely with its “superior resources and crushing members,” not “skill and bravery” (184). And, the North has delivered “unfraternal denunciations” for years, and stigmatized the South “under the name of Rebellion”; yet such impeachments are “reciprocal” (184).

According to Carolyn Karcher, in *Battle-Pieces*, Melville seeks the middle ground between President Andrew Johnson’s benevolent plan of “restoration” and harsh “Reconstruction” by the Congress. With Presidential restoration, the North helped the South to change its system from slavery to freedom but did not permit blacks to have access to politics. In contrast, the Radical Republicans pursued a complete eradication of slavery and secessionism without compromise. Naming Melville’s attitude “Re-establishment,” Karcher considers his war poetry as a literary practice, which is equivalent to Presidential restoration (“The Moderate and the Radical” 225-26). To be sure, Melville’s “Supplement” repeatedly suggests the importance of establishing unity between the North and South. Although admitting that “[s]ome revisionary legislation and adaptive is indispensable,” Melville’s speaker insists that post-war reconstruction policies be made “not unallied with entire magnanimity” (185). The pursuit of national unity after the war is as significant as resolving the problem of slavery: “Let us be Christians toward our fellow-whites, as well as philanthropists toward the blacks, our fellow-men” (186).

Here, by finding an echo of the unlimited spirit of democracy in his essay, we can view *Battle-Pieces* as a literary practice to establish his ideal of democracy, which he had pursued from his earlier career. In other words, Melville’s war poetry examines the way to avoid the North-centered hierarchy after the war by reevaluating convictions and heroic figures not only of the North but also of the South. The Civil

War makes him rethink democratic equality: “[t]he years of the war tried our devotion to the Union; the time of peace may test the sincerity of our faith in democracy” (187). As the preface of *Battle-Pieces* notes, a large number of the poems were written after the fall of Richmond on April 3, 1865. Therefore, Melville assumes that now is in a radical transition from “the years of war” to “the time of peace.”

As the narrator of “Hawthorne and His Mosses” preaches “unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity in all things,” Melville’s war poetry ends up foretelling the advent of the “the bards of Progress and Humanity” after the war (187). For Melville, the Civil War serves to figure out the “unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity” in both the North and South. By reexamining the bloody war from various aspects, Melville resists evaluating it as the cruel time when the nation was divided with the oppressive hierarchy between the victor (the North) and the defeated (the South), which the Northern post-war reconstruction policies would create with their savage patriotism.

Rather, the war displays “patriotic passion” “in a utilitarian time and country,” leading the Northerners to rethink the “other qualities” of the South and find heroic figures with “courage and fortitude matchless” (183). Melville’s hero worship represents a strange expression of the Civil War. Although criticizing the South for planning to perpetuate slavery, he does not see the war as a rebellion, unlike the other Northerners. Melville calls the war a “revolution” (182), which could annihilate the master-slave relationship and establish democratic society. As discussed above, Melville’s earlier texts, written in the age of the Young America Movement, longed for re-establishing the great achievement of the Founding fathers. Next, we will look at *Battle-Pieces* within the Civil War discourse of the Revolutionary ideals, demonstrating that, after nearly two decades passed and Melville seemed to depart

from the nationalistic movement, he continued his project to embody the “unshackled, democratic spirit of Christianity in all things.”

A War on the Revolutionary Ideals

Scholars have examined *Battle-Pieces* in the cultural and political contexts of the Civil War, which resulted in the division between the North and the South. Deak Nabers demonstrates that Melville’s war poetry reflects “legal dilemmas” of the Union between “the positive-law solution to the ‘crime’ of secession” and “the higher-law solution to the problem of slavery” (2). Alice Fahs’s *The Imagined Civil War* (2010) investigates how popular cultural artifacts such as poetry and popular songs during the war reinforced the sectionalist patriotisms between the Union and the Confederacy. But, I would like to pay more attention to the way that such sectionalist discourses were established by manipulation of the Revolutionary ideals. Here, I will look at several documents from Frank Moore’s *The Rebellion Record* (1861-68), the sourcebook of *Battle-Pieces*, to explore another war between the North and South, in which both parties deliberately manipulated Revolutionary ideals, represented in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, to justify their policies and causes.

The Confederate states appropriated the Revolutionary discourses in order to vindicate their secession from the Federal Governments. One example is seen in the “The Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union,” issued about two months after Abraham Lincoln’s election as president on November 6, 1860. While being the first state to ratify the Articles of Confederation on February 5, 1778, South Carolina was also the first to secede from the United States on December 20, 1860. The declaration clarified the cause of secession to be that the non-slaveholding states had become “destructive”

to the South. The northern states behaved as if they had “the right of deciding upon the property of our domestic institutions,” having seen slavery as “sinful” and denied “the rights of property established in fifteen of the States and recognized by the Constitution” (4). In addition, the northern states had “disturb[ed] the peace of and eloin[ed] the property of the citizens of other States” by “encourag[ing] and assist[ing] thousands of our slaves to leave their homes” and “incit[ing] [them] to servile insurrection” through their publications (4).

In it, we can identify echoes of the Revolutionary documents. South Carolina, actually quoting from the Declaration of Independence, superimposed the history of American independence from England on its secession. The foundational document confirmed “the right of a State to govern itself” and of “a people to abolish a Government when it becomes destructive of the ends for which it was instituted” (3). South Carolina also stressed “the law of compact” as the “fundamental principle” of the Constitution: “The parties to whom this constitution was submitted were the several sovereign States; they were to agree or disagree, and when nine of them agreed, the compact was to take effect among those concurring” (3). When the Constitution had been ratified, two states—North Carolina and Rhode Island—did not approve it “until long after it had gone into operation among the other-eleven” (3). During that time, they were considered “separate, sovereign States, independent of any of the provisions of the Constitution” (3).

As did the Declaration of Independence, South Carolina blamed the federal government for becoming “destructive” to the slave-holding states. It referred to the Fourth Article that treats the fugitive slaves: if the person, who is “held to service or labor in one State under its laws,” escapes into another, he or she “shall be delivered up, on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due” (4). However,

the non-slaveholding states had not complied with the Constitution. For instance, New Jersey enacted “laws which render inoperative the remedies provided by her own laws and by the laws of Congress” (4). The courts in New York had also denied “the right of transit for a slave” (4). Thus, these northern states’ disregard of the Constitution allowed South Carolina be “released from her obligation” (4). Finally, Lincoln’s election would impress the North’s hostilities on the Southern states and make the Revolutionary ideals emasculated as a dead letter: “The guarantees of the Constitution will then no longer exist; the equal rights of the States will no longer be lost. The Slaveholding States will no longer have the power of self-government, or self-protection, and the Federal Government will have become their enemy” (4).

Such justification of the South’s secession is also found in the first inaugural address by Jefferson Davis, the first and only President of the Confederate States of America. According to Davis’s address of February 18, 1861, the South’s beginning as a confederacy displayed “the American ideal” (31). As seen in the declaration of South Carolina, Davis also articulated the Revolutionary document. Governments are established with “the consent of the governed” to achieve “justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to our selves and our property,” and the people have the right to “alter and abolish [them] whenever [they] become destructive to ends for which they were established” (Davis 31).

In addition, Davis stressed their industry of agriculture to justify the South’s secession from the United States. The Southerners, “an agricultural people,” had embraced peace and the free trade as “true policies” to export commodities required

in manufacturing countries (31).² Yet, if “passion or lust of dominion should cloud the judgment or inflame the ambition” of the Northern states, the Southerners must prepare for maintaining their countries and the people’s property (31). Saying “the Constitution formed by our fathers in that of these Confederate States,” Davis’s address concluded with a sensational superimposition of their secession with that of the Revolutionary sires:

Reverently let us invoke the God of our fathers to guide and protect us in our efforts to perpetuate the principles which by his blessing they were able to vindicate, establish, and transmit to their posterity; and with a continuance of His favor ever gratefully acknowledged, we may hopefully look forward to success, to peace, to prosperity. (31)

Avoiding the mention of slavery, Davis’s address portrayed the Southerners as the yeoman, who, Thomas Jefferson admired as the foundation of his nation, were free from vices of the corrupting city and embodied the republican virtues.

As well as the Southern states, Lincoln adopted the Revolutionary discourses to express his political attitude. His famous address at Gettysburg on November 11, 1863, heroically sanctified dead Union soldiers, who fought for establishing the democratic “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (n. pag.). Lincoln’s mourning for the dead soldiers could remind the audience of the American Revolution: “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” (n. pag.). Moreover, his first inaugural address, given on March 4, 1861 and collected in Moore’s *The Rebellion Record*, can be read as a

² In *War on Words* (2010), Michael Gilmore points out that “[t]he Empire State [New York], Melville’s birthplace and current residence, enjoyed a remarkably close relationship with the former Confederacy” (175).

response to the South's manipulation of the Revolutionary ideals. Just two months after Davis's address, his inaugural speech carefully tried to avoid the national division by removing the Southerners' fear that "their property and their peace and personal security are to be endangered" (36). Quoting his former speech and the Corwin Amendment, in which "domestic institutions" of each State were to be secured from intervention from the Congress, Lincoln said that he had "no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interference with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists," and that "the property, peace, and security of no section are to be in anywise endangered by the now incoming Administration" (36). He also touched on the issue of the Fourth Article, which stipulated the sending of fugitive slaves back to their states, arguing "[a]ll members of Congress" completely support the law as "unanimous" (37).

At the same time, however, Lincoln's inaugural speech expressed the impossibility of legal secession of the Southern states. It is because the "perpetuity" of the Union "is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments":

[I]f the United States be not a government proper, but an association of States in the nature of a contract merely, can it, as a contract, be peaceably unmade by less than all the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it—break it, so to speak; but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it? (37)

Lincoln took advantage of the law of compact, on which the declaration of South Carolina and Davis's address relied as the basis of their secession. He logically suggested that if one member of the United States tries to withdraw from the Union, it must take consensus from the other ones. Whereas admitting the "revolutionary right

to dismember or overthrow” the existing government, Lincoln counted historical validity of the perpetuity of the Union, which was “formed by the Articles of Association in 1774” (38, 37). For Lincoln, the Articles of Association was more important than the Constitution because of its longevity. The validity of the Union’s perpetuity was confirmed by the fact that it had appeared before the Constitution. In Lincoln’s address, the older age of the Union proves that it is closer and truer to Revolutionary ideals than the Constitution.

Except for Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, all of these texts were included in Melville’s sourcebook, *The Rebellion Record*. “Supplement” in *Battle-Pieces* shows us that Melville was very well aware about such an argument between the Union and the Confederacy. The prose supplement describes such a sectionalist manipulation of the Revolutionary ideals:

It was in subserviency to the slave-interest that Secession was plotted; but it was under the plea, plausibly urged, that certain inestimable rights guaranteed by the Constitution were directly menaced, that the people of the South were cajoled into revolution. Through the arts of the conspirators and the perversity of fortune, the most sensitive love of liberty was entrapped into the support of a war whose implied end was the erecting in our advanced century of an Anglo-American empire based upon the systematic degradation of man. (182)

Melville’s supplement indicates how the partisan discourses re-presented the Revolutionary ideals of the Constitution. Although the spirit of the Constitution is in the “sensitive love of liberty,” the South manipulates it under the guise of liberty to establish “an Anglo-American empire,” which maintains “the systematic degradation of man,” slavery. Next, I will read Melville’s *Battle-Pieces* as a response to the war

on the Revolutionary ideals. More specifically, I would like to focus on his allusions to the Revolutionary sires, arguing that his war poetry aims to relativize the North's victory and avoid the North-centered hierarchy through masquerade as a Southerner.

Ventriloquizing the South

Poems in *Battle-Pieces*, as I first introduced, are grouped into two sections: (1) 52 poems describe the battles of the Civil War and its personalities; (2) 19 poems, subtitled as “Verses Inscriptive and Memorial,” consist of elegies, epitaphs, and requiems. According to the introductory remarks, Melville's war poetry originated in “an impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond,” composed “without reference to collective arrangement” (n. pag.). Nonetheless, scholars have scrutinized the complicated arrangement of Melville's poems. For instance, Maki Sadahiro points out that Melville's battle pieces seem to compose the events of the Civil War in a chronological order, but they actually exclude specific proper nouns. Sadahiro considers that such a strange composition indicates “interrupted history,” which would not narrativize the war, based on the relation of cause and effect (66). Peter J. Bellis also explores the schizophrenic composition of *Battle-Pieces*. Although Melville completes his war poetry with “America” in the first section, he continues in the second one, which widely describes the various locations and motifs of the war. Making comparisons with Walt Whitman's war poetry collection, *Drum-Taps* (1865), Bellis argues that Melville's poetry implicates his ambiguous attitude toward reconciliation between the North and South. The poems adopt “the imperfect, negotiated discourse of partisan politics” in order to find the middle ground between President Andrew Johnson's “restoration” and Congressional “Reconstruction” (“Reconciliation as Sequel and Supplement” 89).

Melville's war poetry maintains the aesthetic value of nothingness.³ *Battle-Pieces*, I think, seems to turn the section of "life" into that of "death": the former part narrates the various acts of the Civil War personalities; the latter is made up of voices of dead soldiers. Equating heroic war personalities with brave poets, Melville considers the Civil War an opportunity to get back lost humanity: "They said that Fame her clarion dropped / Because great deeds were done no more— / That even Duty knew no shining ends, / And Glory—'twas a fallen star! / But battle can heroes and bards restore" (131). Melville curiously counts as a poet the dead as well as the living. "At the Cannon's Mouth (October, 1864)" sanctifies the brave attack of the Union officer, William Barker Cushing, as embodying the Christian virtue of self-sacrifice: "In Cushing's eager deed was shown / A spirit which brave poets own— / That scorn of life which earns life's crown; / Earns, but not always wins; but he— / The star ascended in his nativity" (93). For Melville, the dead soldiers as well as the war heroes are equally seen as hero-bards, who restore lost human passions "in a utilitarian time" (183). In fact, as "The Armies of the Wilderness" indicates, "[n]one can narrate that strife" in the battle-field (76). As if "[a] seal is on it," "the entangled rhyme [of the living] / But hints at the maze of war" (76). Yet, "[a] riddle of death, of which the slain / Sole solvers are" (76). To describe the war as a whole, Melville not only narrates heroic deeds of the living but also makes a desperate attempt to listen to the dead soldiers' voices.

Melville's war poetry with the aesthetics of nothingness hazards criticism of the

³ William C. Spengemann analyzes uniqueness of Melville's poetry in its nothingness. "[N]ineteenth century poetry from Wordsworth and Bryant to Whitman and Y. B. Yeats," according to him, "centered itself on the poet, a speaking subject who asks (or at least does not refuse) to be identified with the author and who poses as the original source and present locus of all sentiments and observations expressed as well as their primary author" (600). By contrast, Melville's poet annihilates himself, "speak[ing] in several, unassimilable voices" (600). He frequently transforms himself into "a dying tar, a jilted woman, a Virginia gentleman, an Englishman of the old order, a utilitarian Yankee" (600).

North to relativize its victory over the South. In the former section of “life,” Melville’s war poetry ambivalently demonstrates the light and dark sides of the Civil War heroes. “The March to the Sea (December, 1864)” indeed uncovers the two-facedness of the famous Union officer, William Tecumseh Sherman, whose military campaign determined the surrender of the South and the end of the war. Melville’s poem stresses the Northern cause to abandon slavery with reference to racial variety in Sherman’s forces: “[t]he slaves by thousands drew, And they marched beside the drumming, / And they joined the armies blue . . . For every man it was free” (95). Sherman’s march predicts the embodiment of freedom throughout the country.

Yet, Melville also deplores the cruelty of the “glorious glad marching” (95):

For behind they [Sherman’s forces] left a wailing,
 A terror and a ban,
 And blazing cinders sailing,
 And houseless householding wan,
 Wide zones of countries paling
 And towns where maniacs ran.
 Was the havoc, retribution?
 But howsoe’er it be,
 They will long remember Sherman
 And his streaming columns free—
 They will long remember Sherman
 Marching to the sea. (96)

Melville’s speaker represents the destructive nature of Sherman’s military campaign from the perspective of the Southerners. Historically speaking, Sherman’s march,

known as the Savannah Campaign, aimed to completely break of the back and spirit of the Confederacy by adopting scorched-earth tactics through Georgia from November 15 to December 21, 1864. Melville's poem brings a grotesque contrast of color, blazing red and pale blue, to illustrate the hellish scenery of the ruined South. There, people lose their homes, and some go mad and roam around. Wondering if Sherman's scorched-earth campaign is "the havoc, [or] retribution," they will remember his march, which is done for freedom, but "left a wailing, / A terror and a ban."⁴

Furthermore, "The Fall of Richmond (April, 1865)" gives a critical look at the Union's glorious victory: "God is in Heaven, and Grant in the Town, / And Right through might is Law— / God's way adore" (99). As post-war reconstruction policies showed, the North's triumph could enforce the "Right" laws to rebuild the South, which had perpetuated "the systematic degradation of man," slavery (182). Yet, as Melville's poem ironically implies, they are established only with "might," the military power of the North. If recalling that the poem was first published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in February 1866, we can regard the poem as a caution to the Northern readers against the jingoistic mood in the North after ending the war.

In addition to his ambiguous perspective on the Union officers, the superimposition of the Revolutionary hero on the Confederate commander enables us to understand the reason Melville evaluates the Civil War as a "revolution" (182), not as a mere rebellion. Throughout *Battle-Pieces*, Melville sometimes refers to the Revolutionary sires. One example is seen in "The Armies of the Wilderness

⁴ In *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Long Civil War* (2015), Cody Marrs examines the historical analogy to "the Roman Civil War" in "The Frenzy in the Wake." There, Sherman's scorched earth campaign becomes "a more brutal repetition of Julius Caesar's subjugation of Pompey" (98). Carrs argues that Melville's war poetry shows "history is tilted toward regress rather than progress" (97).

(1863-64),” which Melville wrote based on his experience of visiting the Union’s camp in the woods of Virginia. The poet laments the “strife of brothers,” comparing the national conflict to the wilderness of Virginia: “Through the pointed glass our soldiers saw / The base-ball bounding sent; / They could have joined them in their sport / But for the vale’s deep rent” (69). Thus, in the Civil War, the poet implies, the North and the South have forgotten their brotherhood and killed each other as in the story of Cain. The poet does not hope for the defeat of one party: “[i]n this strife of brothers / (God, hear their country call), / However it be, whatever betide, / Let not the just one fall” (69). In this poem, Melville’s text historicizes the Civil War with the view of the Revolutionary Fathers: “*Did the Fathers feel mistrust? / Can no final good be wrought? / Over and over, again and again / Must the fight for the Right be fought?*” (70; italics original). Here, the remark in *Mardi* that “‘Tis right to fight for freedom” (533) enables us to find the implication of the Revolutionary sires, who fought for independence and freedom from England. In the Civil War, the Fathers would see repetition of their fratricidal fight with England in their sons’ fight and doubt the causes of the war. Although the right fight for freedom has been repeatedly fought, the “final good” will not be established if the war lets only “one side fall.” Here, we can see a strong affinity between *Israel Potter* and *Battle-Pieces*: both of Melville’s texts, tracing the Revolutionary history of independence, laments the fraternal conflicts between England and the American colonies, and between the Union and the Confederacy

Such mistrust of the Union’s cause of the Civil War is cleared in “Lee in the Capitol,” which impressively shows the power of nothingness to ventriloquize Robert E. Lee to relativize and criticize the Union’s causes of the war. While appearing before the Reconstruction Committee of Congress and seen with “curious eyes,” Lee

makes a testimony as the defeated Confederate commander (164). Melville places the poem of Lee's testimony in "Verses Inscriptive and Memorial," or the section of "death." Yet, Lee was still alive and supported Johnson's Reconstruction policies at the time when Melville published his war poetry in 1866. In Melville's poem, Lee as the defeated commander recalls his dead soldiers and burned homeland, ambiguously behaving as if he is "the victor and the vanquished" (164). At the end of his testimony, the senators urge him to "speak out" if "[a]ught else remain" (165). Lee's testimony gives a warning against the North as victor through a parable of a Moorish maid:

A story here may be applied:

'In Moorish lands there lived a maid

Brought to confess by vow the creed

Of Christians. Fain would priests persuade

That now she must approve by deed

The faith she kept. "What deed?" she asked.

"Your old sire leave, nor deem it sin,

And come with us." Still more they tasked

The sad one: "If heaven you'd win—

Far from the burning pit withdraw,

Then must you learn to hate your kin,

Yea, side against them—such the law,

For Moor and Christian are at war."

"Then will I never quit my sire,

But here with him through every trial go,

Nor leave him though in flames below—

God help me in his fire!" (167-68)

Lee compares the North to Christian priests and the South to a Moorish maid. During the war between “Moor and Christian,” Christian priests require her to convert to Christianity and to prove her “faith” with deed. In other words, she must “learn to hate [her] kin” and leave them behind. But, she refuses to do it and decides to remain with her sire. Lee’s parable reminds the readers that the North’s postwar policies revolve around hostility toward the South, which implants hatred for sires and kin in the Southerners.

In Melville’s poetry, Lee speaks for the Southern people, who just seek to restore their pastoral life: “The South would fain / Feel peace, have quiet low again— / Replant the trees for homestead-shade” (166). As seen in Davis’s inaugural address, Melville’s Southern masquerade implicates the Jeffersonian worship for the yeoman. Furthermore, Melville’s poem makes an allusion to another Revolutionary sire through Lee. He superimposes the defeated Southern commander over the most representative Revolutionary hero, George Washington. Those “who look at Lee must think of Washington,” and they “in pain must think, and hid the thought, / So deep with grievous meaning it is fraught” (165). According to biographical facts, Lee and Washington did have something in common. Both were born in Virginia: Washington was born in Popes Creek, the Colony of Virginia in 1732; Lee was born in Stratford Hall, Virginia in 1807. Lee married with Mary Anna Randolph Custis, who was a step-great-granddaughter of George Washington. The allusion of Lee to Washington connotes an ironical thought that, if the representative Revolutionary sire had been in the same position as Lee, Washington would also have rebelled against the Federal Government, as he did in the American Revolution. Also, Lee fears that the North would “press” the “partial thoughts” on the South:

I know your partial thoughts do press

Solely on us for war's unhappy stress;
 But weigh—consider—look at all,
 And broad anathema you'll recall.
 The censor's charge I'll not repeat,
 The meddlers kindled the war's white heat—
 Vain intermeddlers and malign,
 Both of the palm and of the pine; . . . (167)

The conflation of Lee-Washington historicizes the Civil War. Melville's poem warns that the North-centered hierarchy would be created through the "partial" laws after the war and that the North would become as oppressive and destructive for the South as England for the American colonies. As "Supplement" shows, Melville somehow admits political intervention of the North into the South to liberate black slaves. Yet, Lee's eloquent speech admonishes the North against pushing its triumph too much and urging "[s]ubmissiveness [to the South] beyond the verge" (167).

This chapter reads *Battle-Pieces* in the trans-bellum context of the war on the Revolutionary ideals. Around the Civil War period, both of the Union and the Confederacy deliberately articulated the Revolutionary documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to justify their policies. Melville's war poetry, as I have seen, can be interpreted as a response to such an argument. Through the ingenious re-figuration of the Founding Fathers, *Battle-Pieces* ambiguously reveals the potential danger of the North's victory, not only the hypocrisy of the cause of the Southern states. Melville's Southern masquerade, reflecting his desire to abandon his identity as a jingoistic Northerner, reminds the Northern readers of the American history of "revolution" and encourages them to relativize their victory and avoid inheriting the partisan hatred in the future.

Chapter 4

The Curious Gaze on Asian Junks:

Melville's Art of Exhibition

On first seeing the *Pequod*, Ishmael's curious gaze stresses the antiqueness and strangeness of the whaling vessel by mentioning foreign ships of "square-toed luggers[,] mountainous Japanese junks [, and] butter-box galliots" (69). Ishmael's list of native vessels is important because it stresses the racial diversity on the *Pequod*. In chapter 50 "Ahab's Boat and Crew—Fedallah," Ishmael refers to "Japanese junks," narrating that many "queer castaway" sailors of white, black, and yellow exist on the whaling vessel (191). Yet, the same motif also triggers Ishmael to show his racial fear: Fedallah and his Oriental crew, for him, seemed to have drifted from "blown-off Japanese junks" (191). When seeing the Beelzebub-like "subordinate phantoms," Ishmael expresses his prejudice against the Oriental world, where the people still have "the ghostly aboriginalness of earth's primal generations" and have "indulged in mundane amours" (191). Elizabeth Schultz argues that Ishmael's Asiatic prejudice for Fedallah and his crew shows his "derogatory and demonic racist representation of Asians" (206).

However, such an interpretation of Ahab's Oriental crew as what Christopher Benfey calls the "ultimate 'other'" (19) carries the risk of overemphasizing the racial dichotomy between the imperial subject (the United States) and the colonized object (the Asia-Pacific).¹ More specifically, it overlooks the racial dynamics embedded in Melville's usage of the foreign vessels. The aim of this chapter is to examine the

¹ According to Benfey, Melville's texts assume that Japan is "a world arrested in the sleep of centuries" with "something more courtly and stern," and "an island fortress impregnable and unbreached" (18-19).

power of nothingness in Melville's representation of Asia, especially China and Japan. By scrutinizing his writings on Asian junks, I will argue that Melville's text destabilizes the reductive relationship between the colonizer of the United States and the colonized of Asia-Pacific. Closely investigating Melville's complex figuration of Asian junks from the viewpoint of the antebellum exhibition culture, this chapter will suggest that Melville's texts subvert the imperialist gaze of the U.S. on the Asia-Pacific region.

The issue of possession, which I explored in chapter 1, is essential to consider when looking at Melville's criticism of U.S. imperialism. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) defines imperialism as a narrative of "sustained possession," based on the relentless imagination of the empire to conquer "far-flung and sometimes unknown spaces" and own "eccentric or unacceptable human beings" (64). Warren Rosenberg analyzes "the imperialist gaze" of the white protagonists in Melville's South Pacific narratives, discussing how the act of seeing helps them to visualize and then possess the racial others through their romanticized imagination (242). However, as scholars have pointed out, the Pacific Ocean in Melville's writings also destabilizes "the imperialist gaze" of the white subject. For Rob Wilson, the tragic end of *Moby-Dick*, in which Ahab and the *Pequod* are defeated by the white whale and drowned near Japan, warns against the U.S. commercial imperialism that had turned the Pacific into "a coherent space of American fantasy" (82-83). Yunte Huang in *Transpacific Imaginations* (2008) considers that the characters of *Moby-Dick* are "collectors who hover in the abyss of conflicting economic interests," thinking that these collectors deny the capitalist logic of trade on the Pacific Ocean (7). In Melville's writings, the Asia-Pacific region ambiguously serves both as "a coherent space of American fantasy" and as a critical space against the U.S. imperial

desire to see and possess the racial other.² Building on these studies, this chapter will demonstrate how Melville's texts problematize the possessive subjectivity of the white. While reproducing the racial stereotypes of the time that had enforced white superiority, Melville's complicated representation of Chinese/Japanese junks can be interpreted as a subversive attempt to erase the reductive dichotomy between the imperial spectator and the colonized curiosities.

Barnum and Melville: The Art of Exhibition

The year 1841 was the beginning of the "Golden Age" of freak shows (Albrecht 742). P. T. Barnum bought Scudder's American Museum on the corner of Broadway and Ann Street in downtown of New York City and began his career as a showman. The central attractions of Barnum's American Museum were human freaks. Rosemarie Garland Thompson gives a list of the exotic human curiosities in Barnum's museum: "from wild men of Borneo to fat ladies, living skeletons, Fiji princes, albinos, Siamese twins, tattooed Circassians, armless and legless wonders, Chinese giants, cannibals, midget triplets, hermaphrodites, spotted boys, and much more" (5). Barnum drew considerable attention by manipulating the racial stereotypes of his living curiosities: African Americans, displayed as "missing links," played aboriginal roles; Native Americans performed rituals and dances that confirmed their primitiveness; and Asians adopted a demure and sedate demeanor (Fretz 101-02). By seeing exotic freaks as curiosities, the white spectator put them into the racial hierarchy: Barnum's freaks "undoubtedly naturalized a sense of the slave-as-spectacle as well as the 'rightness' or naturalness of the white gaze" (Fretz 59). The racial

² My study revolves around the rise of transnational American studies in recent years, triggered by Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003). See Gretchen Murphy, *Hemispheric Imaginings* (2005); Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents* (2006); Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations* (2008); Paul Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (2011); Takayuki Tatsumi, "Literary History on the Road" (2004).

differences had helped to stabilize the white subjectivity and confirm its superiority.

While having formed the dichotomy between the white as the observer and the non-white as the observed, the freaks in Barnum's museum also created ambiguity that destabilized the racial hierarchy. As Leslie Fiedler says,

The true Freak stirs both supernatural terror and human sympathy, since, unlike the fabulous monsters, he is one of us, the human child of human parents, however altered by forces we do not quite understand into something mythic and mysterious, as no mere cripple ever is. (95)

In this way, the white gaze on living curiosities turns human beings into monstrous freaks. Yet, "the true freak" causes doubt about the authenticity of the white subject. They undermine the gap between humans and non-humans, between the white and non-white, by convincing the observer that monstrous freaks are "the human child of human parents," or a part of them.

Barnum's museum deliberately articulates what Fielder calls "the true Freak." Consider the advertisement of the Feejee mermaid in 1843. Here, the showman advanced opposite opinions on his exotic freak, creating ambiguity between authenticity and falsity for the audiences. According to the advertisement, the owner said that the mermaid "has been taken alive [in] the Feejee Islands"; it has, the manager testified, "such *appearance of reality* as any fish lying [in] the stalls of our fish markets" (qtd. in Cook 84; italics original). Conversely, the "scientific persons" denied its authenticity and insisted that the mermaid is "an *artificial* product" and "its natural existence claimed to be an utter impossibility" (qtd. in Cook 84; italics original). Barnum did not clarify what was fact or fiction; rather, he just left that decision up to the audience:

At all events whether this production is the work of *nature and art* it is

decidedly the most stupendous curiosity ever submitted to the public for inspection. If it is artificial the senses [of] sight and touch are ineffectual—if it is natural then all concur in declaring it *the greatest Curiosity in the World*.

(qtd. in Cook 84; italics original)

Offering opposite perspectives about the authenticity of the Feejee mermaid, Barnum's advertisement cheerfully encourages the spectators to get involved in the argument. "[T]he operational aesthetics," Neil Harris argues, works at Barnum's exhibition: he "narrow[s] the task of judgment . . . to a simple evaluation" of "real or false, genuine or contrived" (78). The showman attained commercial success by turning the decision of authenticity versus falsity about his curiosities into a participative game.

Several scholars point out that Melville composed his writings in the Barnamian exhibition culture.³ John Evelev traces the influence of Barnum's art of "the operative aesthetics" in *Typee*. In the preface, Melville's narrator suspends the readers between authenticity and falsity of his marvelous experience of being captivated by cannibals on a South Pacific island, as Barnum did in his advertisement of the Feejee mermaid:

There are some things related in the narrative which will be sure to appear strange, or perhaps entirely incomprehensible, to the reader He [the author] has stated such matters just as they occurred, and leaves every one to form his own opinion concerning them; trusting that his anxious desire to speak the unvarnished truth will gain for him the confidence of his readers.

(xiv)

³ Melville's episode confirms his interest in Barnum. After having his first child in 1848, Melville was willing to rent his son, "a perfect prodigy . . . out by the month to Barnum" (*Correspondence* 116).

While implying the deceit about his experience, Melville's narrator denounces suspicion and skepticism of it. Like Barnum, Melville "can profit from skepticism or belief in his readers" by leaving them to judge the truth or falseness for themselves (Evelev 32). In his reading of *The Confidence-Man*, Neil Harris also interprets that Melville's art of exhibition shows how human confidence subverts the dichotomy between true and false and good and evil (221-22). In fact, the Confidence Man answers that "from evil comes good" against his victims, who says "it is evil" to "doubt, to suspect, to prove—to have all this wasting work to do continually" (83).

More significantly, Melville's art of exhibition destabilizes the border between the white subject as the spectator and the racial other as a curiosity. His texts adapt Barnum's museum as a subversive space, where the white subjects themselves are objectified as curiosities. One impressive example is seen in his comic essay, "Authentic Anecdote of 'Old Zack,'" published in issues of *Yankee Doodle* from July 24 to September 11, 1847. The essay satirizes U.S. jingoism during the Mexican War by making fun of Zachary Taylor. An episode is inserted where Barnum tries to obtain profit by hiring the hero of the Battle of Buena Vista as a curiosity in his museum. The showman's "impertinent letter" arranges a plan to exhibit General Taylor as one of his curiosities along with "the venerable nurse of our beloved Washington [Joice Heth] and the illustrious General Tom Thumb" (225). Barnum impudently urges Old Zack to "think . . . of [himself] reclining on the poop of the Chinese Junk, receiving the visits of your friends" (225).⁴ Barnumian exhibition in Melville's text inverts the racial hierarchy of the white and the black, displaying the white as a living exhibit, the position originally assigned to the non-white. Barnum

⁴ Analyzing the freak show of General Taylor from the point of "the politics of celebrity," Elelev argues that "an acquiescence to the demands of the market was seamlessly integrated into democratic political and social ideals" (49).

says at the end of his letter that Taylor's black servant, Sambo, has given the permission to turn his master into an exhibition: "I [Barnum] have already sounded Sambo and he appears to have no objection" (225). While the black servant acknowledges and authorizes Barnum's plan, the white general loses the position of the observer and ironically becomes an exhibited object. Influenced by Barnum's art of the freak show, Melville's aesthetics of exhibition undermine the stable relation between the spectators and the curiosities. In this way, the racial hierarchy of the white and the non-white is ironically subverted: the white is required to abandon its prestigious position as the observer and ironically become the exhibited curiosity.

The Chinese Junk at an Exhibition

A 160-foot long Chinese vessel, the *Keying*, came into New York Harbor and was docked at Castle Garden on July 14, 1847 (Fig. 2). After about seventy decades of the sailing of the *Empress of China*, this three-masted junk sailed from China around the Cape of Good Hope to the United States and England during the period of 1846 to 1848. Under the command of Australian British Captain Charles Alfred Kettle, the crew of the *Keying* consisted of twenty Europeans and forty Chinese. The *Keying* served as a floating museum since Captain Kettle intended to exhibit the Chinese Junk at London's Crystal Palace along with Chinese curiosities and merchandise, including the Chinese sailors. Both in England and the United States, the arrival of the *Keying* aroused a bubbling enthusiasm. For example, when the *Keying* visited London, Charles Dickens gave two reports, "The Chinese Junk" (1848) and "The Great Exhibition and the Little One" (1851). Calling the *Keying* a "floating toyshop," Dickens in the former report interprets it as the symbol of China's antiqueness: "Thousands of years have passed away, since the first Chinese junk was

constructed on this model; and the last Chinese junk that was ever launched was none the better for that waste and desert of time” (72). Dickens’s tone in the latter essay becomes more jingoistic, written after several years have passed. According to Dickens, England has achieved rapid progress with her ingenuity with such inventions as the spinning machine and locomotive, while Chinese inventions, represented in the junk, “have made no advance and been of no earthly use for thousands of years” (358). Dickens’s report emphasizes the comparison between “the greatness of the English results” and “the extraordinary littleness of the Chinese” (358). Dickens’s reports on the Chinese junk, it could be said, are based on the imperialist discourse that demonstrates the progressiveness of his country and the backwardness of China.

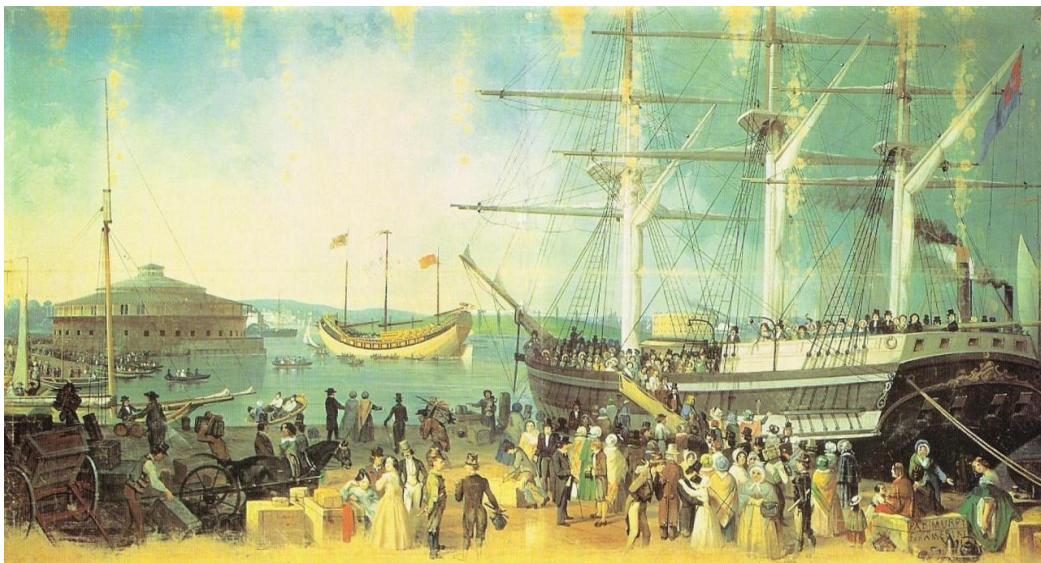


Fig. 2. The Arrival of the *Keying* at New York. Drawn by Samuel B. Waugh, “The Bay and Harbor of New York,” (ca. 1855). Museum of the City of New York.

New Yorkers enjoyed observing the design and crew of the floating museum for twenty-five cents from 6:00 A.M. to 6:30 P.M. daily. A newspaper article celebrated the sailing of the *Keying* as the arrival of “a new era in our commercial intercourse . . . with the Celestial Empire” (qtd. in Tchen 64). New Yorkers flocked toward the harbor to see what the *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer* welcomed as “one of the most remarkable curiosities ever witnessed in the United States” (qtd. in Bonner 2). Barnum made a copy of the Chinese junk and exhibited it with crews, some of whom might have been from the *Keying*. In the great response to the junk, John Rogers Haddad sees “the Barnumization of China” (n. pag.). Suspended in an “unreliable hybrid of fact and fiction,” the visitors at the *Keying* enjoyed the junk “for its amusement value and scrutinized it to determine whether it truly was what it purported to be” (n. pag.). “The Barnumization of China” could have originated with the Opium War (1839-42), which fundamentally changed the U.S. view on China. Before the war, China had been adored as a “different, intriguing, and wonderful” country. However, the war revealed the “true weakness of China to the world,” turning “the object of admiration” into “the object of a laugh or the subject of a pun” (Haddad n. pag.). The domestic discourses of the time produced several stereotypes to make fun of China and her people: (1) Chinese males as “effeminate fops” who “dressed in motley silk costumes and sported ridiculously long fingernails”; (2) the Chinese enjoyed “a diet that consisted of rats, mice, dogs, and cats”; (3) the Chinese were “heathens” who “worshipped strange deities and regularly bowed down before gaudy idols”; (4) Chinese officials as “pompous buffoons,” who “proudly adhered to their own customs and beliefs despite unmistakable evidence the rest of the world had passed them by”; and (5) Chinese as opium addicts, who “were comically pathetic in their inability to resist the poppy and the pipe” (Haddad n. pag.).

China's defeat in the Opium War undermined her authority and stigmatized her as a country of strange, uncivilized, and grotesque freaks.

Echoing the great fanfare for the *Keying*, Melville anonymously published "On the Chinese Junk" in *Yankee Doodle* from July 17 to September 18, 1847. Melville's serialized comic essay embodies "the Barnumization of China." As the narrator Yankee Doodle demonstrates in the first report, the Chinese Junk is ambivalently suspended between authenticity and falsity like the freaks in Barnum's museum. Yankee Doodle emphasizes the genuineness of the junk. "The Keying is a genuine junk," and it is neither "a junk of gingerbread" nor "an unlicensed junk shop" (437, 430). And the crew members were true Chinese: "All the pig-tails are all that they look to be" (437). Yet, such excessive repetition of authenticity ironically raises doubt. The visitors indeed observed the Chinese junk and its crew suspiciously. While Yankee Doodle interviews an exalted Mandarin, Ke-sing, a visitor from "the State of Connecticut" bolts up to him and rudely asks him whether he is a real Chinese (433).

Melville's essay, composed of humorous cartoons and passages, reproduces the racial prejudices about Asia. Report 7 mentions the crew of the *Keying* who enjoy "a little dog" and "a bowl of rat-tail soup" (437). More impressively, Report 4 talks about the "Chinese method of hauling up the stern boat" (434). As Fig. 3 shows, it comically introduces how the Asian crew take boats up and down with their pigtails. The caricature of pigtails would impress upon the readers that the Chinese crew were weird aliens. These Chinese stereotypes were used to establish the supremacy of the white civilization. The age of the Chinese junk, as shown in Dickens's essays, leads Yankee Doodle to stress the backwardness of the Chinese civilization and the progressiveness of American. Melville's narrator uses Chinese clichés that "this ship

and appurtenances are just the same as those in use 2000 years since” and that “the Chinese have made no progress in civilization in that length of time” (432). The antiquity of the *Keying* draws attention to the advanced technology of American vessels: the Chinese junk took “212 days” to sail from her country to New York, while the American clipper the *Sea Witch* did it in “81 days” (435). Although recognizing “grace and beauty in naval architecture” of the *Keying*, Yankee Doodle affirms that “in a question of speed, it may not be presumptuous to claim a superiority for our own vessel” (435).

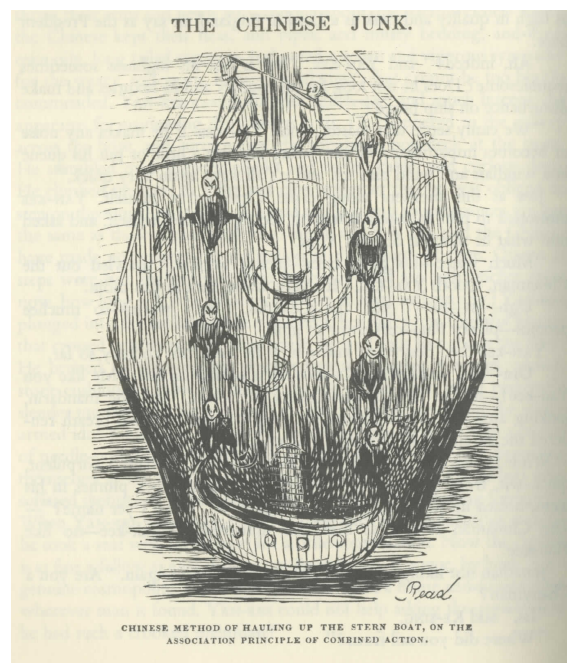


Fig. 3. “Chinese Method of Hauling up the Stern Boat.”

Collected in Melville, “On the Chinese Junk,” 434.

Moreover, Yankee Doodle’s report reinforces the stigma of the Chinese as opium addicts. Report 10, entitled “the Opium War Revived,” transmits the notification of a riot by the Chinese crew: they “rose upon Capt. Killett (of the Junk) and made ten-strike for wages” (440). This revolt is regarded as “the great China war,”

which was caused by the crew which “had been indulging in rather strong opium” (440). Yankee Doodle humorously narrates that “these foreign gentlemen” cannot “come to tea in the evening,” since they are carried to the Tombs in New York City. Melville would have taken this episode from an actual disturbance. On August 31, *New York Herald* reported that the Chinese crew “under the effects of opium” “turned their combined force against the captain” (qtd. in Haddad n. pag.). Along with the newspaper article, Melville’s essay seems to stand on the side of the white authority and order, defining this riot as antisocial behavior and the captain as a victim of barbarity. Such an Asiatic prejudice not only stigmatizes the Chinese junk and its crew as the racial other, but also hides the true picture of the riot. In reality, its cause was a serious labor conflict between the white captain and the Chinese crew. As the crew testified later in court, their riot was because of the brutal mistreatment by the white captain and sailors and of the captain’s refusal to pay for their return to China, which was guaranteed by their contract.⁵ In a sense, Yankee Doodle’s narration transforms the Chinese junk into a sort of an exhibition.

However, we cannot miss that Melville’s text also deliberately criticizes the curious gaze of the white spectator. As Melville had done in *Typee*, his narrator Yankee Doodle satirizes the Western countries’ expansion onto the Asia-Pacific. For instance, he refers to the news that “the British have been spiking 870 guns in the forts of the Celestials” (431). This happened because the Chinese emperor had approved an offer to build an English church, in which “the outside barbarians might worship the Prince of Peace” (431). Yankee Doodle refutes that England should have abandoned their guns regardless of whether or not China accepted its offer. England’s wish to “advocate Peace on Earth and good will to all men” would be established

⁵ For the testimony of the Chinese crew, see Tchen 68-69.

more effectively by destroying her weapons (431). Yankee Doodle also blames France for its uncivilized behavior in the Society Islands, noting that although the French have exported “many colored calicoes and fashionable Parisian hats, with flowers and feathers,” the trade will come to nothing (436). France also exports “wines, cordials, absinthe, beer, cognac,” and “these spirituous missionaries” make the natives “so civilized” that “there will be left no native heads to wear the hats, no aboriginal bodies to be covered with the calicoes” (436).

Melville’s Yankee Doodle narrator comes to sympathize with the Chinese crew through their conversations. In Report 2, Yankee Doodle first meets Ke-sing and asks about his life in New York City. The Chinese mandarin says “so much peoples—plenty Flun-kees come to junk” and “me no like Flun-kee” (433). This “Flun-kee” seems to be a pseudo-Chinese word for “flunky,” a person that, according to the *OED*, “behaves obsequiously to persons above him in rank or position” (“Flunky.” def. 2). In “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” as I have touched on in chapter 1, Melville expresses his growing frustration at the U.S. literary market of the time, in which they are indulged in “literary flunkyism towards England” (248). Repeating “Flunk-kee—no like Flun-kee,” Ke-sing similarly demonstrates his contempt for the visitors at his vessel, whose curious gaze rudely leers at the junk and crew. Yankee Doodle experiences sincere empathy for the “poor home-sick stranger,” based on his misanthropic disgust for his New York brethren: “It is no wonder he don’t like ‘Flun-kees!’ Yan-kee Doodle himself don’t like Flun-kees” (434).

We can see the power of nothingness in the narrator’s sympathy for the Chinese mandarin. In other words, Yankee Doodle destabilizes the racial divide between the white and the yellow by abandoning his position as the observer and turning himself into an exhibited curiosity. Through the interracial friendship with Ke-sing, Yankee

Doodle renames himself with the pseudo-Chinese of “Yan-kee” (434). Report 13, in which Yankee Doodle waves an emotional farewell to Ke-sing, demonstrates his abandonment of white subjectivity (Fig. 4). In the cartoon, three figures appear, Ke-sing, Yankee Doodle, and one of “his curious friends,” who represents the readers of *Yankee Doodle* (432). Yankee Doodle sincerely regrets having to part from the Chinese mandarin and they tightly embrace each other. A tree seems like a wall, or a border, that separates Yankee Doodle and Ke-sing from his “curious” friend. On the left side of the tree, the friend observes their emotional parting, and his impudent gaze turns to curiosity. Yet, on the right side of the tree, Yankee Doodle and Ke-sing are conflated through their sincere embrace. Yankee Doodle, it can be said, goes beyond the wall or border that separates the observer from the observed, becoming himself an exhibition, at which his friend stares.

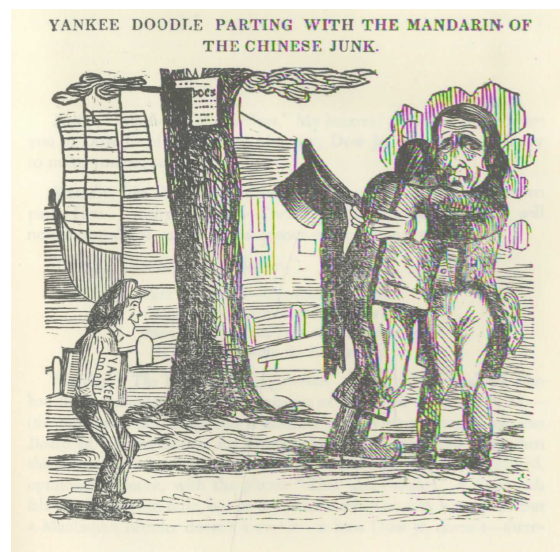


Fig. 4. “Yankee Doodle Parting with the Mandarin of the Chinese Junk.” Melville, “On the Chinese Junk,” 441.

The Opium War radically changed the Western image of China. In 1834, Afong Moy was brought to New York City by Nathaniel and Frederick Carne and exhibited

as “the Chinese Lady.” Moy with her foot binding is symbolized as a being secluded from society who is not to be exposed to the public gaze. The audience could have associated her bound feet with China as a closed nation, into which foreigners’ curious gaze cannot penetrate. By contrast, the opened structure of the Chinese junk represented “China’s openness in the wake of the Opium War” (Haddad n. pag.). Owned and commanded by a British captain, the Chinese junk impressed upon the observers that China had finally opened up and had become a possession of the Western nations. Whereas the visitors could not freely approach the Chinese Lady, they could invade the territory of the Chinese junk. In resonance with this social discourse, Melville’s “On the Chinese Junk” seems to emphasize the openness of the *Keying*, into which the visitors greedily gaze. Yet, Melville’s comic essay depicts the failure of the imperial desire to complete the seeing and possessing of China. Ke-sing continues to keep his secret which is not to be exposed to Yankee Doodle. In fact, even when saying “Me-like you Yan-kee!—me no like all these many Flun-kees,” the Chinese mandarin hides his true expression “behind his fan” (433). The spectators, including his bosom friend Yankee Doodle, cannot properly understand what Ke-sing truly thinks and feels. Melville’s text, retaining the hidden secret of the racial other, problematizes the possessive desire of the white subjectivity. It undermines the difference between the white spectator and the colored curiosities. With his misanthropic sympathy with the Chinese mandarin, Melville’s narrator goes beyond the border between the observer and the observed and becomes an exhibition himself.

“The Piazza” on the Pacific Ocean

March 31, 1854. On this day, Japan’s feudal government signed the Treaty of Kanagawa with the United States under pressure from Commodore Matthew C. Perry.

In command of four “black ships,” Perry came to Uruga and delivered President Millard Fillmore’s letter to Japan. The treaty marked the end of Japan’s closed-door policy, opening her doors to the U.S. and other Western countries. Perry’s expedition had two aims: to acquire naval bases and coal stations, and to establish a commercial route between California and China. As Fillmore’s letter showed, it was necessary for American whalers to access to Japan as a transit port for supplying food, water, and coal, and as a shelter, where survivors from sunken whaling ships could be protected “till [the U.S.] can send vessels and bring them away” (qtd. in Resing and Kvidera 294).

U.S. foreign and domestic discourses were combined on Perry’s expedition. The opening of Japan was an essential step in advancing U.S. westward movement. After gaining the huge territory of California in 1848, the U.S. turned her expansionist gaze toward the Asia-Pacific as a new frontier.⁶ In 1853, *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* issued an article “Japan,” predicting that the U.S. would achieve a connection with Asia: “Westward the chain is forging that connects the Atlantic with the Pacific Ocean, across the Isthmus of Panama. There is but one single link wanting to complete the circuit between California and Japan” (249). Such expansionist logic was based on the desire for buried treasures, fantasizing that Japan would produce infinite amounts of gold. Indeed, Charles MacFarlane’s *Japan* (1852), which later contributed to Perry’s view, described how abundant precious metals such as gold and silver, and pearls were to be found in Japan. MacFarlane introduced a utopian story of a seventeenth century Spanish writer, stating that in Edo “not only the palace of the emperor, but also many houses of great lords, [are] covered with rich plates of gold”

⁶ According to John Eperjesi, since the War of Independence, the Pacific Ocean had served as an economic and national frontier.

(227). He also cited a calculation by a Dutch explorer: “when the trade [of the Netherlands] with Japan was an open one, the export of gold and silver was ten millions of Dutch florins, or about £840,000 per annum” (228). Although the Edo Shogunate had already banned the export of precious metals, MacFarlane still embraced the illusion that the United States could gain them through commercial trade.⁷

In addition, the U.S. discourses around Perry’s expedition classified Japan as the racial other by emphasizing her rigid closure and cruel mistreatment of American drifters. The most famous example of atrocities was the case of the *Lagoda*. In 1848, fifteen crewmembers of this whaling ship escaped from their captain’s mistreatment and landed on the south coast of Ezo. Three survivors were sent to Nagasaki and imprisoned in fierce cold without proper clothing. As a result, two killed themselves or died of disease (Wiley 22-24). This dreary news would have impressed upon Americans the savagery and barbarousness of Japan. In fact, an article in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* reported that the aim of Perry’s expedition was to ask Japan for “better treatment of shipwrecked Americans, who have been heretofore barbarously treated by Japanese” (qtd. in Saiki 189). Japan, however, was not completely regarded as a savage country since she had partially accepted Christianity during her trade with the Dutch. An article in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, citing a letter by William Adams, reported that “the people of this island of Japan are good of nature” and “governed in great civility”; “[t]here [were] many Jesuits and Franciscan friars” in Japan, who “[had] converted many to be Christians, and [had]

⁷ An article of the *United States Democratic Review* in 1852 also stressed the necessity of opening Japan to turn the Pacific Ocean into “a great highway” to export “long-concealed treasures” from “the immense *terra incognita* of North Asia” (qtd. in Saiki 185; italics original).

many churches in this island” (198). Thus, instead of a country with a closed-door policy that mistreated American whalers, Japan was seen as the half-civilized racial other, who someday would come to be an ally of America.

These ambivalent feelings could have formed a peculiar view of Japan as the birthplace of American pilgrims. And, it was with the motif of Japanese junks that the U.S. discourse compared the island country in the Pacific to its coming home. The representation of Japanese junks, Ikuno Saiki suggests, were used as “a symbol of the rigid diplomatic policy of Japan” to criticize her strict closure (194). When seeing Japanese junks at Matsumae, Perry offered an anthropological observation on their structure along with several portraits: the inconvenience of their “frail and open” stern, the commodore thought, reflected the rigid policy of the Japanese government, which forbade “any of its vessels to visit foreign countries” (Hawks 449).

Here, I would like to emphasize that Japan was depicted as the coming home for Americans with the motif of Japanese junks. According to the article in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, Japan was the “home” to which American pilgrims would go back to in the future, after a long exile from England (“Japan” 251). This article curiously connected Japan and England through their geological and climatic similarities: both are island nations, and “[t]he climate of Japan is much like that of Great Britain. Indeed, there springs a thought of likeness between the Japanese and British Empires” (251). The “sanctifying processes of pure Christianity” would transform Japan into their home:

From England the heaven-born pilgrims crossed the Atlantic to the fourth quarter of the globe, and found in this, our land, a home. And now, unwearied, she is travelling after the pioneers of civilization, and voyaging in the wake of ships; sanctifying commercial intercourse and claiming commerce as her

partner. She has taken refuge under the flag of these United States to pass over the Pacific to the East again, persevering in her circuit round the world, until she shall reach her birth-place in Asia (251)

The article justified Perry's expedition to Japan with its appealing domestic rhetoric. The reporter figuratively confirmed the sacred history of the westward progress of American pilgrims in Perry's expedition, who had departed from the Old World and would be arriving on the coast of Japan. Japan was imagined as the birthplace and home of Americans rather than a mere unexplored land filled with savages. As Gretchen Murphy suggests, such domestic rhetoric led the U.S. to justify her expansion in the Western Hemisphere. Based on the Monroe Doctrine that divided the globe into the Western and Eastern Hemispheres, America explained her expansion into the Asia-Pacific region as the national errand to promote Christian democracy. The United States regarded the Western Hemisphere as its home, achieving nationalism and imperialism at the same time. While blaming the Old World for aristocratic imperialism, America considered its extraterritorial expansion a sacred mission to advance democratic progress and freedom through commercial trade. The U.S. expansion, unlike the Old World imperialism, did not aim "to destroy but rather tam[e] monsters with trade" (Murphy 28-29).

Written at the time when Perry's expedition to Japan had become an object of curiosity, almost all of Melville's novels from *Typee* to *The Confidence-Man* make reference to Japan. At the end of *Omoo* (1847), the narrator's representation of Japan impressively assumes that American sailors have already approached near her coast: "So, hurrah for the coast of Japan! Thither the ship was bound" (313). More significantly, Melville in *Moby-Dick* refers to Japan more than 20 times. Written before the opening of Japan, Melville's masterpiece includes two key components.

First, Ishmael foreshadows the opening of “impenetrable” and “double-bolted” Japan in the near future thanks to the U.S. whalers that “[clear] the way to the missionary and the merchant” and to “[carry] the primitive missionaries to their first destination” (367, 99). Echoing the social discourses of the time, *Moby-Dick* understands the opening of Japan in the context of the U.S. expansion into the Asia-Pacific, driven by the desire for valuable treasures. In fact, chapter 87, “The Grand Armada,” narrates that beyond the “straits of Sunda,” “the thousand islands of that oriental sea” are enriched by “the inexhaustible wealth of spices, and silks, and jewels, and gold, and ivory” (297). The Straits of Sunda function as a protective barrier against “the all-grasping western world,” which aims at the treasures of the island in the Pacific (297). Thus, *Moby-Dick* warns against the U.S. commercial imperialism that viewed the Pacific Ocean as “a coherent space of American fantasy” (Wilson 82). At the culmination of the novel, both “the capitalist rationality” of Starbuck and “the blindly transcendental hermeneutics” of Ahab are finally overwhelmed by the great white whale near the coast of Japan (Wilson 82-83).

Secondly, the figuration of “Japanese junks” in *Moby-Dick* is of significance since it triggers the protagonist to express his racial fear of the Oriental world. The motif appears twice, in chapters 16 and 50. The prior chapter “The Ship,” which I have touched on, employs the motif to stress the outdated nature and strangeness of the *Pequod* (69). In the latter chapter, “Ahab’s Boat and Crew—Fedallah,” “Japanese junks” is used to emphasize the racial complexity aboard the whaling vessel:

[W]ith the subordinate phantoms, what wonder remained soon waned away; for in a whaler wonders soon wane. Besides, now and then such unaccountable odds and ends of strange nations come up from the unknown nooks and ash-holes of the earth to man these floating outlaws of whalers; and

the ships themselves often pick up such queer castaway creatures found tossing about the open sea on planks, bits of wreck, oars, whaleboats, canoes, blown-off Japanese junks, and what not; that Beelzebub himself might climb up the side and step down into the cabin to chat with the captain, and it would not create any unsubduable excitement in the forecastle. (191)

Through the motif of “blown-off Japanese junks,” Ishmael depicts the racial diversity of the white, black, and yellow sailors on the whaling ship. Ishmael, at the same time, expresses his fear of Ahab’s Oriental crew, who have apparently drifted from “blown-off Japanese junks.” The Beelzebub-like “subordinate phantoms” lead Ishmael to show his Asiatic prejudice toward the Oriental world, in which the people still have “the ghostly aboriginalness of earth’s primal generations” and have been “indulged in mundane amours” (191). Ishmael’s racial bias against Fedallah and his crew, as Elizabeth Schultz notes, shows his “derogatory and demonic racist representation of Asians” (206).

Yet, Melville in “The Piazza,” written after the opening of Japan, draws “Japanese junks” in a complicated manner. His last short piece subverts the colonial dichotomy between the United States as the observing subject and the Asia-Pacific as the observed object. At first reading, “The Piazza” can be read as a domestic fiction like *Pierre*, not as a sea story such as *Moby-Dick*. The story indeed is set in the pastoral mountains of America; the narrator is a simple old bachelor, who enjoys the beautiful scenery from his favorite piazza. Yet, the details of the story leads the readers to interpret it as a sea fiction. For instance, the narrator has the features of an ex-sailor returning from the tropical zone: he wears “a light hat, of yellow sinnet, [and] white duck trowsers” that are “relics of [his] tropic sea-going” (8). While enjoying the landscape from his piazza, the narrator turns the pastoral scenery around

his house into a beautiful and peaceful seascape: “little wavelets of the grass ripple over upon the low piazza, as their beach, and the blown down of dandelions is wafted like spray, and the purple of the mountains is just the purple of the billows” (3). Moreover, the narrator’s curious gaze on Marianna and her house turns his destination into the islands of the Pacific Ocean: he compares her bemossed house to “Japanese junks,” and her to a “Tahiti daughter” (8, 9).

As Carole Moses points out, “The Piazza” is based on Edmund Spencer’s *The Faerie Queen*. The narrator fancies Marianna’s house as a “fairy-land,” in which “[f]airies there . . . once more; the queen of fairies at her fairy-window; at any rate, some glad mountain-girl” (4, 6). Note that Melville’s adaptation of *The Faerie Queen* mirrors the U.S. imperial desire for the Asia-Pacific in the narrator’s gaze on Marianna’s home. In fact, the narrator’s voyage to the fantastic fairyland is literally described as a westward movement: “I’ll launch my yawl—ho, cheerly, heart! and push away for fairy-land—for rainbow’s end, in fairy-land. . . . Early dawn; and, sallying westward, I sowed the morning before me” (6). The narrator’s longing for reaching at the fairyland hints at his thirst for gold. When first discovering Marianna’s house from his piazza, the protagonist fancies that he would find gold there: “Fairies there, thought I; remembering that rainbows bring out the blooms, and that, if one can but get to the rainbow’s end, his fortune is made in a bag of gold. Yon rainbow’s end, would I were there, thought I” (2). Throughout the story, it is his monomaniacal idealization of Marianna’s house as a fairyland that motivates his harsh voyage. Such a curious gaze cannot help but uncover the imperialist relationship between the narrator (the conquer) and Marianna (the conquered): “[Marianna] shyly started, like some Tahiti girl, secreted for a sacrifice, first catching sight, through palms, of Captain Cook” (8-9). In the protagonist’s wish to look at Marianna and her house, we

can see what Edward Said calls “sustained possession.” It achieves the dichotomy between the narrator as the imperial subject of America and Marianna as the colonized other of the Pacific.

Moreover, the narrator’s eyes penetrating into Marianna’s house reflect the domestic discourse of the time about the circuit between the United States and Asia that was about to be completed. Taking into consideration the two thresholds in *Moby-Dick* and “The Piazza,” we will notice that the narrator of “The Piazza” is aware of the opening of Japan. *Moby-Dick* predicts the ending of the closed-door policy of Japan with the articulation of a threshold: “If that double-bolted land, Japan, is ever to become hospitable, it is the whale-ship alone to whom the credit will be due; for already she is on the threshold” (99). Written before the opening of Japan, the American whaler in *Moby-Dick* stays on the threshold to Japan, or the home that she is going back to, and cannot yet enter into its interior. But, in “The Piazza,” written after Japan’s opening, Marianna’s house, compared to “Japanese junks,” has exposed its threshold and opened the door to the narrator: “Pausing at the threshold, or rather where threshold once had been, I saw, through the open door-way, a lonely girl, sewing at a lonely window” (8-9).

Yunte Huang compares Melville’s “closing vortex” (*Moby-Dick* 427) with Ralf Waldo Emerson’s expanding circle, figuring out the crucial difference between them. While Emerson’s circle embodies the optimistic desire of American expansionism, Melville’s closing vortex rejects it. In other words, the closing circle in Melville’s writing narrates “the disaster of imperial conquest” (Huang 96). The Emersonian expanding circle seems to appear in “The Piazza.” The narrator enjoys the “round and round” landscape from the piazza (2). His gaze changes the beautiful landscape into oceanic scenery, the gloomy rotting house into the beautiful “fairy-land,” and the

pale-faced woman into the “queen of the fairies” (6). The narrator’s curious gaze extends its vision infinitely into the nature in which Marianna’s house is located: “No fence was seen, no inclosure. Near by—ferns, ferns, ferns; further—woods, woods, woods; beyond—mountains, mountains, mountains; then—sky, sky, sky” (8). As seen in “The Chinese Junk,” the white spectator’s curious eye penetrates into the opened structure of Marianna’s house-Japanese junk. As we have seen, Melville’s text deliberately traces the U.S. imperial expansion into the Asia-Pacific in the narrator’s progress toward Marianna’s house.

At the same time, however, we cannot miss that Melville’s text destabilizes such an imperial vision. At the end of his voyage, the narrator discovers a mere mean barn, knowing that his destination is less a fairy-land of the fairy queen than a haunted place of death and decay. It is noteworthy that Melville depicts the ghostly “pale-cheeked” Marianna as a bizarre character of nothing: sitting and sewing all day long in her home, she “know[s] nothing, hear[s] nothing,” and seldom speaks (8,11). Her only relative, her brother, suffers from his hard work as a woodsman, and is only waiting for death. After working “the entire day, sometimes the entire night,” he is completely “fagged out” and sleeps on the bed, or “the grave” (9). This short story Gothicizes Marianna’s house as a “[f]orbidding and forbidden” place, where even animals fear to tread (7). Being “green” as “copperless hulls of Japanese Junks,” her haunted house is “rotting” because of strong sunshine: flies gather on the decaying house as they do on dead bodies (8, 10). At the very end of the story, the narrator is punished because he, through his expansionist vision, violated the territory of the forbidden land. He is haunted by Marianna’s pale face even after he returns home: “every night, when the curtain falls, truth comes in with darkness. No light shows from the mountain. To and fro I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna’s face,

and many as real a story” (12). The Gothicization of Marianna and her house seems to underline the dichotomy between the imperial subject and the colonized object.

Yet, more importantly, I think, the power of nothingness in “The Piazza” comes into its own to uncover the problem of the white subjectivity and its desire to see and possess the racial other through a romanticized imagination. Simply put, Melville’s text examines how the imperialist subjectivity ironically becomes emasculated with its own desire. The strange openness of Marianna’s house makes the narrator lose his privileged position as the observer and conversely turns him into an observed curiosity. According to Elizabeth Renker, the “fear of faces” in Melville’s novels reflects the male protagonists’ own desires (*Strike through the Mask* 41). The male characters, who are afraid of the female’s pallid face, become captivated by their own desire. Building on Renker’s argument, we can think that the pale-faced Marianna uncannily reflects the narrator’s own desire. In fact, Marianna, like the narrator, sees and wants to visit his house: “Oh, if I [Marianna] could but once get to yonder house, and but look upon whoever the happy being is that lives there” (12). At the end of the story, the narrator becomes captivated with Marianna’s curious gaze. After failing to find the fairy queen, he goes back home and decides to “stick to the piazza” (11).

The protagonist portrays the scenery around his house as an amphitheater. In order to forget Marianna, he tries to keep a physical and psychological distance from Marianna through his theatrical rhetoric:

It [the piazza] is my box-royal; and this amphitheater, my theatre of San Carlo. Yes, the scenery is magical—the illusion so complete. And Madam Meadow Lark, my prima donna, plays her grand engagement here; and, drinking in her sunrise note, which, Memnon-like, seems struck from the golden window, how far from me the [Marianna’s] weary face behind it. (12)

The narrator's representation of the piazza as his "box-royal" and the view from it as an "amphitheater" impresses on the readers the considerable distance between the narrator's home and Marianna's "weary face" and her decaying house. He attempts to stay in the position of observing Marianna and her house, as the white visitor at the Chinese junk enjoys seeing the Ke-sing as a curious exhibition. In the final scene of "The Piazza," however, the narrator's pose as spectator ironically repeats what Marianna is doing in her rotten house. While seeking to purge Marianna and her story of misery, the narrator cannot abandon his obsessive imagination that Marianna's ghostly face is always seeing him. In the figurative amphitheater, the narrator finally realizes that he himself ironically becomes a curiosity exhibited to Marianna's curious gaze that reflects his own desire.

Rob Wilson repeatedly demonstrates theatricality of the Pacific Ocean in Melville's writings: "canonical spectacle of destructive powers enacted in the Pacific"; "a spectacle of maritime ambition in the Pacific"; "Melville's spectacle of the Pacific"; and "a spectacle of extraterritorial power" (83, 84). When Melville was writing his works, the Asia-Pacific served as the object of curiosity of the Western countries. There, the white nations such as France, England, and the U.S. had fixed their imperialist gaze on the colonized objects of China and Japan. However, as this chapter has explained, the complicated figuration of Asian junks in Melville's works ambiguously disturbs the curious gaze of the white subject on the Asia-Pacific object. On the one hand, his writings on Chinese and Japanese junks seem to have reproduced the imperialist discourses. "The Chinese Junk" stresses the barbarousness and belatedness of China and the progressiveness of the U.S. civilization; "The Piazza" romanticizes Marianna's house, compared to "Japanese junks," as what Wilson calls "a coherent space of the American fantasy." Chinese and Japanese junks in Melville's

writings are exposed as curiosities to the imperial eyes of the white subject, which stabilize the dichotomy between the colonizer (the United States) and the colonized (China and Japan). Yet, this chapter, scrutinizing the act of seeing curiosities in the antebellum exhibition culture, suggests that Melville's complicated representation of Asian junks destabilizes such a colonial dichotomy. Melville's white characters are ironically required to abandon the hierarchical position as the observer with the very desire to see and possess the racial others. Realizing that their wishes come to nothing, they not only fail to possess what they want, but also become an exhibited curiosity themselves.

Conclusion

Kaleidoscopic Nothingness:

Yoji Sakate's *Bartlebies* and the Great East Japan Earthquake

The year 2019 marks the bicentennial anniversary of Melville's birth and the Twelfth International Melville Conference is held at New York University. When Melville passed away in 1891, people were surprised by the fact that Melville had been still alive. On September 29, 1891, an obituary in the *New York Press* reported "even his [Melville's] own generation has long thought him dead, so quiet have been the later years of his life" (qtd. in Parker, *Herman Melville*, vol. 2, 921). After publication of *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Moby-Dick*, Melville had long been in what Raymond Weaver calls "the long quietus." However, since the Melville Revival of the 1920s, launched by the seminal studies of Weaver and D. H. Lawrence, Melville has been evaluated as one of the representative American classics. Dozens of publications on Melville studies and adaptations of his writings have appeared. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter's *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville* (2008) cultivates a new field of antebellum American literature by shedding light on their biographical and literary relationships. Melville's later poems as well as his early prose have fascinated literary scholars, as seen in the special issue of *Leviathan* in 2007. Moreover, Elizabeth Schultz's *Unpainted to the Last* (1995) traces adaptations of *Moby-Dick* in the twentieth century American visual arts, ranging widely from illustrations and pictures to installation art.

Among them, the trend known as the so-called the "Bartleby" Revival, has commanded considerable attention. Scholars and artists have made a broad range of academic and aesthetic interpretations of Melville's short piece. Leading

contemporary philosophers such as Jacques Lacan, Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, and Slavoj Žižek have attempted to interpret the elusive style and contents of “Bartleby.” Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas published *Bartleby and Co.* (2000) to examine what he calls the “Bartleby syndrome,” or authors’ unwillingness to write, from Socrates to J. D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon. Jonathan Parker directed a film adaptation of “Bartleby” in 2001. The “Bartleby” Revival has also been seen in Japan. Yukiko Oshima’s recent book, *Native Americans underneath Melville’s Writings* (2017), gives a new interpretation on Melville’s short story. Associating the story with the history of the oppression of Native Americans, who were driven out of their lands, Oshima reads Bartleby’s immovability as a sit-in protest of the vanishing people. Moreover, two Japanese translations of “Bartleby” have been issued within these 10 years: one was by Motoyuki Shibata in 2008 and the other by Arimichi Makino in 2015. Echoing such a tendency, distinguished Japanese playwright Yoji Sakate wrote and produced *Bartlebies* in 2015. Its opening monodrama, entitled “The Account of the Director of T Hospital,” was delivered at the Tenth International Melville Conference held at Keio University, Tokyo, in 2015. In concluding my study, I would like to examine how Sakate’s *Bartlebies* inherits the power of nothingness in Melville’s story and applies it in narrating the events of 3.11, also known as the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. Sakate deliberately builds what might be called “kaleidoscopic nothingness,” through which we remember catastrophic disasters and lost humanities in various ways.¹

Sakate was born in Okayama Prefecture in 1962, and he studied Japanese

¹ Sakate’s play, interviews, and notes for the stage mentioned here are my translations. For the opening monodrama, I rely on Samuel Malissa’s translation, delivered at the Tenth International Melville Conference. I would like to express my deep gratitude for his splendid translation.

literature at Keio University. In 1983, he established his theater company, Rin Ko Gun (Phosphorescence Troupe). Since then, he has written many plays with social criticism on sexuality, race, and political matters after WWII, including censorship under the occupation of General Headquarters (GHQ) and the U.S. military base in Okinawa, in *Tokyo Trial* (1988), *Come Out* (1989), *Pikadon Kijimunā* (1997), *The Emperor and The Kiss* (1999), *The Attic* (2002), *DA-RU-MA-SA-N-GA-KO-RO-N-DA* (2005), *Dreaming with a Whale* (2019), and others. Sakate weaves his highly political messages into his avant-garde plays. As Takatyuki Tatsumi observes in *Full Metal Apache* (2006), Sakate's *The Emperor and The Kiss* uncovers the ironical reminiscence of the imperial authority after WWII in the form of what Tatsumi calls "Mikadophilia," or love for the Emperor: "by renouncing divine authority, the royal family became not humans but cultural signifiers to be loved, admired, and consumed through the capitalistic media" (25).

Rin Ko Gun has performed on the global stage and has been active in overseas productions. It joined the performance tour of *The Capital of the Kingdom of the Gods* in Europe in 1994; the script of *Epitaph of the Whales* (1993) was translated into English and performed at the Gate Theatre in London in 1998. When Rin Ko Gun put *The Attic* on stage at the Pearl Theater in 2007, the *New York Times* issued a review on the play about "hikikomori" (youth's withdrawal from society). "Hikikomori" usually tends to be regarded as "a reaction to Japan's intensely competitive educational and economic systems" (n. pag.). However, Sakate's "poignant" play reinterprets it as "a greater human impulse toward isolation in periods of crisis and violence" (n. pag.). More significantly, Sakate's plays have revolved around Melville's writings. His plays such as *Epitaph of the Whales* and *Dreaming with a Whale* have a strong affinity with Melville's writings because they treat the Japanese

whaling industry. He gave a performance of *Moby-Dick* with Leon Ingulsrud in 2001. Furthermore, his *Bartlebies* adapted Melville's famous short story to describe the disastrous situation and the ruined human lives of 3.11.

On March 11, 2011, the devastating earthquake and tsunami caused over 15,000 deaths and produced 300,000 refugees in northeastern Japan (Tohoku). The great tsunami also inflicted critical damage on the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, which resulted in severe radioactive leakage and environmental hazards that required a long-term cleanup. Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings (TEPCO), which had run the nuclear plant, was blamed since they had been negligent in having countermeasures in place for severe disasters. Thus, people were highly critical of the company and considered the serious radioactive leakage a man-made rather than a natural disaster. While making his criticism of the institutional misconduct of 3.11, Sakate asked us, or those who did not directly suffer from the calamity, about how to face it. In his interview on March 11, 2012, he warned that we had stopped pursuing the true cause of the terrible catastrophe and merely inured ourselves into the state of anxiety:

People worry and fear about something. But when their anxiety has come true, they avoid regretting and being sorry about it. They only say, "Why didn't we worry about it properly?" or "If we aptly fear, we are not so shocked now." Here is an irony: people find solace in the state of anxiety. They just tell, "Now we are properly anxious and have plans for the worst case." (7)

However, Sakate wants to have less "fear" than "anger" (8). He likes to protest the opponent, and treat the problem in the state of "seething underneath," not to fear it "passively" (8). Sakate in *Bartlebies* curiously chooses a passive resistance approach

to narrate 3.11. Before addressing the point, I would like to review the plot of *Bartlebies* to show how Sakate adapts Melville's story to describe the appalling disaster.

Sakate's play opens with the account of the Director of T Hospital, located near the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Its model actually exists in the town near the nuclear plant as the only hospital that continued medical practices and accepted patients and admissions even after 3.11. The Director recollects the chaotic situation after the great earthquake. Because of the sequent explosions at the nuclear plant, local residents were instructed to find shelter or evacuate. The Director worked hard to protect T Hospital since they have many patients in critical condition. If they are required to move out, the Director thought, they would lose the will to live, or what she calls the "vital feeling" (8). Despite her utmost efforts, the number of doctors, nurses, and clerks gradually decreased because the fear of radiation leakage was spreading. While facing such a difficulty, the Director hired one pallid-faced youth as her recording secretary. While working hard at first, he started to reject any jobs by simply saying "I would prefer not to." Even after being fired, he strangely remained next to the Director's desk. Ultimately, the Director decided to accept the offer to move all of the doctors, nurses, staffs, and patients to a bigger hospital far away from the nuclear plant. Although deeply regretting it, she abandoned T Hospital to protect all the people in it. Still, the recording secretary would not move out. Afterward, the Director learned about him only from rumors. In one, he was forcefully removed by TEPCO and died in prison. In another, he was coerced into the nuclear plant: "even though he's been soaking up far more radiation than any human being could possibly handle, still he toils on" (18).

After the Director's recollection, *Bartlebies* revolves around the father-daughter

relationship (only their family name, Bito, is revealed), which connects the 1980s with 3.11. In the 1980s, when the Japanese stock market had been bullish, the father was in his senior year in college and worked part-time for a distributor of classified newspapers in Tokyo. Although the people surrounding him enjoyed good times, the father, inactive like *Bartleby*, did not go job hunting or work in earnest. His passive attitude was considered a rebellion against the capitalistic society. Time goes by and his daughter has grown up deeply influenced by his favorite story, Melville's "*Bartleby*." As her father is, the daughter is also like *Bartleby*. She indeed refuses to work at her part-time job and takes up residence in her work place. After 3.11, the daughter leaves her home and moves to a town in Tohoku to support a disaster area. There, she holes up in an advertising sign with the slogan "Nuclear Power. The Energy Competing with the World" (Fig. 5). Although they attempt to force her to leave the tower, which is located in a restricted area, she struggles to stay there.



Fig. 5. Photo of an advertising tower at Futaba Cho, Fukushima.

Taken by Yoji Sakate. From *Blog of Sakate*. August 23, 2015.

Sakate's play narrates the Great East Japan Earthquake with Bartleby's characteristic passivity or apathy. He depicts Bartleby-like persons, or "Bartlebies," as lacking that "vital feeling" (8): the Director's recording secretary, the father, and his daughter. For Sakate, passivity or apathy in Melville's short story does not mean pessimistic rejection of any actions:

Bartleby's "apathy," or being devoid of "vital feeling," is a resistance to [American] capitalism and commercialism, symbolized in the Wall Street. People might regard Bartleby as the symbol of death. But I think being without "vital feeling" does not mean that the person lacks in the will to live. Rather, it is his/her means to accept unreasonableness and absurdity of the world and live his/her own life. It shows the person's sensitivity and wisdom. ("Notes for the Stage for *Bartlebies*" 330)

Living in apathy and refusing any action is the person's own "expression" (334). Sakate also positively evaluates Bartleby's phrase, "I would prefer not to," as the means for the person to spend his or her own life:

We don't know what we can do. But the choice to live without being controlled by the surroundings with the motto of "I would prefer not to" is "the person's" expression. While the phrase seems to be passive, it helps him/her to sincerely confirm his/her own existence. (334)

Such positive understanding of Bartleby's passivity results in what I would call "kaleidoscopic nothingness" in Sakate's play. In allowing for various interpretations of the silence of the Bartlebies, Sakate's play reveals his political anger for the institutional misconduct of 3.11 and makes us contemplate how to face the disaster as our own problem.

In the discussion after the August 26, 2015 performance, Takayuki Tatsumi

points out that Sakate's play indicates that Bartleby's silence provides for a wide variety of interpretations. *Bartlebies* enables us to reinterpret that Melville's "Bartleby, who deals with dead letters, would forever experience a sort of unutterable "disaster" and could not tell the truth. The disaster could be either a natural hazard or a nuclear accident. It applies differently to the time and circumstances" (n. pag). Sakate, referring to his talk with Tatsumi, later emphasizes rejection of any interpretations as the common essence of Melville's "Bartleby" and his *Bartlebies*:

Bartleby would like to refuse any reasoning. The "disaster" as Bartleby's particular motivation cannot be identified with any single interpretation like a calamity, a nuclear accident, or a war. Thus, Bartleby never tells about his inner world. His presence itself seems to get closer to dead letters. (331)

According to him, *Bartlebies* is "a general term for those who live discomforted in the modern society" and for "those who are obliged to live in the unreasonable and absurd society" (327). Their choices are not covered by "any classifications like escape, refusal, laziness, and despair" (328). We reflect on *Bartlebies*' silence as the pathological state of the modern society, in which an individual suffers inner distress such as loneliness and boredom as well as external calamities such as disasters and wars. The passive people's silence and refusal to do anything paradoxically leads us to make numerous interpretations.

Both Melville's "Bartleby" and Sakate's *Bartlebies* revolve around the theme of interpreting nothingness. But, there is a critical difference between them. Examining these texts concurrently, we can demonstrate that Sakate attempts to overcome the limitations of Melville's story. As I have already noted, Melville's lawyer "charitably" tries to "construe to his imagination what proves impossible to be solved by his

judgment” (23). Although trying to understand the true meaning of Bartleby’s “passive resistance” and build a friendship with him, the narrator fails to realize his wish because of his persistent desire to retain his position as an employer (23). It is notable that the narrator consciously or unconsciously understands the reason for Bartleby’s rejection. The lawyer and his clerks, as he himself narrates, do “a dry, husky sort of business” of copying legal documents, which “the mettlesome poet Byron” would not do; their office is on the Wall Street, which is “deficient in what landscape painters call ‘life’” (18, 20, 14). However, when Bartleby “indifferently” asks “Do you not see the reason [why he rejects any job] for yourself?,” the lawyer merely sees the scrivener as mentally unbalanced. Due to his adherence to his social status, the narrator neither confronts Bartleby’s passivity and apathy as his own problem, nor understands that Bartleby reflects his hidden wish not to do “dry” jobs in the lonely street without “life.” In this sense, it can be said, Melville’s narrator misinterprets not only his clerk’s nothingness, but also himself. The readers cannot help but imagine that the narrator would realize his wish, if he thought of Bartleby’s “passive resistance” as his own problem, not as Bartleby’s.

Sakate’s adaptation of “Bartleby” realizes such a supposition of the readers. Unlike in Melville’s story, the characters in his play at last recognize what they have lost and what they have really wanted through their encounters with Bartlebies. Sakate’s play especially shows the audiences how to treat the disastrous past as our own problem by reconfiguring Melvillean dead letters in the context of 3.11. In the opening monodrama, Sakate first makes an adaptation of the dead letters. Losing her recording secretary, the Director hears several vague rumors about what he did before coming to T Hospital:

Just after the disaster, he volunteered to help the victims, but because his

build was slight he wasn't sent to do heavy labor. Instead he took responsibility for collecting things washed away by the tsunami, returning them to their owners or sending them to the surviving family members. In most cases, the owners were gone, or the place where he was supposed to return the items was in the off-limits zone. There were many things he collected that had nowhere to go. Scowling at the list of dead and missing, he nonetheless did the best he could, and day by day his collection of items with nowhere to go grew larger. Items that carried the memories of so many people. (20)

Here, Melville's pale-faced clerk at the Dead Letter Office in Washington is seen as a figure dealing with aimless articles left behind by the tsunami. The representation of dead letters is developed in the last scene, entitled "Walking Dead Letters." There, Sakate interestingly imagines resurrection of dead letters in the future. The daughter leaves her home just after the great earthquake and goes to support those in the restricted area. Sakate's play lets the audience surmise what she experienced: she probably worked with a lot of Bartlebies (people without vital feeling) and treated numerous dead letters (aimless articles left behind by the tsunami): a muddy school backpack, a family album, a distorted bicycle, and a pair shoes. Being surrounded by "ownerless articles left behind" with "aimless messages," the daughter herself becomes a "walking dead letter" (158). Walking dead letters are not just dead, but ambiguously suspended in the limbo between the living and the dead. Indeed, the daughter as a walking dead letter is "alive" and "finds solace with the dead" (158).

Sakate reconstructs Melville's "Bartleby" through the figuration of walking dead letters. Along with the main plot of the father and the daughter, Melville's short story is retold by anonymous characters numbered 1 to 6. In the final scene, these

nameless characters re-narrate the scene of Bartleby's death in the courtyard of the New York City prison:

6: "It [the courtyard] is where ordinary prisoners cannot get in."

5: "It is enclosed by the thick walls, and noises outside are completely shut out."

4: "The walls are made of bricks, and a gloom is heavily brooding."

2: "It is the pressure and melancholy of the real."

1: "But imprisoned grasses softly grow at the base."

3: "The future springs up at the heart of eternity." (150)

For Sakate, Bartleby's death enclosed in the brick walls contains a seed of life that would spring up in the future. As Weaver and Lawrence found creative futurity in the tragic end of *Moby-Dick*, Sakate's play also sees something out of nothing in Bartleby's pessimistic death.

The figuration of walking dead letters displays Sakate's political anger against those responsible for 3.11. He rewrites the "Tombs" in New York City, where Bartleby starves to death, into a mountain of black bulk bags, which were used to decontaminate radioactivity in the polluted areas of Tohoku (Fig. 6). At the dénouement of *Bartlebies*, the characters abandon human identity and transfigure themselves into bulk bags. At the end, the actors in black crouch down and gather themselves together to figuratively build the pyramid of bulk bags:

4: We would not go out.

3: Never.

2: We crouch in the corner of "a black pyramid," a mountain of bulk bags.

1: Someday, the bags will be torn up and our insides will ooze out.

2: . . . Here is far away from where “Bartleby” was written.

3: But the story that refuses to narrate will be with us.

...

2: As Melville did, we appropriate the fact.

5: [Our story is] fake and true.

6: [Our story includes] contradictions and the truth.

1: We accept the future with the dead.

3: We are feeling each other.

2: By doing so, we can finally see Bartleby.

1: Someday, we will be told to get out.

4: We will continue to say.

Females: We would prefer not to.

Males: We would prefer not to.

People: (Whispering) We would prefer not to.

People: (Firmly) We would prefer not to. (159-60)

The mountain of the Bartlebies’ black bulk bags embody Sakate’s political anger toward the institutional mistreatment of those who suffered from 3.11. In the near future, “the influential people” (19) of TEPCO and the Japanese government will remove the contaminated bags from the affected area and declare that the cleanup has been safely finished and then consign their dreadful mistakes to oblivion. Bartlebies would refuse to move out of the polluted area, and they would remain there. Their bodies in bulk bags, accompanied by the dangers of tearing and the leaking radioactive contents, would haunt the hypocritical people and make them remember the traumatic past. Although keeping their silence, Bartlebies as walking dead letters leave the message for the future to memorialize the disastrous man-made accident and

the institutional mistreatments.



Fig. 6. Black bulk bags, filled with contamination waste, are piled up in Fukushima. Mainichi Shinbun. December 10, 2015.

More importantly, Sakate's play encourages the audience to contemplate 3.11 through the kaleidoscopic nothingness of *Bartlebies*. In the midst of her struggle to stay inside the advertising sign, the daughter accidentally falls from it. The Director and the father come to her and are relieved to know that she is still alive. At the moment when she embraces her, the Director finds the "vital feeling" that she did not feel from her recording secretary. Both the daughter and the recording secretary are depicted as *Bartlebies*. The Director confirms life in the daughter by actually touching her body: "I faintly feel. Something is in her. It may not be a vital feeling. But I feel you feel my breath, temperature, and heartbeat. I don't have a medical license, but I know it. You are alive. You are living as I am. You are me" (155). Here, we see the crucial difference between Melville's "Bartleby" and Sakate's *Bartlebies*. Stressing

the ghostly characteristics of his pale-faced scrivener, Melville's narrator fails to uncover the problem of his own in *Bartleby* due to his adherence to his social status. Sakate's Director, reflecting her physical signs on the daughter's body, finally realizes the nothingness of the *Bartleby*-like figures reveals our own problem. In other words, *Bartlebies* are not merely the haunted others. Rather, they help us to rediscover what we have oppressively hidden in our own minds.

In her recollection of the strange recording secretary, the Director remembers that she too was a *Bartleby*, not only him. When the Director was required to remove all of the doctors, nurses, staff members, and patients from T Hospital, she and her colleagues at first rejected the directive. It was neither because of "a sense of justice and compassion for the patients" nor of "a rebellion and despair" (19). Rather, she felt "something dim" in her mind that "stemmed from [her] nature and understanding" (19). In other words, like the recording secretary, she "also would prefer not to do so" (19). But, having been gradually influenced by her surroundings, she finally abandoned her hospital under the guise of protecting the people. After they moved out, she knows, the site of T Hospital was ironically resold to TEPCO for its staff. She has lost her secretary and comes to notice her own regret about the decision: "Like him, I also should stay at the hospital. By leaving 'the very spot,' we might forget and become insensitive to it [what we feel and think]" (19). Despite having lost her own will, the Director regains it by embracing the daughter. She firmly promises herself: "I will come back to the hospital someday and build a new hospital again. I will withdraw there and never go out" (156). In Sakate's play, the *Bartlebies*' passive resistance reminds the people that it is "the best days" when they deal with dead letters and keep in touch with the dead (156).

Japanese theatre critic Nishido Kojin locates Sakate's essence in his "anger" or

“irritation”: “the rejection to the contemporary society” lies at the heart of his plays (219). Sakate expresses his anger about 3.11 through the kaleidoscopic nothingness of *Bartlebies*, which ambiguously renounces specific reasoning but contains many possibilities of interpretation. *Bartlebies* denounces the institutional mistreatments after 3.11, while asking us how to ponder the disaster as our own problem. To be honest, immediately after the great earthquake and the devastating explosions at the nuclear plant, we raised up to support those who suffered from the disaster: some saved water and electricity, sending money and daily living necessities; others actually went to assist in the affected area. It is also true that now, after eight years have elapsed, our interest has waned, and our memories have faded away. In Sakate’s play, Bartleby-like characters stimulate our traumatic memories: they always refuse any single interpretation, but at the same time, open up any possibilities for everyone to variously reflect his or her own mind on 3.11.

My study has examined the dynamism of nothingness in Melville’s later writings, suspended between the state of being positive and creative and being destructive and pessimistic. The seminal studies of the Melville Revival see the author making something out of nothing in the tragic end of *Moby-Dick*. Ahab’s defeat against the white whale, for D. H. Lawrence, reminds the white race of their neglected blood and body; Raymond Weaver wished to see the heavenly resurrection of the ruined crew led by the white whale. Such reinterpretations by the modernist writers, as I have shown, could well have originated in Melville’s writings. To examine the ambiguous power of nothingness has been the consistent theme in Melville from *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* through “Bartleby” and *Israel Potter* to his later poems. His characters show the desire to abandon their identity and subjectivity in self-annihilation, a passive life, and self-fashioning. Melville’s texts reflect criticisms

of U.S. society: seeing that the hierarchical relationship among people remained through slavery and Manifest Destiny, Melville felt compelled to issue a warning that the American ideals of democratic equality, self-reliant individuality, and white subjectivity had become emasculated. At the same time, Melville's texts also search for a way to recreate these ideals at the very moment of his characters' destructive and tragic ending. Beyond time and space, Sakate's *Bartlebies* shows that the pallid clerk requires us to embrace our lost humanity and regain our repressed and forgotten minds. In this sense, we can see that Melville's passive apparitions have continued to be resurrected in the wake of the bicentennial.

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