Melville's *Pierre*: 
Don Quixote with a Vengeance

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The reference to Cervantes's masterpiece in the title of this paper is meant to evoke one of the most powerful incarnations of the hero as reader and author (in the sense of "creator of fictions") in Western literature. My main subject here is another character, a sort of distant American cousin of Cervantes's knight-errant, the hero of a literary work in which literature itself, and specifically its fruition and creation, are at the center of the story. Herman Melville's *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* (1852) is, in Edgar A. Dryden's apt phrase, "a book about writing and reading and about the consumption and production of literary texts" (146). In view of this I believe it is worth devoting some attention to the particular climate in which this novel was conceived, published, and received.

Melville's intentions in writing *Pierre*, as well as his expectations, represent perhaps the most puzzling enigma, the greatest ambiguity that the reader of the novel must confront. Because of the disappointing sales of his three earlier works, Melville's English publisher, Richard Bentley, wrote to him on March 4, 1852, saying that he would consider *Pierre* for publication only on a joint account and on the basis of half-profits (reported in *Pierre* 367). Melville rejected the offer and, in a letter dated April 16, 1852, commented on his latest novel with words that have perplexed several generations of critics:

And more especially am I impelled to decline those overtures upon the ground that my new book possessing unquestionable novelty, as regards my former ones, - treating of utterly new scenes & characters; - and, as I believe, very much more calculated for popularity than anything you have yet published of mine.
- being a regular romance, with a mysterious plot to it, & stirring passions at work, and withal, representing a new and elevating aspect of American life. (449-50)

As we now know, not only did the book prove to be very unpopular, but it was rebuffed with unusual violence and animosity by almost all contemporary reviewers. The questions which must necessarily arise at this point are the following: was Melville in earnest? Was this a desperate attempt to sell the book, with expressions which betray his growing anxieties about his financial situation? Was he trying to deceive his publisher and himself? The hypothesis that Melville sincerely believed in Pierre’s success seems to be supported, although indirectly, by what he wrote in his homage to Hawthorne’s writings, “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850). In this two-part essay, published in The Literary World, Melville expressed his admiration for Hawthorne’s ability to address simultaneously different kinds of audiences. Hawthorne, Melville believed, had found a way to conceal profound, disturbing truths under a surface that could provide naive readers with reassuring amusement, truths which, at the same time, would not escape the attention of a selected, more sophisticated part of the public.

It is possible that, in writing Pierre, Melville was trying to capture this particular quality of Hawthorne’s works, that, in a way, he was trying to write two books at the same time. Perhaps the failure of Pierre depended precisely on his inability to do so, his inability to emulate the double level of meaning which the narrator of Pierre sees as characteristic of Dante’s Inferno:

Fortunately for the felicity of the Dilettante in Literature, the horrible allegorical meanings of the Inferno, lie not on the surface; but unfortunately for the earnest and youthful piercers into truth and reality, those horrible meanings, when first discovered, infuse their poison into a spot previously unprovided with that sovereign antidote of a sense of uncapitulatable security, which is only the possession of the furthest advanced and profoundest souls. (169)

“I write precisely as I please” (144) the narrator tells us defiantly in Book 17. Although it is tempting to view Pierre as characterized by a certain suicidal grandeur, Melville probably believed that this could be the
book with which he could please his audience while pleasing himself. The vast majority of the public would probably be content with what was in the plot but, perhaps, there could be also others who, like Hawthorne with *Moby-Dick*, would be able to “embrace the soul” (Leyda 435) of the book.

It is undeniable that some of the themes Melville chose to address in *Pierre* were daring ones. His unmasking of the dark face of family relationships or his observations on the value of Christianity, to name just a couple of examples, may appear to be deliberately provoking and shocking rather than calculated for popularity. Yet the enormous popular success, over the previous half-century, of such sensational novels as *The Monk* (1796) and *The Quaker City* (1844), clearly indicates that there was a great deal of curiosity about, and demand for, “outrageous” topics. In addition, the author of *Moby-Dick* must have been aware that stories dealing with incest and other “forbidden” passions were being published in several magazines and read avidly by a large audience. Because of its wide appeal, exploitative literature could not be ignored by a writer searching for ingredients to enrich the surface of his work, to provide entertainment on the level of action.

Particularly representative of the period’s popular taste is George Lippard’s *The Quaker City*. This novel was a sensational best-seller in spite, or perhaps because, of its “highly immoral” reputation. Interestingly enough, its plot was inspired by a notorious illicit-love scandal in Philadelphia, involving a man who had shot his sister’s seducer. It is not unlikely that Melville was acquainted with both this case and Lippard’s novel. Moreover, as David S. Reynolds has pointed out, there are similarities between the sinister city-imagery in *Pierre*, with its netherworld-like quality, and the prevailing atmosphere of *The Quaker City* (83). In both works goodness and virtue are seen as defenceless against the forces of darkness and there is a strong sense of the pervasive quality of evil which hides treacherously behind the screen of religion and respectability.

Like Melville, Lippard has some of his characters question even the very existence of God and refer derisively to the notion of man’s natural goodness. Indeed, even the outbursts of utter disenchantment and the “denunciation-of-the-world theme” that characterize the last part of *Pierre* were not unfamiliar to the reading public of the time. In another largely popular novel, George Thompson’s *The Ladies’ Garter* (1850), the
protagonist learns of the sinful past of a respected gentleman by observing closely his portrait as a young man. *The Ladies’ Garter* is not only interesting in that it anticipates one of the central moments in *Pierre*, but also because, as in Melville, the “discovery” forces the hero to confront the question of moral ambiguity. In this as well as in other novels by the same author, such as *City Crimes* (1849), the protagonists have to acknowledge the utterly corrupt state of society. What is more, they come to brand the world as one “gigantic lie” with words that Melville’s hero echoes in *Pierre* (Reynolds 84).

Another section of the audience which Melville probably had in mind while writing *Pierre* was the one formed by the readers of sentimental novels. Works like Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), which superimposed a pastoral world of idyllic serenity and spotless morality on the reality of poverty and crime, reassured the audience with their emphasis on traditional values and were rewarded with great commercial success. In Reynolds’s view, by combining such antithetical (though equally exploitative) genres as the sensational and the sentimental, Melville created a hybrid which did not please any class of readers. To ascribe the majestic failure of *Pierre* to an inappropriate mixture of ingredients seems a rather facile solution, but Reynolds does have a point when he maintains that what made the book particularly unappealing to the majority of readers was its anti-moral. What could be more alarming than the suggestion that “strict insistence on moral rectitude ironically leads to immorality and violence” (Reynolds 159). Pierre and his mother provide examples of the devastating effects that an obsession with virtue can cause and, though acting according to different standards, both display monomaniacal traits. They are both champions of moral inflexibility, the one form of perversion which, Melville seems to suggest, the America of his day had most reason to fear.

What Reynolds’s analysis does not seem to take into full account is the particular way in which Melville treated the genres he was trying to emulate to please popular taste. In a famous letter to Hawthorne he wrote: “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, - it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches” (Leyda 412). In *Pierre*, Melville perhaps set out to write precisely “the other way”. However, using materials which he very
likely found repugnant he was, in a sense, committing violence on himself, violence against which he reacted, parodying savagely the very materials he was using.

This might be a way of accounting for the disconcerting artificiality of the language and the mawkish imagery in the first part of the book (as in the often cited passage in which love is described as a "volume bound in rose-leaves" 34), or the purely melodramatic quality of some scenes in the "New York section" (for instance, Pierre’s disruption of Glendinning’s party in Book 15). As far as we know, when the book was published nobody read it as parody. Also, significantly enough, Pierre was rejected in its entirety. Nobody was intrigued by some parts while irritated by others, and the book was considered offensive from beginning to end. Perhaps, though failing to identify the parodic element as such, the reviewers could not help being influenced by the author’s ill-disguised contempt for his own subject matter, a contempt which could be easily interpreted as being implicitly extended to his potential readers.

In order to understand the failure of Pierre, we must not simply speculate on Melville’s expectations and intentions about the book, but also on the public’s and the critics’ expectations about Melville. Book 17 of Pierre, “Young America in Literature”, tells us a great deal about the difficult relationship between the author and the New York literary establishment. Pierre’s early poems, we are told, receive praise for their perfect taste, because they are not marred by such offensive qualities as “originality” and “taste”, because they are, in other words, harmless.

he never permits himself to astonish; is never betrayed into anything coarse or new; as assured that whatever astonishes is vulgar, and whatever is new must be crude. Yes, it is the glory of this admirable young author, that vulgarity and vigor - two inseparable adjuncts - are equally removed from him. (245)

To the readers of Melville, the readers of Typee and Omoo, Pierre represented precisely something new and astonishing, that is to say crude and vulgar. Like Pierre with Dante’s Inferno (in Book 3), they reacted impatiently to the book’s uncompromising disclosure of “the infinite cliffs and gulfs of human mystery and misery” (54), to the suggestion that the visible world, far from being simple and comprehensible, is in fact utterly
inscrutable. But to Melville any attempt to represent life as orderly and clear is an act of deception. Ignoring the unfathomable quality of human existence the artist becomes a cheat. Pretending to superimpose an organized structure and an open meaning on what cannot be neither organized nor understood, s/he becomes an accomplice in the fabrication of an illusion.

If we imagine two classes of readers, one rejoicing in the illusion, the other having the capacity to recognize it as such, we might say that Pierre’s encounter with Isabel results in his gradual passage from the first to the second. Commenting on Pierre’s attitude towards novels, Melville explains at length how this has been deeply affected by his first interview with his newly-found sister. He is no longer deceived by their “inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystemizable elements”, and is able to recognize all their “speculative lies” (141). He has come to realize that

the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all that can be humanly known of human life; these never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings; but in imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels (as mutilated stumps), hurry to abrupt intermergings with eternal tides of time and fate. (141)

The same insight is indispensable to the readers of philosophy. It enables them to identify as folly the claim of those who pretend to have found a solution to life’s contradictions, those who think they can interpret what cannot be interpreted, that silence which, Melville believes, is the voice of God. However painful, the acceptance of the mystery, of the ambiguities of this world, is better than the delusion; to realize that there may be no answer to the intricacies of life is, ultimately, better than to fabricate one’s substitute for it. Yet the world seems to have no tolerance for such an attitude. The world encourages and rewards those who participate and conspire in the delusion while condemning and castigating those who rebel against it. Hostility, rather than gratitude, greets those who have the courage to denounce hypocrisy, who say aloud that there are questions that cannot be answered. When *Pierre* was published many reviewers found it baffling, bewildering, and complained that it offered no clue to the dilemmas it presented to its readers. What they searched for, what they demanded, were artificial, complaisant solutions and
explanations, something which, if granted, would have meant to Melville
the loss of his integrity as an artist and a human being.

Pierre, the author, has to learn, among other things, that

though the world worship Mediocrity and Common Place, yet hath it fire and
sword for all contemporary grandeur; that though it swears that it fiercely assails
all Hypocrisy, yet hath it not always an ear for Earnestness. (264)

Was this the lesson Melville himself had to learn from the indifferent
reception of *Moby-Dick*? The writer may begin to feel uncertain even of the
very possibility of literature in the face of public misunderstanding or
neglect. Uncertainty and doubts never abandon Pierre throughout the
composition of his book, a task performed in utter isolation and solitude.

Book 19 of *Pierre*, which contains Plinlimmon’s pamphlet on
“Chronometricals and Horologicals”, sheds light on the question of
Melville’s authorial conduct and choices. It is wrong, it is highly unwise,
the pamphlet tells us, to apply heavenly standards to earthly life. It is
advisable instead that men lower their moral aspirations to realizable
levels. This is the lesson Pierre refuses to learn, the same lesson that
Melville himself rejected in relation to his artistic endeavors. He struggled,
in other words, against the notion that artists have to stoop, to lower their
natural aspirations in order to encounter approval. Commenting on the
pamphlet, Henry A. Murray observed that the “enthusiast Christian youth”
is confronted with the dilemma of having to choose between following
Christ’s morality and consequently being “rewarded” by his or her
conscience but censored by society, or following society’s morality and
consequently being “rewarded” by society but censored by his or her
conscience (lxxi). In a way, the dilemma facing artists is not dissimilar
since, as Melville seems to suggest, they are forced to make a choice
between giving way to their natural aspirations, thus pleasing themselves
but alienating the public, or following the public’s taste, thus winning its
approbation while, at the same time, betraying themselves.

Melville uses the pamphlet to comment scornfully on those who call
themselves Christians and actually distort and compromise the very values
they pretend to uphold. By distinguishing between heavenly and earthly
standards, they manage to twist God’s words in order to hear what they
want to hear. In such a world, Pierre’s ideals are not only impracticable, but also senseless. Given this, the novel may be read as an enraged, tragic variation on the quixotic model: the difference between idea and reality finally becomes clear as the hero’s false view of the world is mercilessly exposed.

In the early part of the novel we learn that everything around Pierre inspires ten thousand “thoughts of heroinesness” (14). However, unlike that of his ancestors, Pierre’s life is, at the time we encounter him, uneventful and ordinate. His longing for “some insulted good cause to defend” (14) remains unsatisfied and his condition is one of great restlessness and tension (“a war-horse paws himself into a lyric of foam” 14). Like Don Quixote, he moves in a world ill-fitted for the self-affirmation of a would-be chivalrous hero (Auerbach 151). In a very important scene in Book 1, Mrs. Glendinning, while handling General Glendinning’s baton, is suddenly made aware of the irreconcilable drives agitating her son’s life. How can domestic restraint and docility be reconciled with a disposition for heroism and command? Also, more importantly, we should ask: what is the nature and origin of such a disposition? Pierre’s life is significantly described in Book 1 as a “sweetly-writ manuscript” (7), and Pierre himself might be considered as a naïve reader who comes to view himself as a sort of knight-errant, the protagonist of a lofty epic poem. The glorious associations of his birthplace cannot but nurture this delusion and with it the desire to display his chivalrous qualities (hence his longing for a sister to protect). But the fallacies of the manuscript are all too soon revealed. As Pierre gradually opens his eyes, the images of valiant deeds and noble virtues suggested by the rural beauties of Saddle Meadows leave their place to the reality of narrow-mindedness and bigotry of provincial life. Pierre’s God-like father is revealed to be a seducer, his sister-like mother a cold, heartless, self-centered hypocrite. The city, far from being the place where the “airier graces of life” (6) are cultivated, proves to be the reign of brutality and philistinism, the stage for the death of the soul. Ideal, courteous love is replaced by incestuous passion and Christianity yields to blasphemy.

An analysis of these transformations may lead to a reconsideration, or even a vindication, of some of the major eccentricities of the text. Considering Pierre as a possible quixotic hero, we might say that, perhaps, the affected, overwrought style of the first chapters should not be stigmatized
as one of the book’s major flaws. In fact, it could be seen as intended to reflect the protagonist’s distorted view of reality and, as such, successful. In order to give the full sense of Pierre’s delusion, Melville describes with extravagant imagery a paradisiacal feudal world. A world of dream-like beauty—”strange”, “wonder-smitten”, “trance-like”, “wonderful”, and “bewitched” (3)—and chromatic brilliancy—”green and golden”, “verdant”, “ruddy-cheeked”, “white-footed”, “white glossy”, “rich crimson” (3-4)—which “was the perfect mould of a delicate and poetic mind” (5). Surrounded by images suggestive of the intrepid deeds of a past era, “liberally developed in person and manners” (6), introduced early to fine culture and to the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith, Pierre appears to fit perfectly the prototypic courteous hero in search of a cause to defend, of wrongs to right. But, as we soon discover, things are very different from what they seem to be. Pierre’s uncommonly beautiful birthplace, the site of his ancestors’ heroic actions and, seemingly, the abode of virtue and honor, is also the place of intolerance, hypocrisy, and moral absolutism. It is a place characterized by rigid codes of behavior, the infringement of which is punished swiftly and harshly, as the story of Delly Ulver amply demonstrates.

The idealized picture of Pierre’s father crumbles as miserably as that of Saddle Meadows. Even though throughout the novel there is a sense of uncertainty as to the reliability of Isabel’s story, what is relevant is the way it makes the virtuous reputation of Pierre’s father appear as a mystifying construction. Isabel’s letter undoes all of Mrs Glendinning’s efforts to “magnify ... spiritualize, and deify her husband’s memory” (83) and reveal them in all their artificiality. Its revelations also deeply affect Pierre’s view of his mother. The hypothesis of a disclosure of Isabel’s identity to Mrs Glendinning makes Pierre aware of his mother’s “immense pride” (89), an insurmountable barrier which his “lover-like adoration” (89) for her had prevented him from seeing. The till then cherished appearance of “perfect confidence and mutual understanding” is wiped out to be replaced by a feeling “entirely lonesome, and orphan-like”, and Pierre finds himself regretting the “thousand sweet illusions of life; tho’ purchased at the price of life’s truth” (89). He has come to realize that what his mother really loves in him is little more than the reflection of her own splendor. What she values mostly is his devotion and admiration for her as well as his docility.
He has a role to play, and the moment he steps out of it he ceases to represent an object of affection. Hers is a monstrously selfish view of life, one in which even other people’s tragedies (such as Delly’s) are exclusively regarded as possible perturbations to the harmony of her own little world. If to act with wisdom means to acknowledge the elusive quality of truth and the fundamental ambiguity of morality, then Mrs Glendinning’s attitude, her conviction to be the repository of such values, represent the ultimate form of folly.

On first entering New York (in Book 16), Pierre comments bitterly on the hardness of the road pavement, which seems to suggest the equally hard and pitiless nature of the place. It is the first time, he tells Isabel, that he has seen the city by night, and what he sees is dramatically different from the pleasant memories of his annual visits with his father and mother. It could not be otherwise as, at this stage, he does see things differently. Like Saddle Meadows, the city now shows its worst face, and what should have been the entrance into the reign of refinement and sophistication becomes instead a descent into the netherworld. Everything in the city speaks of corruption and perversion: the lights, the noise and, most of all, the people. The fiendish coach-driver, the “scarlet-cheeked, glaringly-arrayed” temptress (237) (possibly a reminiscence of the woman in the scarlet petticoat in Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”), and the bestial mob in the watch-house, all concur in an appalling representation of debased humanity. The scene in the watch-house, which cannot fail to strike the reader for the physical sense of repulsion it conveys, assumes a particularly sinister meaning if interpreted as a further enactment of the hero’s impact with reality:

The sights and sounds which met the eye of Pierre on re-entering the watch-house, filled him with inexpressible horror and fury. The before decent, drowsy place, now fairly reeked with all things unseemly ... In indescribable disorder, frantic, diseased-looking men and women of all colors, and in all imaginable flaunting, immodest, grotesque, and shattered dresses, were leaping, yelling, and cursing around him ... On all sides, were heard drunken male and female voices, in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, interlarded now and then, with the foulest of all human lingoes, that dialect of sin and death, known as the Cant language, or the Flash ...
The thieves'-quarters, and all the brothels, Lock-and-Sin hospitals for incurables, and infirmarys and infernoes of hell seemed to have made one combined sortie, and poured out upon earth through the vile vomitory of some unmentionable cellar. (241)

The Pierre who reemerges from this hellish crowd, after having fought his way into it to rescue Isabel and Delly, does not escape untainted by such a contact. Disgusted by the spectacle of what his fellow human beings can become, he opts for a life of seclusion and minimal communication.

Pierre’s simulated marriage with Isabel represents a double deception. It deceives the world (as it is intended to do), by presenting a façade of legality and ordinariness which protects a most unusual situation and, more importantly, it deceives Pierre’s courteous ideals of fraternal love. Having originally conceived the union as a stratagem to give himself and his newly-found sister the chance to live in “domestic confidence” (192) without dishonoring his father’s memory, Pierre must soon acknowledge the different, non-brotherly nature of his feelings for Isabel. Having fantasized about a sister to “protect, and fight for” (7), he finds himself entangled in a relationship based on much less uplifting premises. Not only is he not able to live up to his chivalrous ideals, but Isabel herself is equally unfit to fulfill the role he had imagined for her. As her jealous reaction to Lucy’s arrival at the Apostles clearly demonstrates, the “sweet and awful passiveness” (192) which earlier in the novel seduced Pierre is only one aspect of her intricate character, and her affectionate devotion can easily turn into manic possessiveness.

Finally, even the very possibility of what the narrator describes as the “deepest element” (6) in Pierre’s upbringing, his Christian faith, is revealed to be illusory. His book that, leech-like, has slowly and unremittingly absorbed his very essence, is branded as a “blasphemous rhapsody” (356). But how could it be otherwise in a world where truth is elusive and virtue impracticable? Ironically, those who, in spite of all evidence, insist and strive to find truth and virtue are called swindlers and liars. Life which, to the would-be knight-errant of the first chapters was an incomparable gift, is scornfully discarded by the more insightful author-hero of the closing scenes. By taking his life, Pierre leaves this world with a derisive parting glance: death is not accepted, but rather welcomed.


