EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM AND HERMAN MELVILLE*

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There are many critical manners of looking at any writer. It is impossible for anyone to absolutely disclaim the validity of any of these manners. For instance, we can study Shakespeare from the varying points of view of (1) the Renaissance stage conventions that shaped his work, (2) historical and biographical data that illuminate his work, (3) problems in textual scholarship, (4) the New Criticism's wholly aesthetic approach, or (5) the medieval and renaissance notions of cosmology and ethics that inform his plays—and there are many more approaches. This study explores the point of view of the existentialist as critic of life and literature and then suggests how this point of view may be valuable in regarding the works of Herman Melville.

I

Existentialism is in our time a household word, and it is applied to every study from politics to literature—often wrongly, often cheaply and sensationaliy. It has been commandeered by novelists like Richard Wright to explain the plight of the Negro as an outsider. It has been attached to singer Juliette Greco; and it has been taken over in part by the San Francisco Beats. But in its most seriously philosophical terms, it is a form of ontology or at least of phenomenology. And it can, as such, direct the thinking of a literary critic in exegesis of certain kinds of literature.

Existentialism as a philosophical movement, or rather as a way of looking at oneself and the world about one, is not a recent phenomenon. For the average reader it has been linked only with certain bohemian cafes in Paris after World War II. Undesirable sensationalism, faddism, cultism, and superficial sophistication have all unfortunately attached themselves to the most recent manifestations of this method of thought and drawn upon it the disapproval of the serious intellectual in other countries besides France. I say that this is unfortunate not out of pity for the existentialists, but out of regard for the general understanding of intellectual movements and their consequences in history. Existential thought is a very real and a very potent force in modern living, and a blindness to this movement or trend is a blindness to what is happening

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around one. I fear that our conservative scholars, disgusted by some of the lunatic fringe and the cultism of modern existentialism, have committed themselves to a seriously debilitating blindness in the field of modern philosophical movements. This is particularly true, I think, of our literary critics. Existentialism in the twentieth century is closely linked to literary art. The most important of recent existential thinkers have not been philosophers only, but literary artists. I am thinking particularly of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir.

A literary critic whose field is American literature of the period from 1830 to 1860 would scarcely dream of divorcing an examination of the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman from Transcendentalism, that extraordinary brand of idealism which dominated the thought and literary creations of these men. Even the critics of their era were aware of their philosophical biases and duly noted them. By the same token literary critics of our time should not close their eyes to existentialism.

Existentialism is not new. Its elements certainly appear in the fragmentary philosophies of the pre-Socratic philosophers. Thales, Heraclitus, and the major Sophists all represent certain existential attitudes. With the coming of Socrates and Plato, idealism swept away the relativism and pluralism of the pre-Socratics, and the ordered rationalism of Aristotle's mind denied the irrational elements which are foundations of existential thinking. On Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle the philosophy of twenty centuries was built. With a few notable exceptions the philosophical and religious thought of those centuries was dominated by three factors: by idealism, optimism, rationalism, or by a combination of two or three of them. It is true that some of the Church mystics were irrationalists. There were also some heretic, pantheist mystics in the history of Western thought. Indeed, late Roman Stoicism was a tiny camp of pessimism and anti-idealism in the Western world, but it was eventually smothered by a combination of Christianity, Platonism, and Aristotelianism. In general this long twenty-century period was thoroughly dominated by the rationalism of Plotinian Christian Platonism, the rationalism of St. Thomas Aquinas' Aristotelian Christianity, and a general feeling—despite human cruelty, plagues, fires, pestilence, wars, famines—that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world.

The eighteenth century saw a de-emphasis of God and a deification of Reason. But this was merely an emphasis on another aspect of the same general train of thought that had prevailed since the great Greeks. Granted, the eighteenth century upheaval was enormous. The movement from religious to secular thinking was pro-
foundly disturbing to the world, but in some respects it was merely
a surface manifestation of something far more significant going
on underneath.

During the second half of the eighteenth century and throughout
the entire nineteenth century, Germanic idealism seemed to domi-
nate Western thinking. Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and the English and
American transcendental followers of these philosophers were the
important thinkers of the time. But it is important to notice that
contemporary with these men arose two movements in thought
which were to overthrow this brand of idealism. On the one hand
were Marx, Engels, and dialectical materialism; on the other were
Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and the existentialists. It is ironic to note
that both of these movements derived their vitality from a reaction
to the systematic idealism of G. W. F. Hegel.

At this point we must be certain to note the vast differences that
exist within the broad term “existentialism.” One of the disturbing
factors to the student of philosophy in approaching existential
thought is the fact that he finds difficulty in systematizing it. There
is a very good reason for this. One of the few things which all
existentialists have in common is a rebellion against all systemati-
zation or attempts to unify things into wholes. It is easy to see then
why Kierkegaard rebelled so violently against Hegel. The vast, arti-
ficial “world career” of Hegel, so carefully worked out through
thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, was maddening to Kierkegaard.
He saw it not as the dynamic process which Hegel had intended,
but as an empty shell without a self. The thing which was missing
was the philosopher himself. No man, said Kierkegaard, can set up
an artificial system which actually represents external reality, be-
cause all he can know is within himself. His senses are faulty, even
with the most intricate extensions of them which man can contrive.
Knowledge comes from within, but not from Kant’s ordered cate-
gorical and intuitive Reason. Rather “Truth is subjectivity,” says
Kierkegaard. Nietzsche extends this thought to the extreme of the
Superman. The will to power is the subjective force of truth. Man
alone must breed moral superiority by reversing the weak moral
tenets of Christianity.

For both of these men the world presented a welter and a chaos.
It was “absurd,” in the sense that it was, they felt, vastly different
in its physical and psychological reality from what man, through
scientific rationalism and blind idealism, attempted to bend it into.
The “absurd,” then, arises out of the ironic disparity between what
promises the world actually makes to man and what man fancies
he sees in the world or what he, with his infinitely complex moral
imagination, thinks that the world should be. This element of exist-
entialism can be recognized as a favorite theme of world literature. It is the basis of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. For the existentialist, *Hamlet* is the “absurd” man. It is a particularly potent theme in literature beginning with the Romantic movement in the late eighteenth century and continuing with some abatement through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The definition of “Byronism” is contained within the dichotomy of the ironic “should-be” and “is.” Goethe, Keats, Tennyson, Baudelaire, Poe—all of these men represent this theme in their works and lives.

But Nietzsche was an atheist (or at any rate a violent anti-Christian), and Kierkegaard was a great Christian theologian. How can this wide disparity occur? I suggested previously that all existentialists are different. Since they are anti-systematists it is difficult to make philosophies or systems out of their thinking. Kierkegaard said that the fact that man feels himself alone within his subjective being, that he is riddled with the anguish of existence, aware of the chaos of the real world around him, aware that existence and the universe are “absurd”—this is the fact, Kierkegaard says, which helps produce the leap of faith by which man discovers that God is the “absurd.” There is a bitter relief and glory in this realization which is one way of regarding the gift of Grace. It is perhaps easy to see in this what some of the more realistic and less sanguine Christians have maintained about Christianity from the very beginning. All the great mystic saints of the Church have been aware of the “dark night of the soul,” the agony of being a Christian.

Modern atheistic existentialists such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir are probably most responsible for the twentieth century revivification of existentialist thought. But there are Christians among these contemporary existentialists. Father Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers, and even Reinhold Niebuhr can be classified, at least in part, as existential thinkers. There is a similarity in thought amongst all these writer-philosophers, up to the point, that is, at which the Christians make the leap of faith. Existentialists see man thrown alone into a materialistic jungle. If he keeps good faith with himself, he realizes his aloneness and does not create moral fantasies around himself. This realization causes dread, anguish, “fear and trembling,” and even “nausea.” Concomitant with this feeling of aloneness comes a nauseating awareness of subjective selfhood. The existentialist becomes terribly aware of himself as a single, individual entity in the process of creating itself. In a world with no external values, the individual is faced with the fact that he is merely a blob of sentient and intelligent protoplasm with the necessity of shaping not only its own personality, but its entire code of values. In other words, in every
action a choice is made by the individual which helps to delineate the values of the individual and therefore adds to the totality of his personality. This holds particularly true in the case of the actions of an individual facing death. The way he faces death sums him up.

Thus the existentialist sees that the world is “absurd.” It is “absurd” because of the incongruity between the chaotic nature of the universe into which man is thrown and the functioning of man’s moral imagination. In other words, man’s mind is so constructed that he conceives of an ordered moral universe. He does not live in such a place, they say. Consequently, he is torn among the following possibilities: living in a constant dream fantasy (where, by the way, he is continually betrayed); not living in this impossible environment at all (suicide); or living in this chaos stripped bare of the trappings of all false systems, schemes, moral formulae, easy religions, God-comfort, “Ben-Franklin” type moral virtue—everything.

These are the only three paths. The first—for the person who respects intellect and reality—is unthinkable. It is hiding; it is unreal; it is escape. It might be a solution, of course, but in the long run reality will betray the illusion. All the false codes and formulae break down and betray. So the strong man has only two paths to choose; he may commit suicide, or he may face the chaos of living in this bitter world he never chose and learn to live without hope in the midst of absurdity—in fact, to become an “absurd” man as did Hamlet. Hamlet suddenly sees the world bare, denuded of the pretty formulae presented him in youth and in “your philosophy” at Wittenberg. And the world becomes an “unweeded garden.” Things “rank and gross in nature” possess it entirely. Hamlet sees the vast absurdity of man in this world (note his “What is man?” speech), and for a time, when he realizes the horrible necessity for self-definitive action on his part, he contemplates the other path—suicide (note the “To be or not to be” soliloquy). But when he decides to live in the chaos in which love is a liar; his mother a whore; his unshriven, ghostly father a wanderer in an earthly purgatory; his uncle a bestial, lecherous murderer; his school chums his potential murderers—when he decides to live in such a world, he realizes that the “readiness is all.” Note that he comes close to accepting the philosophy of Horatio, the friend who admits that he is “more of an antique Roman than a Dane.” Horatio is a Stoic, and we have already observed that is many respects Roman Stoicism was a sort of ancient existentialism. For the Senecan Roman there was no moral fantasy. The Stoic admitted he had been tossed into a chaotic universe. He either learned to live in that bitter environment (as did Marcus Aurelius) or he calmly slashed his wrists and bled to
death while unconcernedly gossiping or reciting poetry (as did Petronius Arbiter).

Hamlet, in some respects, follows both paths. He learns how to live in this world in the sense of performing the necessary self-definitive actions. But his actions lead inevitably to his own destruction. So Hamlet becomes an excellent archetypal existential figure.

At the point of choosing one of the three possible paths—the moral dream-fantasy, suicide, or living without hope—the Christian existentialists and the atheists part. The Christian feels that at that point the leap to faith in God is made—that He is the "absurd," that finding him is an agony, a little Crucifixion, a bitter but glorifying experience. This, they feel, is the way to learn to live without hope—by living with faith in God. The atheistic existentialists, of course, would say that the so-called Christians are actually creating another fantasy world to live in.

Of the other two paths—suicide or actually living without hope—either is acceptable, say the atheistic or agnostic existentialists. A man may kill himself or learn to live without systems. This is why Albert Camus says in the first sentence of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide." He feels that before man can solve any other problems, he must ask himself if the pain of living is worth remaining alive. If not, suicide. But if remaining alive is worth the pain, the man must find some way to live in a bitter world and reconcile himself to the absurdity about him.

Herman Melville is one of the supreme examples of a man continuously shuttling between these two possibilities—self-destruction and learning to live in a bitter world without hope. He never succeeded in either, but he poured both of these possibilities into his literary works. As a result, in Melville’s writing we find a continual undertone of actual, symbolic, and vicarious suicide, while at the same time we find a collection of heroes or major figures who are trying to come to grips with reality, to strip the world of pretenses and to learn to live outside the aegis of moral and religious fantasies and wish-fulfillment dreams. The fact that almost without exception these heroes annihilate themselves in the process is significant.

In other words, in Herman Melville, one finds an existential writer (but then, so was Shakespeare) who had probably never heard of Kierkegaard and who lived long before Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, and company.

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II

This discussion of existentialism will serve to place Melville in the proper category of thinkers. It is tremendously important to understand the relative intellectual and artistic position of this man who—in an age of transcendental idealism, optimism, progressivism, false liberalism, Utopian Brook-Farmism, “best-of-all-possible-worlds” philosophy, comfortable Christianity, platitudinous poets afraid of a single real idea or image in their poetry, Victorian novelists with one foot in syrup and the other being twisted by Mr. Bowdler—dared “to eat a peach,” dared to “roll the universe into a ball” and hurl it at the “overwhelming question” that faced and will always face humanity. It is not necessary to call Melville an existentialist. It would be wisest not to call the existentialists by that name. The term has come to be so inclusive as to be of little value. But one must have a label for certain kinds of thinking, certain attitudes toward life. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a Transcendentalist. No one would gainsay that fact. And I think it is obvious that Herman Melville was as far from the thinking of Ralph Waldo Emerson as it is possible to go. Why not give Melville’s attitudes a title also? Since existentialism is such a broad term, and since it implies a connection with people and concepts Melville never dreamt of, I use the word “nihilism” to categorize Melville’s view of life. Melville’s nihilism, then, is the opposite side of the coin of transcendental idealism, optimism, and general nineteenth century namby-pambyism. Is it any wonder that Moby-Dick and Pierre were such failures in their time?

Melville did not actually commit suicide; he learned to live without hope. But in his inner world of images, the world that he depicted in words on paper, Melville committed suicide over and over. Like his leaning “Tower of Pisa,” he was actually only a “would-be suicide.” In a late poem entitled “Pisa’s Leaning Tower,” Melville discusses the tower’s construction and then finishes with the following personification of the masonry.

It thinks to plunge—but hesitates;
Shrinks back—yet fain would slide;
Withholds itself—itself would urge;
Hovering, shivering on the verge,
A would-be suicide!²

But vicariously through Taji, Ahab, Pierre, Bartleby, Benito Creno, Billy Budd, and even through Tom (in Typee), Ishmael, Israel Potter, Redburn, and White-Jacket—through all these Melville vicariously indulged his self-destructive wishes.

² Herman Melville, Works (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1922), XVI, p. 278.
First of all, Melville represented in *Pierre* an actual suicide. Pierre, in prison for murder, takes poison—and it is interesting to note that his actions throughout the novel are self-destructive and in the process destructive to all the other major figures. Through Pierre Glendinning’s desire to act virtuously, he destroys his mother, his cousin Glen, Lucy Tartan, his sister Isabel, and himself. And death imagery vies with love imagery throughout the book. Love, it is suggested by Melville, is ultimately self-destructive and universally destructive. Mrs. Glendinning’s possessive love of Pierre contributes to Pierre’s dilemma and to her death. The unnatural love of Isabel and Pierre precipitates Pierre’s flight from the pre-lapsarian Eden of Saddle Meadows. Lucy Tartan’s misplaced, almost religious, devotion to Pierre motivates the fatal duel. At one point Melville says, “Love is here, love is there, love is busy everywhere,” and the careful reader recognizes ironic Melville’s echoing the lines of a late poem by the suicidal Percy Shelley—“Death is here, death is there, death is busy everywhere.”

The masterpiece *Moby-Dick* contains actual suicide. Mad Ahab, certainly one of the most important examples of what Mario Praz calls “The Fatal Men of the Romantics,” is suicidal. He is determined, at the end of the novel, to “strike God and die.” He recognizes his finiteness and the infinite qualities (represented by the white whale) against which he rebels. But like Milton’s Satan who says “better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven,” Ahab would rather die (as he knows he must) than submit to any force beyond his own ego. And it is again worth noting that he carries his entire world to destruction with him. His crew become the willing tools of their “monomaniac commander’s soul,” and even Starbuck (who represents orthodox Christianity) is unable to act against this destructive tendency as is pagan but quiescent Ishmael, whose physical salvation at the end of the novel was a matter of pure expediency on Melville’s part. Note that he is ironically saved on a coffin.

The novels of Melville written before *Moby-Dick* show the suicide motif in varying degrees of intensity. The plunge of Tommo and Toby into the Vale of Typee in Melville’s first novel seems totally suicidal. And as a matter of fact, the theme of “ship-jumping” (taking French-leave from the microcosm of a ship to plunge into a destructive environment such as the ocean or a cannibal isle) becomes symbolically an act of physical or moral suicide in at least three of Melville’s novels—*Typee, Omoo*, and *Mardi*. In *Mardi*, of course, the actions of the protagonist, Tajji, at the end of the novel,

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*a Ibid., IX, p. 45.

are distinctly self-destructive. All of his companions finally leave him, and he sails in search of Yillah (his lost love) "beyond the reef" that encircles the islands that make up Mardi. Since in the novel Mardi comes to represent the world, Tají's sailing "beyond the reef" suggests suicide.

It would be possible to show the suicide motif also in such minor works as Redburn, White-Jacket, Israel Potter, and even in the quietistic deaths of Bartleby the Scrivener and Billy Budd—but this brief synopsis of the theme in the major works would indicate Melville's literary preoccupation with this existential drive toward self-annihilation—what Freud called the Thanatos urge.

Was this sublimated suicide, then, an act of bad faith on Melville's part? Probably not. Albert Camus speaks of various suicidal and non-suicidal writers who held that life was meaningless. The most significant that he mentions is Arthur Schopenhauer! He says, "Schopenhauer is often cited, as a fit subject for laughter, because he praised suicide while seated at a well-set table." Obviously there is the other path of living without hope. We presume that this was Schopenhauer's path. (It is interesting to note that Schopenhauer was Melville's major reading during the last years of his life.) The evidence of interest in suicide in a man's writing, however, identifies him with this particular attitude toward life, and indicates a desire channeled off into fantasy creation.

But is this shuffling off of the suicide urge through created characters, then, pure fantasy or should it be considered more closely connected with a man's life? According to Albert Camus, creative fiction is inextricably bound up with the life of the creator of that fiction. An observation which Camus makes concerning actors is applicable also, I believe, to writers. He says,

It is certain that apparently, though I have seen the same actor a hundred times, I shall not for that reason know him any better personally. Yet if I add up the heroes he has personified and if I say that I know him a little better at the hundredth character counted off, this will be felt to contain an element of truth. For this apparent paradox is also an apologue. There is a moral to it. It teaches that a man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses.  

Melville "defined himself by his make-believe," that is, by his make-believe characters, "as well as by his sincere impulses." And since nearly all Melville's major characters are suicidal, and nearly all of his works contain the theme of self-destruction, Melville defined himself as a "would-be suicide."

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6 Ibid., p. 17.
To turn briefly from Melville’s themes of self-destruction to the author’s metaphysical or cosmic nihilism, we shift from the existentialist who desires to leave this world because of the pain which living entails, and turn to the existentialist who has decided to live without hope. To keep good faith with himself, if he is to live in this world, the existentialist learns to live without hope. This means to live without reliance on any system of religious, moral, or ethical principles, without faith in any ordered doctrine or philosophy. In this respect Melville certainly fills the bill. His entire literary life was devoted to a graphic demonstration that no philosophy, religion, or pattern of thought is adequate for man in the face of the inscrutable universe into which he has been cast. One may haul the Kantian whale’s head up on one side of the ship to balance the Lockeian whale’s head on the other side, but the two together merely weigh the ship down without helping it in any way through the sea of life. Better it is, says Melville, to cut both philosophical heads away and steer the ship in a lonely, nihilistic manner. Nowhere is this nihilistic attitude toward life-guides, toward moral and religious systems, toward a concept of a benevolent creator in the universe, toward even a belief in Fate, more completely rehearsed than in Moby-Dick where many approaches toward life—Ahab’s fanatical pursuit of truth and the infinite, Ishmael’s fatalistic resignation, Starbuck’s orthodox Christianity, Stubb’s self-blinding escapism, Flask’s unthinking materialistic utilitarianism, and Pip’s insane mysticism—all prove futile in the face of the chaotic universe, so completely malignant in its relationship to the humans who inhabit it and try to understand it. In various fashions Melville demonstrates the same concept in all of his works—even in the so-called final “testament of acceptance”—Billy Budd.

But for a moment let us return to the modern existentialists for a background against which to place Melville’s metaphysical nihilism.

The closest that modern existentialist writers have come to real metaphysical and ethical explorations is probably Simone de Beauvoir’s book, The Ethics of Ambiguity. Most contemporary existential thinkers restrict their publication to works on psychoanalysis and phenomenology. Madame de Beauvoir, however, insists that there can be a positive ethical value-scheme even within the limits of atheist existentialism’s chaos-ridden universe. The book just mentioned explores this possibility—the creation of a positive ethical attitude in a world without any absolute values. A human discovers

this ethical positivity, says Madame de Beauvoir, in a realization of the relationship between himself and other selves, and this relationship is a balance of freedoms. One’s moral freedom is the most important aspect of his existence. On another level, it is his struggle for self-realization. And while in certain respects, say Jean-Paul Sartre and Madame de Beauvoir, every other person’s freedom is a threat to my own self-realization, still I cannot really be free without the concomitant moral freedom of others. It is by a complicated process of ontological juggling that the existentialist arrives at this position, and it is not the purpose here, nor is it necessary, to explain the process in detail. The point is that there is an attempt by the modern existentialists to draw away from a sense of quiescent fatalism on the one hand and sheer nihilism on the other.

In drawing away from these possible alternate existential world-outlooks, Madame de Beauvoir presents a very interesting and a very valuable picture of what she calls the “serious” man and his ultimate extreme—the “nihilist.” Her book is especially valuable for a student of Melville, since it seems to present in capsule form a description of the Melvillean attitude toward life. By Madame de Beauvoir’s definition Melville is unquestionably a nihilist.

First of all, Madame de Beauvoir discusses what she calls the “serious” man. This is, essentially, man in society or societal man carried to his ideal and fanatic extremes. This is the man who willingly gives over his attempts at subjective self-realization because he understands that this will conflict with society. Consequently, he subordinates himself to something in which he believes (or in which he tries desperately hard to believe). This may be a cause, a religion, a movement, science, philosophy—any organized system of moral or religious thought. “The thing that matters to the serious man is not so much the nature of the object which he prefers to himself, but rather the fact of being able to lose himself in it.”

This serious man is actually making a subjective value-choice, but he refuses to realize this, says Madame de Beauvoir; he assumes that the values are absolute and smothers himself in them. This is dishonest and dangerous, according to the existentialists. It leads to fanaticism, tyranny, and despotism. Ordinarily this person does not put all his eggs in one basket. He believes in a number of causes. But occasionally fanaticism centers a man in one cause. If this fails him, the “serious” man is destitute. Then he “joins the sub-man [an unthinking amoeba], unless by suicide he once and for all puts an end to the agony of his freedom.”

The only possibility for the disillusioned “serious” man is to put himself the question “What’s the use?” And with this question

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should come an insight into the absurdity of the universe. At this point, "Conscious of being unable to be anything, man then decides to be nothing. We call this attitude nihilistic," says Madame de Beauvoir. To put it another way, Nihilism is disappointed seriousness which has turned back upon itself.

In a further discussion of the nihilist, as he is seen by the practicing existentialist, Madame de Beauvoir presents for us a picture which might be that of Herman Melville as well as of Baudelaire.

It sometimes happens that, in his state of deception, a man maintains a sort of affection for the serious world; this is how Sartre describes Baudelaire in his study of the poet. Baudelaire felt a burning rancor in regard to the values of his childhood, but this rancor still involved some respect. Scorn alone liberated him. It was necessary for him that the universe which he rejected continue in order for him to detest it and scoff at it; it is the attitude of the demoniacal man as Jouhandeau has also described him: one stubbornly maintains the values of childhood, of a society, or of a Church in order to be able to trample upon them. The demoniacal man is still very close to the serious; he wants to believe in it; he confirms it by his very revolt; he feels himself as a negation and a freedom, but he does not realize this freedom as a positive liberation.

Thus the values of Melville's youth and of the bourgeois American world around him are constantly returned to in his novels. By returning to God, idealism, Saddle Meadows, the "prosy old Guide Book" of Redburn's father, Romantic aspiration, and prelapsarian innocence, Melville could try to believe in them and scorn them at the same time. More important, he was well equipped with values to scorn. He insisted on retracing the same path of his rejection again and again, employing each time a new work of art and sometimes new symbolism.

But, says Madame de Beauvoir, "One can go much further in rejection by occupying himself not in scorning but in annihilating the rejected world and himself along with it." And it was in this area of endeavor that Melville proved himself undeniably a metaphysical nihilist. A man may devote himself to a lost cause or fritter his life away on trivialities. Or he may follow other paths.

Surrealism provides us with a historical and concrete example of different possible kinds of evolution. Certain initiates, such as Vache and Crevel, had recourse to the radical solution of suicide. Others destroyed their bodies and ruined their minds by drugs. Others succeeded in a sort of moral suicide; by dint of depopulating the world around them, they found themselves in a desert, with themselves reduced to the level of the subman.

Melville's entire canon manifests this "moral suicide" by which he depopulated his created worlds. (Witness the decimation of char-

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10 Ibid., p. 52.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., p. 53.
13 Ibid., pp. 54–55.
acters in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* in particular.) In addition to this, Melville systematically disproved the validity of every system of morality, metaphysics, and philosophy maintained by his various characters. In so doing he reduced to zero the possibilities of his own belief in anything. He had become a nihilist. Melville committed a continual vicarious suicide in his literary world; and he also reduced all the metaphysical possibilities in his created worlds to nothing.

First of all, since he was born and baptized into Christianity, we might infer his major interest in the religion of his fathers. Three major proponents of the Christian way seem to leap out at us from his works—Starbuck in *Moby-Dick*, Pierre, and Billy Budd. In Starbuck, orthodox Christianity is suggested, and we see in this man the "fall of valor in the soul." Unable, through religious scruples, to kill Ahab, Starbuck and his Christian world are carried helplessly to destruction. And in Pierre we see the opposite kind of Christian from Starbuck. Pierre acts too rashly in the name of Christian virtue and in the process destroys all around him. In Billy Budd, Melville attempted to picture a boy who approximated perfection in Christian ethics (although Billy is too unlearned in all ways to understand the rudiments of Christianity). Billy is as close to complete goodness, Melville implies, as man perhaps ever reaches. But when he is trapped by the utter depravity of a Claggart, his basic human fallibility arises in him in the form of a speech defect, and he commits unwitting murder. Human imperfection eventually defeats Christian virtue.

In *Clarel*, Melville's long poem concerning his pilgrimage in the Holy Land, the poet very straightforwardly and unsymbolically indicates that Christian faith, or religious faith of any sort, is impossible for the man of a "deep-diving temperament," however much he may wish he could believe. It is a poem as arid as the Holy deserts which it treats.

But Melville does not stop with decimation of religion. The major philosophies of the Western world are all tried and found wanting. Melville was a formidable opponent of nineteenth century German idealism as it derived from Kant and was developed by Hegel. And he was no less an attacker of American Transcendentalism. Plinlimmon and his followers in the novel *Pierre* suggest Emerson and the Concord Platonists. And the character of Mark Winsome in *The Confidence-Man* is obviously a vicious burlesque of the personality of Ralph Waldo Emerson. All transcendental idealism appalled Melville. His major warning against it occurs in the chapter of *Moby-Dick* called "The Mast-Head," where he warns the young look-out in the crow's nest not to be lulled into a sense of oneness with the
beautiful ocean, because one misstep can send him hurtling eighty feet to a death by drowning or a discovery of sharks under the beautiful surface of the water.

But Melville was not a proponent of those philosophies that run counter to idealism. One remembers that he likens, in *Moby-Dick*, the two whales' heads that are hoisted on either side of the *Pequod* to the philosophies of Kant and Locke. These represent the two great streams of modern Western philosophy—rationalism and empiricism. One is needed to balance the other. But Melville suggests cutting them both away and sailing without either.

About modern pragmatism and scientific positivism, Melville had less to say, since they were not in his time serious avenues of belief as they have become in our time with the deification of science. But Melville does indicate his distrust of these atheistic, materialistic approaches to life in his attack on Margoth—the Hegelized, science-ridden Jew in the poem *Clarel*.

So in his literary works, Melville destroyed all possibilities of faith or belief and in nearly all he committed vicarious suicide through his characters. And in a manner of speaking he committed actual literary suicide, since after his first two successes, he deliberately wrote unpopular books and spent the last thirty years of his life in relative literary silence. When he died he was actually forgotten as a literary figure.

He was indeed the "disillusioned serious man" of the existentialists—if you wish, the "nihilist," the man who—in an era when it was popular to be the smiling optimist—said "No" to practically all aspects of the wretched existence into which he found himself thrown.

A portion of Melville's letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne makes a fitting summation of Melville's world-view and a good summary of this study. The letter was written to Hawthorne in praise of the latter's *House of the Seven Gables*. Melville says:

There is the grand truth about Nathaniel Hawthorne. He says *No*! in thunder; but the Devil himself cannot make him say *yes*. For all men who say *yes*, lie; and all men who say *no*—why, they are in the happy condition of judicious unincumbered travellers in Europe; they cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpetbag—that is to say, the *Ego*.14

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