Melville's Thematics of Form

Dryden, Edgar

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Dryden, Edgar.
Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/67847

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2391299
I

METAPHYSICS AND THE ART
OF THE NOVEL
The novel is a subjective epopee in which the author avails himself of the privilege of treating the world in his own manner. Thus the question is only whether he has a manner; the rest will take care of itself.

JOHANN WOLFGANG GOETHE, Proverbs in Prose

A fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics. The critic's task is to define the latter before evaluating the former.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, "On The Sound and the Fury"
There has developed in recent years a remarkable interest in the aesthetics of the novel, an interest which at once expresses a disenchantment with the state of contemporary novel criticism and seeks to establish a broad poetics for the genre which will permit a more coherent and precise description of individual works. That much of the discussion has centered on the question of the relation of fiction to reality is not surprising, for realism has been the perennial problem of the novel. The novel was born of a tension between the realm of romance and that of reality, and its history may be seen as an attempt to resolve the paradox that this tension implies. The problems which such a struggle involves are nowhere more obvious than in the nineteenth-century American novel and especially in the fiction of Herman Melville. This study suggests that the recent interest in the poetics of the novel reveals another dimension of the modernity of Melville's fiction and also that Melville's battle with this problematical genre illuminates and clarifies much of the commentary on its nature and origins.

Until recently twentieth-century criticism of the English and American novel has been controlled to a large degree by the aesthetics of Henry James or, perhaps better, by Percy Lubbock's interpretation of James's aesthetics. One of the most important effects of this domination has been the recognition of narrative point of view as fiction's basic structural principle. Few modern critics of the novel would question the importance of point of view. However, some might deplore the direction the discussion has taken. Both James and Lubbock are prescriptive, the latter more so than the former. This may be a necessary and expected approach for James because, as a novelist, he is primarily concerned with defining his own approach to art and life. It is, however, less admirable for the practical critic. Lubbock's tendency to present James as the model for all aspiring novelists to follow involves some rather
questionable assumptions. Behind his analysis is a belief that
the novel has a "progressive history" (272)—that it is mov-
ing from a direct and pictorial method toward an indirect and
dramatic one. He assumes the existence of an ideal form so
dramatic and "true" (67) that the old problem of the dis-
crepancy between it and life is put to rest forever. This rather
confusing blend of conceptual and empirical assumptions
resulted in the development of an almost purely technical ap-
proach to the novel and its concern with point of view. 3

More recently Wayne Booth has attempted to repair the
damage done to the reputations of important eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century writers by the advocates of the disappear-
ing author. 4 And, as Ronald Paulson pointed out in a review of
four recent studies of the novel, most critics "have accepted
gratefully and confidently the tone set for them by Wayne
Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction and his reviewers." 5 Cer-
tainly no one can deny that Booth performs a much-needed
service by exposing many of the assumptions hidden beneath
the "general rules" which critics have gradually established
for the practice of the art of fiction. But although he calls for
a repudiation of "false restrictions imposed by various forms
of objectivity" (397), he too finds some techniques more ad-

dvantageous than others. As the title of his book implies, Booth
regards fiction as "the art of communicating with the reader." 

Point of view, therefore, is defined as "the form an author's

1 See, for example, Mark Schorer's seminal essay, "Technique as Dis-
W. Aldridge (New York, 1952); and Norman Friedman, "Point of View
1160–84. A summary of the key discussions of point of view in fiction
may be found in Jacques Souvage, An Introduction to the Study of the
Novel (Ghent, 1965), pp. 50–60.

2 The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961).

3 JEGP, 66 (April, 1967): 44. The books under consideration were Na-
ture of Narrative, by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg (New York,
1966); Man's Changing Mask: Modes and Methods of Characterization
in Fiction, by Charles Child Walcutt (Minneapolis, 1966); Character and
the Novel, by W. J. Harvey (Ithaca, N.Y., 1965); and Language of Fic-
voice can take.” For Booth, those forms which tend to hinder communication by keeping the author’s “second self” locked up within the world of the novel and obscure his ethical judgments are not only inartistic but immoral. He disapproves of impersonal narration because its use has led to moral confusion, has indeed at times actually “seduced” the reader. As his final chapter reveals, in his view the rhetoric of fiction, like more traditional kinds of rhetoric, finally aims not only at communication but at conversion as well.

The nature and extent of Booth’s disapproval of impersonal narration is revealed by the pattern of satanic imagery which runs through his discussion of the modern novel. The twentieth-century novelist is ego-ridden, swollen with false pride, and bent on confusing, seducing, and ultimately corrupting or destroying his reader. Armed with his greatest weapon, impersonal narration, he is made to seem as formidable as Satan himself.

Booth’s suggested solution to the rhetorical problems raised by the techniques of the modern novel is in line with his Christian analysis. The novelist must find a way to break out of the “subjectivism” on which his difficulties are based. He must humble himself, learn how to “transform his private vision, made up as it often is of ego-ridden private symbols, into something that is essentially public” (395).

Needless to say, in the end such an attitude is as prescriptive and limiting as that of the objective critics. The one denies us Fielding because he is unrealistic, the other Joyce because he is impersonal and ambiguous. In both cases, however, what is unconsciously being objected to is not the technique but the metaphysics which it implies. Interestingly enough, the technical preferences of both Booth and his antagonists reflect the desire to rid the novel of subjectivism, which seems, on the one hand, to subvert the rhetorical function of fiction and, on the other, to destroy its validity as an actual transcription of reality.

Such prescriptive approaches lead away from rather than
toward the central issues raised by the novel's form. The problem of subjectivity in fiction cannot be solved by the writer's making the correct technical choice, since both objective and intrusive narrators are equally subversive. It is no accident that the century in which the novel became the most popular form of literature was also the one in which a subjective theory of artistic creation was developed. The novel, like romanticism, is the product of a post-Cartesian world. Defined by Lukács as “l' eopee d'un monde sans Dieux” and by Ortega as the product of Renaissance man's discovery of the subjective, it may be seen as the art form which best expresses the "modern theme."

If the novel is viewed from this perspective, its preoccupation with questions of realism becomes an indication that the form is not so much an imitation of a unified reality as it is a search for one. Indeed, the novel might be said to be an expression of modern man's longing for the synoptic vision of the Christian God. Unfortunately, however, man's great expectations and his actual experience fail to coincide. Only the most naïve novelist can be so self-forgetful as to offer his work as though it had made itself, and then we do not see it as he does but rather view it as an expression of his own individuality. The self-conscious novelist is painfully aware of his fiction as fiction. He recognizes the subversive implications of his demiurgical acts and understands that his own presumptuous world is ultimately unified by personal and largely arbitrary choices, with the result that the novel becomes self-reflexive and develops a bad conscience. As Jean Rousset points out, the anti-novel is as old as the novel, since Don Quixote is the ancestor of both, and J. Hillis Miller finds a "secret

---

nihilism” at the core of the apparently realistic Victorian novel, which results, finally, in the “metaphysical” fiction of Joseph Conrad.

The novel, then, may be seen as a metaphysical rather than as a descriptive or rhetorical form: it is not primarily concerned with explaining or reflecting a pre-existing reality without disturbing its fabric but rather with formulating an experience which is both particular and unified. Therefore the fact that a novel is organized by virtue of its being written from a particular point of view becomes a thematic rather than a technical consideration. Implied in every novel is the operation of a special organizing principle, of which the method of narration is the most obvious sign. This special perspective or point of view is neither a technique of discovery nor a rhetorical device, although it may both show and tell. It is not merely a means of access to the fictional world but is one of its component parts. The world is as it is seen.\(^\text{10}\) Point of view is at once a literary technique and a metaphysical principle. It is a \textit{process} which determines the controlling pattern and movement of the fictional world; to identify and describe it is to reveal the theory of the fiction, its internal cause. Hence the critic who asks a writer to tell his story in a different way is requiring of him a total renunciation of his experience. Criticism of technique is tacitly a criticism of vision.

Such a perspectivistic approach seems justified by the fact that elements of self-conscious form are found even in those novels which try to deny the implications of subjectivism. Consider, for example, the authorial intrusions in \textit{Tom Jones}. While Fielding insists, on the one hand, that he follows the traditional literary forms, he is, on the other, well aware that he is the creator of a new kind of writing. Although his book is a reworking of the universal myth of the Fortunate Fall,

he finds it necessary to intrude into the action of the novel to discuss his own and his reader's relationship to that traditional world:

Though we have properly enough entitled this our work, a history, and not a life, nor an apology for a life, as is more in fashion; yet we intend in it rather to pursue the method of those writers who profess to disclose the revolutions of countries, than to imitate the painful and voluminous historian, who, to preserve the regularity of his series, thinks himself obliged to fill up as much paper with the detail of months and years in which nothing remarkable happened, as he employs upon those notable eras when the greatest scenes have been transacted on the human stage.

Now it is our purpose, in the ensuing pages, to pursue a contrary method. When any extraordinary scene presents itself (as we trust will often be the case), we shall spare no pains nor paper to open it at large to our readers; but if whole years should pass without producing anything worthy his notice, we shall not be afraid of a chasm in our history, but shall hasten on to matters of consequence, and leave such periods of time totally unobserved.  

Although the neoclassical assumption that the artist creates for the pleasure of his audience is certainly present in the above quotation, several important complications are also introduced. This and other similar passages in Tom Jones ask the reader to consider more than his own relationship to the story. He is asked—indeed forced—to take into account the artist's relationship to the fiction and to the reader. By intruding into the world of his creation to discuss with the reader the problems of the art of fiction, Fielding effectively destroys the reader's illusion of participating in a real world by reading the novel.

His fictional world, the narrator tells us, is a grand meal prepared from the vulgar foodstuffs of nature by the skillful "cookery of the author" (2). As this metaphor makes clear, the real and fictional worlds are two different realms, and

the uniqueness of the fictional one derives from the contribution of the writer. The writing of fiction apparently involves more than reflecting, representing, or counterfeiting nature. Like Henry James, who was to speak in similar terms one hundred and fifty years later, 12 Fielding understands the importance of the process which the novelist applies to the materials he plucks from the "garden of life."

It is the nature of this process which is the narrator's main concern in the authorial intrusions in *Tom Jones*. By interrupting his story to discuss the problems implicit in its creation, the narrator forces the reader to view the fiction as fiction and asks him to recognize and appreciate the skill of the creator. He insists, in other words, that its value lies in the unique flavor which his special culinary skill has given to it.

The narrator's concern with the special qualities of his own originality is also present in his description of his book as a "new province" founded by himself. As founder and divine ruler he makes his own special laws, which the reader is "bound to believe in and to obey" (41). As with the culinary metaphor, the political one serves to stress the origin and uniqueness of the book's world. Unlike ordinary historians, the narrator of *Tom Jones* is no "amanuensis" (40) of time; he is the creator of a special world and as creator is able to make time serve him. In this world time and space do not rule the writer but are carefully and symbolically manipulated by him. He is careful, moreover, to make sure that his "great creation" (446) remains perfect. By trying to anticipate and defend himself against attack by critics, he hopes to keep these satanic reptiles excluded from his carefully constructed world. He even warns them that an attack on the creation will be taken as an attack on the creator (489). The political metaphor expands into a cosmic one as the narrator makes his greatest assertion of originality. Although concerned with the imperfections of a fallen world, his creation, new and unique, is as

yet unfallen. While *Tom Jones*, like *Paradise Lost*, is partially concerned with man's tie to a traditional past, it also contains elements which seem destined to destroy the controlling myth from the past. Not only is the Fortunate Fall myth secularized in *Tom Jones*, but the novelist's powers of invention seem to imply a world where it functions—if at all—only as metaphor.

As is clear to any student of the nineteenth-century English novel, the intrusive narrator, so important in Fielding's fiction, does not disappear. This should not, however, be taken as evidence of a retarded development, but as an indication of the subjective nature of the form itself. The apparently realistic fiction of George Eliot, for example, illustrates the continuity of the tradition in a striking way. The narrator of *Adam Bede*, while emphasizing her devotion to the commonplace or the real, interrupts her "faithful representing of commonplace things" to discuss the implications of that representation. Although the narrator's intrusion sharply divides the worlds of life and art by introducing another level of reality, there is an even more revealing distinction drawn between the two realms. It is significant that the narrator does not insist that her fiction is a pure transcription of reality: "My strongest effort is to . . . give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in a witness-box narrating my experience on oath."\(^{13}\)

It is important to recognize the subjective origin of the narrator's vision. As she implies in the above passage, a totally mimetic art is impossible. The world of the novel is a product of a very special mirror, one which reflects but which also transforms. The experience of the narrator is a unique one which is colored, shaped, and flavored by her own special way of seeing. The reflected world is, in fact, so special that it requires a detailed commentary. Before it can be understood, the

motives and acts which underlie its creation must be examined and explained. The narrator's central purpose in the chapter "In Which the Story Pauses a Little" is to explain the genesis of her book. The tone of the chapter is appropriately personal. Personal habits and preferences are described in detail; and there is even a mention of the "ill shapen nostrils" of the British. As this personal tone, along with the extensive use of the "I" form, implies, the narrator is well aware that her fictional world is the product of her own special vision.

As with the authorial intrusions in *Tom Jones*, the narrator's presence in *Adam Bede* calls the reader's attention to the subjective center of the fictional world. It matters little that the narrator may wish to put the reader into direct contact with the real world; the important point is the implication of the impossibility of the task. The narrator of *Adam Bede* is "the centre of [her] own world," as the narrator of *Middlemarch* recognizes that we all are. For this reason the novelist is never merely an observer, but a creator as well. Hence the fictional world, if it is to be adequately understood, must be viewed from the inside as well as the outside.

But at present this caution against a too hasty judgment interests me more in relation to Mr. Casaubon than to his young cousin. If to Dorothea Mr. Casaubon had been the mere occasion which had set alight the fine inflammable material of her youthful illusions, does it follow that he was fairly represented in the minds of those less impassioned personages who have hitherto delivered their judgments concerning him...? Suppose we turn from outside estimates of a man, to wonder, with keener interest, what is the report of his own consciousness about his doings or capacity: with what hindrances he is carrying on his daily labours; what fading of hopes, or what deeper fixity of self-delusion the years are marking off within him; and with what spirit he wrestles against universal pressure, which will one day be too heavy for him, and bring his heart to his final pause. Doubtless his lot is important in his own eyes; and the chief reason we think he asks too large a place in our consideration must be our want of room for him, since we refer him

to the Divine regard with perfect confidence. . . . Mr. Cassaubon, too, was the centre of his own world. . . . this trait is not quite alien to us, and, like the other mendicant hopes of mortals, claims some of our pity. (62)

The narrator's fluctuation in this passage—from an objective position, seeing Casaubon as his associates see him, to a position of complete identification with him, seeing the world as it exists in his consciousness—is characteristic of the narrative strategy of the entire novel. Because she believes that it is necessary to see both objectively and subjectively, her fluctuating movement provides the moral and artistic foundations of the novel. The narrative mode is at once the fiction's organizing principle and the manifestation of its theme. It is, moreover, the narrator's self-conscious discussion of her method of procedure which forces the reader to view her fictional world as she does. It reminds him that she too is "the centre of [her] own world" and asks him to consider the implications of its subjective origins as well as its objective operations.

An even more revealing example of the dangers implicit in the failure to recognize and explore the metaphysical basis of a fictional technique is found in current evaluations of the theories and fiction of Henry James. More than any other writer or critic, James is invoked by those who view fiction as a totally objective art. To suggest, however, as many have done, that James's major contribution to our understanding of the art of the novel is the distinction which he makes between direct and indirect presentation is to miss the point of much of his argument. No novelist has made a clearer or more definitive statement of the subjective nature of the art of fiction than Henry James:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size,
hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbors are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. . . . The spreading field, the human scene, is the “choice of subject”; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the “literary form”; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has been conscious.15

James’s insistence here and in other places on the importance of the special nature of the writer’s consciousness should not be dismissed or ignored. He is always sensitive to the importance of perceiving and describing the unique quality of a writer’s world; he recognizes the importance of defining the quality of vision behind the “dead wall.” For this reason, to note that James confines himself to the consciousness of a central intelligence in his fiction is only to begin a discussion of his use of narrative point of view. While it is true that the central intelligence is used as “the impersonal author’s concrete deputy or delegate, a convenient substitute or apologist for the creative power otherwise so veiled and disembodied,”16 it is equally clear that the crucial relationship in fiction is the one between the narrator and the central consciousness chosen. In the Preface to *The American* James writes of Christopher Newman:

If Newman was attaching enough, I must have argued, his tangle would be sensible enough; for the interest of everything is all that

it is his vision, his conception, his interpretation: at the window of his wide, quite sufficiently wide, consciousness we are seated, from that admirable position we "assist." . . . A beautiful infatuation this, always, I think, the intensity of the creative effort to get into the skin of the creature; the act of personal possession of one being by another at its completest—and with the high enhancement, ever, that it is, by the same stroke, the effort of the artist to preserve for his subject that unity, and for his use of it (in other words for the interest he desires to excite) that effect of a centre, which most economise its value.  

The "assistance" given is of the utmost importance in a James novel. An awareness of a creative consciousness surrounding and possessing the consciousness of the central character is a necessity if James is to accomplish his artistic purpose—the complete possession of one being by another. The house of fiction has within it smaller houses with smaller windows, narrowed and humanized versions of the creative power. This does not, however, minimize the importance of that "majesty of authorship" which has created the smaller house and smaller window and which stands behind and assists. James tells the reader in the Preface to The Ambassadors that Strether arrives at Chester "for the dreadful purpose of giving his creator 'no end' to tell about him"; and the reader is acutely aware of the narrative voice in The Ambassadors. He finds the narrator referring to himself as "I" on the first page of the novel, and he always senses a consciousness faced with the problem of discovery and revelation through the use of artistic selection: "All sorts of other pleasant small things—small things that were yet large for him—flowered in the air of the occasion [Strether's walk around Chester with Miss Gostry]; but the bearing of the occasion itself on matters still remote concerns us too closely to permit us to multiply our illustrations. Two or three, however, in truth, we should perhaps regret to lose." 

17 In ibid., pp. 37-38.
18 In ibid., p. 320.
Not only is the reader told that this occasion marks Strether's first step toward understanding Europe and hence his first step toward self-understanding, but he is also made aware that all which is to happen already exists within the mind of the narrator. Strether's mind is, to be sure, the focal point of the novel, but his mind, in turn, is inside a larger one. As James implies in the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, his discovery of Strether, "the happiest of accidents" (311), was the first and easiest step in his creative task:

Art deals with what we see, it must first contribute full-handed that ingredient; it plucks its material, otherwise expressed, in the garden of life—which material elsewhere grown is stale and uneatable. But it has no sooner done this than it has to take account of a process. . . . The process, that of the expression, the literal squeezing-out, of value is another affair—with which the happy luck of mere finding has little to do. . . . There is the story of one's hero, and then, thanks to the intimate connection of things, the story of one's story itself. (312-13)

Like Fielding and Eliot, James finds "the story of one's story itself" at the center of the novelist's creative task. The writer of fiction does not tarry long in the garden of life; his primary interest is not in the raw materials but in the imaginative process they undergo. Germs from the real world provide the novelist with the "virus of suggestion," but the novel is the story of the history of the inoculated imagination. It is for this reason that James devoted so much attention to the writing of the Prefaces for the New York edition of his works:

The private history of any sincere work, however modest its pretensions, looms with its own completeness in the rich, ambiguous aesthetic air, and seems at once to borrow a dignity and to mark, so to say, a station. . . . These notes represent, over a considerable course, the continuity of an artist's endeavour, the growth of his whole operative consciousness and, best of all, perhaps, their own tendency to multiply, with the implication, thereby, of a memory much enriched.20

The prefaces are valuable not because they set up artificial rules for the practice of the art of fiction, but because they attempt to clarify, in each case, the relationship between the "operative consciousness" of the artist and the world of the novel. Concerned with private history, each preface attempts to re-create the attitudes with which the artist approached his materials. For this reason the prefaces do not exist—as is usually assumed—apart from the fictional world to which they are appended. In fact, they function in much the same way as do the authorial intrusions in *Tom Jones* and *Adam Bede*. In the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, for example, James, in attempting to tell the story of his story, defines the laws which govern his world and recalls "old intentions" (319). As implied by his discussion of the "memory of the thrilling ups and downs, the intricate ins and outs of the compositional problem" (319) he had solved, he is attempting to identify and elucidate the "operative consciousness" of the artist as it is manifested in *The Ambassadors*. That he is successful is suggested by the way in which the metaphors of the Preface extend and partially explicate the metaphors within the novel itself.

In an attempt to define the nature of Strether's change in the novel, James writes in the Preface: "He had come [to Paris] with a view that might have been figured by a clear green liquid, say, in a neat glass phial; and the liquid, once poured into the open cup of *application*, once exposed to the action of another air, had begun to turn from green to red, or whatever, and might, for all he knew, be on its way to purple, to black, to yellow" (314). When Lambert Strether arrives in Europe, he is dependent, both literally and figuratively, on Mrs. Newsome, the wealthy widow to whom he is engaged and the main representative of the world he has left behind. The nature of Strether's tie to the Woollett world is

figured for him in the green cover of a review which he edits with the funds supplied by Mrs. Newsome: "His name on the green cover, where he had put it for Mrs. Newsome, expressed him doubtless just enough to make the world—the world as distinguished, both for more and for less, from Woollett—ask who he was. . . . He was Lambert Strether because he was on the cover, whereas it should have been, for anything like glory, that he was on the cover because he was Lambert Strether" (63).

The nature of Strether's identity, then, is defined at the beginning of his journey by the green covers of the review. As he becomes more and more influenced by the atmosphere of Europe, however, he begins to change, and that change is expressed through a series of color metaphors. He is introduced to Europe by Maria Gostry, a woman who dresses "in a manner quite other than Mrs. Newsome's, and who [wears] round her throat a broad red velvet band" (43). Strether is impressed by this band, which "somehow added, in her appearance to the value of every other item" (43). Although he wonders at this point what "had a man conscious of a man's work in the world to do with red velvet bands" (43), he is unable to escape its influence. The red band does not, however, remain the primary object in Strether's experience. When he and Miss Gostry attend a play, his attention is directed toward an actress "in a yellow frock who made a pleasant weak good-looking young man . . . do the most dreadful things" (45). As with his discovery that Madame de Vionnet owns the books with the "lemon-coloured covers with which his eye had begun to dally from the hour of his arrival" (153), Strether's encounter with the yellow dress marks an important step in his movement toward the development of a "Paris" vision.

The important point for the present discussion is, of course, the nature of the connection between the figurative language of the Preface and the metaphorical development of the novel. As the example of the color metaphor implies, the relationship
is a continuous one; and the continuity of metaphor implies a continuity of consciousness. Because the Preface to The Ambassadors is a "private history" of the novel, it attempts to define the motives of the creative consciousness which organize and control the development of the novel. The Preface explores the goals and methods of the "chronicler" of the hero (43), not those of Strether himself. "Compositional problems" become for James "the question at issue" and "keep the author's heart in his mouth" (319) precisely because they are the sign of the artist's relationship to his fiction, his point of view.

i

But if I go further and seek among these characteristics the principal one, which includes almost all the rest, I discover that in most of the operations of the mind each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding.

America is therefore one of the countries where the precepts of Descartes are least studied and are best applied.

Everyone shuts himself up tightly within himself and insists upon judging the world from there.22

The nineteenth-century American novelist justifies in a striking way Alexis de Tocqueville's brilliant insight into the nature of the American mind. He differs from his English counterpart in his willingness to accept—indeed, to affirm—the subjective origins of his art. In contrast to novelists like Dickens, Eliot, and Trollope, he finds no pre-established institutional, moral, or rational order on which to ground himself, but, as R. W. B. Lewis has noted,23 finds himself alone in a neutral universe and goes forth to invent his own character and personal history. For this reason a central concern of his art becomes the nature of the creative task itself.

Thoreau rejects established order as represented by Concord

22 Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (New York, 1945), 2:3-4.
and retreats to the woods in order to reduce life "to its lowest
terms"—the naked self and the natural world. In his case, the reductive process leads to affirmation. The inner and outer worlds are discovered to be products of a divine order. "The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf" (275). This insight, however, comes only to the man who is willing to reject all previous grounds for order and create his own. It is important that Walden derives its structure from the seasonal cycle; for Thoreau, like the sun, "this first spring morning" is "re-creating the world" (280). Walden is directly concerned with this creative process: "In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that in respect to egotism is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I know as well" (3).

It is significant that the "I" is retained in so many American books. The American writer continually sings a "Song of Myself." He may appear in his own person, as Hawthorne does in "The Custom House," his introduction to The Scarlet Letter, or he may be figured in the form of a fictitious first-person narrator who tells his story as he writes his book. From Washington Irving's Sketch Book to John Barth's The Floating Opera, the first-person point of view has been used to dramatize the American writer's concern with the nature of the relationship between art and life. The artist's presence in his own work—either as a dramatized version of himself or as a fictitious narrator—serves to imply a radical distinction between the two realms. This is especially true of the fiction of America's two great nineteenth-century novelists. For Hawthorne and Melville the novelist is not an observer but the creator of fictitious life.

The decision of Hawthorne and Melville to refer to their fiction as "romance" reflects their concern with the act of creation itself, as well as their desire to call attention to the

vital perspective which is responsible for their art. Hawthorne prefers the romance to the novel because while the latter "is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience," the former "has fairly a right to present [the truth of the human heart] under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation." The writer's creative act is crucial, for the fictional world is a "neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (V,55). It is in this neutral territory, and only here, that inner and outer, subject and object, are joined in meaningful intercourse.

As "The Custom House" suggests, the real world is one of fragments. Hawthorne is forced to live either at the old manse within the magical circle of imaginative isolation or in the decaying public world of the customhouse. Within the world of *The Scarlet Letter*, however, the faded scarlet "A" which is discovered in the attic of the customhouse takes on a new beauty and meaning because it now exists harmoniously within an atmosphere created by the author's return to the private world. Although Hawthorne the man must live in either one realm or the other, Hawthorne the author is able to create a world where public and private may not only coexist but interact. In "The Custom House" the private author, seized by an "autobiographical impulse" (17), attempts to "complete the circle of his existence" through public utterance, "since thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed, unless the speaker stand in some true relation with his audience" (18). It is important to realize, however, that the speaker here is Hawthorne the artist, not Hawthorne the man. The "inmost me" is kept "behind the veil" (18). It is only the voice of the author speaking from a neutral realm which is able to bridge the gap between self and world.

It is in the fiction of Herman Melville, however, that the acutely self-conscious artist is given his most radical and important role. If Hawthorne's experience of the world, as divided into subject and object, private and public, looks backward toward romanticism, Melville's vision of a white universe looks forward to the nihilism of a Conrad. Melville's theory of fiction is based on a vision of life as an empty masquerade. The human and natural worlds are lies. The mind of man and the material of nature are "nothing but surface stratified on surface" (P, XXI, 335) and both are hollow at the core. To penetrate beneath these surfaces, however, is no easy task. As with Conrad's darkness, direct confrontation with Melville's whiteness brings madness and death. Man seems destined to be either a naive innocent, a raving madman, or a dying misanthrope. Characters like Jackson, Pip, Bulkington, Pierre, Billy Budd, and Claggart—among a host of others—dramatize the scope of the problem. Nevertheless there is always someone else present in Melville's fiction, someone who loses his innocence and also retains his sanity. There is the narrator, who in his role of fictive author seeks to approach the truth indirectly by viewing it through the experiences of created characters in a fictional world. It is this quest which provides the generative formal principle in Melville's early fiction and results, finally, in Moby-Dick, a book which demonstrates the writer's ability to forget life by creating another world. But it was the destiny of Herman Melville to expose the subversive implications of this subjective aesthetic by uncovering an internal blankness which renders it absurd. This exploration generates Pierre, Israel Potter, and The Confidence-Man.

The assumptions which form the foundation of Melville's theory of the novel receive their most concise statement in his famous essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses." One of five surviving book reviews which Melville wrote for The Literary World, the Hawthorne essay is by far the most important in that only there does Melville deal with matters other than
plot. The other reviews, however, furnish an important clue to the central meaning of "Hawthorne and His Mosses." It is by noting an important difference between them and the longer Hawthorne piece that the reader becomes aware of the literary device by which the meaning of the essay is rendered. The only one of the five reviews which has any kind of authorial signature (the other four were published anonymously in The Literary World), "Hawthorne and His Mosses," the reader is told, is written "By a Virginian Spending July in Vermont." As the existence of the other reviews suggests, this pseudonym serves a more important purpose than the concealment of the writer's identity. The symbolic development of the essay depends upon the narrator's dramatization of himself as a Virginian spending the summer in Vermont:

A papered chamber in a fine old farm-house—a mile from any other dwelling, and dipped to the eaves in foliage—surrounded by mountains, old woods, and Indian pools,—this, surely, is the place to write of Hawthorne. Some charm is in this northern air, for love and duty seem both impelling to the task. A man of a deep and noble nature has seized me in this seclusion. His wild, witch voice rings through me; or, in softer cadences, I seem to hear it in the songs of the hill-side birds, that sing in the larch trees at my window. (535-36)

From the very beginning of the essay the reader is asked to consider the special nature of the Virginian's experience of New England. As the literary character of the essay's introductory paragraph (quoted above) suggests, the narrator's introduction to the area is a bookish one. The farmhouse covered with foliage, the mountains, woods, and Indian pools, have reference to the poetic New England landscape described by Hawthorne in his Preface to the Mosses. Because of the special nature of his introduction to his new environment, the narrator does not remain an ordinary tourist. Although his "sightseeing" is at first limited to the usual and commonplace
—people, places, and food—he soon enters a more meaningful realm:

At breakfast the other day, a mountain girl, a cousin of mine, who for the last two weeks has every morning helped me to strawberries and raspberries,—which, like the roses and pearls in the fairy-tale, seemed to fall into the saucer from those strawberry-beds her cheeks,—this delightful creature, this charming Cherry says to me—"I see you spend your mornings in the hay-mow; and yesterday I found there 'Dwight's Travels in New England.' Now I have something far better than that,—something more congenial to our summer on these hills. Take these raspberries, and then I will give you some moss."—"Moss!" said I.—"Yes, and you must take it to the barn with you, and goodbye to 'Dwight.'" (536–37)

The narrator’s farewell to Dwight and his acceptance of Hawthorne’s Mosses marks his entrance into another world and the essay’s movement into metaphor. A glance at the index of the first volume of Dwight’s Travels reveals a complete if somewhat dull guide book to New England. The book, which includes everything from a description of the climate to a discussion of the morals of Indian tribes, attempts, in Dwight’s words, “to describe New England in a manner resembling that in which a painter would depict a cloud.”26 The Virginia tourist, visiting in New England, loses interest in Dwight’s factual description of the actual landscape, accepts Hawthorne as his guide, and is magically transported into the “enchanting landscape” of Hawthorne’s fictional world. As his actions imply, the narrator finds Hawthorne’s landscape more appealing and meaningful than Dwight’s descriptions of the actual one.

Because the narrator’s movement from the Travels to the Mosses controls the metaphoric development of the essay, it is important to recognize the implications of the shift. That the Virginia tourist faced with the problem of understanding a new environment apparently finds fiction more helpful than

the factual guide book is not surprising to the student of Melville. As the reader of Redburn knows, guide books are "the least reliable books in all literature" (R, 151). In the "world of lies" ("HHM," 542) the "sands are forever shifting" (R, 151). Nature, who "absolutely paints like a harlot" (M-D, XLII, 193), is always changing her face. She never lures the unsuspecting traveler with the same temptation. Hence the tourist who depends on a guide book is destined to become hopelessly lost.

Implicit in the narrator's contrast of Dwight and Hawthorne is a superficial similarity between the Travels and the Preface to the Mosses, in which Hawthorne takes the reader "sight-showing" (II, 14) around the New England countryside. Hawthorne, however, recognizes that it is "difficult to view the world precisely as it exists" (41). For this reason he adjusts "his inward eye to a proper focus with the outward organ" (33) and introduces the reader to a "fairy-land," midway between dream and reality. Like Dwight, Hawthorne discusses New England history, climate, flowers, rivers, apples, and vegetables, but, as Melville sees, these descriptions are intended to introduce the reader to a fictional world, not to provide him with a guide to the actual one. Hawthorne's Preface is a "stream of thought . . . flowing from my pen" which attempts to describe the "broad tide of dim emotions . . . which swell around me from that portion of my existence" (43). The Preface takes the reader "just within the cavern's mouth" of Hawthorne's fictional world (44) and leaves him there free to explore at will.

It is this fictional landscape which the Virginia tourist prefers to Dwight's descriptions of the actual one, and so he feeds on Hawthorne's fictional apples, finds mountains and valleys in his humor and love, and enjoys his Indian-summer melancholy:

For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black. But this dark-
ness but gives more effect to the evermoving dawn, that forever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world. . . . Certain it is, however, that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. . . . Still more: this black conceit pervades him, through and through. You may be witched by his sunlight,—transported by the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you;—but there is the blackness of darkness beyond; and even his bright gildings but fringe, and play upon the edges of thunder-clouds. . . . He is immeasurably deeper than the plummet of the mere critic. . . . You cannot come to know greatness by inspecting it; there is no glimpse to be caught of it, except by intuition; you need not ring it, you but touch it, and you find it is gold. (540–41)

It is important that the narrator of the review uses aspects of the New England climate which Dwight regards as characteristic of the area as a basis for his metaphoric description of Hawthorne's fictional world. As his comments make clear, however, the symbolic landscape reveals a truth which remains hidden in Dwight's purely factual account. In the fictional landscape the Virginian discovers the "Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity," an aspect of the New England tradition which is not visible in the natural landscape. It is only in the fictional world that the "background" leads to a "mystical depth of meaning."

Having indicated the limits and nature of his tour, the narrator moves on, through a discussion of Shakespeare's fictional world, to define more precisely the ways in which the fictional world differs from the actual one. After suggesting that Shakespeare's popularity is due to his use of a sort of rant which "brings down the house," he goes on to discuss what he considers to be at the heart of Shakespeare's genius:

But it is those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality:—these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare. Through the mouths of the dark char-

25
acters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth. . . . For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches. (541–42)

Shakespeare, like Hawthorne, "plays his grandest conceits" against a symbolic "background." By creating a fictional surrogate for himself and placing him within a fictional world, Shakespeare is able to penetrate to the very "axis of reality." This indirection is necessary not only because the actual world is a "world of lies" but because of the destructive nature of Truth itself. As with Conrad's darkness, Melville's Truth is a positive threat to sanity and life. To face it directly, in one's "own proper character," is to be driven mad. Only when it is articulated by a fictional character in a realm whose landscape is designed to reveal rather than hide can Truth be experienced as "sane madness." By turning his back on life and entering a world which does not exist, the writer is able to approach the "axis of reality" without being destroyed or driven mad. Fiction, paradoxically, puts man in touch with Truth while protecting him from it.

As the narrator of the "Mosses" is well aware, his theory implies a radical distinction between the actual and fictional worlds. "Would that all excellent books were foundlings,

27 The Literary World read "same," a mistake which was not corrected until the publication of Eleanor Melville Metcalf's Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle (Cambridge, Mass., 1953). Here was printed for the first time a letter from Sophia Hawthorne to her mother in which she reports Melville's reaction to the publication of the "Mosses" essay: "He told me that the Review was too carelessly written—that he dashed it off in great haste & did not see the proof sheets, & that there was one provoking mistake in it. Instead of 'the same madness of truth' it should be 'the sane madness of truth'" (p. 92).
without father or mother," he writes, "that so it might be, we could glorify them, without including their ostensible authors" (536). This radical separation of the man from the artist points directly to the difference between the natural and literary landscapes:

I know not what would be the right name to put on the title-page of an excellent book, but this I feel, that the names of all fine authors are fictitious ones, far more so than that of Junius,—simply standing, as they do, for the mystical, ever-eluding Spirit of all Beauty, which ubiquitously possesses men of genius. Purely imaginative as this fancy may appear, it nevertheless seems to receive some warranty from the fact, that on a personal interview no great author has ever come up to the idea of his reader. (536)

It is of crucial importance to distinguish between Hawthorne the man and "Hawthorne in his writings" (547). In his "own proper character" a great writer is, as we all are, merely a part of this "world of lies." In his role of fictive author, however, he inhabits another world. He possesses the power of a "wizard" who "magically" constructs and inhabits an "enchanting landscape" (536). The value of fiction is, then, dependent upon the reader's recognizing and approaching it as fiction. Art which imitates life is merely meaningless gesture.

But if this view [the Virginian's] of the all-popular Shakespeare be seldom taken by his readers, and if very few who extol him, have ever read him deeply; or, perhaps, only have seen him on the tricky stage (which alone made, and is still making him his mere mob renown)—if few men have time, or patience, or palate, for the spiritual truth as it is in that great genius;—it is, then, no matter of surprise that in a contemporaneous age, Nathaniel Hawthorne is a man, as yet, almost utterly mistaken among men. (542)

To put Shakespeare on the "tricky stage" is to bring fiction too close to the lies of the actual world. The stage is "tricky" precisely because it drives the white doe of truth into "the infinite obscure of [the] background" (541). The words of
Lear are meaningful only as long as they are spoken within the symbolic landscape of the fictional world. Removed from this context and spoken by a real man on the stage, they are no longer the “sane madness of vital truth,” but are instead mere “popularizing noise and show of broad farce, and blood-be-smeared tragedy” (542).

The only connection which exists between the realms of life and art is that materials from one are used in the construction of the other. As the metaphoric development of Melville's essay implies, Hawthorne the man, a resident of New England, is related to the inhabitor of the symbolic landscape of the Mosses. So it is that Hawthorne the artist does not appear in “the costume of Queen Elizabeth's day,” and is not “a writer of dramas founded upon old English history, or the tales of Boccaccio” (543). Because “great geniuses are parts of the times,” indeed “themselves are the times; and possess a correspondent coloring” (543), Hawthorne the artist employs raw materials taken from the world of Hawthorne the man in constructing his symbolic landscape. He takes, as it were, a “skeleton of actual reality,” and builds about it “with fulness & veins & beauty.”

Referring by implication to Melville's own fiction as an example, the narrator insists that the nineteenth-century American writer must have “plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in” (544).

Because the writer of fiction attempts to reveal the truth which lies hidden beneath the surfaces of nature and entangled in the labyrinth of the multiple avenues of experience, he must begin with the facts of his own experience. “Clear Truth,” however, “is a thing for salamander giants only to encounter,” and hence the writer must see these facts as the basis for the creation of another realm where the “dread goddess's veil” (M-D, 336) may be lifted with impunity.

The theory of fiction implied in the Hawthorne essay has a special relevance to Melville's practice of his craft. When

these two attitudes—that “all fine authors are fictitious ones” and that the art of fiction is the “Great Art of Telling the Truth”—are combined, the critic is provided with the important suggestion that all of Melville’s narrators are, in some way, portraits of the artist at work.