

# Existential Incest: Melville's Use of the Enceladus Myth in *Pierre*

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Among the many avenues explored by Herman Melville in his quest for satisfactory answers to the ultimate questions of religion and philosophy, the world of myth plays a very prominent part. Whether these myths were of his own making (as in the magnificent myth of the Great White Whale in *Moby-Dick*) or taken from other sources, classical or contemporary, they always add important dimensions of resonance and meaning to the themes so passionately hunted by the literary whaler. The fertility of Melville's imagination, combined with his prodigious memory of seemingly everything he had ever read, resulted in complex and illuminating patterns of mythical construction, both on the textual surface and even more importantly in the dark depths of thematic significance in "the little lower layer" of his great novels.

As with everything else pertaining to Melville, his use of myth has been extensively studied by a number of critics.<sup>1</sup> What they have documented is not just the range of Melville's mythic imagination and the wide extent of his knowledge of the mythology of both the Oriental and the Western tradition, but also how easy it is to interpret much of his writing from modern intellectual perspectives, whether they be Existentialist, Freudian, or Jungian. For Melville was above all interested in the potential of mythological constructs as guides and tools in his truth-seeking process, and with his innovative ideas of the human uncon-

<sup>1</sup> Among the critical studies of this aspect of Melville's art, the most illuminating are H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963); Dorothee M. Finkelstein, *Melville's Orienda* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); Martin L. Pops, *The Melville Archetype* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1970), and Gerard M. Sweeney, *Melville's Use of Classical Mythology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1975).

scious and his deep interest in and knowledge of the primitive mind, from *Typee* onwards, it is perhaps not surprising that the terms of his quest should seem to us so modern.

As H. Bruce Franklin has emphasized, Melville was so concerned with the epistemological value of myths "because the truth of comparative mythology depends on the 'truth' of myth, and all truth available to man appears finally to be mythic."<sup>2</sup> For Melville, at least from the beginning of his writing career in the 1840s, it seems to have been a truism that no religious, philosophical, or mythological system could claim special status as revelation, and that this entailed the relativistic conclusion that all attempts made to understand ourselves and the universe must be seen as constructions originating in the human mind. Classical myths would thus seem potentially as valid as expressions of the deeper truths as more modern and rational explanations, and it was therefore natural for Melville to seek out and develop those mythical stories that to him best epitomized the various aspects of the human condition he was exploring.

After his seemingly more anthropological fascination with primitive myths in his Marquesan novels, Melville set out in *Mardi; and a Voyage Thither* to analyze and test the validity of the myth-making faculty itself, and although he never turns that meandering novel into more than the "chartless voyage" it is characterized as being, his conviction that myths and symbols together could be powerful instruments for the revelation of hidden truth seems to have been strengthened in the process. Certainly his next philosophical novel, *Moby-Dick*, bases much of its intellectual power on the textual richness of its associations to mythical figures like Prometheus, Narcissus, Jonah, Leviathan, and Typhon. And when he tried to find appropriate embodiment for his despairing vision of the necessary futility of all truth-seeking in *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, it is still the symbolic use of mythological figures and stories that makes the thematic lines reverberate with deeper meaning, even when the plot line and characterization threaten to veer off into chaos and incoherence.

What, then, were the most important mythological figures that Melville relied on in his development of the thematics of *Pierre*? Here the critics have had rather different evaluations of the relative importance of these figures. Dorothee M. Finkelstein believes that "the myth of

2 *The Wake of the Gods*, p. 4

Memnon, like the story of Hamlet, is the key not only to Pierre's personality, but to the 'unsummed world of grief' in Melville's work."<sup>3</sup> Gerard M. Sweeney thinks it is the stories of Prometheus and Orestes that will yield the most fruitful understanding of the novel,<sup>4</sup> while Henry A. Murray claims that "Pierre is Oedipus-Romeo-Hamlet-Memnon-Christ-Ishmael-Orestes-Timon-Satan-Cain-Manfred, or more shortly, an American Fallen and Crucified Angel."<sup>5</sup>

Conspicuously missing from Murray's long list is Enceladus the Titan, who in my opinion in many ways is more of "a key to it all" than all of the other suggestions, even if these figures complement rather than exclude each other. Franklin is one of the few critics who have seen the pivotal role played by the Enceladus myth in the novel, but even he subordinates the Enceladus figure to the general theme of "the petrification of myth" in his chapter on *Pierre*. Raj Kumar Gupta sees the symbol of Enceladus (along with the Memnon story) as "more organically integrated with the theme and texture of the novel in which they appear than any other symbol used by Melville, with the possible exception of the White Whale."<sup>6</sup> Generally speaking, however, even if few critics have been so wide of the mark as Warner Berthoff when he refers to "the set-piece digression on Enceladus,"<sup>7</sup> it would seem that the thematic centrality of the Enceladus figure is much greater than most critics would appear to have recognized, the more so since many of the novel's central figures can be arranged in concentric circles emanating from the hub of the Enceladus vision.

Since Melville knew that Enceladus and the myth of the Titans were less well-known to his audience than figures like Prometheus and Narcissus (even Pierre himself is said to have only "random knowledge of the ancient fables"), he takes pains to give the reader as full a description of this broken hero and his genealogy as his symbolic purposes would demand:

Old Titan's self was the son of incestuous Coelus and Terra, the son of incestuous Heaven and Earth. And Titan married his mother Terra, another and accumulatively incestuous

<sup>3</sup> *Melville's Orienda*, p. 139.

<sup>4</sup> *Melville's Use of Classical Mythology*, esp. Ch. VI.

<sup>5</sup> "Introduction" to *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities* (New York: Hendricks House, 1949), xx.

<sup>6</sup> "Form and Style in Herman Melville's *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities*" (Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1964), p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> *The Example of Melville* (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 50.

match. And thereof Enceladus was one issue. So Enceladus was both the son and grandson of an incest; and even thus, there had been born from the organic blended heavenliness and earthliness of Pierre, another mixed, uncertain, heaven-aspiring, but still not wholly earth-emancipated mood; which again, by its terrestrial taint held down to its terrestrial mother, generated there the present doubly incestuous Enceladus within him; so that the present mood of Pierre—that reckless sky-assaulting mood of his, was nevertheless on one side the grandson of the sky. For it is according to eternal fitness, that the precipitated Titan should still seek to regain his paternal birthright even by fierce escalade. Wherefore whoso storms the sky gives best proof he came from thither!<sup>8</sup>

Balancing this description, where so much of the emphasis is on Enceladus' incestuous origins, is another passage, where the focus is on his Ahab-like defiance of the powers that be:

But no longer petrified in all their ignominious attitudes, the herded Titans now sprung to their feet; flung themselves up the slope; and anew battered at the precipice's unresounding wall. Foremost among them all, he saw a moss-turbaned, armless giant, who despairing of any other mode of wreaking his immitigable hate, turned his vast trunk into a battering-ram, and hurled his own arched-out ribs again and yet again against the invulnerable steep (346).

When Pierre wakes in horror from this dream, having seen his own face on the mutilated trunk of Enceladus, Melville makes clear that Pierre himself is without the understanding that the reader is invited to share with the author-narrator, who has supplied the key to the unraveling of the mystery in the sketch of Enceladus's incestuous background quoted above. For all is not totally hopeless, even if our best intentions turn to disaster, if we can believe that our aspiration towards heavenly virtue in itself reveals that part of our nature belongs to a world outside of the physical realm. However, in this his most despairing novel, Melville gives the reader little hope that this possibility can be affirmed in any other way than as a desperate wish that actualities do nothing to substantiate. For in *Pierre*, the voice of God is no longer to be found in storm or lightning, but only in the stony silence that entombs the protagonist at the end of the novel. If there is a God, Melville seems to feel, He must have created human beings as a kind of practical joke, doomed to suffer the agonies of dissatisfaction and despair. By referring to such a divine being as "the eminent Jugglarius himself" (262), Melville rein-

<sup>8</sup> *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1971), p. 347. Further reference to this standard text, Volume 7 of the Northwestern-Newberry edition of the Writings of Herman Melville, will appear parenthetically in the text.

forces this notion, and clearly reveals the extent of his irreverence and even blasphemy in the context of his own time.

What concerns Melville in this novel, then, is not the possibility of a metaphysical reality beyond nature, as much as our total inability to know about it. In one of the most important thematic statements in the novel, the author-narrator gives the following description of our human situation in this respect:

Now without doubt this Talismanic Secret [that would reconcile this world with his own soul] has never yet been found; and in the nature of human things it seems as though it never can be. Certain philosophers have time and again pretended to have found it; but if they do not in the end discover their own delusion, other people soon discover it for themselves, and so those philosophers and their vain philosophy are let glide away into practical oblivion. ...That profound Silence, that only Voice of our God, which I before spoke of; from that divine thing without a name, those impostor philosophers pretend somehow to have got an answer; which is as absurd, as though they should say they had got water out of stone; for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence? (208).

A careful reading of the complex patterns of themes and imagery that inform *Pierre* suggests that the incest motif is not just essential for an understanding of the importance of the Enceladus myth in the novel, but a key to a number of other central themes as well. In this respect the novel also represents a significant step beyond the philosophical analyses of *Moby-Dick*, whereas the second part of the myth, the defiance theme, does not. So much of *Pierre* is designed to develop the idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with human nature, in that our unavoidable hybrid of spirit and matter, mind and body, is to blame for our fundamental inability to reconcile our aspirations towards the absolutes of truth and knowledge on the one hand and our incarceration in our necessarily relativistic consciousness on the other. One is tempted here to rewrite Hamlet's famous statement, to illustrate Pierre's situation:

Human nature's out of joint; O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!

*Pierre*, starting out in the idealized Heaven of Saddle Meadows, with a father whom he reveres as a god<sup>9</sup> and a mother whom he likes to address as "Sister Mary," is clearly set up as a Christ figure in the novel,

<sup>9</sup> Newton Arvin has noted that even in Melville's early description of Pierre's father, there are incestuous implications. See *Herman Melville: A Critical Biography* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), p. 223.

and his development into the figure of Enceladus is thus full of both religious and philosophical significance. And if Melville could call *Moby-Dick* "a wicked book," one might wonder what adjective he would have found appropriate, to characterize *Pierre!* For the multiple disasters that the protagonist calls down on his own head as well as on everyone else around him, are all brought about by his earnest attempt to be a Christ-like champion of truth and virtue: "Thus, in the Enthusiast to Duty, the heaven-begotten Christ is born; and will not own a mortal parent, and spurns and rends all mortal bonds" (106). Again and again the author-narrator reminds us that all enthusiastic champions of the heart are bound to botch their noble missions: "But Pierre, though charged with the fire of all divineness, his containing thing was made of clay. Ah, muskets the gods have made to carry infinite combustions, and yet made them of clay" (107). In Merlin Bowen's words,

It is the true irony of man's position that he can neither achieve virtue nor renounce it: as his earthly half puts perfection forever beyond his reach, so his godlike half forbids his ever being content with less. But this is a self-knowledge that brings no resignation with it but instead a deepening anger with the power that has made him as he is.<sup>10</sup>

Of this perception the figure of Enceladus is the perfect embodiment, and incestuous sterility and deformity a logical corollary.

It is important at this point to remember, however, that the Enceladus figure of the novel is in fact neither a Titan nor its sculpted representation. It is indeed a stone, a huge piece of rock that has no pre-ordained significance in itself, but can only be made to yield a meaning or a message by the interpretative act of the human mind. This pervasive theme in Melville, that truth is always in the final analysis subjective and human rather than objective and absolute, is given careful adumbration in the author's description of the circumstances, natural and human, that surround the Enceladus rock:

Say what some poets will, Nature is not so much her own ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood (342).

<sup>10</sup> *The Long Encounter: Self and Experience in the Writings of Herman Melville* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 181.

Not surprisingly, then, the present Mount of Titans has previously, presumably in more Christian times, been called the Delectable Mountain, and a closer study reveals good reasons for emphasizing either its green moistness or the arid horrors of "so chameleon a height":

Stark desolation; ruin, merciless and ceaseless; chills and gloom,—all here lived a hidden life, curtained by that cunning purpleness, which, from the piazza of the manor house, so beautifully invested the mountain once called Delectable, but now styled Titanic (344).

To further emphasize this point, Melville uses two other symbols that also recur in other parts of the novel to align the characters within his symbolic scheme: the catnip and the amaranth. These two flowers, suggesting on the one hand the homely temporal greenness of hearth and home, and on the other hand the eternally white and sterilizing striving to get beyond the limits of our earthly existence, are obvious counterparts to Lucy and Isabel, as well as a fitting environment for the Enceladus rock. And in keeping with Pierre's own development,

every spring the amaranthine and celestial flower gained on the mortal household herb; for every autumn the catnip died, but never an autumn made the amaranth to wane. The catnip and the amaranth!—man'searthly household peace, and the ever-encroaching appetite for God (344-45).

In this struggle between heaven and earth, spirit and matter, it is ultimately not our human inability to reconcile these two forces in life-sustaining and happiness-conducive patterns that is the most fundamental problem in Melville's analysis. Tragic defiance and heroic greatness had been possible and admirable only a year earlier, when Ahab sank to his doom in futile protest against the realities of the universe. In his subsequent novel, however, it is as if the worst fears of Ishmael's solipsistic skepticism have joined forces with Ahab's demonic need to say "No!—in thunder," and the result is a "hero" whose authority is undercut on every count. In spite of his commendable desire to champion the right and the true in a world "soaking in lies," Pierre is exposed as "the fool of Truth, the fool of Virtue, the fool of Fate" (358), totally unable to emulate either the level-headed sailor or the monomaniacal Captain of *Moby-Dick*. For in the figure of Pierre-as-Enceladus, Melville has identified his young hero's plight as a necessary consequence of our human condition, the built-in incestuous sterility that can only produce

ambiguities and uncertainties on the level of knowledge, and can only result in petrification and death on the level of life.<sup>11</sup>

It is also in this context that the two false oracles of the novel must be understood. Exploring further his intimate knowledge of the world of Greek mythology, shared with a large part of his reading audience, Melville uses Apollo's oracle at Delphi as another symbolic representation of his ambiguous themes. Clearly he had ample reason in the Greek tradition itself for such a usage, since many of the pronouncements of the oracle are shown to be dangerous and destructive precisely because of their ambiguity. In *Pierre*, it is clear that both Isabel and Plotinus Plinlimmon function as oracular voices that complement each other, and to most critics equally clear that both represent positions that the author believes to be untenable.

It is interesting to note that the name Isabel from an etymological point of view can be linked to the Oriental Baal, and be construed as "oath of Apollo."<sup>12</sup> But even without this connection, it appears obvious that Melville has taken pains to make Isabel as oracular as possible. Her entire background is shrouded in mystery, and the formation of her mind is consistently described as pre-rational and intuitive. It is really only through her guitar that she is able to express her personality, and this is how she presents her feelings to Pierre during one of their first encounters:

"Mystery!Mystery!  
Mystery of Isabel!  
Mystery!Mystery!  
Isabel and Mystery!  
Mystery!" (150).

Isabel's oracular challenge to Pierre is for him to unravel this mystery, to respond to her contention that his father is also her father, and to decide not only whether this astonishing possibility is true, but also to determine what action is required on his part in order to do what is right and virtuous. Pierre chooses to believe his half-sister and to champion her

<sup>11</sup> In his review of Hershel Parker's recent revised edition of *Pierre* (HarperCollins, 1995), Richard H. Brodhead has emphasized the extent to which the novel is a study of the absolutist temperament, and how Pierre is just one in a series of figures who represent "the cult of private visionary calling" in America. See "The Book That Ruined Melville," *The New York Times Book Review*, 7 January, 1996, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> See Sweeney, p. 313.



rights, but at the same time tries to save his father's name and his mother's peace of mind, all with the best of intentions. The results are disastrous all around, and worst of all, Pierre at the end has no way of knowing if Isabel's claim is really valid, while at the same time he has begun to suspect that his enthusiasm to sacrifice himself on Isabel's behalf has been motivated as much by a hidden passion for a beautiful woman as by a saintly desire to protect a sister. Thus, to use the heart to interpret the oracle's message seems to be a dubious course indeed.

However, to follow the expedient ratiocinations of the head seems little better, as this alternative is developed in Melville's description of Plotinus Plinlimmon and his pamphlet on "Chronometricals and Horologicals." Again Melville makes a direct link to the Delphic oracle by having the torn-off pamphlet begin and end with the Greek word "ΕΙ" ("IF"), historically the inscription over the portal to that famous Greek shrine. The pamphlet is an extended exercise in defense of the pragmatic position that "a virtuous expediency, then, seems the highest desirable or attainable earthly excellence for the mass of men, and is the only earthly excellence their Creator intended for them." Therefore, man "must by no means make a complete unconditional sacrifice of himself in behalf of any other being, or any cause, or any conceit" (214). This message of calculated self-interest as the highest moral virtue is paralleled by the studied non-involvement and non-benevolence of Plotinus Plinlimmon himself, when Pierre later meets him at the Church of the Apostles. Clearly, any reader familiar with Melville will realize that this oracle is at least no better than the other!

Another dimension to this conundrum is added if we look at Melville's analysis of human motivation here in the light of his protracted quarrel with Transcendentalism. Pierre is, in his enthusiastic championship of the heart and desire to do "something transcendently great" (284), another example of the "sunken-eyed Platonist" who falls from the mast-head of the Pequod to be lost forever. His sailor's perception of the sharkishness of the world always prevented Melville from buying the pantheistic theory that is at the heart of Emersonian philosophy, and his basic conviction that mind and matter are asymmetrical and "out of joint" made belief in any "Doctrine of Correspondences" out of the question. If Emerson were right, Pierre should have been applauded as a great moral hero, and his agonizing transformation from Christ figure and moral exemplar to the maimed and impotent Enceladus would

have been totally impossible. Instead, we are presented to a universe where "the only way God's truth and man's truth correspond is through their contradictions."<sup>13</sup>

In *Pierre*, Melville is more openly satirical of the Transcendentalists than in any of his other novels. Whether we choose to look at his reference to the "preposterous rabble of Muggletonian Scots and Yankees, whose vile brogue still more bestreaks the stripedness of their Greek or German Neoplatonical originals" (208), his burlesque of "the Transcendental Flesh-Brush Philosophy" (295), or his disparaging remarks about those "amiable philosophers of either the 'Compensation,' or 'Optimist' school" (277), the impression is throughout that the stony ambiguities that dominated his vision at the time of *Pierre* made the Transcendentalists an even more obvious target of criticism than usual.<sup>14</sup>

If it is true, as Melville obviously believes in this novel, that what James Duban has called "the mind's incestuous union with its own desires and aspirations"<sup>15</sup> renders us existentially impotent and epistemologically benighted, then not only is Transcendentalism an immature cheat, but even the tragic defiance of the Enceladus figure on the Mount of Titans is a figment of man's imagination. The rock is a piece of stone, and all symbolic interpretations are as potentially subjective and ambiguous as our other attempts to make sense of our lives. Seen against this background, the final scene of the novel, impossibly melodramatic though it is, must still appear entirely appropriate for the message Melville is out to deliver:

"Ye two pale ghosts, were this the other world, ye were not welcome. Away!—Good Angel and Bad Angel both!—For Pierre is neuter now!"

"Oh, ye stony roofs, and seven-fold stony skies!—not thou art the murderer, but thy sister has murdered thee, my brother, oh my brother!" (360).

Here, when all is said and done, it is ultimately impossible even to determine whether it is Lucy or Isabel who represents the good or the

13 F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 471.

14 James Duban has also shown how Melville's use of the "oracles" of Isabel and Plinlimmon can be seen as a comment on the heated contemporary debate between the Transcendentalists' emphasis on personal intuition and the Unitarian emphasis on the importance of historical evidence. See *Melville's Major Fiction: Politics, Theology, and Imagination* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983), pp.149-175.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

bad, in a world of ambiguities so basic and unavoidable that all impulses and aspirations paralyze each other and cancel out whatever values mankind might want to affirm. At last, Pierre's passionate and idealistic nature has been metamorphosed into the stone that his name suggests, and, like the figure of Enceladus, his fundamentally incestuous nature has rendered him impotent forever. And the rest, one is tempted to say in the symbolic vocabulary of the novel, is Silence.