

ANALYSIS

Pierre (1852) by Herman Melville

E. L. Grant Watson

The New England Quarterly 3 (April 1930) 195-234

Pierre is a record (for a certain period) of Melville's mystical experience. It is the story of the coming of the knowledge of good and evil, of the fall from innocence and the paradisiacal, unconscious spell of childhood; it is placed in a deliberately artificial setting, borrowed from the New England of 1850. It is more than the story of the fall, for with the fall from innocence of this modern Adam, comes a soul-shaking increase of consciousness, which could only come to one who has the legend of Christianity as his spiritual inheritance....

Melville creates *Pierre* as the God-man, one who, imaginatively conscious of the tragedy of life, would offer himself as a sacrifice to right the wrongs which Life--the father-life from which he himself has sprung--has, in moods of truculent unheedingness, created. But there is much besides, and if the reader's intuition can penetrate beneath the surface value of the symbols, he will find, recreated in the substance of this story of the soul, the fine, ambiguous threads of the warp and woof of good and evil.

Melville, in this work, more directly than in any other, attempts to formulate what he has apprehended of the mystery of life; and what is particularly interesting and remarkable is that he has placed all his apprehendings within the scope of those symbols offered by the *domestic* human circle, thus indicating that the spiritual advancement of man still exists and has its origins within the bonds of the family. Or in other words the world-images created from within outward are all sexual objects. The elements of the soul are divided into the mother and her son, the father and the son, the brother and sister, and the young man and his betrothed. These are not simple in their relationship; the brother and sister have different mothers; the boy calls his mother, sister; and later, with the coming of the consciousness of the tragedy of life, takes his sister to be his wife. The situation becomes thereby immensely complicated, and to the end it remains so, and, as a true picture of life, unresolved.

[Parts II-V of the essay treat *Pierre's* innocent background dominated by his proud mother; his acquiescent betrothal to the pure and fair Lucy ("the pure the conscious part of himself"); his new acquaintance with his dark, illegitimate sister Isabel ("the dark half of his soul"), her symbolic guitar, and her psychological double, Delly Ulver; his disillusionment with the God-like image of his dead father; and his mother's growing hostility as he tries to help Isabel; Part V continues thus:]

Melville, in his elaborate thoroughness, devoted a good deal of time to the whys and wherefores and reasonings which bring *Pierre* to the final resolution of establishing Isabel, not as his sister, but as his wife. The directing motive is *Pierre's* profound recognition of Isabel as a soul-image; and it is always with the soul-image in human form that the lover wishes to unite [Jung's *anima*]. Although *Pierre*...has no thought of an incestuous relation, yet he would, to justify the deepest springs of his being, celebrate a spiritual marriage with Isabel. This is his desire, and his reasonings lead him to this end. With the awareness of things unsuspected, all values are changing, and though at first from habit he may adhere to the conventions of good and evil, yet these values, too, are no longer set and definite. It is not long before he says: "Look: a nothing is the substance, it casts one shadow one way, and another the other way; and these two shadows are cast from one nothing; these, so it seems to me, are Virtue and Vice."

Therefore, all reasonings apart, the fundamental cause of his proclaimed marriage with Isabel is his profound desire for such a marriage. On this point the whole story turns. To understand what follows, the reader must make himself as emancipated from conventional thought as is Melville himself. He must not believe that Good is preferable to Evil, or Sanity to Madness; but rather recognize that Evil and Madness may be necessary and indispensable to certain phases of development. He must know, not only with his mind but with his heart, that the "sick soul" is just as relevant to life as the "healthy-minded" soul, and that

many sick souls are spiritually far in advance of happier, healthy-minded souls. He must know, moreover, that such souls as are depicted in *Pierre*, though they go (together with all their lesser associated personalities) down into madness and death, are necessary and valuable contributions to the life of Man. We can see that if Pierre had not married Isabel, but had kept his consciousness of tragedy and mystery as something separate (though loved and recognized) from his directing soul, then madness and misery would not have inevitably followed, but we can not say it would have been *better* thus. Melville has given us the privilege of seeing another kind of happening, one which is rich in a transcendent beauty....

At this critical period, Pierre must break, if need be, with all ties and affections of the past; he will proclaim Isabel as his wife, and accept the ordeal which will prove for him the transvaluation of all values: he is thus impelled by the facts of his experience. It is suggested that because fictitiously he had tried to put his mother in the domestic relation of a sister, so now he would make his sister into a wife. This is interesting to consider in its symbolic value. He does not know fully, though he apprehends vaguely the tragedies which lie in his path. He is impelled by the innermost forces in himself; and as the guitar answers to the voice and presence of Isabel, so he hears the deep voice of her being calling him from "the immense distances of the air, and there seemed no veto of the earth that could forbid her heavenly claim." Hers is "the unmistakable, unsuppressible cry of the Godhead speaking through his soul." And while he answers this call, his conscious self would guard the memory of his father. Thereby it is suggested that he would keep justified his vision of life, while realizing that the acts and nature of life should be kept secret.

To Lucy he first makes known his changed condition. His words are short, merely announcing that he is married. He speaks, knowing that he must blast her and at this moment his earlier consciousness of a happy and innocent world falls, as does Lucy, into a swoon; she seems almost utterly to be destroyed. The vision of innocence fades before the rivalry of experience, and he is impelled to risk the death of part of his own soul.

He goes directly to his mother's mansion; in the same short words he tells her he is married. Mrs. Glendinning's pride and haughtiness rise to the rebuke. "My dark soul," she says, "prophesied something dark. If already thou hast not found other lodgment, and other table than this house supplies, then seek it straight. Beneath my roof and at my table, he who was once Pierre Glendinning no more puts himself." For Mrs. Glendinning, Pierre's wife, whoever she be, whom he has taken without her (Mrs. Glendinning's) consent, is a dark, *unknown thing*, as indeed the Spirit of Tragedy awake within an individual soul is dark and unknown to herd-consciousness.

Disinherited by his mother, he returns to Isabel, assuring her that all loss for her sake is gain, for "she is of that fine, unshared stuff of which God makes his seraphim." He goes together with her and Delly to the village inn. Delly he has also taken under his protection, for he perceives that she is indubitably associated with Isabel, and must from now on be her handmaiden. To the inn he brought all his private papers together with the betraying portrait of his father. These he now burns, that he may have no unnecessary weight from the past to burden his soul. This accomplished, he prepares for the journey to the city. Very early the next morning they enter the stage coach, and travel throughout the day. During this fateful journey they are all silent. Delly and Isabel sit with faces averted, and Pierre, plunged in gloomy contemplation of the bivalent nature of life, broods over the evils he has been forced to visit on Lucy and his mother in following what so clearly seems his best and most commanding impulse. In this mood of despondency his fingers close on a pamphlet, or rather on a fragment of a pamphlet, left by some former traveler. He looks at it at first unseeingly, but after a while begins to read with increasing interest. This pamphlet is a lecture by one Plotinus Plinlimmon. It is the first of three hundred and thirty-three lectures and is entitled: *Chronometricals and Horologicals*....

The writer contrasts those values which condition and rule in the universe of transcendental Being with those others, which in the practical way of life, are found convenient in the every-day world of Becoming; and he suggests that since we are willy nilly in the world of Becoming, we can not in practice live by the transcendental values of that greater universe which our souls apprehend, without doing evil to both ourselves and others. Pierre reads and understands more than he is aware of at the time; indeed he carries the understanding of that pamphlet in his unconscious to determine his later acts. It is this that sets him a little bit aslant from his line of transcendental idealism, makes him a rebel against the destiny which is the

guerdon of an enlarged and religious consciousness, inculcating a doctrine of exalted and aloof non-benevolence. Thus Pierre, under the influence of a philosophy which is not his by nature to fulfil, fails, both in the world of ordinary human values, and in that other universe of all-accepting, Christ-like love to which he has aspired. There are hints here, developed more fully in the following story, which throw interesting illuminings on Melville's psychology. He is a deep searcher into the ways of life, the purity of whose perception is in some way clouded. Men such as Meister Eckhart and Jacob Behmen, are mystics both by nature and circumstance. Melville seems rather to be primarily a thinker, who by the accident of deep experience has become a mystic. He is never quite content to be led solely by the inner light, and though he is enough of a mystic to know that he can not rely upon the conclusions of thought, there are always not far distant, even in his most mystic moods, conscious strivings which sometimes seem to further his search and sometimes to drive him the more recklessly into a region of oblivion. Of this region he writes:

"But the example of many minds, forever lost, like undiscoverable Arctic explorers, amid those treacherous regions, warns us entirely away from them; and we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of Truth too far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike."

This is not the mystic speaking but the baffled thinker, and it is the thinker in Pierre who understands the pamphlet of Plotinus Plinlimmon. This thinker is at variance with the mystic acceptance of either Isabel or Lucy. He does not accept the child-like and twice-born wisdom of either his dark or his bright angel; he *thinks*, continually he thinks, and will not rest from thinking; his thought would persuade him to the attitude of a man who would master space and time with an aloof non-benevolence; his mind persuades him of the possibility of such a mastery, and at critical moments he hesitates between the polite, non-benevolent and aloof masterliness of Plinlimmon, and the tragic acceptance of the *Untergang* that the embracing of the religious principle involves. This is the tragedy of a divided nature, and Melville, in writing *Pierre*, has set down a large portion of his own psychic history. In the end of this story, though neither triumphant nor serene but passionately grasping at despair and self-immolation, poor Pierre declares himself neuter; the twin angels of his soul have both of them fallen into decline.

But many things happen before the end, and the complex events which follow are often not obvious of interpretation; yet the inner reality is always to be found, and, once found, is far more significant than the surface happenings of the story. These latter often seem wild and fantastic, crowded with continual use of symbolism; often the smallest details shine with significance. New characters are introduced; representing tendencies or complexes within the *psyche*. Isolated and individualized, they stand out the clearer, and can be the more easily grouped to show the intense inner conflict.

Glen Stanley is the respectable counterpart and worldly double of Pierre, just as Delly is the sensual double of Isabel. These seemingly separate personalities only amplify one human consciousness....

[Part VII continues with the symbolic difficulties of the characters in the city, while Part VIII deals with the arrival there of Lucy (Pierre's "innocent consciousness" as opposed to Isabel, his "seductive...unconscious") and then proceeds thus:]

Pierre continues to work on at his book. In this work, in his cold, isolated room, he is cut off from both Lucy and Isabel; their offered helps he refuses. Lucy, now occupying the empty room on the other side of the kitchen, works at a secret portrait. Isabel gives an involuntary homage to the heavenly virtue of her rival; even her guitar answers sometimes when Lucy speaks; and Delly, the almost mute, unconscious vital-dynamism of this strange trio, cooks for and waits upon them all.

The stage is set for the last and fatal struggle of these inner forces, and it were well to review our former analysis and carry it further. Pierre's mother is the world-substance which enfolds him: under her sway he is still in the womb. He must free himself, and with the coming of a larger, individual consciousness, burst the husk. In that act lies the cause of his mother's death. He would seem to discover an outlet for growth in Isabel, and with growth, freedom. She is for him, in that first contact, the consciousness of the tragic aspect

of life, and also the channel of contact with all the mysteriousness of unknown forces. But she is more than this, and, if we look closely, we shall see an interesting relation between Pierre's mother and Isabel. Isabel is, as it were, the complement, and not the opposite of his mother, and, as the complement, is of the same material. The incestuous relation is still retained, and in place of a mother Pierre has substituted a sister; his introversion in relation to the sister, and his espousing her as his wife, is a disguised incest-tendency towards his mother. Not only have we the incest-tendency shown clearly, but the incest-prohibition, for he renounces both Isabel and Lucy and with them the complete erotic experience, in order that he may remain a child. The mother-material which is in Isabel, namely the mysteriousness, the beauty, and the divine-seeming moods of indolence are of *danger* to Pierre. At the last, with the vial of poison in her bosom, she names herself, the murderer of Pierre.

But all this, it must be clearly understood, has no part in actuality. This is not intended as a simple story of the freeing from the physical mother, as perhaps some schools of psycho-analysts would name it. It is the story of a conscious soul attempting to draw itself free from the psychic world-material in which most of mankind is unconsciously always wrapped and enfolded, as a foetus in the womb. Melville would draw the history and the tragedy of a soul seeking freedom outside (or rather apart from) the world-substance. And here we find an analogy in the book which immediately precedes Pierre. In this comparison we see that, as the mysterious Isabel is a danger and a final destruction to the virtuous Pierre (Pierre, who is Melville's representation of the God-man), so the mysterious white whale in *Moby-Dick* is a danger and an ultimate destruction to Ahab and all his crew (Ahab being the Man-god). Isabel is of the same world-substance (mother-substance) as Moby Dick; the aspect from which they are viewed constituting the difference. Their mystery, their attractiveness and their all-engulfing destructiveness is the same. If we have understood the books aright, we see them as complementary aspects of the same problem. And here again it should be emphasized that Isabel is no more a symbol of *evil* than is the white whale. In both these books Melville is dealing with life-values which are beyond good and evil. Only from the terrestrially human standpoint, and still enwrapped in that same mother-substance of the world, do these words have any meaning.

Lucy, with her heavenly love and her heavenly acceptance of the event, is an essence direct from the universe of transcendental Being; and although, as Pierre's innocence of conscience, she was framed to save him from the brother-sister incest relation, which, as we have seen, is reversion into the world-substance, she is of too heavenly a nature to offer adequate compensation to the lure of Isabel. She is too pure and too frail in her earthly manifestation. In actuality she has not earthly strength enough to portray him as he should be *in the flesh*; she draws him only in the skeleton. And, when at the crisis of his fate he bursts in to see the portrait, she sits mute and unmoving, allowing him to rush away *from her* to his destruction.

Attended upon each hand by these familiars (his heavenly and his earthly Aphrodite) Pierre still works at his book, seeking to find in thought a deliverance from his fate, his fate sealed already by his union with Isabel. His forces fail him; he can do no more. "A general and nameless torpor seems stealing upon him." In this state of semi-consciousness he has a vision, in which are contrasted man's earthly household, peace and the ever-encroaching appetite of God; here is given (symbol of Pierre as a thinker) the giant Enceladus, who would storm the heavenly heights, and regain his paternal birthright even by fierce escalade, but who is overthrown by the gods themselves, with a mountain heaved upon his back, and pinned to the earth. As Enceladus he sees himself battering the steep of heaven with his bare, armless torso....

From this vision Pierre rises and, on an impulse, offers to take his two companions out into the city. Isabel is overjoyed that he has left his "hateful book." She hates it as part of the realm of thought, and thus opposed to her. Pierre offers to take them out on the sea--a desire for further contact with the unconscious. This last passage is so tremendously charged with events and symbolic significance that it should be read carefully and in detail. Every detail counts, and not only what is written, but the great silent vistas between the words; these need all faculties to grasp their suggestiveness. The mysterious picture of a *foreigner*, that to Pierre resembles the portrait of his father, and to Isabel resembles her memory of her father, when he came to see her at the farm after she had left the asylum, this foreign picture clothes the image of the father in yet further ambiguousness; and this is further enhanced by Lucy's preoccupation with the copy of Guido's "Beatrice Cenci." These two pictures front one another on opposite sides of the gallery, "so that in secret they seemed to be pantomimically talking over the heads of the living spectators below." This, in the

light of recent psychological research, is significant enough, and significant, too, Isabel's excitement at the motion of the boat, and her desire to plunge over the side and float away into the blue profound where sky and sea meet.

The end comes swiftly. Pierre, who has been wrought to the uttermost extreme of exasperation by the hostile gestures of his double, Glen Stanley, now ruthlessly murders that part of himself which Glen symbolizes, and in so doing: "His own hand had extinguished his house in slaughtering the only unoutlawed human being by the name of Glendinning." After this action of inner violence he falls into a self-shut-in state of gloom and despondency, well symbolized by the prison. But even in prison he is attended by his two angels; Lucy, so long as sanity remains, will ever cleave to his soul, however great his despair, and Isabel is that deeper part which can not be separated even by death or madness. Enveloped by the uttermost despair, and surrounded by the ruin which has become his fate, he knows them, in a light of a newly-won wisdom, as the Fool of Virtue and the Fool of Truth. Himself, as the Fool of Fate, has already repudiated them both.