

The Human Comedy in Shakespeare and Melville*

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O, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in't!

The "brave new world" that Miranda in her innocence saw is by no means without evil: "such people" include usurpers, betrayers, and murderers (if only potential) as well as the brave, the beautiful, and the faithful men. Nevertheless, the effect the comedy leaves on us is as affirmative as Miranda's wonder. The vision that a profound comedy (and tragedy) present us, after tempestuous disorder, is an all-inclusive vision of the world that "the web of life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together." In one of his poems, Melville gives a tribute to this vision of Shakespeare's "brave new world":

No utter surprise can come to him
Who reaches Shakespeare's core;
That which we seek and shun is there—
Man's final lore.¹

Melville, too, sees this double aspect of reality in the gigantic Galapagos' tortoise: "Even the tortoise, dark and melancholy as it is up the back, still possesses a bright side; its calipee or breast-plate being sometimes of a faint yellowish or golden tinge... The tortoise is both black and bright."²

Eliot claims contrast and comparison as a principle of aesthetic as

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well as historical criticism. As a matter of fact we cannot value any artist alone—in a vacuum; we must set him for contrast and comparison among the dead. Moreover, when we deal with such a writer as Melville, who shares with Shakespeare an all-inclusive vision of the world that “the tortoise is both black and bright,” this method of contrast and comparison should, it is hoped, illuminate both writers. Much scholarship has been done to draw parallels between the two artists, especially in tragic matters. It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to explore Shakespeare’s influence on Melville, or if not that, the confluence of their points of view, in comic matters,—that is the nature of humour—, learning what we can from some of their characters, and the points of view with which their creators regard them.

It is generally acknowledged that “the world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel.” Such a clear-cut distinction, however, ignores the fact that a man may laugh *and* be sorry *at the same time*, deride the fool and yet acknowledge a companionship in his folly, which is exactly what Shakespeare offers in his comedies. His comic spirit is more kind, more genial than Meredith’s “spirit overhead,” which looks down humanely malign (however humanely), and “casts an oblique light on us, followed by volleys of silvery laughter.”³ John Palmer justly observes that the essential quality of human comedy only appears when the distinction between heart and head is obliterated; for in the finest and most satisfying laughter there is that element of emotional sympathy which is denied in Walpole’s dictum.⁴ In Shakespeare we laugh *with* his fools and clowns rather than *at* them. The delight we experience in his plays is largely due to his genuine humour, which is keenly aware of the infinite contradictions of life, and at the same time willing to put up with things as they are, while discreetly smiling at their incongruities.⁵ The

inmost spirit of this humour is that of acceptance; and its tone is affirmative.

This comic genius, humour, which is aware of the infinite contradictions of life, takes off the mask from ignorance and conceit, and teaches us to "see ourselves as others see us."⁶ Thus, a humorous bent provides us with "a lively sense of the relativity of things."⁷ This intellectual detachment, or what Meredith calls "a bright and positive clear Hellenic perception of facts,"⁸ gives us a more comprehensive vision of the world and reality. Misanthropy arises from the lack of this "clear Hellenic perception of facts" which humour provides us, as Plato writes: "misanthropy arises from *too great confidence* of inexperience, ignorance of the world." We trust a man and think him true and good and faithful and then in a little while he turns out to be false and knavish, as Proteus turns out to be. And if this happens several times to us, especially within the circle of our own most trusted friends and relatives, we at last come to hate all men, and believe that no one has any good in him at all. Such a limited perspective based on "too great confidence of inexperience, ignorance of the world" is the cause of the bitterness of Timon, or Lear (at one time), or Melville's Pierre, or the misanthrope that the Confidence Man encounters on board the *Fidèle* in Melville's novel of that title.

However, to turn a personal grudge into a hatred of mankind is most uncongenial to Shakespeare's disposition, and he illustrates again and again how it is that genuine humour has that saving grace which "translates the stubbornness of fortune into so quiet and so sweet a style." So Amiens turns "the stubbornness of fortune" into a song:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude;
Thy tooth is not so keen,

Because thou art not seen,
Although thy breath be rude.
Heigh-ho! sing, heigh-ho, unto the green holly;
Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly.
Then heigh-ho! the holly!
This life is most jolly.

Or if “men were deceivers ever, one foot in sea, and one on shore,” it might be just as well, as Balthazar exhorts us, to be “blithe and bonny, converting all [our] sounds of woe/Into hey nonny, nonny.” For humour implies self-mastery; and a twist, a paradox, is the essential condition of its manners. Otherwise, how can it be that “This life is most jolly,” if “most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly”?

As artists whose visions of the world are both dark and bright, both melancholy and jolly, Shakespeare and Melville possess that secret which Meredith claims for a great humourist: “the stroke of the great humourist is world-wide, with the lights of tragedy in his laughter.”⁹ Louis Cazamian writes on Shakespeare’s humour that:

La dualité de la pensée est la condition maîtresse de l’humour; elle s’exerce jusque sur la création du comique, comme sur tout autre objet. Le plus souvent, l’humoriste sourit en silence des choses apparemment sérieuses qu’il nous dit; mais nous devinons aussi parfois le pli interrogateur ou doucement ironique de sa lèvre, quand son visage porte le masque de la plus folle insouciance.¹⁰

And it seems that Melville shares this “duality of thought” we find in Shakespeare’s humour, and the ambiguities of merriment and gravity.

Now, since humour is concerned with the discovery and enjoyment of the incongruities of life, this comic spirit preys on human folly and thrives on it, as it were. Human folly and vanity are the matter and substance of comedy, which drives at the fact that we all have a speck of motley in us. Indeed, as Twain’s Pudd’nhead Wilson writes in his calendar, “April 1: is the day upon which we are reminded of what we are on the

other three hundred and sixty-four." In a short essay on "All Fools' Day," Charles Lamb writes: "Say a fool told you, if you please, that he who has not a dram of folly in his mixture, has pounds of much worse matter in his composition."¹¹ It is only the superficially wise that claim wisdom; "the fool doth think he is wise," Touchstone quotes, "but the wise man knows himself to be a fool." Touchstone is a natural philosopher who sees himself in detachment; and it is his function in the comedy to "speak wisely what the wise do foolishly." We have fools and clowns and by calling them so, we are reminded that we are "patched fools" ourselves. Or laughing at them, we are reminded of that which is the flesh of our flesh.

Melville seems to have had something of Shakespearean fool in the conception of Babbalanja, the royal jester in *Mardi*. He tells King Media: "My lord, I beseech you, remind me not of that fact [he is a fool] so often. It is true, but annoying. Nor will any wise man call another a fool."¹² *Mardi*, which follows Melville's successful travel romances, is its author's attempt at a more ambitious work, which is to culminate in *Moby Dick*. *Mardi* is an allegorical philosophic voyage in search of truth, love, and the true religion of Alma which is practiced in Serenia. Its Ahab-like protagonist, Taji, and his quest for his lost Yillah, the white maiden, is pushed into the background by Babbalanja's philosophising, though the book begins and ends with Taji and his head-on quest: "I am the hunter that never rests! the hunter without a home!"¹³ But what concerns us here is that *Mardi* is a predominantly comic work, and that its comic effect is largely due to the humorous philosopher, Babbalanja. He is the funniest and most important—not excepting King Media—of the Mardians who accompany Taji in his voyage. He is a Shakespearean fool, like Feste who is "wise enough to play the fool," and at the beck and call of

his King, he makes up some paradox or other so that the King and his court may laugh. When possessed of the devil, Azzageddi, Babbalanja sets forth his demonic theory of humour, referring to the ambiguities of merriment and gravity which seem to be at the heart of Melville's work:

Life is an April day, that both laughs and weeps in a breath. But whoso is wise, laughs when he can. Men fly from a groan, but run to a laugh. . . it is good to laugh, though the laugh be hollow; and wise to make merry, now and for aye. Laugh, and you make friends; weep and they go. Women sob, and are rid of their grief; men laugh, and retain it. There is laughter in heaven, and laughter in hell. And a deep thought whose language is laughter. Though wisdom is wedded to woe, though the way thereto is by tears, yet all ends in a shout. But wisdom wears no weeds; woe is more merry than mirth; 'tis a shallow grief that is sad. Ha! ha! how demoniacs shout; how all skeltons grin; we all die with a rattle. Laugh! laugh! Are the cherubin grave? Humour, thy laugh is divine; whence mirth-making idiots have been revered; and therefore may I. Ho! let us be gay, if it be only for an hour, and Death hand us the goblet. . . All sages have laughed, —let us; . . . the hyenas grin, the jackals yell, —let us.¹⁴

The thesis that "life is an April day, that both laughs and weeps in a breath," seems to explain, for Melville, the essence of things and the double aspect of life. Like pleasure and pain, which come out of one head, as Plato writes, mirth and sorrow are the twin products of a heightened sensibility. "Will you weep? then laugh while you weep. For mirth and sorrow are kin; are published by identical nerves,"¹⁵ Babbalanja tells the King. And he defends one of the paddlers who is rebuked by King Media for laughing at Babbalanja's serio-comic tale about one Midni, the ontologist and entomologist, who stumbled through his studies in the woods by glowworm light. "My lord, he is not to blame. Mark how earnestly he struggles to suppress his mirth; but he cannot. . . My lord Media, this man's body laughs; not the man himself."¹⁶

It is a psychological truth that laughter is something not always to

be controlled, as the above episode illustrates. Nor is it necessarily related to joy: "the hyenas grin, the jackals yell." There is something sinister or disturbing in laughter; there is laughter both in heaven and in hell. More often than not, laughter tends to sound bitter and unkind. None the less, laughter per se is an anti-toxin of the first order; it is a healthy clatter. "Whoso is wise, laughs when he can. . . it is good to laugh, though the laugh be hollow," Babbalanja says. And "humour, thy laugh is *divine*."

The theory of humour expounded by Babbalanja explains the ambiguous comic temper of his creator; and the same ambiguity of merriment and gravity is also at the center of *Moby Dick*. As *Mardi* is about Taji's quest for the white maiden, Yillah, *Moby Dick* is a grand epic about Ahab's deadly hunt after the white whale, in which, for this crazy captain, is visibly personified all evil "from Adam down."¹⁷ *Moby Dick* is a profound exploration about the meaning of life, death and rebirth. Its hero is the "ungodly godlike" Ahab, who head on rushes to his own destruction, striking straight through the mask of appearance. Yet, in *Moby Dick* the tragic and the comic are kept in balance: there is this monomaniac Ahab—"a woe that is madness"—, and on the other hand, there is the happy-go-lucky Stubb, the second mate of the *Pequod*. And there is Ishmael, the narrator of the story, who is blessed with genuine humour, which gives him "a lively sense of the relativity of things."

If Ishmael agrees with Babbalanja's observation that "wisdom is wedded to woe," or that "woe is more merry than mirth," he also learns that "there is a woe that is madness." To be sure, there is a certain heroism in Ahab, who plunges into the "unsounded gorges," and at one time Ishmael is attracted to such "wild dedication to unpath'd waters." But he comes to realize that "there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that *can*

alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces."¹⁸ For every meaningful experience consists of both the withdrawal *and* return, regression and emergence, with a recognition of the dark side of life. In Blakean terms, this process of experience can be described as reaching higher innocence, or Eden, as opposed to the Beulah land of innocence via Experience.

It is Ishmael, therefore, not Ahab, who soars out of the gorges again after the dive, both in a symbolic and literal sense. Only Ishmael survives the *Pequod's* catastrophe. It so *chanced*, he tells us, that at the crisis on the third day of the chase, he is taking the place of Ahab's bowsman. "So, floating *on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it*, when the half spent suction of the sunk ship [reaches him], [he is] then, slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex."¹⁹ And out of the vortex he is buoyed up in the coffin which Queequeg has made for himself. Ahab's monomania is the necessary cause of his destruction. Symbolically, then, Ishmael's survival is due to his balanced comic vision of things.

Moreover, Ishmael has a comic part to play in the first few chapters of the book before the *Pequod* leaves Nantucket. He is a dupe, as it were, and is fooled by the landlord of the Spouter Inn into sharing bed with the strange, tattooed cannibal the very first night he spends at Nantucket. Yet, he good-humouredly confesses of his experience that he never slept better in his life, for "Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian."²⁰ There is much lee way in his view of things; for him "there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast."²¹ The next morning, he greets the *grinning* landlord very pleasantly. "I cherished no malice towards him," he says, "though he had been skylarking with me not a little in the matter of my bedfellow."²² This Ishmael is, too, an advocate of Babbalanja's maxim that "humour, thy laugh is divine,"

and he believes in "a good laugh," which is, "a mighty good thing."²³ He continues with his observation that "the man that has anything bountifully laughable about him, be sure there is more in that man than you perhaps think for."²⁴ For Stubb, the second mate, however, laughter is simply the means of evading any serious thinking and reality.

Stubb is "a happy-go-lucky" fellow, "neither craven nor valiant; taking perils as they came with an indifferent air."²⁵ Good-humoured, easy, and careless, he presides over his whale-boat, "as if the most deadly encounter were but a dinner, and his crew all invited guests."²⁶ When he learns about Ahab's deadly pursuit after Moby Dick—at the expense of all the crew and at the expense of their expectation of reward of the voyage,—Stubb laughs it away: "Ha! ha! ha! ha! . . . ha, ha's the final consequence. Because a laugh's the wisest, easiest answer to all that's queer. I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I'll go to it laughing."²⁷ Here we observe an echo of Babbalanja's theory of humour: "it is good to laugh, though the laugh be hollow; and wise to make merry, now and for aye." His humour makes Stubb immune to the vicissitudes of life; he avoids confronting reality—even that of death—by a policy of determined levity. He never tries to understand the immensity of the universe; rather he seeks refuge in the negation of thought. His immunity to vexation and to the sense of evil is underscored in his somewhat puzzled observation on Ahab: "I guess he's got what some folks ashore call a conscience; it is a kind of Tic-Dolly-row they say—worse nor a toothache. Well, well, I do not know what it is, but the Lord keep me from catching it . . . think not is my eleventh commandment."²⁸ This is a comic reversal of Hamlet's observation that too much thinking makes a coward of man.

Stubb dominates the middle section of the book, where he presides over the actual business of whaling, the killing of the whale, and cutting-

in, and contributes to the comic effect of the book. He has something of Yankee shrewdness; he is a trickster, like the Confidence Man and Autolycus. Somewhat in the manner of Autolycus, Stubb exploits the ignorance and innocence of the captain of the French whaler, the *Rosebud*. Playing (or being) a good Samaritan—he actually does the Frenchman service in a sense—Stubb gets the precious sperm oil out of the *stinking* carcass which he advises the ignorant Frenchman to abandon. Then he refuses to drink a bottle of Bordeaux with the captain of the *Rosebud*, just as Autolycus declines the Clown's offer of a little money, saying, "offer me no money, I pray you! that kills my heart." Stubb tells the interpreter, "Thank him heartily; but tell him it's against my principle to drink with the man I've diddled."²⁹ After the *Rosebud* goes away, Stubb at once proceeds to reap the fruit of his unrighteous cunning. "I have it, I have it," he cries, with delight, finding the precious oil in the carcass, "a purse! a purse!"³⁰ Both Autolycus and Stubb take advantage of "a fool Honesty, and Trust, his sworn brother, a very simple gentleman." Like Autolycus, he has no compunction whatsoever. He is easy-going, carefree, and indifferent to any moral implication of his action.

"A laugh's the wisest, easiest answer to all that's queer," says this Stubb, and calls himself "wise Stubb." Indeed, laughter may be the easiest answer to "all that's queer," but not always the wisest. His eleventh commandment, "Think not," might be all right in fair weather, but there is a time to be serious, too. If Ahab's way of approaching reality, which ignores the bright side of life, is one-sided, the sterility of Stubb's way of evading reality becomes apparent, as the story reaches its climax. On the first day of the chase, Stubb laughs before the wreck, if only to bay at the threatening danger: "The thistle the ass refused; it pricked his mouth too keenly, Sir; ha! ha!" And he calls from Ahab a bitter indictment for

the ill-timed joking. "What soulless thing is this that laughs before a wreck? . . . Groan nor laugh should be heard before a wreck." "Aye, Sir, 'tis a solemn sight," Stubb answers.³¹ But, does not Babbalanja defend the silly paddler who bursts into laughter at the pathetic efforts of the philosopher of his tale? Hence the ambivalence of merriment and gravity. Yet, Stubb *is* a soulless thing; he is not "valiant;" he is only "as fearless as fire," and "as mechanical."³² And he is made a spiritual scarecrow by Pip, who is possessed by "heaven's sense." To Pip Stubb is nothing but "two bones stuck into a pair of old trousers and two more poked into the sleeves of an old jacket."³³

For all this, Stubb figures as a comic ballast to the monomaniac Ahab, to whom all is woe, and who does not know how to turn the tortoise over and enjoy the bright side, as it were. Stubb, on the other hand, never tries to understand nor admit the black side. Both Ahab and Stubb laugh and hoot at the gods, or the inscrutable forces of the universe—"all that's queer." If Stubb's laughter is a kittenish evasion of life, Ahab's is a profane challenge thrown in its face. His terrible laugh of derision puts to scorn the powers of God.³⁴ "Who's over me?" he says. Such a scorn of laughter, then, is what Babbalanja speaks of as "laughter in hell." On the other hand, Ishmael appreciates "a good laugh, a mighty good thing." His kind of good laugh results from a genuine sense of humour. It does not imply the negation of thought nor the defiance of whatever gods there be. His "free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy" that this whole universe is a "vast practical joke"³⁵ is a kind of psychological safety valve. He explains that such "wayward mood" comes "only in some time of *extreme tribulation*; it comes in the very *midst of his earnestness*, so that what just before might have seemed to him a thing most *momentous*, now seems but a part of the general joke."³⁶ Thus, his "free

and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy" seems to embrace both the sheer levity of Stubb and the irreverence of Ahab, rather than strike any sort of balance between them.³⁷

Ishmael plays the game with whatever gods there be in the highest good humour, even though he may be the butt of some "unseen and unaccountable old joker;"³⁸ yet at the same time he knows that he is in the charge of "the invisible police officer of the Fates, who has the constant surveillance of [him], . . . and influences [him] in some unaccountable way."³⁹ This somewhat reminds us of Hamlet's "there's a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will." And if we recall, it is in "some unaccountable way" that Ishmael is taking the place of Ahab's bowsman, and thereof saved from the catastrophe of the *Pequod*. He is free from the kind of hubris that Ahab has; and whereas Ahab is doomed to despair by laughing at what threatens his soul, Ishmael saves his because he believes that "[his] body is but the less of [his] better thing." "Take my body who will," he says, "it is not me."⁴⁰ And his sense of the relativity of things holds in a single vision both the black and bright sides of the tortoise: "Not ignoring what is good, [he is] quick to perceive a horror, and could *still be social with it*."⁴¹ In Ishmael, good humour and patience seem to take the place of anger and rebellion.

In *Moby Dick* the tragic and the comic are kept in balance by the narrator who has a relative view of things. It is generally thought that after *Moby Dick*, Melville's comic spirit has declined, and that *The Confidence Man* is the bitterest kind of satire. However, if we look below the surface of this troublesome work and reflect upon the source and quality of our amusement, there is more of fellow-feeling in the novel than mere detachment. The effect the novel leaves on us is not that of depression nor of bitterness.

As its author defines it in the novel, *The Confidence Man* is “a comedy of thought.” It is part of the form and content of the novel that the moral masquerade takes place on April Fool’s Day, the general festival, which is “related to the vernal equinox, when nature, too, *fools* mankind with sudden showers and sunshine” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). And “life is an April day,” with its laughs and tears, mirth and sorrow. Charles Lamb ends his essay mentioned earlier as follows: “Reader, if you wrest my words beyond their fair construction, it is you, and not I, that are the April Fool,”⁴² which can also be applied to *The Confidence Man*. Its humour employs the strategy of dissembling, paradox, and twist.

Melville makes it explicit at the outset that the people on the Mississippi river boat, the *Fidèle*, are the “multiform pilgrim species, man.” They are the hunters of various kinds: men of business and men of pleasure; parlor men and back-woodsmen; farm-hunters; heiress-hunters, happiness-hunters, truth-hunters, and still keener hunters of all these hunters.⁴³ The last mentioned is the Confidence Man in many disguises, or the Autolycus figure, who preys on “a fool Honesty, and Trust, his sworn brother, a very simple gentleman.” If Melville’s earlier works are primarily concerned with “truth-hunters” such as Taji, Ahab, or Ishmael, *The Confidence Man* deals with all of “the multiform pilgrim species, man.”

As has already been mentioned, the keen eyes of humour perceive the incongruities of life. This comic spirit delights in nothing so much as in a masquerade, where at its own chosen moment it exposes the striking discrepancy between the real and the false face, or as the Confidence Man discovers, “a metamorphosis more surprising than any in Ovid.”⁴⁴ The professed *friend* is metamorphosed into a *stranger* when his friend asks for a loan. “Life is a pic-nic *en costume* [—a masquerade—],” the Cosmopolitan whistles, “one must take a part, assume a character, stand

ready in a sensible way to play the fool.”⁴⁵ In such a perspective, life is a confidence-game, a warfare of wits, which exploits human folly and vanity. *The Confidence Man* resorts for its structure to the folklore of dupe and trickster, the confidence game of the lion and the fox, the warfare in the animal kingdom, which is the human race.

The confidence game is what takes place on board the *Fidèle* on April Fool's Day. If one approach fails as with the case of the Missouri bachelor, another will prevail. If the Confidence Man, as John Ringman, fails to raise funds for the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum, he succeeds as an agent of Black Rapids Coal Company, selling non-existent stocks—that is, whereas his sweet voice fails to loosen the string of the tight purse, it has much better chance appealing to man's insatiable greed. And all are sold out, including the Confidence Man, who in one disguise or another has fooled all, preying on their honest and trustful or trusty nature. At the end it is not possible to distinguish the operator and the victim; both tend to blend into a common image of folly. For everyone on the *Fidèle* goes on “a wild goose chase,” as it were. The Confidence Man himself runs the errand of a fool on the first of April, when people go “hunt the gowk another mile” (*Encyclopedia Britanica*). To be sure, hunting the gowk is a fruitless errand; so is the Confidence Man's hunt for confidence, for he, too, is a seeker, like Taji, Ahab, and Ishmael, and Babbalanja, the philosopher in *Mardi*. They are all the seeker, not the finder; but what is important is the quest, as Babbalanja answers to the question “what is truth?” that the question itself is the answer. And it is needless to say that the blithe *confident* Cosmopolitan, in his costume of many colors, is Everyman. His many-sided character is dominated by repeated avowals of optimism—about nature and mankind.⁴⁶ The Cosmopolitan manifests to a world which is out of joint the human potential

for both good and evil, inviting mankind to choose.

To be sure, the humour in *The Confidence Man* is more of head than of heart. Our amusement at the novel comes mainly through the mind. The laughter it arouses is that of self-mockery—at our own folly, which is vulnerable to the challenge of the Confidence Man. Yet, the laughter per se is a healthy clatter, as Wyndham Lewis writes: “by making a great deal of noise ourselves, we at least drown the alarming noise made by our neighbors. . . I approve of a *barking* man [meaning a laughing man] myself, I find that I have less occasion, with his likes, to anticipate a really serious *bite*.”⁴⁷ *The Confidence Man* is the toughest and most delightful game to test our intellectual energy. If we feel sold out or are trapped into disbelieving that “Charity never faileth,” then *we* are a *great* fool (instead of a fool), not the Confidence Man nor his creator. The doctrine that “charity never faileth” still holds true. The Confidence Man does bring out the goodness of the clergyman, who takes the trouble of finding the witnesses for Black Guinea. This Black Guinea is the Protean Confidence Man, to be sure, this time “a white masquerading as a black,”⁴⁸ as one of the passengers comments. Indeed, the Confidence Man is neither black nor white, like Ovid’s (or Shakespeare’s for that matter) Autolycus, who could “mennes eyes so blure, / As for too make y black things whyght, and whyght things black appeere.”⁴⁹

The short beginning chapter ends in an affirmative tone, which is the general effect of the masquerade on the *Fidèle*:

These varieties of mortals blended their varieties of visage and garb. A Tartar-like picturesqueness; a sort of pagan abandonment and assurance. Here reigned the dashing and *all-fusing spirit of the West*, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which *uniting* the stream of the most distant and opposite zones, pour them along, helter-skelter, in *one cosmopolitan and confident tide*.⁵⁰

The great paradox of the book is that in the wit play with Egbert, the disciple of Mark Winsome, it is the Cosmopolitan who is puzzled and who offers Egbert a shilling, saying: "Why wrinkle the brow, and waste the oil both of life and the lamp, only to turn out a *head* kept cool by the under ice of the *heart*? . . . Pray, leave me, and with you take the last dregs of your inhuman philosophy. And here, take this shilling, and at the first wood-landing buy yourself a few chips to warm the frozen natures of you and your philosopher by."⁵¹ Thus considered, the message of *The Confidence Man* is not very far from the message of the importance of the brotherhood of man expounded in "The Monkey Rope" chapter in *Moby Dick*. Both Ishmael and Babbalanja are the advocates of heart; they find that "we cannot live without hearts; though the heartless live longest." The cold inhuman philosophy is the protection against the confidence game. "Yet hug your hearts, ye handful that have them; 'tis a blessed inheritance."⁵² We are delighted to see the confident Cosmopolitan duped by Mark Winsome's Yankee shrewdness; and at the same time we whole-heartedly subscribe to his gospel of "trust and confidence."

Our main thesis in this paper is that both Shakespeare and Melville share an all-inclusive view of the world, and hold in a single vision both black and bright sides of the tortoise. In such an enlarged perspective, we see beyond the personal and the immediate, and view our fellowmen and our experience in their true proportions. And as has already been observed, humour has something to do with the cultivation of such a wide-awake sense of the relativity of things. Among Melville's later tales, "Jimmy Rose" and "The Fiddler" are the exempla of the autumnal serenity achieved by the genuine sense of humour.

Like Lear and Timon, Jimmy Rose has seen better days; but unlike these tragic figures, Jimmy Rose remains intact and merry. His perpetual

smile in adversity is a riddle to the narrator of the story:

I still must meditate upon his strange example, . . . how after that gay, dashing nobleman's career, he could be content to crawl through life, and peep about among the marble and mahoganies for contumelious tea and toast, where once like a very Warwick he had feasted the huzzaing world with Burgundy and venison.⁵³

The world can better understand Timon, the egotistic fool, who turns into a misanthrope. It is true that once this same Jimmy Rose, with a pistol, threatened the narrator, who went to see him after his downfall. "I trust no man now," he has told the narrator. However, his perennial good humour saves Jimmy Rose from becoming a misanthrope. He is too thoroughly good and kind to be made a man-hater from any cause. "It at least seemed irreligious to Jimmy Rose," the narrator speculates, "even to shun mankind."⁵⁴

At the same time, Jimmy Rose possesses the intellectual energy of a Feste, who is "wise enough to play the fool," and thereof deceiving the world, which regards him as an "impractical strolling simpleton." He knows that even though he has not a penny to give the poor, he still has alms to give the rich. "For not the beggar chattering at the corner pines more after bread than the vain heart after compliment."⁵⁵ Thus, Jimmy Rose is another Confidence Man, if you like, who exploits human folly and vanity. Jimmy Rose accepts the world as it is, and even is willing to live with the contradictions of the world. Hautboy, the ex-prodigy in "The Fiddler," upholds a philosophy similar to Jimmy Rose's:

What was sad in the world [Hautboy] did not superficially gain-say; what was glad in it he did not cynically slur; and all which was to him personally enjoyable, he gratefully took to his heart. It was plain, then—so it seemed at that moment, at least,—that *his extraordinary cheerfulness did not arise either from deficiency of feeling or thought.*⁵⁶

Whereas the narrator of "Jimmy Rose" is still meditating upon "the strange example of Jimmy Rose," Helmstone, the disappointed poet and narrator of "The Fiddler," follows Hautboy's example. "Shall not my petty affair be as nothing, when I behold in Hautboy the vine and the rose climbing the shattered shafts of his tumbled temple of Fame?"⁵⁷ Then, Helmstone tears all his manuscripts, buys a fiddle, and goes to take regular lessons from Hautboy.

There is a world of difference between the levity of Stubb and the *apparent* cheerfulness and indifference of Hautboy or of Jimmy Rose. They are closer to Ishmael, who, not ignoring what is good, is "quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it." They strangely resemble the fools and clowns in Shakespeare's comedies, who see things as they are but without bitterness. Or, is it going too far to say that they even possess the calibre of a Horatio, who is "as one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing, / A man that fortune's buffets and rewards / Hast ta'en with equal thanks"? Perhaps, genuine humour and the virtue of patience practiced by the Stoics are the basic condition necessary for philosophical resolution; both imply self-mastery. Such characters as we have just examined take "fortune's buffets and rewards with equal thanks." In them patience and good humour take the place of anger and rebellion.

We have thus far examined the range of humour as revealed in and through some of Melville's characters, and have observed some evidences to support our assumption that Melville shares with Shakespeare that secret which Meredith claims for a great humourist: "the stroke of the great humourist is world-wide, with the lights of tragedy in his laughter," or what Cazamian defines as "the duality of thought." This basic condition for humour is reflected in Babbalanja's theory of humour that "life is an April day, that laughs and weeps in a breath," or that "mirth and

sorrow are kin; are published by identical nerves." In our profoundest experiences the tragic and the comic are indivisible, and the works of both Shakespeare and Melville are about the meaning of life, death, truth, and love. In a word, their works are concerned with "man's final lore," the human comedy.

Now, it seems almost irreverence to discuss the range of humour in Shakespeare; as the *Cosmopolitan* in *The Confidence Man* says, "Shakespeare has got to be a kind of deity."⁵⁸ Hazlitt pays a beautiful tribute that "[Shakespeare's] humour (so to speak) bubbles, sparkles, and finds its way in all directions, like a natural spring";⁵⁹ it is, as Coleridge suggests, like "Proteus of the fire and the flood." For our purpose here, it suffices to say that it is a hallmark of Shakespeare to have both the tragic and the comic, both tears and laughter, in one composition. In Shakespeare's hands, "Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light." Hence, there is a shadow of death in *Love's Labour's Lost*, or in *The Comedy of Errors*—though in the latter play death is never realized. Likewise, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, or in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there are the notes of agony—jealousy, perjury, and betrayal—and of course, the general delight of "one feast, one house, one mutual happiness" at the end. There are spring and winter, the cuckoo's word of fear and the staring owl's merry note. But it is always spring, the spring that "has all the seasons before,"⁶⁰ that carries the leading note in these comedies.

Love's Labour's Lost is about the three excellent young men, who, during the course of the play, learn to forsake their pursuit in philosophy for love and for women's eyes, "from whence doth spring the true Promethean fire." Thus, they learn to practice their philosophy rather than study it. *Love's Labour's Lost* ends with the songs of spring and of winter, in which icicles, snow, Marian's red nose, and greasy Joan are praised as

well as daisies, violets, larks, and maidens in silver-white smocks. If “the words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo” in the comedy, in *The Winter’s Tale*, the order of spring and winter is reversed. This later romance of Shakespeare’s is, à la Polonius, “tragical-comical-pastoral.” The first three acts are overcast by the irremediable deaths of the “welkin-eyed Mamillius and of the loyal Antigonus, and the fourth act, which opens up after the sixteen year interval, is flooded with sunshine, and with the merry laughter of shepherds at the sheep-shearing. And the sweet-voiced rogue, Autolycus, the spring incarnate, dominates the scene with his roguery and his songs:

Jog on, jog on, the footpath way,
And merrily hent the stile-a:
A merry heart goes all the day,
Your sad tires in a mile-a.

Thomas Marc Parrott observes that the comic figures of the Clown and Autolycus are the traditional, yet transformed country bumpkin and the Vice of the morals and interludes.⁶¹ Autolycus is a much more complex figure than such a type; he is, like Feste, a singing jester. As he tells himself, he is an offspring of Ovid’s Autolycus, whose twin brother is Philammon, the natural singer. “He [is] his fathers owne sonne right,” and he has no peer in theft and filching. Like Falstaff, he is a pickpocket, and a swindler. He is a peddler, but he also sells his songs and the *élan vital*, as it were. And as far as his dramatic role is concerned, he has, like Touchstone, served at court. Now, out of service, and after many knavish professions, he has settled down only in rogue; and he glories in it. He is amoral, carefree, and happy. If “gallows and knock are too powerful on the highway: beating and hanging are terrors [to him]: for the life to come, [he sleeps] out the thought of it.” This happy rogue outrouges Melville’s Confidence Man. Autolycus knows that much more is

to be got by picking pockets than by invoking them, which the Confidence Man tries to do, without success. "For this reason, as he thinks, that the soft heads outnumber the soft hearts";⁶² this is Melville's Cosmopolitan speaking, somewhat lamenting the fact that soft hearts are scarce. Autolycus, however, any more than his creator, is not troubled with such a conclusion. Autolycus preys on "a fool Honesty, and Trust, his sworn brother, a very simple gentleman," for the sheer enjoyment of trickery.

Here it may be worth our while to examine in some detail what Melville's Cosmopolitan says about Autolycus and his humour. Melville must have conceived of the Confidence Man with Autolycus in mind. Even their appearances are similarly conceived; the Cosmopolitan appears on board the *Fidèle*, looking like a "Toucan fowl" in his parti-hued clothes, which, too, reminds us of the harpy-like Ariel. The Cosmopolitan continues his speculations on Autolycus as follows:

The devil's drilled recruit, Autolycus is joyous as if he wore the livery of heaven. . . Can [Autolycus'] influence be salutary? True, in Autolycus there is humour; but *though, according to my principle, humour is in general to be held as a saving quality, yet the case of Autolycus is an exception*; because it is his humour which, so to speak, oils his mischievousness. The bravadoing mischievousness of Autolycus is slid into the world on humour, as a pirate schooner, with colors flying, is launched into the sea on greased ways.⁶³

"According to my principle, humour is in general to be held as a saving quality"; the implication is that to the Cosmopolitan (and to his creator) humour is more or less related to moral values. The humour of this kind is more critical, moralistic than sympathetic in its spirit. To be sure, the Cosmopolitan makes an exceptional case for Autolycus that "his humour oils his mischievousness." But, then, what is it, if this is not in itself "a saving quality"? Humour in Autolycus is that of release, carefree, amoral, and happy, like the spirit of spring itself. It is,

as Wilson Knight phrases it, the richest kind of humour, "golden" humour, of which Falstaff is a superb example.⁶⁴ It results from the carefree stripping away of cherished values; and Autolycus fares even better than Falstaff, who is necessarily rejected by Prince Hal. To the Clown, his former gull and now a born gentleman, Autolycus gives only an elusive answer:

The Clown: . . . I know thou art no tall fellow of thy hands and that thou wilt be drunk: but I'll swear it, and I would thou wouldst be a tall fellow of thy hands.

Autolycus: I will prove so, sir, *to my power*.

His creator knows what his power is—the Clown says, "thou wilt be drunk"—and knowing it he (and by proxy we) lets Autolycus go loose.

What is also important to us is that the role of Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale* is to set the note, with his songs, for the spring festivity of Flora—and Perdita plays Flora—and of the play. For the spring, which is renewal, rebirth of the year, is at the heart of Shakespeare's comedies. As has been mentioned earlier, *Love's Labour's Lost* ends with the song of spring, though followed by the song of winter; the rite of May is mentioned in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which celebrates the marriage ceremony. In *The Tempest*, there is a masque performed by Iris, Ceres, and Juno. And if we recall the masquerade on board the *Fidèle*, this also takes place on April Fool's Day, the general festival, related to the spring equinox, when nature, too, fools mankind with sunshine and showers. As everything is renewed or *re-created*, so the Protean Autolycus remains true to his "power," forever masquerading, amoral, carefree, and happy.

It is in the general spirit of comedy, as Melville's Autolycus—if we may pursue the analogy—whistles away, that "life is a pic-nic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool." And "to come in plain clothes, with a long face, as a wiseacre, only makes one a discomfort to himself, and a blot upon the

scene,"—which, of course, is the world. Autolycus sings: "A merry heart goes all the day, / Your sad tires in a mile-a." Babbalanja, the royal jester in *Mardi*, claims to be revered, since "mirth-making idiots are revered." For the same reason the fools and clowns in Shakespeare's plays are revered. Touchstone, Feste, Bottom, and many others, all "in a sensible way *play* the fool." They solicit our love and admiration more than those wisecracks with "a long face"—Jaques or Malvolio—do. Palmer rightly perceives that Shakespeare, presenting a fool, is the fool incarnate; and, laughing at a fool, laughs at something which he requires us to recognize as flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones.⁶⁵ It is always sympathy not satire, as it is now clear, that is the inspiration of Shakespeare's comedies.

It has already been agreed that humour cultivates "a lively sense of the relativity of things." The function of the clowns and fools in Shakespeare's comedies very much resembles this salutary effect that humour has. Their role in the comedy is to throw the light of reality and common sense on the fanciful figures. As early as in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, it is the wide-awake comic servant, Launce, and the clear-sighted Lucetta, who have the correct view of his master or her mistress. Both Launce and Lucetta see through the true character of Proteus. "I am but a fool," Launce mutters, "yet I have the wit to think my master is a kind of a knave," which fact eludes the hoodwinked Julia or Valentine.

Touchstone, the natural philosopher in *As You Like It*, may be the best example of such commentator, as his very name explains itself. He puts all things and every person in the play, including himself, to the comic test.⁶⁶ As he tells Rosalind and Celia when he first appears on the scene, it is his function in the play to "speak wisely what wise men do

foolishly." As if to comment on the fanciful courtship of the shepherd and shepherdess, or even that of Orlando and Rosalind who has a good sense of humour herself, Touchstone courts and marries Audrey out of sheer "desire," so he tells us. But, like all the others, perhaps, he is himself in love—a little.

Feste, the clown in *Twelfth Night* (or *What You Will*), is another such comic figure. He is "wise enough to play the fool," and speaks "wisely what wise men do foolishly," correcting the excess of sentiment, either of mirth or melancholy. For "those that are in extremity of either [mirth or melancholy] are abominable fellows," Rosalind says to Jaques, "and betray themselves to every modern censure worse than drunkards." To his mistress who mourns, unduly, her brother's death, Feste says:

Feste: I think his soul is in hell, madonna.

Olivia: I know his soul is in heaven, *fool*.

Feste: *The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul being in heaven.*

Like many other "wise fools" in Shakespeare's plays, Feste drives at the paradoxical truth—here of friends and foes; he says to the Duke:

[The friends] praise me and make an ass of me; now my foes tell me plainly I am an ass; so that by my foes, sir, I profit in the knowledge of myself.

And as Olivia says, he has wits enough, like Autolycus, to observe and use the humour of his betters in order to get extra gold, as he does on the above occasion.

The comic characters in Shakespeare's plays observe others and themselves as they are—they know that we all are "patched fools"—yet without sourness or bitterness, because they are armed, as it were, with "a bright and positive clear Hellenic perception of facts." By virtue of genuine humour, they are able to translate the stubbornness of fortune into a quiet and sweet style. Hence, Rosalind is not very sympathetic to the

melancholy Jaques: "I had rather have a fool to make me merry than experience to make me sad." If our experience only makes us sad, it is not the true experience,—it is rather our "too great confidence of inexperience"—, the poet seems to say. We know that to turn our personal grievance into a hatred of mankind, and become bitter and sour is most uncongenial to Shakespeare's disposition. Melville's philosopher in *Mardi* says, "'tis a shallow grief that is sad"; Ishmael, too, discovers that "there is a wisdom that is woe", and "there is a woe that is madness." "It is irreligious even to *shun* mankind," not to say to *hate* mankind, Jimmy Rose learns.

In Shakespeare's comedies, the clowns and fools have the conventional roles to play. The contrasting characterization of the comic and the fanciful—romantic or idealistic—characters is well balanced, so as to create an affirmative effect of the play as a whole, presenting a full vision of an ordered universe that "life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together," or that image of the Galapagos tortoise which has both the black and bright sides.

Our repeated leit-motif that "life is an April day, that laughs and weeps in a breath" seems to explain the essence of the human comedy both in Shakespeare and Melville. It is of a profound significance that Shakespeare has given such marvellous lines to Proteus, the perjurer in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*:

O! how this spring of love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day,
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by and by a cloud takes all away!

Perhaps, like Proteus himself, the reality of the world is the flux; it is *uncertain*, to be sure, but it is a *glory*, the poet says. The same Proteus tells Valentine: "Time is the nurse and breeder of all good." The

implication is not that time solves all the problems, but rather that time will give us a certain objectivity, with which we are able to regard our sorrows and pains in a different perspective. This is very much like the way humour functions.

It may well be our illusion to think that the world is static and changeless. It is ever changing, as spring comes round each year. To Miranda's wonder at the "brave new world" Prospero answers, "'Tis new to thee." It *is* new to us, too, because our each experience of joy or sorrow makes the world new to us; and it is genuine humour that gives us a Miranda's sense of wonder to see our world as "brave new world." At least such is the grace of a profound work of art, which gives us an illusion of the ordered universe.

Notes

1. Herman Melville, "The Coming Storm," *Collected Poems*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Chicago, 1946), p. 94.
2. Herman Melville, *The Encantadas, Selected Tales and Poems*, ed. Richard Chase (New York, 1950), p. 236.
3. George Meredith, *Essay on Comedy* (New York, 1918), p. 142.
4. John Palmer, *Comic Characters of Shakespeare* (London, 1947), p. viii.
5. Louis Cazamian, *The Development of English Humour* (Durham, 1952), p. 303.
6. William Hazlitt, "On Modern Comedy," *Prose of the Romantic Period*, ed. Carl R. Wooding (Boston, 1961), p. 334.
7. Louis Cazamian, "Humour in *Hamlet*," *The Rice Institute Pamphlet*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Jan. 1937), p. 216.
8. George Meredith, *Essay on Comedy*, p. 125.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
10. Louis Cazamian, *L'Humour de Shakespeare* (Paris, 1945), pp. 10–11.
11. Charles Lamb, "All Fools' Day," *Essays of Elia* (New York, 1908), p. 52
12. Herman Melville, *Mardi*, Vol. IV, (New York, 1963), p. 255.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 382.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 351.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
17. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York, 1964), p. 180.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 421. Italics mine.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 565. Italics mine.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 404.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 405.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 544.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 553.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Edward H. Rosenberry, *Melville and the Comic Spirit* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 120.
35. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 224.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 224. Italics mine.
37. Edward H. Rosenberry, *Melville and the Comic Spirit*, p. 123.
38. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 5.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 5. Italics mine.
42. Charles Lamb, "All Fools' Day," *Essays of Elia*, p. 52.
43. Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man* (New York, 1964), p. 15.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
46. John Seelye, *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* (Evanston, 1970), p. 118.
47. Wyndham Lewis, "The Greatest Satire Is Non-Moral," *Men Without Art* (New York, 1964), p. 114.
48. Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man*, p. 20.
49. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. tr. Golding. Book XI, 11. 362–363.

50. Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man*, p. 15. Italics mine .
51. *Ibid.* , p. 231.
52. Herman Melville, *Mardi*, Vol. IV, p. 351.
53. Herman Melville, "Jimmy Rose," *Selected Tales and Poems*, p. 143.
54. *Ibid.* , p. 139.
55. *Ibid.* , pp. 141–142.
56. Herman Melville, "The Fiddler," *Selected Tales and Poems*, p. 146.
57. *Ibid.* , p. 150.
58. Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man*, p. 180.
59. Quoted in Wyndham Lewis, "The Greatest Satire Is Non-Moral," *Men Without Art*, p. 111.
60. Herman Melville, *Mardi*, Vol. IV, p. 211.
61. Thomas Marc Parrott, *Shakespearean Comedy* (New York, 1949), p. 390.
62. Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man*, p. 180.
63. *Ibid.* , pp. 180–181. Italics mine .
64. G. W. Knight, *The Crown of Life* (London, 1952), p. 100.
65. John Palmer, *Comic Characters of Shakespeare*, p. ix.
66. *Ibid.* , p. 35.

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