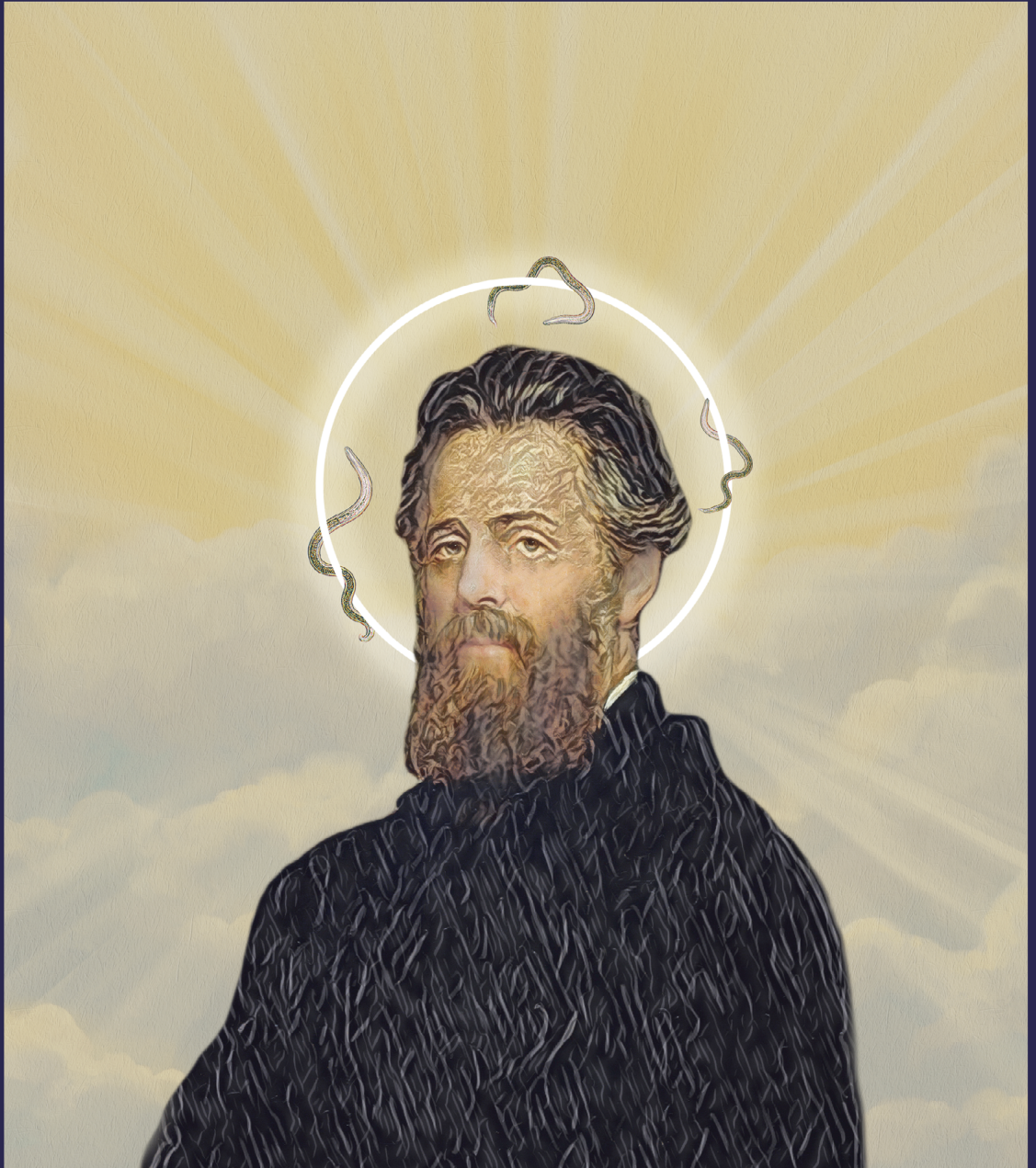


Melvillean Parasites

Anders M.
Gullestad



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ÇAPPELEN DAMM AKADEMISK

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Cappelen Damm Akademisk/NOASP
noasp@cappelendamm.no

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Abbreviations

All quotations from Herman Melville's works are taken from The Northwestern-Newberry Edition of *The Writings of Herman Melville*. The following abbreviations have been used:

- “B” “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” [1853]. *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*. Vol. 9. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1987, pp. 13–45.
- BB *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* [1924]. *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Uncompleted Writings*. Vol. 13. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, Robert A. Sandberg, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 2017, pp. 1–72.
- “BC” “Benito Cereno” [1855]. *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*. Vol. 9. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1987, pp. 46–117.
- C *Clarel: A Poem and a Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* [1876]. Vol. 12. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, Alma MacDougall Reising, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1991.
- CM *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* [1857]. Vol. 10. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1984.
- Corr *Correspondence*. Vol. 14. Edited by Lynn Horth. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1993.
- “IMC” “I and My Chimney” [1856]. *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*. Vol. 9. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1987, pp. 352–77.

- IP* *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* [1855]. Vol. 8. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1982.
- “JR” “Jimmy Rose” [1855]. *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*. Vol. 9. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1987, pp. 336–45.
- M* *Mardi: and a Voyage Thither* [1849]. Vol. 3. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1970.
- MD* *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* [1851]. Vol. 6. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1988.
- O* *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* [1847]. Vol. 2. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1968.
- P* *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* [1852]. Vol. 7. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1971.
- PP* *Published Poems: Battle-Pieces, John Marr, Timoleon*. Vol. 11. Edited by Robert C. Ryan, Harrison Hayford, Alma MacDougall Reising, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 2009.
- PT* *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*. Vol. 9. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1987.
- R* *Redburn: His First Voyage* [1849]. Vol. 4. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1969.
- T* *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* [1846]. Vol. 1. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1968.
- WJ* *White-Jacket; or The World in a Man-of-War* [1850]. Vol. 5. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1970.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Almost
All the wise world is little else in nature
But parasites or sub-parasites.”

Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, Act 3, Scene 1, Line 11–13

“Scientists ... have no idea how many species of parasites there are, but they do know one dazzling thing: parasites make up the majority of species on Earth. According to one estimate, parasites may outnumber free-living species four to one. In other words, the study of life is, for the most part, parasitology.”

Carl Zimmer, *Parasite Rex*, p. xxi

“There is no system without parasites. This constant is a law.”

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 12

There can be no doubt that Herman Melville (1819–1891) was keenly interested in all manner of living creatures—as Johan Warodell has noted, not only did he write “one of the world’s most famous books about an animal,” one can find references to more than 350 different species in his works (68–9). For this reason, please take a moment to consider the following question: If the relationships—be they between humans, or between humans and animals—depicted in Melville’s texts were to be described in biological terms, which type of relationship would be the most relevant?

To readers of *Moby-Dick*, in particular, the answer might seem obvious: Ishmael’s description of the “universal cannibalism of the sea; all

whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began” (*MD* 274) points to *predation*. Not only is it easy to understand the battle between Ahab and Moby Dick as a clash between two mighty predators trying to defeat each other, but, as Elizabeth Schultz has pointed out, imagery supporting such a reading abounds in the novel, where Ahab is repeatedly associated with predatory animals like leopards, tigers, bears, and wolves (102). Crucially, in the “wolfish world” portrayed by Ishmael (*MD* 51), man does not only prey upon the creatures of the sea, but also upon his fellow men: *Homo homini lupus est*.

While there is no doubt that the relationship between predator and prey is relevant to *Moby-Dick*, as well as to a work such as “Benito Cereno,” to my mind, there is another type of biological interaction that might prove to be equally important—if not more so—if the aim is a better understanding of what typically defines relationships in Melville’s writings. This is the parasitical relationships referred to in the three epigraphs from Shakespeare’s great contemporary, Ben Jonson, the popular science writer Carl Zimmer and the French philosopher and historian of science Michel Serres.¹ Whereas predation involves either an individual or a group of predators killing the prey—think of a lion attacking an antelope—parasitism instead involves smaller organisms feeding on a larger host. While this might, in certain cases, result in the death of the host organism, oftentimes the loss caused by the parasite is minor, and may not even be noticeable to it at all. As I see it, such uneven relationships, where the weaker try to feed off the more powerful—who, in turn, might be sponging off *their* superiors—are, in fact, everywhere in Melville’s writings. Taking my cue from Serres’ book *The Parasite* (1980), my contention is therefore that the common image in Melville is that of human affairs as “parasitic chains” where “the last to come tries to supplant his predecessor” (4). To elaborate on the importance of the conceptual figure of the parasite in Melville’s writing, in this book I will

1 In addition to predation and parasitism, the relationships in Melville’s works might also be analyzed from a perspective of what Schultz has termed “an intrinsic and irresistible interdependency among diverse species of life” (100), or what biologists usually term symbiosis. For an example of such a reading, see Sanborn (“Melville”).

offer detailed analyses of the parasitical relationships found in two of his novels—*Typee* and *The Confidence-Man*—and two of his short stories: “Bartleby the Scrivener” and “Jimmy Rose,” as well as briefer reflections upon *Omoo* and *Billy Budd, Sailor*.

A more detailed history of the figure of the parasite will be offered in Chapter 2, but a few basic details are here in order: Stemming from the Greek *parasitos* (later *parasitus* in Latin), the word means next to (*para*) the food or the grain (*sitos*).² Having its origin in a religious context, it eventually came to designate a type of stock character in Greek and Roman comedies whose *raison d’être* was that of acquiring a free dinner from others. Particularly famous in this regard are the parasites of Plautus and Terence. The parasite can be defined as a figure lacking a proper place at the host’s table—he is a “foreign body” who does not really belong, and who is at the mercy of those who feed him.³ Even though he received a dinner invitation yesterday, he can never be sure that another one will be forthcoming today; hence, he is forced to apply a variety of tactics if he is to avoid going hungry, and typically has to depend upon his wit, inventiveness and a sharp tongue. In addition to flattering his patrons, performing various types of services for them, or providing other kinds of entertainment, the comedic parasite often has to be willing to suffer all kinds of abuse—physical as well as verbal—to ensure access to meals. Most often functioning as types in ancient comedy, rather than individualized characters, they were frequently made to serve as the butts of jokes and as moral exempla of unethical behavior to be avoided. Still, they were not always presented in a negative light, but were sometimes portrayed as intelligent opportunists excelling at taking advantage of others and, on occasion, also allowed to play leading roles.

However, the concept of the human parasite described so far—the concept Ben Jonson had in mind when he wrote that “[a]lmost/ All the wise

2 On the etymology of “parasite,” as well as of “host,” see Miller (“The Critic”).

3 Even though a few female exceptions exist, I use the word “his” because the classical parasites were almost always male. Anna Watkins Fisher oversimplifies matters when she claims that the parasite is “a historically feminized metaphor for an intruder that is overly dependent, ungracious, and unwelcome” (“We Are Parasites”). While some comedic male parasites have been portrayed as feminine, the parasite was still characterized by such typically masculine traits as gluttony and a voracious appetite.

world is little else, in nature,/ But parasites or sub-parasites”—is not the only one available, neither today nor in Melville’s era. As Chapter 2 will explore in more detail, botanists had begun using the adjective “parasitical” and the noun “parasite” to describe certain kinds of plants in the mid-seventeenth and the early eighteenth century, respectively, whereas from the end of the eighteenth century, naturalists came to adopt the noun for insects and animals that, according to a fairly typical contemporary definition, “live for an appreciable proportion of their lives in (endoparasites) or on (ectoparasites) another organism, their host, are dependent on that host and benefit from the association at the host’s expense” (Matthews 12). Over time, this new biological understanding would become not only dominant, but eventually also taken for granted. As the word “parasite” came to be primarily associated with entities like lice and tapeworms, rather than with people looking for free dinners, the classical concept was relegated to comparative obscurity. Exactly when this shift took place is difficult to decide, but it had obviously not yet occurred in 1829, when the pseudonymous Dick Humelbergius Secundus offered the following definition: “in plain English, at the present day, [parasite] means neither more nor less than what is generally understood by the word *spunger*, or *hanger-on*, a personage at times not easily affronted, and of whom, at all times, it is not easy either to dispense with or to shake off” (93; emphasis in the original).

It was only in the last half of the nineteenth century that the biological concept came to be the standard one, due to the establishment of parasitology, the biological subfield dedicated to the study of the life cycles of parasites and their relationships to their hosts. A comparison with the life and work of the naturalist usually held to be the father of American parasitology, Joseph Leidy (1823–1891), shows that Melville’s career as a professional author is almost exactly coterminous with the first American scholarly research on biological parasites. Born four years after Melville, and dying a few months before him, Leidy first made a name for himself with the identification of the parasitic worm *Trichinella spiralis* in 1846, the year *Typee* was published. Furthermore, he had his first classic monograph on parasites, *A Flora and Fauna within Living Animals*, accepted for publication in 1851, the year

Moby-Dick came out, and published in 1853, the same year as “Bartleby, the Scrivener.”⁴

As Tyrus Hillway has argued in several publications, even though his descriptions are often critical and sometimes inaccurate, the largely self-taught Melville was a keen student of science, “of which he was much more thoroughly aware than most of his literary contemporaries” (“Critic of Science” 411).⁵ It is obvious that he was also familiar with the new scientific concept being shaped by Leidy and others. While he himself only used the noun “parasite” or the adjective “parasitical” a handful of times in his literary writings, these references are particularly relevant because they indicate that he was writing during a transitory phase when the new biological concept seems to have co-existed on more or less equal terms with the older, classical one; a phase, in Gillian Beer’s words, “when ‘a fact is not quite a scientific fact at all’ and when ‘the remnant of the mythical’ is at its most manifest” (4). To be precise, in *Typee*, there is a reference to “parasitical plants” (*T* 40). In *Mardi*, the sucking-fish, or Remoras, which cling to the backs of sharks, are described (wrongly, as it were) as

snaky parasites, impossible to remove from whatever they adhere to, without destroying their lives. The Remora has little power in swimming; hence its sole locomotion is on the backs of larger fish. Leech-like, it sticketh closer than a false brother in prosperity; closer than a beggar to the benevolent; closer than Webster to the Constitution. But it feeds upon what it clings to; its feelers having a direct communication with the esophagus. (*M* 54)⁶

Later in the book, Babbalanja makes the claim that “as the body of a bison is covered with hair, so Mardi is covered with grasses and vegetation, among which, we parasitical things do but crawl, vexing and tormenting

4 On Leidy’s life and work, see Warren.

5 Much has been written on Melville’s relationship to the various natural sciences and pseudo-sciences of the nineteenth century. Examples include Hillway (“Spirit of Science”; “Amateur Zoologist”; “Critic of Science”; “Education in Science”; “Geological Knowledge”; and “Two Pseudo-Sciences”), Karcher, Marovitz, Otter (*Melville’s Anatomies*), Schultz, Wilson, Barnum, Rebhorn, Calkins, as well as my “Man or Animal?”

6 On the factual inadequacy of the quoted passage, see Hillway (“Amateur Zoologist” 160–61).

the patient creature to which we cling” (*M* 458).⁷ In *Clarel* (1876), the Greek Banker travelling from Smyrna is said to like not only Glaucon, his son-in-law-to-be, but also “his clan,/ His kinsmen, and his happy way;/ And over wine would pleased repay / His parasites: Well may ye say/ The boy’s the bravest gentleman!—” (*C* 2.1.162–66). Also, during a discussion between Rolfe and Derwent about Rome, Catholic monks are likened to “Parasite-bugs—black swarming ones” crawling over a vine (*C* 2.26.181).⁸

To Melville, in other words, the parasitical does not only refer to interactions among humans and to sponging animals, insects, and plants, but it is also used to indicate similarities between these different registers, as the quotations from *Mardi* and *Clarel* indicate. To understand the importance of the figure of the parasite in Melville’s writings, one must therefore consider its dual belonging to culture and nature, as well as its capability of metaphorically transferring meanings between these two domains. In my opinion, the most relevant thinker for this task is Michel Serres, who has ceaselessly traversed the boundaries between the soft and the hard sciences, as well as between the natural and the cultural, showing how they are always mixed up in each other; in his words, “[v]ery little literature strays far from science, and much brings us back to science. Very little science strays far from literature, and much brings us back to literature” (*Parasite* 211).

Serres’ work is relevant for the analysis of the “parasitical relationships” found in Melville’s writings for several reasons. I will return to his

7 Another passage where humans are indirectly likened to biological parasites can be found in Chapter 48, where the narrator attempts to describe the strangeness of the school of bonito swimming alongside the *Chamois*. He then inquires what the craft and the humans aboard it look like to the bonito, which are said to consider the *Chamois* as a strange sort of fish: “What a curious fish! what a comical fish! But more comical far, those creatures above, on its hollow back, clinging thereto like the snaky eels, that cling and slide on the back of the Sword fish, our terrible foe. But what curious eels these are!” (*M* 149).

8 There are also many references that bring the figure of the parasite to mind without naming it, or that concern specific species of parasitic animals, such as leeches. In what is surely a pun, meant to invoke both doctors and blood-sucking worms, the narrator of *Typee*, Tommo, offers this description of the native who tries to heal his swollen foot: This old “leech” had “fastened on the unfortunate limb as if it were something for which he had been long seeking” (*T* 80). Ishmael claims that the killer whale “sometimes takes the great Folio whales by the lip, and hangs there like a leech, till the mighty brute is worried to death,” and also describes a harpooned whale trying to “rid himself of the iron leech that had fastened to him” (*MD* 143, 385). For additional references, see (*R* 269), and (*P* 304).

arguments in more detail, but two deserve immediate mention. First, his theoretical contribution helps shift focus away from the question of the *identity* of the parasite to its *relationship* with its host(s) and its *effects* on its surroundings. Through reconceptualizing the parasite as a “thermal exciter” nudging the systems it enters away from an equilibrium state, Serres helps explain how even the actions of small and seemingly insignificant foreign bodies can have a major impact on their surroundings (*Parasite* 190). Even though the consequences differ greatly, this is something that holds true for all the texts I interrogate in this book. Second, his concepts of the “parasitic chain” and “cascade” help examine how the manifestations of parasitism in Melville’s works gradually become more complex, in the end coming to include almost all of society within their purview. I therefore concur with a claim made by Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, who belong to the very limited number of previous scholars who have deployed the conceptual figure of the parasite to analyze Melville’s writings.⁹ As they at one point argue, “[i]n Melville’s universe, parasites exist in every social interaction” (“Masquerades” 50). The only thing I would add is that whereas they are specifically talking about the literary universe of *The Confidence-Man*, their words are equally relevant to many of his other texts, where, as soon as one starts looking for them, parasites turn out to be almost everywhere.

At this point, a potential objection must be addressed. If my last claim is correct, why is it that Melville only uses the words “parasite” and “parasitical” five times in his works? While this limited number might seem to counter the validity of my claim, to me, the crucial factor is not the presence of these words in his writings, but rather the presence of character traits typically associated with the figure of the parasite. *The Mask of the Parasite: A Pathology of Roman Patronage* (1997) helps explain why this

9 Several Melville scholars have mentioned the parasite in passing, and many biologists have spiced up their writings on whale parasites by referring to Melville; to quote Jennifer Calkins: “You would be hard pressed to find a single book describing the natural history of the sperm whale that does not use extensive quotes from *Moby-Dick*” (40). To my knowledge, there are only a handful of contributions that explicitly treat the topic. Two texts that briefly touch upon similar issues will be addressed in Chapter 4: Little, and Vismann. Chapter 6 discusses the most thorough contributions: the Serres-inspired readings of *The Confidence-Man* by Gelley (“Parasitic Talk”; “Talking Man”), and by Snyder and Mitchell (“Masquerades”; *Cultural Locations*).

is so. Here, Cynthia Damon argues that the word “parasitus” was rarely used outside of the genres of comedy and the declamation in ancient Rome. Still, authors in other genres had at their disposal a variety of means of indirectly eliciting the type of the sponger: “many postcomedy references to parasites evoke the type by its distinguishing characteristics or behaviors rather than by the label *parasitus*” (Damon 24). The traits that allowed playwrights and authors to create characters that audiences and readers would recognize as belonging to the type of the parasite will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 2, but two of the most important ones must here be mentioned: an excessive interest in food and a willingness to do more or less anything to acquire free meals.¹⁰ Whereas the word “parasite” is seldom used by Melville, such traits are everywhere in his writings.

On Food in Melville

To approach these parasitic traits, I want to highlight a theme that for a long time received meagre critical attention from Melville scholars: *food*—that is, food of other kinds than human flesh.¹¹ Given the enduring ability of this most forbidden dish to thrill the reader’s imagination, it is no wonder that a lot of criticism has concentrated on the different uses Melville made of it in works such as *Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, and “Benito Cereno.”¹² The quality of the best of these contributions aside, the focus on

10 As Damon argues, it was common to highlight such traits in others in the genres of satire and forensic oratory: Horace, Martial, and Juvenal drew on typically parasitic traits to satirize their targets, yet without openly accusing them of being parasites, whereas Cicero frequently did something similar in his legal speeches to undermine the credibility of his opponents (105–251).

11 Among the scholarly writings that have considered the question of food in Melville without a focus on cannibalism, see Stein, G. Brown, Savarese, and Hughes. Even though she only makes a few references to Melville, for a thorough exploration of the importance of food and eating in nineteenth-century American literature, see Tompkins.

12 For a general overview of the importance of cannibalism to Western thought, see Avramescu, and Sanborn (*The Sign* 21–73). Sanborn’s *The Sign of the Cannibal* stands as one of the best approaches to anthropophagy in Melville. See also several of the contributions in the anthology *Critical Essays on Herman Melville’s Typee* (1982), edited by Milton R. Stern, as well as Crain, Hughes, Herbert, and Pollock.

anthropophagy might nevertheless have helped overshadow that human flesh is far from the only dish of importance in Melville's works.

Recently, however, the analytical perspective on food has started to widen. Particularly important here is Édouard Marsoin's work on the concept of *pleasure*.¹³ While delight in eating is only one of the many, often interconnected pleasures explored by Marsoin, he has not only shown how important food (of the non-cannibalistic kind) is in Melville's work, but also how he frequently invokes other pleasures through metaphors related to nourishment, for example having to do with taste and touch. In fact, even a cursory reading of Melville's writings clearly indicates how important the topics of dinners and feeding are to many of his narrators and characters. For example, the narrator of *White-Jacket* (1850) puts it in no uncertain terms: "let us candidly confess it, shipmates, that, upon the whole, our dinners are the most momentous affairs of these lives we lead beneath the moon. What were a day without a dinner? a dinnerless day! such a day had better be a night." (*WJ* 29). The narrator of *Mardi* asserts that "no sensible man can harbor a doubt, but that there is a vast deal of satisfaction in dining. More: there is a savor of life and immortality in substantial fare. Like balloons, we are nothing till filled" (*M* 170), whereas the eponymous narrator of *Redburn* (1849) claims that "I never felt so bad yet, but I could eat a good dinner," before continuing: "And once, years afterward, when I expected to be killed every day, I remember my appetite was very keen, and I said to myself, 'Eat away, Wellingborough, while you can, for this may be the last supper you will have'" (*R* 23). And in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael offers the advice that "when cruising in an empty ship, if you can get nothing better out of the world, get a good dinner out of it, at least" (*MD* 447).

Moreover, Melville's characters often take an almost sensual delight in consuming and in thinking about meals. That they frequently linger on the taste and smell of what they eat, can be seen in the following tribute to the pork that Tommo, the narrator of *Typee*, is served by his savage hosts on the island of Nukuheva, "a morsel of which placed on the tongue melts like a soft smile from the lips of Beauty" (*T* 159). Through

13 See Marsoin (*Melville*; "The Belly Philosophical"; "No Land" and "Billy Budd").

this hyperbolic description, he is not simply drawing our attention to an objective fact about his meal or about the cannibal tribe supplying it. More significantly, he is clearly expressing his own fundamental, subjective *hunger*—a hunger which, I contend, must be taken into consideration to understand his actions and his narrative.¹⁴

These quotes indicate that many of Melville's different narrators and characters seem to be uncommonly preoccupied with their dinners, time and again expressing their strong cravings and "genuine relish" for nourishment (*MD* 292). Hence, his novels and stories abound not only with situations where characters exchange table-talk during meals, but also with detailed references to various types of foods and foodstuffs; to meals meager and festive; to a lack of nourishment or an abundance thereof; to the taste and flavor of food; to expectations of good meals to come; and reflections on how best to acquire them. For example, the entire first half of "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855) essentially consists of detailed descriptions of a single, sumptuous dinner that the narrator attends in the company of a band of merry, well-off bachelors in London. In addition, "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" (1854) juxtaposes two very different meals where the narrator gets to sample and compare the hospitality of the poor and the largesse of the rich, finding them equally unappealing.

Obviously, these aspects have not gone entirely unnoticed among Melville scholars, some of whom have touched upon them in their writings. Newton Arvin has for example noted that the extensive "praise of eating and drinking [in *Mardi*] is highly Rabelaisian in intention" (73); Richard Chase claims that in order to understand the deeper meanings of *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924) one "might well begin with the large number of figures of speech having to do with the act of eating" (Introduction xiv);

14 That Melville frequently uses hunger (or lack thereof) to characterize his characters is also evident in *Pierre* (1852). Here, the narrator initially notes that the title character "always had an excellent appetite, and especially for his breakfast," but after the incidents that lead to his self-destructive pursuit of a career as an author in New York, it is remarked that "his is the famishing which loathes all food. He can not eat but by force. He has assassinated the natural day; how can he eat with an appetite?" (*P*: 16, 305). *Pierre's* changing relation to food thus becomes one of the narrator's means of tracing his fall and destruction. For a further analysis of *Pierre's* changing dietary habits, see Marsoin ("The Belly Philosophical" 1715–17).

whereas Dan McCall argues that dining “appears so persistently and with such prominence that it constitutes a major theme of [Melville’s] work” (41). These insights notwithstanding, this “major theme” has seldom been pursued in a sustained manner. Instead, it tends to be either mentioned in passing or in a way that only accords it importance insofar as it is treated as a symbol of something less mundane. A good example of the latter tendency can be found in Thomas J. Scorza’s “Tragedy in the State of Nature: Melville’s *Typee*” (1979). Commenting on the lack of food experienced by Tommo aboard his ship, the *Dolly*, Scorza claims that “the fact that ‘weeks ago’ the ship’s ‘fresh provisions were all exhausted’ is important only because it points to the more crucial fact that the ship’s society has exhausted its *moral* stores in its cruise” (227; emphasis in the original). Something similar might be said of the Melville scholars who have treated references to food and eating as veiled allusions to socially unacceptable sexual practices and desires, as does Robert K. Martin when he claims that “Melville makes frequent use of food as a metaphor for love” (46).¹⁵ The problem is that whenever a textual description of (lack of) food is seen as nothing but a sign or a coded reference, the importance of what is explicitly there in the text risks being overlooked.

The end of Chapter 33 of *Moby-Dick*, “The Specksynder,” can begin to indicate why the topic is far more important than Scorza realizes, as well as important for different reasons than those suggested by Martin. Here Ishmael reflects upon how the distinctions between officers and sailors are upheld at sea. While acknowledging that the crew aboard the *Pequod* was in many ways treated leniently, he notes that “yet even Captain Ahab was by no means unobservant of the paramount forms and usages of the sea” (*MD* 147). As becomes clear, these forms and usages were something the captain took advantage of for his own ends. For, as Ishmael puts it:

15 For similar arguments, see Crain, and Hughes. To treat food as a metaphorical substitute for something forbidden is common in psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud has argued that dreams of food signify “an innocent desire” used “as a screen for a more serious one which could not be so openly displayed,” such as “a child’s longing for his mother’s breast” (233).

That certain sultanism of his brain, which had otherwise in good degree remained unmanifested; through those forms that same sultanism became incarnate in an irresistible dictatorship. For be a man's intellectual superiority what it will, it can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other men, without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments, always, in themselves, more or less paltry and base. (*MD* 148)

Exactly which “external arts and entrenchments” Ishmael has in mind is never really spelled out. It is striking, though, that the next chapter, “The Cabin-Table,” is dedicated to a contrasting discussion of how dinner is consumed by the captain and his three officers—Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask—and then, after they have finished eating, by the ship's three harpooners. As Ishmael makes clear, meals aboard the *Pequod* are served according to old maritime customs where the steward first alerts the captain that dinner is ready. The captain then makes the announcement to the first mate, the first mate to the second, and finally the second mate to the third. In this order, and with a suitable pause between each, in silence they enter the cabin, are served, and begin to eat. Under Ahab's stern gaze, Starbuck is said to receive “his meat as though receiving alms,” whereas Flask, the last to enter, is said to do so “in the character of Abjectus, or the Slave” (*MD* 150). The end of the meal reverses the order of the entrance, meaning the third mate must finish first:

Flask was the last person down at the dinner, and Flask is the first man up. Consider! For hereby Flask's dinner was badly jammed in point of time. Starbuck and Stubb both had the start at him; and yet they also have the privilege of lounging in the rear. If Stubb even, who is but a peg higher than Flask, happens to have but a small appetite, and soon shows symptoms of concluding his repast, then Flask must bestir himself, he will not get more than three mouthfuls that day; for it is against holy usage for Stubb to precede Flask to the deck. Therefore it was that Flask once admitted in private, that ever since he had arisen to the dignity of an officer, from that moment he had never known what it was to be otherwise than hungry, more or less. For what he ate did not so much relieve his hunger, as keep it immortal in him. (*MD* 151)

Even though this practice seemingly only follows “holy usage,” here it becomes evident that access to food functions as one of Ahab's practical

means of keeping those closest to him in rank aboard the *Pequod* under his control; to quote Ishmael: “They were as little children before Ahab” (*MD* 150).¹⁶ In other words, the distribution of nourishment and the regulation of its consumption function precisely as examples of those “external arts and entrenchments” that allow the captain to strengthen and maintain his “practical, available supremacy over other men.” However, it is not obvious why, day after day, the three officers consent to hurriedly eat in “awful silence” (*MD* 151), especially since Ahab has never explicitly forbidden conversation during the meals. Ishmael’s attempt to explain this puzzling fact invokes Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon:

he who in the rightly regal and intelligent spirit presides over his own private dinner-table of invited guests, that man’s unchallenged power and dominion of individual influence for the time; that man’s royalty of state transcends Belshazzar’s, for Belshazzar was not the greatest. Who has but once dined his friends, has tasted what it is to be Cæsar. It is a witchery of social czarship which there is no withstanding. (*MD* 150)

As Ishmael puts it, there is something about the act of sharing a meal that places the host in a curiously elevated position, giving him “unchallenged power and dominion of individual influence for the time.” That the distribution of edibles in Melville’s works is often intimately connected to *power* and *power relations* thus becomes clear.¹⁷

Nevertheless, nourishment is not only an opportunity for the mighty to control their subordinates, as in this case, but it can also offer unexpected transgressive possibilities for the latter. Chapter 181 of *Mardi*, “They sup,” explains why. Here it is forcefully stressed that if there is one thing the mighty have in common, it is the tendency to throw lavish feasts. As the narrator sees it, this holds true no less for gods than it does

16 The meals of the harpooners are quite different since they eat on their own, out of Ahab’s commanding sight. Their dinners are filled with an “almost frantic democracy”: “the harpooners chewed their food with such a relish that there was a report to it. They dined like lords; they filled their bellies like Indian ships all day loading with spices,” all the while keeping the unlucky steward, Dough-Boy, in a state of constant terror through their playful threats (*MD* 152).

17 See also Chapter 6 and 7 of *White-Jacket*, where the narrator discusses the importance of rank to the dinner arrangements on board the *Neversink*: Those more or less on an equal footing dine together, but rank also decides “the dinner hour. He who dines latest is the greatest man; and he who dines earliest is accounted the least” (*WJ* 28).

for “distinguished mortals” of all nationalities and ages, leading him to offer an extensive list of the famous “Sultans, Satraps, Viziers, Hetmans, Soldans, Landgraves, Bashaws, Doges, Dauphins, Infantas, Incas, and Caçiques” who have done so throughout history (*M* 603, 604).

While to the host, giving a sumptuous feast may serve as an opportunity to put others in debt or to solidify power, to the guests, it may offer the possibility of nourishment at the host’s expense. To draw upon Michel de Certeau’s distinction from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), meals can be said to function as arenas for the *strategies* of those in power, but they can also provide opportunities for the *tactics* of those lacking it. Whereas the first concept involves having control over a given place (the way Ahab has control over the *Pequod*), to de Certeau, the second is marked by the lack of such spatial ownership. To him, a tactic is defined by

a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak. (de Certeau 37)

In *Moby-Dick*, one of the best examples of such tactical appropriations of the nourishment of others is found in Chapter 91, “The *Pequod* meets the *Rose Bud*,” where Stubb proves his craftiness in a comic encounter with the *Bouton de Rose*, a French ship that has come into possession of two dead whales said to smell “worse than an Assyrian city in the plague, when the living are incompetent to bury the departed” (*MD* 402). Stubb, who is sent by boat to inquire whether the French whalers know anything about *Moby Dick*, takes an interest in the second of the reeking carcasses, which he thinks might contain ambergris, the valuable substance produced in the digestive system of cachalots, most famous for its use as a fixative in perfumery. Suspecting that the French whalers are not aware of this, he comes up with a sly plan. When he realizes that the only sailor aboard the *Bouton de Rose* who speaks English would like nothing more than to get rid of the nauseating smell, the two work together to trick the inexperienced captain, who insists that the two whales must be flensed,

not realizing that this will yield little oil. The mate pretends to translate into French what Stubb is saying. Whereas the latter is happily accusing the captain of being “no more fit to command a whale-ship than a St. Jago monkey” (*MD* 406), the former claims that their guest is warning them that they might catch a deadly fever from the reeking whales. As a result, the captain orders his men to get rid of their catch. Stubb offers to help drag the cachalot away from the ship with his boat, and, when the *Bouton de Rose* is out of sight, proceeds “to reap the fruit of his unrighteous cunning” (*MD* 407). Having cut a hole beside one of the whale’s side fins, Stubb is finally rewarded with “a faint stream of perfume” emerging from the foul odor:

“I have it, I have it,” cried Stubb, with delight, striking something in the subterranean regions, “a purse! a purse!”

Dropping his spade, he thrust both hands in, and drew out handfuls of something that looked like ripe Windsor soap, or rich mottled old cheese; very unctuous and savory withal. You might easily dent it with your thumb; it is of a hue between yellow and ash color. And this, good friends, is ambergris, worth a gold guinea an ounce to any druggist. (*MD* 407)

While Stubb is elsewhere said to be “somewhat intemperately fond of the whale as a flavorish thing to his palate” (*MD* 292), the ambergris he tactically misappropriates is obviously only nourishment in a metaphorical sense. Even so, it is not insignificant that Ishmael likens it to “rich mottled old cheese”. Wherever trickery is to be found in Melville, food seems never to be far away. To borrow a term used to describe pursers in *White-Jacket*, Stubb might be seen as belonging to the class of sneaky opportunists known as “nip-cheeses” (*WJ* 206)—that is, someone who has made a career out of nibbling the resources of others, which is exactly what the parasite is famous for. Thus, whereas the word “parasite” is seldom used in Melville, on closer examination, his writings turn out to be full of parasitical “nip-cheeses” and other “unprincipled gourmands” (*WJ* 133) lacking power and provisions of their own, but who are always on the lookout for the opportunity to acquire free meals at the expense of others.

Since such “nip-cheeses” can also be found elsewhere in Melville, my approach could easily have been extended to other texts than those

I analyze in this book. Let me therefore indicate a few of the possible paths I have not pursued. First of all, even though the figure of the parasite is relevant to several of his poems, I have decided to limit myself to his prose writings.¹⁸ This is because one of the key characteristics of the literary parasite is his ability as a teller of tales: Wherever parasites are found, so are stories, functioning as one of the most important types of “currency” that they use to acquire their nourishment. In the words of Redburn, after he encounters “a party of rustics” in England: “They treated me to ale; and I treated them to stories about America” (R 211). It therefore seemed most relevant to turn to Melville’s narrative texts.

Second, I have refrained from trying to offer an overview of the role of the parasite in all his narratives.¹⁹ Instead, I have limited myself to analyses of those narratives where the figure becomes so central that they may be read as literary experiments with the classical stock character of the parasite. Through infusing different characters with parasitic traits, which are then tested out in various settings and contexts, Melville’s texts can be said to adapt the classical figure to their own time, bringing it to bear upon the different questions they set out to explore.

This brings us to a final point: The parasite cannot be understood in isolation. The reason is that it is so intimately connected to several other concepts that it is nearly impossible to address, without also addressing

18 Among the poetry, the posthumously published *Burgundy Club* material is particularly relevant. It is made up of a combination of poems and prose sketches concerning the exploits of the Marquis de Grandvin and his follower, Major Jack Gentian, see Sandberg, and Dryden (“Poet”). The figure of the parasite can also shed light on “Falstaff’s Lament over Prince Hal Become Henry V,” from *Weeds and Wildings* (1924), where Shakespeare’s famous braggart and parasite, Sir John Falstaff—to be addressed in Chapter 2—drowns his sorrows in ale after having been disowned by his patron, Hal. Moreover, the biological concept of symbiosis—to be addressed in Chapter 5—is highly relevant to “The Maldive Shark” from *John Marr and Other Sailors with Some Sea-Pieces* (1888).

19 To give a few examples of other texts by Melville that the conceptual figure of the parasite might illuminate, in *Mardi* the narrator receives steady access to food and hospitality after successfully passing himself off as the demi-god Taji. “Benito Cereno” takes place aboard a ship, the *San Dominick*, described almost as if it were the host of a parasitical foreign body hidden from view; under water, “a huge bunch of conglobated barnacles” adheres to it “like a wen” (“BC” 49). It also features a memorable meal where it is far from clear who is feeding at the expense of whom, and who is the true host and who is the guest. Both “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” and “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” revolve around issues of hospitality, and both are told by narrators who end up nourishing themselves on others, literally and perhaps also metaphorically.

them.²⁰ I have already briefly touched upon how questions of parasitism for Melville are typically interwoven with questions of *power* and *power relationships*. Among other key concepts that are both crucial to Melville's work and directly linked to the parasite, we find, for example, *the host*, *hospitality*, *responsibility*, *hunger*, *dependence*, *patronage* and *the gift*, just to name some of the auxiliary concepts that will become central to the analyses presented later in this book. When these concepts are considered in conjunction, with the parasite as a point of entry and main analytical tool, they allow us to delineate a field of related ethico-political issues that runs throughout Melville's writings.

A First Peep at the Melvillean Parasite: *Omoo*

At this point, readers likely wonder what the Melvillean parasite might look like in practice. Before offering an outline of the cultural history of the parasite in the next chapter, I will therefore give a preliminary answer to this question through a brief reading of Melville's second book, the semi-autobiographical travel-narrative *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847). Here we find several characters with easily recognizable parasitic traits. Perhaps the clearest example in all of Melville's writings is Kooloo, a native who befriends the beachcombing narrator, who goes by the name "Typee," during his adventures on Tahiti. Just prior to introducing this "comely youth" (O 157) at the beginning of Chapter 40, the narrator takes the opportunity to reflect on the peculiarities of Polynesian customs concerning friendship:

The really curious way in which all the Polynesians are in the habit of making bosom friends at the shortest possible notice, is deserving of remark. Although, among a people like the Tahitians, vitiated as they are by sophisticating influences, this custom has in most cases degenerated into a mere mercenary relation, it nevertheless had its origin in a fine, and in some instances, heroic sentiment, formerly entertained by their fathers. (O 152)

20 With the following claim, the editors of the journal *Mafté'akh* aptly describe the tendency of concepts to cluster: "Concepts, like people, are never alone, they are nothing as singulars—they always need the company of others" (Edelman et al. viii). My understanding of concepts is primarily indebted to Mieke Bal's *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*.

Thus, the narrator introduces the crucial distinction between the noble and the mercenary “tayo,” a Tahitian word that roughly translates as “friend,” but which indicates a type of relationship falling somewhere between a friendship and a tactical alliance.²¹

Typee exemplifies this opposition between different types of “tayos” by reference to two Tahitian acquaintances. The first is Poky, “a handsome youth, who could never do enough for me. Every morning at sunrise, his canoe came alongside with fruits of all kinds” (O 152). Even though it is indicated that he perhaps expects to be remunerated for his services, he never asks for anything in return: “Though there was no end to Poky’s attentions, not a syllable did he ever breathe of reward; but sometimes he looked very knowing” (O 153). While this might indicate a degree of calculation at odds with Western ideas of friendship, the narrator never expresses doubt about the sincerity of the youth’s feelings. Poky therefore seems the perfect embodiment of the true and honorable “tayo.”

This is clearly not the case for Kooloo, whom Typee later encounters. After first assuring him “that the love he bore me was ‘nuee, nuee, nuee,’ or infinitesimally extensive,” the native’s feelings sour as soon as he has “cajoled” him out of his belongings (O 157, 158).²² At last, when the source has run completely dry and there is no more to be had, he matter-of-factly makes it clear to Typee that their relationship has come to an end:

As for Kooloo, after sponging me well, he one morning played the part of a retrograde lover; informing me, that his affections had undergone a change; he had fallen in love at first sight with a smart sailor, who had just stepped ashore quite flush from a lucky whaling-cruise.

It was a touching interview, and with it, our connection dissolved. But the sadness which ensued would soon have dissipated, had not my sensibilities been wounded by his indelicately sporting some of my gifts very soon after this transfer of his affections. Hardly a day passed, that I did not meet him on the Broom Road, airing himself in a Regatta shirt, which I had given him in happier hours. (O 158)

²¹ On the differences between Western and Polynesian understandings of friendship, see V. Smith.

²² For an interesting analysis that addresses the opposition between Poky and Kooloo in economic terms, but without reference to the parasite, see Marsoin (“No Land” 234).

Not only does the once affectionate youth brazenly flaunt the gifts he has received, but as the days go by, he even stops greeting his former “tayo” when the two happen to meet, causing the narrator to conclude that “[h]e must have taken me for part of the landscape” (O 158).²³

In other words, like the traditional Greek and Roman comic parasites, the sponging Kooloo is someone who obviously hopes to gain from flattering his host with fair, but empty words. Since he only appears very briefly in the narrative, at first glance he functions as little more than an insignificant comic interlude. However, even though this has not been acknowledged by scholars, the crucial thing about his relationship to the narrator is that the two share quite a few traits. This is not to say that there are not important differences between them. As opposed to Kooloo, Typee, who often expresses seemingly heartfelt gratitude and respect for those who serve as his hosts, does not strike readers as callous. Still, as he tends to treat others in a manner not fundamentally different from the way his own ungrateful “tayo” treats him, this difference is one of degree, rather than of kind. Along with his roguish companion, Doctor Long Ghost, Typee repeatedly takes advantage of local customs regulating interactions with strangers; in Polynesia, “hospitality without charge is enjoined upon every one” (O 118–19).²⁴ Or, as he will later put it after he and the Doctor have benefited from the kindness of an old couple they meet:

23 Even though Typee is only a poor sailor by Western standards, to the natives he is still wealthy. His relationship to Kooloo illustrates a point made by Plutarch in the essay “How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend”: “flatterers are never so much as to be seen coming near where succulence and warmth are lacking, but where renown and power attend, there do they throng and thrive; but if a change come, they slink away quickly and are gone” (49d). Chapter 2 returns to the figure Plutarch warns his readers against: the *kolax* or flatterer. For the moment, the crucial point is that when he uses this term, it is as a synonym for parasite—to quote Athenaeus’ *The Learned Banqueters*: “there is not much difference between the words ‘flatterer’ and ‘parasite’” (248c). On Melville’s familiarity with Plutarch, see Sealts Jr. (205). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from classical Greek and Latin works are taken from the translations in The Loeb Classical Library, using the references found in the different works, rather than page number. Note that in several cases, the Greek *parasitos* and the Latin *parasitus* have been translated as “hanger-on,” probably to avoid confusion due to the contemporary understanding of parasite as a biological concept. In such cases I have slightly modified the quotes.

24 Marsoin offers interesting reflections on Typee and Doctor Long Ghost’s tactics for avoiding labor, but taking the parasite into account would have further enriched his analysis (“No Land” 236).

They gave us a hearty meal; and while we were discussing its merits, they assured us, over and over again, that they expected nothing in return for their attentions; more: we were at liberty to stay as long as we pleased; and as long as we *did* stay, their house and every thing they had was no longer theirs, but ours; still more: they themselves were our slaves—the old lady, to a degree that was altogether superfluous. This, now, is Tahitian hospitality! Self-immolation upon one's own hearth-stone for the benefit of the guest. (O 254; emphasis in the original)

In this way Typee and Doctor Long Ghost feed on the people they encounter, including Captain Bob, Father Murphy, Marharvai, and Ereemear Po-Po, as well as countless unnamed others. Nor can there be any doubt that the two companions actively seek out those situations “where we could get plenty to eat without pay” (O 250). Addressing their lack of food while on Tahiti, it is said that “we managed, by a systematic foraging upon the country round about, to make up for some of our deficiencies. And fortunate it was, that the houses of the wealthier natives were just as open to us as those of the most destitute; we were treated as kindly in one as the other” (O 132).

Potentially to absolve himself from any criticism for ungrateful and unethical behavior, Typee directs the reader's attention to Doctor Long Ghost's appetite and his role as the chief instigator behind these expeditions: “Like all lank men, my long friend had an appetite of his own. Others occasionally went about seeking what they might devour, but *he* was always on the alert” (O 132; emphasis in the original). Nonetheless, there is little to indicate that his own qualms about playing the parasite exceed those of his companion. This for example becomes evident in the part of the narrative that deals with their attempt to attach themselves to the court of Queen Pomaree III in Taloo on the island of Imeeo. Even though the plan ultimately fails, Typee initially considers it very promising, showing that he, too, knows how to recognize an opportunity to feed when he sees one:

All things considered, I could not help looking upon Taloo as offering “a splendid opening” for us adventurers. . . . there were hopes to be entertained of being promoted to some office of high trust and emolument, about the person of her

majesty, the queen. Nor was this expectation altogether Quixotic. In the train of many Polynesian princes, roving whites are frequently found: gentlemen pensioners of state, basking in the tropical sunshine of the court, and leading the pleasantest lives in the world. Upon islands little visited by foreigners, the first seaman that settles down, is generally domesticated in the family of the head chief or king ... These men generally marry well; often ... into the royal blood.
(O 246–47)

Having as their explicit aim the “pleasantest lives in the world,” where food is always forthcoming and very little work is expected in return, Typee and Doctor Long Ghost prove themselves true heirs of the classical parasites.²⁵ In fact, since the original comedic parasites were above all else defined by their literal hunger, the two companions are both truer heirs than the narrator’s fair-weather “tayo,” whose aim was to wheedle him out of his earthly riches, rather than food.

For this reason, I am not entirely sure whether to agree with Wyn Kelley’s description of the difference between Typee and the other white beachcombers appearing in the narrative: “Only by a slight degree of decorum and wit in his narration does Typee avoid falling into the debased condition of [these] broken-down white parasites of the Pacific” (81). If what Kelley has in mind is that the narrator is not a debased and broken-down parasite, but rather an eloquent and resourceful sponger, I agree. If, on the other hand, she means that, unlike his shipmates, he is not a parasite at all, I disagree. When Kooloo leeches off someone who himself survives by living off others, it is accordingly not only a fitting punishment, but also exemplifies a point well known to biologists: Parasites can often have spongers of their own, so-called “epi-” or “hyperparasites.”

25 The narrator claims that “we expected to swell the appropriations of bread-fruits and cocoa-nuts on the Civil List, by filling some honorable office in her gift,” and also indicates that they were ready to take part in the queen’s planned campaign against the French (O 248). While this might seem to counter my claim that the companions are out to get an abundance of food in return for as little work as possible, there is an undeniable ironic ring to the term “honorable office” due to the narrator’s earlier reflections on the “work” traditionally done by the runaway sailors who had attached themselves to local courts (O 247).

To conclude, this preliminary analysis has resulted in several insights that will prove relevant to the readings to come of *Typee*, “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” “Jimmy Rose,” and *The Confidence-Man*. First, Melville’s writings are full of characters with typical parasitic traits, but what *Omoo* clearly shows, is that the most obvious parasites are not always the only ones in the texts, nor the most important ones. In addition, *Typee* exemplifies how many of his first-person narrators show a strong concern with food at the same time as they are also very much in favor of idleness and leisure—to quote Ishmael: “For my part, I abominate all honorable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever” (*MD* 5). One way of getting access to both is by playing the parasite. Nevertheless, these narrators are typically interested in presenting a positive image of themselves and therefore often try to downplay or make light of anything that could be held against them, as does *Typee* when he blames Doctor Long Ghost for their sponging.

In addition, whereas *Kooloo* comes across as a fairly typical comedic parasite, much like the ones found in Greek and Latin comedy (albeit one found in an unusual setting), the narrator is a much more three-dimensional parasite. This alerts us to a fact that we will encounter repeatedly in this book: Melville’s parasites tend to be much more complex than the original stock characters whose defining traits they have been endowed with. As I will argue, he time and again takes up the traditional comedic figure not to reproduce it, but to do something new, be it by probing and modifying it, adding new traits to it, removing old ones, or by combining different traits in unexpected ways. Thus, he ends up testing how it functions in various contexts and genres, as well as experimenting with its ability to illuminate different ethical questions concerning hospitality and dependency upon others. This willingness to experiment with a standard figure is also evident from the complex relationships between the Melvillean parasites and their hosts, relationships which not only problematize who dines at the expense of whom, but also if what the parasite offers the host might not in the end be more valuable than what it tactically poaches.

CHAPTER 2

On the Genealogy of the Parasite²⁶

At one point in *The Confidence-Man*, the narrator remarks that “[t]he grand points of human nature are the same to-day they were a thousand years ago. The only variability in them is in expression, not in feature” (CM 71). This quote serves well to indicate the remarkable persistence of the comedic figure of the parasite, which exists in much the same manner today as it did in Classical Greece, at least in some of its incarnations; in the words of Northrop Frye:

Dramatic comedy, from which fictional comedy is mainly descended, has been remarkably tenacious of its structural principles and character types. ... the Joxer Daley of [Sean] O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* [1924] has the same character and dramatic function as the parasites of twenty-five hundred years ago. (163)

The reason for this persistence is undoubtedly that the figure embodies some of “the grand points of human nature”—or better yet, some of the not quite so grand ones, having to do with dependency upon others and the abuse of hospitality—whose basic features remain constant throughout the ages, and whose ethical relevance are felt anew by every successive generation. Even though these fundamental traits remain the same, the quote from *The Confidence-Man* indicates that innovations in their rendition are possible, something that is also stressed in Cynthia Damon’s *The Mask of the Parasite* (1997):

26 This chapter is an extended and reworked version of my article “Parasite,” which was originally published in *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* in 2011. Reprinted with permission.

in making the parasite act, that is, in working out the behavioral consequences of his traits, the comic poets proved themselves highly innovative. New techniques, new areas of involvement, new complications—all of these are devised for the parasite as he processes through Greek and Roman Comedy. (24)

Such innovations are far from limited to Greek and Roman comedy, but can also be found in later writings. Before the importance of the parasite to Melville's works and whether the uses he made of it were original or derivative can be explored, a more fundamental understanding of the literary parasite's basic features, as well as of some of the most important innovations in its expression during the last 2500 years or so, is needed. Since a comprehensive history of the parasite in literature lies far outside the scope of the present book, I have limited myself to a few central stages in the evolution of the figure. Specifically, in the first part of this chapter, I address the religious origins of the term "parasitos" in Ancient Greece. This is followed by a discussion of how the adoption of the term by poets of Middle Comedy helped create the stock character of the parasite, which was later transported to a Roman context through the *commoedia palliata* of Plautus and Terence. The second part traces how renewed interest in these two authors during the Renaissance led to the reappearance of the parasite in Elizabethan drama, where the figure came to appear both in comedies, tragicomedies, and tragedies, and where, in certain works by Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, the figure becomes so complex that it breaks free of its origin. Finally, the third part discusses how the parasite appears in a pathologized form in the novels of Melville's contemporary, Charles Dickens. To explain this pathologization, the chapter addresses how naturalists gradually came to adopt the term "parasite," as well as some of the implications of this shift. Even though these brief overviews of the literary and scientific concepts of the parasite will by necessity contain many lacunae and omissions, in helping highlight both continuities and important innovations, they serve as a necessary background for the analyses of Melville's texts to come.

Religious Origins and the Greco-Roman Comedic Parasite

As previously indicated, the Greek term “parasitos” had its origin in religious practices, dating back at least to the fifth century B.C. Initially, the name designated temple assistants who, according to W. Geoffrey Arnott, “received free food and meals in return for services like that of the selection of the sacred grain for use in particular festivals” (“Studies” 162–63), most famously at the Heracleia, the annual celebration of Heracles at Cynosarges, near Athens.²⁷ Not much is known with certainty about this religious phase, but important clues can be found in the Greek rhetorician and grammarian Athenaeus’ monumental fifteen volume *The Learned Banqueters*, also known as *The Deiphnosophists*. Dating from the end of the second century A.D., the work contains a multitude of discussions about all sorts of topics from the guests attending a feast given by the wealthy Roman official Larensis. A chance remark about parasites in Book VI sets off long monologues from two of the characters present: Plutarch, who is largely concerned with literary parasites (6.234c–48c), and Democritus, who primarily focuses on the hangers-on of famous historical individuals (6.248c–62a). Both quote all manner of sources, many of which today are lost or exist only in fragments—be it comedies, the works of historians and philosophers, laws, or gossip about their contemporaries. While the objectivity of these speakers should *not* be taken for granted, they still offer many insights into the parasite’s role in Greek culture and religion.²⁸

Concerning the cultic origin of “parasitos,” Athenaeus’ Plutarch quotes the Stoic philosopher Polemon of Athens, who had claimed that “[p]arasite’ is today a disreputable term, but among the ancients I find

27 On the cultic origin of the parasite, see Wilkins (73–74), and J. Z. Smith (257–58).

28 Even though the parasite it is just one of many topics discussed by Larensis’ guests, Tim Whitmarsh has argued that it is central to an understanding of the combined poetics and politics of *The Learned Banqueters*. To him, Athenaeus playfully undermines the critical comments of Plutarch and Democritus by indicating that their own relationship to Larensis closely mirrors that of parasites and host. Whitmarsh therefore considers their attacks on parasitism as “humorously hackneyed and ill-conceived attempt to deflect from themselves the charge of precisely such conduct” (305).

that the parasite was sacred and resembled an invited guest at a meal” (6.234d), before listing a number of different facts about who were eligible to be parasites, how they were chosen, what the job entailed, how long they served, and how they were housed. He further indicates that this change from sacred to disreputable came about when poets started using the term as a name for comedic characters out to acquire free dinners. Exactly who did so first is a matter of some dispute. The primary candidates are the Middle Comedy rivals Alexis, who wrote a play called *Parasitos* sometime in the period 360–350 B.C., and Araros, who uses the word in his play *The Wedding Hymn*, dating from roughly the same period. Even so, Plutarch favors one of their forerunners, the Old Comedy poet Epicharmus, thought to have lived between c. 540–450 B.C.: “Carystius of Pergamum in his *On Dramatic Records* claims that the character referred to today as a parasite was invented by Alexis, forgetting that Epicharmus in *Hope or Wealth* introduced one at a drinking party” (6.235e). He then quotes Epicharmus’ unnamed glutton, who is said to have dedicated his talents to

[d]ining with whoever’s willing—all [the host] needs to do is issue an invitation!—as well as with whoever’s unwilling—and then there’s no need for an invitation. When I’m there, I’m on my best behavior, and I generate a lot of laughs and flatter the man who’s hosting the party; if someone wants to quarrel with him, I attack the guy and get similar grief back. Then, after I’ve eaten and drunk a lot, I leave. No slave goes with me carrying a lamp; I make my way alone, slipping and sliding in the darkness. And if I meet the night-patrol, I credit the gods with having done me a favor if all they want to do is give me a whipping. When I get home, in terrible shape, I sleep with no blankets. At first I don’t notice, so long as the unmixed wine envelops my mind. (Athenaeus 6.235f–36b)

Even though this character’s behavior perfectly fits that of the comedic parasite, later scholars have opposed the view taken by Plutarch. Arnott, who holds Alexis to have been first, stresses that in Epicharmus’ lifetime the glutton from *Hope or Wealth* would not yet have been understood as a parasite. In the fragment quoted in *The Learned Banqueters*, he is simply called “a low-priced perpetual guest” (6.235f), but it would also have been

possible to label him a *kolax*: a flatterer who pretends to be a true friend, but who is only looking for personal gain.²⁹ One typical trait of such flattering hangers-on in comedies is that they tended to be given comic nicknames illustrating their character or personality, often having to do with their hunger or willingness to debase themselves for food.³⁰ One of the remaining fragments from Alexis' *Parasitos* reads as follows: "All the young men call him Parasite by way of a nickname. He doesn't mind at all" (qtd. in Arnott, *Alexis* 542–45). Based on this fragment, Arnott argues that the play must originally have used the religious term "parasitos" as a comic sobriquet for one of its characters:

Up to the moment when Alexis produced his *Parasitos*, we may be sure, the term ... was still reserved for the priestly dignitary who received free meals in the sanctuary of his god or hero. Alexis' originality lay in decking out his parasite with a nickname that evoked for his audience a picture of priestly gormandisers, and especially doubtless those at Cynosarges in the service of Heracles, the archetypal glutton and patron of comic parasites. And we may guess that what began as a colourful nickname for one stage parasite so impressed the audience by its aptness that they began to use it themselves as the *mot juste* for the type as a whole. ("Studies" 167)

To follow this argument, one could distinguish between the comic parasite proper, who only comes into being once the religious term had been appropriated sometime during the Middle Comedy period, and proto-parasitic forerunners such as Epicharmus' "perpetual guest" and other

29 Elizabeth Ivory Tylawsky maintains that the first known instance of the word *kolax* occurs in a poem by the seventh- or sixth-century elegist Asius of Samos, quoted in Athenaeus, but that the *kolax* as a fully-fledged comedic type only came into being with Eupolis' play *Flatterers* from 421 B.C.: "Eupolis took the next step and in 421 created a type, the *kolax*, which was neither an abstraction nor an historical individual; and this may be the first time that a character labeled *kolax* stepped upon the stage" (18–19).

30 Such nicknaming was usual both prior to and after the adoption of the term "parasitos." For an abundance of examples, see Alciphron's "Letters of Parasites." The parasites sending and receiving these 42 fictional letters all go by such telling names as "Dinnerchaser," "Dish-Crazy," "Doorbolt-Pecker," "Loaf-Lust," "Savoury-Soup," "Ready-for-Cuffing," "Brothy-Breath," "Wine-Choker," "Cup-Guzzler," "Olive-cake-Hound," "Crumb-Breaker," "Stuff-Cheek," "Full-Mouth," "Lick-Platter," "Table-Licker," "Napkin-Filcher," "Breakfast-Fighter," and "Meat-Maimer."

practitioners of the art of *kolakeia* (flattery), prior to the transfer of the term from the cultic to the comedic sphere.³¹

Regardless of whether Arnott's hypothesis is correct, the consequences are clear: Over time, the parasite ended up as an interchangeable rival to the earlier comedic stock character of the *kolax*, with whom he shared most of his defining traits. While different scholarly attempts to differentiate between the two figures have been made, in most plays their traits tended to blend together, causing Elizabeth Ivory Tylawsky to conclude that "[i]n Middle and New Comedy the two terms were almost interchangeable because what the *parasitos* did was to practice *kolakeia*" (4).³² In addition, Cynthia Damon points out that the term *kolax* never really gained currency in the Roman world, meaning that "[i]n Latin, there is no easily identifiable boundary between the parasite and the flatterer" (14). For the sake of convenience, in the following, I will treat the two as synonyms.³³

Since they are primarily known through fragments, quotations in Athenaeus, as well as through later authors like Plutarch, Lucian, and Alciphron, who wrote in other genres, direct access to the parasites of Greek Middle and New Comedy is scarce.³⁴ The situation is better

31 Tylawsky offers an overview of different proto-parasites dating back to the *Odyssey*, with Odysseus himself as the parasite's oldest known ancestor. Not only did he pass himself off as a hungry beggar upon his return to Ithaca, but in some way or another his "adventures and misadventures all hinged on having to ask for help, food, or shelter of the right person at the right time and in the right way" (9). She also argues that other characters in the *Odyssey*, including the beggar Irus, the herald Medon, and the bard Phemius, embody traits typically associated with the figure later named "parasitos."

32 For an overview of various attempts to differentiate between the *kolax* and the *parasitos*, see Damon (11–14).

33 The parasite may also be situated in relation to basic types of Greek comedic characters outlined in the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, such as the *alazon* (the impostor or boaster), the *eiron* (a self-deprecating character), and the *bomolochos* (buffoon). While parasites would usually function as variants of the latter type, in the plays where they had an active role in exposing the *alazon*'s lies and imposture, they could also be *eirones*. On the *Tractatus coislinianus*, which has sometimes been held to be Aristotle's lost work on comedy, and the relationship between the *alazon*, *eiron*, *bomolochos* and the fourth basic stock character of Greek comedy, the *agrikos* (the rustic churl), see Frye (172–76).

34 On the difference between parasites in Middle and New Comedy, see Tylawsky (59–106). As noted in Chapter 1, in his "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend," Plutarch is warning his readers against falling prey to parasites. Chapter 4 returns to Lucian's quasi-Socratic dialogue "The Parasite: Parasitic an Art." On parasitical imagery in Lucian's "Symposium," and on Alciphron's "Letters of Parasites," see König (247–65).

when it comes to the Roman world, where the authors of the *comoedia palliata*—most notably Plautus and Terence—would rework Greek material into Latin, in the process transposing the figure of the parasite to a new culture; as Tylawsky puts it: “The parasite of the *palliata* was a hybrid, a Grecized character on a Roman stage” (5). Of the 21 surviving, complete comedies from Plautus, eight contain easily recognizable spongers: *The Comedy of Asses*, *The Braggart Soldier*, *The Two Menaechmuses*, *Stichus*, *The Captives*, *Curculio*, *The Two Bacchises*, and *The Persian*. The same also holds for two of Terence’s six extant plays, *The Eunuch* and *Phormio*.

Even though Roman authors often took liberties with their Greek source materials, their parasites seem to have corresponded closely to those of their Hellenic forerunners.³⁵ A brief comparison of these ten plays therefore helps pinpoint the defining traits of Greco-Roman parasites of comedy. First, in these plays, the Latin term “*parasitus*” is most often used in a descriptive, rather than in a pejorative sense; to quote Damon: “In comedy the term *parasitus* is the *vox propria*: it is used by patrons of their parasites and by parasites of themselves. The word is nearly neutral in tone in this genre” (15).³⁶ Indeed, to the parasites themselves, it is often seen as a term of honor indicating their belonging to (what they consider) a long and venerable tradition; in the words of Saturio from *The Persian*: “The ancient and venerable vocation of my ancestors I continue, follow, and cultivate with constant care. For never a one of my ancestors was there who didn’t provide for his belly as a professional parasite” (54–57). This self-identification as parasites is most often made known in introductory monologues where the more successful hangers-on will brag about their adeptness at their parasitic art, whereas the less successful complain about the difficulties of earning a dinner. As Kathleen McCarthy has argued, these monologues differ from other types of soliloquies in

35 Damon points out two important differences between the Greek and Roman parasites. The first is that the former “preyed on whoever was offering a good meal on any given day,” whereas the latter “tended to have one particular patron and to take regular potluck at his house” (29). The second is that Greek parasites often appeared uninvited, whereas “[o]btaining an invitation is crucial for the success of parasites in Roman comedy” (59).

36 As Damon notes, “the term could also be used as a reference to someone who was not ostensibly a parasite, in which case it was indeed insulting” (15). Accordingly, the line between descriptive and derogatory usage is not always clear, but when I use the term “parasite” regarding Melville’s characters, it is meant in the descriptive sense.

the comedies in several ways. First, “the parasite’s monologues are all direct addresses to the audience, with no semblance of a realistic dramatic motivation; the parasite is baldly introducing himself across the footlights” (McCarthy 62). As she sees it, the primary reason these monologues make no attempts at realism is due to the defining traits of the parasite as a stock character:

the most distinctive feature of these speeches is the way they are so emphatically focused on the description of the ‘trade’ of parasitism itself. ... no other character type is so pervasively associated with such a distinctive subject matter and expression. These monologues serve to establish the unusually fixed (and unusually explicit) spectrum of characteristics of the parasite and to establish him in a close relation to the audience. His character, rigidly defined by comic convention, has so few traits that it is reducible to a single motivation, and therefore is both more comic and more explicitly artificial than the other character types. (McCarthy 63)

While she at times goes too far in her descriptions of the parasite’s lack of complexity, McCarthy is correct that in many respects, it was a rigid character type.³⁷ Even so, it could be put to a variety of different uses in comedy. Accordingly, the importance of the different parasites in the plays varies greatly: Sometimes, they are brought in as little more than comic interludes, but in other cases, they are central to the plots, for example as catalysts who help the hero get the girl he wants. On one end of this spectrum are the two unnamed hangers-on appearing in *The Comedy of Asses* and in *The Two Bacchises*. Simply listed as “Parasitus” in the *dramatis personae*, both are clearly very minor characters. On the other end of the scale are Curculio and Phormio, who are both protagonists of sorts, and give their names to the plays in which they appear. While not even Phormio can be said to transcend his function as a stock character, he still stands out as one of the most original and positive portrayals of a

37 See for instance the following, reductive claim about Plautine parasites: “The several parasites in the corpus are so similar as almost to merge into a single character” (McCarthy 202). My own view lies somewhere between those of McCarthy and George E. Duckworth, who goes too far in the other direction: “Both the character of the parasite and the role he plays differ from comedy to comedy, so that it is unwise to refer to him as a conventional type” (266).

parasite in ancient comedy; a charming scoundrel who easily outwits his opponents to acquire a dinner invitation.

While the Roman parasites are all freeborn, rather than slaves, they are most frequently poor, lacking a secure place in society as well as family ties of their own.³⁸ They are almost always portrayed as excessively hungry, driven into dependence upon those more powerful than themselves by the demands of their stomachs; as Damon argues: “To reveal the first of the parasite’s features, his dependency on his patron for food, the comic poets made him hungry, indeed insatiable” (25). Time and again, the parasites in these plays clearly express this overriding interest of theirs; as Gelasimus puts it in his opening lines in *Stichus*: “I suspect that Hunger was my mother: from the time that I was born I’ve never been full” (Plautus 155–56). Moreover, Plautus and Terence often follow the Greek tradition of giving their parasites comic nicknames having to do with their hunger or their willingness to entertain others for food. Gelasimus, which means “funny,” has earned this name because poverty has taught him that being amusing is the best way to acquire a dinner (Plautus, *Stichus* 173–78), whereas Peniculus in *The Two Menaechmuses* explains his own sobriquet as follows: “The youngsters have given me the name ‘Peniculus, the Brush’ because ... when I eat I wipe the table clean” (Plautus 77–78). Other telling examples in Plautus and Terence include Artotrogus (“Crust-muncher”), Curculio (“Weevil”), and Gnatho (“The Jaw”), from *The Braggart Soldier*, *Curculio*, and *The Eunuch*, respectively.

Damon stresses two different sorts of tactics parasites use to attach themselves to their superiors: *flattery* and *services*. Many are master flatterers who heap mountains of praise upon their hosts, labeling them *rex* (king) or even comparing them to gods, as does Artotrogus when he insincerely tells his patron, the boastful and cowardly soldier Pyrgopolinices, that “Mars wouldn’t dare to call himself such a warrior or compare his exploits to yours” (Plautus, *Braggart* 11–12). Services can be of different types, ranging from keeping others amused with jokes and stories, to delivering letters or presents, acting as a go-between (especially

38 The single known exception in Roman comedy is Saturio in *The Persian*, who “alone of literary parasites is endowed with the rudiments of a family, a daughter” (Damon 51).

in romantic affairs), going to the forum or doing the shopping for his patron, defending his honor or fighting for him, or appearing on his behalf in court. No matter what services are offered, though, in all cases they seem to have primarily been remunerated in food.

Wealthy hosts capable of providing their parasites with fine dining can be found in several of the plays, including *The Comedy of Asses*, *Curculio*, *The Two Menaechmuses*, and *The Captives*. Others must settle for less, as is the case with Saturio, whose patron is only a rich man's slave. Some hosts treat their parasites well; others, knowing that they will endure anything to fill their stomachs, abuse or make fun of them. An excellent example here is the unfortunate Gelasimus, who not only fails to acquire a dinner invitation, but is also ridiculed and mistreated by everybody he encounters. In Damon's words, "he is more thoroughly abused than any other Roman parasite" (65).³⁹

There is also a marked difference when it comes to the willingness to put up with such mistreatment. Whereas Gelasimus is all too willing to abase himself and Saturio is even ready to sell his daughter into prostitution to avoid being cut off from his dinners, Peniculus is so angry when he thinks his patron has tricked him out of a promised meal, that he exposes his infidelities to his wife: "All those insults will fall back unto you. I'll make sure that you haven't eaten that lunch without punishment" (Plautus, *Menaechmuses* 520–22). Even though few other parasites are willing to actively alienate their patrons in this manner, this does not mean that they are necessarily to be trusted, as their advice and friendship is informed by the desire to fill their own bellies, rather than a sincere concern for the well-being of their hosts. Still, some parasites appear to truly hold their patrons in high esteem, as in *The Captives*, where Ergasilus' respect for the old Athenian Hegio and his son, Philipolemus,

39 However, some of Gelasimus' Greek ancestors are much worse off. The parasites in Alciphron's letters are repeatedly beaten (3.3, 3.18), force-fed (3.4), whipped and imprisoned (3.7), and drenched in sticky broth (3.25). Some have cups smashed in their faces (3.9) or various substances, including pitch and blood, poured over their heads (3.12), and two of the letter-writers barely avoid having kettles of boiling water poured over them (3.2 and 3.32). On these abuses, see König (256–58). Consequently, being a parasite was not the easiest line of work; as Hectodictes ("Hour-of-Six-Chaser") puts it to Mandalocolaptes ("Doorbolt-Pecker"): "we are fed on deceptive hopes, and end by getting more insults than pleasures" (Alciphron 3.2.3).

seems sincere. Others, though, take every opportunity to ridicule those who feed them. This is especially the case for the ones that are teamed up with the stock character of the *miles gloriosus*, the braggart soldier. In *The Eunuch*, Gnatho switches between flattering the vain and cowardly Thraso to his face, and making fun of him behind his back, as does Artotrogus, who pretends to be the faithful companion of Pyrgopolinices in *The Braggart Soldier*.⁴⁰

These examples begin to make clear the many possibilities inherent in the relationship between the parasite and his patron, possibilities comic poets could experiment with as part of their quest to make their audiences laugh. Depending on what the plays were aiming for, parasites could be charming or wicked; clever or foolish; full and content or starving and desperate; useful help for their patrons or blocking characters trying to ridicule or even hinder them, as in the case of Peniculus; intruders at the dinner table or welcome guests.⁴¹ As Damon puts it:

The relative prominence of the parasite's basic traits could be adjusted to suit various themes. Emphasize the importance of food, as Plautus does in [*The Persian*] ... and you have a memorable demonstration of a free man's servility. Increase the parasite's cleverness vis-à-vis his benefactor, and you get the flatterer who takes advantage of a fool; that is, you get someone like Artotrogus or Gnatho. Make him a helpless dependent like Ergasilus, however, and you reveal a generous patron in a Hegio. (99–100)

Before moving on to the next important phase of the parasite's career, a few remarks must be made about a social institution that was central to the birth of the comedic figure of the sponger in the first place, namely patronage (*clientela*). Following the definition suggested by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, it may be understood as

40 For a third version of the pairing of the parasite and the *miles*, see the interaction between the title character and the soldier Therapontigonus Platagidorus in *Curculio*.

41 Parasites are often understood as *unwanted* guests, but, as Tim Whitmarsh has argued, the “tradition of the welcome parasite is an important one, stretching from Philippus in Xenophon's *Symposium* (who turns up uninvited, but amuses all with his jokes) down to the Gnathon in Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* (who is clearly in the favour of his master)” (311).

a social relationship which is essentially (i) reciprocal, involving exchanges of services over time between two parties, (ii) personal as opposed to e.g. commercial, and (iii) asymmetrical, i.e. between parties of different status. Most would accept a fourth element ..., namely that it is voluntary, not legally enforceable. (3)⁴²

As Wallace-Hadrill and other scholars have shown, this institution often had very real and tangible effects on the ordering of Roman society, helping to ensure relative stability through binding the poorer and the richer together through mutual responsibilities, where the *cliens* (client) would typically offer various services in return for the meals and the protection given by his patron. The transactions involved in relationships of patronage were remarkably similar to the ones in comedy between the parasite and his host. Damon therefore claims that to the Romans, the figure of the parasite became a rhetorical tool for attacking this system when it did not work as intended, as in those cases where either of the parts involved in the patron-client relationship did not—or were perceived not to—live up to their end of the bargain or tried to get more out of it than was deemed to be fair. Whenever clients became successful due to the support of their patrons, they were always at risk of the accusation of being flattering parasites. To Damon, the figure therefore

served Roman authors well when they wanted to evoke the frustration, envy, and outrage that could arise from frictions due to the functioning of patronage. If the parasite is always a mask and if the fit between the mask and its wearer lies in the eyes of the beholder, that the mask seemed to fit people in so many different situations ... indicates how well it satisfied those who wanted to complain about or criticize the system. (9)

In other words, there is always a question of *perspective* involved whenever people are accused of parasite-like behavior. This becomes especially obvious in the genre of satire, where authors such as Horace, Martial, and Juvenal all used the figure of the parasite as a rhetorical tool for satirizing

42 Wallace-Hadrill's definition combines the work of Richard P. Saller, and Peter Garnsey and Greg Wolf. For points i-iii, see Saller (1); for iv, see Garnsey and Wolf (154).

contemporaries and denouncing rivals.⁴³ Since authors prior to the birth of the literary marketplace typically had to rely on the favors of patrons if they were to be able to dedicate themselves to writing—Horace himself a dependent on the financial support of Maecenas, for example—this was nevertheless a double-edged sword that could easily be turned against the accusers.⁴⁴ Tim Whitmarsh has for instance argued that in *The Learned Banqueters*, “the denial of *kolakeia* [flattery or parasitic behavior], or the attribution of it to another, may well be a strategy of self-authorization by one who is himself vulnerable to the charge” (308). It is thus important to bear in mind that even from very early on, the parasite did not only come to inhabit different literary genres—dramatic as well as non-dramatic—but it also took on two related, yet separate identities: one as a comedic figure meant to make audiences laugh, the other as a rhetorical tool meant to degrade others.

The Elizabethan Literary Parasite

While neither Plautus nor Terence was ever totally forgotten, after the death of the latter in 159 B.C., the genre they had adapted from their Greek sources—and with it, the stock character of the parasite—lost much of its momentum, lying largely dormant until the Renaissance.⁴⁵ Nicholas of Cusa’s discovery of twelve lost Plautine plays in 1428 ushered in a revival for both of the comic poets, whose fame increased as their work was staged anew from the last quarter of the fifteenth century and onwards.⁴⁶

43 See Damon (105–91).

44 For analyses of the forms literary patronage took during different historical epochs, see Gold, Holzknacht, and Griffin. For a typology of five different forms of literary and artistic patronage throughout the ages, see Williams.

45 For a discussion of the respective afterlives of Plautus and Terence during the Middle Ages, see Segal (255–58). A genre that did not forget the parasite was that of religious writings, where the figure served as a useful trope both to warn readers against sinful behavior and to criticize religious rivals for failing to live up to biblical standards, see Welborn, Blowers (“Pity”; “St. John”), and König (323–51).

46 On the Renaissance rediscovery of Plautus and Terence, see Duckworth (396–433). The two playwrights often appealed to different audiences. The former was long held to be more vulgar, and the latter more refined. On the Renaissance debates concerning the respective qualities of the two, see Hardin. For an assessment of their popularity among the Romans that challenges the common view that Plautus was much more successful than Terence, see H. N. Parker.

This renewed popularity meant that they came to serve as inspirations to contemporary authors, who often borrowed freely from them.

That this, in turn, also entailed a new dawn for the figure of the parasite, is evident if we turn to what is generally held to be the first regular comedy written in English, Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister*. While potentially written several years earlier, the play was most likely first performed in 1553 or 1554, and then published in 1567, well after the death of its author.⁴⁷ In the prologue, Udall explicitly mentions Plautus and Terence as his main sources of inspiration, and the play functions as a modernized version of the relationship—already familiar from *The Braggart Soldier* and *The Eunuch*—between the ridiculous bigmouth and the scheming parasite who pretends to be his friend. In Udall's version, the title character is the braggart, whereas his false friend is called Mathew Merygreeke. That the latter is modeled on the parasite is obvious from his comic introductory monologue in Act I. As many a sponger before him, here he raises the question of who is going to be supplying his dinner: "wisdom would that I did myself bethink/ Where to be provided this day of meat and drink" (1.1.11–12). However, he is in no danger of starvation, bragging about the many hosts at his disposal, including "Lewis Loytrer," "Watkin Waster," "Davy Diceplayer" and others. This abundance of opportunities for free meals notwithstanding, the patron who offers him the most pleasure is Ralph Roister Doister, "[f]or, truly, of all men he is my chief banker/ Both for meat and money, and my chief shoot-anchor" (1.1.27–28). In fact, so great is Merygreeke's delight in getting Ralph to make a fool of himself that he actually makes the—for a parasite unheard of—suggestion that if need be, he would even abstain from dinner in order to have his fun: "such sport I have with him as I would not lese,/ Though I should be bound to live with bread and cheese" (1.1.53–54).

47 On *Ralph Roister Doister* as candidate for the first proper English comedy, see Duckworth (408–10), and Thorndike (58). On the dating of the play, see Clarence G. Child's introduction in Udall (42). Earlier English parasites exist in other genres. For example, Book 1 of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) contains an anecdote known as "A Merry Dialogue between a Friar and a Hanger-On," but here the word "parasite" is never used, even though More's hanger-on is obviously modeled on the classical Greco-Roman figure, see Perlette. According to the *OED*, the first documented use of the word parasite in English is from Richard Taverner's 1539 translation of Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Proverbs or Adages*, where it is mentioned that "[i]t is the fascion of a flatterer and parasyte to lyue of an other mans trencher" ("parasite").

Here a new tendency can be discerned, where parasitical characters turn out to be somewhat less concerned with food than their Greco-Roman forefathers. Instead, they may focus on fun, as does Merygreeke, or, more often—and especially in genres other than comedy—on acquiring money and power through their relationship with their hosts.⁴⁸

This indebtedness to Plautus and Terence—in general, as well as specifically regarding the parasite—is not only felt in Udall, but in a number of the dramatic works of sixteenth-century England. Particularly during the reign of Elizabeth I, one finds an abundance of literary hangers-on of all types. As E. P. Vandiver has argued, these can be grouped in two different classes. The one Merygreeke belongs to is the one most closely resembling the classical sources: the jolly, lighthearted and amusing parasite who entertains others in return for food. Vandiver terms this the “un-moral Italian parasite” (412), a creature commonly influenced by the spongers of Italian *commedia erudita* and *commedia dell’arte*, as well as by the comic figure of the Vice, often associated with medieval morality plays.⁴⁹ Even though there are several examples of this kind of hanger-on in Elizabethan comedies, such as Pasyphilo in George Gascoigne’s *The Supposes* (c. 1566) and Appetitus in Thomas Tomkis’ *Lingua* (1607), they were less common than those belonging to the other class, namely “the immoral parasite of the German-Dutch school drama” (Vandiver 412–13). The authors of the school drama—or “Christian Terence,” as it was also known—were often clergymen and teachers associated with the Reformation.⁵⁰ Even though these authors were inspired by the Greco-Roman sources, they often combined biblical and allegorical characters with the classical ones to improve upon the latter’s morals and to bring them more in line with their own religious beliefs. As opposed to the amusing spongers of the Italian tradition, when parasites of the second class appeared, it was usually in the form of wicked counselors bringing

48 In some cases, the focus on food disappears completely, as in the case of scheming but ignorant Selincour in Friedrich Schiller’s comedy *The Parasite, or the Art to Make One’s Fortune* (1803). Only out to further his own career, he makes absolutely no references to hunger or food.

49 On the relationship between the parasite and the Vice, see Withington. For a different explanation of the origin of the Vice, see Mares.

50 On “Christian Terence,” see Herrick.

destruction to others through their intrigues at court.⁵¹ And whereas Plautine and Terentian parasites tended to be rewarded with dinner (if they were lucky) or, at worst, a good beating (if they were not), those inspired by the “Christian Terence” school were usually made to pay dearly for their evil ways; in Vandiver’s words:

The didactic impulse from the morality plays, the “Christian Terence” school drama, and the English inclination to look with disfavor upon parasites were among the influences that caused the so-called parasite of Elizabethan drama to be regarded as an opprobrious character and as one who should be punished. (416)

As opposed to the amusing Italian parasites, these Germanic ones were better suited for more serious genres like tragedy or tragicomedy than they were for comedy. Hence, parasites were to make their first of many appearances in the former genre in Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville’s *Gorboduc* (1561), where the evil counselors Hermon and Tyndar—both of whom are listed as parasites in the *dramatis personae*—set the two sons of the British king Gorboduc against each other, leading in the end to death, insurrection, and civil war throughout the realm. As Vandiver argues, similar appearances by scheming court parasites are found in several tragedies based upon historical materials. Examples include Gaveston and Spencer in Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1593), Sir John Bushy and Sir Henry Greene in Shakespeare’s *King Richard II* (c. 1595–1596), and the title character of Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus His Fall* (1603). During this period the flattering parasite had thus gone from being perceived as a humorous, minor nuisance to a potentially acute danger to political stability.⁵²

There are several reasons Jonson and Shakespeare are important to the history of the parasite. The former has created several flattering spongers, three of them explicitly listed as parasites in the plays’ *dramatis personae*:

51 Whereas this second class of parasites does not make any significant appearances in the Roman comedies, several potential forerunners for the Elizabethan parasite as evil advisor are mentioned in Democritus’ monologue in *The Learned Banqueters* (6.248c–62a).

52 That scheming or incompetent counselor-parasites were perceived as a serious problem in the world of politics can be seen from Chapter 23 of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1532), “How Flatterers Should be Avoided.”

Mosca in *Volpone, or The Fox* (1606), Fly in *The New Inn, or The Light Heart* (1629), and Mistress Polish in *The Magnetic Lady, or Humours Reconciled* (1632). In addition to these and Sejanus, other parasitical characters include Bobadill in *Every Man in His Humour* (1598/1616),⁵³ Carlo Buffone and Shift in *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), and Tucca in *Poetaster, or His Arraignment* (1601). Not counting Mistress Polish—who is something as rare as a “she-Parasite” with a female patron—two of these deserve further mention.

First, the quick-witted deceiver Mosca is one of the most remarkable comedic parasites of the age. In many respects, he belongs to the more lighthearted and amusing class of literary spongers, a comic hanger-on helping repeatedly foil the plans of Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, the three “birds of prey” (*Volpone* 1.2.89) who aspire to inherit the fortune of Mosca’s sly patron, Volpone. Still, his ambitions and his utter shrewdness—some would say evil—far exceed those of his Greco-Roman forefathers, and when the chance occurs, he gladly fools Volpone, too, almost getting away with all his riches. However, in the end Mosca’s plans fail and he is harshly punished by the Venetian court: “our sentence is, first thou be whipped;/ Then live perpetual prisoner in our galleys” (Jonson, *Volpone* 5.12.113–14); a punishment of the kind usually reserved for the parasites of “Christian Terence.” Taken together, these aspects all play an important part in the unsettling effect of the play, which critics have often struggled to properly categorize; to quote Northrop Frye: “*Volpone* is exceptional in being a kind of comic imitation of a tragedy” (165).⁵⁴

Jonson’s portrayal of Mosca thereby serves as an example of how authors could combine traits from the two different traditions of parasites for new effects. Moreover, he also exemplifies how the figure needs no longer be particularly concerned with food, at least in the literal sense. True, in his monologue in Act 3 where he brags about his talents as a parasite, he does refer to the traditional kind of sponger,

53 In the 1598 quarto version, his name was Bobadilla, but this had been changed to Bobadill in the 1616 folio version of the play.

54 In this regard, see Partridge (70–71).

those that have your bare town-art,
 To know who's fit to feed 'em; have no house,
 No family, no care, and therefore mould
 Tales for men's ears, to bait that sense, or get
 Kitchen-invention, and some stale receipts
 To please the belly and the groin. (*Volpone* 3.1.14–19)

As Mosca forcefully stresses, the base tricks these creatures use to feed are far beneath his dignity. Contrary to them, he considers himself a

fine, elegant rascal, that can rise
 And stoop, almost together, like an arrow,
 Shoot through the air as nimbly as a star,
 Turn short, as doth a swallow, and be here,
 And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;
 Present to any humour, all occasion
 And change a visor swifter than a thought.
 This is the creature had the art born with him;
 Toils not to learn it, but doth practise it
 Out of most excellent nature: and such sparks
 Are the true parasites, others but their zanies. (Jonson, *Volpone* 3.1.23–33)

For Mosca, nothing but the final food is good enough, and—as Edward P. Partridge has pointed out—“the final food is man” (107).

No less important than Mosca is the title character of *Sejanus His Fall*. In his portrayal of the rise and fall of the ruthless Sejanus, Jonson created a character who undoubtedly embodies many of the traits typically associated with parasites, and who is at one point also labeled Emperor Tiberius’ “private parasite” by his enemies (1.386). Coming from a humble background, he attaches himself to the emperor through cunning and flattery. Helping the latter brutally get rid of his rivals, he makes himself invaluable to Tiberius, who terms him the “great aid of Rome,/ Associate of our labours, our chief helper” (Jonson, *Sejanus* 1.528–29). In the end becoming no less influential than his mighty patron, he almost succeeds in outmaneuvering him, too, only to be exposed by Tiberius’ agent, Macro, summarily condemned as a traitor and executed. His parasitic

traits notwithstanding, Sejanus clearly transcends the parasite as a type or stock character; in Vandiver's words:

This material the dramatist enlarged upon and presented in such a forceful and original manner that he made Sejanus the most towering and impressive historical parasite in Elizabethan tragedy. The parasitical evil counselor ... here breaks all bounds of the stock figure and looms up as an individual, a dramatic creation which one almost fears to call a parasite. (420)

Thus, here a great author has turned a stock character into something as rare as what, following the narrator's discussion in Chapter 44 of *The Confidence-Man*, might perhaps be termed a truly "original" literary creation: "As for original characters in fiction, a grateful reader will, on meeting with one, keep the anniversary of that day" (*CM* 238).⁵⁵

Shakespeare, too, has created two truly original characters with parasitic traits—one of them more of the merry Italian kind, the other wholly Teutonic. Lesser parasite-like characters also appear in several of his comedies as well as his tragedies, and, just like Jonson, he draws upon both the comic and the evil type and is also capable of mixing them in original ways.⁵⁶ In regard to the comedies, Vandiver notes as follows: "Surveying all the Shakespearean parasites, it is evident that, although none of this dramatist's creations exactly resembles the Plautine or Terentian parasite, approximations to the type occur in Parolles and Falstaff especially and to a less extent in Sir Toby Belch" (422–23).⁵⁷

Sir Toby's relationship to the rich but foolish Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night* (c. 1601) resembles the pairings of Gnatho and Thraso, Artotrogus and Pyrgopolinices, or Mathew Merygreeke and Ralph. That

55 The narrator's discussion of originality in *Confidence-Man* will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 6.

56 In Chapter 5 and 6, we will encounter the hatred of parasites expressed by the titular character of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (c. 1604–1607). In the one Shakespearean play where one would expect to find a parasite, there is none, though. This is *The Comedy of Errors* (c. 1594), which takes from Plautus' *The Two Menaechmuses* most of its key elements, including the identical twins mistaken for each other, yet omits its angry parasite, Peniculus.

57 Vandiver fails to mention the trickster Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1609–1610), who is brought up during the discussion between Frank Goodman and Charlie Noble in *The Confidence-Man*. As will be argued in Chapter 6, he, too, embodies clearly recognizable parasitic traits.

is, he is yet another merry and gluttonous jester who happily drains his patron's resources, flattering him one moment, having fun at his expense the next; in Robert S. Miola's words, he is "an English version of the classical *parasitus*, a great gorging of food and drink at others' expense" (42). The roles of Parolles and Sir John Falstaff, on the other hand, depart from this relationship: The former appears in *All's Well That Ends Well* (c. 1602–1605); the latter is the unruly companion of Prince Hal in *King Henry IV, Part 1* (c. 1597–1598) and *Part 2* (c. 1598–1600), as well as the cheerful butt of many a joke in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c. 1597–1599). In both characters the figures of the parasite and the braggart soldier came to be merged, something that is also the case for Jonson's Bobadill, and, to a certain degree, Don Adriano de Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost* (c. 1594–1595).⁵⁸

Of these comedic Shakespearean spongers, the fat and jolly Falstaff is by far the most significant literary creation. As John W. Draper has pointed out, in the true spirit of his Greco-Roman forefathers, he "is more, and more continuously, interested in food than any other character in Shakespeare" ("Falstaff" 393). When it comes to feeding, this cowardly soldier is a veritable tornado that repeatedly lays waste to his various patrons' larders without regret, living off anybody he can through a combination of flattery, jests, good cheer, and playing the buffoon. He is filled with an infectious comic energy that breaks down social hierarchies, loves playing tricks on others, but is himself also repeatedly tricked; in Draper's words:

Falstaff, indeed, is no respecter of his social inferiors, his equals, or his betters: he seems to respect only those who may provide his dinner and only when they do it. He is like the Roman parasite not only in being at once a wit and the butt of wit, but also in combining flattery and fawning with impudence and brag. ("Falstaff" 396–97)

58 On Parolles as a combination of parasite and braggart soldier, see Miola (127–29). When Vandiver claims that "[t]hese two stock figures, parasite and *miles gloriosus*, [were] entirely distinct in Latin comedy" (421), he overlooks that there was a touch of the braggart in many classical parasites, too, though not to the same extent as in the boasting spongers of Elizabethan comedy.

Indeed, Shakespeare's "parasite extraordinary plenipotentiary" (Draper, "Falstaff" 392)—whom Melville, as previously noted, commemorated in the late poem "Falstaff's Lament over Prince Hal Become Henry V"—is the only true rival to Mosca as the Elizabethan comic parasite *par excellence*.

Similarly, with the creation of "honest" Iago in *Othello* (c. 1603–1604), Shakespeare also came to rival Jonson's Sejanus as the most memorable parasite-like character in tragedy. Obviously, his scheming master villain is a very different creature from the classical Greek and Roman hangers-on, showing little or no interest in food, as well as far exceeding his predecessors in complexity. Even so, he still embodies several of the most usual traits of the parasite; in Vandiver's words: "Perhaps it is not too bold to suggest that Shakespeare was partly influenced by the preceding English dramatic parasites in the creation of Iago, who at first appears to be a villain of the Machiavellian type" (421).⁵⁹ This can both be seen in his relationship with Othello, whose confidence he gains in order to ceaselessly pursue his downfall, but most explicitly in his dealings with the rich Venetian gentleman Roderigo, whom Iago not only manipulates through a combination of flattery and cunning, but whose resources he is also steadily draining.⁶⁰ This becomes especially clear at the end of Act I, where he convinces the heart-broken Roderigo, who has just learned that Othello has wedded Desdemona, to sell his lands in order to finance their supposedly joint revenge against the Moor. After Roderigo departs, Iago lets it be known what he really thinks of his companion, whom he will later label "this poor trash of Venice, whom I trash/ For his quick hunting" (2.1.300–1), before finally murdering him in cold blood in Act V: "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse:/ For I mine own gained knowledge should

59 For others who have discussed Iago's possible parasitic traits, see Draper ("Poor Trash" 512–13), Withington (747–48), and Gilchrist. Even though it makes no reference of the figure of the parasite, see also the discussion of Iago as a flatterer and false friend in Evans, where it is argued that Shakespeare was likely influenced by Plutarch's aforementioned "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend," either directly or through Sir Thomas Elyot's "The Election of Friends and the Diversity of Flatterers" from *The Book of the Governor* (1531).

60 In their introduction to *Twelfth Night*, J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik claim that the relationship between the aforementioned parasite and host, Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, "are models for the more lethal relationship between Iago and Roderigo in *Othello*" (1191).

profane/ If I would time expend with such a snipe/ But for my sport and profit” (1.2.381–84).

Scholars have also noted the many similarities between Iago and Mosca, both of whom are from Venice, and—more importantly—both of whom are master storytellers who beguile others through their complicated narratives. Stephen Greenblatt for example notes that “[l]ike Jonson’s Mosca, Iago is fully aware of himself as an improviser and revels in his ability to manipulate his victims, to lead them by the nose like asses, to possess their labor without their ever being capable of grasping the relation in which they are enmeshed” (233). In addition, the similarities between Mosca’s soliloquy and Iago’s distinction between different forms of knavery at the beginning of Act I may serve as an indication that in the creation of the former, Jonson was partly inspired by Shakespeare’s villain. As will be remembered, in his monologue, Mosca distinguishes between base parasites that flatter for food, and “true parasites,” such as himself. Similarly, in his dialogue with Roderigo, Iago distinguishes between base and elevated forms of knavery. The former type he defines as follows: “You shall mark/ Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave/ That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,/ Wears out his time much like his master’s ass,/ For naught but provender” (*Othello* 1.1.43–47). This type of knave, who flatters for “naught but provender,” obviously resembles the type of parasite whom Mosca looks down upon. Just like him, Iago too holds himself to much loftier ideals:

Whip me such honest knaves! Others there are
Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
Do well thrive by them, and, when they have lined their coats,
Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul
And such a one do I profess myself. (Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.1.48–54)

That Jonson’s great comic parasite clearly echoes Shakespeare’s villain serves as an additional indication that the latter, too, has much of the parasite in him. However, even more than does Mosca, Sejanus, and Falstaff, as a character Iago transcends all kinds of literary types and stock characters, ending up as so much more than the different parts and influences

that went into his making; as Vandiver puts it: “In Shakespeare’s great creations the stock character disappears, becoming an indissoluble part of the new figure that escapes the bounds of rigid classification” (427).

Before leaving the Elizabethan parasite, a few remarks must be made about the two supposedly parasitic counsellors in Shakespeare’s *King Richard II*, Bushy and Greene.⁶¹ Not only do they have little stage-time and few memorable lines, but they also end up being summarily executed at the beginning of act III by Richard’s rival, Henry Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV. Even though they are thus obviously minor characters, they are frequently referred to by other characters, either by name or indirectly. It is obviously them the Earl of Northumberland has in mind when he claims that “[t]he king is not himself, but basely led/ By flatterers” (2.1.241–42). Bolingbroke explicitly refers to them as “[t]he caterpillars of the commonwealth,/ Which I have sworn to weed and pluck away” (2.3.165–66), whereas, after the execution, Richard’s gardener labels them as “weeds” that have been “pluck’d up root and all by Bolingbroke” (3.4.50, 52). To Vandiver, the two are typical examples of the evil, Teutonic parasitic counselors whose scheming leads to the king’s downfall. As he puts it, their influence “results in their death as well as the king’s. They create civil discord and domestic trouble, estranging Richard from his wife . . . ; moreover, Bushy and Green[e] are rewarded with the possessions of the men they have wrongly injured” (420).

This view corresponds well with the opinion concerning the lives of the real Sir John Bussy and Sir Henry Green given in many of the historical writings about the reign of Richard II available to Shakespeare. Examples include Edward Hall’s *The Union of the Two Noble & Illustre Families of Lancastre & Yorke* (1548), Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587), and Samuel Daniel’s *The Civil Wars* (1595). All of these explain the king’s unpopularity and his fall from grace as being in large part occasioned by his reliance, in Hall’s words, on the influence of “his pasesites [sic] and flattering foloers [sic]” (qtd. in Gaudet 142). Even though the historical evidence seems to be on his side, there

61 The historical sources for the two characters were King Richard II’s advisors, Sir John Bussy (also known as Bushy) and Sir Henry Green. While some editions of the play and some scholars, including Vandiver, spell the latter’s name in this manner, I have followed *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* in calling him Greene.

is nonetheless a fundamental problem with Vandiver's claim. As Paul Gaudet has argued, Shakespeare's portrayal of Bushy and Greene does not actually present them as given to flattery, as offering bad advice, or as having much influence over the willful king at all; in his words: "Shakespeare has not dramatized their flattery as a calculated attempt to create personal advantage by misleading a king; their behavior is rather a tacit acceptance of Richard's will, a form of passive encouragement" (147). For example, the king alone is responsible for banishing Bolingbroke and, upon the death of the latter's father, John of Gaunt, for confiscating the family's property, thereby setting in motion the events that will lead to his own downfall.

This helps us see the many accusations against Bushy and Greene for what they truly are: In labeling the two as parasitical "weeds" and "caterpillars" that have led the king astray and which must be removed for the health of the commonwealth, Richard's rivals have acquired a powerful rhetorical weapon capable of legitimizing their military intervention. Under cover of helping the king get rid of these damaging "foreign bodies," Bolingbroke is easily able to pursue his real goal, forcing Richard to step down so that he can capture the crown for himself.⁶² In accepting Bushy and Greene's status as parasites as a given, Vandiver seems to be unaware that he is simply reiterating as an objective fact something Shakespeare's play strongly indicates is ruthless political propaganda; to quote Gaudet: "The principal case against Bushy, ... and Greene is in the form of assertion and accusation. These are essentially partisan censures that can be taken as true only if we are willing to disregard the political motives in which they originate and only if we accept allegation as proof" (145).

The rhetorical strategies here indicated by Gaudet may be contrasted with those found in *Sejanus His Fall*. In both plays, the figure of the parasite is actively used to undermine the authority of political opponents, but Shakespeare withholds all evidence whether Bushy and Greene deserve the label given them. Jonson, on the other hand, shows that the jealousy

62 In fact, in the play, it is not Bushy and Greene, but Bolingbroke's followers that come across as fawning flatterers. The Earl of Northumberland, in particular, offers his patron the type of praise that could easily have been expressed by any Plautine parasite, for instance telling Bolingbroke that "your fair discourse hath been as sugar,/ Making the hard way sweet and delectable" (Shakespeare, *Richard II* 2.3.6-7).

and anger of Sejanus' aristocratic enemies plays an important part in their invectives; his most vocal critic, Arruntius, condescendingly claiming that he has been "raised from excrement to side the gods" (4.406). Moreover, Jonson's deceitful courtier is clearly guilty of much of what he is accused of, but this does not make his opponents model citizens, even though they do their best to appear as such. Ironically, Sejanus, too, at one point indirectly invokes the figure of the parasite against them. Trying to convince Tiberius to act against these noblemen, he offers the following depiction of their frequent attendance at the feasts of Agrippina, the widow of Germanicus, the popular general in whose death in 19 AD the emperor was suspected of being involved. Playing upon his patron's fears, Sejanus strongly indicates that these feasts are little more than excuses for plotting against Tiberius and in favor of Agrippina's sons:

Days and nights

She spends in banquets and ambitious feasts
 For the nobility, where Caius Silius,
 Titius Sabinus, old Arruntius,
 Asinius Gallus, Furnius, Regulus,
 And others of that discontented list
 Are the prime guests. There, and to these, she tells
 Whose niece she was, whose daughter, and whose wife;
 And then must they compare her with Augusta,
 Ay, and prefer her too, commend her form,
 Extol her fruitfulness; at which a show'r
 Falls for the memory of Germanicus,
 Which they blow over straight with windy praise
 And puffing hopes of her aspiring sons. (2.216–29)

While this accusation should not be taken at face value, the play shows that "windy praise" indeed is *everywhere* in Imperial Rome, and not solely the domain of Sejanus. In fact, even those characters in the play claiming to abhor such strategies turn out to be all too willing to apply them. For instance, even though Arruntius seemingly takes the high road when he states that "[o]f all wild beast, preserve me from a tyrant;/ And of all tame, a flatterer!" (1.437–38), he has no qualms about flattering Tiberius'

son, Drusus. And the cunning Macro, too, shows his capacity for flattery when he tricks Sejanus, who, echoing Iago's frequently repeated epithet in *Othello*, addresses him as "[h]onest, and worthy Macro" (5.380). How honest and worthy he really is can be seen after Sejanus has been beheaded and literally torn to pieces by the crowd, when Macro hands over his fallen adversary's son and daughter to their brutal end:

because our laws
 Admit no virgin immature to die,
 The wittily and strangely cruel Macro
 Delivered her to be deflow'ed and spoiled
 By the rude lust of the licentious hangman,
 Then to be strangled with her harmless brother. (5.831–36)

Hence, trading in Sejanus for Macro hardly seems an ethical improvement for a society where political flattery is everywhere, and where the senate is ready to redirect its allegiance at a second's notice; in the words of Arruntius: "I prophesy, out of this Senate's flattery,/ That this new fellow, Macro, will become/ A greater prodigy in Rome than he/ That now is fall'n" (Jonson, *Sejanus* 5.732–35). The play thus illustrates Michel Serres' claim that "history has never lacked for political parasites. History is full of them, or maybe is made solely of them" (*Parasite* 5).⁶³

In their different ways, *King Richard II* and *Sejanus His Fall* can therefore both help clarify a point I made about parasites in Roman satire: One should never forget the question of the speaker's perspective when it comes to accusations of parasitic behavior leveled against others. In addition to their inventive use of parasitic traits for a variety of purposes, both in their comedies and tragedies, Shakespeare and Jonson have offered important examples of how literature may explore the uses of the parasite as a rhetorical tool for political purposes.

63 The political world depicted in *Sejanus His Fall* also brings to mind the following quip, no less fitting for being etymologically incorrect: "The word 'politics' is derived from the word 'poly' meaning 'many,' and the word 'ticks' meaning 'blood sucking parasites'" (origin unknown, but sometimes ascribed to Larry Hardiman).

Charles Dickens and the Pathologization of the Parasite

From Elizabethan England, it is time to move ahead to September 20, 1845, when a band of merry amateurs in London gave the first of several performances of Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*. Directing the play, as well as filling the role of the vain, boastful, cowardly, and parasitic Captain Bobadill, was none other than Charles Dickens, whose works Melville was well acquainted with.⁶⁴ Even though the punishment Bobadill receives at the end of the folio version of the play staged by Dickens is far lighter than the one he received in the original quarto version, for a parasite it would perhaps have been even more bitter. Whereas everybody else is either invited to the lavish wedding feast of Edward Knowell and Bridget, or at least offered food, Justice Clement tells Bobadill and Matthew—the false soldier and the false poet—that “while we are at supper, you two shall penitently fast it out in my court without; and, if you will, you may pray there that we may be so merry within as to forgive or forget you when we come out” (Jonson, *Every Man*, folio version, 5.5.42–44).⁶⁵

That Dickens was familiar with the figure of the parasite is also obvious from his writings, which contain several explicitly parasitic characters. This is most clearly the case in what H. M. Daleski has termed Dickens' “first major attempt to come to grips with the society in which he lived” (186): *Bleak House* (1852–1853). In fact, along with *The Confidence-Man*, it is one of the novels of the nineteenth century most overrun with spongers. Since the portrayals of the various parasitic characters in these two works are very different, having a closer look at *Bleak House* is useful both as a contrast to Melville, and because it helps explain a new stage of the evolution of the literary parasite. On the one hand, Dickens shows how the figure may come to function in the novel, as opposed to drama.⁶⁶

64 On Dickens' staging of *Every Man in His Humour*, see Tambling. On Melville and Dickens, see Jaffé, Arac (32–57), and Weisbuch (36–54).

65 For Bobadilla's original punishment, see the quarto version of *Every Man in His Humour* (Jonson 5.3.301–8).

66 This is not to say that Dickens is the first novelist to make use of the figure of the parasite: Regine May has for example argued that Lucius, the protagonist of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* (c. late second century AD), is endowed with parasitic traits (143–81).

On the other, and more importantly, contrasting his parasites with those of Shakespeare and Jonson, it becomes evident how major a change the figure has gone through between the beginning of the seventeenth century and his own, and Melville's, time.⁶⁷

Even though parasites seem to be everywhere in *Bleak House*, the word "parasite," either in the singular or the plural, is only used three times, all three appearing in the chapters told by Dickens' anonymous and omniscient third-person narrator, rather than by the novel's somewhat anemic heroine, Esther Summerson. The second instance, found in Chapter 16, is particularly instructive.⁶⁸ Here is the narrator's description of the rundown tenements known as "Tom-all-Alone's" where the poor street-sweeper Jo survives as best he can:

It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants, who, after establishing their own possession, took to letting them out in lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than ... all the fine gentlemen in office ... shall set right in five hundred years. (256–57)

To understand how the "vermin parasites" in this passage differ from all the older references previously encountered in this chapter, a few words about metaphors are needed. As Regine May has noted, in classical comedy "parasites are often metaphorically associated with greedy animals" (98), and several works where they have been compared to animals and insects have already been mentioned: Plutarch likening parasitic flatterers to "vermin" (49c); Bolingbroke labeling Bushy and Greene "caterpillars of

67 In addition to Dickens and Melville, several other nineteenth-century authors have contributed to the evolution of the figure of the parasite. While I will not discuss these here, two deserve particular mention: Honoré de Balzac and George Eliot. On parasites in the former's work, see Baran, and Paulson (38–52); on Eliot's parasites, see Zwierlein ("From Parasitology" 165–68).

68 See also the references to botanical parasitism in Chapter 10, and to biological parasites in Chapter 47 of *Bleak House* (Dickens 155, 724).

the commonwealth” in *King Richard II*; and Voltore accusing Mosca of being a “flesh-fly” in *Volpone* (5.9.1). Or, to invoke another example, the English poet William King concludes his *The Art of Cookery* (1709) with the claim that if he were allowed to choose, he would rather encounter “a ravenous Wolf or Bear got loose” than a parasite, because the latter will “eat and talk, and talking still will eat,/ No quarter from the Parasite you’ll get;/ But, like a leech, well fix’d, he’ll suck what’s good,/ And never part till satisfied with Blood” (630–35).

Parasites have thus often tempted authors prior to Dickens into drawing comparisons with the lowest living creatures on the *scala naturae*, “the great chain of being” thought to hierarchically organize everything that exists, from God and down to inanimate objects.⁶⁹ However, to claim that “vermin parasites” crawl over “the ruined human wretch” would simply not have made sense to any of these authors. The reason is that to them, even though the degraded behavior of hangers-on might be likened to that of various entities in nature, the *only* creatures recognized as parasites in the *literal* sense of the word were human beings. In *Bleak House*, on the other hand, we encounter a dramatic reversal: In the quote, the label “parasite” refers to non-human entities such as fleas and lice, and is only subsequently metaphorically transferred to the wretched and poverty-stricken humans that inhabit these pestilent lodgings; in H. M. Daleski’s words from *Dickens and the Art of Analogy* (1970): “In terms of the simile, the ‘crowd of foul existence’ that the slum has bred ‘in maggot numbers’ is clearly a crowd of human parasites, of miserable mendicants whose begging exemplifies the most primitive and precarious form of social parasitism” (171). In other words, Dickens heralds a stage where humans and animals come to change places as the metaphor’s tenor and vehicle, as attested to by one of the explanations of the noun parasite offered by the *OED*: “a person whose behaviour resembles that of a plant or animal parasite; a sponger” (“parasite”).

69 On the importance of the *scala naturae* to Western thought, see Lovejoy. On Melville and the great chain of being, see Marovitz, and Wilson. The latter argues that *Moby-Dick* foreshadows many of the ideas later to be found in Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), including its attack on the *scala naturae*. On Darwin and Melville, see also Gottlieb, Franzosa, and Howarth.

Before looking in more detail at *Bleak House*, it is necessary to briefly address this shift, which came about due to the gradual adoption of the term “parasite” by naturalists. The *OED* helps outline how the class of parasitic entities was thus significantly extended: The first known usage of the adjective “parasitical” in English to indicate sponging among non-humans is from the middle of the seventeenth century. In his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), Sir Thomas Browne—much admired by Melville, who labeled him a “crack’d Archangel” (qtd. in Metcalf 56)—argues that, contrary to common belief, mistletoe does not grow upon trees as a result of seeds dropped by birds.⁷⁰ In passing, he notes that wherever it grows, “it is of constant shape, and maintains a regular figure; like other supercrescences, and such as living upon the stock of others, are termed parasitical plants, as polypody, moss, the smaller capillaries, and many more” (Browne 203). As a noun, parasite was first used in the botanical sense in Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopædia* (1728). Under the heading “PARASITES, or PARASITAICAL [sic] Plants,” he defined the subject as “in Botany, a Kind of diminutive Plants, growing on Trees, and so called from their Manner of living and feeding, which is altogether on others” (351).

This was only the second meaning given to the term by Chambers; the first dealt with the social origins of the concept.⁷¹ That is to say, to him, there were only two kinds of parasites: men and plants, listed in that order. As late as 1785, the former meaning was the only one included in Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which defined parasite solely as “[o]ne that frequents rich tables, and earns his welcome by flattery” (277). As Jonathan Z. Smith notes, it is also revealing that the 1838 edition of *Allegemeine Encyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* featured a grand total of *two* sentences on botanical parasitism, as

70 On Browne’s influence on mid-nineteenth-century American literature, see Matthiessen (100–30); on his influence on Melville, see Brian Foley, who argues that echoes from *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* resonate strongly throughout *Moby-Dick*.

71 In Chambers’ words: “PARASITE, PARASITUS, among the Greeks, was originally a very reputable Title; the Parasites being a Kind of Priests, or at least Ministers of the Gods ... They took care of the sacred Corn, or the Corn destined for Service of the Temples and the Gods, viz. Sacrifices, Feasts, &c. They had even the Intendance over Sacrifices, and took care they were duly performed. At Athens there was a Kind of College of twelve Parasites; each people of Attica furnishing one; who was always chosen out of the best Families” (350–51).

opposed to the preceding seven pages (13 columns), which were dedicated to various issues relating to the social meanings of the term (280).

Exactly why the term parasite came to be applied to plants in the first place is not certain, but what is clear is that such usage did have literary antecedents. For instance, the gardener in Shakespeare's *King Richard II* at one point describes his king's downfall to two servants in terms that duplicate those of Bolingbroke and his circle. Referring to Bushy and Greene, as well as to another of Richard's close associates, the Earl of Wiltshire, he claims that "[t]he weeds which his [Richard's] broad-spreading leaves did shelter,/ That seem'd in eating him to hold him up/ Are pluck'd up root and all by Bolingbroke" (Shakespeare, *Richard II* 3.4.50–52). It is not a far stretch to go from metaphorically depicting those perceived to be court parasites as like weeds drawing their nourishment from other plants, to adopting the terms "parasitic," and later "parasite," for plants that live on others. No matter how the adoption of the term originated, though, botanists themselves originally understood it as a figure of speech, as can be seen from Almira H. Lincoln's *Familiar Lectures on Botany* (1831). In an explanatory footnote after a reference to parasitic plants, she mentions the etymology of the term, its classical origin in Greek religion, and its afterlife in the spongers of comedy, before going on to note that, "by analogy, the term is now applied to plants which live upon others" (34; emphasis added). Today, the "by analogy" has long since been forgotten, and botanists simply understand a parasite as a "plant that lives on another plant and derives its nourishment from it" (Hickey and King 30).

The idea that animals and insects could be labeled and understood as parasites is of even more recent origin. The first example noted by the *OED* is the fourth volume of William Kirby and William Spence's *An Introduction to Entomology*, published in 1826.⁷² While the two authors had also applied the term in the earlier volumes, published from 1815 and onwards, and while I have come across a reference from as early as 1769 describing cuckoos as "animal parasites," it seems this new

72 For an analysis of the ideological implications of the joint entomological venture of Kirby and Spence, the former a parson-naturalist, the latter a capitalist and political economist, see Clark (14–33).

meaning probably only gradually started coming into common usage in English in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.⁷³ An even more recent occurrence, dating from 1857, is the adoption by naturalists of the concept of the “host,” which many take for granted as the natural companion to the parasite. This year not only saw the publication of *The Confidence-Man*, but also of Edwin Lankester’s translation of Friedrich Küchenmeister’s influential *On Animal and Vegetable Parasites of the Human Body*.⁷⁴ In his explanatory footnote after the word is first used, Lankester notes that “‘Host’ is a literal translation of the German ‘Wirth,’ and although not perhaps previously used in the above sense in the English language, I have adopted it to prevent a somewhat tedious circumlotion” (in Küchenmeister 4).⁷⁵ Thus, for a period of about 30 years or so, a situation existed in which Anglo-American naturalists had access to the concept of the parasite, but not of the host.⁷⁶

As mentioned in the introduction, these conceptual adoptions helped pave the way for the emergence of the biological subfield of parasitology sometime in the last half of the nineteenth century.⁷⁷ Even though

73 An anonymous book review in the British periodical *The Monthly Review* mentions the work of one M. Gleditsch on the parasitical plant *Cytinus hypocistis*: “The *Hypocistis* is one of that family of plants called parasites, and which we may, perhaps without much impropriety, term the cuckows [cuckoos] of the vegetable kingdom. They exceed this animal parasite however in rapacity and perseverance: as many of them are not only hatched and brought up by, but during the whole state of their vegetable life owe their subsistence to, plants of another genus” (“The History of the Royal Sciences” 558).

74 According to Jonathan Z. Smith, Küchenmeister’s original, published in 1855 as *Die in und an dem Körper des lebenden Menschen vorkommenden Parasiten*, is most likely the first major work in biology to have used the word “parasite” in its title (280).

75 Earlier naturalists only used the term host in order to indicate multiplicities, as in *A Flora and Fauna within Living Animals* by Melville’s aforementioned contemporary, Joseph Leidy: “When piles of decaying sticks or dry leaves were stirred up, or the dust was blown about by the wind, a host of most incongruous objects could be obtained from the air; none, however, which could be supposed capable of producing disease” (15). Additional proof that naturalists were aware that the concept had been imported to their field from a different origin can be found in T. Spencer Cobbold’s *Entozoa: An Introduction to the Study of Helminthology* (1864), which switches back and forth between writing host with and without inverted commas, as if not entirely sure what status to accord the term.

76 Thus, the following claim from J. Hillis Miller is not entirely correct: “‘Parasite’ is one of those words which calls up its apparent opposite. It has no meaning without that counterpart. There is no parasite without its host” (“The Critic” 178).

77 There seems to be a general agreement that, important predecessors notwithstanding, the scientific field of parasitology should be dated to the last half of the nineteenth century: Reinhard Hoeppli suggests “about 1850” (xiv); Arthur William Meyer the period 1840–70 (43); John Farley

awareness of the existence of the kinds of non-human creatures that came to be known as parasites has a long history, several different factors were necessary for the study of such creatures to become scientific.⁷⁸ First of all, as Jonathan Z. Smith has put it,

awareness of parasitism's ubiquity had to await the late seventeenth-century development of the microscope. This resulted in a decisive shift of intellectual interest to the scientific, philosophical, and literary topos of the intricately small. Even after this point, despite the enormous increase in data, theoretical issues with respect both to taxonomy and "spontaneous generation" had to be settled before the discipline of parasitology could emerge. (254)

The question of "spontaneous generation" partly concerns the origins of the miniscule creatures that were finally made visible after Anton van Leeuwenhoek's 1673 invention of an improved microscope. According to Edward S. Dunster, this "brought into view a new outlying territory which swarmed with animal life in numbers and kind before unsuspected" (157). The question of where these "animalcules"—as they were known—came from and how they lived, was one that puzzled the scientists of van Leeuwenhoek's day. Building on the tradition stretching back at least to Aristotle, the commonly accepted answer was that such creatures were not the offspring of any preceding animals. Rather, they were thought to have been spontaneously generated from living elements different from themselves (*heterogenesis*) or out of non-living elements (*abiogenesis*); as Aristotle describes it in his *Historia animalium*:

some [animals] come into being from animals whose natural form is of the same kind as their own; others spontaneously and not from animals of the same kind as themselves: and the latter are subdivided into (a) those which arise out of putrefying earth and plants, which is the case with many of the insects; and

dates parasitology, as distinct from the earlier and much more limited field of helminthology, to the 1880s ("Parasites" 55); whereas Michael Worboys operates with three periods: the field's prehistory (the mid-nineteenth century to 1900), its emergence (1900–1918), and finally its proper establishment during the interwar period (2). For an overview of the history of parasitology, see also Power.

78 On knowledge prior to the modern age of the biological entities later to be termed parasites, see Hoeppli, and Power.

(b) those which arise inside animals themselves out of the residues in their parts. (5.1.539a 20–25)

The Italian naturalist Francesco Redi launched an attack on the validity of this view as early as in 1668, when he showed the presence of maggots in putrefying meat to be caused by eggs from blowflies, rather than by spontaneous generation. Even so, his work and that of those following in his footsteps only managed to reduce the area the theory was applied to, rather than disprove it. More specifically, whereas Aristotle's point (a) came to be overthrown, his point (b), which concerns the existence of animals living inside others (what would later be known as endoparasites), was held to be valid by many of the foremost naturalists throughout at least the first half of the nineteenth century.⁷⁹ As John Call Dalton puts it:

spontaneous generation lost its rank as a great natural division of the reproductive function; and came to be regarded as an exceptional phenomenon, confined to a very few species whose existence could not be accounted for in the ordinary way. Its territory was narrowed exactly in proportion as the knowledge of natural history advanced; and it became reduced almost exclusively to the class of animals known as *entozoa* or internal parasites. (qtd. in Dunster 154)

The adherents of spontaneous generation considered the presence of such entozoa to be caused by a sick body, rather than as something making the body sick. This was not finally disproven before the mid-nineteenth century, in part due to the work of such naturalists as the Danish zoologist Japetus Steenstrup in 1842 and Küchenmeister in the 1850s.⁸⁰ From this

⁷⁹ On the struggle between the supporters and the opponents of spontaneous generation, see Farley ("Spontaneous Generation").

⁸⁰ Küchenmeister's work involved feeding bladder worms to men sentenced to die and then searching through their intestines after they had been executed. On his and Steenstrup's importance, see Farley ("Spontaneous Generation" 117–23), and Zimmer (6–10). The theory of spontaneous generation is often considered to have been disproven, once and for all, with Louis Pasteur's famous 1860 experiments on bottled broth, which proved that microbes are transferred to their destination through the air, not generated *ex nihilo*. However, as Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch have argued, Pasteur's work only gained gradual acceptance, with many holding on to the old paradigm. For example, when the British scientist Henry Charlton Bastian died in 1915, he was still convinced the theory of spontaneous generation was correct, see Collins and Pinch (79–90).

point on, parasites could no longer be viewed as *symptoms*. On the contrary, scientists had to accept the fact that these were creatures that could be independently studied, and from this the field of parasitology proper could finally come into being.

Before returning to Dickens, a final point must be made concerning the transfer of the parasite to the natural sciences. Crucially, it was not only the word itself that naturalists adopted, but also a number of negative associations that came with it. From a humanist perspective, the scientific language of parasitology is therefore interesting because it is so utterly suffused with remnants of the social origins of its object of study; in the words of Michel Serres:

The basic vocabulary of this science comes from such ancient and common customs and habits that the earliest monuments of our culture tell of them, and we still see them, at least in part: hospitality, conviviality, table manners, hostelry, general relations with strangers. Thus the vocabulary is imported to this pure science and bears several traces of anthropomorphism. (*Parasite* 6)⁸¹

As a result, throughout the parasitological writings of the nineteenth (as well as parts of the twentieth) century, the parasite is not treated simply as scientists would treat any other natural phenomenon. Instead, by blending the descriptive and the normative, naturalists very often presented it as an “immoral” creature whose “unethical” behavior must be condemned or actively defeated.⁸² A clear-cut example of this tendency of describing nature in ethical terms derived from relationships among humans is found in “Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism,” an 1879 lecture by E. Ray Lankester, the son of Küchenmeister’s translator and a renowned

81 Or, as Serres also notes: “The intuition of the parasitologists makes him import a common relation of social manners to the habits of little animals, a relation so clear and distinct that we recognize it as being the simplest” (*Parasite* 7).

82 Exceptions do exist. For instance, Charles Darwin usually refers to parasites in an objective manner, but even he was not entirely able to avoid ethical judgments, as evident from the following passage from *On the Origin of Species*: “The acquisition of a *useless* part can hardly be said to raise an organism in the natural scale; and in the case of the *imperfect*, closed flowers above described, if any new principle has to be invoked, it must be one of *retrogression* rather than of progression; and so it must be with many parasitic and *degraded* animals” (175; emphasis added). On nineteenth-century naturalists who defended the parasite against accusations of unethical behavior, see Zwierlein (“From Parasitology” 157–62).

evolutionary biologist in his own right. In the lecture, social Darwinism converges with the different theories of *degeneration* in vogue in Europe after the publication of Bénédict Augustin Morel's *Treatise on the Physical, Intellectual and Moral Degeneration of the Human Race* (1857).⁸³ As one of the most important British advocates of the theory of degeneration, Lankester perfectly exemplifies how the diffuse relationship between the human and the non-human parasite allowed the concept to function as a bridge between nature and social policy.⁸⁴ He argues that evolution can take three different forms, respectively termed "balance," "elaboration," and "degeneration." The latter category he primarily illustrates through references to animal parasites, which represent a swerve in the exact opposite direction from the ever-increasing complexity he considers the ideal of evolution.⁸⁵ As he sees it, the degenerate parasites are content to become steadily less complex due to too easy an access to food:

Any new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained, seem to lead as a rule to Degeneration; just as an active healthy man sometimes degenerates when he becomes suddenly possessed of a fortune; or as Rome degenerated when possessed of the riches of the ancient world. The habit of parasitism clearly acts upon animal organisation in this way. Let the parasitic life once be secured, and away go legs, jaws, eyes, and ears; the active, highly gifted crab, insect, or annelid may become a mere sac, absorbing nourishment and laying eggs. (Lankester 27)

As the quote clearly indicates, to Lankester, parasitism in nature is not simply one possible mode of life among many; it is a thoroughly despicable one. This is even more explicitly spelled out in a book influenced by

83 In construing social deviance as a question of heredity, as something that is passed on from generation to generation, Morel offered a new and powerful vocabulary for addressing the existence of unwanted social elements deemed harmful to the common good. His theory, which originally grew out of a Lamarckian context, came to receive widespread scientific legitimacy because it could easily be adapted to a Darwinian model of evolution, see Gissis. On the importance and longevity of the theory of degeneration, see Pick.

84 On Lankester's importance and views, see Pick (216–18), and Zimmer (15–22).

85 That Lankester's idealizes complexity is clear from his definition of "elaboration" as "a gradual change of structure in which the organism becomes adapted to more and more varied and complex conditions of existence. In Elaboration there is a new expression of form, corresponding to the new perfection of work in the animal machine" (27).

Lankester, *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* (1883) by the Scottish evangelist and naturalist Henry Drummond, who makes the following claim:

Why does the naturalist think hardly of the parasite? Why does he speak of them as degraded, and despise them as the most ignoble creatures in Nature? ... The naturalist's reply to this is brief. Parasitism, he will say, is one of the gravest crimes in Nature. It is a breach of the law of Evolution. Thou shalt evolve ...—this is the first and greatest commandment of nature. But the parasite has no thought for its race, or for perfection in any shape or form. It wants two things—food and shelter. How it gets them is of no moment. Each member lives exclusively on its own account, an isolated, indolent, selfish, and backsliding life. (158)

In addition to their mutual distaste for the “indolent, selfish, and backsliding life” of the biological parasite, in their respective writings, both Lankester and Drummond present the degeneration resulting from a parasitic lifestyle as no less of a danger to humans than it is to their sponging brethren in nature; as the former contends, “it is well to remember that we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress” (Lankester 48). Anne-Julia Zwierlein has noted that in Victorian England, such comparisons were very common: “In Victorian accounts of biological parasitism, we almost always find explicit parallels between parasitic stagnation in the animal world and the ‘contented life of material enjoyment accompanied by ignorance and superstition’ that human beings had to shun at all costs” (“From Parasitology” 163).

Lankester, Drummond, and contemporaries in England and abroad sharing their views thereby ended up giving scientific legitimacy to a new, reshaped conception of the human parasite.⁸⁶ In the process those so judged were literally marked as little or no better than what was considered the lowest and most useless of all animals; as Carl Zimmer puts it: “People had been referred to as parasites before the late 1800s, but

86 On contemporary scientists, political theorists, criminologists, and novelists who similarly addressed social problems in terms of biology, see Pick's thorough discussion of the respective situations in France, Italy, and England.

Lankester and other scientists gave the metaphor a precision, a transparency, that it had never had before” (18).

More precisely, in *King Richard II* and *Sejanus His Fall* it became apparent how the figure of the parasite could function as a rhetorical means of accusing individuals of fawning, selfish, and sycophantic behavior. However, after the transformation caused by the natural sciences, the destructive potential inherent in the parasite as a rhetorical tool for political purposes infinitely multiplied. It thus became a very effective weapon for labeling entire groups of people as “less than human,” and consequently, not entitled to the same basic rights and protections as others. The most infamous instance of how the new, scientific concept would be abused for political purposes is the National Socialists’ widespread propaganda concerning the Jew as a parasite that had to be exterminated for the good of the social body. Through the rhetorical creation of the Jew as *lebensunwerten Leben* (“life that does not deserve to live”), the scientific concept became an important factor in legitimizing the Holocaust. To give one particularly horrifying example, a 1944 manual issued by the “nationalsozialistischer Führungsstab der Wehrmacht” makes the following claim:

The Jew wants us to be forced into a life of slavery so as to live among us as a parasite who can suck us dry. Our people’s sound way of life opposes the parasitic Jewish existence. Who can believe it possible ... to reform or convert a parasite (a louse for example)? Who can believe in a compromise with the parasite? We are left with one choice only, either to be devoured by the parasite or to exterminate it. The Jew must be exterminated wherever we meet him! We do not commit a crime against life acting like this; on the contrary, we serve the law of life by fighting against all that is hostile to a sound existence. Our fight serves, indeed, the preservation of life. (qtd. in Bein 33–34)⁸⁷

As a corollary, one should avoid the temptation to think that the adoption of the term “parasite” within the natural sciences had little to do with the figure’s earlier history or that it has had no political consequences

87 On the importance of the figure of the parasite for legitimizing the Holocaust, see Bein, and my “Parasite.” On “life that does not deserve to live,” see Agamben (*Homo Sacer* 136–43); on dehumanization, see D. L. Smith.

to speak of; to quote Michel Serres' conclusion about modern science: "These epistemologies are not innocent" (*Hermes* 28). In this case there is rather a mutual influence between literature, politics, and science, where these spheres constantly influenced, modified, and fed back into each other.⁸⁸ Hence, as Han-liang Chang has argued, any clear-cut distinction between a purely literary and purely biological discourse is simply not possible:

From this fictitious distinction one may develop accordingly a literary semiotics and a biological semiotics, as if the latter could be immuned from the containment of language. This, of course, is to miss the encroachment of rhetoric on biology and the fact that even parasitology as a positive science is encoded in language in the first place. (8)

In other words, what the adoption of the figure of the parasite makes particularly clear is that no matter how much the positive sciences lay claim to an access to natural phenomena, this access will always have to be articulated in a language shaped by cultural norms and traditions.

To return to *Bleak House*, it in many ways foreshadowed arguments such as Lankester and Drummond's. As several scholars have shown, a strong influence from contemporary developments in the natural sciences runs through Dickens' writings.⁸⁹ The previously quoted passage on the state of Tom-all-Alone's and its inhabitants show that, like many of his Victorian contemporaries, he not only drew heavily on the biological metaphor of the organism, but that he was also, in the words of George Levine, "extremely alert to modern scientific and technological developments" and "characteristically used scientific facts and method for moral purposes" (122, 121). One of the things the metaphorical and conceptual reservoir offered by the natural sciences of his day helped him do, was draw a clear distinction—closely resembling the one later to be found in

88 On the mutual influence between science, literature, and politics in the Victorian era, see Beer, Levine, Otis (*Membranes; Literature and Science*), and the texts in Zwierlein (*Unmapped Countries*).

89 On the influence of science on Dickens, see Wilkinson, Arac (123–38), and Levine (119–52). There is much to indicate that he, in turn, also influenced contemporary scientists: Gillian Beer has for example argued that "the organization of *The Origin of Species* seems to owe a good deal to the example of one of Darwin's most frequently read authors, Charles Dickens" (8).

Lankester and Drummond—between the active and productive, on the one hand, and the idle and non-productive, on the other. Time and again, Dickens depicts characters belonging to the latter category to condemn their behavior; as Zwierlein puts it, “Dickens’s novels evince a fascination with members of the social organism who refuse to contribute their own share of work and energy, parasitically benefiting from other people’s labour” (“From Parasitology” 164). Significantly, those described as parasites will often belong to all layers of society, from the very top and all the way down: “While we can detect in Dickens a tendency to reproach aristocrats and exploitative capitalists with parasitical existences, the phenomenon is by no means restricted to them—in fact, parasitism is shown to be so ubiquitous that one has to be constantly on the alert against it” (Zwierlein, “From Parasitology” 163).

In the case of *Bleak House*, lawyers as a class are particularly targeted. At one point describing them “like maggots in nuts” (158), the novel offers several characters whose only goal seems to be to bleed their clients dry of all their resources. Chief amongst these is the vampiric lawyer, Mr. Vholes, thus described by protagonist Esther Summerson: “As he gave me that slowly devouring look of his, while twisting up the strings of his bag . . . , he gave one gasp as if he had swallowed the last morsel of his client, and his black buttoned-up unwholesome figure glided away to the low door at the end of the hall” (975–76).

In fact, *Bleak House* describes as parasitic not only individual lawyers like Vholes and Mr. Tulkinghorn, but also the very institution they belong to—the Court of Chancery, an institution whose American counterpart will be addressed in Chapter 5. Daleski therefore argues that law as it appears in Dickens’ novel “has little to do with justice and is simply a socially condoned form of parasitism” (165). As he stresses, Chancery, in turn, is “symbolic of the functioning of a parasitic society,” and “is from the outset associated with the spread of a noxious infection and corruption in the body politic. . . . Chancery and all its works is presented as the blight of public life, the parasite that consumes the social organism” (167, 169). However, the quote where the poverty-stricken inhabitants of Tom-all-Alone’s are likened to “vermin parasites” indicates that this blight spreads throughout society in its entirety, meaning no social class

is exempt from its taint: “The image of being of this society, it becomes clear, is a chain of parasites” (Daleski 172).

As a corollary, in Dickens can be found the germ of how the metaphor of the parasite has often been applied both by the political left *and* the right ever since the middle of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, through his portrayals of Vholes, Tulkinghorn, and the evil money-lender Mr. Smallweed, he foreshadows the common trope of the capitalist as a useless parasite who nourishes himself on society without offering anything in return.⁹⁰ While versions of this trope appear in the writings of several prominent theorists on the left, including those of Karl Marx himself, an explicit example can be found in “Let Us Free Ireland!” (1899) by the Irish socialist James Connolly.⁹¹ Here he touches upon the topic of what exactly those who own the means of production can be said to contribute to society:

The capitalist, I say, is a parasite on industry; as useless in the present stage of our industrial development as any other parasite in the animal or vegetable world is to the life of the animal or vegetable upon which it feeds. The working class is the victim of this parasite—this human leech, and it is the duty and interest of the working class to use every means in its power to oust this parasite class from the position which enables it to thus prey upon the vitals of labour.
(Connolly)

On the other hand, through the portrayal in *Bleak House* of the parasitic, unproductive poor, as well as of so-called “telescopic” philanthropists like the selfish Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, and Mr. Chadband (49), Dickens’ novel also helped clear the path for the way the metaphor of

⁹⁰ In its portrayals of the relatives of Sir Leicester Dedlock sponging off his fortune, *Bleak House* also resonates with contemporary attacks on the aristocracy as a parasitic institution, see William Howitt’s claim from 1846 that “[o]ur aristocracy are like parasitical plants ... Above, hang perhaps parasitical blossoms of great beauty, but all beneath is rottenness and decay. Such is the gay and aspiring, but fatal nature of an aristocracy, parasitical in all its qualities” (324).

⁹¹ See Marx’s reference to the “state parasite” in his writings on the Paris Commune, as well as Lenin’s elaborations of the same point (Marx and Lenin 59–60 and 121–23, respectively). On the role of the parasite in Marx’s argument, see LaCapra. For a more recent example, see the section “Parasite” in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (359–61).

the parasite came to be used by the political right.⁹² Here, it is typically directed against those in need of welfare, and sometimes also social reformers trying to alleviate poverty. These uses are both evident in a talk given by Ayn Rand on February 9, 1961, where she claimed that the only kind of men that “can be of value to one another” are “rational, productive, independent men in a rational, productive, free society,” before making the following assertion:

Parasites, moochers, looters, brutes and thugs can be of no value to a human being—nor can he gain any benefit from living in a society geared to *their* needs, demands and protection, a society that treats him as a sacrificial animal and penalizes him for his virtues in order to reward *them* for their vices, which means: a society based on the ethics of altruism. No society can be of value to man’s life if the price is the surrender of his right to his life. (Rand; emphasis in the original)⁹³

Comparing Connolly and Rand, we see that the only thing they have in common, is the shared view that the parasite—no matter if in animal or human shape—is a useless creature draining the health of its host organism. That a socialist attacking capitalists, and a supporter of *laissez-faire* capitalism attacking socialists and recipients of social benefits, did so in identical manners perfectly illustrates a point made by Susan Sontag about the effectiveness of metaphors: “Like all really successful metaphors, the metaphor of [tuberculosis] was rich enough to provide for two contradictory applications” (24–25). Or, as Jeanette Samyn has put it, “[t]he parasite can be left or right, weak or strong, rich or poor, healthy or sick—it just depends on who’s talking” (“Anti”).

To return to *Bleak House*, if one were to further describe Dickens’ parasites, they are often entertaining literary figures lacking anything

92 The appetite of the hypocritical philanthropist, Mr. Chadband, leads the narrator to describe him as “a consuming vessel” capable of wielding “such weapons of the flesh as a knife and fork, remarkably well.” Although “attached to no particular denomination,” he is “in the ministry” (Dickens 303–4). Thus, he represents a type of literary sponger not yet mentioned: the religious parasite who gains access to his host’s larder through promises of salvation and threats of eternal damnation, as famously found in Molière’s *Tartuffe, or the Impostor* (1664).

93 In addition to its usefulness for criticizing welfare recipients, the metaphor of the parasite has also allowed the populist right to conceptualize immigrants as “foreign bodies” doing damage to the society hosting them, see Inda, and Musolff (73–92).

resembling depth, functioning as little more than the embodiment of sneakiness and evil.⁹⁴ Moreover, to Zwierlein, “[p]arasites in Dickens have the advantage of being easily recognizable—at least for privileged focalizers like Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, or, through their grotesque physicality, for the reader” (“From Parasitology” 164). This might be slightly unfair to Dickens. After all, Esther takes a long time to see through the most original parasite in *Bleak House*, Harold Skimpole, who is introduced in Chapter 6 as being “grown up ... but in simplicity, and freshness, and enthusiasm, and a fine guileless inaptitude for all worldly affairs, ... a perfect child” (87). While the strange charisma of this jovial, lighthearted and absolutely irresponsible sponger, who lives off everybody he can with absolutely no regret, is proof that Zwierlein’s assessment is not entirely accurate, there is no doubt that the claim is valid for such utterly grotesque characters as the aforementioned Vholes and Smallweed, as well as for the pompous Mr. Turveydrop, a “model of Deportment” who, “having never in his life before done anything but deport himself,” sponges off his hard-working son and daughter-in-law in order to “lead an idle life in the very best clothes” (Dickens 225, 226).⁹⁵ Nor can there be any doubt that readers are meant to condemn the dependent mode of life of these parasitic villains, striving instead for the independence exemplified by the novel’s kind and moral, but also fairly uncharismatic heroine, Esther, and her equally bland allies.⁹⁶

In Dickens there appears not only an early stage of the process that would lead to sponging humans switching places with animals and insects, thereby going from being literal to metaphorical parasites, but also a strong tendency toward pathologizing spongers. Drawing upon the natural sciences, but in many ways also foreshadowing the results of the

94 Levine has argued that this is typical of Dickens, whose characters tend to “behave as though they had single, discoverable selves that constitute their essence” (144).

95 On the correspondence between outward appearance and inner character in *Bleak House*, see Levine, who claims that “Dickens had the confidence of natural theology, in which material reality corresponds meaningfully to a moral reality. The great analogy of natural theology, between physical and spiritual nature, is embedded in his imagination” (134).

96 As has been pointed out by many scholars, the villains in *Bleak House* are for the most part far more fascinating than the protagonists. Daleski for instance argues that the latter—including Esther, young Turveydrop, Rouncewell, Allan Woodcourt, and Mr. Jarndyce—are all defined by a lack of “imaginative vitality” (187).

later convergence between evolutionary theory and the theory of degeneration, Dickens wove together human beings and the creatures in nature commonly considered the lowest in ways that would simply not have made sense to his Greek, Latin, or Elizabethan precursors. Even though Melville, too, was familiar with the adoption of the term “parasite” by the natural sciences, in his mode of describing parasitic relationships, as well as in the attitude toward parasitic characters found in his texts, he differs from his British contemporary. That the Melvillean parasite has little to do with the Dickensian one, becomes clear already in the former’s debut, *Typee*, to which it is now time to turn.

CHAPTER 3

A Parasite among the Cannibals in *Typee*

After the historical overview in Chapter 2, it is now time to turn to the first part of Herman Melville's career, consisting of the six books he published in the period 1846–1851: *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, and *Moby-Dick*. These have in common that they all, at least partly, take place at sea, and that they are narrated in the first person by rootless sailors of modest means: respectively, Tommo, Typee, Taji, Wellingborough Redburn, White-Jacket, and Ishmael. Crucially, these six narrators also all have at least a little bit of the classical figure of the parasite in them, even though none of these books are comedies, as such. While some of them express this objective with greater frequency and conviction than the others, they all take an active interest in good dining and leisure. As difficult as these aims can be to achieve for poor landmen, combining the two may initially appear as a near impossibility for Melville's sailor-narrators: Not only is their access to fresh and tasty forms of nourishment severely limited by their infrequent contact with land, but they often serve under tyrannical officers and captains ready to punish them for even the smallest infraction of the strict rules regulating life at sea. These obstacles aside, to some degree all of Melville's early narrators dream of what in *Typee* is described as "plenty and repose" (*T* 52), and some of them are even willing to go to great risks to pursue this dream. By now, one answer to the question of how this might be achieved should be obvious: to play the parasite.

In the end, none of Melville's six sailor-narrators acquires more free dinners than does the narrator of *Mardi*, who, in passing himself off as the demi-god Taji, discovers an excellent way of getting easy access to the hospitality of the many kings and lords throughout the vast kingdom of Mardi. Still, after a certain point he shows surprisingly little interest in the abundance of food resulting from his new-found semi-divinity, often

simply mentioning that yet another meal has been served. As noted in Chapter 1, Typee in *Omoo* also discovered ways of feeding on his surroundings, but the one narrator in the first part of Melville's career whose interest in matters of the belly is so obvious that it can hardly be denied, and whose hunger also becomes the catalyzing element that sets his narrative in motion, is Tommo in *Typee*.

Hence, the most important dilemma faced by parasites throughout history—how to get access to food—was undeniably on Melville's mind from the start of his career, and, accordingly, an analytical focus on “parasitical relationships” is essential to understand his first work. Even though previous scholars have, to the best of my knowledge, never approached Tommo in this manner, in the first part of this chapter my analysis shows that he is someone who, initially at least, clearly and unambiguously longs for a parasitic lifestyle.⁹⁷ In order to make this point, I start by discussing how the narrative expresses his hunger and his desire to avoid toil. In the second part, I move on to address his relationship to those that feed him: the Typees. As I will argue, without Tommo fully realizing this himself, his story shows readers two different sets of expectations coming into conflict with each other: Whereas the Typee chief Mehevi likely considers their relation as one of *patronage*, where the patron and his client have mutual obligations toward one another, Tommo's expectations of a parasitic lifestyle lead him to fail to understand that the food and companionship he receives are *not* gifts freely given. I first suggest that when Tommo tries to repay some of the people who have cared for him near the end of the story, this might be read as his somewhat problematical attempt to redefine his own position, in order not to appear as an ungrateful parasite. I then propose that the very narrative of *Typee* might be understood as a problematical, belated gift to his former hosts. Finally, Michel Serres' work is deployed in order to analyze how Tommo's presence comes to affect the Typees. Here I argue that reading *Typee* in light of Ilya Prigogine's work on non-equilibrium thermodynamics helps explain the seeming lack of correspondence between Tommo, as

97 The only work I have come across where both parasites and *Typee* are mentioned, if only in passing, is A. M. Adamson's *Review of the Fauna of the Marquesas Islands and Discussion of Its Origin* (1939).

a relatively insignificant “foreign body,” and the potentially dramatic effects of his escape on his hosts’ society and their ways of life.

Tommo in the Paradise of the Parasite

Typee is the narrative of Tommo’s adventures on Nukuheva, the largest of the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia. When his ship, the *Dolly*, makes landfall there, he runs away together with his shipmate, Toby, with the aim of hiding out in the interior of the island until it has left. Their journey turns out to be much more difficult than expected and Tommo also gets sick, but after five days, the two deserters finally reach an inhabited valley. From what they know about the island, it could belong to either of two tribes that are at war with each other: the Happers or the Typees, the former rumored to be friendly, the latter to be ferocious cannibals. As it turns out, the valley does belong to the latter, but they show few signs of living up to their dreadful reputation, instead feeding and pampering their guests. Tommo, whose foot is swollen, is also carried around by his own personal valet, Kory-Kory. Hoping to find medical aid for his companion, Toby tries to leave. His first attempt must be aborted when he is attacked by the Happers, but the second one seems to succeed. However, when he does not return as promised, Tommo is thrown into a deep depression, where fears that his friend has simply deserted him alternate with fears that he has been eaten by their hosts.

It is only as his leg starts to get better that his depression lifts. In the company of Kory-Kory and the beautiful and scantily clad Typee girls, of whom “the beauteous nymph” Fayaway is his favorite (*T* 85), Tommo sets out to explore what the valley has to offer. In doing so he reflects on a variety of aspects of Typee life and culture, which he generally compares favorably to the ills of Western civilization. He also spends a lot of time in the Ti, where Mehevi holds court. Taboo for women, it is a place for dining, repose, and general hilarity in the company of the male warriors.

This happy life of leisure starts coming to an end when Tommo realizes that the natives want to tattoo his face. Around the same time his fears of cannibalism return, as does the ailment in his leg. Realizing that the Typees, all their kindness notwithstanding, are in effect holding him

prisoner, he decides to run away. The opportunity finally arises after four months when, taking advantage of a dispute amongst the natives, he manages to reach a boat that has appeared in the bay. He is forced to throw the boat hook at the one-eyed chief Mow-Mow to avoid recapture, thereby safely reaching the ship *Julia*, which he signs on to and whose further adventures will form the first part of Melville's next book, *Omoo*. *Typee* thus ends with Tommo leaving his kind cannibal captors/hosts and their comfortable life of leisure and abundance behind for good.

This narrative is presented as a true account of Melville's own experiences as a sailor. Its preface states that the author trusts "that his anxious desire to speak the unvarnished truth will gain for him the confidence of his readers" (*T* xiv), but even from the start, this desire was not always met, and the question of how true to Melville's own experiences *Typee* really is has been a recurring one ever since.⁹⁸ What is known is that he boarded the *Acushnet* as a common seaman on January 3, 1841. While on shore leave on the Marquesan island of Nuku Hiva (in *Typee* referred to as Nukuheva) in French Polynesia, he and his shipmate Richard Tobias Greene deserted on July 9, 1842. On August 9, he then boarded the *Lucy Ann*, having in the meantime most likely spent one month with the local Taipi tribe, which in the book became the "Typees."⁹⁹

Under the title *Narrative of a Four Months' Residence among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands; or, a Peep at Polynesian Life*, the story of this experience was originally published in England by John Murray in February 1846, when Melville was twenty-six years old. In March and

98 Early scholars often treated *Typee* as autobiography, but this became less common after Charles Roberts Anderson proved that Melville had incorporated materials from different contemporary sources. The standard view today—resonating well with Tommo's claim about cannibalism, that "[t]ruth, who loves to be centrally located, is again found between the two extremes" (*T* 205)—is that *Typee* is neither entirely true nor entirely made up. Recent contributions to this discussion can be found in Suggs, Bryant ("Taipi"), Otter ("*Typee*"). Edwards goes as far as to suggest that Melville may not have stayed with the Typees at all during his month on the island, but that instead, "he may have lived, as many deserters did, with the tribes along the beach" (41). Since the question of how true *Typee* is to Melville's own experiences is not central to my argument, I will simply label the work a travel narrative.

99 In this chapter, I follow Melville's spelling of all local words (i.e. Typee instead of Taipi; Nukuheva instead of Nuku Hiva), as well as of the names of historical persons, even where these differ from common usage: In the narrative, the French admiral Abel Dupetit-Thouars is referred to as Du Petit Thouars, and the Hawaiian king Kamehameha III as Kammehammaha III).

August of the same year, Wiley & Putnam brought out two editions for the American market. The version most American readers of the time were familiar with, was the latter of these, which had been heavily bowdlerized to tone down the critical view of missionaries and some of the veiled, but still obvious eroticism of the English edition. Even though not a best-seller, the book sold quite well for a first work, and was for the most part favorably reviewed.¹⁰⁰ It also created somewhat of a personal reputation for Melville, who would later come to grow weary of the epithet “the man who lived among cannibals.” Even so, to the degree that he was remembered at all, near the end of his life it was first and foremost because of this book; as Hershel Parker puts it: *Typee* was “a great cultural icon ... far more important to the [nineteenth] century than *Moby-Dick*” (*Herman Melville* 2: 882).

Hence, readers of *Typee* encounter a text that tries to pass itself off as an autobiographical travel narrative of Melville’s own experiences when he was a runaway sailor in French Polynesia, but one that has long been recognized as at least a partly fictitious adventure story, and partly ethnological study. In the following I will argue that *Typee* is also part *sitological* treatise, in the sense of it being an extended reflection on eating, food, and nourishment. At first glance this claim may seem neither groundbreaking nor controversial. After all, even though the Typees receive Tommo with an almost excessive kindness, due to their reputation as cannibals, he can never entirely rid himself of the fear that he might end up on their menu. Throughout the story, this causes him to repeatedly return to the issue, which is even indicated in the title: as Tommo explains, the name Typee “in the Marquesan dialect signifies a lover of human flesh” (*T* 24).¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, cannibalism is far from my primary reason for labeling the narrative a sitological treatise. First, Melville’s first work is full

100 On the differences between the various versions of *Typee*, the different editorial policies of John Murray and Wiley & Putnam, as well as the reactions of reviewers and the book-buying audience, see Leon Howard’s “Historical Note” (*T* 277–302), and Bryant (*Melville Unfolding*).

101 As noted in Chapter 1, when scholars have shown an interest in food in *Typee*, for the most part it has only been in relation to anthropophagy. While Hughes avoids this, he ends up treating the references to food almost solely as symbols of forbidden sexual acts, as already indicated in Chapter 1. Hershel Parker briefly addresses the question of access to food at sea and Melville’s own hunger in *Herman Melville: A Biography* (1: 208–9).

of references to meals, foodstuffs, and to native food culture. Herein might be found one potential explanation of why the topic of (non-human) food has generated so little critical interest: as is well documented, John Murray had an aversion to fiction, and only included books in his series of travel narratives, *Colonial and Home Library*, if they were completely true. After Murray expressed doubt about the verity of *Typee*, Melville made several changes to reassure him, for example writing three new chapters (number 20, 21, and 27), as well as adding material to others—ironically, much of it appropriated from other written sources. In the words of John Evelev: “This material, much of it touching upon the meaning of the system of ‘taboo,’ but also adding a variety of different details about Marquesan islander life, was designed to bolster the factuality of the narrative and thus augment its market ‘value’” (29).

That is, Melville aimed to make his first book seem as true to life as possible, and a lot of the references to food and to eating in *Typee* can be seen as a means of strengthening the narrative’s factuality. Accordingly, it could be argued that food and eating are important to the story, insofar as they say something about the genre of travel narratives and Melville’s willingness to adapt to the wishes of his editor.¹⁰² In other words, it is possible to view the references to food as a version of what Roland Barthes termed “the reality effect” of realistic literature (148). The concept refers to the effect of little details in works of fiction that do not contribute to narrative progression, but whose function, as Barthes saw it, was to draw attention to their own purported reality. This might help explain why the seemingly mundane topic of food has seldom been considered worthy of extended analytical reflection from Melville scholars.

While many of the references to food in the narrative may also function in this manner, this does not mean Tommo should be understood

102 Evelev comes close to such a view when he states that “*Typee* is full of long descriptions of Marquesan landscapes, the types of clothing worn (and not worn) and how they are produced, as well as of diet and eating habits. Functioning as authentic experience, but also, ironically, derived almost entirely from other books, these details and information establish Melville’s authority to speak on such matters” (32).

as an impartial, proto-anthropological observer of exotic foodways. As shown by the passage quoted in Chapter 1 about pork—“a morsel of which placed on the tongue melts like a soft smile from the lips of Beauty”—he is also a hungry guest who seems to be enjoying his meals in an almost sensual manner.¹⁰³ This gives a strong indication that the importance of food to the narrative far exceeds the pragmatic uses Melville made of the topic to persuade John Murray and potential readers to accept the story as true.

At times, Tommo comes across not just as hungry but as outright obsessed with eating, at one point even gladly digging into what Toby claims is most likely human flesh, rather than go hungry:

“But I say, Tommo, you are not going to eat any of that mess there, in the dark, are you? Why, how can you tell what it is?”

“By tasting it, to be sure,” said I, masticating a morsel that Kory-Kory had just put in my mouth; “and excellent good it is too, very much like veal.” (*T* 95)

This excessive hunger is something he has in common with the classical parasite.¹⁰⁴ That *Typee* is to a large degree a narrative about the quest for what the parasites of comedy were always looking for, already becomes clear on the first page of Chapter 1. The first sentences come across almost as an elegy, where Tommo is lamenting not the loss of a lover, relative, or friend, but tasty meals and fresh fruit:

103 In a reading of Chapter 4 of *Moby-Dick*, Christopher Looby argues that Melville’s characters should not be understood in terms of sexuality as conceptualized today, but rather from a standpoint of *sensual tendency*, “a relatively persistent taste for certain pleasures” (67). For him, the concept functions as an intermediate stage between the early modern regime of *sexual acts* and the modern understanding of sexuality as *identity*, as described in Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. As Looby claims, “well into the nineteenth century in the United States, people did not habitually think in terms of sexual identity, but in terms of sensual tendency or sensual practices, a category of experience that included genital practices and other behaviors we might retrospectively regard as sexual, but that also would have included *eating, drinking, smoking, gazing at landscapes, reading stimulating novels, going to the theater, and a host of other pursuits*” (69–70; emphasis added). Tommo’s hunger might therefore be understood as just such a sensual tendency, not just for food, but also for leisure, companionship and erotic experiences.

104 To quote Cynthia Damon: “To reveal the first of the parasite’s features, his dependency on his patron for food, the comic poets made him hungry, indeed insatiable” (25).

Six months at sea! Yes, reader, as I live, six months out of sight of land; cruising after the sperm-whale beneath the scorching sun of the Line, and tossed on the billows of the wide-rolling Pacific—the sky above, the sea around, and nothing else! Weeks and weeks ago our fresh provisions were all exhausted. There is not a sweet potatoe left; not a single yam. Those glorious bunches of bananas which once decorated our stern and quarter-deck have, alas, disappeared! and the delicious oranges which hung suspended from our tops and stays—they, too, are gone! Yes, they are all departed, and there is nothing left us but salt-horse and sea-biscuit. (T 3)

The four exclamation marks make it obvious that the passage is uttered with great conviction and urgency.¹⁰⁵ Invoking the sweet memories of sweet potatoes, yams, bananas, and oranges, Tommo immediately makes it clear that life at sea has implanted in him a strong desire for food. This becomes even more obvious when, in a somewhat envious tone, he subsequently makes fun of first-class passengers complaining about the “hardships” of their voyages:

Oh! ye state-room sailors, who make so much ado about a fourteen-days’ passage across the Atlantic; who so pathetically relate the privations and hardships of sea, where, after a day of breakfasting, lunching, dining off five courses, chatting, playing whist, and drinking champagne-punch, it was your hard lot to be shut up in little cabinets of mahogany and maple, and sleep for ten hours, with nothing to disturb you but “those good-for-nothing tars, shouting and tramping over head,”—what would you say to our six months out of sight of land? (T 3)

While the quote indicates that Tommo is also yearning for sleep and idleness, since the question of food and eating is brought up time and again throughout the narrative, it seems especially important. For instance, it is there in one of the most frequently quoted passages of the book, where Tommo describes his expectations when he learns that the *Dolly* is heading for the Marquesas Islands to stock up on provisions:

105 On Melville’s exclamatory style, see Sanborn (“Melville” 13–4).

The Marquesas! What strange visions of outlandish things does the very name spirit up! Naked houris—cannibal banquets—groves of cocoa-nut—coral reefs—tattooed chiefs—and bamboo temples; sunny valleys planted with bread-fruit trees—carved canoes dancing on the flashing blue waters—savage woodlands guarded by horrible idols—*heathenish rites and human sacrifices*. (T 5; emphasis in the original)

To a Western observer, some of these things are obviously more “outlandish” than others. As a corollary, native eroticism (“naked houris”), the Polynesian practice of facial- and full-body tattooing (“tattooed chiefs”), paganism (“bamboo temples,” “horrible idols,” and “heathenish rites”), and the aforementioned taste for human flesh (“cannibal banquets” and “human sacrifices”) have all received considerable attention from Melville scholars.¹⁰⁶ While it is understandable that the not quite as exotic coconuts and bread-fruit trees have been less commented upon, they are still there in the list of “the strangely jumbled anticipations that haunted me during our passage from the cruising ground” (T 5), indicating that they, too, are important to Tommo and to his story.

This focus continues in Chapter 2, where it also becomes clear that Tommo is highly predisposed toward *leisure*.¹⁰⁷ Here is his description of the wonderful days when the *Dolly* is approaching the Marquesas Islands, the winds doing almost all the work, allowing the crew to do as little as possible:

I can never forget the eighteen or twenty days during which the light trade-winds were silently sweeping us towards the island. . . . What a delightful, lazy, languid time we had whilst we were thus gliding along! There was nothing to be done; a circumstance that happily suited our disinclination to do anything. We abandoned the fore-peak altogether, and spreading an awning over the fore-castle, slept, ate, and lounged under it the live-long day. Every one seemed to be under the influence of some narcotic. (T 9)

106 For contributions on eroticism, see Martin (17–39), Heath, Crain, and Hughes; on Tommo’s fear of being forcibly tattooed, see Renker (17–23), Cassuto, and Otter (*Melville’s Anatomies* 9–49); on taboo and religion among the Typees, see Calder.

107 This is something Tommo had in common with the young Herman Melville himself, at least if we are to believe his brother Gansevoort. Mentioning Herman in a letter to their brother Allan in 1840, he states that “I know no other reason for his remissness but laziness—not general laziness by any means—but that laziness which consists in an unwillingness to exert oneself in doing at a particular time, that which ought then to be done” (*Corr* 565).

Obviously, these days are unforgettable because they represent something altogether different from Captain Vangs' usual strict regime aboard the *Dolly*. As Tommo makes clear, this regime is why he decides to run away on Nukuheva, stressing that he should not be expected to uphold his end of the contract when his captain has not upheld his: "The usage on board of her was tyrannical; the sick had been inhumanly neglected; *the provisions had been doled out in scanty allowance*; and her cruizes were unreasonably protracted" (*T* 20–21; emphasis added). While the provisions "doled out in scanty allowance" is not the only reason he decides to jump ship, the reference to food is important, especially since Tommo soon thereafter returns to the topic at length, describing the sorry state of the ship's larder in an ironic tone:

The very preparations made for one of these expeditions are enough to frighten one. As the vessel carries no cargo, her hold is filled with provisions for her own consumption. The owners, who officiate as caterers for the voyage, supply the larder with an abundance of dainties. Delicate morsels of beef and pork, cut on scientific principles from every part of the animal, and of all conceivable shapes and sizes, are carefully packed in salt, and stored away in barrels; affording a never-ending variety in their different degrees of toughness, and in the peculiarities of their saline properties. Choice old water too, decanted into stout six-barrel-casks, and two pints of which are allowed every day to each soul on board; together with ample storage of sea-bread, previously reduced to a state of petrification, with a view to preserve it either from decay or consumption in the ordinary mode, are likewise provided for the nourishment and gastronomic enjoyment of the crew. But not to speak of the quality of these articles of sailor's fare, the abundance in which they are put on board a whaling vessel is almost incredible. Oftentimes, when we had occasion to break out in the hold, and I beheld the successive tiers of casks and barrels, whose contents were all destined to be consumed in due course by the ship's company, my heart has sunk within me. (*T* 21–22)

That is, what is lacking in variety is made up for by the sheer quantity of tough and tasteless salty meat, hard bread, and stale and brackish water. The dark humor of the passage results from the discrepancy between the contents of the *Dolly's* larder and the terms Tommo uses in describing

them, his vocabulary making him come across more like a professional food critic than a common sailor. In other words, the reader gets the impression that he is no stranger to “gastronomic enjoyment,” even though the present situation offers extremely little of it.

This discrepancy between an interest in good food and access to it is something Damon claims was often the case for the classical parasites. By making them “connoisseur[s] of good eating,” the writers of comedies could make the plight when dinner invitations were not forthcoming all the bigger, crueller and funnier: “Equally pitiable is the parasite-connoisseur who had to be content with leftovers, for ancient leftovers seem to have been a mince of what diners left on their plates or threw back into the pot, together with food that was old and tired before it ever left the kitchen” (Damon 27). So too with Tommo: Not having been to sea for that long yet, he could be looking at several more years of the same fare. No wonder, then, that one of the most important reasons the Marquesas Islands beckon, is the promise of food.

The references to eating and to different sorts of food also continue after the *Dolly* arrives at her destination, both prior to and after Tommo and Toby make their escape. For example, when planning to run away, the former explains that as the natives of the island inhabited its different valleys, his intention was to seek its heights to avoid detection: “if I could effect unperceived a passage to the mountains, I might easily remain among them, supporting myself by such fruits as came in my way until the sailing of the ship” (*T* 31). Immediately, he comments that this plan pleased him so much that “straightway [I] fell to picturing myself seated beneath a cocoa-nut tree on the brow of the mountain, with a cluster of plantains within easy reach” (*T* 31). Later, Tommo mentions that “I fully relied upon the fruits of the island to sustain us wherever we might wander,” but that, after having run away, this hope for a time is not met: “we perceived none of those trees upon whose fruit we had relied with such certainty” (*T* 36, 41).

Finally gaining a view of a valley down below, it becomes evident that Toby fully shares his companion’s interest in nourishment. He is not only described as eager to “partake of the hospitality of its inmates,” as well

as “incapable of resisting the tempting prospect which the place held out of an abundant supply of food and other means of enjoyment,” but also offers the following description in order to persuade his more reluctant fellow fugitive to join him: “So glorious a valley—such forests of bread-fruit trees—such groves of cocoa-nut—such wilderness of guava-bushes! Ah, shipmate! Don’t linger behind: in the name of all the delightful fruits, I am dying to be at them” (*T* 50, 51, 57). This leads to another passage often quoted by Melville scholars, taken from the beginning of Chapter 10, where the two deserters finally enter the valley. Tommo needs convincing by Toby because the two deserters know that the valley must belong to one of the two tribes inhabiting the area, tribes whose reputations differ. The dilemma facing the two is the following: “Typee or Happar? A frightful death at the hands of the fiercest of cannibals, or a kindly reception from a gentler race of savages?” (*T* 66). However, what is much more seldom quoted is the sentence immediately preceding these two: “How to obtain the fruit which we felt convinced must grow near at hand was our first thought.” As much as the two runaways would, for obvious reasons, prefer not to be eaten, at that moment, it is the desire to *eat* that is foremost in their minds, even though this entails the risk of encountering cannibals. As Henry Hughes has put it, it is thus their “hunger that drives them toward their first contact with the natives” (4). If the question of eating is really this important to Tommo, then his hunger is surely also important for understanding his narrative. Clearly, the lure of easy access to food is perhaps the most important factor motivating his actions.

Another important trait that Tommo has in common with the classical parasites is that he is not only hungry, but also unable to fill his stomach on his own. There can be no doubt that among the Typees, and especially before his foot gets better, he is in a position of extreme vulnerability. Not only is he a poor sailor without any means to support himself—poverty being a common trope in comedy to “reveal [the parasite’s] dependency” (Damon 28)—but when he finally reaches the valley, he is also starving and suffering from the ailment in his leg. Given the difficulties of the journey, it is doubtful if he could have made it back to Nukuheva bay, had he tried, and his knife would hardly have helped him against the spears

of the Typees. Consequently, he is entirely at the mercy of his hosts; had they decided to eat him on the spot, to enslave him or to drive him away, there is not much he could have done about it.

Luckily for Tommo, he does have one thing he also shares with many parasites of comedy: his quick wits and his capability for adapting to circumstances, tailoring his behavior and opinions to what he deems the most gainful. This knack for saying the right thing at the right time—even though he does not necessarily mean what he says—is perhaps most clearly seen when, after finally encountering the natives that live in the valley, he and Toby are led to a large bamboo hut where they are scrutinized by everyone. At this moment the two are not yet aware which tribe they have encountered, and are therefore understandably nervous when the seeming leader of the tribe, speaking in his own tongue, asks them what appears to be the following question: Typee or Happar? Following an impulse, Tommo lets it be known that he considers the Typees “mortar-kee” (good), which is said to help “conciliate the good will of the natives, with whom our congeniality of sentiment on this point did more towards inspiring a friendly feeling than anything else that could have happened” (*T* 71–72). It is this that leads to a ceremony where the deserters and the natives exchange names, and then to exactly what Tommo and Toby had been hoping for: first food and later rest.

Tommo then offers a detailed account of the meal they are served, which consists of cocoanut milk, the bread-fruit dish known as “poeepoe,” and “several other dishes . . . , some of which were positively delicious” (*T* 73). Due to the effect the visitors’ clumsy attempts to eat it has on their hosts, the poee-poe is treated to the largest part of this description:

This staple article of food among the Marquese islanders is manufactured from the produce of the bread-fruit tree. It somewhat resembles in its plastic nature our bookbinder’s paste, is of a yellow color, and somewhat tart to the taste.

Such was the dish, the merits of which I was now eager to discuss. I eyed it wistfully for a moment, and then unable any longer to stand on ceremony, plunged my hand into the yielding mass, and to the boisterous mirth of the natives drew it forth laden with the poee-poe, which adhered in lengthening strings to every finger. So stubborn was its consistency, that in conveying my

heavily-freighted hand to my mouth, the connecting links almost raised the calabash from the mats on which it had been placed. This display of awkwardness—in which, by-the-bye, Toby kept me company—convulsed the bystanders with uncontrollable laughter. (*T* 72–73)

This passage is worth quoting in full because it clearly exemplifies the narrative's two main modes of referring to food, as well as Tommo's tendency of shifting back and forth between the two, often in the same paragraph: The quote starts out as an anthropological observation about a noteworthy fact about native food culture, presented in a fairly detached and academic tone ("Such was the dish, the merits of which I was now eager to discuss"), only to turn into the viewpoint of a famished guest gorging himself on the dinner he has long been dreaming of ("I eyed it wistfully for a moment, and then unable any longer to stand on ceremony, plunged my hand into the yielding mass"). The narrative then shifts back again to the descriptive mode, addressing the reactions of the natives to the clumsiness of their guests, as well as the instructions on how to properly eat poee-poee subsequently given by the chief, whose name they will later learn is Mehevi. This split in Tommo as narrator—he is part detached outsider describing the islanders in a seemingly objective manner, and part hungry guest with a strong personal interest in filling his stomach—will be seen repeatedly in the narrative.

Even though Tommo and Toby have not managed to rid themselves of the fear that the Typees may eat them, after their initial acceptance by the tribe, they are offered an abundance of food, kindness, and leisure. When Mehevi learns of the former's ailment, he orders a young Typee, Kory-Kory, to look after him. Tommo highly appreciates the services offered by this "tried servitor and faithful valet" (*T* 82–83), including spoon-feeding, making sure the guests get enough sleep, carrying Tommo on his back, bathing him, various forms of entertainment, and, as several critics have noted, possibly also sexual favors.¹⁰⁸ No matter if the latter is a correct

108 In particular, the description of the task claimed to be "the most laborious species of work performed in Typee," namely Kory-Kory lighting Tommo's pipe by rubbing two sticks against each other, has strong homoerotic undertones (*T* 111). For critics who have written about possible hidden references to homosexuality in *Typee*, see Martin (17–39), Crain, Hughes, and Bryant (*Melville Unfolding*).

assessment, there seems to be little doubt that Tommo, his coy veiling of his own sexual experiences notwithstanding, has every opportunity to have his bodily needs met by Fayaway and the other fair maidens of the valley.¹⁰⁹

Hence, in the valley of the Typees—described by Kory-Kory as almost as pleasant as the Polynesian “heaven of bread-fruit, cocoa-nuts, and young ladies” (*T* 173)—Tommo finds exactly what he has all the while told the readers that he is looking for: food, leisure, and most likely also other sensual pleasures. In fact, for the most part there is so much of the former that nobody ever needs to go hungry.¹¹⁰ And, just like himself, the natives, whom he describes as of an “indolent disposition,” are highly predisposed toward the latter (*T* 90). Throughout the narrative Tommo constantly returns to their aversion to hard labor and their fondness for leisure. This becomes particularly clear in his description of a typical day in the valley in Chapter 20, which ends with the statement that “[t]o many of [the Typees], indeed, life is little else than an often interrupted and luxurious nap” (*T* 152).¹¹¹ At first glance, then, what Tommo has found is nothing less than the paradise of parasites, the one place on earth where his dream of “plenty and repose” can come true.

Before addressing Tommo’s relationship to the Typees, some additional comments about his potential indebtedness to the classical figure of the comedic parasite are in order. Whereas there are many similarities, there are also differences. For example, once he has been accepted by the natives, Tommo must no longer worry about a fearsome possibility that had always kept the parasites of comedy on their toes: due to the abundance of food in the valley, he is spared the parasite’s “painful eagerness

109 In a thorough analysis of importance placed upon sex in the native culture, as well as its connections to religion, William Heath claims that “[n]othing was more honorific in Marquesan society than sexual skill” (48).

110 However, Tommo mentions that sometimes the harvest could be poor (*T* 117).

111 The sole exception mentioned by Tommo is Kory-Kory’s mother, Tinor, “the only industrious person in all the valley of Typee; and she could not have employed herself more actively had she been left an exceedingly muscular and destitute widow, with an inordinate supply of young children, in the bleakest part of the civilized world” (*T* 85). However, Marsoin has convincingly argued that Tommo’s claim that the Typees do not work, says more about his own Western expectations that “‘labor’ should be painful,” than it does about the natives’ way of life (“No Land” 224).

for the arrival of the dinner hour,” as well as the usual “struggle to gain his place at the table” (Damon 26, 28). He also has a lot of time on his hands, as opposed to the always busy parasites of comedy, who generally “had little time for accessory pleasures, such as sex” (Damon 57). On the other hand, and this too is a direct consequence of ending up with the Typees, Tommo does have at least two things to worry about that the classical parasites did not have to deal with: the possibility of becoming dinner or being forcibly tattooed.

The former possibility raises a few philosophical questions. In *Typee* it is Toby who comes closest to formulating these. Refusing to believe that their hosts are feeding them out of the goodness of their savage hearts, he at one point tells Tommo:

Why, for what do you suppose the devils have been feeding us up in this kind of style during the last three days, unless it were for something that you are too much frightened to talk about? Look at that Kory-Kory there!—has he not been stuffing you with this confounded mushes, just in the way they treat swine before they kill them? Depend upon it, we will be eaten this blessed night, and there is the fire we shall be roasted by. (*T* 94)

Toby’s fears raise the apt question of whether people who fully qualify as parasites in all other regards, can be described as such if they are literally being fed and fattened to be eaten. This is an additional difficulty facing all attempts to arrive at clear and unambiguous rules for separating parasites from non-parasites; to quote Serres: “The feast changes hosts, and the guest changes roles; from the subject of the banquet, the [guest] becomes the object: once a parasite, now the main course” (*Parasite* 62).¹¹²

112 Similar borderline cases can also be found in other works by Melville. In *Mardi*, Taji at one point visits the two lords Piko and Hello, whose mutual love of bloodshed leads them to arrange tournaments where their subjects are encouraged to kill each other for their sovereigns’ viewing pleasure: “the unbounded hospitality of the kings’ household was freely offered to all heroes whatsoever, who for the love of arms, and the honor of broken heads, desired to cross battle-clubs, hurl spears, or die game in the royal valley of Deddo” (*M* 444). In *Moby-Dick*, Queequeg teaches Ishmael that humans might be fattened up for more reasons than to be eaten or killed in battle: “in his broken fashion Queequeg gave me to understand that, in his land, owing to the absence of settees and sofas of all sorts, the kings, chiefs, and great people generally, were in the custom of fattening some of the lower orders for ottomans; and to furnish a house comfortably in that respect, you had only to buy up eight or ten lazy fellows, and lay them round in the piers and alcoves” (*MD* 100).

One trait of the parasites of classical comedy that at first glance would seem *not* to be applicable to Tommo, is the fact that they were seldom properly individualized: even though exceptions exist, due to their function as comic relief, they were usually presented as little more than embodiments of typical parasitic character traits, in particular their hunger. Obviously, this does not hold for Tommo, who is a far more complex character than any literary parasite prior to Shakespeare and Jonson, but even so, there are still some similarities. First, there is the question of background and ties to the world, something the parasites of comedy almost never had. While this is not entirely the case for Tommo, he has very little to say about his family or about his previous life, only making a few sporadic references to missing his friends, family, and country throughout the narrative.¹¹³ It would therefore be possible to say of him something similar to what Damon says of Saturio from Plautus' *The Persian*, who "alone of [Roman] literary parasites is endowed with the rudiments of a family" (51).

Finally, the question of names should be addressed. As noted in Chapter 2, the parasites of comedy were most often known by their comic nicknames having to do with their appetites. As Elizabeth Ivory Tylawsky argues, to the classical parasites the very act of being given an epithet functioned as a means of inclusion within a group: "Being named brought the hungry outsider into the group, giving him recognition together with his invitation. Being nicknamed granted inclusion within a closed group, a nickname conferred belonging and belonging meant access to the table" (4). Now, after the Typees want to learn his and Toby's names, Tommo expresses a similar insight: "An exchange of names is equivalent to a ratification of good will and amity among these simple people; and as we were aware of this fact, we were delighted that it had taken place on the present occasion" (*T* 72). In addition, when he is going to introduce himself to Mehevi, it is revealed that Tommo is not the narrator's real name at all:

113 See (*T* 108, 239, 243). There is also the reference to the two English words Tommo has taught Kory-Kory's father, old Marheyo: "Home" and "Mother" (*T* 248).

I hesitated for an instant, thinking that it might be difficult for him to pronounce my real name, and then with the most praiseworthy intentions intimated that I was known as “Tom.” But I could not have made a worse selection; the chief could not master it: “Tommo,” “Tomma,” “Tommee,” every thing but plain “Tom.” As he persisted in garnishing the word with an additional syllable, I compromised the matter with him at the word “Tommo;” and by that name I went during the entire period of my stay in the valley. (*T*72)

Thus, just as is the case in *Omoa*, *Mardi*, *White-Jacket*, and probably also *Moby-Dick*—“Call me Ishmael” (*MD* 3)—*Typee*’s narrator goes under a sobriquet. No matter if this is a coincidence, given Tommo’s hunger and the Polynesian tradition of bestowing nicknames “in accordance with some humorous or ignoble trait” (*O* 260), it is fitting that one of the suggestions made by Mehevi is a homophone for the word “tummy.” There is also a second potential meaning of his chosen moniker: As John Samson points out, “the name that the narratives propose, ‘Tommo,’ has a meaning: it is a Marquesan verb signifying ‘to enter into, to adapt well to’” (30). Contrary to Samson, who notes that “ironically Tommo not only fails to understand his newly given name, he never adapts” (31), I would rather claim that while Tommo obviously never adapts to Typeean society, as such, like the comedic parasites, he is a master of adaptation, in the tactical sense of securely lodging himself in a position where he may freely feed. Accordingly, both these potential meanings of the name “Tommo” are telling.

The Parasite and His Host

So far, the analysis has focused on Tommo’s parasitical traits, but this is only a small part of what I have in mind when I claim that its “parasitical relationships” are essential to *Typee*. To move beyond this first step, in the following I will scrutinize the narrator’s association with his hosts to address a question that has been repeated by readers, from Sophia Hawthorne—who in a letter commented upon “the unfathomable mystery” of the Typees’ treatment of Tommo (qtd. in Metcalf 91)—and up to the present: What exactly do the natives want from him? Or as

Tommo himself remarks, after he and Toby have stayed with the Typees for a week:

The natives, actuated by some mysterious impulse, day after day redoubled their attentions to us. Their manner towards us was unaccountable. Surely, thought I, they would not act thus if they meant us any harm. But why this excess of deferential kindness, or what equivalent can they imagine us capable of rendering them for it? (*T* 97)

To better understand this “excess of deferential kindness,” it is necessary to turn to a concept already briefly addressed in Chapter 2 due to its many points of intersection with the figure of the parasite: *patronage*. While Tommo never explicitly uses the term, there are a number of reasons for understanding his relationship to Mehevi as one between patron and client.¹¹⁴ One, to be addressed in more detail later, is that social anthropologists have argued that historically, a local version of this type of social relationship functioned as one of the basic organizing principles of Polynesian society. Another is that Tommo’s association with the chief almost fully satisfies Andrew Wallace-Hadrill’s four criteria: to reiterate, he suggests that to qualify as patronage a social relationship must be (i) reciprocal, (ii) personal, (iii) asymmetrical, and (iv) not legally enforceable. In *Typee*, the last three criteria are undoubtedly met: Mehevi personally interacts with Tommo (ii), the chief is clearly of much higher rank than his guest (iii), and, due to the lack of institutionalized courts and written laws among the natives, if one of them had failed to live up to their bargain, it would obviously not be possible to drag the guilty party in front of a judge (iv). The only potentially ambiguous point is the question of reciprocity (i). A pertinent question must therefore be addressed: is there a sort of unwritten contract between the two, and, if so, what are its terms and stipulations?

Since Tommo never mentions such a contract and since the lack of a shared language prevents him from understanding what the natives

¹¹⁴ There is also another possible candidate for the role of Tommo’s patron. Following Wai-chee Dimock’s argument, it would be possible to argue that the entire tribe, which she considers “the collective presence behind Mehevi,” comes to function as his patron, the chief just being the tribe’s most visible representative (“*Typee*” 33).

want from him, from his perspective the most likely answer is no. Interrogating the details of his relationship to Mehevi as it plays out in the narrative offers several central clues that indicate that to the chief, the answer is clearly yes. To explain why this is so, it is necessary to approach their association from the only perspective the narrative offers: that of the guest. First, consider what Tommo says about the Typees. On the one hand he constantly praises them in what seems a very earnest and sincere manner, stating that, even though they are cannibals, “a more humane, gentlemanly, and amiable set of epicures do not probably exist in the Pacific” (*T* 97). He also declares that, “after passing a few weeks in this valley of the Marquesas, I formed a higher estimate of human nature than I had ever before entertained. But alas! since then I have been one of the crew of a man-of-war, and the pent-up wickedness of five hundred men has nearly overturned my previous theories” (*T* 203).

Nothing in the narrative indicates that this is not his honest opinion of the matter. Still, there is no doubt that he deliberately hides his true feelings from the natives on several occasions. This becomes especially evident when, after his initial encounter with the only native who speaks English, the wanderer Marnoo, Tommo realizes that he is, in effect, a prisoner in the valley. When he asks this “Polynesian Apollo” (*T* 135)—himself a parasite figure of sorts whose tabooed status allows him to come and go between the different tribes on the island, being well fed everywhere in return for the news he brings—to convey to the Typees that he wishes to leave, Marnoo is reluctant, but finally gives in: “yielding at last to my importunities, he addressed several of the chiefs ... His petition, however, was at once met with the most violent disapprobation, manifesting itself in angry glances and gestures, and a perfect torrent of passionate words, directed to both him and myself” (*T* 141).

In other words, Tommo quickly learns that some things are better kept to himself if he wants to avoid angering his host:

the scene which had just occurred admonished me of the danger of trifling with the wayward and passionate spirits against whom it was vain to struggle, and might even be fatal to do so. My only hope was to induce the natives to believe

that I was reconciled to my detention in the valley, and by assuming a tranquil and cheerful demeanor, to allay the suspicions which I had so unfortunately aroused. Their confidence revived, they might in a short time remit in some degree their watchfulness over my movements, and I should then be the better enabled to avail myself of any opportunity which presented itself for escape. (T 144)

As the preceding quoted passages clearly indicate, Tommo's relationship to the tribe is thoroughly ambiguous. He simultaneously praises the natives and hides his true feelings to be able to escape. Accordingly, it is difficult to answer whether he is their friend or is merely pretending to be. One might also ask, if he is truly a friend, is he a good one?

A similar ambiguity also defines his personal relationship to the commanding and "superb-looking warrior" Mehevi (T 71), who immediately takes an active interest in the well-being of his two visitors: "nothing could surpass the friendliness he manifested towards both my companion and myself" (T 79). As much as he initially impresses Tommo, it is only later that the full extent of the chief's power and importance begins to dawn on him. This becomes especially evident after the grand party described in Chapter 23: "What lavish plenty reigned around!— Warwick feasting his retainers with beef and ale was a niggard to the noble Mehevi!" (T 163).¹¹⁵ Returning to this magnificent repast two chapters later, Tommo admits that "[p]revious to the Feast of the Calabashes I had been puzzled what particular station to assign Mehevi. But the important part he took upon the occasion convinced me that he had no superior among the inhabitants of the valley" (T 186). For the first time, Tommo sees all the chiefs of the valley gathered, and it is this that makes him realize that Mehevi is second to none, and that the Ti, the "Bachelor's Hall" where the chief holds court (T 157), is the local equivalent of a castle:

115 The feast offers an opportunity both for anthropological observations concerning native food culture, and for the hungry visitor to gorge himself (T 165). In the quote, Tommo is probably referring to Richard Neville, 16th Earl of Warwick (1428–1471), better known as "Warwick the Kingmaker," accused in Shakespeare's *King Henry VI, Part 3* (c. 1590) of being a "[p]roud setter up and puller down of kings" (3.3.167). In order to explain the extent of Mehevi's hospitality, Tommo thus ends up explicitly invoking older European relationships of aristocratic patronage.

Among [the chiefs] Mehevi moved with an easy air of superiority which was not to be mistaken; and he whom I had only looked at as the hospitable host of the Ti, and one of the military leaders of the tribe, now assumed in my eyes the dignity of royal station. His striking costume, no less than his naturally commanding figure, seemed indeed to give him pre-eminence over the rest. The towering helmet of feathers that he wore raised him in height above all who surrounded him; and though some others were similarly adorned, the length and luxuriance of their plumes were far inferior to his. Mehevi was in fact the greatest of the chiefs—the head of his clan—the sovereign of the valley. ... The Ti was the place—and Mehevi the king. (*T* 186–87)

This leads Tommo to the following realization, clearly showing that there is an unmistakable degree of calculation behind the friendship he professes for the chief:

After having made this discovery I could not avoid congratulating myself that Mehevi had from the first taken me as it were under his royal protection, and that he still continued to entertain for me the warmest regard, as far at least as I was enabled to judge from appearances. For the future I determined to pay most assiduous court to him, hoping that eventually through his kindness I might obtain my liberty. (*T* 187)

Just as Tommo is eager to gain Mehevi's protection and friendship—not with the aim of keeping it, but of being allowed to leave the valley—the chief also seems eager to offer it. I will return to the question of what Mehevi might be said to gain from this, but it is first necessary to describe the concrete advantages he bestows upon his guest. As mentioned, Mehevi orders Kory-Kory to serve as his valet. Tommo also ends up living in the household of his faithful servant's parents, Marheyo and Tinor, together with the beautiful Fayaway and several other lovely maidens, as well as three merry young idlers, all of whom have the best interests of his stomach in mind: "All the inhabitants of the valley treated me with great kindness; but as to the household of Marheyo, with whom I was now permanently domiciled, nothing could surpass their efforts to minister to my comfort. To the gratification of my palate they paid the most unwearied attention" (*T* 113).

Even in such a paradise of plenty as the valley of Typee, regaling a hungry guest with a hearty appetite for four months is bound to be costly. Still, the cost does not fall on Marheyo, or at least not alone, since it turns out that Mehevi plays an important part in keeping his new retainer properly fed. For example, when Tommo and Toby are returning from their first visit to the Ti, the chief sends an abundance of food with them, including poee-poe, bread-fruit, bananas, cocoa-nuts, and pork. This causes Tommo to conclude that “Mehevi, it seemed, was bent on replenishing old Marheyo’s larder, fearful perhaps that without this precaution his guests might not fare as well as they could desire” (*T* 96).

The arrangement with his patron also gains Tommo regular access to Mehevi’s inner circle at the Ti. As befitting a good host, here the chief offers not only companionship and leisure, but also what the etymology of the former word suggests: food.¹¹⁶ In fact, Tommo at one point admits that this is the main reason he comes: “To tell the truth, Mehevi was indebted to the excellence of his viands for the honor of my repeated visits,—a matter which cannot appear singular, when it is borne in mind that bachelors, all the world over, are famous for serving up unexceptionable repasts” (*T* 158). Mehevi thus seems to take his role as patron seriously. As social anthropologist Marshall D. Sahlins has pointed out, such generosity was customary among Polynesian chiefs. As he sees it, their power was intimately connected to the generation of “a politically utilizable agricultural surplus,” which could then be used for a variety of means, leading him to the conclusion that “[r]edistribution of the fund of power was the supreme art of Polynesian politics” (Sahlins 296).¹¹⁷ One of the most important of these means was the allocation of the goods contributed by the people to the members of the chief’s closest circle, to ensure their continuing loyalty. As Sahlins argues—and, since “hanger-on” and “retainer” often

116 The origin of companion is the Latin “companionem,” combining “com” (together) and “panis” (bread), that is, someone to share bread with. In other words, companionship and parasitism both derive from the sharing of food.

117 That Mehevi has access to such an agriculturally based “fund of power” is evident from Tommo’s description of the conservation of the fruit from the bread-fruit tree in Chapter 15 (*T* 116).

serve as synonyms for “parasite,” in so doing indirectly evoking the latter concept—these goods were

appropriated for the livelihood of circles of retainers, many of them close kinsmen of the chief, who clustered about the powerful paramounts. These were not all useless hangers-on. They were political cadres: supervisors of the stores [of food], talking chiefs, ceremonial attendants, high priests who were intimately involved in political rule, envoys to transmit directives through the chiefdom. (297)¹¹⁸

What Sahlins’ analysis indicates is that, instead of viewing the abundance of food and other favors bestowed upon Tommo as a sign of hospitality given without expectation of anything in return, to Mehevi, it likely is meant as part of a mutually binding agreement where both parts have a part to play. This possibility is further strengthened if *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1950) is taken into consideration. Here, Marcel Mauss maintains that there exists an unwritten obligation to return even what is seemingly freely given, and that this obligation functions as the glue holding pre-capitalist societies together. This argument helps explain the excessive kindness of Mehevi: From Mauss’ perspective, it becomes part of a “*system of total services*” where “total services and counter-services are committed to in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare” (5–6; emphasis in the original). Also note that to Mauss, food holds a special role in this reciprocal system: “The gift is therefore at one and the same time what should be done, what should be received, and yet what is dangerous to take. This is because the thing that is given itself forges a bilateral, irrevocable bond, above all when it consists of food” (59).

118 Sahlins’ primary focus is the most advanced Polynesian islands, such as Hawaii and Tahiti, where chiefs would rule over much larger populations than Mehevi does. On a more moderate scale, his statements would still seem to hold true for the Typees: “A lesser chiefdom, confined say as in the Marquesas Islands to a narrow valley, could be almost personally ruled by a headman in frequent contact with the relatively small population. Melville’s partly romanticized—also for its ethnographic details, partly cribbed—account in *Typee* makes this clear” (299).

To combine the arguments of Mauss and Sahlins, while Tommo's acceptance of Mehevi's friendship is also important, it is particularly through repeatedly consuming the chief's edible "fund of power" that he manages to entangle himself in a "bilateral, irrevocable bond" of expectations he barely seems to grasp. No matter if he himself is aware of this or not (and his narrative seems to indicate that the latter is the case), by accepting Mehevi's food Tommo has very likely entered a form of pre-capitalist, gift-based relation of exchange where something is expected of him in return.

If the possibility I am suggesting by way of Sahlins and Mauss is correct, the question logically follows: What exactly is it Mehevi wants from his guest? Since Tommo—all his enthusiasm for the Typees and criticisms of the West aside—shows a very limited understanding of native culture, one cannot give any final answers to this question. Even so, Cynthia Damon's analysis of the relationship between patron and client/parasite offers a possible answer. Describing the different ways a classical parasite might go about acquiring his dinner invitations, she states that "it is useful to recognize that there are two basic techniques that a dependent might use to attract benefits from a patron, namely, flattery and services" (13).

Starting with flattery, it has already been pointed out how Tommo constantly praises Mehevi in a tone of gradually increasing admiration, going from calling him a "superb-looking warrior" to a "king." This might of course simply be seen as objective descriptions of a remarkable individual, but two things should be borne in mind. First, the classical parasite would frequently do anything to stroke the ego of his host, lavishing him with praise. Second, as noted in Chapter 2, if one wanted to indirectly label others as parasites, one common way of going about it was to apply the term "rex" to their patrons: "One could also characterize someone as a parasite by labeling his patron *rex*, 'king,' the flattering term used by comic parasites of their patrons" (Damon 16–17).

While it is often difficult to gauge whether Tommo's comments about Mehevi are objective descriptions or outright flattery, at one point he goes so far in his praise that it becomes obvious that he is feeding the reader little more than fawning propaganda. This happens in Chapter 26, which starts out as a reflection on whether or not it is appropriate to label

Mehevi king: “King Mehevi!—A goodly sounding title!—and why should I not bestow it upon the foremost man in the valley of Typee?” (T 188) To answer this question, Tommo lampoons “his gracious majesty” King Kammehammaha III of Hawaii as, among other choice epithets, a “fat, lazy, negro-looking blockhead, with as little character as power” (T 189). This leads to the following conclusion:

if the farcical puppet of a chief magistrate in the Sandwich Islands be allowed the title of King, why should it be withheld from the noble savage Mehevi, who is a thousand times more worthy of the appellation? All hail, therefore, Mehevi, King of the Cannibal Valley, and long life and prosperity to his Typeean majesty! May Heaven for many a year preserve him, the uncompromising foe of Nukuheva and the French, if a hostile attitude will secure his lovely domain from the remorseless inflictions of South Sea civilization. (T 189)

Clearly, no matter how great a chief Mehevi is, this is the sort of blatant flattery classical parasites excelled at offering, right down to the use of the epithet “king.” However, since Mehevi himself has no way of understanding his guest’s praise, it cannot be meant for the ears of the chief himself, but for the readers of *Typee*, a point I will return to.

The second of the two techniques mentioned by Damon is services. One of the reasons Tommo is unable to understand why the Typees are so intent on keeping him in the valley, is because he feels that he has little of value to offer. As he puts it in regard to their kindness and attention to all of his needs:

Had I been in a situation to instruct them in any of the rudiments of the mechanic arts, or had I manifested a disposition to render myself in any way useful among them, their conduct might have been attributed to some adequate motive, but as it was the matter seemed to me inexplicable.

During my whole stay on the island there occurred but two or three instances where the natives applied to me with the view of availing themselves of my superior information. And these now appear so ludicrous that I cannot forbear relating them. (T 120)

The incidents in question are all related to the few things Tommo brought with him when he ran off from the *Dolly*, including “a razor with its case,

a supply of needles and thread, a pound or two of tobacco, and a few yards of a bright-colored calico" (*T* 121). To the Typees, these items are regarded as treasures: "they gazed upon the miscellaneous contents as though I had just revealed to them a casket of diamonds" (*T* 121). The needle and thread come in handy when Tommo repairs a strip of old cloth for Marheyo, and the razor for shaving the warrior Narmonee. Later, it is also mentioned that the former finds a novel use for the old shoes that his guest has discarded, proudly wearing them as pendants around his neck.¹¹⁹

Apart from the uses these basic items are put to, even though Tommo is unable to instruct the Typees "in any of the rudiments of the mechanic arts" and has no great talent for rendering himself useful, this does not mean that he has nothing else to offer. In fact, in addition to the aforementioned "two or three instances," several times in the text he relates things he has done that, while he himself accords them little value, are evidently a source of real joy to the Typees. What these services have in common is, to quote Damon, "their cheapness: they cost the parasite nothing" (4). First, even though the Typees are never mean-spirited, unless Tommo misreads the situations, there are occasions where they gently ridicule him. This for example happens during the previously mentioned ceremony where he and Toby exchange names with the natives:

During this ceremony the greatest merriment prevailed, nearly every announcement on the part of the islanders being followed by a fresh sally of gaiety, which induced me to believe that some of them at least were innocently diverting the company at our expense, by bestowing upon themselves a string of absurd titles, of the humor of which we were of course entirely ignorant. (*T* 72)

This does not seem to bother Tommo, and neither does the "uncontrollable laughter" of the natives when he and Toby make their first, rather inelegant attempts at eating *poe-poe*. Now, compared to the abuse that the classical parasites of comedy had to be ready to suffer in return for their free meals—according to Damon, they were usually "shamelessly tolerant

¹¹⁹ An early indication of the problems involved in deciding whether Tommo is truly generous or not can be found in the following quote: When Marheyo signals an interest in the shoes, he states that "I immediately comprehended his desires, and very generously gave him the shoes, which had become quite mouldy" (*T* 146).

of insult and injury” (29)—this is nothing. Even so, it does show that up to a certain point, at least, Tommo, just like his comedic forefathers, is willing to lose face to fill his stomach.

From the Typees’ perspective, the undoubtedly comic situations that arise from Tommo’s lack of knowledge of their culture and traditions can be sources of amusement, but still, the most important contributions of their guest seem to be connected to the new inventions and ideas he brings into the valley. While these might appear insignificant to him, they are clearly not so to them. One such instance is the pop-gun he decides to make for a small boy, which leads to a veritable rush of similar requests from Typees young and old. As he puts it: “Had I possessed the remotest idea of the sensation this piece of ordnance was destined to produce, I should certainly have taken out a patent for the invention” (*T* 145). Even more important is what happens when Mehevi discovers that his new retainer has two talents nobody else in the valley seems to possess. Tommo mentions the first after having described the Typees’ love of chanting. This fondness notwithstanding, what they do not seem to be familiar with is singing, “at least,” as he puts it, “as that art is practiced among other nations” (*T* 227). When Tommo once chances to sing, the effect it has on them amazes him:

I shall never forget the first time I happened to roar out a stave in the presence of the noble Mehevi. It was a stanza from the “Bavarian broom-seller.” His Typean majesty, with all his court, gazed upon me in amazement, as if I had displayed some preternatural faculty which Heaven had denied to them. The king was delighted with the verse; but the chorus fairly transported him. At his solicitation I sang it again and again . . . Previous to Mehevi’s making the discovery, I had never been aware that there was anything of the nightingale about me; but I was now promoted to the place of court-minstrel, in which capacity I was afterwards perpetually called upon to officiate. (*T* 227–28)¹²⁰

¹²⁰ In *Melville’s Folk Roots* (1999), Kevin J. Hayes analyzes the correspondence between Tommo’s experiences and those related in the “Bavarian Broom-seller,” which chronicles a homesick foreigner selling brooms on the streets of London. Given the evolution of the parasite from an unwanted dinner-guest to an insect or an animal feeding on its host, it is not without significance that the broom-seller tries to convince people to buy his wares by stating that his brooms can “brush away insects that sometime annoy you,” as well as “sweep all vexatious intruders away” (qtd. in Hayes 14).

Strange as it may sound that the Typees are not familiar with singing, Tommo had previously mentioned that while the valley was home to an abundance of colorful and beautiful birds, these all had one thing in common: “they go sailing through the air in starry throngs; but alas! The spell of dumbness is upon them all—there is not a single warbler in the valley!” (T 215). This perhaps helps explain why the Typees have never been exposed to the phenomenon before, and why nothing resembling (Western) traditions of singing had evolved. No matter if this explanation is correct, Tommo is in effect the sole songbird of the valley. Given the pleasure the Typees gain from his efforts as “nightingale,” this gives one indication why it would reflect well upon Mehevi to keep such a *rara avis* in his entourage.

While the first new *techné* Tommo offers the Typees involves the voice, the second involves a form of acting:

Singing was not the only means I possessed of diverting the royal Mehevi and his easy-going subjects. Nothing afforded them more pleasure than to see me go through the attitudes of pugilistic encounter. As not one of the natives had soul enough in him to stand up like a man, and allow me to hammer away at him, for my own personal gratification and that of the king, I was necessitated to fight against an imaginary enemy, whom I invariably made to knock under my superior prowess. Sometimes when this sorely battered shadow retreated precipitately towards a group of savages, and, following him, I rushed among them, dealing my blows right and left, they would disperse in all directions, much to the enjoyment of Mehevi, the chiefs, and themselves. (T 228)

That Tommo’s shadowboxing and singing hardly qualify as great art is of little importance, given that the Typees obviously find pleasure in them.¹²¹ Thus, in addition to whatever other reasons Mehevi might have for wanting to retain the guest, it becomes clear that just as the classic parasite, Tommo is a master of providing entertainment—no matter if he is aware of it or not. In the context of what he offers the Typees and what

¹²¹ That the Typees themselves enjoy play-acting is evident from the detailed description of how one of the younger chiefs, Narnee, goes about fetching fruit from the top of the tall cocoanut trees for Tommo (T 214).

he receives in return, he can therefore be viewed not only as a parasite, but more specifically as an artist-parasite: someone who pays for the food he receives through words (in the form of song) and acting (in the form of pugilistic encounters).

To sum up at this point, it seems likely that having Tommo in his entourage not only reflects positively on Mehevi as chief, but also ensures him steady access to entertainment and to various types of technological innovation, which are no less important for being comparatively modest from a Western perspective. Allowing him to leave, on the other hand, would not only deprive Mehevi of his guest's various talents, but could also potentially be held against him as a sign of weakness or as an indication that he has not been a good enough host. Also, no matter if this was the explicit intention which led the natives to feed and pamper Tommo, he is clearly in their debt—in Alex Calder's words:

Tommo “belongs” to Mehevi, who has extended to him the protective and proprietary mantle of his personal taboo. The more important point is that everyone else in the valley is entirely aware this is so, and Tommo will find doors opening and closing in relation to a sign he cannot read but that has always determined how he stands in relation to his surroundings. (33)

To Mehevi, letting Tommo go before this debt has been properly repaid would thus be the equivalent of being conned in a business venture. This is a prospect few self-respecting leaders anywhere would take lightly, but it might be seen as especially important in Polynesia, where honor, according to Mauss, “expresses itself violently” (37). When Tommo makes it known that he wants to leave the valley, the anger expressed by Mehevi, who “took care by the whole of his behavior towards me to show the displeasure and resentment which he felt” (*T* 142), therefore makes perfect sense.¹²²

122 While Calder's explanation of what the Typees want from Tommo doesn't cover all relevant aspects, it is still useful: “The people of Typee require a Pakeha Maori of their own—if I may use the New Zealand term for a European who settled with Polynesians on Polynesian terms, who mediated transactions between ship and shore and so augmented a tribe's position relative to the other tribes of the island” (33).

What finally puts an end to the contentment Tommo has found as a well-fed client of Mehevi's, is the tattoo artist Karky, who lets it be known that he wants to practice his art on him, and, more specifically, on his face. This would serve a double function, at the same time permanently initiating him into Typeean society and excluding him from Western civilization.¹²³ Clearly in favor of this plan, Mehevi does not only desire his continual presence, with all the advantages this brings, he wants him to once and for all become part of the tribe. *This* is the contract Tommo has unknowingly signed by accepting the chief's patronage; in the words of Hildegard Hoeller, who has explored somewhat similar questions in relation to gift-fiving in *Typee*:

What escapes Tommo is that, in response to the gifts bestowed upon him, he is expected to become a Typee since gift economies function by drawing clear distinctions between brother and other—the former bound within the community through gift exchange, the other treated as enemy with different, far less “generous” rules. (150)¹²⁴

Faced with this expectation it becomes evident what Tommo is willing to accept in order to gain free meals and what he is not. As long as all he has to suffer is laughter, he does not mind metaphorically losing face, but losing face in a *literal* sense through tattooing is another matter altogether; as Hoeller puts it: “The phenomenal, unfathomable generosity of the Typees becomes impossible for Tommo precisely because it demands a counter-gift of nothing less than himself” (155). Around the same time the ailment in his foot returns, as does his fear of being eaten, and he finally decides to “escape from a captivity, which, however endurable, nay, delightful it might be in some respects,

123 For the argument that the Typees' desire to tattoo Tommo should be read as an attempt to integrate him more fully into their culture, see Otter (*Melville's Anatomies* 10). The Typees also attempt to do so through teaching Tommo different skills useful for life in the valley: stating that whenever he took part in their activities, “the delight of the islanders was boundless; and there was always a throng of competitors for the honor of instructing me in any particular craft” (*T* 151).

124 On gift-giving in Melville, see also Doan.

involved in its issues a fate marked by the most frightful contingencies” (*T* 140–41).¹²⁵

To summarize the argument so far, the narrative of *Typee* illuminates the tension resulting from two different sets of contrasting expectations. On the one hand, Mehevi seems to consider their relationship as one between patron and client, and having lived up to his end of the bargain, he expects his guest to do the same; on the other hand, Tommo is primarily looking for someone to feed him, but whose meals come with no expectations attached. When he finally decides to run away, it might thus be seen as the result of his realization that what originally looked like a host, in fact was a patron.

The ending of the narrative, where Tommo finally manages to escape after having spent four months in the valley, must now be addressed. When the excited natives one day announce to him that Toby has returned by boat, he conveys that he wants to go to the beach to meet his friend, but it is only after having several times repeated the request that he is allowed to do so by his patron: “Again and again I renewed my petition to Mehevi. He regarded me with a fixed and serious eye, but at length yielding to my importunity, reluctantly granted my request” (*T* 246). Upon learning that Toby has not come, after all, Tommo insists on continuing in the hope that the strangers who have arrived might help him run away. With the help of Kory-Kory, he at last manages to reach the beach, where he sees an English whale-boat, as well as a tabooed native from Nukuheva, Karakoe, bartering with the Typees for his freedom:

Karakoe stood near the edge of the water with a large roll of cotton-cloth thrown over one arm, and holding two or three canvass bags of powder; while with the other hand he grasped a musket, which he appeared to be proffering to several of the chiefs around him. But they turned with disgust from his offers, and seemed to be impatient at his presence, with vehement gestures waving him off to his boat, and commanding him to depart. . . . When I remembered the extravagant

¹²⁵ In an ironic twist, the decision to run away can be said to point back to the very first page of *Typee*, where Tommo had complained about the spoilt and ungrateful behavior of “state-room sailors” and their incapacity of appreciating their privileges. In the end, he, too, turns out to be unable to enjoy the Typeean equivalent of “breakfasting, lunching, dining off five courses, chatting, playing whist, and drinking champagne-punch,” as well as “sleep[ing] for ten hours” a day.

value placed by these people upon the articles which were offered to them in exchange for me, and which were so indignantly rejected, I saw new proof of the same fixed determination of purpose they had all along manifested with regard to me, and in despair, and shaking myself free from the grasp of those who held me, I sprung upon my feet and rushed towards Karakoee. (*T* 249)

From the perspective of my analysis, the most important part of the ending is Tommo's attempt, as he finally reaches Karakoee and the boat, to repay the kindness of those who have cared for him during his stay in the valley, as expressed in the following passage:

Marheyo and Kory-Kory, and a great many of the women, followed me into the water, and I was determined, as the only mark of gratitude I could show, to give them the articles which had been brought as my ransom. I handed the musket to Kory-Kory, with a rapid gesture which was equivalent to a "Deed of Gift;" threw the roll of cotton to old Marheyo, pointing as I did so to poor Fayaway, who had retired from the edge of the water and was sitting down disconsolate on the shingles; and tumbled the powder-bags out to the nearest young ladies, all of whom were vastly willing to take them. The distribution did not occupy ten seconds, and before it was over the boat was under full way; [Karakoee] all the while exclaiming loudly against what he considered a useless throwing away of valuable property. (*T* 250–51)

With some commendable exceptions, few Melville scholars have taken an interest in this passage, which to my mind is central for understanding the relationship between the guest and his hosts in *Typee*. Two of those who have analyzed the passage, Milton R. Stern and Hildegard Hoeller, have come to similar, somewhat Emersonian conclusions about Tommo's gifts: The former holds that he "cannot buy his own deliverance with the fortuitous gun and calico, which are a bogus reprieve because they are external to his own commitments" ("*Typee*" 133); the latter that "he knows his gifts are poignant, ironic travesties of the gifts he has received. They are given fast, as a way of ridding himself of his bond" (156).¹²⁶ As

126 More precisely, Stern and Hoeller's views of what constitutes a "real" gift might perhaps be said to resemble Ralph Waldo Emerson's maxim from his essay "Gifts": "The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me. ... But it is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something, which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith's" (26).

opposed to Stern and Hoeller, I am not convinced that this is necessarily the best way to understand these gifts.

Looking in more detail at the passage, the “young ladies” all seem very happy to receive their presents, but when it comes to those that have been closest to Tommo, it is much harder to gauge their reactions. Since the heartbroken Fayaway is described not just as sobbing, but as “sobbing indignantly” (*T* 250), this might indicate that she is not simply sad at his leaving, but perhaps also feels betrayed by him.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, since she has withdrawn from Tommo’s side it is hard to know whether the roll of cotton has an effect on her, and, if so, whether it makes her more or less sad and indignant. Nor is it possible to unambiguously assess Kory-Kory’s reaction to the gift of the musket—at least not in the original edition of *Typee*. In the revised American edition, though, Melville changed the second sentence quoted above to “I handed the musket to Kory-Kory, in doing which he would fain have taken hold of me.” His reasons for making this change are not known, but it seems likely that his aim must have been to say something about Kory-Kory’s reaction to Tommo’s gift, perhaps as the result of a realization that his narrator’s actions might seem ungrateful to some readers; as it is put in the editorial appendix to the Northwestern-Newberry edition: “the revision does remove the possible implication of callousness on Tommo’s part, and may thus be thought to soften the original forthright tone of the book” (*T* 333).

At first glance, the new sentence can be read as expressing gratitude. As the musket is a valuable and rare item, Kory-Kory is so happy that he would have embraced his friend, were it not for the hurry Tommo is in to make his escape. Even so, in contrast to this way of understanding “taken hold of me,” the phrase can just as well express that Kory-Kory would like to hold him back to stop him from leaving. After all, a few sentences previously it had been stated that as Tommo takes the last few steps toward his saviors in the boat, neither Marheyo “nor Kory-Kory attempted to

127 In the revised American edition, “sobbing indignantly” was changed to “sobbing convulsively.” The editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition remark that “[a]n effect of Fayaway’s sobbing being reported as convulsive rather than indignant is to remove any implication that she was indignant because Tommo was leaving her rather than because he was being prevented from leaving the island” (*T* 333).

hold me” (*T* 250), holding here meaning to hold him back. In such a reading, the musket could potentially be perceived as an insult to Kory-Kory’s honor. Realizing that the man whom he considered a friend is trying to buy him off with something that is not even properly his to give might have caused him to change his mind about letting Tommo go. Yet another possibility is suggested by the ending of *Omoo*, where the narrator tries to give half of his wages to the hospitable Ereemear Po-Po “as some small return for his kindness; but, although he well knew the value of the coin, not a dollar would he accept” (*O* 315). If comparable notions of hospitality exist on the different Polynesian islands, Kory-Kory could have similar reasons not to accept the gift Tommo thrusts into his hands.

In the end, it is probably not possible to decide whether any of these interpretations are correct. Since Tommo stresses that the whole scene took less than ten seconds, it could very well be that he himself is not sure how to understand what he has experienced. It is therefore truly fitting that this specific change made by Melville, likely intended to allay doubts about the sincerity of Tommo’s feelings, ends up so clearly embodying the fundamental ambiguity of *Typee* toward those who are simultaneously the narrator’s friends and captors. Similarly, it could also be asked whether Stern and Hoeller are right to define Tommo’s gifts simply as a “bogus reprieve” and as “ironic travesties.” After all, the context clearly shows that even though it only takes him a few seconds to offer these gifts, they nonetheless increase the chances of his recapture. Nor is it fair to claim that he should necessarily be understood as callous because he gives away something that does not belong to him, since there was simply nothing else he could have given the Typees at the time. Perhaps it would be better to understand Tommo’s presents as his attempt, to borrow a phrase from Arndt Niebisch, “to renegotiate the parasite-host relationship” (15). In other words, through his actions at the beach Tommo tries in the best way he can to balance out his accounts, so as *not* to be seen as an ungrateful parasite. Whereas Stern and Holler are correct that, in the end, he probably does not entirely succeed in the effort to cancel his debts, the significance of his attempt should not be overlooked.

Conspicuously absent from Tommo’s escape is the man he owes the most to, Mehevi. In fact, the passage where he states that “at length

yielding to my importunity, [he] reluctantly granted my request” is the last time the noble chief is mentioned in the narrative. Hence, even though Tommo should have succeeded in repaying Kory-Kory and Fayaway what he owes them with those gifts that were not really his to give, he is still in debt to his protector, without any final gift to offer him in return for the patronage he has received. Consequently, the decision to let the chief silently disappear from the story prior to the escape can be seen as Tommo’s understandable, if somewhat unsatisfactory way of avoiding the embarrassment of still being in debt.

There is perhaps one final thing that Tommo has to offer Mehevi: the narrative of *Typee* itself. For, as earlier noted, trying to understand the massive amount of flattery heaped upon the chief throughout the story leads to the paradoxical situation where Tommo’s admiration can only be expressed to the readers of the narrative, and not directly to the one he professes to admire. When approached from this perspective, *Typee* can be understood as a belated work of praise for someone whom Tommo had no way of thanking at the time, immortalizing him as a noble king in a work of literature read and discussed over one hundred and seventy years later. If not for the parasite-poet, there is no doubt that Mehevi—if he ever really existed—would have been long forgotten.

Tommo the Troublemaker

We have already seen that in their final moment together, Mehevi grants what turns out to be his guest’s last wish only because of the “importunity” of Tommo’s repeated requests. According to *OED*, this word refers to the “quality or fact of being persistent or pressing in making requests, demands, or offers, esp. so as to cause irritation or distress,” in other words, “something which is troublesome or difficult” (“importunity”). A fitting word: Melville’s narrator is a *troublesome* guest, indeed.¹²⁸ This brings to mind the following claim from Michel Serres:

128 As Michael C. Berthold notes, David Porter’s travel narratives—which Melville drew heavily upon in *Typee*—contain reflections on the Typeean word “kie-kie”: “*Kie-kie* signifies to eat, it also signifies a *troublesome fellow*; may it not also have many other significations, with which we are unacquainted? It may signify to *cut up*, to *divide*, to *sacrifice*, to *keep as trophies*”

“The parasite is an inclination toward trouble, to the change of phase of a system. It is a little troublemaker” (Parasite 196).

Even though Tommo is no revolutionary or reformer himself, as well as explicitly opposed to those who try to impose Western ways of life on the Polynesians, the narrative clearly demonstrates that, no matter if he is aware of this or not, he is still the bringer of something akin to what Serres terms “a little difference, a minimal action” that disturbs traditional customs (*Parasite* 193). To understand the chain of events he sets in motion, in this last part of the chapter I first offer a closer look at what the narrative says about Typeean society as a “system.” Then, I trace some of the changes that occur as this system is affected by the presence and subsequent escape of the “foreign body” it—unwisely?—ends up hosting.

The first time Tommo glimpses the beautiful valley of the Typees, with its “hushed repose,” he likens it both to “the gardens of Paradise” and “the enchanted gardens in the fairy tale” (*T* 49). If this Edenic, seemingly ageless world were to be understood as a system, how should it be described? First, as it exchanges matter, energy, and information with its surroundings, it is an open and self-organizing living system, rather than closed and isolated one, like the kind that can be created in a laboratory, where there is a causal connection between input and output. While closed systems tend toward a state of equilibrium and a maximum amount of entropy—that is, energy not capable of doing work—this is not the case for open ones receiving a continual influx of outside energy, where, to quote Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, “equilibrium is a rare and precarious state” (128).

Contrary to what classical, Newtonian science held to be the case, to Prigogine and Stengers—as well as to Michel Serres, who is clearly indebted to their work—it is therefore not open systems and their randomness that should be counted as the exceptions to the general rule, but closed ones and their determinism.¹²⁹ At first glance, Tommo’s description

(Porter 46; qtd. in Berthold 556; emphasis in the original). This polysemous word is therefore highly relevant to Tommo: he is a troublesome guest out to eat at the tables of others, kept by Mehevi as a sort of trophy, who fears he might end up being eaten, and who causes a division among his hosts.

129 On the importance of Prigogine and Stengers’ work for Serres, see Johnsen.

of the social order of the natives appears as somewhat of an anomaly from such a Prigoginian perspective. For, while undoubtedly a complex open system, this Edenic world seems to be if not in, at least very close to a state of equilibrium. As Tommo puts it: “Nothing can be more uniform and undiversified than the life of the Typees; one tranquil day of ease and happiness follows another in quiet succession; and with these unsophisticated savages the history of a day is the history of a life” (*T* 149). In thermodynamic terms, the Typeean social order could thus perhaps be said to resemble what is known as a *steady state system*, meaning one that is open, but where most properties do not change over time.

In addition to being stable, the system would also seem to be in something close to an optimum state. Given the Typees’ lack of “legal provisions . . . for the well-being and conservation of society,” this puzzles Tommo:

everything went on in the valley with a harmony and smoothness unparalleled, I will venture to assert, in the most select, refined, and pious associations of mortals in Christendom. How are we to explain this enigma? These islanders were heathens! savages! ay, cannibals! and how came they, without the aid of established law, to exhibit, in so eminent a degree, that social order which is the greatest blessing and highest pride of the social state? (*T* 200)

Several factors mentioned in the narrative help explain this seeming combination of stability and optimization. As they are all related by Tommo, it is of course not unlikely that as a Western outsider he has misunderstood some of them, that he is consciously or unconsciously exaggerating, romanticizing, or that he has been tricked into drawing the wrong conclusions by the Typees. However, as later scholars have argued, even though some details may be inaccurate, the larger picture he presents corresponds well with what is known about life on the island in the period.¹³⁰ Tommo’s descriptions may therefore still give a good indication of why life in the valley has managed to remain so stable for long periods of time.

First, in terms of the size of the population, Tommo estimates there to be “about two thousand inhabitants in Typee; and no number could

¹³⁰ To quote Charles Roberts Anderson: “As romantic as these accounts seem to be in their picture of an almost ideal government reduced to a minimum and economic justice extended to all—they seem to be surprisingly near the truth, at least in their statement of fundamental facts” (132).

have been better adapted to the extent of the valley” (*T* 194). Neither too many, nor too few, the Typees can continue to reap the benefits of Mother Nature without having to fight among themselves for scarce resources. As Kory-Kory at one point remarks, “liberally” translated by Tommo: “Ah, Typee ! isn’t it a fine place though !—no danger of starving here, I tell you !—plenty of bread-fruit—plenty of water—plenty of pudding—ah ! plenty of everything !—ah ! heaps, heaps, heaps !” (*T* 103). In addition, since “the births would appear but very little to outnumber the deaths” (*T* 192), the size of the population seems to have remained remarkably stable over time. In other words, the population is well within its carrying capacity, or maximum number of individuals that can be sustained indefinitely, given the resources available. This Tommo considers of the utmost importance to the continuing happiness of the Typees:

The ratio of increase among all the Polynesian nations is very small ... This would seem expressly ordained by Providence to prevent the overstocking of the islands with a race too indolent to cultivate the ground, and who, for that reason alone, would, by any considerable increase in their numbers, be exposed to the most deplorable misery. (*T* 192)

This combination of natural abundance and a balanced and stable population helps explain the approximate steady state of life: the valley has enough for everybody and there is little to be gained by striving for more. Tommo points out the lack of money in the valley, and this, too, undoubtedly helps explain the situation. As Manuel De Landa has argued, the presence of money in a society will tend to function as “a catalyst or stimulant of trade,” which in turn causes an increasing systemic self-acceleration, whereas its absence functions as “an inhibitor” (35), meaning such auto-catalytic processes are less likely to occur, and change on the whole to be much slower.¹³¹

¹³¹ While there is no official money in the valley, the Typees have a version of what social anthropologists often refer to as “primitive money,” i.e. valuable items that function as a means of payment (see Graeber 60). In *Typee*, it is salt that plays this role: “From the extravagant value placed upon the article, I verily believe, that with a bushel of common Liverpool salt all the real estate in Typee might have been purchased” (*T* 114). As Marsoin has argued, Typeean society is thus no “pre-economy,” but should rather be understood as a “proto-economy” which has pleasure and enjoyment as its fundamental values, and where the defining trait of pleasure is that it is allowed to circulate freely, rather than being hoarded and thus delayed (“No Land” 223–31).

Another relevant aspect is the regulative function of taboo in Typee. Taboo not only helps ensure that people act as expected of them, but, due to what Tommo considers a widespread, rather pragmatic attitude to religion, the potential for religious officials taking advantage of taboo for their own ends is also limited. Finally, one could also mention the Typee's lack of jealousy in romantic affairs, their lack of crime, their lack of property rights (at least in the Western sense), as well as their comparative egalitarianism.¹³²

Finally, the unchanging aspects of Typeean life might in part also be explained by one additional trait, which greatly impresses Tommo:

There was one admirable trait in the general character of the Typees which, more than any thing else, secured my admiration: it was the unanimity of feeling they displayed on every occasion. With them there hardly appeared to be any difference of opinion upon any subject whatever. . . . During my whole stay on the island I never witnessed a single quarrel, nor any thing that in the slightest degree approached even to a dispute. (*T* 203–4)

In other words, the Typees appear as almost entirely free from internal dissent. Along with the strong social bonds uniting even those who are not relatives, this must greatly contribute to the stability of their society. Most important, though, is probably the very limited interaction with strangers, in large part resulting from the rest of the world considering them ferocious cannibals. Due to the reputation that Melville's narrative exposed as a sham, it seems the Typees have only to a limited degree been exposed to new technologies and new and unexpected challenges capable of transforming their society and their traditional ways of life.

This rough outline of the traits of Typeean society likely contributing to its seeming stability and resistance to change—hence its status as “near equilibrium,” in thermodynamic terms—allows for a better understanding of the changes caused by Tommo, in his role as parasitic “thermal exciter.” For, as the following words from Serres indicate, the presence of such a foreign body may inadvertently have played a part in bringing

¹³² On the pragmatic attitude to religion, see (*T* 178); on the lack of jealousy, see (*T* 191); on the lack of crime, see (*T* 200); on comparative egalitarianism, see (*T* 185).

this stable situation to an end: “If some equilibrium exists or ever existed somewhere, somehow, the introduction of a parasite in the system immediately provokes a difference, a disequilibrium. Immediately, the system changes; time has begun” (*Parasite* 182).

Some of these changes have already been mentioned—the items he brings with him; the new “arts” he introduces—but two additional ones must be stressed. First, Alex Calder argues that the influence of outsiders would have been bound to affect the workings of taboo:

Had Melville “gone native,” he would have joined the many beachcombers who accelerated change far beyond local expectations. With regard to taboo, for example, their making allowances for his ignorance of its provisions would eventually weaken those provisions, not only so far as he was concerned, but also so far as everyone was concerned. (33)

Calder notes that such a weakening of the taboo is evident in the chapter where Tommo convinces Kory-Kory to bring a canoe to the lake where he often enjoys the company of Fayaway and the young ladies of the valley. As it turns out that not only the canoe, but also the water it touches, is taboo to women, to his chagrin he suddenly finds himself without female companions. After he tries to persuade Mehevi to lift the ban, the chief finally agrees to discuss the matter with the priests of the valley. This leads to unexpected results: “How it was that the priesthood of Typee satisfied the affair with their conscience, I know not; but so it was, and Fayaway’s dispensation from this portion of the taboo was at length procured” (*T* 133). No matter if this solution to his problem is realistic or not, from an ethnographic perspective, it shows how Tommo’s presence clearly disturbs established cultural patterns.¹³³

The second, and perhaps most important change caused by Tommo becomes visible in the description of the events leading up to his escape in Chapter 34. The first indication of what he has set in motion occurs when he is brought to Mehevi due to news claiming that Toby has returned to the beach: “I found myself within the Ti, surrounded by a noisy group

¹³³ Calder takes issue with those commentators who have remarked upon the unlikelihood of such a dispensation being granted, claiming that “[t]o suppose that a taboo against women entering canoes was immutable ignores the local dynamics of change in this period” (42).

engaged in discussing the recent intelligence” (*T* 246). That the Typees turn out to be capable of disagreement, after all, becomes even more evident after Tommo and “some fifty of the natives” set out for the beach after receiving Mehevi’s reluctant permission: “In this manner we had proceeded about four or five miles, when we were met by a party of some twenty islanders, between whom and those who accompanied me ensued an animated conference” (*T* 246). None of the Typees is willing to carry him any further, but he carries on alone after finding a spear he can use as a crutch:

To my surprise I was suffered to proceed alone, all the natives remaining in front of the house, and engaging in earnest conversation, which every moment became more loud and vehement; and to my unspeakable delight I perceived that some difference of opinion had arisen between them; that two parties, in short, were formed, and consequently that in their divided counsels there was some chance of my deliverance. (*T* 248)

Gone is not only the “hushed repose” of the landscape, which initially had so impressed Tommo, but also the “unanimity of feeling” that the Typees “displayed on every occasion.” The difference of opinions—obviously over what to do with him—is so severe that, in the end, the different factions start fighting each other, thus allowing him to escape: “blows were struck, wounds were given, and blood flowed” (*T* 250).

This ending exemplifies Serres’ notion of the parasite as a thermal exciter nudging the system away from its steady state, irritating it into evolving in unforeseen new directions. Nevertheless, Tommo’s effects—particularly him causing a severe split among natives who hitherto had “appeared to form one household, whose members were bound together by the ties of strong affection” (*T* 204)—seem disproportionate when compared to the fact that he is a stranger whom the Typees have only known for four months. Prigogine and Stengers argue, for instance, that in a stable system in or near equilibrium, fluctuations will have few lasting effects—as they see it, such systems are “‘immune’ with result to fluctuations” (14). After suffering a “microscopic event”, “macroscopic structures” will therefore soon return to their stable states, much the same way a swinging pendulum soon returns to rest (Prigogine and Stengers 191).

The relatively modest input of Tommo should therefore only result in small and short-lived effects. Does this mean that after his departure, life in the valley ought to quickly have gone back to business as usual, marked by the return of “hushed repose” and “unanimity of feeling”?

Typee does not answer this question. As the boat pulls away from its pursuers and strength finally deserts Tommo, the Typeean system fades from view and with it, its potential future states, whatever they might be. Nonetheless, the narrative does offer several important indications that *Typee* may not be a steady state system after all. The reason for this is that when Tommo ends up in the valley, it is at a very specific historical moment where the system is under a lot of pressure from its surroundings. To quote T. Walter Herbert: “The Marquesas were well known in Melville’s time because they provided a stage on which the drama of empire was played out” (72). More precisely, Tommo arrives on Nukuheva not long after the French have taken possession of most of the island. Entering the bay of Nukuheva for the first time, he makes the following observation:

No description can do justice to its beauty; but that beauty was lost to me then, and I saw nothing but the tri-colored flag of France trailing over the stern of six vessels, whose black hulls and bristling broadsides proclaimed their warlike character. ... The whole group of islands had just been taken possession of by Rear Admiral Du Petit Thouars, in the name of the invincible French nation.
(*T* 12)

The presence of the French is most important in the first chapters of *Typee*, where Tommo for example states that “[t]he islanders looked upon the people who made this cavalier appropriation of their shores with mingled feelings of fear and detestation. They cordially hated them; but the impulses of their resentment were neutralized by their dread of the floating batteries” (*T* 16). Later the French colonial enterprise somewhat recedes from view. Once Tommo comes to stay with the Typees, his descriptions tend to focus on the stable and unchanging aspects of life in the valley, rather than on the ongoing political situation of the island. Even so, this external pressure is clearly visible in the text. After he and Toby have been accepted by the tribe, the Typees exhibit a strong

awareness of the presence of the French colonizers and a wish to learn as much as possible about their plans:

They then plied us with a thousand questions, of which we could understand nothing more than that they had reference to the recent movements of the French, against whom they seemed to cherish the most fierce hatred. So eager were they to obtain information on this point, that they still continued to propound their queries long after we had shown that we were utterly unable to answer them. ... in the end they looked at us despairingly, as if we were the receptacles of invaluable information; but how to come at it they knew not. (*T* 75, see also 79)

Whereas Tommo and Toby are of little help in this regard, during one of his visits to the valley, Marnoo gives the Typees all the information he can about the French invaders:

he related circumstantially the aggressions of the French—their hostile visits to the surrounding bays, enumerating each in succession—Happar, Puerka, Nukuheva, Tior,—and then starting to his feet and precipitating himself forward with clenched hands and a countenance distorted with passion, he poured out a tide of invectives. Falling back into an attitude of lofty command, he exhorted the Typees to resist these encroachments; reminding them, with a fierce glance of exultation, that as yet the terror of their name had preserved them from attack, and with a scornful sneer he sketched in ironical terms the wondrous intrepidity of the French, who, with five war-canoes and hundreds of men, had not dared to assail the naked warriors of their valley. (*T* 137–38)

In other words, the Typees are perfectly aware that they are under threat from outside forces. This is significant because it indicates that even though the system Tommo enters and for a limited time becomes a part of may seem stable and unchanging to him, it should probably be understood as being in a state far from equilibrium. Crucial for Prigogine and Stengers' argument and for Serres' concept of the parasite, is the fact that in such a state even very small fluctuations may have enormous consequences. In other words, when put under a lot of pressure, systems have a point of no return from whence they can no longer revert to their initial states: "At some point we reach the threshold of stability of the

‘thermodynamic branch.’ Then we reach what is generally called a ‘bifurcation point’” (Prigogine and Stengers 160). Beyond this point the behavior of the system becomes random and impossible to predict in advance, and changes may lead to yet further changes, and temporary stable states will be followed by new bifurcations, and so on. While the Typeean system seems calm on the surface, due to the threat of invasion it might have reached exactly such a bifurcation point. At this critical point even the minor fluctuations caused by a hungry parasite looking for “plenty and repose,” yet unwilling to be incorporated into the social body, might lead to changes that could far outlive his presence, irreversibly and profoundly changing the state of the system.

This way of conceptualizing the situation on the island is useful because it helps address the changes Tommo sets in motion, all the while avoiding the moralism of some scholars. This tendency is clearly exemplified in Rita Gollin’s “The Forbidden Fruit of *Typee*” (1975). After touching upon many of same changes caused by Tommo as I have mentioned, she comes to the following conclusion:

Tommo did taste the fruit of the valley and found it sweet despite its decay; he had longed for the world of “cannibal banquets” and he entered it for a time. Implicitly conflating the image of the forbidden tree with the apples of Sodom, Melville suggests that appetites and expectations are never wholly gratified in this fallen world. And as the double image also suggests, Tommo is from the first a snake in the grass, a Satanic tempter in the garden; he is a polluter of the flawed paradise of *Typee*—the only kind of paradise to survive the fall. (Gollin 34)

The problem with this interpretation is that the narrative gives no indication that Tommo is evil or that he is interested in harming the Typees; quite the contrary, his love and respect for the natives seems sincere. Serres’ work in the wake of Prigogine and Stengers, on the other hand, illuminates how the small bifurcations inadvertently brought about by an insignificant parasite, guilty of nothing more than his desire for free meals, may lead to dramatic consequences.

However, here a difference between Serres, and Prigogine and Stengers becomes evident: When describing the randomness associated

with systems far from equilibrium, the latter two tend to present such instances in a positive light. This is because the new structures that result from this unexpected behavior form the basis of their argument that in conditions far from equilibrium, order is sometimes spontaneously born out of chaotic fluctuations—as they see it, nature can therefore be said to be “self-organizing” (176). Hence, Prigogine and Stengers end up stressing those cases where fluctuations cause systems to *successfully* reorganize at a higher level of complexity. This unfortunately coincides with a downplaying of the importance of those cases where systems far from equilibrium are set in motion, but prove *unable* to adapt, leading to their eventual dissolution. As most of Prigogine and Stengers’ concrete examples are either taken from heat conduction or from chemical reactions, such a failure might not seem particularly important. When they do address more complex organic systems, they do not seem to take this possibility and all its implications very seriously, for example stating that “*the same nonlinearities may produce an order out of the chaos of elementary processes and still, under different circumstances, be responsible for the destruction of this same order, eventually producing a new coherence beyond another bifurcation*” (Prigogine and Stengers 206; emphasis in the original), as if the destruction of a system was nothing but a step on the way toward the production of “new coherence.”

What is lost from view here is that whether or not a system manages to adapt, can be a matter of life and death. As opposed to this somewhat one-sided optimism, Serres is much clearer regarding the destructive potential of the parasite. Sometimes its actions may result in the death of a given host, or, in rare cases, even of an entire host species, but it might just as well irritate the system it enters into adapting, either by incorporating or by expelling the foreign body, in the process making it healthier, stronger and more complex. The latter is what happens with vaccinations, where an individual’s immune system is strengthened through a moderate infection of parasitic microorganisms:

In vaccination, poison can be a cure, and this logic with two entry points becomes a strategy, a care, a cure. The parasite gives the host the means to be safe from the parasite. ... The generous hosts are therefore stronger than the bodies without visits; generation increases resistance right in the middle of endemic

diseases. Thus parasitism contributes to the formation of adapted species from the point of view of evolution. At the same time it causes the disappearance, by terrifying epidemics, of unadapted species. (*Parasite* 193)¹³⁴

From the narrative of *Typee*, alone, it is impossible to decide the ultimate consequences of hosting the hungry Tommo: a strengthening of the tribe's immune system, its destruction, or something in between.¹³⁵ In the end, what remains is only a combination of the parasitic guest's good intentions and troublesome nature.

134 J. Hillis Miller makes a similar point: "Health for the parasite, food and the right environment, may be illness, even mortal illness, for the host. On the other hand, there are innumerable cases, in the proliferation of life forms, where the presence of a parasite is absolutely necessary to the health of its host" ("The Critic" 186).

135 Unfortunately, the fate of the real Typees was quite bleak, at least if Jack London can be trusted. In *The Cruize of the "Snark"* (1911), he describes his pilgrimage to the valley of his boyhood dreams, only to learn that exposure to Western civilization and its microparasitic foot-soldiers had taken a great toll on the local population: "the valley of Typee is the abode of some dozen wretched creatures, afflicted by leprosy, elephantiasis, and tuberculosis. ... Life has rotted away in this wonderful garden spot, where the climate is as delightful and healthy as any to be found in the world. Not alone were the Typeans physically magnificent; they were pure. Their air did not contain the bacilli and germs and microbes of disease that fill our air. And when the white men imported in their ships these various microorganisms of disease, the Typeans crumpled up and went down before them" (169). On the importance of parasitic microbes for the success of the Western colonial enterprise, see McNeill (*Plagues; The Human*), and De Landa.

CHAPTER 4

A Parasitic Chain on Wall Street in “Bartleby”

Moving on to Melville’s work after *Moby-Dick*, already in *Pierre* it becomes obvious that when the author’s interests turned toward life on American soil, the parasite tagged along, easily accommodating itself to dry land—where, after all, free dinners are generally easier to obtain than they are at sea. In *Pierre*—which, according to Édouard Marsoin, “is a novel about various bodily practices, especially dietic ones, and their connections with philosophical attitudes” (“The Belly Philosophical” 1715)—there is for example something of the sponger in Reverend Falsgrave, whose manners are said to be “polished and unobtrusive, but peculiarly insinuating” (*P* 98), suggesting his spiritual kinship with such religious parasites as Molière’s *Tartuffe* and Dickens’ Mr. Chadband. The novel also indicates that the reason Falsgrave is unwilling to offer concrete advice to Pierre, is because he fears alienating his “untiring benefactress,” Mrs. Glendinning, “from whose purse, [Pierre] could not help suspecting, came a great part of his salary, nominally supplied by the rental of the pews” (*P* 97). Moreover, Pierre himself has also something of the sponger in him, as obvious from his idle, aristocratic life at Saddle-Meadows, as well as his initial plans to live off his cousin, Glen, in New York. The figure of the parasite is also relevant to many of the shorter stories Melville wrote in this period, including, as mentioned in Chapter 1, “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” and “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”. However, at present I will focus on the various parasitical relationships that play out in his undoubtedly most famous story, “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” before moving on to one of his least read stories, “Jimmy Rose,” in Chapter 5.

The former of the two, whose full title is “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street,” was published in two instalments in the November and December editions of *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American*

Literature, Science and Art in 1853, before being reprinted in *The Piazza Tales* in 1856. My primary reason for including it here, is that it offers what may well be the most puzzling parasitical relationship in all of Melville's writings. What becomes clear when the story is approached through the conceptual lens of the parasite, is that it is far from obvious whom is sponging on whom: Is the real parasite of the story the titular character, the frustrated lawyer-narrator who tries to make sense of his strange employee, or the very words that Bartleby repeatedly utters, in doing so spreading chaos around him: "I would prefer not to"? In the following, these candidates for the role of the story's ultimate parasite will be considered in turn.

Bartleby, the Anorexic Parasite

Set in New York sometime during the 1840s or the early 1850s, the story follows the retroactive attempts of the narrator—an unnamed, elderly lawyer—to come to terms with the life and death of Bartleby, whom he ends up hiring in order to compensate for the particularities of his other employees, as well as to cope with a heavier workload after being promoted.¹³⁶ In the beginning, the new scrivener works diligently, but on the third day, the problems start. When the narrator requests that Bartleby help him proof-read legal documents, his new employee simply tells him that he "would prefer not to" ("B" 20).

From here on, this sentence—or versions thereof—will be Bartleby's answer to most of the lawyer's utterances, be they questions, suggestions, orders, pleas, attempted bribes, or threats. Since the copyist never explicitly opposes him, the mild-mannered and kind-hearted narrator, who considers himself a man of "prudence" and "method" ("B" 14), feels incapable of taking decisive action. Finally, seeing no other way of getting rid of his polite foe, he decides to relocate, leaving Bartleby in the old office, where the new tenants finally have him arrested for vagrancy and put in

¹³⁶ As Barbara Foley has argued, due to contemporary events, a few years must have passed between the initial encounter between the lawyer and Bartleby (sometime between 1843 and 1847), and the act of narration (sometime between 1848 and 1853). According to her, Melville has mixed up the order of events so that "the story could not, strictly speaking, have taken place at all" (89).

jail. The lawyer still feels a strange sort of responsibility, but even though he bribes one of the jailers to make sure he is well fed, Bartleby prefers not to eat. In the end he dies, curled up in front of a brick wall.

The narrator adds a postscript to his story by disclosing the one piece of additional information he has managed to come across, namely that the scrivener had once been employed at the Dead Letter Office in Washington, but that he had been removed due to a change in the political administration. Even though he cannot vouchsafe for the truth of the story, for the lawyer, herein can be found a possible explanation for Bartleby's strange behavior: "Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames?" ("B" 45). The story then ends with the following paratactic exclamation: "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" ("B" 45).

How then should this strange story be understood? "Bartleby" seems to belong to that rare species of literary text where there is almost no limit to what scholars might make of the story, and as even a small sampling of its scholarly reception clearly indicates, the titular character has been interpreted in a truly impressive number of ways.¹³⁷ For this reason, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that several previous scholars have expressed the idea that the scrivener should be understood as a parasite of

137 Bartleby has for example been read as a corpse (Hoag); as a ghost (Reed); as Christ and a Hindu ascetic (Franklin, *The Wake* 126–36); as proto-slacker (Lutz 129–35); as suffering from a variety of diseases and/or ailments, including leprosy (Zlogar), schizophrenia (Beja), agoraphobia and anorexia (G. Brown), autism (Sullivan), Asperger syndrome (Koegel), catatonia (Osmond), dyspepsia (Savarese), acedia (Hildebrand, and Knighton), and lead poisoning (Bogin). He has also been read as the narrator's double (Marcus); as Melville himself and as a symbol of the artist under marketplace conditions (Chase, "A Parable", and L. Marx, "Melville's Parable"); as Melville's friend Eli Fly (Leyda 455); as patron saint of non-writing writers (Vila-Matas); as Henry David Thoreau (Oliver, "A Second Look"); as Nathaniel Hawthorne (Bickley Jr., "Minor"); as exploited worker (Barnett); as squatter (Barbara Foley, and Yablon, 107–45); as failed revolutionary (Emery, and Hardt and Negri 203–4); as offering a revolutionary path (Žižek 381–85); as idiot (Stengers, and Arsić, *Passive* 54–67); as the neutrality haunting life and thinking (J. H. Miller, *Versions* 141–78); as absolute potentiality, (Agamben, "Bartleby"); as, among a number of other things, "a beingless cloud" (Arsić, *Passive*). For more examples put forward by the so-called "Bartleby industry," see McCall, which also includes an overview of different critical suggestions for how to understand the narrator, ranging from Pontius Pilate to Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe, and Melville's father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw.

sorts. To discuss whether this is a fitting description, I will start by looking at these earlier suggestions. First, here is what Frederic Rosenheim had to say, as part of a rather odd psychoanalytic reading from 1940:

The *parasitic creature* is actually described in the story, “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Bartleby is an extraordinarily queer, reserved, isolated being who refuses to exert himself or make any of the efforts of an adult to procure a living. Like the infants, he must be fed unconditionally. When Bartleby is not fed, he starves to death. (9; emphasis added)

Five year later, Egbert S. Oliver went on to make the following claim about the scrivener:

His attitude toward life was a gradually progressive nonviolent noncooperation—even while he *attached himself as a parasite to his employer and benevolent guardian*. (This, the reader must be assured, is an inadequate and unfriendly summing-up of “Bartleby,” which will be modified before this essay is finished). (“A Second Look” 63; emphasis added)

Then, in 1962, Mordecai Marcus asserted that after Bartleby “refuses to work any longer, he *becomes a kind of parasite on the lawyer*, but the exact nature of his dependence on the lawyer remains mysteriously vague” (108; emphasis added), before Humphrey Osmond in 1971 explained the narrator’s decision to relocate to new offices as follows: “It appears that *this strange parasitic relationship* might have gone on indefinitely had not his fellow lawyers begun to question his keeping an eccentric scrivener in the office” (166; emphasis added).¹³⁸

What are we to make of these four quotes? First, none of the articles refers to any of the others, and it is therefore not unlikely that they arrived at the notion of Bartleby as parasite and the narrator as his host independently of each other. Second, they all invoke the parasite (Marcus and Oliver) or the parasitic (Rosenheim and Osmond) only briefly and

¹³⁸ In addition to these four, I will later touch upon the contributions from Vismann, and Little. While neither analyzes the question of parasitism in depth, they both offer valuable insights that can contribute to this task. Jean Fisher’s “Tricksters, Troubadours—and Bartleby” contains a reading of “Bartleby” and references to Serres’ work on the parasite, but without connecting the two. For an analysis that conceptualizes the narrator as a host and the scrivener not as a parasite, but as an unwanted guest, see Bigagli.

in passing, and—with the partial exception of Rosenheim—without attempting to explain their respective claims. This perhaps suggests that Bartleby's parasitic traits must have seemed so self-evident to the authors in question, that no further explanations were needed. However, with the exception of Rosenheim, whose article holds a highly negative view of the supposedly dependent and infantile Bartleby, the other scholars express an uneasiness with the label parasite, evident in formulations such as "kind of parasite" and "mysteriously vague" (Marcus), and "strange parasitic relationship" (Osmond), as well as Oliver's explanatory parenthesis. This indicates an awareness that the fit between the scrivener and the concept might not be perfect after all. Finally, it must be pointed out that all four write long after the biological concept of the parasite had become the standard one, and that none of them refer to the older meanings of the term. For this reason, what they are trying to convey is likely that the relationship between Bartleby and the lawyer in some ways resembles the extended relationship found in nature between biological parasites and their hosts, where the former feeds at the expense of the latter. As we saw in Chapter 2, even biologists have often evaluated such relationships in ethical terms, and it seems that this also holds for these four scholars. In labelling Bartleby a parasite or a parasitic creature, they are explicitly, in the case of Rosenheim, or more implicitly, in the case of the others, condemning him for a certain kind of unethical behavior.

There are certainly aspects of Melville's story that could be brought in as support for this conclusion. First, Bartleby undoubtedly receives a salary for work he to a large extent prefers not to do, in the end doing none. This non-preference for work is probably one of the most important reasons the four scholars found recourse to the image of the parasite: Bartleby's behavior indeed comes across as a blunt offense against the Protestant work ethic described by Max Weber as having evolved from religious thinkers like Luther and Calvin, who advocated the idea that labor must "be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling" (62).¹³⁹ The long historical processes that led people to internalize this

139 For a reading that focuses on Bartleby's idleness in relation to the Protestant work ethic from a different perspective, see Knighton.

view, helping reshape work from a necessary evil to a virtue, has been so effective that today—as was also the case in Melville’s day—not working is commonly held to be one of the most unethical things one can do.¹⁴⁰ This is especially the case in America, where, to quote Sacvan Bercovitch, the Protestant work ethic was granted “a special supernatural legitimacy” by the New England Puritans (xiii), which led to its deep embedding in American culture. In addition, the country was founded on a strong opposition to the aristocracy of the Old World and its idle ways.¹⁴¹ To Tom Lutz, the consequence has been that “work, in America, is not simply an opportunity; it is our personal responsibility, perhaps our prime moral imperative” (10). This moral imperative helps explain the vehement attacks often levelled at those deemed unproductive, lazy, and dependent on others for their survival—attacks that often make explicit use of the concept of the parasite to dehumanize one’s opponents, as we saw in the discussion of Ayn Rand in Chapter 2.

Second, since *Bartleby* seemingly never leaves the lawyer’s offices, at some point he goes from being an employee to an occupant. Over time, this understandably leads to the narrator’s increasing exasperation, culminating in the following outburst: “What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?” (“B” 35). Thus, the idea that *Bartleby* is exploiting the lawyer in a parasitic manner, likely has less to do with him receiving a salary he has not earned, than it has to do with his peculiar way of embedding himself within the narrator’s world—or creating a *habitat* for himself, so to speak. This is because the scrivener seems to have no interest in money, which is what causes all attempts to buy him off to fail—and, as a corollary, *Bartleby* can hardly be accused of taking advantage of his boss for economical reasons. In addition, his inhabiting the lawyer’s offices—particularly, him being strangely enfolded within the “high green folding

140 As Tom Lutz notes, “[i]n ancient Greek, Roman, and Middle Eastern civilizations, work was by and large considered a curse, accorded dignity only to the extent that it made possible the *vita contemplativa*, the higher life of the mind. Labor had no honor in and of itself, and certainly no entronement among the virtues” (14). From a Christian perspective, work was originally God’s punishment after Eve convinced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit: “cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life” (Gen. 3.17).

141 On American opposition to aristocracy, see Wilentz, and Fraser (11–53).

screen" that has been procured for him ("B" 19)—connects him to the definitions of the parasite as an entity living *in* or *on* other creatures offered by the, in the 1850s, nascent scientific field of parasitology.

Several references in the story take on new meaning when seen in this light. When the narrator thinks he has finally managed to solve his problem, simply by assuming that Bartleby will leave if told to, he is in an excellent mood: "I could not but highly plume myself on my masterly management in getting rid of Bartleby" ("B" 33). In this context, the verb *plume* means praising oneself in a self-congratulatory way, but it can also signify a bird preening its feathers to remove lice and other ectoparasites. The narrator thus seems to imply that Bartleby has somehow *attached* himself to him, and, in a similar vein, he later concludes that "it is quite plain he prefers to cling to you" ("B" 38)—almost as if he were talking about a parasitic plant or an ectoparasite. That such an entity cannot simply be left behind, if it has first gotten hold of you, becomes clear when, as a last resort, the lawyer takes the extraordinary step of relocating to the new offices. His description of his departure implies that a certain violence is needed: "I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of" ("B" 39).

But why is it that the narrator does not simply fire Bartleby as soon as he first "prefers not to" comply with his orders? While scholars have usually explained this by reference to his kindness, it should be pointed out that the scrivener is not the only character with parasitic traits working for the lawyer. In fact, there is something of the parasite in all three of his other employees—all whose names, fittingly, are sobriquets at least partially related to food or to eating.¹⁴² This is especially the case for his two other scriveners, Turkey and Nippers, who can both be said to be part-time parasites of sorts. While diligent until noon, the former regularly drinks too much during his lunch break. As a result, the rest of the day he is rash, hot-tempered and far too energetic for the narrator's liking. Nippers, on the other hand, strikes the lawyer as "the victim of two evil

142 As the narrator puts it regarding the names of his employees: "These may seem names, the like of which are not usually found in the Directory. In truth they were nicknames, mutually conferred upon each other by my three clerks, and were deemed expressive of their respective persons or characters" ("B" 15). For the argument that "Nippers" is most likely a reference to lobster claws, see Stein (29).

powers—ambition and indigestion” (“B” 16). Due to the second of these evil powers, he is irritable in the morning, but his mood improves after lunch. Hence, prior to hiring Bartleby, the lawyer is stuck with one scrivener who is productive in the morning and comparatively useless in the afternoon, and another where it is the other way around. Finally, there is the errand boy nicknamed Ginger Nut. While he undoubtedly makes a valuable contribution by supplying the scribes with the refreshments they require to do their “dry, husky sort of business” (“B” 18), he does not seem to exert himself in studying the law, which was the reason his father got him the job in the first place. As the narrator puts it: “He had a little desk to himself, but he did not use it much. Upon inspection, the drawer exhibited a great array of the shells of various sorts of nuts. Indeed, to this quick-witted youth the whole noble science of the law was contained in a nut-shell” (“B” 18).

Prior to hiring Bartleby, the narrator is therefore already used to being moderately parasitized, and it seems that he has learned to make the best of the situation, at least if it does not interfere unduly with his business. Speaking of Turkey and Nippers, he mentions that “I never had to do with their eccentricities at one time. Their fits relieved each other like guards. . . . This was a good natural arrangement under the circumstances” (“B” 18). He still manages to keep his office in a state close to equilibrium where, in Andrew Knighton’s words, “alternating currents of productivity and unproductivity compensate for each other” (191).¹⁴³ This might help explain his relative lenience toward the scrivener, illustrating a well-known point in parasitology: The more parasites a given host harbors, the more likely it is to suffer additional infections.¹⁴⁴

143 Knighton’s next sentence should also be quoted: “Bartleby’s force is single-handedly to disrupt these equilibria” (191). This indicates a similarity between the effects the scrivener has on his surroundings and those of Tommo on the Typees: In both cases, a foreign element is introduced into a system in or near equilibrium, only to cause a rupture at the system’s bifurcation point, forcing it into a new direction. No less than Tommo, Bartleby exemplifies Michel Serres’ claim that the parasite is “an inclination toward trouble, to the change of phase of a system. It is a little troublemaker” (*Parasite* 196).

144 Biologists often invoke the so-called 80:20 rule to explain how the parasite population is aggregated among the potential hosts, meaning that at least 80% of parasites will be found in 20% of the hosts, see Bishop (41).

In addition to his previous exposure to semi-parasitic employees, the narrator's reaction the first time Bartleby "prefers not to" indicates that there may be important additional reasons for his unwillingness or inability to fire him:

I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors. ("B" 20-21)

There is thus something in the scrivener's manner that makes the lawyer feel incapable of firing him, and even after he tries to force himself to do so, his attempts are insecure and stumbling. Bartleby, in fact, seems to hold some sort of strange power over his employer. How then should we understand this, as the narrator puts it, "wondrous ascendancy which the inscrutable scrivener had over me" ("B" 35)? Here, Tom Lutz might be on to something when he claims that "the narrator's inability to get rid of him is downright pathological" (131). It is almost as if the lawyer has been infected by something that controls his thoughts and actions, ensuring that he will not be capable of ridding himself of his foe. For instance, when a few days later the scrivener again indicates that he would prefer not to comply with a request, the narrator's response is strangely muted by Bartleby's mildness:

With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and trust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted me. I began to reason with him. ("B" 21)

The last sentence is evidence that the lawyer will get nowhere: trying to reason with the scrivener is about as useful as arguing with a rock. Later, he will also say that "it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were" ("B" 27), indicating

that Bartleby in effect renders him impotent—if not literally, at least metaphorically, and perhaps also grammatically.¹⁴⁵

To address this seeming impotence, I want to briefly turn to the parasitic barnacle *Sacculina carcini*.¹⁴⁶ It starts life like any free-living barnacle, but after injecting itself into a common crab, it grows inside it almost like a nutrient-absorbing rhizome.¹⁴⁷ While the host goes on eating, it is in effect feeding the parasite inhabiting it. If the barnacle manages to reproduce inside its new, living home, thousands of larvae are produced every few weeks. This coincides with a fascinating manipulation of the crab's behavior. The crab is sterilized, and the parasite's larvae grow on the underside of the host's belly, where the brood pouch containing the female crab's own eggs would be located. This is also the case for male crabs. Due to changes caused by the parasite to their bodies and behavior, not only do they grow larger abdomens than uninfected males, which means there will be room for the larvae, but they also start acting like females, suddenly showing an interest in nurturing offspring. Its original sex notwithstanding, the infected crab thus ends up grooming and looking after the parasite's larvae as if they were its own. The crab is turned into a living nursery, as it were; to quote Carl Zimmer: "parasites such as *Sacculina* ... control their hosts, becoming in effect their new brain, and turning them into new creatures. It is as if the host itself is simply a puppet, and the parasite is the hand inside" (82).

Even though the power of *Sacculina carcini* over the crab is obviously much stronger than that of Bartleby over the narrator, Zimmer's description might still shed light on Melville's story. After all, on several occasions the lawyer comes close to accepting that he is fated to be stuck

145 J. Hillis Miller draws our attention to the narrator's statement immediately following the remark that he has been "unmanned" by Bartleby: "For I consider that one, for the time, is a *sort of unmanned* when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his own premises" ("B" 27; emphasis added). As Miller sees it, the lacking noun after "a sort of unmanned" deprives the sentence of sense, leading him to the conclusion that "[t]his grammatical impotence corresponds to the narrator's unmanned state" (*Versions* 161).

146 *Sacculina carcini*, which was originally classified by the British zoologist John Vaughan Thompson in 1836, came to be singled out for special scorn by E. Ray Lankester, Henry Drummond, and other naturalists, see Zimmer (16–22) and Gould.

147 For Bartleby considered in terms of the Deleuzian concept of the rhizome, see Arsić ("Active Habits" 144).

with the scrivener. For example, at one point he concludes that his predestined "mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such a period as you may see fit to remain" ("B" 37). Later, it is only due to critical comments from his clients that he manages to jolt himself out of his stupor: "a great change was wrought in me. I resolved to gather all my faculties together, and for ever rid me of this intolerable incubus" ("B" 38).

Nonetheless, even after he leaves Bartleby behind, it is obvious that the scrivener's hold over the narrator continues:

Established in my new quarters, for a day or two I kept the door locked, and started at every footfall in the passages. When I returned to my rooms after any little absence, I would pause at the threshold for an instant, and attentively listen, ere applying my key. But these fears were needless. Bartleby never came nigh me. ("B" 39)

As time passes, he starts to relax, but he still seems caught up in an inner battle over whether he is responsible for the scrivener. Even after finally removing himself from Bartleby's immediate influence, it is as if the narrator is a host partially controlled by his parasite, and where the part of his mind that is captive—which legitimizes its claims in terms of charity or responsibility towards others—is in constant combat with the part that wants to break free.

This newfound freedom is only temporary, however. Learning that Bartleby, who has been evicted from the offices, has started inhabiting the hallways of the building, the narrator is forced to return by the landlord and the other tenants. Trying to help them get rid of the scrivener, he makes several suggestions for alternative jobs for which Bartleby might be better suited. Since he would prefer not to do any more copying, the narrator suggests that he could become a clerk in a dry-goods store, a bartender, a bill-collector, or even go "as a companion to Europe, to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation" ("B" 41). However, even the prospect of receiving food, lodging, and a salary as payment for keeping a rich patron company with idle talk—surely the ultimate vocation for any classical parasite—is something Bartleby would prefer not to. In a moment of fundamental resignation, the exasperated narrator is finally

struck by an idea that “had not been wholly unindulged before” (“B” 41), namely, to offer the scrivener a new habitat:

“Bartleby,” said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, “will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away.” (“B” 41)

Free food and lodging: What more could any parasite possibly want? The scrivener, though, makes the following answer, once and for all proving that his parasitic traits notwithstanding, he is no typical sponger: “No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all” (“B” 41). This maddening stubbornness puts the narrator in such a mindset that he runs away, while the scrivener, on the other hand, continues staring at the blank walls in his own inscrutable way.

In other words, while there is a certain logic to labelling Bartleby a parasite, there are also serious obstacles to this procedure. One is that he prefers not to make any changes at all. Any parasite unwilling to adapt to changing circumstances is as good as a dead parasite—as the British helminthologist T. Spencer Cobbold argued in 1864: “None of the internal parasites ‘continue in one stay;’ all have a tendency to roam; migration is the very soul of their prosperity; change in residence the *sine quâ non* of their existence, whilst a blockade in the interior, prolonged beyond the proper period, terminates only in cretification and death” (4).

The second obstacle, which is even more important, is pinpointed in William G. Little’s *The Waste Fix* (2002), one of the few critical works that has explicitly, albeit briefly, reflected upon “Bartleby” in terms of parasitism, instead of simply labelling him a parasite. After first remarking that to cut into the whales they have caught, the seamen in *Moby-Dick* must attach themselves to their surface “like a kind of parasite,”¹⁴⁸ Little makes the following claim: “Bartleby, it turns out, is an unsettling

148 Little could have been more specific: the sailors come to occupy a position as *ectoparasites* on the whales. When Tashtego falls into the the sperm whale’s head in Chapter 78, only to be rescued by Queequeg, it can be seen as a temporary and involuntary change of career from ecto- to endoparasite (*MD* 342).

parasite in his own right (he lodges himself within the chambers of his employer/host yet doesn't seem to derive any nourishment from the attachment) and produces a similar tumult amongst the crew in the law office" (59–60).

Thus, while Bartleby comes to inhabit the narrator's offices, he does so without drawing any sustenance from his host. Even though he might initially appear to qualify as a parasite, is it possible to continue seeing him as such, considering what Gillian Brown has claimed to be his "primary feature," namely that he seems to have no interest in eating (147)?

Several times throughout the story, the narrator ponders this seeming lack of sitological habits; as Allen F. Stein argues: "of all Bartleby's peculiar preferences the one which seems most consistently to perplex the lawyer is his preferring not to eat" (29). After the second instance where the scrivener has preferred not to examine his copies, it is food the narrator turns to, to explain this odd behavior: "His late remarkable conduct led me to regard his ways narrowly. I observed that he never went to dinner; indeed he never went any where" ("B" 23). The lawyer then remarks how he has noticed that Ginger Nut regularly purchases ginger cakes for Bartleby, but is incapable of making up his mind about this strange choice of diet:

He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian then; but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts. Ginger-nuts are so called because they contain ginger as one of their peculiar constituents, and the final flavoring one. Now what was ginger? A hot, spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all. Ginger, then, had no effect upon Bartleby. Probably he preferred it should have none. ("B" 23)¹⁴⁹

It is thus revealed that Bartleby appears to eat nothing except ginger-nuts and perhaps also, as indicated later in the story, some cheese ("B" 27). Even

¹⁴⁹ For an analysis of the role played by ginger in "Bartleby," see Arsić, who argues that it might be a metaphor for drugs: "Bartleby, the opium eater" (*Passive* 74). On ginger in Melville's *oeuvre*, see Savarese.

so, these references likely say more about the narrator's way of understanding those he interacts with in terms of food, than it does about the scrivener. As Gillian Brown has argued, this somewhat excessive concern with the eating habits of his employees—not just of Bartleby, but also of Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut—makes the narrator “a kind of Wall Street housekeeper” (146). In light of their peculiarities, she contends that he must keep a keen eye on his employees' consumption of food and drink to keep his business running as smoothly as possible:

The business of the lawyer's domestic commercial sphere chiefly involves over-seeing and compensating for the unhealthy gustatory habits of his copyists. . . . For the lawyer, these concerns with food and drink are labor/management issues: what his employees consume directly affects what they produce. In this office in the image of home, the eccentricities of appetite are incorporated into the business routine. (G. Brown 146)¹⁵⁰

This habit perhaps helps explain why, when Bartleby starts “preferring not to,” his eating habits are the first thing the narrator turns to, and why he keeps pursuing the question of nourishment, his continuing lack of success notwithstanding. For example, sometime after his failed attempt to suggest new lines of work to the scrivener, the lawyer is made aware that the landlord has had Bartleby locked up as a vagrant in New York's infamous prison, The Tombs.¹⁵¹ Feeling responsible and wanting to help, the lawyer decides to visit his former employee. Even though the scrivener makes it clear that, as he mysteriously puts it, “I know you . . . and I want nothing to say to you” (“B” 43), the narrator still thinks he might contribute to his well-being by bribing the aptly named Mr. Cutlets, who describes his unofficial duties in the prison as follows: “Such gentlemen as have friends here, hire me to provide them with something good to eat” (“B” 43). However,

150 A similar point is made by Knighton, who refers to “the many ways in which the office is organized around its inhabitants' literal and figurative appetites” (204).

151 The idea of having Bartleby arrested had earlier struck the narrator, but, pondering this solution, he asks himself “upon what ground could you procure such a thing to be done?—a vagrant, is he? What! He a vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge? It is because he will *not* be a vagrant, then, that you seek to count him *as* a vagrant. That is too absurd” (“B” 38). Part of Bartleby's hold over him thus seems to arise from how the former's presence turns the logic and method the lawyer takes such pride in against himself.

when Mr. Cutlets requests the scrivener's company for dinner, his reply is simple: "I prefer not to dine to-day," said Bartleby, turning away. "It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners" ("B" 43, 44).¹⁵²

Scholars have made different suggestions regarding this refusal to eat: Bartleby could perhaps be suffering from what would in 1873 come to be termed *anorexia*, or from the medical condition known as *dyspepsia*, as argued by Gillian Brown and Ralph James Savarese, respectively. Or maybe it is *sitophobia*—a morbid dread of eating or aversion to food—that ails him? No matter which term best describes the scrivener's abstinence from consumption, and no matter what his actual reasons for fasting might be, the result is clear—it is obvious that he simply prefers not eating.¹⁵³ In fact, the only time in the story when the narrator describes Bartleby as stuffing himself, it is not on food, but on work. This occurs as part of the description of the scrivener's first few days in the office: "As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light" ("B" 19). Hence, Bartleby rarely consumes anything, and when he does, it is in a way that increases, rather than decreases what he feeds on.

To sum up at this point, if Bartleby is indeed a parasite on the narrator, he is one without interest in food or money, even though he could easily have gotten both out of his host. The only thing he with certainty can be said to get out of the relationship, at least for a time, is a habitat and a blank wall to stare upon. This is not without importance; to quote Serres' explanation of the origin of property rights: "Whoever was a lodger for a long time, ... remembers someone who was not willing to divide the salad course. When the salad bowl came, he spat in it, and the greens were his. The salad was all his; no one argued with him" (*Parasite* 139, 140). Thus, to

152 Mr. Cutlets reappears when the narrator revisits the Tombs some days later, only to find Bartleby dead, proving that the scrivener is no more interested in eating when the lawyer is not around: "The round face of the grub-man peered upon me now. 'His dinner is ready. Won't he dine to-day, either? Or does he live without dining?' 'Lives without dining,' said I, and closed the eyes" ("B" 45).

153 As such, Bartleby helped clear the path later taken by the "Hungerkünstler," after whom Franz Kafka's famous short story is named. On the close affinity between Melville and Kafka, see Borges (246).

Serres, the parasite's power does not result from the use of force to control a space, but from making a milieu uninhabitable for others, so that one can inhabit it without competition. Or as he puts it, in what could just as well have been a description of how Bartleby finally causes the narrator to give up his offices: "The parasite gets power less because he occupies the center than because he fills the environment" (*Parasite* 95).¹⁵⁴

His habitat notwithstanding, the question naturally arises: What sort of parasite not only drives away the host, but also shows a complete lack of interest in re-attaching himself to him, even though the opportunity to do so arises on several occasions? And most importantly: Can he be said to be a parasite when he willingly abstains from eating? Since the fact that parasites feed on other animals has been an axiom for parasitological definitions ever since the term was adopted by the natural sciences, such a creature hardly deserves the epithet. Even though the manner of feeding is obviously different, this point is equally important to the classical understanding. This is for instance explicitly spelled out in "The Parasite: Parasitic an Art," written in Greek in the second century AD by the Assyrian rhetorician and satirist Lucian of Samosata.¹⁵⁵ This quasi-Socratic dialogue presents a discussion between two interlocutors, Simon and Tychiades, about what is the greatest of all arts. The former offers the radical suggestion that the answer is being a parasite, which he defines as follows: "Parasitic is that art which is concerned with food and drink and what must be said and done to obtain them, and its end is pleasure" (Lucian 9). When asked by his companion how the parasite is affected by a lack of food, he gives the following answer:

154 This resonates well with the narrator's reflections on the possibility of Bartleby "turning out a long-lived man, and keep occupying my chambers, and denying my authority; ... and in the end perhaps outlive me, and claim possession of my office by right of his perpetual occupancy" ("B" 38).

155 Whether Melville had read "The Parasite" is not clear, but he was familiar with Lucian and his English translator, William Tooke: The latter's 1820 translation of "The True History" is quoted in the "Extracts" of *Moby-Dick* (*MD* xviii); in the angry letter sent to Pierre by his publishers, Steel, Flint & Asbestos, Lucian is labeled a "vile Atheist" (*P* 356); in *Israel Potter* (1855), Tooke is indirectly referred to as "a good-natured English Clergyman [who] translated Lucian" (82); and one of the swindlers in *The Confidence-Man* at one point accuses Lucian—along with Thucydides, Juvenal, and Tacitus—of spreading views particularly "injurious to human nature" (*CM* 27).

You fail to understand, Tychiades, that *a priori* one who lacks food is not a parasite. ... If the brave man is brave for no other reason than because he has bravery at his command, and the sensible man because he has sense at his command, so, too, the parasite is a parasite because he has food at his command; consequently, if this be denied him, we shall be studying some other man instead of a parasite. (Lucian 54)¹⁵⁶

While this definition ignores the many parasites of comedy who fail to feed, it alerts us to the fact that the idea of a parasite with absolutely no *interest* in food is counterintuitive, to say the least; to quote Serres: "Not eating, not even being hungry, is erasing oneself as a parasite" (*Parasite* 109). As if the paradox of a scrivener who prefers not to copy was not enough, here, then, is a potential parasite who prefers not to eat: Bartleby, the anorexic parasite.

A Sweet Morsel for the Narrator

So far, the focus has been on what Bartleby may be said to get out of the narrator. As there is little doubt that it is the latter who acts as the host of the relationship, this is logical. Ever since these concepts were adopted by the natural sciences, it has always been an axiom that it is the parasite that takes advantage of the host. However, as David Cecil Smith explains in "The Symbiotic Condition" (1992), the matter is sometimes more complicated. Contrasting parasitism and symbiosis, he argues that whereas the former concept involves hosts being exploited by their associates,

¹⁵⁶ "The Parasite" contains an ironic twist that inverts the relationship between the two companions, but if Melville read the dialogue, he would not have been aware of this, as this part had strangely been omitted in Tooke's translation. Simon eventually manages to convince Tychiades that being a parasite is the greatest art, but the latter has a surprise for him: "Hereafter I shall go to you like a schoolboy both in the morning and after luncheon to learn your art. You, for your part, ought to teach me ungrudgingly, for I shall be your first pupil. They say that mothers love their first children more" (Lucian 61). Simon has thus acquired a parasite of his own; as Graham Anderson puts it: "within the limitations of Platonic dialogue the author has turned the tables on Simon. So far the latter has won every round with his absurd demonstrations ..., only to find that his false reasoning has brought him a parasite at his own expense!" (64). The moral is that no one is safe from attracting parasites, not even those who have perfected the parasitic art; in Serres' words: "In short, the parasite has but one enemy: the one who can replace him in his position of parasite" (*Parasite* 107).

the latter involves hosts exploiting them, leading him to the following conclusion: “The question will arise of whether there are situations in which a symbiont simultaneously exploits its host as it is being exploited” (7).¹⁵⁷ In other words, in certain instances hosts may derive benefits at the expense of their parasites; the habitat strikes back. Could this be the case in Melville’s story?

To answer this question, a closer look at the narrator is necessary. First, he mentions that he is a lawyer working on Wall Street. As noted in Chapter 2, to Charles Dickens, both lawyers and capitalists were seen as particularly prone to parasitism. This opinion was also common in America. Steve Fraser has for example argued that there is a long tradition of social reformers conceptualizing rampant capitalism in such terms, where Wall Street was perceived as amassing “its fabulous riches like a parasite, living off the fruits of the honest labor of impoverished farmers, sweated industrial workers, and self-sacrificing, frugal entrepreneurs” (7). Similarly, in relation to the public image of the lawyer, Ruth M. Elson has made the claim that in American schoolbooks of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, “lawyers as a class are looked on with suspicion. The law is regarded generally as a parasitic occupation” (26).

Since the narrator belongs to both groups, it should come as no surprise that he has been accused of being a parasite by scholars reading the story as a parable of the dehumanization of life and work under capitalism. In his *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1978), H. Bruce Franklin for example makes the following claim, which is in line with the Marxist conceptualization of the parasite encountered in Chapter 2:

To Melville, the underlying sexual perversion of our society is the enslavement of human beings, imprisoning them in factories, ships, plantations, and offices, forcing them to expend their creativity to enrich a handful of parasites who own the means of production. Master of this hell is none other than the capitalist. (56)

157 In biology, the term symbiont can refer to any organism living in a symbiotic relationship with another organism, no matter if the relationship is parasitic, commensalistic, or mutualistic. Mutualisms are often understood as different organisms cooperating for their mutual benefit, but Smith claims that it might be better to see their relationship as one where they are simultaneously taking advantage of each other in such a manner that a balance has been reached.

Franklin admits that the narrator's behavior in the story seems to contradict this claim. His own faults and peculiarities asides, there is no doubt he does his best to help his strange scrivener. There is an easy solution to this problem, however; as Franklin puts it: "The narrator is not an unkind, much less a Satanic, man. But he is an employer" (*The Victim* 56). In this way, the discrepancy between the bloodthirsty capitalist and the kindness of the narrator is easily resolved through shifting the question of parasitism to a structural level. Even though the narrator might privately be a good man, he is also a capitalist, and thereby by definition a parasite.

To me, this understanding is not very useful. This is not because I wish to defend capitalism against the claim that it dehumanizes workers, but rather because conceptualizing those thought to be non-producers—no matter if rich or poor—as parasites on the social body takes for granted the erroneous idea that parasites are lazy, where in reality, this is far from the case. Because dinner-invitations are not always forthcoming, and since it is easy to be wiped out by the immune system of your host, being a successful parasite demands a lot of ingenuity. As the narrator at one point remarks in *White-Jacket*, "every one knows that idleness is the hardest work in the world" (*WJ* 22).¹⁵⁸ Still, I wish to suggest that the narrator does indeed have some parasitic traits, but in contrast to Franklin, I do not think these have much to do with him being a typical capitalistic employer. In fact, one thing that makes his parasitic traits so fascinating is that, in the end, the lawyer is quite a strange specimen of a capitalist. To explain why, it is useful to have a closer look at his attitude to work, as expressed early in the story:

I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of the sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those

158 For an analysis of the intricate dependency between idleness and labor, see Tom Lutz' juxtaposition of Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Johnson in *Doing Nothing*. While Franklin is often seen as the incarnation of the Protestant work ethic, and Johnson as the father of the modern figure of the idler, Lutz shows how they both embody the opposition between work and non-work (56–75).

unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds. ("B" 14)

This stated preference for "the easiest way of life" is a far cry from Weber's Protestant work ethic, and whoever utters these words certainly does not consider work a calling or a moral imperative. Rather, as critics have argued, the lawyer is someone who has an "inherent penchant for unproductivity" and who "is himself a bit of a loafer" (Knighton 190; Lutz 132).¹⁵⁹ When the specific position the narrator was in when hiring Bartleby is taken into consideration, it becomes even more evident that minimizing stress is as important to him as maximizing his income, if not more so: "Some time prior to the period at which this little history begins, my avocations had been largely increased. The good old office, now extinct in the State of New York, of a Master in Chancery, had been conferred upon me. It was not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative" ("B" 14).¹⁶⁰

In "'Bartleby,' Allan Melville, and the Court of Chancery" (2011), Warren Broderick explains what made the position ideal for someone with an aversion to stress. Masters in Chancery were hired for three years at a time and would be reappointed as long as they stayed politically connected. As their cases were assigned by the court, they did not have to seek out clients of their own. Finally, they only dealt with civil equity, which meant no unpleasant exposure to thugs and common criminals

159 While Lutz is right to consider the narrator as a loafer-figure of sorts, the following claim is less convincing: "Although he interprets his own disinclination to fire Bartleby as charity, the story suggests it to be primarily an avoidance of the effort it might take" (132).

160 For similar opinions about Chancery, see Robert Grant White's *Law and Laziness; or, Students at Law of Leisure* (1846), which Knighton argues was a direct influence on "Bartleby." Here it is claimed that "[t]here is no place like a law-office for making a fashionable acquaintance, and doing the least work with the greatest ease" (White qtd. in Knighton 191). See also the 1844 letter from Melville's brother Allan where he noted that their brother Gansevoort had been appointed Examiner in Chancery, or assistant to the Master, a position he described as "a very fair office and one which pays quite well" (*Corr* 567). After Gansevoort quit this job to focus on his political career, he was replaced by Allan, who was also a lawyer. As Warren Broderick has argued, Herman and his wife, Elizabeth, shared a residence with Allan and his wife, Sophia, in New York in the period 1847–1850. This means that most of Herman's knowledge of the Court of Chancery probably came from him.

that could lead to the sort of "vulgar bullying," "bravado" and "choleric hectoring" the narrator wants to avoid when he tries to rid himself of Bartleby ("B" 33). The narrator's use of the word "avocation" to describe his work is thus telling, his true *vocation* seeming to be leisure.¹⁶¹ Hence, this "good old office" must have seemed like a dream come true, which can also explain his anger at having subsequently lost it, due to political reforms.¹⁶²

Broderick is not the only critic to have noted the importance of the narrator's position to the story. Herbert F. Smith, for instance, argues that from a democratic point of view, the existence of Courts of Chancery in America in the nineteenth century represented an "extraordinary anachronism" (736). Stemming from England in the fourteenth century, they were originally instituted as an alternative to courts of common law, differing from these in two important respects. First, they were based on principles of *equity* rather than on common law, trying to achieve justice through taking into consideration external circumstances of the kind that normal courts did not address; in Cornelia Vismann's words: "In consequence two types of law were differentiated: the hard and the soft, the strict and the merciful, the legal and the human" (141). Also, the two types of law received their legitimacy from different sources: "The Master in Chancery, essentially, draws his power from association with the king, not at all from 'below,' from the common-law courts and, in a democracy, from the people" (H. F. Smith 736). In other words, Courts of Chancery—which, as noted in Chapter 2, also play an important part in Dickens' *Bleak House*—were

161 According to the *OED*, the word has as one of its original meanings something diverting one from one's true vocation, or a "minor or less important occupation, a by-work" ("avocation").

162 New York phased out the Court of Chancery in July 1847. To the narrator, this was a hard blow: "I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages; but I must be permitted to be rash here and declare, that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a—premature act; inasmuch as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years. But this is by the way" ("B" 14). The wry humor of the passage is the result of the narrator's lack of talent for anger: even when he makes a conscious effort to be "rash," his anger is not even strong enough to last him through the entire sentence, petering out into nothing after the dash.

pre-capitalistic and aristocratic institutions that had somehow managed to survive in America well into the nineteenth century.¹⁶³

Rather than a typical capitalist, as Franklin thought, the narrator should therefore be understood as a remnant from an aristocratic past—in Nick Yablon’s words, “a relic of an age of Chancery privileges” (121)—who has attached himself to the very heart of American capitalism. Feeding on Wall Street’s flow of business, he is all the while perfectly content with his own aristocratic advantages; as Basem L. Ra’ad puts it:

The narrator ... is now only marginally subjected to the primary motives of the capitalistic enterprise. He has become a parasite at the service end of already established American capital—a “safe” man who is self-congratulatory about the rich he services and resentful about any threat to his established self-interest. (181)

To explain the nature of these aristocratic privileges, the narrator’s position is for instance most likely not one he has rightfully earned. Since the *OED* lists one of the meanings of the verb confer as “[t]o give, grant, bestow, as a grace, or as the act of a qualified superior” (“confer”), when he tells readers that his job has been “conferred upon” him, this strongly implies that it has been bestowed upon him by a superior as a favor. That is to say, the position of Master in Chancery should be understood as “a politically appointed sinecure” (Lutz 132), or a gift from a patron, perhaps in return for the narrator’s faithful services in the past and perhaps—remembering Marcel Mauss’ insistence

163 *Bleak House* presents an extremely negative opinion of the (British) Court of Chancery, at one point described as “most pestilent of hoary sinners” (Dickens 14). As David Jaffé has argued, in writing “Bartleby,” Melville was fundamentally indebted to Dickens’ novel, which was serialized in America between April 1852 and October 1853 in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, which Melville subscribed to. Jaffé’s claim is that Bartleby might be modeled after Dickens’ scrivener Nemo (Latin for “no one”), but that he also has traits in common with the childlike parasite Harold Skimpole. He also points out similarities between the narrator and Dickens’ John Jarndyce; Turkey and Mr. Boythorn; Nippers and William Guppy; and Ginger Nut and Young Smallweed. For the argument that “Bartleby” is an extended attack on Dickens, see Weisbuch (36–54).

that the gift always carries an obligation to be reciprocated—in expectancy of favors yet to come.¹⁶⁴

While it is not said exactly how the narrator has come into possession of this gift, what he has done to earn it, or who has bestowed it upon him, it is worth noting that the description of his “pleasantly remunerative” and “not very arduous office” comes immediately after his references to John Jacob Astor (1763–1848). Astor was not only New York’s richest man at the time—“America’s first multimillionaire,” as the title of one recent biography puts it—but also landlord over large parts of the city.¹⁶⁵ Finally, he is also someone for whom the narrator has an obvious respect, bordering on awe:

The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor’s good opinion. (“B” 14)

This is important because the man whose good opinion the narrator was “not insensible” to was no stranger to New York’s Court of Chancery; in the words of Claudia Durst Johnson: “in this court, which heard cases involving contract violations, debts, and real estate, John Jacob Astor had appeared repeatedly to foreclose on mortgages and collect debts” (21). To have a trusted client installed as Master of Chancery would surely have been helpful to Astor, who was known to be well aware of the advantages

164 The narrator’s use of the adjective “remunerative” deserves mention, stemming from the Latin *remunerari*, from *re* (back) and *munerari* (to give). The latter comes from the noun *munus*, which can mean office or duty, but also gift. All these meanings come together in his promotion to Master in Chancery, a rewarding position that has been given him as a gift, but which likely carries obligations toward whoever he received it from.

165 On Astor as America’s first multimillionaire, see Madsen. On his importance to “Bartleby,” see D’Avanzo, McCall (124–25), Barbra Foley, C. D. Johnson (19–21), and Guillen (193–96). Astor’s notoriously vague will is satirized in *Mardi*’s Chapter 177, “At last, the last Mention is made of old Bardianna; and His last Will and Testament is recited at Length” (*M* 582–85).

of having loyal friends secured in the right places.¹⁶⁶ Even though the story carefully avoids saying so outright, one possible sense of what the narrator has in mind is imparted to the reader when he claims to have been “not unemployed in my profession” by Astor (“B” 14).

In addition to the narrator’s aversion to stress and his income being based upon a position within a patronage economy (no matter if Astor was his actual patron or not), a previously mentioned point must be repeated: To a large degree, he seems to think in terms of food, time and again trying to make sense of his own experiences and his employees through notions of nourishment. As opposed to *Bartleby*’s lack of interest in the demands of the stomach, the narrator—no less than the classical parasites of comedy—seems to have edibles on his mind.¹⁶⁷ What’s more, the story indicates that it is *he*, rather than the scrivener, who nourishes himself from their association. This becomes evident in an oft quoted passage where he reflects upon the various advantages and disadvantages of his employee’s presence:

He is useful to me. I can get along with him. If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less indulgent employer, and then he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve. Yes. *Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval.* To befriend *Bartleby*; to humor him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove *a sweet morsel for my conscience.* (“B” 23–24; emphasis added)

¹⁶⁶ Mario D’Avanzo for example points out that Astor had been the patron of the poet Fitz-Greene Halleck, as well as Washington Irving, who in turn had helped Melville get *Typee* published in America. Even though Irving (along with James Fenimore Cooper) is often held to be the first American author who made a living from selling his books on the open market, he also made a great deal of money through his association with his patron, from whom he received \$10,000 for writing *Astoria* (1836), a fawning travelogue of Astor’s conquests.

¹⁶⁷ As Allen F. Stein has pointed out, the “doctrine of assumptions” underlying the narrator’s actions is etymologically connected to eating and nourishment (“B” 35): “Approaching life through a series of assumptions is what Melville depicts in the motif of eating in ‘*Bartleby*.’ Among the definitions which the Oxford English Dictionary lists for *assume* are: ‘to take as being one’s own,’ ‘to arrogate,’ ‘to lay claim to,’ ‘to appropriate,’ and the now obsolete ‘to take into the body (food, nourishment, etc.)’” (33).

It would be difficult to find a passage that better exemplifies Serres' claim: "To give without receipt in kind is to give oneself honor and virtue, to display one's power: that is called charity" (*Hermes* 6). This is not to say that the narrator is a hypocrite who only loves his neighbor if there is something in it for himself. The crucial thing is rather, as the following quote from John Matteson indicates, that for the lawyer (as is perhaps the case for most people), charity is intricately woven into self-interest: "At the same moment that the lawyer determines to do good for Bartleby, he envisions a sort of spiritual cannibalism; Charity becomes an almost parasitic act, enabling the lawyer's soul to savor the juicy satisfaction of relieving another's misfortune" (47). At least for a time, the narrator therefore clearly seems to nourish himself on Bartleby's presence, which functions as support for his view of himself as a charitable man.¹⁶⁸

Who, then, is the parasite of the story: Bartleby or the narrator? The difficulty of answering this question stems from Melville having taken the two most typical traits of the parasite—no matter if in its classical form or in the modern biological conceptualization—and separated them. The scrivener has inherited the parasite's tactics for creating a habitat out of a space belonging to another; the lawyer its hunger and its means of feeding on others. Together, they would seem to make up a complete parasite, but what the story offers its readers is a narrative of an impossible symbiosis that almost, but only almost, adds up; in Serres' words: The parasite "becomes invisible by being impossible. Impossible, absurd, outside reason and logic. That is what is interesting; that is the point; that is what must be thought about. He becomes invisible in the inconceivable" (*Parasite* 218).

168 However, the scrivener's behavior makes it impossible for the narrator to hang on to this "sweet morsel": "But this mood was not invariable with me. The passiveness of Bartleby sometimes irritated me. I felt strangely goaded on to encounter him in new opposition, to elicit some angry spark from him answerable to my own" ("B" 24). The problem is not that he is unwilling to offer charity to his employee, but rather that the latter does not act in a manner fitting one receiving hospitality; as Serres puts it: "The counterpart of charity, of the gift without counterpart, is the whole of the poor man's conduct" (*Hermes* 6).

The Replicating Formula

Who, then, is the ultimate parasite of Melville's story? Bartleby himself? The narrator? Or neither? In this final part of the chapter, I want to explore a third possibility. To do so, it is first necessary to turn to the scholars who have shifted the analytical focus away from the two main characters, and towards the nature and force of the scrivener's famous utterance. Chief among these is Gilles Deleuze.¹⁶⁹ In "Bartleby; or, The Formula," which appeared in his last book, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1993), he insists that the story must be understood *literally*:

"Bartleby" is neither a metaphor for the writer nor the symbol of anything whatsoever. It is a violently comical text, and the comical is always literal. ... It means only what it says, literally. And what it says and repeats is *I would prefer not to*. This is the formula of its glory, which every loving reader repeats in turn. A gaunt and pallid man has uttered the formula that drives everyone crazy. But in what does the literality of the formula consist? (Deleuze 68)

The question, then, is whether Deleuze's change of perspective from characters to utterance is relevant to the analysis of the parasitical relationship playing out in the story: Could it be that just as Bartleby and the narrator have parasitic traits, so does the scrivener's formula?

Before answering this question, one obvious objection must be raised: Does it make sense to say that an utterance such as "I would prefer not to" can have parasitic traits? The notion that ideas or utterances can be likened to parasites, has been given scientific legitimacy through Richard Dawkins' theory of the *meme*. His book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) argues that human beings might be understood from the perspective of their DNA. Rather than people being masters of their own bodies, such a change of perspective opens the radical possibility that "we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes" (Dawkins 2). It is thereby suggested

169 Even though Deleuze's reading is not without problematic aspects, his focus on Bartleby's formula has generated considerable interest in Melville's story from continental and political philosophers. For overviews of this critical tradition, see Attell, Jonik ("Murmurs") and my two contributions ("Loving"; "En fremmed"). For an innovative reading of Melville's *oeuvre* in light of Deleuze's philosophy, see Jonik (*Herman Melville*).

that humans might ultimately be there for them, and, consequently, that it is they that make use of their hosts—us—to replicate.

In Chapter 11 of *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins goes on to suggest that other types of replicators than DNA exist. In particular, he focuses on the cultural equivalents of genes, which he terms *memes*—meme being “a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*” (Dawkins 192). As he sees it, just like genes, such units—which roughly correspond to *complex ideas*—have as their ultimate “goal” their own survival through replication.¹⁷⁰ All it takes to consider them as entities that use their hosts in order to spread is therefore a change of perspective; in Dawkins’ words: “What we have not previously considered is that a cultural trait may have evolved in the way that it has, simply because it is *advantageous to itself*” (200; emphasis in the original). Memes can thus make individuals act in a manner that is advantageous to themselves, but detrimental to the well-being of those spreading them—think of suicide bombers giving their lives for their religious beliefs, or soldiers giving theirs for their country. For this reason, Dawkins explicitly likens memes to parasites affecting the behavior of their hosts:

As my colleague N. K. Humphrey neatly summed up an earlier draft of this chapter: “... memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. *When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.* And this isn’t just a way of talking—the meme for, say, ‘belief in life after death’ is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over.” (192; emphasis added)¹⁷¹

170 Due to the difficulty of defining exactly what counts as a meme, Dawkins also introduces the concept of meme-complexes (or *memeplexes*), consisting of “a co-adapted stable set of mutually-assisting memes” (197). When it comes to the use of “goal” or similar anthropomorphic terms regarding memes, Dawkins obviously does not mean that they have concrete intentions, but rather that memetic replication follows as a natural consequence of basic evolutionary mechanisms.

171 In an explanatory note included in the second edition of his book, Dawkins slightly modifies his original stance. Referring to Juan D. Delius’ attempt to differentiate between different types of memes in “Of Mind Memes and Brain Bugs; a Natural History of Culture,” he makes the following claim: “Among the other interesting things [Delius] does is to explore, far more searchingly than I had done, the analogy of memes with parasites; to be more precise, with the spectrum of which

What I want to do in the following, then, is explore what happens if “I would prefer not to” is considered as a meme, and hence as a “living structure” capable of replicating itself.¹⁷² In fact, this is in many ways similar to what Deleuze and critics such as J. Hillis Miller and Cornelia Vismann—to whose readings of “Bartleby” we will later turn—have done, although from a different perspective, and without reference to Dawkins or the concept of the meme.

To explore this unexpected convergence, it is first necessary to describe the effect the scrivener’s peculiar utterance has on those he encounters. By not doing what is expected of him, he of course slows down the productivity of the office, but what I here have in mind, is rather that there is something profoundly unsettling about the very phrase he utters, especially in combination with his quiet steadfastness and lack of anger. This is where Deleuze might be of help. As he sees it, while the sentence “I would prefer not to” is grammatically and syntactically correct, there is still something not quite right about it. As readers we expect to be told exactly *what* it is Bartleby would prefer not to do, but due to the abrupt ending of the utterance, this information is withheld. In Vismann’s words: “The verb ‘prefer’ is highly referential. It always raises the question—prefer what ...?” (147). The impression the first time he utters the formula, is that Bartleby simply prefers not to do what has been asked of him, to verify the accuracy of his copies. However, the more times the utterance is repeated, the more the suspicion grows that there is in fact *nothing* the narrator could suggest to him that he would “prefer” to do. Due to this openness and undecidability, the formula comes to function as the limit of the series of concrete things one can prefer not to do, capable of

malignant parasites are one extreme, benign ‘symbionts’ the other extreme” (Dawkins 323). In other words, whereas Dawkins originally came close to claiming that memes should *literally* be understood as parasites, he later seemed to consider them parasites in a metaphorical sense.

172 While Melville scholars have so far not addressed Bartleby’s utterance as a meme, O. C. McSwite comes close with the following question: “Imagine if a Bartleby virus (in the form of one of Dawkins’ cultural memes) were to spread rapidly through contemporary society, such that there were more Bartlebys than people still confined to the orthodox social reality. What would happen then?” (201). For a general reading of the “Melville meme” which primarily focuses on *Moby-Dick*, see Bryant (“Wound”).

encompassing them all: not just a, but also b, c, d, e, f, g, and so on.¹⁷³ As a corollary, the scrivener's non-preference should not be understood as him saying *no* to anything. It is rather a way of avoiding having to deal with the opposition between accept and negation altogether, and this is what causes Deleuze to conclude that even if the formula is "at best a localized tick that crops up in certain circumstances," it is nonetheless powerful enough to topple all the social bonds language helps keep alive: "Without a doubt, the formula is ravaging, devastating, and leaves nothing standing in its wake" (72, 70).

One way of explaining this claim is through speech act-theory, as theorized by J. L. Austin in his *How to Do Thing with Words* (1962).¹⁷⁴ In the early part of the book, Austin introduces the distinction between *constative* and *performative* speech-acts—that is, between utterances that refer to what already exists, and those that cause something new to come into being *in* being uttered, and must therefore be assessed by means of other criteria than their truth-value.¹⁷⁵ For Deleuze, one of the fundamental traits of Bartleby's formula is how it effectively collapses this distinction:

In speaking, I do not simply indicate things and actions; I also commit acts that assure a relation with the interlocutor, in keeping with our respective situations: I command, I interrogate, I promise, I ask, I emit "speech acts." Speech acts

173 This resonates well with Jacques Derrida's claim that Bartleby's utterance "evokes the future without either predicting or promising; it utters nothing fixed, determinable, positive, or negative. The modality of this repeated utterance that says nothing, promises nothing, neither refuses nor accepts anything, the tense of this singularly insignificant statement reminds one of a nonlanguage or a secret language" (*Gift* 75).

174 While this is not something I will touch upon here, in *How to Do Things with Words* Austin makes the claim that language used in a way not meant to be taken seriously should be understood as "parasitic upon its normal use" (22), a claim that became central to the heated debate between Jacques Derrida and John R. Searle, see the former's *Limited Inc.* and the latter's "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida." On the debate between the two, see Alfino. For an analysis that connects Austin's claim with Serres' work on the parasite and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "minor literature," see my "Literature and the Parasite."

175 Austin suggests that performatives should be judged according to whether they bring about the intended action or not (14). Those that succeed he labels *happy* (or *felicitous*), whereas those that do not are seen as *unhappy* (or *infelicitous*). According to Austin, the latter category can be subdivided into *misfires* (botched procedures) and *abuses* (where the speech acts are properly executed, but without the intention of abiding by them). Bartleby's speech acts are evidence of the insufficiency of such categories, since it is as difficult to decide what category they belong to as it is to decide what would actually constitute a *happy* or *unhappy* instance of performative non-preference.

are self-referential (I command by saying “I order you ...”), while constative propositions refer to other things and other words. It is this double system of references that Bartleby ravages. The formula I PREFER NOT TO excludes all alternatives, and devours what it claims to preserve no less than it distances itself from everything else. It implies that Bartleby stop copying, that is, that he stop reproducing words; it hollows out a zone of indetermination that renders words indistinguishable, that creates a vacuum within language. But it also stymies the speech acts that a boss uses to command, that a kind friend uses to ask questions or a man of faith to make promises. If Bartleby had refused, he could still be seen as a rebel or insurrectionary, and as such would still have a social role. But the formula stymies all speech acts, and at the same time, it makes Bartleby a pure outsider [*exclu*] to whom no social position can be attributed. (Deleuze 73)

A similar reading of the formula as undermining the distinction between constatives and performatives can be found in J. Hillis Miller’s *Versions of Pygmalion*, where he claims that “I would prefer not to,”

is like an endless loop in the process of reasoning. The disruptive energy of this extraordinary group of everyday words is limitless. A shorthand way of describing that power is to say that Bartleby’s sentence cannot be assimilated to any dialectical or oppositional way of thinking. You can neither deny it nor accept it. It is neither constative nor performative, or perhaps it might be better to say it is an exceedingly disquieting form of performative. It is a use of words to make something happen, but what it makes happen is to bring about the impossibility of making anything happen with words. (156)

Miller also notes that through Bartleby’s unwillingness to verify his copies, the unsettling effects of such “performatives which do not perform”—to borrow a phrase from his “The Critic as Host” (206)—also spread to *written* language. For the legal documents he is hired to copy to be accepted in a court of law, there can be no doubt about their authenticity and correctness. This, of course, is why proof-reading them is so important to the narrator:

These documents must be exactly correct in all their copies in order to perform their function, which is to transfer property from one owner to another

or to execute a bond or mortgage, a promise to pay so much interest along with principal over such and such a time. Such a promise, like a property deed, is a speech act. A conveyance is not primarily constative, though it may contain a description of the property in question. A conveyance is properly performative, if it is written right. It is a way of doing things with words. (Miller, *Versions* 148)

By “preferring not to” verify what he has copied, Bartleby in effect makes the copied documents null and void in a legal context. In so doing, he undermines their performative power, turning them into *dead letters* similar to the ones he supposedly handled in his previous job.¹⁷⁶ In effect, the scrivener causes a double short-circuit, both to written and to spoken language; or, to quote Deleuze: “Bartleby has invented a new logic, a *logic of preference*, which is enough to undermine the presuppositions of language as a whole” (73; emphasis in the original).¹⁷⁷

This, however, is only one of the defining traits of the formula—even more important for the present discussion is its highly contagious nature. Like a virus or a disease, it spreads, inflicting the speech of everybody in its vicinity, the other scriveners no less than the narrator; to Deleuze, it is “a trait of expression that contaminates everything” (77). More precisely, the word “prefer” starts popping up in the utterances of the other characters, often without them being aware of it, something Melville applies for comic effects. At one point, the narrator requests that Bartleby “begin to be a little reasonable,” leading the scrivener to reply “[a]t present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable” (“B” 30). Overhearing this, Nippers, who at the time is in a foul mood due to his indigestion, is enraged:

¹⁷⁶ Vismann makes a similar point: “if Bartleby prefers not to examine the copy, he renders the examination impossible and, furthermore, makes the copy itself worthless. A copy is a copy precisely because certified by a comparison with the original which guarantees its *legal* correctness. An unrevised transcript is not a legal copy and must not be allowed into circulation” (144). However, as Arsić has argued, this logic of verification leads to an endless regress: “there are always more witnesses who can be invited to witness the accuracy of a witnessing. And the logic in question suggests that copying is precisely such a process of infinite witnessing” (*Passive* 142).

¹⁷⁷ As opposed to the narrator’s logic of *assumptions* or *presuppositions*, Bartleby’s logic might not be on the side of commonly accepted reason, but, as Deleuze sees it, it is still fully formed and internally consistent. The creation of such an alternative logic of constant becoming is one of the main tasks of what he and Félix Guattari termed “minor literature.” What Deleuze says about “great novelists” might just as well have been said about Bartleby: their work remains “enigmatic yet nonarbitrary: in short, a new logic, definitely a logic, but one that grasps the innermost depths of life and death without leading us back to reason” (82).

“*Prefer not, eh?*” gritted Nippers—“I’d *prefer* him, if I were you, sir,” addressing me—“I’d *prefer* him; I’d give him preferences, the stubborn mule! What is it, sir, pray, that he *prefers* not to do now?”

Bartleby moved not a limb.

“Mr. Nippers,” said I, “I’d prefer that you would withdraw for the present.” (“B” 31; emphasis in the original)

Realizing that he has just used Bartleby’s dreaded word in his reply to Nippers, the narrator then makes the following remark:

Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using the word “prefer” upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? (“B” 31)

After Nippers leaves, Turkey approaches:

“With submission, sir,” said he, “yesterday I was thinking about Bartleby here, and I think that if he would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day, it would do much towards mending him, and enabling him to assist in examining his papers.”

“So you have got the word too,” said I, slightly excited.

“With submission, what word, sir,” asked Turkey ... “What word, sir?”

“I would prefer to be left alone here,” said Bartleby, as if offended at being mobbed in his privacy.

“*That’s* the word, Turkey,” said I—“*that’s* it.”

“Oh, *prefer*? oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer—”

“Turkey,” interrupted I, “you will please withdraw.”

“Oh certainly, sir, if you prefer that I should.”

As he opened the folding-doors to retire, Nippers at his desk caught a glimpse of me, and asked whether I would prefer to have a certain paper copied on blue paper or white. He did not in the least roguishly accent the word *prefer*. It was plain that it involuntarily rolled from his tongue. I thought to myself, surely I must get rid of a demented man, who already has in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads of myself and clerks. (“B” 31; emphasis in the original)

Even though the scrivener himself "would prefer not to" budge, the formula obviously has no such qualms, constantly proliferating throughout the story. And whereas he—unlike successful parasites classical and biological—is not adaptable to changing circumstances at all, the formula is. Writing about the story, it is easy to focus solely on its generic form, but Deleuze and others have analyzed how it undergoes constant changes, depending on the context and the narrator's various utterances. At different times "I would prefer not to" morphs into: "I prefer not to" ("B" 22, 25); "I *prefer* not" (25); "At present I prefer to give no answer" (30); the above quoted "At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable" (30) and "I would prefer to be left alone here" (31); "I would prefer *not* to quit you" (35); "I would prefer not to make any change" (41); "I would prefer not to take a clerkship" (41); "I would prefer to be doing something else" (41); "at present I would prefer not to make any change at all" (41); and, the final version uttered by Bartleby before dying, "I prefer not to dine to-day" (44). If these examples are indeed all versions of what Deleuze calls "the great indeterminate formula, I PREFER NOT TO, which subsists once and for all and in all cases," and whose "muted presence . . . continues to haunt Bartleby's language" (69), the formula is so adaptable that on occasion, it is also able to turn into its apparent opposite, positive preference, as when the scrivener lets it be known that he wants to be left alone.¹⁷⁸

Since the formula seems to be able to easily adapt to any counter-strategies the narrator can come up with, as well as of replicating itself through the utterances of everyone in the office—turning their minds, in Dawkins' aforementioned words, "into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell"—perhaps *it* could be the story's ultimate parasite. This, at least, is what Vismann hints at when she contends that one of the defining traits of the formula is that in being uttered, it brings about the impossibility

178 In addition, Bartleby also makes other utterances where it is not obvious whether they fall under the formula or not. Deleuze analyzes "I am not particular," which the scrivener utters three times, as the formula's "indispensable complement" (74). J. H. Miller focuses on Bartleby's "gift for absurd literalism" (*Versions* 159), as is in the following quote from the narrator: "Going up the stairs to my old haunt, there was Bartleby silently sitting upon the bannister at the landing. 'What are you doing here, Bartleby?' said I. 'Sitting upon the bannister,' he replied mildly" ("B" 40).

of Bartleby doing those tasks that he claims to “prefer not to” do: “The sentence produces the impossibility of what is asked for. The force of the sentence, then, is autopoeitic, without author or offender. Bartleby cannot be held responsible for the consequences” (145). Later returning to the formula’s effects, she offers the further elaboration:

It lives, or rather nourishes itself, on the content of that which can be crossed out. The parasitic structure of the sentence might, thus, explain its pathology—its contingency, as Deleuze has characterized it. The phrase “sprouts and proliferates” to the extent that it builds up a reference that may be cancelled. In its voraciousness it consumes all that could be achieved by affirmation. Due to this peculiar, all too logical structure, the performative force operates anti-performatively or deformatively. (Vismann 147)

If the formula indeed has a “parasitic structure,” then maybe Bartleby’s strange behavior is not so different from that of the castrated crab housing *Sacculina carcini*, after all. Both end up acting in a manner detrimental to their own well-being, but in the best interest of their hidden guest within; as Vismann puts it: “[Bartleby] is consumed by the formula until nothing remains but an inactive and mute *ex-copyist*” (149). The only difference would be that it is Bartleby’s mind, and not his body that is infected, at least according to the narrator: “it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach” (“B” 29). Since it is not clear whether the scrivener’s parasitic traits are properly his own—that is, something he has chosen of his own free will—or simply the result of him being infected by the parasitic formula, which uses him as a *vector* in order to reach its final host, I am reluctant to fully agree with Vismann that Bartleby is “as parasitic as the formula itself—the perfect copyist, one might say” (148). In my opinion, it would be more correct to say that the formula’s parasitic traits greatly exceed his own.

In conclusion, then, Melville’s story can be seen as offering an ingenious example of Serres’ “parasitic chain” where “the last to come tries to supplant his predecessor” (*Parasite* 4): the formula uses Bartleby to spread, and this leads the scrivener—at least from a certain perspective—to parasitize the narrator, who is already a host of sorts to Nippers, Turkey and Ginger Nut. The lawyer, in turn, is no stranger to feeding off

others, leading a relaxed life due to the aristocratic privileges and idleness he seems to have earned through parasitizing his patron. While he thinks that Bartleby will function as a "sweet morsel" for his conscience, in the end, what the scrivener does is shift the miniature system of the story—the law office—irreversibly away from its precarious equilibrium. After his employee's death in prison, this instability leads to the lawyer's attempt to regain homeostasis through narrating his experiences in a meaningful way. His final utterance—"Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!"—might perhaps then be understood as the weary, but contented sigh of the leisure-seeking narrator as he realizes that the fluctuations set in motion by this strange foreign body are finally calming down.

However, while these are the last words of the story, they do not end the proliferation of the formula—far from it. As attested to by the Bartleby Industry's extraordinary diligence, it continues replicating outside of Melville's text. Every time "I would prefer not to" is reiterated by eager and puzzled scholars—the present author not excluded—the Bartleby-meme spreads and undergoes new mutations as it is made to fit into yet new explanatory contexts. The hope is that in the process, a little bit of the creative madness of Melville's story is also transferred anew. In the end, this is perhaps what readers and critics owe to great works of literature.

CHAPTER 5

Spotting the Parasite(s) in “Jimmy Rose”¹⁷⁹

Among Melville’s works that have received the least scholarly attention is the short story “Jimmy Rose.” Published anonymously in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in November 1855, it deals with the attempts of the elderly first-person narrator, William Ford, to retell the life and death of an old acquaintance, the eponymous Rose. The scholarship on the story thus far has been modest, whether because scholars have felt that what could be said about it was exhausted in early readings or because the story has been dismissed as overly sentimental and lacking in quality.¹⁸⁰ Marvin Fisher’s claim from 1977 thus seems no less accurate today: “Compared to most of Melville’s stories, ‘Jimmy Rose’ has suffered from relative neglect; no one seems to have felt that it was particularly significant in regard to theme or technique” (133).¹⁸¹

The figure of the parasite, however, allows us to see that there is more to “Jimmy Rose” than first meets the eye. More precisely, among those previous critics who have offered contrasting opinions on William Ford’s character, not even those who have deemed him an unreliable narrator seem to have grasped just how similar he in many respects is to Jimmy Rose, who is obviously indebted to the classical figure of the parasite. As

179 This chapter was originally published under the title “A Parlor of One’s Own: On Spotting the Parasite in ‘Jimmy Rose’” in *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* in 2017. Reprinted with permission.

180 As Lea Newman shows, the readings that exist usually attempt to locate the real-life models for the characters in the story or the narrator’s house, and/or they address the importance of the rose metaphor to the story, compare it to other writings by Melville, or debate the ethical character of Jimmy Rose, as well as the narrator’s reliability (255–68). Among more recent scholars who have approached the story in a different manner, see Yablon (133–35) and Scanlan (86–98). Both compare “Bartleby” and “Jimmy Rose” to reflect upon the rapid transformations that New York went through during the 1850s, as well as the nostalgic longing for the past to which these changes gave birth.

181 Or, in Newman’s words: “A great many Melville enthusiasts ignore the story entirely, which is a kind of condemnation by omission” (266).

I will argue, this is most likely due to Ford's oblique mode of narration, which downplays his own involvement and omits information that could be used against him.¹⁸² A closer scrutiny of what he says, as well as of the lacunae found in his narrative, begins to indicate that—not unlike the pairing of *Bartleby* and the narrator—here too we encounter a relationship where it is not entirely clear who is the ultimate parasite.

The Two Careers of Jimmy Rose

Ford's narrative opens with a description of how, “[a] time ago, no matter how long precisely”, he had moved to New York after becoming “unexpected heir to a great old house in a narrow street of one of the lower wards, once the haunt of style and fashion, full of gay parlors and bridal chambers; but now, for the most part, transformed into counting-rooms and warehouses” (“JR” 336). Even though the old house is in a state of decay, and even though his wife wants to modernize it, it is obvious that Ford is reluctant to make any changes, considering it a remnant of a bygone era: “in this old house of mine, so strangely spared, some monument of departed days survived” (“JR” 336). In particular, he absolutely refuses to redecorate its decaying parlor, with its once grand, but now partly destroyed ornamental wallpaper. As he makes known—thus introducing the story's titular figure—the main reason is because of the room's “long association in my mind with one of the original proprietors of the mansion,” the recently deceased James Rose (“JR” 338).

In the second part of the story, Ford describes the unfortunate events that came to affect Rose, whom he consistently refers to as Jimmy. A handsome and charming ladies' man with rosy cheeks, the latter was once famous for his lavish parties and extravagant dinners. Ford compares Jimmy to “the great Florentine trader, Cosmo the Magnificent,” noting that large crowds were attracted by his “uncommon cheeriness; the splendor of his dress; his sparkling wit; radiant chandeliers; infinite fund of small-talk; French furniture; glowing welcomes to his guests;

182 For critics who have found the narrator to be reliable, see Tutt, Gargano, and Slater; for the opposite view, see Jeffrey, and Bickley Jr. (*Method* 47–8).

his bounteous heart and board; his noble graces and his glorious wine" ("JR" 338–39). However, Jimmy's days as popular host come to an end when he is ruined by a string of bad luck in business, leading to most of his former companions abandoning him, and his creditors, "once fast friends," now pursuing "him as carrion for jails" ("JR" 342). Upon learning of his misfortune, the narrator tries to track him down to help. Finally learning where Rose is hiding to avoid his creditors—in the very house Ford will later inherit—he offers his services, only to have his bankrupt acquaintance tell him that "I can trust no man now" ("JR" 341). When the distressed man finally threatens him with a gun, the narrator flees.

The third and final part of the narrative concerns Jimmy's life after the bankruptcy. When the narrator finally meets him again, twenty-five years later, he is stunned by how little his old associate seems to have changed:

He whom I expected to behold—if behold at all—dry, shrunken, meagre, cadaverously fierce with misery and misanthropy—amazement! the old Parisian roses bloomed in his cheeks. And yet poor as any rat; poor in the last dregs of poverty; a pauper beyond alms-house pauperism; a promenading pauper in a thin, thread-bare, careful coat; a pauper with wealth of polished words; a courteous, smiling, shivering gentleman. ("JR" 342)

The quote indicates that when they finally meet again, Ford expects Jimmy to have followed the misanthropic course of the title character of a text not directly referred to in the story, but which Melville drew on in several of his works: Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (c. 1604–1607).¹⁸³ Timon is the man who lavishly spends his riches on entertaining friends, but whose former companions all refuse to help him when he is ruined. He then starts hating mankind, eventually retreating to a cave outside of Athens, where he finally dies in solitude; as he puts it, after throwing warm water on those who formerly used to flatter him:

Live loath'd, and long,
Most smiling, smooth, detested parasites,
Courteous destroyers, affable wolves, meek bears,

183 On the influence of *Timon of Athens* on Melville's writings, see Watson. As we will see in Chapter 6, Shakespeare's Athenian misanthrope is also relevant to *The Confidence-Man*.

You fools of fortune, trencher-friends, time's flies,
 Cap-and-knee slaves, vapours, and minute-jacks!
 Of man and beast the infinite malady
 Crust you quite o'er. (Shakespeare 3.6.90–96)

While the first part of Jimmy's life thus perfectly corresponds to that of Timon, the second, to Ford's surprise, has not. Even though Jimmy never regained his riches after the bankruptcy, he is still the same charming gentleman. In addition, his inability to trust his fellow men turns out to have been short-lived; for, as Ford claims, "[p]erhaps at bottom Jimmy was too thoroughly good and kind to be made from any cause a man-hater. And doubtless it at last seemed irreligious to Jimmy even to shun mankind" ("JR" 342).

Hence, Richard Bridgman is correct in labeling Jimmy a "counter-Timon" (236). In fact, as Lea Newman has pointed out (258), "Jimmy Rose" can almost be seen as the story of what might have happened if Shakespeare's misanthrope, having been transported to nineteenth-century New York, had reacted differently to the advice given to him by the cynic Apemantus, who seeks him out and asks him to return to Athens: "Be thou a flatterer now, and seek to thrive/ By that which has undone thee. Hinge thy knee,/ And let his very breath whom thou'lt observe/ Blow off thy cap; praise his most vicious strain,/ And call it excellent" (Shakespeare 4.3.213–17). While Timon scornfully rejects Apemantus' proposal to flatter others, Ford's description indicates that it is this tactic which has enabled Jimmy to survive all these years. Formerly he gave dinners, but after the bankruptcy, he has become dependent upon the charity of others. As the narrator puts it:

From an unknown quarter he received an income of some seventy dollars, more or less. The principal he would never touch, but, by various modes of eking it out, managed to live on the interest. He lived in an attic, where he supplied himself with food. He took but one regular repast a day—meal and milk—and nothing more, *unless procured at others' tables*. Often about the tea-hour he would drop in upon some old acquaintance, clad in his neat, forlorn frock coat, with worn velvet sewed upon the edges of the cuffs, and a similar device upon the hems of his pantaloons, to hide that dire look of having been grated off by

rats. On Sunday he made a point of always dining at some fine house or other.
("JR" 342; emphasis added)

In other words, having started out as a host giving sumptuous feasts, the result of Jimmy Rose's financial troubles is a new career as a parasite.

Similar claims have been made by previous Melville scholars. Ralph M. Tutt for example mentions Jimmy's "parasitic readjustment" to his "shallow society" (30); R. W. B. Lewis asserts that he has been "transformed at a stroke from a wealthy man-about-town to a sandwich-filching parasite" (41); Edward Haviland Miller that he "is now a parasite upon the wealthy to whom he toadies for crusts of bread" (257); and William B. Dillingham that when the narrator meets him again, he has become "a pitiful old parasite" (311). As Jimmy undoubtedly belongs to the tradition stretching back to the comedic Greek and Roman parasites, these critics are correct in their choice of label. In failing to interrogate properly this literary tradition, they end up using the epithet "parasite" as little more than an insult for someone thought to be too lazy to work. However, as previously discussed, being a successful parasite is far from easy.

In overlooking the history of the comedic parasite, as well as through the use of derogatory terms such as "sandwich-filching," "toadies for crusts of bread," and "pitiful," these critics end up framing the title character in a much more negative light than does the narrator, who clearly indicates an awareness of the talent and adaptability that his old acquaintance has brought to the task of acquiring his free dinners. To borrow a phrase from Ishmael: as he is portrayed by Ford, Jimmy in many ways comes across as an incarnation of "the stubbornness of life" (*MD* 165).¹⁸⁴ Whereas the aforementioned scholars are in danger of accepting at face value the widespread stigmatization of those deemed unproductive and dependent upon others, the story itself can thus be read as a critical interrogation of exactly such problematic exclusionary social mechanisms.¹⁸⁵

184 As Dillingham has pointed out (317), there is an interesting resemblance between the opening lines of Ford—"A time ago, no matter how long precisely" ("JR" 336)—and Ishmael: "Some years ago—never mind how long precisely" (*MD* 3). Along with Melville's other writings in the period 1853–1856, several scholars have approached "Jimmy Rose" as a hypothetical narrative of what could have become of Ishmael after his return from sea, see Slater, and Chase (*Herman Melville*).

185 For a somewhat related argument concerning the depiction of disability in *The Confidence-Man*, see Snyder and Mitchell (*Cultural Locations* 37–68 and "Masquerades"), and Samuels.

Ford touches upon several of the tactics that have enabled Jimmy to survive as a parasite. First, his famous smile is said to have become no less winning after the bankruptcy: “The lordly door which received him to his eleemosynary teas, knew no such smiling guest as Jimmy” (“JR” 343). Second, just like his literary ancestors, he uses his wit, learning, and ability to entertain as a means of securing invitations, be it by spreading “the news of the town” or by “frequenting the reading-rooms” to keep informed on “European affairs and the last literature, foreign and domestic” (“JR” 343). Third, having been a ladies’ man in the past, he still knows how to charm members of the opposite sex: “Neither did Jimmy give up his courtly ways. Whenever there were ladies at the table, sure were they of some fine word” (“JR” 343). He thus undoubtedly offers those who feed him *something* of value, meaning that it is not easy deciding who has the most to gain from the relationship—the hosts or the parasite; as Ford puts it:

Though in thy own need thou hadst no pence to give the poor, thou, Jimmy, still hadst alms to give the rich. For not the beggar chattering at the corner pines more after bread than the vain heart after compliment. The rich in their craving glut, as the poor in their craving want, we have with us always. So, I suppose, thought Jimmy Rose. (“JR” 344)

Hence, to have survived in this manner for such a long time, Jimmy must once have been a truly excellent parasite. Nevertheless, to quote Athenaeus’ previously mentioned *The Learned Banqueters*: “The bloom is quickly off a flatterer’s life;/ no one likes a parasite with gray temples” (6.255b). When the narrator meets Jimmy again, twenty-five years after the bankruptcy, he has been plying his tricks for so long that he is in the process of being outdated: dinner invitations are harder to come by, his charms no longer as appreciated as they used to be, his wit not as welcome, and his compliments often perceived as “somewhat musty” by the young ladies to whom they are directed (“JR” 343). In order not to further alienate his remaining patrons, he therefore has to know when to make himself scarce: “At certain houses, and not a few, Jimmy would drop in about ten minutes before the tea-hour, and drop out again about ten minutes after it; well knowing that his further presence was not indispensable

to the contentment or felicity of his host" ("JR" 343). Ford also notes that "[s]o numerous were the houses that Jimmy visited, or so cautious was he in timing his less welcome calls, that at certain mansions he only dropped in about once a year or so" ("JR" 344).

While the title character thus shares many of the central traits of the comedic parasites, Melville's story is clearly no comedy. Jimmy's hunger serves a tragic, rather than a comedic function. This can be seen from the following passage, where it becomes clear that the aging parasite has reached a point where he must swallow his pride for tea and scraps of bread, perfectly aware that a proper meal will only be served after he has left:

How forlorn it was to see him so heartily drinking the generous tea, cup after cup, and eating the flavorful bread and butter, piece after piece, when, owing to the lateness of the dinner hour with the rest, and the abundance of that one grand meal with them, no one besides Jimmy touched the bread and butter, or exceeded a single cup of Souchong. And knowing all this very well, poor Jimmy would try to hide his hunger, and yet gratify it too, by striving hard to carry on a sprightly conversation with his hostess, and throwing in the eagerest mouthfuls with a sort of absent-minded air, as if he ate merely for custom's sake, and not starvation's. ("JR" 343)

That is to say, Melville has created a tragic parasite whose pathetic traits are counterbalanced by his extraordinary ability to swallow his pride and to adapt to his poverty and the situation he finds himself in.¹⁸⁶ In "Jimmy Rose" he has taken up the traditional comedic stock figure not to reproduce it, but to do something new by probing and modifying it, adding new traits to it, removing old ones, or by combining different traits in unexpected ways. This is the case for Jimmy, but it might also be true for William Ford. Even though the latter does not come across as particularly interested in food, as such, there are still several indications that the

¹⁸⁶ As Gavin Jones has argued in his chapter on Melville in *American Hunger*, his work is defined by its "sustained development of a dynamic, balanced, yet critical response to the contentious cultural questions that always seem to inform debates over socioeconomic inequality" (22). Even though he only mentions "Jimmy Rose" in passing, there is little doubt that Jones' sustained analytical focus on poverty intersects with the question of social parasitism.

story might also contain another sponger, albeit one intent on hiding his true character.

William Ford's Surprising Inheritance

As several critics have argued, even though the story bears his name, Jimmy Rose is not necessarily its most important character; in the words of Lea Newman: "As one of several of Melville's stories in which the narrator is as central to the meaning as the alleged protagonist, 'Jimmy Rose' has generated as much commentary on behalf of William Ford, who tells the story, as of Jimmy, who is its subject" (263).

Previous scholars have offered contradicting reflections on Ford's character. To some, he is endowed with a "superior insight which enables him to penetrate the surface of Jimmy's shallow society" (Tutt 30), thus functioning as "a moral yardstick" against which this superficial social milieu is judged and found wanting (Slater 273). Or, to quote James W. Gargano, who claims that through "the story he so honestly tells," Ford exposes "the ingratitude, parasitism, and selfishness" of Jimmy's social milieu (279, 278). On the other hand, there are those who consider him a sentimental old man who is not only unable to see the truth about Jimmy, but also unable to acknowledge "the shallowness in his own character" (Bickley Jr. *Method* 48). Others go even further, describing him as an unreliable narrator who frequently "skirts the truth," whose story is marked by significant omissions and lacunae, and whose relationship to the elites frequenting Jimmy's parties is far from unambiguous (Jeffrey 70). Nonetheless, even David K. Jeffrey, who argues that there is "a close affinity between the narrator and Jimmy; the two do not contrast but are very similar" (71), did not raise the possibility that Ford might embody parasitic traits of his own.

Assessing Ford's possible parasitic qualities requires answering one simple question: How did he end up as the owner of Jimmy's old house? To me, this is the central question raised by the story. Nonetheless, few scholars have asked it, either simply ignoring the issue or settling for unsatisfactory conclusions like pointing out that Ford inherits it "by some stroke of fortune which is never explained" (Tutt 30). One exception

is William B. Dillingham, who notes that the inheritance "is a curious detail, though it has not teased critics into speculating much about it" (302). All Ford mentions is that Jimmy "was among my earliest acquaintances," and that at the funeral, he "and two other tottering old fellows took hack, and in sole procession followed him to his grave" ("JR" 338). For this reason, Dillingham's own attempt at an answer does not seem particularly convincing, nor does it help explain the story: "A possible explanation is that Jimmy Rose is a relative of William Ford's and that this is a family house passed on from one member to another over the years" (302).

A closer look at what might be gleaned from the story about Ford's personality and character traits begins to indicate another possibility. First, he comes across as a conservative and sentimental old gentleman who longs for the past and has little interest in the present or the future. Not unlike the house itself, he can thus be seen as a "holdout" from an age gone by, to adopt Nick Yablon's term (131). This is for instance evident from the way Ford opposes his wife, whom he fears "was too young for me" ("JR" 338). She wants to replace their main parlor's old and partially faded French wallpaper, but he adamantly refuses her requests for something more modern. What is important to him is the quality and sense of history of the original, which shows roses and peacocks: "such paper could only have come from Paris—genuine Versailles paper—the sort of paper that might have hung in Marie Antoinette's boudoir" ("JR" 337). This has led Marvin Fisher to conclude that "[t]he narrator is distinctly French in his tastes and outlook, his family and their servant girl no less distinctly American. But significantly he is not Jacobin French, but definitely *ancien régime* in his values" (137). While in many ways an accurate description, I would add that instead of labeling Ford's taste as French, as such, it rather indicates his fundamental attachment to the aristocracy of the Old World and its system of core values.¹⁸⁷

187 As Ralph M. Tutt has argued, the roses in the parlor's wallpaper can be read as "an emblem of aristocracy" (30). The claim made in one of G. K. Chesterton's stories that in "those larger landscape gardens of the landed aristocracy ... peacocks as pets are not uncommon" (117), suggests that the same also holds for peacocks.

This becomes even more evident in another story that Melville wrote in the same period, and which is likely also narrated by Ford: “I and My Chimney,” published in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* in March 1856.¹⁸⁸ Here the unnamed narrator—hereafter referred to as “I”—is the owner of a house in the country with an extraordinarily large chimney. “I” is very fond of this chimney, describing it in terms of royalty, nobility, and aristocratic prerogatives. His wife, however, is not, and her major goal is therefore to tear it down—this because, “like the English aristocracy, [it] casts a contracting shade all round it” (“IMC” 359). Thus, in both “Jimmy Rose” and “I and My Chimney,” there is an opposition between the aristocratic traditions of yesteryear and current democratic ones, where the narrators are stubbornly on the side of the former, even though the splendor of the past has faded and crumbled. Where others—their wives, in particular—see a present and future full of opportunities, the aging narrators see nothing but “degenerate days” (“IMC” 355).

“I” makes known his own attitude to work when he describes himself as “a dozy old dreamer” who “dote[s] on seventh days as days of rest, and out of a sabbatical horror of industry, will, on a week day, go out of my road a quarter of a mile, to avoid the sight of a man at work” (“IMC” 360–61). Thus, in the true spirit of the aristocracy, “I” seems to abhor work. Moreover, for the most part he also appears to be able to avoid it: “I never was a very forward old fellow, nor what my farming neighbors call a forehanded one. Indeed, those rumors about my behindhandedness are so far correct, that I have an odd sauntering way with me sometimes of going about with my hands behind my back” (“IMC” 353). In fact, the one time in the story he does a bit of manual labor, he remarks that “so deeply was I penetrated with wonder at the chimney, that one day—*when I was a*

188 For the argument that Ford is the narrator of both, see Fogle (72–73), and M. Fisher (200–1), who stress that both stories are told by a conservative and old-fashioned man in opposition to a younger, more vital wife who wants to radically change their homes. Both couples have two daughters (unnamed in “Jimmy Rose”; named Julia and Anna in “I and My Chimney”) and a maid named Biddy. If the narrators are indeed one and the same person, this means that “I and My Chimney” must take place before the narrator moves to New York after inheriting Jimmy’s house in “Jimmy Rose.” For the argument that these stories and “The Apple-Tree Table” (1856)—which also features a married, unnamed narrator with daughters named Julia and Anna, and a maid named Biddy—were written in sequence between the late summer of 1854 and the summer or fall of 1855, see Newman (256).

little out of my mind, I now think—getting a spade from the garden, I set to work, digging round the foundation” (“IMC” 357; emphasis added). Moreover, he describes his aims in life solely in terms of his opposition to his wife’s plans: “I have not a single scheme or expectation on earth, save in unequal resistance of the undue encroachment of hers” (“IMC” 361). In other words, “I” would without a doubt agree with Ishmael’s previously quoted claim about detesting “all honorable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever” (*MD* 5).

These traits seem equally applicable to William Ford, who never clarifies how he makes his living. What he does lovingly mention, however, is sofas to relax in and “delicious breakfast toast,” and he also talks of joining the “loitering census” of the “few strange old gentlemen and ladies” yet to be found in his neighborhood (“JR” 336). From this perspective, his attachment to the good old days when he had recourse to Jimmy’s lavish dinners and expensive wines appears in a different light. Even though Ford, in Sheila Post-Lauria’s words, is someone who “distances himself from the tragedy of Jimmy Rose by restricting his role to impassive observer” (171), and also seems to purposefully minimize the degree of his personal involvement in the life of his acquaintance, there is little doubt that he, too, must have been an active participant at these dinners and parties. For, as David K. Jeffrey has rightly noted: “It is in the narrator’s descriptions of Jimmy’s parties that he most clearly exposes his longing for the past, and at the same time his description links him inadvertently with the society he condemns throughout the story” (71). After all, he could hardly have described these festive occasions in the manner that he does if he did not have first-hand experience to draw upon, and, at one point, he also explicitly mentions that “[i]t was but four or five days since seeing Jimmy at his house the centre of all eyes” (“JR” 339). That he must have been present on multiple occasions is betrayed when, describing how he happened to meet an “indignant gentleman” who had lost money due to the bankruptcy, he remarks that “now that I bethink me, I recall how I had *more than once* observed this same middle-aged gentleman, and how that toward the close of one of Jimmy’s dinners he would sit at the table pretending to be earnestly talking with beaming Jimmy” (“JR” 340; emphasis added).

Moreover, Ford's presence as a guest at *past* feasts casts an interesting light on his descriptions of Jimmy's tactics for acquiring nourishment, after the two are reacquainted. Take, for example, the previously quoted passage where he lamented "[h]ow forlorn it was to see him so heartily drinking the generous tea ... and eating the flavorful bread," when, due to the late dinner they were waiting for, nobody else ate anything. Logically, if Ford has really seen what he here claims to have seen, he must have been present on at least one such occasion, implying that no less than the other guests, he, too, had waited for the late dinner to be served as soon as his hungry associate had left.

While the story does not allow the reader to come to any clear conclusions, it thus gives birth to the suspicion that when it comes to free dinners, Ford might have more in common with Jimmy than he is willing to admit—perhaps one could even go so far as to see the two as the sides of another one of Melville's diptychs.¹⁸⁹ And if he is indeed an idler whose fondness for aristocratic prerogatives equals his dislike of manual labor, as well as someone who considers the present age a degenerated version of the glorious days when Jimmy was in his bloom, then he, no less than his old host, must be aware of the necessity of telling people what they want to hear to earn such free meals. Ford's nostalgic style and the sentimental refrain he repeatedly interjects might therefore be understood as a way of presenting a potentially difficult topic in a manner that will offend no one: "Poor Jimmy Rose" ("JR" 338), and "Ah! poor, poor Jimmy—God guard us all—poor Jimmy Rose!" ("JR" 339; for varieties, see 342, 343, 345).¹⁹⁰ Moreover, the cheerfulness with which he ends the narrative ultimately turns it into a story of hope, rather than one of despair: "Transplanted to another soil, all the unkind past forgot, God grant that Jimmy's roses

189 When considered in this light, interesting points of contact become visible between "Jimmy Rose" and Melville's other stories that deal with the opposition between hunger and plenitude, as well as wealth and poverty, such as "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" and "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs."

190 As Post-Lauria argues, the narrator's sentimentality resembles the tone common in texts about poverty published in *Harper's*. As she sees it, this holds for all the stories Melville published in the magazine: "Melville consciously adheres to the *Harper's* dictum for a sentimental structure in crafting his own message. His interest in questioning or even challenging the ideological views supported by both the magazine and the sentimental form had to be relegated to the substrata of his *Harper's* tales" (176).

may immortally survive!" ("JR" 345). In so doing, Ford transforms the narrative into the kind of story he could have safely told at one of Jimmy's dinners without having to risk alienating his patrons.

Tasty Compliments for a Vain Heart

The question remains: Why did the narrator inherit Jimmy's house? Considering his rhetorical strategies, the fact that Ford never gives an answer to this question gives the impression that he might have kept this information to himself on purpose, rather than simply forgotten to mention it. What he does share with the reader, however, is that "a sweet girl" looked after Jimmy near the end of his life: "The only daughter of an opulent alderman, she knew Jimmy well, and saw to him in his declining days. During his last sickness, with her own hands she carried him jellies and blanc-mange; made tea for him in his attic, and turned the poor old gentleman in his bed" ("JR" 344). Ford mentions neither that Jimmy had any family or relatives, nor does he do anything to counter the impression that he only met him a few times after the bankruptcy. This might lead the reader to suspect that the one who deserved to inherit his house would have been she who made his last days as comfortable as possible.

What Ford does share, however, is that he went to visit Jimmy after chancing to hear about his illness, and that something peculiar happened while he was there: "I hardly know that I should mention here one little incident connected with this young lady's ministrations, and poor Jimmy's reception of them. But it is harm to neither; I will tell it" ("JR" 344). What happens is that the young woman has brought "several books, of such a sort as are sent by serious-minded well-wishers to invalids in a serious crisis," but when she retires to leave Ford and Jimmy alone, the latter, "with what small remains of strength were his, pitched the books into the furthest corner, murmuring, 'Why will she bring me this sad old stuff? Does she take me for a pauper? Thinks she to salve a gentleman's heart with Poor Man's Plaster?'" ("JR" 344). Some critics have taken this as an indication of the shortcomings of Jimmy; James W. Gargano for example considers the outburst as evidence of how he "rejects self-knowledge and obstinately fancies himself, to the end, a kind of grandee"

(279). As I see it, what is important is rather that the sick man here inadvertently offers an opening for anybody with an interest in appearing as his true friend. What these words clearly indicate is that Jimmy has his pride. He still considers himself a gentleman and wants to be treated as one, rather than as a pauper. Since the narrator comments that “[f]or not the beggar chattering at the corner pines more after bread than the vain heart after compliment” (344), it does not seem unlikely that such tasty compliments and reassurances are exactly what he must have offered his acquaintance and his vain heart. However, Ford’s actual words to Jimmy are never revealed—instead, he simply breaks off from the story with the help of another one of his bland, non-offensive interjections: “Poor, poor Jimmy—God guard us all—poor Jimmy Rose!” (“JR” 345).

In the end, one can only speculate if the inheritance of the house came as a surprise to Ford, or if it was something he aimed for through plying the vanity of his dying acquaintance with fair, but empty words.¹⁹¹ No matter what the answer, inherit the house he did, and at the close of the story, the reader’s last glimpse is of him once more contentedly looking at the elegant peacocks and roses of the parlor’s faded wallpaper, having dried a sentimental tear from his eye. This ending is obviously far from the glamor and radiance of the extravagant parties he experienced in his youth, but then again—not unlike Jimmy—the aging Ford is not somebody who appears to demand all that much from life. What it takes to keep him satisfied, it seems, is to have a parlor of his own where he can meditate on the past and enjoy his aristocratic idleness—potentially while waiting for an invitation to his next free dinner—all the while trying to keep his busy wife from wreaking too much havoc on his peace of mind.

191 One of the stock characters the Roman *parasitus* had the most in common with was the *captator* or inheritance-hunter. Addressing Horace’s *Satire* 2.5, Cynthia Damon points out their similarities and their main difference: “The parasitical origin of Horace’s *captator* is fairly easy to discern. Both types ‘consume’ their hosts, but whereas the parasite needs his ration daily, the *captator* can afford to wait for his prize” (121). The many omissions and lacunae of William Ford’s narrative, in particularly concerning Jimmy’s death and the details of the inheritance, thus indicate that he might embody traits taken from both these figures.

CHAPTER 6

The Parasitic Cascade in *The Confidence-Man*

The Confidence-Man (1857) turned out to be the last piece of prose published by Melville in his lifetime. That the book—which is set aboard the Mississippi steamer *Fidèle*, travelling from St. Louis to New Orleans—has proved an enduring puzzle should come as no surprise to anyone who has had the dizzying pleasure of diving into this strange and intricate novel, described by Sianne Ngai as “more Bartlebyan than ‘Bartleby’ itself” in that it “takes the form not just of a single psychologically inscrutable character, but of *too many* psychologically inscrutable characters” (49, 50).¹⁹² And, as Nina Baym rightly points out, *The Confidence-Man* is “a work so paralyzingly self-conscious and so intricately engineered as to be unrecognizable as the product of the same sensibility that had produced *Typee* only a decade earlier” (921)—or, for that matter, the sensibility that had produced “Jimmy Rose” just a few years earlier. As different as these works are, there is nonetheless at least one thing that connects them, and that is the figure of the parasite. However, whereas *Typee* focuses on a single character’s parasitic quest for “plenty and repose,” and “Bartleby” and “Jimmy Rose” present a limited number of people sponging on each other, in *The Confidence-Man*, parasites seem to be *everywhere*.

192 I label *The Confidence-Man* a novel mostly for the sake of convenience. The work is a true *bricolage* of all sorts of forms and subgenres, including elements of Menippean satire, anatomy, comedy, farce, hoax, folk humor, allegory, philosophical dialogues, quest romance, picaresque, and experimental novel; in H. Bruce Franklin’s words: “In a sense it is a grand *reductio ad absurdum* of the novel form itself” (*The Wake* 153).

In fact, the figure is even there in the lyrical fragment called “The River,” which was likely intended to open the book.¹⁹³ Addressing how the Mississippi and the Missouri merge near St. Louis, the latter river is labeled as “a hostile element” and an “invader,” and is furthermore said to have two different procedures at its command in its persistent attempt to “sweep away” whatever is located on land: “open assault or artful sap” (CM 499). In the narrative of *The Confidence-Man*, where physical violence is limited to a single punch thrown at one of the characters, “open assault” is rarely to be seen. This lack, however, is more than made up for by the ever-present abundance of “artful sap”—a perfect description of the parasite’s tactics for nourishing itself on its host. The novel’s omnipresence of trickery, combined with the scarcity of outright violence, would come as no surprise to Michel Serres, who notes that “[p]reying and hunting need more energy and finesse than sponging. Thus the latter is more probable. This could also be translated: the more widespread, the more natural or the more native” (*Parasite* 165). While contemporary parasitologists—knowing well how much energy and ingenuity is needed for parasites to successfully adapt to their living hosts—might disagree with the first part of the claim, they are much more likely to agree with the rest. There is no doubt that the number of parasites in nature far exceeds that of predators, meaning, as Carl Zimmer puts it, that “the study of life is, for the most part, parasitology” (xxi).

In this chapter, I claim that a similar insight was, in a sense, already formulated in *The Confidence-Man*, a novel that not only contains a variety of characters with parasitic traits, but which is also full of references and allusions to literary works also concerned with the topic. This makes it even more fitting that the novel takes place on a steamer at one point described as “a human grain-bin” (CM 137). Even though only a few of the confidence men seem to be explicitly concerned with nourishment in a literal sense, this reference indicates two things. Those aboard the *Fidèle* are not only *part of* that pile of (human) grain that one of the more skeptical characters—the Missourian Pitch—fears is

193 On the genesis and removal of “The River,” see (CM 490–95). All quotes from “The River” are from Harrison Hayford’s transcription of Melville’s notoriously difficult hand-writing (CM 496–99).

being steadily nibbled by “sly, smooth, philandering rat[s]” (*CM* 137), but are also literally *next* to the grain. The passengers are *sitos*, as well as *parasitos*, in equal parts becoming food for others and feeding upon them. To a large degree, *The Confidence-Man* may thus be said to correspond to what Serres has claimed about Le Fontaine’s fable of the city rat and the country rat: “Parasitism is never mentioned, but it is really a question *only* of that” (*Parasite* 9; emphasis in the original).

On Begging, the Charity of the Crowd, and Sturdy Teeth

In *The Confidence-Man*, a nameless third-person narrator of the not excessively reliable kind takes the reader on a journey down the Mississippi River aboard the *Fidèle*, where a wide cast of characters do their best to trick and swindle each other, all in the course of a single April Fool’s Day.¹⁹⁴ Who exactly is being made a fool of is not always easy to tell. It is obvious that many of the figures in the story are, but readers will inevitably begin to suspect that they may be, too—a feeling that does not diminish upon learning that the novel was originally published in America on April 1, 1857. Indeed, as R. W. B. Lewis has put it, “the first and the most accomplished of the confidence men in the novel is the author; and his first potential victim is the inattentive reader” (65). It would perhaps be even more accurate to say that part of the fascination of Melville’s novel is how it instills in its readers—the attentive no less than the inattentive—a fear that they, too, are somehow being conned, but without allowing one to decide with certainty whether this really is the case. As such, maybe the act of reading *The Confidence-Man* can be said to qualify as one of those “queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life” invoked by Ishmael, “when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody’s expense but his own” (*MD* 226).

194 Or maybe not: Several scholars have argued that the novel’s last chapter—“The Cosmopolitan increases in seriousness”—most likely takes place just *after* midnight, meaning it is no longer April Fool’s Day, but April 2, see Franklin (*The Wake* 168), and Blackburn (165).

Still, some things can be said about Melville's novel with certainty. First, the term "confidence man" was new when he wrote his book. As critics have shown, he was undoubtedly familiar with the reputation of the well-dressed and smooth-talking crook known as William Thompson (as well as several other aliases). His *modus operandi* was to ask people he met on the street whether they had any confidence in him, requesting them to lend him their watches as proof that they did—those eager to prove their confidence of course never saw their timepieces again. Hence, upon his arrest in New York in 1849, newspapers dubbed him the "Confidence Man," and later, after he reappeared in Albany in 1855, the "Original Confidence Man," implying him to be the first, but far from the only one of his kind. A good candidate for the most famous confidence man was showman and hoaxer P. T. Barnum, who bragged to the public about his many scams in his immensely popular 1855 autobiography. Thus, a new generic type had been born, which Melville was among the first authors to draw upon for literary purposes.¹⁹⁵

Regarding structure, the novel can be divided into two parts, one taking place during the day and one during the nighttime. In the most action-packed part, spanning the first 22 chapters, the narrator focuses on a variety of episodes involving seven different characters and the people they encounter. With the possible exception of the first, these seven—1) a deaf-mute man in cream-colors; 2) a crippled black beggar; 3) a man in a mourning weed; 4) a man in a gray coat and a white tie, collecting donations for the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum; 5) a man in a tasseled travelling-cap who claims to work for the Black Rapids Coal Company; 6) a herb-doctor peddling his wares; and 7) a fawning man employed by the so-called Philosophical Intelligence Office—all seem to be swindlers,

195 On Melville's knowledge of William Thompson, see Bergmann, and Reynolds. On confidence men in American literature, society, culture, and politics, see Kuhlman, J. G. Blair, Lindberg, Haltunen, Quirk (*Melville's*), Lenz, Trimpi (*Melville's*), and Samuels. On the career of Barnum, see Harris; on the many references to Barnum in *The Confidence-Man*, see Ramsey. The anonymous reviewer in the London *Literary Gazette* on April 11, 1857 wondered whether *The Confidence-Man* might be "a hoax on the public—an emulation of Barnum" (Higgins and Parker 493).

many of them using tricks similar to those perfected by Thompson and other real-life con men.¹⁹⁶

The novel's second part follows a single character through a variety of encounters. This is the self-proclaimed cosmopolitan who goes by the name Frank Goodman. Although Goodman, who is first introduced at the end of Chapter 23, differs from his predecessors in important ways, he is probably also a confidence man, as are several of the other people with whom he becomes acquainted. It should also be noted that the exact relationship between the various swindlers in *The Confidence-Man* is far from clear. The reader will likely begin to suspect that all, or at least some of them, are the same person in different disguises, but all such definitive evidence is withheld by the narrator. Therefore, it cannot be decided with certainty whether some of them are acting as *shills* (accomplices) for the other con men or operating independently of them, or whether some might in the end be innocent of wrongdoings. Even though many of the attempts to empty the pockets of those they encounter are successful, in some cases they are not, while in others it is difficult to decide who has fooled whom, and what exactly (if anything) has been won. In addition to this main plot, the novel also includes several interpolated stories narrated by different characters, as well as three chapters—numbers 14, 33, and 44—where the narrator breaks off from his story to directly address his readers.

Now, to begin to explore in what ways the figure of the parasite can help illuminate Melville's puzzling novel, I would first like to look in some detail at the arguments of two of the three scholars who have previously attempted to do so, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell.¹⁹⁷ Their book *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006) features an original reading of *The Confidence-Man*, with a focus on how societal attitudes to disability, poverty, begging, and charity were changing in antebellum America.¹⁹⁸ Whereas previously, care of the disabled and others deemed

196 On the similarity between the tricks found in the book and those of real-life con men, see Pimple.

197 The third scholar is Alexander Gelley, whose two contributions ("Parasitic Talk" and "Talking Man") I will come back to later in the chapter.

198 The reading has also been published on its own as "Masquerades of Impairment: Charity as a Confidence Game." In addition, see Mitchell's "'Too Much of a Cripple,'" which pursues related questions about disability in *Moby-Dick*.

“unproductive” to society had primarily been the responsibility of local communities, Snyder and Mitchell argue that in this period, distributing charity to those in need increasingly came to be delegated to a new and blooming charity industry, made up of various private organizations and state and federal agencies. Or, to follow *The Confidence-Man*’s most vocal participant and supporter of this industry—the man in a gray coat and a white tie—one could talk of a “charity business,” meant to infuse missions “with the Wall street spirit” (CM 38, 40).

Important aspects of this endeavor toward what the man in gray calls “the methodization of the world’s benevolence” (CM 39) were principles and methodologies supplied by then popular “sciences of the surface,” such as phrenology and physiognomy, having in common “the belief that external body features functioned as reliable markers by which the identity of a person could be fixed” (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations* 38).¹⁹⁹ This belief led to the idea that the bodily and mentally impaired could be objectively classified, thus creating a scientifically grounded dividing line separating those deserving of charity from the undeserving. The emerging American charity industry can therefore be seen as a part of a larger process involving the professional management of human bodies on scientific principles, famously analyzed by Michel Foucault as a shift from an older “anatomy-politics of the human body” toward “a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race” (*Society* 243).

Whereas social historians of antebellum-era America have offered extensive analyses of this shift in societal approaches to charity, Snyder and Mitchell argue that the fate of those individuals who suffered from bodily or cognitive impairments have largely been ignored (*Cultural Locations* 42). To them, Melville represents an important exception from this tendency. The interesting thing about *The Confidence-Man* is not only that it features several disabled characters, but also the difficulty of deciding whether their impairments are real or faked, to trick the other passengers. Hence, Snyder and Mitchell approach the novel primarily in terms of how it thematizes the difficulty of deciding

199 On Melville’s attitude to such “sciences of the surface,” see also Otter (*Melville’s Anatomies* 101–71).

between real and faked disability, as well as between who deserves charity and who does not in a world where one can never be sure if others are telling the truth:

The Confidence-Man wages warfare on “sciences of the surface” for presuming, on behalf of scientific and national knowledge, the reliability of bodily appearance as a means to evaluate the social worth of persons. . . . Melville takes up these critiques of visual assessment practices to foreground the deceptions of bodies, and to evaluate capitalist charity exchanges that not only support, but also produce, socially inequitable bodies. (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations* 43)

From my perspective, the crucial aspect of this analysis is how it explicitly conceptualizes the relationship between disabled beggars—be they real or fake—and those who donate money to them in terms of parasitism:

Disabled people represent prototypical nonproducers in exchange economies because the terms of their social participation often exceed a system’s willingness to accommodate them. Consequently, disabled people become parasitical, or so runs the narrative of capitalism. (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations* 46)

To explain this in more detail, it is necessary to take a closer look at a few of the interactions between various beggars and donors in *The Confidence-Man*. The first example the novel offers is the deaf-mute man in cream-colors, who is the center of attention in Chapters 1–2. After he embarks in St. Louis, the narrator offers a brief description of him—for example pointing out that he was without luggage or friends—before turning his attention to the reactions caused by the deaf-mute’s presence amongst the other passengers: “From the shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings of the crowd, it was plain that he was, in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger. In the same moment with his advent, he stepped aboard the favorite steamer *Fidèle*, on the point of starting for New Orleans” (*CM* 3).

After boarding, he begins inscribing a small slate with a string of anaphoric quotations from 1 Corinthians 13, all of which have to do with

charity: “Charity thinketh no evil,” etc.²⁰⁰ It is only when he thus makes known his quiet, but steadfast request for charity from his surroundings that these “shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings” are transformed into something more openly hostile:

it was not with the best relish that the crowd regarded his apparent intrusion; and upon a more attentive survey, perceiving no badge of authority about him, but rather something quite the contrary—he being of an aspect so singularly innocent; an aspect, too, which they took to be somehow inappropriate to the time and place, and inclining to the notion that his writing was much of the same sort: in short, taking him for some strange kind of simpleton, harmless enough, would he keep to himself, but not wholly unobnoxious as an intruder—they made no scruple to jostle him aside; while one, less kind than the rest, or more of a wag, by an unobserved stroke, dexterously flattened down his fleecy hat upon his head. (CM 4)

Meeting with no success, at the end of Chapter 1 the deaf-mute retires to have a nap. Chapter 2 then begins by presenting 19 different “epitaphic comments, conflictingly spoken or thought,” generated in the crowd of on-lookers by his presence, ranging from “ODD FISH!” to “Jacob dreaming at Luz” (CM 7). Thus, even aboard a floating society which is “always full of strangers” and where there is a constant influx of “strangers still more strange” (CM 8), the deaf-mute is an outsider. For Snyder and Mitchell, what makes him a stranger “in the extremest sense of the word” is precisely his disability, which, as they see it, “calls into action an interpretative social mechanism” (*Cultural Locations* 49). How this social mechanism functions, has been convincingly addressed by Jennifer Greiman in *Democracy’s Spectacle* (2010).²⁰¹ In her analysis of *The Confidence-Man*, she argues that the first three chapters make the crowd “a kind of protagonist, tracing its activities as it gathers, deliberates, forms consensus, and disintegrates once again” (*Democracy’s Spectacle* 196). Crucially, she points out that this protagonist only comes

200 For the argument that St. Paul’s enumeration of different types of members of the church in 1 Corinthians 12.28 served as a model for the succession of the different confidence men, see Quirk (“St. Paul’s”).

201 See also Greiman’s “Theatricality, Strangeness, and the Aesthetics of Plurality in *The Confidence-Man*,” where she further elaborates her argument.

into existence due to the advent of the deaf-mute, and that it only continues to exist in this state while it has a concrete object to hold its attention:

The mute is not a stranger before he meets the crowd, but neither are the passengers a crowd before they recognize a stranger. Instead, Melville places the man and the crowd in a dynamic relationship of definition and constitution, which, if not exactly “mutual,” is clearly dependent and simultaneous. (*Democracy’s Spectacle* 197)

In other words, the deaf-mute is simultaneously *not* himself part of the crowd and its *raison d’être*, his strangeness constituting “the internal outside that makes such collective formations as a ‘crowd’ or a ‘majority’ visible and viable” in the first place (Greiman, *Democracy’s Spectacle* 200). Although he subsequently falls asleep, he still holds together that social body his presence has unknowingly generated, and continues to do so for quite a while:

By-and-by—two or three random stoppages having been made, and the last transient memory of the slumberer vanished, and he himself, no unlikely, waked up and landed ere now—the crowd, as is usual, began in all parts to break up from a concourse into various clusters or squads, which in some cases disintegrated into quartettes, trios, and couples, or even solitaries; involuntarily submitting to that natural law which ordains dissolution equally to the mass, as in time to the member. (*CM* 8–9)

Although the crowd has dissolved by the end of Chapter 2, no longer welded together by a foreign body sufficiently strange to capture its attention, in Chapter 3 it has found another object to focus on, thereby resurrecting itself. This is the novel’s next disabled character, the crippled black beggar Black Guinea, whom Snyder and Mitchell only mention in passing. Whereas critics disagree whether the deaf-mute is one of the novel’s confidence men, Black Guinea—who may potentially, the narrative hints, be neither crippled nor black—is the first character to come across as definitely up to no good.²⁰² The chapter’s first paragraph reads as follows:

202 For differing views of the identity of the deaf-mute, compare Elizabeth S. Foster’s opinion that “[u]pon him the stigmata of the true Christian, and even of Christ himself, are patent” (1) with

In the forward part of the boat, not the least attractive object, for a time, was a grotesque negro cripple, in tow-cloth attire and an old coal-sifter of a tambourine in his hand, who, owing to something wrong about his legs, was, in effect, cut down to the stature of a Newfoundland dog; his knotted black fleece and good-natured, honest black face rubbing against the upper part of people's thighs as he made shift to shuffle about, making music, such as it was, and raising a smile even from the gravest. It was curious to see him, out of his very deformity, indigence, and houselessness, so cheerily endured, raising mirth in some of that crowd, whose own purses, hearths, hearts, all their possessions, sound limbs included, could not make gay. (*CM* 10)

What happens is that this beggar, who introduces himself as Black Guinea, starts a “game of charity” to convince people to donate money to him (*CM* 10, 12). Acting like a dog, he catches coins tossed at him with his mouth. Amused by the diversion, people willingly throw pennies at him, but his success ends when “a limping, gimlet-eyed, sour-faced person” with a wooden leg tries to expose him for a fraud whose deformity is “a sham, got up for financial purposes” (*CM* 12). At first, those present are not sure whom they are to believe, but they end up requesting documentary proof or reliable witnesses from Black Guinea that his deformity is real. While he is unable to provide such proof, he claims that there are people aboard the *Fidèle* that can vouch for him:

“Oh yes, oh yes, dar is aboard here a werry nice, good ge'mman wid a weed, and a ge'mman in a gray coat and white tie, what knows all about me; and a ge'mman wid a big book, too; and a yarb-doctor; and a ge'mman in a yaller west; and a ge'mman wid a brass plate; and a ge'mman in a wiolet robe; and a ge'mman as is a sodjer; and ever so many good, kind, honest ge'mmen more aboard what knows me and will speak for me, God bress 'em; yes, and what knows me as well as dis poor old darkie knows hisself, God bress him!” (*CM* 13)²⁰³

Hershel Parker's claim that “[g]arbed to suggest Jesus, and traversing the deck with mottoes from I Corinthians 13 placarded on his slate, he is the Devil” (*Herman Melville* 2:258).

²⁰³ Black Guinea's list of the different gentlemen that can vouch for him helps shape the reader's expectations for what will come, but it only partially corresponds to the narrative. As such, it puzzles as much as it clarifies, and much ink has been spilt to account for its shortcomings. For a thorough discussion of these discrepancies, see Franklin (*The Wake* 157–65).

After a young Episcopalian clergyman sets out to find the gentlemen in question, people are still reluctant to trust Black Guinea, who becomes more and more desperate to find someone willing to place their confidence in him. In the end, a kind country merchant gives him half a dollar as proof that he does. When handing over the money, the merchant drops his business card, which the beggar secretly pockets, before “forlornly stump[ing] out of sight” (CM 17). In the next chapter, the merchant, whose name is Henry Roberts, is accosted by what seems to be the first gentleman on Black Guinea’s list, as if they were old acquaintances. This is the man with the mourning weed, who introduces himself as John Ringman. The reader soon realizes that most likely, he is the beggar in a new disguise, or the two are in league with each other to swindle Roberts with the help of the information from the pocketed business card.

How then should Black Guinea be understood? To the adherents of one influential critical tradition, the so-called “standard line” of interpretation, his identity is clear. As they see it, Melville’s novel is an allegory where all the different confidence men encountered in the text, including Black Guinea, are to be understood as the Devil in different disguises, out to test the state of contemporary Christianity.²⁰⁴ To me, however, the possible indications these scholars have offered in order to prove the beggar’s diabolical nature are far too ambiguous to be able to support this view.²⁰⁵ Moreover, it becomes much harder to uphold this conclusion when what

204 The label was originally introduced by Hershel Parker in his introduction to the 1971 Norton Critical edition of Melville’s novel, where he claimed that “[r]ecent criticism of *The Confidence-Man* is notoriously confused, yet in preparing this edition it seemed easy enough to discern a standard line of interpretation” (ix). Historically, this view has had many proponents, especially among the first generations of critics writing after Elizabeth S. Foster’s landmark 1954 Hendricks House edition of the novel, but it has also met with extensive criticism. While less commonly held today, it is still influential, in large parts due to Parker’s faithful championing of the argument (“The Metaphysics”; “Use of Evidence”; *Herman Melville* 2:257–58; Parker and Niemeyer). For other scholars who understand the novel’s confidence men as the Devil in disguise, see Shroeder, Foster, Miller Jr., Rosenberry (*Comic Spirit*), McHaney, and Urbanczyk; for those critical of this conclusion, see Drew, Wadlington (139–40), Bellis, Kamuf (167–69), and Ryan. For an overview of the conclusions drawn by one hundred and one different articles about Melville’s novel in the period 1922–1980, see Madison.

205 For possible indications of Black Guinea’s diabolical nature, see Parker and Niemeyer (17n6; 18n8; 22.4n6). For a critique of Parker’s notes in the 1971 Norton Critical edition, see Susan M. Ryan, who claims that they are “rife with . . . speculative annotations” (709).

the narrator has to say about the (potentially fake) crippled beggar is taken into consideration. Black Guinea's "game of charity" is said to come about when he realizes that his mere appearance is no longer enough to keep people's attention:

Thus far not very many pennies had been given him, and, used at last to his strange looks, the less polite passengers of those in that part of the boat began to get their fill of him as a curious object; when suddenly the negro more than revived their first interest by an expedient which, whether by chance or design, was a singular temptation at once to *diversion* and charity, though, even more than his crippled limbs, it put him on a canine footing. In short, as in appearance he seemed a dog, so now, in a merry way, like a dog he began to be treated. Still shuffling among the crowd, now and then he would pause, throwing back his head and opening his mouth like an elephant for tossed apples at a menagerie; when, making a space before him, people would have a bout at a strange sort of pitch-penny game, the cripple's mouth being at once target and purse, and he hailing each expertly caught copper with a cracked bravura from his tambourine. (CM 11; emphasis in the original)

In other words, realizing that charity comes much easier to people when it buys them both amusement and a good conscience, Black Guinea adapts to the situation by voluntarily debasing himself for the spectators' viewing pleasure.²⁰⁶ Although coins are the concrete aim of the "pitch-penny game," through comparing Black Guinea to an elephant trained to catch tossed apples, the quoted passage also likens money to food. In other words, it is almost as if he is feeding on the pennies thrown to him, beginning to indicate his potential kinship with the classical figure of the parasite.

206 In my "Man or Animal?" I criticize David Livingstone Smith's claim that "dehumanizers always identify their victims with animals that motivate violence" (223) by showing how Captain Delano, even though he sees the black slaves aboard the *San Dominick* as resembling animals, in the first part of "Benito Cereno" only focuses on their *positive* animalistic traits. Melville's exposé of Delano's "benevolent" dehumanization proves that it is perfectly possible to dehumanize others without intending to harm them. Furthermore, contrary to what Smith holds to be the case, the portrayal of Black Guinea indicates that dehumanization is *not* only a strategy that allows people to harm others; His doglike behavior exemplifies how self-dehumanization might serve as a tactic for eliciting donations.

In addition, the following passage also deserves mention. In a work where the narrator for the most part offers very little insight into what (if anything) lies behind the words and actions of the characters, this description of the beggar's involuntary bodily reactions supplies information that can hardly be doubted:

To be the subject of alms-giving is trying, and to feel in duty bound to appear cheerfully grateful under the trial, must be still more so; but whatever his secret emotions, [Black Guinea] swallowed them, while still retaining each copper this side the œsophagus. *And nearly always he grinned, and only once or twice did he wince*, which was when certain coins, tossed by more playful almoners, came inconveniently nigh to his teeth, an accident whose unwelcomeness was not unedged by the circumstance that the pennies thus thrown proved buttons. (CM 11–12; emphasis added)

Here the narrator is describing the painful degradation gone through by someone who is forced to hide his “secret emotions,” and for the most part succeeds in doing so, to avoid alienating his donors, even though the “more playful” of these contribute to his additional degradation by feeding him valueless buttons, instead of coins.²⁰⁷ As Susan M. Ryan has put it, the novel draws our attention to “the donors’ unseemliness, their cruelty, and their quasi-erotic enjoyment of another’s humiliation” (698). For this reason, a more relevant literary model for Black Guinea than the Devil might be Saturio, the parasite from Plautus’ *The Persian*. Just like his forefathers before him, he claims to be willing to suffer blows and all kinds of abuse to fill his stomach—as he somewhat braggingly puts it:

The ancient and venerable vocation of my ancestors I continue, follow, and cultivate with constant care. For never a one of my ancestors was there who

207 Yoshiaki Furui has analyzed the same passage with a focus on the narrator’s preoccupation with “secret emotions,” but his conclusions differ somewhat from mine. As he sees it, while Black Guinea’s wince might be a result of pain and humiliation, it could also “be another theatrical performance by the confidence-man,” causing Furui to conclude that “[t]hus the private, interior space of Black Guinea is ultimately left inscrutable and unreachable” (66). As I see it, it is exactly through drawing the reader’s attention to the beggar’s *unsuccessful* attempt to hide or minimize an *involuntary* bodily reaction that the narrator here manages to convey something that it is difficult to doubt.

didn't provide for his belly as a professional parasite. My father, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather, great-great-great-grandfather, and his father, too, always ate other folks' food, just like mice, and not a soul could beat 'em at edacity. Yes, and their family surname was Hardheads. It's from them I inherit this profession and ancestral position of mine. (*The Persian* 54–62)

By this I do not mean to imply that Black Guinea shares Saturio's high esteem of the vocation they have in common, or that his ancestors had been similarly "employed"—the text does not give any clues that could help decide on these issues. Rather, the parasite's surname is equally applicable to Melville's beggar. For those who nourish themselves on the largesse of others, a hard head (as well as sturdy teeth, in Black Guinea's case) is a necessity.

To return to Greiman's analysis, even more so than the chapters involving the deaf-mute, the Black Guinea-episode is evidence that crowds are precarious entities.²⁰⁸ This precariousness notwithstanding, once a crowd in an active state collectively decides to act, it can wield a lot of power. In this regard, *The Confidence-Man* gives a clear indication that facts might be far less important than emotions when it comes to what might push a crowd into taking action—for, as the narrator ironically describes Black Guinea's reactions to the accusations made against him by the one-legged man, "that Newfoundland-dog face turned in passively hopeless appeal, as if instinct told it that the right or the wrong might not have overmuch to do with whatever wayward mood superior intelligences might yield to" (*CM* 12).

With this in mind, it becomes possible to let Snyder and Mitchell's analysis of parasitism and Greiman's analysis of the constitution of the crowd in *The Confidence-Man* mutually illuminate each other.²⁰⁹ If the latter is indeed correct in arguing that "the crowd's energetic

208 A similar point is made by Elias Canetti in *Crowds and Power* (1960), one of the classic works on crowds: "In its spontaneous form it is a sensitive thing. The openness which enables it to grow is, at the same time, its danger. A foreboding of threatening disintegration is always alive in the crowd" (16–17).

209 Greiman briefly refers to Snyder and Mitchell's work, yet without touching upon the question of parasitism (*Democracy's Spectacle* 250n7).

curiosity and noisy debate are little more than exercises in self-perpetuation” (*Democracy’s Spectacle* 198), as I think she is, it should be added that such “noisy debates” seem to have as their precise topic the question of who are to be defined as parasitic foreign bodies, as well as what to do about them. What becomes evident in the chapters where the deaf-mute and Black Guinea appear is that even systems with a high tolerance for “strangeness” cannot do without borders. Without an “internal outside” to ban, no such thing as a community or a system would exist in the first place. For individuals to come together in the communality of a crowd, no matter how short-lived, the outsider is a prerequisite.

One of the most famous attempts to analyze such general mechanisms is found in René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), which deals with the continuing cultural importance of the figure of the scapegoat. A staple ingredient in populist political discourse is that some sort of foreign element has destroyed the stability of a given society, meaning what is (supposedly) needed to regain what has (supposedly) been stolen or lost, is to expel, neutralize, or eradicate the intrusion in question.²¹⁰ Against this type of argument, Girard forcefully stresses that social cohesion can only be gained by channeling the inherent violence that continually threatens any feeling of community, and redirecting it toward a scapegoat—as he puts it, “society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a ‘sacrificeable’ victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect” (4). Hence, to Girard, the case is *not* that any foreign body has destroyed a pre-existing community, but rather that a social system continually threatened by “that natural law which ordains dissolution ... to the mass”—to repeat the narrator’s comments in *The Confidence-Man*—needs the scapegoat to become and remain a community.

As several critics have argued, Girard and Serres have mutually influenced each other’s work.²¹¹ Even though the former is only referred to by name a few times in *The Parasite* (80, 149), his analysis of the

210 For examples of specific groups—be it freemasons, Catholics, or communists—that have at some point been made to fill this role in an American context, see Hofstadter.

211 See for example Johnsen.

scapegoat mechanism is crucial for understanding a claim such as the following: “For unanimity to appear within a group, sometimes all that is necessary is to bring about general animosity toward the one who will be labelled public enemy. All that is necessary is to find an object of hatred and of execration. ... Union is produced through expulsion” (Serres, *Parasite* 118–19).

Following Steven D. Brown, one could even claim that in *The Parasite*, “Serres locates Girard’s argument within a state of generalized parasitism” (17). One reason the figure of the parasite is intimately linked to the scapegoating processes described by Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, is because those people deemed parasites on the social body have often ended up filling exactly this function, thereby helping create a community in the very act of being violently banned from it.

To now return to Snyder and Mitchell’s analysis, whereas several other (potentially fake) disabled characters appear in *The Confidence-Man*, they note that after these first chapters, the narrative seems to shift its focus from disability and pauperism, as such, to the question of societal responses to these phenomena. Through their analysis of this shift, they point out how Melville’s novel explicitly reflects upon how the new charity industry not only directly depends upon the continued existence of the suffering it is meant to alleviate, but also ends up hiding its own dependence under a mask of benevolence. In their words:

Charity ushers in a division between hosts (those who produce and consume in equal amounts) and parasites (those who consume without replenishing what they use up). While capitalism narrates social aid recipients as parasitic upon the productive labor and tax dollars of the majority, it does so while dissimulating the dependencies of the middle and upper classes on the poor. With the development of organized charity agencies in the nineteenth century, the management of “social dependents” became legitimated as an occupation and provided stable professional careers for middle-class professionals. In doing so, the management of charity cases buoyed the economic livelihood of numerous public and private administrators who were financially dependent on the oversight of those in “need.” In this sense, the distinction between host and parasite proves a fiction of exchange-based systems seeking to justify the capitalist

and working classes as appropriate beneficiaries of their own productive labor capacities. (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations* 56)²¹²

In *The Confidence-Man*, this hidden mutual dependence is most explicitly brought to light during an episode in Chapter 7, where the man in the gray coat tries to persuade a rich gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons to donate money to the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum. After the former cheerfully makes a donation, he suggests that it might be more efficient if different charitable societies were to coordinate their efforts. This is a view the man in the gray coat fully shares, and he takes the opportunity to inform the gentleman about his plans for what he terms “the World’s Charity,” to be made up of representatives from all known charities and missions, with the aim of eradicating poverty once and for all through the introduction of “one grand benevolence tax upon all mankind” (*CM* 39). Somewhat skeptical, the rich gentleman offers various objections, but this does not deter the man in gray, who goes on praising the project in enthusiastic tones. The narrator, for his part, does his best to build up the reader’s expectation that the latter will finally win over his new acquaintance to see things his way: “The master chord of the man in gray had been touched, and it seemed as if it would never cease vibrating. A not un-silvery tongue, too, was his, with gestures that were a Pentecost of added ones, and persuasiveness before which granite hearts might crumble into gravel” (*CM* 42).

This persuasiveness notwithstanding, and even though there is no doubt that the rich gentleman is indeed the owner of a charitable heart, rather than one made of granite, he is *not* convinced. To quote the ending of the chapter:

Strange, therefore, how his auditor, so singularly good-hearted as he seemed, remained proof to such eloquence; though not, as it turned out, to such

²¹² Snyder and Mitchell do not present Melville as a revolutionary aiming to get rid of capitalist society. Pinpointing the novel’s message is not easy, but the following suggestion is not implausible: “the exposé of parasitism in capitalism does not cast Melville as a budding Marxist seeking to overturn a culture based upon corrupt economic practices. Instead, the work calls for the cultivation of a consistent skepticism that recognizes we are all parasites operating within an impure social system” (*Cultural Locations* 64).

pleadings. For, after listening a while longer with pleasant incredulity, presently, as the boat touched his place of destination, the gentleman, with a look half humor, half pity, put another bank-note into his hands; charitable to the last, if only to the dreams of enthusiasm. (*CM* 42)

Some scholars have claimed that in order to qualify as a true confidence man, a swindler must not only make money out of his victims through criminal activities, but must also get the dupes to actively participate in their own swindling. John G. Blair has for example offered a “criminological definition” of the figure, stressing that “his identifying ploy is to cheat only those who are themselves ready to cheat. . . . A con man . . . offers his victims partnership in an illegal scheme, the more sure because it is illicit. The victim must agree in advance to participate in trickery” (12). The problem with this definition is that while some of the swindles in Melville’s novel follow such a pattern, quite a few do not, including the one between the man in the gray coat and his “victim.”²¹³

What the ending of Chapter 7 shows, is that even though the gentleman at first donates money to a charity that likely does not exist, when he afterwards supports “the World’s Charity,” he has absolutely no belief that it will ever come to anything, nor does he really care. When he offers that last banknote with a benevolent look of “half humor, half pity,” it is thus *not* because he has been fooled by his sweet-talking interlocutor or because he has any confidence in his grandiose plans, nor because he has been offered “partnership in an illegal scheme.” He donates not only because he can easily afford it, but he enjoys doing so—to him, charity is said to be “in one sense not an effort, but a luxury; against too great indulgence in which his steward, a humorist, had sometimes admonished him” (*CM* 37)—and clearly gets something out of it. Likely, this “something” is far more valuable to him than what he ends up donating, but it has nothing to do with being tricked into participating in anything illegal. What the donation does is strengthen his appearance as a charitable man, proving “a sweet morsel” for his conscience, akin to that sought by

213 Nor does Blair’s definition really cover William Thompson’s *modus operandi* of asking for his victims’ confidence. If even the “Original Confidence Man” fails to qualify as a proper confidence man according to Blair, this is a strong indication of the inadequacy of his definition.

the narrator in “Bartleby.”²¹⁴ Or, to borrow a phrase from Serres, in return for the gentleman’s donations, the man in the gray coat “feeds his greatness” (*Parasite* 194).

In other words, even more explicitly than in “Bartleby,” *The Confidence-Man* shows how the donor “nourishes” himself upon the act of charity, no less than the beggar or, for that matter, the professional middleman employed by the charity industry (or pretending to be so). As Snyder and Mitchell put it, perfectly capturing the gist of the interaction between the man in the gray coat and the rich gentleman:

The con game is not so much duplicity at the expense of the wealthy as conspicuous donation for the purchase of moral appearance. Thus, the con man does not commit the crime of fraud in Melville’s system; instead, he lets responsible citizens off the hook. He offers a rhetorical and monetary quick fix to entrenched social conflicts. (*Cultural Locations* 62)

To recapitulate the argument so far, one of the problems of exchange-based economic systems such as capitalism is that they tend to present a flawed view that only takes the dependency of the poor into account, all the while hiding the other half of the equation: the dependency of the rich donors and of the middle class employed in the charity industry. Serres’ analysis becomes useful to Snyder and Mitchell because, to them, it helps replace such a slanted economic model with one that is more attuned to this fundamental *mutual* dependency: “In the place of this exchange economy model, Serres proposes the paradigm of parasitic economies in which all relationships prove interdependent, and the division between those who produce and those who consume proves unviable” (*Cultural Locations* 57).

In addition, the natural sciences stress that parasites perform a crucial function within the ecosystems to which they belong. Snyder and Mitchell summarize one of Serres’ most important points:

214 William E. Lenz has claimed something similar about the charitable lady who donates \$20 to the man in the gray coat in Chapter 8: the narrator’s “extremely qualifying rhetoric . . . leads us to suspect her purity; the pleasure she experiences in reading the passages on charity from her ‘small gilt testament,’ which she holds ‘half-relinquished,’ and in giving twenty dollars to the man in gray is a kind of pleasure analogous to pitching pennies at Black Guinea—it is self-congratulatory, a sanitary gesture like those of the narrator in ‘Bartleby the Scrivener’” (125–26).

As an alternative to [standard, derogatory] representations of the parasite ..., a parasitic economy turns the tables on the power inequities between benefactors and “the needy.” Rather than locate the under- and unemployed as parasites on the labor of others, Serres’s definition promotes the function of the parasite as that which keeps systems fluid and flexible. Parasites are the forces of creative possibility; like the sacred guest of Greek myth, the parasite accepts material sustenance and returns the favor with stories of adventure that enliven the world of the host. Thus, the parasite represents a site of invention, bringing something new into a system of meanings that would otherwise tend toward homogeneity. ... Consequently, a parasitic economic model exposes the ways in which those who are marginalized within an exchange-based economy prove necessary to the maintenance of a dominant culture’s investment in its own benefactor status. Thus, the parasite continually threatens to surface and expose this hierarchy as a social fiction. (*Cultural Locations* 57)

In their attempt to elaborate more precisely how Melville’s novel is informed by and illuminates such a “paradigm of parasitic economies,” the two make the following claim:

The plot of *The Confidence-Man* depicts society aboard the steamship *Fidèle* as engaging in a series of parasitic economic relationships, in which con artists dupe marks, shills, and each other in a frenzy of corrupt exchanges. Yet the seemingly solid distinctions between cons, marks, and shills continually blur as all actively participate in a chain of parasitic duplicities. ... The book unseats the reader’s ability to cleanly distinguish between these familiar nineteenth-century social types by undermining the strict divisions between them. No character occupies a deterministic position with respect to the economic food chain that informs human relations on the ship ... The narrative plays a shell game with the location of an elusive economic host upon whom its parasitic clientele feeds. The role of host (that which exists at the origin of a food chain, upon which others feed for their survival) ultimately proves an absent center. In a profit-based economy, parasites infest every social interaction. (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations* 57–58)

While this is a relevant description, lacking from Snyder and Mitchell’s analysis is closer attention to the many of episodes in *The Confidence-Man* that have little or nothing to do with disability. Most importantly,

they barely mention the (non-disabled) cosmopolitan, Frank Goodman. Given the concrete analytical focus of their contribution, this is perhaps understandable, but it is still unfortunate. Not only is Goodman at the center of the narrator's attention throughout the second part of *The Confidence-Man*, but, as I will now go on to argue, he is also the character in the novel most clearly indebted to the classical figure of the parasite.

Enter the Cosmopolitan

Before introducing Goodman, a brief glance at what happens immediately prior to his entry at the end of Chapter 23, is necessary. In this chapter, which functions as a hinge between the novel's first and second part, the narrator focuses on the reflections of the Missourian bachelor Pitch, who in the two previous chapters has had the dubious pleasure of becoming acquainted with two strangers who correspond to the "yarb-doctor" and "ge'mman wid a brass plate" that Black Guinea had mentioned earlier. Pitch is described as someone who puts on a misanthropic air, but without really being a misanthrope at heart. This becomes evident when he, after first having managed to repel the advances of the herb-doctor, succumbs to those of the fawning man with the brass plate, who claims to work for the "Philosophical Intelligence Office," an employment agency that finds domestic help for its customers. Even though a frontiersman like Pitch could surely need this kind of help—in Chapter 21, he admitted as much to the herb-doctor—he first refuses the offer. The reason is that he has previously employed thirty-five boys, "[a]ll rascals, sir, every soul of them; Caucasian or Mongol. Amazing the endless variety of rascality in human nature of the juvenile sort" (*CM* 117). As a result, he has decided to get machines to do the work for him instead, but due to the persistence of the P.I.O. man he finally relents, paying a few dollars in advance to hire a fifteen-year-old boy claimed to be honest and trustworthy. Nevertheless, Pitch's new-won faith in humanity quickly evaporates after the P.I.O. man disembarks. Once he is on his own again, the Missourian begins to suspect that he has been duped, but without understanding why someone would take so much trouble for such a measly reward: "He revolves, but cannot comprehend, the operation, still less the operator. Was the man a

trickster, it must be more for the love than the lucre. Two or three dollars the motive to so many nice wiles?" (*CM* 130). It is at this precise moment, when Pitch has just resolved not to be tricked again, that the cosmopolitan strikes up a conversation with him: "From these uncordial reveries he is roused by a cordial slap on the shoulder, accompanied by a spicy volume of tobacco-smoke, out of which came a voice, sweet as a seraph's: 'A penny for your thoughts, my fine fellow'" (*CM* 130).

The man speaking is the self-proclaimed cosmopolitan and philanthropist who goes by the name Frank Goodman. Not counting some minor characters, the second half of *The Confidence-Man* focuses on his encounters with Pitch (in Chapter 24); Charlie Noble (25–35); the mystic Mark Winsome and his "practical disciple," Egbert (36–41); the *Fidèle's* barber, William Cream (42–43); as well as an old man reading the Bible (45). As Henry S. Sussman has noted, whereas the swindlers in the novel's first part all seem to represent different spheres of society, through the cosmopolitan, "the universal man, the novel in effect sublates itself to a higher level of generality" (90). If *The Confidence-Man* has a protagonist, Goodman is the most obvious candidate, even though he is no less of a mystery than everybody else onboard. Unlike the characters that precede him, he "hawks no wares, promises neither cures nor riches nor aid" (Quirk, *Melville's* 71). Even so, scholars have usually read him too as a confidence man. While I do not want to contest this conclusion, some dissenting voices might still be mentioned. In "Quite an Original": The Cosmopolitan in *The Confidence-Man* (1973), Elizabeth Keyser for example concludes that Goodman opposes the swindlers that appear in the novel's second half. A somewhat related, but more convincing argument is offered by John Bryant, who problematizes the common assumption that Goodman must *necessarily* be a swindler. He not only points out that the cosmopolitan does not really correspond to any of the "ge'mmen" on Black Guinea's list, but, more importantly, maintains that the first part of the novel creates a stable pattern allowing the reader to recognize characters as confidence men, only to distort it in the second. As Bryant sees it, Goodman poses a problem to readers because he "follows some of the behavior patterns [of the previous con men] perfectly, some ambiguously, but many not at all. Our expectations thwarted, we warm to the

possibility that Goodman is not a diddler but a true believer in man” (*Melville and Repose* 238–39). He also points out that several of Goodman’s interlocutors—especially Noble, but possibly also the Emersonian mystic, Mark Winsome—fit this behavior pattern better than the cosmopolitan himself, and that it is far from clear what, if anything, he actually gets out of those he encounters.²¹⁵ Bryant therefore concludes that if Goodman is truly a confidence man, “he is a miserable specimen of con artistry” (*Melville and Repose* 238).

How should Frank Goodman be understood, then? Is he a third-rate swindler, as Bryant puts it, or “the subtlest and cleverest of foes” of mankind, as Elizabeth S. Foster argues (lxxi)?²¹⁶ Or perhaps neither? As the cosmopolitan remarks in Chapter 29, “I find some little mysteries not very hard to clear up” (*CM* 161). In the following I want to argue that this may hold for him, too, if he is understood as a modern version of the classical figure of the parasite. My attempt to explain why this is so will primarily focus on the chapters where he interacts with Charlie Noble, but first, a few points must be made about his encounter with Pitch in Chapter 24. The conversation between the two is of particular interest because the Missourian is often held to be one of the most perceptive opponents of the confidence man. Hershel Parker for example claims that along with the “invalid titan” who strikes down the herb-doctor in Chapter 17, Pitch—his moment of weakness in the encounter with the P.I.O. man aside—is the only passenger actually “worthy to oppose” the confidence man’s “blandishments” (*Herman Melville* 2: 258). Supposing that the assumption of Pitch being able to penetrate the confidence man’s disguises is correct, the question naturally arises: What does he see behind the mask?

At the beginning of Chapter 24, Pitch is far from pleased to once again be addressed by a stranger—especially one dressed in curious and colorful

215 The argument that Winsome is based on Emerson was first made by Egbert S. Oliver, who also claimed that his disciple, Egbert, is based on Thoreau (“Melville’s Picture”).

216 To those adhering to the “standard line,” Goodman tends to be understood as the novel’s most important incarnation of the Devil: he is the equivalent of Prince Beelzebub in Hawthorne’s “The Celestial Railroad” (Shroeder 370), “the climatic Confidence Man” (Foster lxxv), and the one who, at the end of the novel, “extinguishes a lamp that symbolizes the Old and the New Testaments, relegating Christianity to the row of religions that once burned but now swing in darkness” (H. Parker, *Herman Melville* 2: 258).

clothes, which leads his reluctant interlocutor to compare Goodman to a toucan and to somebody playing the part of a monkey in a pantomime.²¹⁷ Upon being asked whom he is by the angry frontiersman, he replies that he is “[a] cosmopolitan, a catholic man; who, being such, ties himself to no narrow tailor or teacher, but federates, in heart as in costume, something of the various gallantries of men under various suns” (*CM* 132). While these words begin to explain his unorthodox costume, they do not impress Pitch, who tells him to get lost, only to be met with the following reply:

Is the sight of humanity so very disagreeable to you then? Ah, I may be foolish, but for my part, in all its aspects, I love it. Served up à la Pole, or à la Moor, à la Ladrone, or à la Yankee, that good dish, man, still delights me; or rather is man a wine I never weary of comparing and sipping; wherefore am I a pledged cosmopolitan, a sort of London-Dock-Vault connoisseur, going about from Teheran to Natchitoches, a taster of races; in all his vintages, smacking my lips over this racy creature, man, continually. (*CM* 133)

The proponents of the “standard line” have generally read this passage as the Devil ironically professing his diabolical hunger for man under cover of being a philanthropist.²¹⁸ Yet, the statement can easily be seen as a sly version of the kind of speeches that literary parasites—be it Plautus’ Saturio, Lucian’s Simon, Udall’s Mathew Merygreeke, Jonson’s Mosca or Dickens’ Harold Skimpole—are known for, where they praise their own profession, as well as their own talent for sponging off others. Perhaps Frank Goodman, then, should be understood as a parasite turned cosmopolitan. He is not content to serve one or even a few select patrons, but considers the whole of humanity a fitting dinner-table. To nourish himself in this way, he knows that he will be required to offer services, flatter, or amuse those upon whom he feeds, but this he sees as unproblematic. To quote his stated philosophy of life: “Life is a pic-nic

217 The cosmopolitan’s strange dress is reminiscent of that of Harlequin, whom the narrator explicitly refers to in Chapter 33 (*CM* 182). For an analysis of the cosmopolitan as a modern-day Harlequin, inspired by the Italian *commedia dell’arte* and nineteenth-century English Pantomime, see Trimpi (“Harlequin”).

218 See Shroeder (370–71) and Rosenberry (“Ship of Fools” 607–8).

en costume; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool. 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” (*CM* 133).

Making a blot upon the scene earns no parasite a dinner: This is exactly what the title character of Denis Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, or *the Second Satire* (c. 1761–1772) discovers. This strange idler is described as “a compound of the highest and the lowest, good sense and folly” whose “first care when he gets up in the morning is to make sure where he will be dining; after dinner he thinks where to go for supper” (33, 34). Having attached himself to an extravagant host, he has found a perfect solution to the question of how to acquire his meals, only to suddenly lose his privileges after inadvertently offending his patron; as he puts it: “The stupidity of having shown a bit of taste, intelligence and reason! Rameau, old man, this will teach you to remain what God made you and what your patrons expected you to be” (Diderot 46–47). That it is better to play the fool “in a sensible way” than to be intelligent in an insensible way would thus seem to be an assertion Rameau’s parasitic nephew and the cosmopolitan fully share.

However, this philosophy of life gains the latter no favors from Pitch, as evident when Goodman proposes that they join the “dancing on the hurricane-deck tonight”—“I holding your watch,” in what is surely meant as a reference to the procedure that made William Thompson famous. Rather than consent, the Missourian asks him whether he is “Jeremy Diddler No. 3” (*CM* 135), Nos. 1 and 2 obviously being the two strangers he has already encountered: the herb-doctor and the P.I.O. man. This is the second time the protagonist of the British dramatist James Kenney’s popular farce *Raising the Wind* (1803) is mentioned in *The Confidence-Man*, a distrustful man in Chapter 3 already having claimed that he sees “no reason” why Black Guinea “may not be some sort of black Jeremy Diddler” (*CM* 16). Although the word “parasite” is never used in Kenney’s play, it is the perfect epithet for the main character, a charming and short-sighted idler who “borrows money of every body [sic] he meets” and “who lives by sponging,—gets into people’s houses by his songs and his bon mots. At some of the squires’ tables, he’s as constant a guest as the parson or

the apothecary” (Kenney 6). Or, in the words of the anonymous author of an 1843 article on “The Comedies of Plautus,” printed in the American edition of *The Foreign Quarterly Review*: “The jesting parasites, the men who earn their feasts by pleasantries, are the ancestors of a numerous race, of whom Jeremy Diddler, in Mr. Kenney’s ‘Raising the Wind,’ and the gastronome Sponge, in ‘Who wants a Dinner?’ are the most famous” (“The Comedies of Plautus” 113).²¹⁹

If Pitch’s assessment of Goodman is accurate, should it not then be concluded from the reference to Jeremy Diddler, Nos. 1, 2, and 3, that the Missourian has seen the cosmopolitan, the herb-doctor, and the P.I.O. man for what they are: parasites trying to feed on him? After all, this would begin to explain why Pitch later “launched forth into the unkindest references to . . . gouty gluttons limping to their gouty gormandizings” (CM 136), as well as his aforementioned reference to the *Fidèle* as “a human grain-bin,” as part of the following exasperated outburst: “Now the high-constable catch and confound all knaves in towns and rats in grain-bins, and if in this boat, which is a human grain-bin for the time, any sly, smooth, philandering rat be dodging now, pin him, thou high rat-catcher, against this rail” (CM 137).

In the end, Goodman’s attempt to befriend Pitch is therefore unsuccessful. Having been tricked once aboard the *Fidèle*, the Missourian is no less wary of being preyed upon again than Shakespeare’s professed hater of parasites, Timon of Athens, whom Goodman explicitly invokes. To the cosmopolitan, the complete solitude sought by this misanthropic recluse stands as the worst possible way of life. In a final attempt to persuade Pitch to accompany him, Goodman asks, “was not the humor, of Diogenes, which led him to live, a merry-andrew, in the flower-market,

219 In antebellum America, the figure of Jeremy Diddler lived on in popular culture. He had for example been commemorated in Edgar Allan Poe’s “Raising the Wind; or, Diddling Considered as one of the Exact Sciences” (1843), which *The Confidence-Man* likely alludes to (Pollin 18–20)—as Hayford has argued, the crazy beggar in Chapter 36 is also almost certainly modelled on Poe. Melville had previously used the verb “to diddle” in the chapter of *Moby-Dick* where Stubb tricks the French out of the dead sperm whale (MD 406). In August 1849, Evert and George Duyckinck’s *Literary World* had printed a piece on the arrest of William Thompson, where the confidence man was claimed to be “the new species of the Jeremy Diddler” (qtd. in P. Smith 334).

better than that of the less wise Athenian, which made him a skulking scare-crow in pine-barrens? An injudicious gentleman, Lord Timon” (*CM* 137). As Goodman sees it, if one cannot love mankind, it is at least better to be a cynic in the company of others than a cynic on one’s own. While cultivating a Timon-like misanthropy and keeping everybody at a safe distance might help one not get conned, the price to be paid for such an eternal vigilance is steep. As Neil Harris puts it: “To be human is to be cheated, to be victorious is to become inhumane” (223). Nonetheless, Pitch is deaf to the cosmopolitan’s arguments. When he continues to rebuff his advances, Goodman finally gives up, understanding that no matter what he does, no nourishment—either of the physical or the spiritual kind—is here to be had. When he moves on it is in a manner, as the narrator notes, “less lightsome than he had come, leaving the discomfited misanthrope to the solitude he held so sapient” (*CM* 138).

Although he has suffered a momentary setback, Goodman will not have to wait long for someone new and more cheerful to converse with, this being Charles Arnold Noble—“do call me Charlie” (*CM* 160)—whose encounter with the cosmopolitan stretches from Chapter 25 to 35, making it by far the longest of the novel. During the initial part of their conversation, the two express similar views concerning the nobility of man and their dislike of misanthropy; in the cosmopolitan’s words: “our sentiments agree so, that were they written in a book, whose was whose, few but the nicest critics might determine” (*CM* 158). When Noble invites him to continue their chat over a bottle of port wine and cigars, however, it turns out that their opinions differ more than what initially seemed to be the case. It also becomes evident that while his new acquaintance keeps filling up Goodman’s glass and tries to convince him to smoke freely, he hardly touches the port wine or the cigars himself. At the end of Chapter 30, the cosmopolitan suddenly requests a loan of 50 dollars from his companion, whereupon Noble tells him to “go to the devil, sir! Beggar, impostor!—never so deceived in a man in my life,” before undergoing some sort of transformation, “much such a change as one reads of in fairy-books” (*CM* 179, 180). In response, the cosmopolitan performs something described by the narrator almost as a magical spell, causing the “old” Noble

to reappear.²²⁰ Goodman then claims he was only joking when he asked for the loan, proceeding to tell the story of Charlemont, a “gentleman-madman” from St. Louis who withdrew from society after going bankrupt, only to return years later, after having regained his fortune. Reflecting upon Charlemont’s plight, he asks Noble whether he would ever “turn the cold shoulder to a friend—a convivial one, say, whose penilessness should be suddenly revealed to you?” (*CM* 187). Seeming to fear that Goodman is about to repeat his request for a loan, Noble hastily withdraws, claiming the wine has given him a headache. Their meeting ends with the cosmopolitan telling his new companion that “I will see you to-morrow” (*CM* 188).

The question, then, is who is fooling whom during the extended interaction between Goodman and Noble? The answer commonly given by scholars is that the cosmopolitan realizes that Noble is trying to get him drunk to swindle him, but that he cleverly foils his opponent by asking for the loan. Although he makes no money from the encounter, he at least has the pleasure of outfoxing the fox; in Elizabeth S. Foster’s words:

The cosmopolitan pretends to honor the new and perfervid friendship by asking for a loan, and thus foils the sharper and cleverly traps him into revealing that his profession of love of mankind is a masquerade for hatred and egoism, and that his trust is a pretense for the sake of business. (lxx)

While such a reading is not incorrect, it overlooks that in addition to the pleasure of outwitting Noble, Goodman gets something more concrete out of their interaction. To be more precise, while some critics have discussed whether the wine they drink is fake “elixir of logwood,” as Noble insinuates upon leaving his companion, or “genuine, mellow old port,” as Goodman insists (*CM* 187, 188), few have looked into the question of

²²⁰ Chapter 32, which describes Noble’s “metamorphosis” and re-transformation, is among the novel’s most puzzling. It is not clear what the narrator means when he says that “[o]ut of old materials sprang a new creature. Cadmus glided into the snake” (*CM* 185). Nevertheless, no matter if this is meant to be understood metaphorically or literally, it is Noble, and *not* the cosmopolitan who is said to glide “into the snake.” The difficulty posed by this encounter for the “standard line” argument was already noted by Shroeder, who acknowledged that “I have not offered any explanation as to why Noble and Goodman, if both are from the pit [i.e. Hell], should unknown to one another carry on their long conversation” (379).

who pays for it and for the cigars: who is the host, and who is guest of the symposium?²²¹ The novel gives several strong indications that it is Noble who acts as the (more or less) hospitable host for the evening. For example, it is he who invites the other to join him. Moreover, Goodman tells him that “you are my entertainer on this occasion” (*CM* 162); and finally, the cosmopolitan has the following to say to the next man he meets, Mark Winsome, who has warned him against the recently departed Noble, whom he accuses of being a “Mississippi operator” (*CM* 196):

My friend [Noble], whose seat is still warm, has retired for the night, leaving more or less in his bottle here. Pray, sit down in his seat, and partake with me; and then, if you choose to hint aught further unfavorable to the man, the genial warmth of whose person in part passes into yours, and whose genial hospitality meanders through you—be it so. (*CM* 190)

In other words, no matter if the wine is fake or genuine—a question which may not be all that important, as Goodman at one point alludes to “a kind of man who, while convinced that on this continent most wines are shams, yet still drinks away at them; accounting wine so fine a thing, that even the sham article is better than none at all” (*CM* 162)—it is Noble who is the source of its “genial hospitality.” In return for his time and conversation, the cosmopolitan—who drinks with relish and tells his acquaintance that he is on his “fourth or fifth [glass], thanks to your importunity” (*CM* 174)—thus ends up getting almost an entire bottle of port wine and cigars. In addition, he also gets an interesting specimen of “that good dish, man” to “smack” his “lips over,” or—to borrow a phrase from *White-Jacket*—to “study and digest” (*WJ* 185).²²² While these gains might appear insignificant from the perspective of a professional con man, from that of a parasite—and especially one who explicitly considers

221 On the wine as fake or genuine, see Renker (81).

222 Goodman is not the only character in Melville’s works trading stories for food and/or beverages. In Chapter 1, I quoted Redburn’s comments about offering stories about America in return for ale. Many other examples could be given, but one will suffice: In Chapter 54 of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael mentions how he once told “The Town-Ho’s Story” to “a lounging circle of my Spanish friends” in Lima (*MD* 243). As the story progresses, it becomes evident that his generous hosts keep refilling his cup with chicha while he is telling his story.

“man a wine I never weary of comparing and sipping”—they make much more sense.

The fact that the cosmopolitan embodies traits typically associated with the classical figure of the parasite has several interpretative consequences. First, the encounter between him and Noble appears as a tactical struggle between two characters trying to place each other in the position of the host. This perfectly exemplifies Snyder and Mitchell’s previously quoted claim that society aboard the *Fidèle* consisted of a “series of parasitic economic relationships” where the “role of host (that which exists at the origin of a food chain, upon which others feed for their survival) ultimately proves an absent center.” To be precise, it is an absent center because anybody can potentially end up in this position. This perspective makes the cosmopolitan appear as someone who repeatedly keeps trying to play the parasite in a game including “fools” (those not aware of the game, or only dimly so), “knaves” (those who actively play the game, even though their methods might differ from Goodman’s) and those somewhere in the middle. In so doing, he is sometimes successful—as in the episodes featuring Charlie Noble and the ship’s barber, William Cream—and sometimes not. Defeat is the outcome not only of his encounter with Pitch, but also with Mark Winsome and his disciple, Egbert, whose “inhuman philosophy” turns out to be too strong an opponent for Goodman’s combination of cosmopolitanism and philanthropy (*CM* 223).

In addition, Goodman sometimes encounters others who are playing the same game, but without coming into direct conflict with them, as is the case with the dirty peddler-boy in Chapter 45. This “juvenile peddler . . . of travelers’ conveniences” easily manages to prey on the fears of an old man with whom Goodman is discussing the Bible (*CM* 244). First he persuades him to buy a traveler’s patent lock and a money belt, meant to keep his money safe from burglars and pickpockets, then he offers him the dubious gift of a (potentially counterfeit) *Counterfeit Detector* to help him check the validity of his banknotes.²²³ This only ends up confusing

223 Under the American banking system at the time, local banks were allowed to print their own banknotes. As this led to a proliferation of different bills in circulation, it made it easier to counterfeit money. Hence, the need for periodicals such as *The Counterfeit Detector*, meant to

the old man as to their authenticity. As he puts it, after having checked two of his bills against the detector (a claim that holds just as much for the novel as for the banknotes): “there’s so many marks of all sorts to go by, it makes it a kind of uncertain” (CM 248). But when the boy asks Goodman whether he, too, would like to buy a lock, the latter declines, claiming he never uses “such blacksmiths’ things,” which prompts the following reply, accompanied by a comment from the narrator suggesting that here one rogue has recognized a kindred spirit: “‘Those who give the blacksmith most work seldom do,’ said the boy, tipping him a wink expressive of a degree of indefinite knowingness, not uninteresting to consider in one of his years. But the wink was not marked by the old man, nor, to all appearances, by him for whom it was intended” (CM 246).

Here it becomes evident that the parasitic chain is both longer and far more complex in *The Confidence-Man* than in the texts by Melville analysed in the previous chapters, and is even capable of including apparent truces between various parasites. This indicates that Serres oversimplifies matters when he claims that “the parasite has but one enemy: the one who can replace him in his position of parasite” (*Parasite* 107). What Melville here demonstrates is that sometimes parasites feeding on the same host may respectfully co-exist.

To summarize the argument thus far, much of what Frank Goodman says and does makes much more sense considered in light of the tradition of the literary parasite, than it does if he is understood as either the Devil, looking for souls, or a professional con man, looking for monetary gain. The same can also be said of many of the literary texts that are mentioned or alluded to in *The Confidence-Man*, either by the narrator, by the confidence men of the first half, or by Goodman and his interlocutors. Whereas scholars have offered detailed analyses of the importance of many of these references to the narrative, what has not previously been acknowledged is how many of the works in question fit into one of

help the public ensure that their bills were legal tender. This did not solve the problem, though. As Ted Weissbuch has pointed out, counterfeit detectors were sometimes counterfeited, too (16–18). For an analysis of the similarity between the disorderly American banking system and religious faith in the novel, see Imbert; for one concerning Melville’s strategy of “writing on credit,” see Kamuf.

the following two categories: either they feature memorable characters with recognizable parasitic traits, or they explicitly warn against trusting the type of false, flattering friends whose aim is to sponge off their host. Among the works already mentioned, James Kenney's *Raising the Wind* belongs to the first of these groups, whereas Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* belongs to the second. In the following, I want to look in more detail at some additional works referred to in *The Confidence-Man*, but let me first mention that scholars have identified other possible influences on Melville's novel that also fit within these two categories. For example, in describing the process whereby the confidence man first became a distinct type in American culture, Johannes Dietrich Bergmann notes that "besides being the first," the elusive William Thompson "seemed to be all over, in many places at once. He must have seemed like Ben Jonson's Mosca, a man who could 'be here, and there, and here, and yonder, all at once'" (576). As will be remembered from Chapter 2, the sly Mosca is explicitly listed as a parasite in *Volpone's* dramatis personae and labeled as such both by other characters and by himself. In *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (1944), William E. Sedgwick briefly compares *The Confidence-Man* to Jonson's play, as well as to his *Bartholomew Fair* (188). The former comparison was later investigated in more detail by Jay H. Hartman in "Volpone as a Possible Source for Melville's *The Confidence Man*" (1965), where he claimed that there are "striking similarities, especially in theme, characterization, and structure" between the two works (248).²²⁴

Moreover, two other possible influences are mentioned in *Melville's Humor* (1981), where Jane Mushabac argues that "if we are looking for prototypes for *The Confidence-Man*, we should look to *Lazarillo de Tormes* and Ben Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humor*" (139). As noted in Chapter 2, in the latter can be found the two parasitical characters Carlo Buffone and Shift. The former book, which Melville had borrowed from Evert Duyckinck in 1850, was originally published in Spain in 1553 or 1554

224 While I agree with Hartman, by almost solely focusing on the figure of Volpone, he overlooks that it is his parasite who is responsible for most of the mischief in Jonson's comedy. If there is indeed a link between *Volpone* and *The Confidence-Man*, it is Mosca that should be the primary focus, not his patron. On Melville's familiarity with Jonson, see Sealts Jr. (190).

by an anonymous author. It is often seen as the first picaresque novel, even though the concept of the *picaro* (rogue) was only introduced in a later work Melville was also familiar with, Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599/1604).²²⁵ Many narrators in picaresque novels—the eponymous Lazarillo included—are clearly indebted to the classical figure of the parasite.²²⁶ More specifically, their stories, which tend to be presented as autobiographies, are narrated in the first person by a low-born *picaro* looking back on his life, and usually consist of a number of loosely connected episodes where he has to use his wits and various dirty tricks in order to feed off others in a hostile environment.²²⁷ Lazarillo at one point explains his own cunning in this way: “Hunger is the mother of invention, and sharpens the wit as much as gluttony drowns it” (Anon. and de Luna 40).

After this brief look at the presence of the figure of the parasite in these potential sources of inspiration, it is time to turn to some of the texts explicitly mentioned in *The Confidence-Man*. First, in Chapter 30, when Noble brings up that he dislikes the advice Polonius offers his son, Laertes, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1600), Goodman admits that he, too, is on occasion troubled by the Bard of Avon, whom he finds “a queer man” (CM 171). To exemplify what troubles him, Goodman refers to Shakespeare's Autolycus, the happy-go-lucky jester who steals, cheats, and tricks his way through the last two acts of *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1609–1610):

225 Critics have argued that several of Melville's works incorporate picaresque traits. On picaresque traits in *Omoo*, see Sten (41–62); in *The Confidence-Man*, see Wicks (125–34), Malkmus, and Blackburn (158–77). The latter claims that “[t]he ingenuity of *The Confidence-Man* is that Melville discovers a way to reexpress his familiar tragic themes in a picaresque schema” (Blackburn 161). For a comparison of the picaresque traits of *Israel Potter* and *The Confidence-Man*, see Mushabac (122–42); for the Spanish *picaro* as a precursor of the figure of the confidence man, see J. G. Blair (22–27). Melville also referred to some of the most famous picaresque novels, for example praising Tobias Smollett's works in *Omoo*, *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket*, and—in the latter—Alain René Lesage's *The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santilane*, which Smollett had translated into English. On Melville's familiarity with these authors, as well as with *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Guzmán de Alfarache*, see Sten (43–44) and Sealts Jr. (25, 31, 50, 59, 61, 150, 193, 216).

226 For an analysis of the figure of the *picaro* in terms of Michel Serres' concept of the parasite, see Maiorino (30–35).

227 I say “he” because just like the parasites of classical comedy, protagonists in picaresque novels tend to be male. Exceptions can be found in Francisco López de Ubeda's *The Life of Justina, the Country Jilt* (1605) and Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722).

There's his Autolycus now, a fellow that always puzzled me. How is one to take Autolycus? A rogue so happy, so lucky, so triumphant, of so almost captivatingly vicious a career that a virtuous man reduced to the poor-house (were such contingency conceivable), might almost long to change sides with him. And yet, see the words put into his mouth: "Oh," cries Autolycus, as he comes galloping, gay as a buck, upon the stage, "oh," he laughs, "oh what a fool is Honesty, and Trust, his sworn brother, a very simple gentleman." Think of that. Trust, that is, confidence—that is, the thing in this universe the sacredest—is rattlingly pronounced just the simplest. And the scenes in which the rogue figures seem purposely devised for verification of his principles. (*CM* 172)

For someone like Goodman, who time and again stresses his belief in the profound goodness of man, such a character poses a serious dilemma:

When disturbed by the character and career of one thus wicked and thus happy, my sole consolation is in the fact that no such creature ever existed, except in the powerful imagination which evoked him. And yet, a creature, a living creature, he is, though only a poet was his maker. It may be, that in that paper-and-ink investiture of his, Autolycus acts more effectively upon mankind than he would in a flesh-and-blood one. Can his influence be salutary? True, in Autolycus there is humor; but though, according to my principle, humor is in general to be held a saving quality, yet the case of Autolycus is an exception; because it is his humor which, so to speak, oils his mischievousness. The bravadoing mischievousness of Autolycus is slid into the world on humor, as a pirate schooner, with colors flying, is launched into the sea on greased ways. (*CM* 172)

While Noble claims to agree with Goodman, the narrator hints that he is simply paying lip service, his real aim being to steer the conversation back to Polonius' advice to Laertes.²²⁸ However, more attention should be paid to the cosmopolitan's reflections on Autolycus than his interlocutor does. To begin exploring the importance of Shakespeare's rogue,

228 Noble's likely aim is to have the cosmopolitan openly admit to disagreeing with Polonius' advice to "[n]either a borrower nor a lender be" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.3.75), in order to trick a loan out of him. However, Goodman beats him to making the request, thus turning the tables on him.

here is the first part of Parker and Niemeyer's explanatory note in the second Norton Critical edition of *The Confidence-Man*: "After Autolycus the robber in Greek myth, Shakespeare's Autolycus is a cunning, cynical, heartless trickster, a peddler of trashy goods, his eye on the main chance and the big haul" (178n6). This assessment demands a few remarks. First, "trickster" here seems to be used in a derogatory sense, rather than in the precise mythological understanding that can be found in a work such as Paul Radin's classic, *The Trickster* (1956). Here Radin contends that tricksters are found in a variety of myths, legends, and folk tales, and belong "to the oldest expressions of mankind" (xxiii). Among the most famous examples are Hermes and Prometheus in Greek mythology, Loki in the Old Norse mythology, Eshu in the Yorùbá religion, as well as cunning animals such as Coyote and Raven for different Native American tribes, Brer Rabbit for African Americans, and Reynard the Fox in Europe. What these wanderers driven by their appetites have in common is that they are all mischievous and cunning creatures of the threshold. Breakers of rules, creators of disorder, introducers of newness, givers of gifts and players of tricks, tricksters are, to quote Lewis Hyde, "the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox" (7). Or, as Radin puts it:

Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. . . . He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being. (xxiii)

Now, the Autolycus of myth is none other than the son of the greatest Greek trickster, Hermes.²²⁹ It is from his father that he has inherited his

229 Several critics have analyzed *The Confidence-Man* in terms of the figure of the trickster, including Baim, Wadlington, Cook (13–14), and Hyde (53–54). Similarly, Hermes has been invoked both as the model for the confidence man, and for the juvenile peddler whom the cosmopolitan encounters in the book's final chapter, see R. W. B Lewis (69) and Dryden (*Melville's Thematics* 192–94), respectively. On Hermes as trickster, see N. O. Brown. This cunning god, whose name Michel Serres' early five-volume series bears, is also intimately related to the conceptual figure of the parasite, as the following quote begins to indicate: "Hermes is the father of eloquence, patron of orators, musicians, master of words, noise, and wind" (Harari and Bell xxxv).

talents for mischief, theft, trickery, lying, as well as singing and playing the lyre—many of which were later to reappear in his own grandson, the parasite *avant la lettre*, Odysseus.²³⁰ Rather than simply being a “robber,” as Parker and Niemeyer claim, the mythic Autolycus immediately brings to mind the figure of the trickster.

Moving on to Shakespeare’s Autolycus, he, too belongs to this tradition, as evident from the way he introduces himself in Act IV: “My father named me Autolycus; who being, as I am, littered under Mercury, was likewise a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles” (*Winter’s* 4.3.24–26). Since Mercury is the Roman equivalent of Hermes, *The Winter’s Tale* is explicitly asking its audience to consider Autolycus as a trickster. But him being “a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles” who uses wit, cunning and flattery in order to reach his amoral goals, and who expresses his pleasure in bodily nourishment—for example claiming that “a quart of ale is a dish for a king” (Shakespeare, *Winter’s* 4.3.8)—his traits are simultaneously those of the parasite; in the words of William Collins Watterson: “Like his counterpart Capnio in the play’s prose source, [Robert] Greene’s *Pandosto* (1588), Autolycus belongs to a familiar class of comic character, that of the *parasitus* or wily servant” (537).

This brings me to a final point. If one reads *The Winter’s Tale* thoroughly, Parker and Niemeyer’s view of Autolycus turns out to be too negative and one-sided. While I do not feel competent to draw any conclusions about the validity of Watterson’s claim that Autolycus is “the author’s self-parody” (536), it is fairly clear that Shakespeare must have had a certain fondness for his amoral but charming trickster-parasite, who, in William C. Carroll’s words, belongs to “the tradition of the merry beggar” (168). Given his selfishness and ruthlessness the audience *should* instinctively dislike Autolycus, but there is something about him that makes it difficult to do so: “Neither a sociopath like Richard III nor a ‘demi-devil’ like Iago, Autolycus more nearly resembles Falstaff and Cleopatra, heroic personifications of invention—and accommodation—whose comic energies manage to discourage the audience’s reflexive need to judge and condemn” (Watterson 536).

230 On the parasitic traits of Odysseus, see Tylawsky (7–16).

Moreover, as opposed to the harsh punishments awaiting many other Elizabethan parasites, including Jonson's Mosca, Autolycus is not only let off the hook, but is even rewarded for his selfish actions. True, he realizes that his last attempt to trick the Shepherd and his son, the Clown, has backfired, resulting in them becoming part of the gentry: "Here come those I have done good to against my will, and already appearing in the blossoms of their fortune" (*Winter's* 5.2.125–27). Even so, the Clown is remarkably forgiving of his misdeeds and tells him that "I will swear to the prince thou art as honest a true fellow as any is in Bohemia," in addition to promising—not entirely wisely, perhaps—that "we'll be thy good masters" (Shakespeare, *Winter's* 5.2.156–57; 174). In other words, at the end of *The Winter's Tale* the lucky parasite-rogue has suddenly found two *nouveau rich* gentlemen willing to be his patrons. It seems unlikely that such a handsome reward would be appropriate if he were truly nothing more than "a cunning, cynical, heartless trickster."

How should the cosmopolitan's puzzlement over Autolycus be understood, then? To answer this question, it is crucial to recognize that Goodman often make statements where it is unclear whether he means what he says or is lying through his teeth, but where the novel obviously intends what has been said to be understood in an ironic manner. The best example of such an utterance is his comment to Pitch that "irony is so unjust; never could abide irony; something Satanic about irony. God defend me from Irony, and Satire, his bosom friend" (*CM* 136). Perhaps he means it, and perhaps he does not, but the novel—ironic and satirical through and through—surely does not. Goodman's reflections on Autolycus can be read in a similar manner, uttered as it is by someone who undoubtedly has many parasitic traits in common with the character in question; in Tom Quirk's words the cosmopolitan "might just as well have been talking about himself" (*Melville's* 88). Himself part trickster, part jester and part parasite, as well as full of "comic energies" similar to those that make it so hard to judge Shakespeare's rogue, it is surely one of the novel's great ironies that Melville has Goodman doubt the possibility of the existence of someone "thus wicked and thus happy," not to forget the irony of him finding his "sole consolation . . . in the fact that no such creature ever existed, except in the powerful imagination which evoked

him.” Through the references to Autolycus, *The Confidence-Man* is thus slyly providing further means of understanding the cosmopolitan’s parasitic traits.

Just as the figure of the parasite helps illuminate Goodman’s reflections on Autolycus, it is also relevant for understanding another important literary reference in the novel. In Chapter 43, the *Fidèle’s* barber, William Cream, encounters the cosmopolitan, whom he ends up shaving, only to find himself tricked out of his payment.²³¹ During their conversation, Cream at one point quotes the book alternatively known as Ecclesiasticus and *The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach* to explain why he once refused to offer a free shave to a sweet-voiced man who claimed to be his distant relative: “I recalled what the son of Sirach says in the True Book: ‘An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips;’ and so I did what the son of Sirach advises in such cases: ‘I believed not his many words’” (CM 236). Goodman claims he has never come across these specific passages in the Bible. Finding it hard to believe that the Good Book should contain such cynical advice, he resolves to look it up for himself.

The last chapter of *The Confidence-Man*—“The Cosmopolitan increases in seriousness”—opens with Goodman’s attempt to clear up the matter. Entering the cabin, he finds most of the passengers sleeping in their berths, while under the room’s single burning lamp, an old man is quietly reading the Bible. After Goodman has a chance to inspect it for himself, the narrator describes how his expression turns from “attentiveness” to “seriousness,” and, finally, to “a kind of pain,” before asking whether his companion can help him resolve “a disturbing doubt,” which is like “gall and wormwood” to him, as a philanthropist:

I am one who thinks well of man. I love man. I have confidence in man. But what was told me not a half-hour since? I was told that I would find it written—“Believe not his many words—an enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips”—and also I was told that I would find a good deal more to the same effect, and all in this book. I could not think it; and, coming here to look for myself, what do

231 Scholars often hold the barber to be an innocent dupe, but Tom Quirk has argued that he, too, is a confidence man of sorts, and that the dialogue between him and Goodman “is a tissue of misunderstandings and double meaning, the wit of which largely derives from a punning with underworld jargon” (*Melville’s* 143).

I read? Not only just what was quoted, but also, as was engaged, more to the same purpose, such as this: “With much communication he will tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou? If thou be for his profit he will use thee; he will make thee bare, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep.” (CM 242)

At this point, someone kept awake by their conversation interrupts them with the following question: “Who’s that describing the confidence-man?” (CM 242)—the title aside, this is the only time the term “confidence-man” is used in the novel. Goodman is then reassured when the old gentleman points out that Ecclesiasticus is not recognized as a canonical part of the Bible, but that, along with the other apocryphal texts, it has been included between the Old and the New Testament in the copy found aboard the *Fidèle*.²³²

At first glance, the verses from Ecclesiasticus quoted first by William Cream and then by the cosmopolitan, might seem to support the “standard line” argument. Ecclus. 12.16 reads as follows: “An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips, but in his heart he imagineth how to throw thee into a pit: he will weep with his eyes, but if he find opportunity, he will not be satisfied with blood.” No less diabolical-sounding are the following quotes: “If he have need of thee, he will deceive thee, and smile upon thee, and put thee in hope; he will speak to thee fair, and say, What wantest thou?” (Ecclus. 13.6); “Affect not to be made equal unto him in talk, and believe not his many words: for with much communication will he tempt thee, and smiling upon thee will get out thy secrets” (Ecclus. 13.11); and

232 The apocryphal texts were also included between the Old and the New Testament in Melville’s own, heavily annotated 1846 edition of *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments, Translated out of the Original Tongues, and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised, with References and Various Readings, together with the Apocrypha*. All quotes from Ecclesiasticus are taken from this edition. The old man’s claim about the official status of Ecclesiasticus is not entirely precise. As a deuterocanonical text (i.e. belonging to the second canon), it is considered canonical by the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Church, but not by Protestants. Therefore, it is a fundamentally problematic book; as Mark C. Taylor has put it: “for thoughtful readers, the apocryphal is uncontainable; the margin inevitably overflows its bounds and contaminates the whole book as if from within. The history of the Apocrypha shows the undeniable arbitrariness of the text: sometimes included, sometimes excluded, sometimes included as excluded” (613).

“Observe, and take good heed, for thou walkest in peril of thy overthrowing: when thou hearest these things, awake in thy sleep” (Ecclus. 13.13).

Ecclesiasticus was written in Hebrew, probably in Jerusalem around 180 BC by the scribe Joshua or Jesus ben Sirach, sometimes referred to as Ben Sira. As these quotes indicate, he is trying to warn his readers against what he holds to be a grave danger, but what sort of danger exactly? Initially, one might think that he must be referring to the Devil. In a similar vein, Gail Coffler has argued that the passage Goodman quotes “might describe Satan, or perhaps the Cosmopolitan, or, Melville devilishly hints, it might refer to the false promise of the gospels, the ‘good news’ of Christianity” (66–67). Nevertheless, when the quotes are read in their original context—as did Melville, who had marked several passages from Ecclesiasticus in his Bible (Heidmann 385)—it turns out that ben Sirach has something wholly other in mind. An indication of just what is found in Ecclus. 13.4–5, which Goodman also partially quotes: “If thou be for his profit, he will use thee: but if thou have nothing, he will forsake thee. If thou have any thing, he will live with thee: yea, he will make the bare, and will not be sorry for it.” Here it becomes obvious that ben Sirach is *not* talking about how man should avoid eternal damnation in the afterlife, but about how to succeed *here and now*, while on earth. More precisely, the danger he is addressing is exactly the one that befell Timon of Athens: being taken advantage of by false friends. If there is one creature known for living off his host if there is something to be gained by doing so, but who will desert his benefactor the moment the latter is “bare”—just like Kooloo deserted the narrator in *Omo*—it is none other than the parasite.

As Seth Schwartz has argued in *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?* (2009), for all its religious content, large parts of Ecclesiasticus—including both chapters quoted in *The Confidence-Man*—are almost wholly concerned with worldly matters. More specifically, he notes that it contains an abundance of practical “advice on relations to one’s fellows, including friends, social superiors, hosts, guests or parasites (dining figures prominently in the book), dependents, family members, slaves, and women; reciprocity is a near-constant theme, and gift exchange is mentioned frequently” (Schwartz 48).

In addition, Schwartz has the following to say about ben Sirach's specific aims in Chapter 13 of Ecclesiasticus, where most of the quotes in *The Confidence-Man* are taken from:

In chapter 13 ... he warns his audience against falling into a state of dependency on the wealthy without any allusion to Pentateuchal norms or much significant use of biblical language ... In sum, Ben Sira here offers advice, based on a keen sense of its inherent danger, about the proper management of a social institution he did not yet have a separate name for but that following Roman precedent, we could call patronage. (69)²³³

One thing that should be clear by now, is that where there is such an institution as patronage, those trying to sponge off its benefits will always be close at hand. In the chapters quoted in *The Confidence-Man*, ben Sirach is thus *not* warning his readers against the Devil, but against exactly the type of false and flattering friends that were labeled parasites in the Greco-Roman tradition. As someone who incorporates many of the traits typically associated with the classical parasite, it is no wonder that Goodman takes offence at finding such words in the Bible, or that he rejoices when learning that Ecclesiasticus can be dismissed, due to its non-canonical status. As he remarks to his companion:

I cannot tell you how thankful I am for your reminding me about the apocrypha here. For the moment, its being such escaped me. Fact is, when all is bound up together, it's sometimes confusing. The uncanonical part should be bound distinct. And, now that I think of it, how well did those learned doctors who rejected for us this whole book of Sirach. I never read anything so calculated to destroy man's confidence in man. (CM 243)

Nor, perhaps, has he ever read anything so calculated to make a parasite go hungry, at least if its message were taken to heart by the reader. The irony is that the gist of ben Sirach's warning to his readers is almost

²³³ Worth quoting is also Schwartz' reflections on ben Sirach's warning of what will happen to those ignorant of the rules of gift exchange: Such a man has no real friends, only "parasites, people who eat at his table but are no true friends, whom he holds in contempt because they fail to reciprocate his benefits in a way he deems appropriate, while the parasites, for their part ... repay his abuse with raw hatred" (69).

identical to one of the main points of Polonius's advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*: Beware of false friends trying to sponge off you. The strong reactions of Goodman against Ecclesiasticus and Noble against Polonius can therefore be read as having their origins in a fear known to all parasites throughout history, namely that of being cut off from their nourishment.

The "Noise" of *The Confidence-Man*

To return to Snyder and Mitchell's analysis, the combination of the highly normative ideals of antebellum America and the new charity industry ended up excluding those perceived as nonproductive in a new and more dehumanizing manner than had previously been the case. As they see it, the portrayal of disability in Melville's novel counteracts this tendency because it exposes the violence at the heart of societal attempts to cope with such "parasitic" foreign bodies; in their words: "The radicality of *The Confidence-Man* is found not in its social vision of a more inclusive society, but rather in its anticipation of new forms of social violence" (*Cultural Locations* 65). This leads Snyder and Mitchell to discuss the narrator's reflections in the three chapters where he directly addresses the reader. To them, his is a far-reaching vision that aims to reflect life in its multiplicity, including the disabled that the charity industry attempts to speak *for*, all the while keeping them safely out of the public's view:

By thwarting charity's efforts to keep disability under wraps and out of the public eye, *The Confidence-Man* creates the interference that upsets bodily appearances as a reliable medium of interpretation. In this way the tactics of Melville's writing hinge on the deformation of aesthetics as a significant register for literary innovation. (*Cultural Locations* 67)

In this final section of the chapter, my aim is to further explore Snyder and Mitchell's idea that *The Confidence-Man* creates some sort of "interference" through a deformation of aesthetics. However, whereas they seem primarily to think of this in the sense of the narrator's willingness to portray what falls outside the purview of "normality"—that is, the disabled body—this is not what I have in mind. To me, the most important question is how to describe the enduring strangeness of Melville's novel.

Whereas the thematic level is no doubt of importance for any attempt to answer this question, the crucial thing in this regard is *how* the narrator tells his story—in other words, the question of literary form.

To approach this question, I would like to begin by quoting a point made by Wai-chee Dimock in *Empire for Liberty* (1989). As she sees it,

speech in *The Confidence-Man* has almost nothing to do with speakers: it is an autonomous phenomenon, not a communicative device. ... From the first scene till the last, disembodied voices are made to deliver oblique comments on the action of the story. All in all, we have the eerie sense that speech imposes itself on a character—rather than issuing from him—and that in the long run, it makes little difference who this character is. Characters are interchangeable. They are no more than the medium in which words circulate. (207–8)²³⁴

If Dimock's assessment is valid, as I think it to a large degree is, understanding this seeming lack of connection between the characters of the novel and their various utterances is necessary for coming to terms with the strangeness of *The Confidence-Man*. Now, what all the confidence men aboard the *Fidèle* have in common is their tool of choice: *words*. With the exception of the deaf-mute and his written words, they more specifically employ what Pitch terms “the crafty process of sociable chat” (*CM* 130)—an activity that in *White-Jacket* is claimed to be absolutely fundamental to Americans: “For chat man must; and by our immortal Bill of Rights, that guarantees to us liberty of speech, chat we Yankees will” (*WJ* 386). Whether the confidence men make promises (usually of a kind too good to be true) in return for a small investment; whether they offer sad stories of woe, meant to tweak their interlocutors' heartstrings, and open their purses; whether they try to manipulate their insecurities, fears, hopes, self-esteem, sense of charity, or their confidence—they do so through a constant stream of talk. Or as Pitch puts it, when he accuses the P.I.O. man of being “a talking man—what I call a wordy man. You talk,

²³⁴ See also Dimock's claim that “[p]eople do not use words [to tell the stories]; words use them. The receding authorship in the ... stories makes it impossible to say just who the storytellers are—and in the long run, it does not matter. The discrete segregation and mutual imperviousness between speech and speaker make words utterly free, utterly unaccountable. They go nowhere, illustrate nothing, and refer to nothing but themselves” (*Empire* 209).

talk” (CM 125). Thus, as Warwick Wadlington has noted, Melville’s novel truly gives “the impression of being stuffed with words” (140).

Hence, *The Confidence-Man* is a fundamentally *noisy* novel, filled with chatter that sometimes seems to border on the meaningless.²³⁵ The book is to a large degree made up of conversations between “nonsensical people talking nonsense,” as one contemporary reviewer put it (qtd. in CM 325), and the passengers are also said to constantly “buzz” on the *Fidèle’s* “decks, while, from quarters unseen, comes a murmur as of bees in the comb” (CM 8). To understand its peculiar effect, then, this noisy wordiness must be analyzed. This brings me to one scholar who has addressed these specific questions, the previously mentioned Alexander Gelley. His “Parasitic Talk” and “Melville’s Talking Man” deploy Serres’ concept of the parasite to analyze Melville’s novel.²³⁶ Central to both these texts is Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Gerede*, or “idle talk,” which Gelley uses to situate *The Confidence-Man* as part of an alternative literary lineage:

The Confidence-Man may be placed in a line of modern novels—including *Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *L’Éducation sentimentale*, *Bouvard et Péuchet*, *Der Stechlin*, and *Ulysses*—that could be termed novels of idle talk, of *Gerede*. They are works whose sustaining principle, their red thread, is neither the action nor a central protagonist but rather a principle of discourse [that] can be shown, in each case, to manifest a continuous, cumulative pattern. (“Parasitic Talk” 88–89)²³⁷

235 A central premise for Michel Serres’ argument, is the fact that the word parasite in French refers not only to sponging among humans and in nature, but also to *noise*, as in the expression “bruit parasite” (static, distortion, or white noise). Drawing on the way information theory understands noise as anything that interferes with successful communication, in *The Parasite*, he constantly weaves these three meanings together. On this third meaning of the concept, as well as the importance of information theory to Serres’ thought, see Harari and Bell (xxii–xxviii), Paulson (53–100), and S. Brown (7–8).

236 Gelley’s texts have unfortunately not elicited much response from Melville scholars. One important exception is Sianne Ngai, whose chapter on “tone” in *Ugly Feelings* (2005) draws upon his contributions as part of an original reading of *The Confidence-Man*. While I support Gelley’s general conclusions, I do not agree with him when it comes to all details. For example, he states that when Noble and Goodman are drinking port wine, “each repeatedly urges the other to drink, while at the same time maintaining considerable reserve regarding the wine” (“Parasitic Talk” 96). As earlier indicated, this only holds for Noble, not Goodman.

237 As Gelley makes clear, the negative implications of the expression notwithstanding, for Heidegger, *Gerede* is not to be understood as referring to a failure of communication: “The expression ‘idle talk’ is not to be used here in a ‘disparaging’ signification. Terminologically,

The constitutive traits of this principle of discourse are easier to discern in a later text where Gelley approached similar questions without reference to Melville: “Idle Talk: Scarcity and Excess in Literary Language” (2001). Here he analyzes works by Louis-René des Forêts and Henry James to highlight how spoken utterances in narratives may be crucial, even when no specific information is conveyed:

What I am looking for are instances where there is a hollowing out of *what* is said, but the act of talking remains. One way to focus on this issue is to pay particular attention to language that is deemed low, formulaic, or “empty”—gossip, chatter, prattle, *idiotismes*. It is this kind of inadvertence in language that I think of as speech in an “idling” state. (“Idle Talk” 30)

That is to say, the central question Gelley is addressing is what it means when language “happens” in works of literature, but without having an obvious meaning. Or, as he has also written: “When language is idling, it is still running, like a motor in neutral. It goes nowhere, we say, which means that we haven’t yet found a way to make sense of its noise” (“Talking Man” 249).

One way to make sense of the unwonted wordiness of *The Confidence-Man* would therefore be through interrogating its peculiar form of noisy “idling.” To offer a tentative initial analysis of this aspect, the various utterances made by the different con men can never be taken at face value. There is no way of knowing when they are telling the truth (if at all), and when they are not, or of separating their truths from their lies. What is important about the conversations in the novel is not so much *what* is said at any given moment—when the cosmopolitan at one point asks Noble what they should talk about, the latter’s reply is fitting: “Oh, anything you please” (*CM* 181). Substituting “Confidence” for “Leviathanisms” in the following quote from Ishmael would therefore supply a good description of the status of the words uttered aboard the *Fidèle*: We “can hardly help suspecting them for mere sounds, full of Leviathanisms, but signifying nothing” (*MD* 145).

it signifies a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of Being of everyday Dasein’s understanding and interpreting” (Heidegger qtd. in “Parasitic Talk” 87).

Instead, three other aspects should be highlighted. The first is the simple fact that words are continually being uttered. This is not only for existential reasons, since “the skills of the confidence man always require a partner” (Gelley, “Talking Man” 256), but also for utterly pragmatic ones, since a lull in the conversation would mean a chance for the intended victim to get away. The second is that regardless of their truth-value, these words that are uttered have effects; as Gary Lindberg has claimed: “Throughout his novel Melville urges us to distinguish between the truth of a statement and the effects of it” (18). Put differently, everything that is said is meant to ensure that the intended victim ends up and remains in the position of the host. The third is that this aim must remain hidden from those being addressed: Tricking people who suspect that they are being conned is obviously much more difficult than duping the unsuspecting ones.²³⁸ This means that “idle talk,” as Gelley sees it, “is both pervasive and unnoticed,” or at least “nearly unnoticed” (“Parasitic Talk” 99–100). To him, what circulates in the novel “is idle talk, talk that systematically conceals what it means. . . . It is not in the content, the referential element, but in the process, the discourse itself that the narrative dynamic is concentrated” (“Talking Man” 250, 253).

To conceptualize this defining function of language in *The Confidence-Man*, Gelley refers to communicative circuits:

In this novel Melville undertakes to foreground the dialogic situation itself while underspecifying the narrative posts or agencies. In terms of the communicative circuit . . . we may note a radical instability in all three narrative posts, that of sender, receptor, and referent. The referent or subject matter is a reiterated appeal for “confidence” (or one of its analogues like “charity” or “trust”). But this notion is no more than a lure, a concept emptied from the start so as to serve as a means of manipulation. The receptor is inconsequential in terms of personality or individuality but interesting only insofar as he is more or less of a

238 This, however, does not mean that it is impossible—to some, it might even be an opportunity. Neil Harris has for example argued that P. T. Barnum was so successful because he mastered the art of exposing his own cons: “Barnum . . . and other hoaxers didn’t fear public suspicion; they invited it. They understood . . . that the opportunity to debate the *issue* of falsity, to discover how deception had been practiced, was even more exciting than the discovery of fraud itself. . . . when people paid to see frauds, thinking they were true, they paid again to hear how the frauds were committed” (77; emphasis in the original).

dupe The sender, finally, the confidence-man figure, is by no means a stable, consistently successful master of the game. ("Parasitic Talk" 89)

If sender, receptor, and referent are all thus tainted with a "radical instability," how does this affect the readers' understanding of the novel's various communicative circuits? As Gelley argues, one possible answer is that it redirects our attention to the "problematic nature of the channel" the message passes through—that is, toward the precarious state of the very words being uttered ("Parasitic Talk" 90). This might be understood in light of Roman Jakobson's concept of *phatic speech* or *communion*, which basically communicates a readiness to communicate, as when people ask "How are you?" or when they clear their throats to get someone's attention.²³⁹ In Bernhard Siegert's words: "'Phatic communion,' ... denotes a linguistic function in the course of which words are not used to coordinate actions, and certainly not to express thoughts, but in which a community is constituted by means of exchanging meaningless utterances" (34). Usually such "meaningless" utterances are just one of many necessary ingredients for successful communication. However, since it is impossible to know whether the words uttered in *The Confidence-Man* have a deeper meaning at all, or whether they are simply intended to keep the channel of communication operative, it is as if they are threatening to completely take over, potentially turning Melville's novel into one extended phatic speech act.

This is where Serres' concept of the parasite becomes relevant; positing two people talking to each other, Gelley makes the following claim:

Such a dual or specular communicative model constitutes a closed system and assumes the possibility of maximal communication, of a nearly perfect transmission between two poles. But such an exchange would also be tautological, since the model ignores a basic factor in any communication, the channel of transmission. In order to complete the model we need to posit an agency capable of accounting for the resistance inherent in the medium of transmission. Such an agency may be conceived as operating either through force, through a violent intervention in the system, or through a tactical maneuver that would

239 On the phatic function, see Jakobson (18–51).

arouse minimal resistance and yet still modify or transform it. The parasite is such a mobile agent ... It is the tactician of the quotidian. It saps, not combats, the system that serves as its host. ("Parasitic Talk" 91–92)

Rather than resort to violence, which would mean to draw unwanted attention to itself, the parasite intercepts the relations of others, transforming them to divert nourishment in its own direction; as Serres puts it in order to explain why goods do not always arrive where they should: "There are always intercepters who work very hard to divert what is carried along these paths. Parasitism is the name most often given to these numerous and diverse activities, and I fear that they are the most common thing in the world" (*Parasite* 11). At least, such activities are surely the most common thing in the floating world of *The Confidence-Man*. No less than the characters he describes, Melville's narrator is someone who intercepts and latches onto relations, in his case through constantly diverting, problematizing, and undermining the meaning of his narrative. To take a closer look at his role, it is crucial to turn to the novel's many interpolated stories, as well as at the three chapters where he directly addresses his readers about the nature of literature.

The Confidence-Man contains five longer embedded narratives, as well as several shorter tales told by different characters to their interlocutors.²⁴⁰ While many of these stories are concerned with various types of misfortune, there is little in terms of direct content to tie them all together, nor is it always easy to understand exactly why they are told and what they are supposed to mean. Might there be a different sort of red thread connecting them, one that has more to do with their function within the novel than with their explicit subject matter? To answer this question, one might begin by inquiring into who narrates them. The first major story is originally brought to the reader's attention in Chapter 4, after John Ringman has tricked the merchant, Henry Roberts, into

²⁴⁰ The five longer tales concern the evil Goneril (in Chapter 12); the crippled Thomas Fry (19); Colonel John Moredock, the "Indian-hater" (25–27); Charlemont, the gentleman-madman (34); and the ruined candle-maker China Aster (40). The shorter narratives include the tale of the man who refused to think his wife was unfaithful (6); that of the moral old woman of Goshen who did not drink alcohol (24); as well as a poetical eulogy of the press (30).

thinking him an old acquaintance. After having asked the latter whether he, too, is a freemason, and whether he would loan money to a brother in need, Ringman proceeds to tell his story: “In a low, half-suppressed tone, he began it. Judging from his auditor’s expression, it seemed to be a tale of singular interest, involving calamities against which no integrity, no forethought, no energy, no genius, no piety, could guard” (*CM* 21). Even though the reader at this juncture has no idea what this “tale of singular interest” is about, it evidently leads to what Ringman had been hoping for:

At every disclosure, the hearer’s commiseration increased. No sentimental pity. As the story went on, he drew from his wallet a bank note, but after a while, at some still more unhappy revelation, changed it for another, probably of a somewhat larger amount; which, when the story was concluded, with an air studiously disclamatory of alms-giving, he put into the stranger’s hand; who, on his side, with an air studiously disclamatory of alms-taking, put it into his pocket. (*CM* 21)

Put differently, the performative effects of the story—Roberts making not only a donation, but a larger one than he had originally intended—are made familiar before its subject matter. In fact, it is only in Chapter 12 that its sad (but probably false) content is revealed, concerning Ringman and his evil wife, Goneril, who takes his daughter away from him, ruins him and tries to have him committed to a lunatic asylum. What deserves mention is who is doing the telling. The immediate cause of the narration is a disagreement between Roberts and John Truman, the agent from the Black Rapids Coal Company, from whom he has just bought what is likely bogus stock. Whereas the agent holds that misfortune in life is probably deserved and that those who observe the suffering of others tend to overrate its severity, the merchant is more charitably inclined. To argue his case, he first mentions a sick, old miser he has seen aboard (whom Truman will proceed to trick out of \$100 in Chapter 15, and the herb-doctor will convince to buy a box of his “Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator” in Chapter 20), then Black Guinea, but neither example changes his companion’s opinion about the reality of suffering. Finally, he mentions Ringman’s sad story:

Foiled again, the good merchant would not desist, but ventured still a third case, that of the man with the weed, whose story, as narrated by himself, and confirmed and filled out by the testimony of a certain man in a gray coat, whom the merchant had afterwards met, he now proceeded to give; and that, without holding back those particulars disclosed by the second informant, but which delicacy had prevented the unfortunate man himself from touching upon.

But as the good merchant could, perhaps, do better justice to the man than the story, we shall venture to tell it in other words than his, though not to any other effect. (*CM* 59)

In Chapter 12 readers are thus presented with a story first told by someone who corresponds to the first gentleman on Black Guinea's list (Ringman) to Roberts in Chapter 4; then "confirmed and filled out" by someone who corresponds to the second person on the list (the man in gray); then retold by the merchant to someone who corresponds to the third person on the list (Truman); but where the narrator, who does not feel that Roberts does the story justice, finally proceeds to tell it in "other words than his, though not to any other effect." For this reason, assigning ultimate responsibility for the story becomes a tricky task, indeed.

Similar tactics are at work in the narration of many of the novel's other interpolated tales. The story of Colonel Moredock, for example, is told by Charlie Noble to the cosmopolitan, but responsibility for its content is passed on to his father's friend, Judge James Hall. Noble claims to have heard it from him so many times that he knows it by heart:

In every company being called upon to give this history, which none could better do, the judge at last fell into a style so methodic, you would have thought he spoke less to mere auditors than to an invisible amanuensis; seemed talking for the press; very impressive way with him indeed. And I, having an equally impressible memory, think that, upon a pinch, I can render you the judge upon the colonel almost word for word. (*CM* 142)

Later, after the cosmopolitan points out that he does not seem to be drinking his port wine, Noble offers a second digression that he cannot ultimately be held responsible for:

“By-the-way, Frank,” said he, perhaps, or perhaps not, to draw attention from himself, “by-the-way, I saw a good thing the other day; a capital thing; a panegyric on the press. It pleased me so, I got it by heart at two readings. It is a kind of poetry, but in a form which stands in something the same relation to blank verse which that does to rhyme. A sort of free-and-easy-chant with refrains to it. Shall I recite it?” (*CM* 165)

Different sorts of evasive procedures are also involved in the story of Charlemont, told by Goodman to Noble. When asked by the latter whether it is true, the cosmopolitan replies “[o]f course not; it is a story which I told with the purpose of every story-teller—to amuse” (*CM* 187). And when Egbert, acting the part of “Charlie,” tells Goodman, acting the part of “Frank,” the story of China Aster to legitimize his decision not to give him a loan, he introduces it in the following manner:

I will tell you about China Aster. I wish I could do so in my own words, but unhappily the original story-teller here has so tyrannized over me, that it is quite impossible for me to repeat his incidents without sliding into his style. I forewarn you of this, that you may not think me so maudlin as, in some parts, the story would seem to make its narrator. It is too bad that any intellect, especially in so small a matter, should have such power to impose itself upon another, against its best exerted will, too. However, it is satisfaction to know that the main moral, to which all tends, I fully approve. (*CM* 207)

The different stories fall into two categories. Some, like Noble’s panegyric on the press, seem to be told with the explicit attention of diverting the current interlocutor’s attention. Here the fact that *something* is said is more important than what is uttered. Some of the other stories seem to be conveying a specific message, such as “the folly, on both sides, of a friend’s helping a friend” implied by the story of China Aster (*CM* 221). Yet, no matter what category the stories belong to, they are all narrated in such a manner that whoever is doing the telling can feign innocence or pin the responsibility for the content on someone else, if need be; as Noble tells the cosmopolitan after having finished the story of Colonel

Moredock: “There, I have done; have given you, not my story, mind, or my thoughts, but another’s” (CM 155). Gelley therefore concludes that “[s]tories are generated in the course of the encounters, but responsibility for them is evaded, and their significance, their illustrative function, is repeatedly obscured. At the level of narrative voices an elaborate ventriloquism is at work” (“Parasitic Talk” 97). To him, this can be said to constitute “a principle of narrative displacement along a parasitic chain” (“Parasitic Talk” 99). Serres’ concept of the parasitic chain might therefore not only be relevant to the relationships between the various characters in *The Confidence-Man* but can also help explain how the stories told by these characters—more likely than not with the intent of nourishing oneself on somebody else—are constantly being reiterated and modified, meaning that it becomes increasingly difficult to say who is responsible. The only thing I would add to Gelley’s claim is that here the simple parasitic chain has been transformed into a much more complex and convoluted parasitic cascade.

Crucially, at the end of this parasitic cascade is none other than the narrator. Even more important than his tendency of interfering in the retelling of his character’s stories, is his habit of offering various digressions that move readers out of the narrative proper. This can most clearly be seen in Chapters 14, 33, and 44, all bearing titles equally unfalsifiable and devoid of useful information: “Worth the consideration of those to whom it may prove worth considering”; “Which may pass for whatever it may prove to be worth”; and “In which the last three words of the last chapter are made the text of the discourse, which will be sure of receiving more or less attention from those readers who do not skip it,” respectively. Apart from the tautological character of their titles, what these short chapters have in common is that in them, the narrator breaks off from his story of what goes on aboard the *Fidèle* to directly address his readers by means of what Gérard Genette has labeled “commentarial discourse,” where the narrative “interrupts itself to give up its place to another type of discourse” (36–37), thereby bringing its own progression to a standstill. In all three cases, the narrator’s aim in doing so seems to be to clarify something that he has just said that he fears might confuse or annoy people if left uncommented, and in all three, his remarks concern the nature

of works of literature, providing what can perhaps be seen as fragments of a poetics.²⁴¹

Before addressing these chapters and their function within the narrative, the brief story at the beginning of Chapter 13 must be mentioned. This anecdote concerns an unnamed American scholar in London who encounters someone he believes to be a fool, only to learn that it was none other than the great British scientist Sir Humphrey Davy, “almost as great a savan as himself” (*CM* 64). Since the story is only a quarter of a page long and seems to add little to the narrative, it is all too easy to overlook its significance. However, it should be noted that the story differs from the interpolated stories previously referred to in one crucial manner. Whereas all these stories are (ostensibly, at least) told by different characters aboard the *Fidèle*, in this case, neither confidence men nor their victims are involved. As becomes clear from the narrator’s convoluted explanation, there is no doubt it is told *by him, to the reader*:

The above anecdote is given just here by way of an anticipative reminder to such readers as, from the kind of jaunty levity, or what may have passed for such, hitherto for the most part appearing in the man with the travelling-cap [John Truman], may have been tempted into a more or less hasty estimate of him; that such readers, when they find the same person, as they presently will, capable of philosophic and humanitarian discourse—no mere casual sentence or two as heretofore at times, but solidly sustained throughout an almost entire setting; that they may not, like the American savan, be thereupon betrayed into any surprise incompatible with their own good opinion of their previous penetration. (*CM* 64)

I will return to the anecdote and the narrator’s explanation, but for now, I simply want to stress that in combination, they in a sense function as a bridge between the different stories told *in* the novel and the three chapters where the narrator directly addresses the reader.

241 The pieces of this potential poetics should not necessarily be ascribed to Melville himself. As Dimock has rightly claimed, due to the constant slippages of meaning and inconsistencies in and between the meta-literary chapters, organizing the pieces into a coherent whole is far from easy: “Melville’ is simply not available for our enlightenment. Or rather, he is too available. He appears in too many shades and forms of ideas. He cancels himself out . . . in his very plenitude of utterance. He is at once manifest and unaccountable” (*Empire* 206–7).

The first of the latter is occasioned by the ending of Chapter 13, where the good merchant, who up to this point has come across as cheerful and full of faith in others, proves that he is capable of distrust, after all. Having had several glasses of wine in the company of Truman, he suddenly begins to question whether “wine or confidence [can] percolate down through all the stony strata of hard considerations, and drop warmly and ruddily into the cold cave of truth?” (*CM* 67). This reaction seems to come as a surprise both to the merchant himself, as well as his present companion, causing Roberts to withdraw “with the air of one, mortified at having been tempted by his own honest goodness, accidentally stimulated into making mad disclosures—to himself as to another—of the queer, unaccountable caprices of his natural heart” (*CM* 68). It is at this juncture the narrator takes the opportunity to address the question of consistency, and more specifically whether this is something one should expect from characters found in works of literature. As he puts it in Chapter 14, which he opens by way of an analeptic reference to the previous chapter’s “anticipative reminder” to readers not to judge Truman too hastily:

As the last chapter was begun with a reminder looking forwards, so the present must consist of one glancing backwards.

To some, it may raise a degree of surprise that one so full of confidence, as the merchant has throughout shown himself, up to the moment of his late sudden impulsiveness, should, in that instance, have betrayed such a depth of discontent. He may be thought inconsistent, and even so he is. But for this, is the author to be blamed? (*CM* 69)²⁴²

Whereas the narrator thus freely admits to the inconsistency of the merchant’s behavior, he refuses to consider this a shortcoming of the author. If it is a shortcoming, it is one resulting from the endless, inventive inconsistency of life; for, as he asks, “is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent

²⁴² Another occasion where the narrator makes oblique references to his own discourse can be found in Chapter 33, which he ends by referring his readers back to Chapter 14: “all such readers as may think they perceive something inharmonious between the boisterous hilarity of the cosmopolitan with the bristling cynic, and his restrained good-nature with the boon-companion, are now referred to that chapter where some similar apparent inconsistency in another character is, on general principles, modestly endeavored to be apologized for” (*CM* 183).

character is a *rara avis*?" (CM 69). Or, as he then notes: "If reason be judge, no writer has produced such inconsistent characters as nature herself has. It must call for no small sagacity in a reader unerringly to discriminate in a novel between the inconsistencies of conception and those of life" (CM 70).

Moving on to "Which may pass for whatever it may prove to be worth," the shortest of the three chapters, it is occasioned by what happens prior to Goodman's offer to tell Noble the story of Charlemont, namely the latter's (seeming) transformation into a new shape and the cosmopolitan's (seeming) use of magic to transform him back again. Chapter 33 opens as follows:

But ere be given the rather grave story of Charlemont, a reply must in civility be made to a certain voice which methinks I hear, that, in view of past chapters, and more particularly the last, where certain antics appear, exclaims: How unreal all this is! Who did ever dress or act like your cosmopolitan? (CM 182)

This "certain voice" that the narrator thinks he hears is the voice of the critical reader who not only expects consistency from characters in works of literature, but also what is termed a "severe fidelity to real life" (CM 182). As a reply to this imagined critical voice, the narrator highlights that he finds it strange that anyone sufficiently in need of diversion from quotidian existence to be willing to spend time reading a book, should expect such "a work of amusement" to correspond closely to the "real life" the book was meant to offer refuge from (CM 182). As opposed to this type of reader, the narrator favors those that are willing to "sit down to a work of amusement tolerantly as they sit at a play, and with much the same expectations and feelings" (CM 182). According to the narrator, it is for such readers as these that his narrative is intended: "If, then, something is to be pardoned to well-meant endeavor, surely a little is to be allowed to that writer who, in all his scenes, does but seek to minister to what, as he understands it, is the implied wish of the more indulgent lovers of entertainment" (CM 183).

Finally, Chapter 44 aims to discuss the expression "QUITE AN ORIGINAL," which William Cream's friends had all thought a fitting description of the cosmopolitan. But, as the narrator points out, the notion of originality is problematic because most often, it is invoked by

those with the least experience in life: “Certainly, the sense of originality exists at its highest in an infant, and probably at its lowest in him who has completed the circle of the sciences” (CM 238). Hence, the more one has seen, the less likely one is to consider anything original. The chapter, then, can be understood as an attempt to decide whether Goodman truly deserves this epithet or not. If he does, the narrator indicates that this would mean that he belongs to a *very* select category of literary characters:

As for original characters in fiction, a grateful reader will, on meeting with one, keep the anniversary of that day. True, we sometimes hear of an author who, at one creation, produces some two or three score such characters; it may be possible. But they can hardly be original in the sense that Hamlet is, or Don Quixote, or Milton’s Satan. That is to say, they are not, in a thorough sense, original at all. They are novel, or singular, or striking, or captivating, or all four at once. (CM 238)

According to the narrator, then, true originals must be distinguished from characters that are merely “singular.” To substantiate this claim, he discusses how authors come to create characters that belong to either of the two categories:

For much the same reason that there is but one planet to one orbit, so can there be but one original character to one work of invention. Two would conflict to chaos. In this view, to say that there are more than one to a book, is a good presumption there is none at all. But for new, singular, striking, odd, eccentric, and all sorts of entertaining and instructive characters, a good fiction may be full of them. (CM 239)

What defines true originals is not only how rare they are, and how hard they are to create—in order to create “singular” characters, an author “must have seen much, and seen through much: to produce but one original character, he must have had much luck” (CM 239)—but also their effect on their surroundings: “the original character, essentially such, is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it—everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it (mark how it is with Hamlet),” causing “an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things” (CM 239). That is to say, to the

narrator, characters are only truly original insofar as they bring a world into being; as Branka Arsić puts it, “they imply a new life that hasn’t yet been formed. . . . Originals are formless life, impersonal atmospheres, figures without form” (*Passive* 7).²⁴³

How should these three digressive chapters, as well as of the narrator’s preliminary address to the reader in Chapter 13, be understood? First, there is a marked discrepancy between the form and the content of what is said, where the form casts doubt upon the validity of the message that is seemingly conveyed. The anecdote of the American savan, for example, puts forward the simple idea that readers should avoid judging literary characters too hastily. However, given the narrator’s *modus operandi* in the rest of the novel, one might ask why would he bother breaking off from his narrative if all he wanted to convey was something as commonsensical as this? With the confidence men’s tactics of “idle talk” in mind, and considering that the intricate addendum to the story is slightly longer, as well as a lot less straightforward than the actual anecdote it comments upon, one might begin suspecting that the story of the American savan has been told as little more than an excuse for the narrator to directly address the readers of *The Confidence-Man*. What the narrator does here is in many ways reminiscent of what the confidence men do to their intended victims. In both cases, it is a question of making sure that a channel of transmission is set up between the sender (confidence men/the narrator) and the intended receptor (potential victim/the reader), and then that it remains operative through the continual flow of (more or less) “idle” words, even though it is difficult to tell what exactly they are meant to convey. Here as in the rest of the novel, the fact that communication is going on might be more important than *what* is said.

A similar discrepancy between form and content also informs Chapter 14, where the narrator, as Deleuze puts it, claims “the rights of a superior irrationalism” for authors (81). Although the chapter seems to offer the vitalistic argument that authors who embrace multiplicity and change, rather than seeking too strictly to adhere to a limiting

²⁴³ For a productive analysis that applies the distinction between singular and original characters to Melville’s *oeuvre*, see Deleuze (81–84).

consistency, may be the ones that are truer to nature, it would be hard to claim that this is its ultimate message. Among other things, this is due to the way the narrator keeps digressing, adding layer upon layer of information—in the space of little more than two pages, he touches upon such issues as the resistance to newness found in scientific communities, as exemplified by the skepticism originally shown by British naturalists toward the Australian duck-billed beaver; different aspects of the psychological novel; the status of various quasi-sciences; and the finer points of human nature. In so doing, he effectively blocks any attempt to narrow down the “true” meaning of the chapter. What exactly the narrator is trying to tell his readers therefore remains just as unclear as his given reasons for breaking off from the story, which may or may not be believable. Hence, it is difficult to know whether he goes on talking because he has something specific to say, or simply to keep the words flowing. The feeling that the latter may be the case does not diminish upon reaching the end of the chapter, where it is almost as if the narrator suddenly realizes that he is, in fact, rambling, and somewhat reluctantly decides to return to the narrative proper: “But enough has been said by way of apology for whatever may have seemed amiss or obscure in the character of the merchant; so nothing remains but to turn to our comedy or, rather, to pass from the comedy of thought to that of action” (CM 71).

A similar tactic of deferral can also be found at work in Chapter 44, where the narrator offers an oblique non-answer to the question of whether Goodman is an original literary character in the strict sense of the word. On the one hand, he indicates that his aim has been to show that the question should be answered in the negative—in other words, that Goodman is not original in the same sense as Don Quixote, Hamlet or Milton’s Satan—but, on the other, this conclusion is formulated in a manner that draws its own validity into doubt, indicating that perhaps the cosmopolitan does qualify, after all. Not only does the narrator thus avoid answering his own question, but he also explicitly uses the uncertainty he has created as an excuse to return to his narrative:

In the endeavor to show, if possible, the impropriety of the phrase, *Quite an Original*, as applied by the barber’s friends, we have, at unawares, been led into a dissertation bordering upon the prosy, perhaps upon the smoky. If so, the best

use the smoke can be turned to, will be, by retiring under cover of it, in good trim as may be to the story. (*CM* 239)

In other words, the narrator seems to love the sound of his own voice no less than his parasite-like characters love their own “idle talk,” manipulating his readers much like the confidence men cozen their victims.

For the longest time these manipulative attempts were entirely unsuccessful. Upon its publication in 1857, *The Confidence-Man* was a resounding failure, commercially as well as critically, and so it remained for almost one hundred years. Even after the “Melville Revival” of the 1920s, there was a long period where it was hardly read, and it was only with Elizabeth S. Foster’s 1954 critical Hendricks House edition that the tide really started turning. Today, the novel is among Melville’s most popular works, generating a steady abundance of critical attempts to come to terms with the peculiar noisiness of the floating world of the *Fidèle*. Accordingly, Jim Lewis might be onto something when he makes the following claim:

The Confidence Man is wasteful, ornery and unkempt: the book is a barnacle, a stubborn and inert parasite on the hull of the great, gliding culture above it, fastened there by a drowning man. You can’t outsmart it, you can’t lose it, you can’t even criticize it; it seems to defy every attempt at understanding. It takes you as the confidence man takes his victims: with a patience and tenacity that will wear you down if it can’t win you over. (“Melville”)

If it is indeed a stubborn parasitic growth on American culture, the still ongoing attempts to understand and come to terms with its strangeness prove that parasites sometimes function as generators of newness. To finally address *The Confidence-Man*’s famous last sentence, uttered by the narrator after the cosmopolitan has extinguished the last lamp in the cabin and “kindly” led his last companion, the old man with whom he discussed Ecclesiasticus, into the ensuing darkness: “Something further may follow of this Masquerade” (*CM* 251). If the figure of the parasite is proof of anything, it is that something surely will; in Serres’ words: “A microscopic parasite can be introduced into an equilibrated pathological environment, or a good-sized parasite into an economically stable system, or a noisy parasite into a dialogical message; in any case a (hi)story will follow” (*Parasite* 182–83).

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

It is now time to return to the claims that were made about Herman Melville's writings in Chapter 1. It was, for example, claimed that his texts are filled with characters and narrators who attempt to feed off others. That this is truly the case should by now be clear. In fact, in Melville's texts, parasitical relations are often so omnipresent that Ishmael's question might be slightly rewritten. Instead of asking "Cannibals? who is not a cannibal?" (*MD* 300), one could ask "Parasites? Who is not a parasite?" Just as Ishmael holds that cannibalistic traits can be found in civilized Westerners, no less than in unenlightened savages, it could also be argued that almost everybody in Melville has parasitic traits—the rich no less than the poor; the productive no less than the idle. The world he creates for his readers is one where no one is totally independent, and where, to some degree or another, the hospitality of others is always threatening to put the recipients in debt. This even holds for proud Ahab, who has no recourse but to ask the *Pequod's* carpenter for help in shaping him a new whalebone leg after he damages his old one: "Here I am, proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air; and I'm down in the whole world's book" (*MD* 471–72).

Thus, what Melville indicates is that, as much as one might dream of total independence, dependency upon others—be it for a whalebone leg or for a free meal to sate one's hunger—is everywhere. To arrive at a better understanding of his work, this ubiquity of sponging is something scholars should address in a much more thorough and extensive manner than has hitherto been done. This book is only a step toward this objective, and it is to be hoped that others will further explore the issues analyzed herein, be it through the conceptual figure of the parasite or by other means.

Chapter 1 also made the claim that the manifestations of parasitism in Melville's writings are not static, but that they gradually thicken and become more complex over time. This process would no doubt have appeared differently if other works than *Typee*, "Bartleby," "Jimmy Rose" and *The Confidence-Man* had been analyzed, but in summary, we have seen how Melville started out his career by creating a parasitic character in search of free meals and an easy life of leisure. Nevertheless, when Tommo's dream comes true, he is ultimately unable truly to enjoy his privileges. His unwillingness to become a proper member of the community that hosts him, finally means that he must give up his pleasant life of "plenty and repose" in the valley of the Typees. In "Bartleby," readers encounter a small Wall-Street microcosm where a limited cast of characters sponge on each other, at least to a certain degree and part of the time, and where everything seems to revolve around the question of consumption—if not for Bartleby, at least for the narrator. Just like "Bartleby," "Jimmy Rose" features a first-person narrator with parasitic traits of his own, who is telling the story of a parasite-like character—the primary difference being that while Bartleby is a thoroughly paradoxical sponger who prefers to abstain from food, Jimmy Rose more obviously belongs to the lineage of the classical literary parasite. Finally, in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville gave shape to a chaotic, floating system where almost everybody in one way or another seems to be out to feed upon the resources of others, in the process producing an abundance of "idle talk" not unlike that which the narrator is serving his readers. As I have been suggesting, one way of framing this shift is through Serres' concepts of the parasitic chain and cascade. The evolution traced in this study can be said to go from a single parasite to a parasitic chain, to a full-blown parasitic cascade made up of several intertwining chains constantly overlapping, diverging, and folding into each other.

As a corollary, some comments may also be offered regarding the relationships between the various systems and the foreign bodies that come to inhabit them encountered in these texts, although less so in "Jimmy Rose" than in the others. In *Typee*, the parasitic Tommo is clearly an exception from the perspective of the system. More precisely, he is an exception

the system wants to incorporate through integrating him into Typeean society, but who ultimately resists being assimilated. In “Bartleby,” the narrator seems to subscribe to a similar view, treating the scrivener as a troubling anomaly that he variously tries to incorporate and expel. So strong is the fascination of this anomaly that it is only with his retelling of Bartleby’s life and death that he finally manages to explain it away. From the lawyer’s perspective, he can then continue believing that the parasitic is the exception, but this happens from a vantage point which is not only high up on the trophic chain, but also relatively sheltered and more stable than *laissez-faire* capitalism, due to the way capitalist dynamics and aristocratic privileges converge in his position as Master of Chancery. However, the narrative undermines this view by indicating that the parasitic is not only present in Bartleby, who might in the end be the least parasitic character in the story, but, to a larger or smaller degree, in everybody around the narrator, himself not excluded.

Thus, what begins to appear as less certain is the idea that the parasite is an exception, that it is something that does not properly belong to the system, something that enters it under false pretenses and threatens to destroy its stability. In *The Confidence-Man*, this grain of doubt has grown to near certainty. The vision of the novel is that of the system found aboard the *Fidèle* as made up of nothing but parasitic elements—strangers and “strangers still more strange” (CM 8)—feeding on each other. What the book hints at is that these foreign bodies are the elementary parts that make up the system in the first place; if it were possible to exclude them all, there would most likely be no system left. Thus, corresponding to the shift from the single parasite in *Typee* to the cascade of parasites in *The Confidence-Man* is an insight that gradually makes it more and more difficult to treat the parasite as an exception to some general rule, as a secondary deviation that society could easily do without; to repeat the third epigraph to Chapter 1: “There is no system without parasites. This constant is a law” (Serres, *Parasite* 12).

Finally, a claim from Chapter 2 must be addressed. During the discussion of *Bleak House*, I asserted that Melville’s parasites are usually highly dissimilar from those of his great British contemporary, and by now this difference should be clear. Just like many of the most important nineteenth

century realists and naturalists, Dickens for the most part operates with a simple dichotomy between productive and unproductive. To him, characters belonging to the second category should clearly be condemned, and for the reader to be able to do so, his immoral, selfish parasites are easily recognizable in their depravity. The irony, of course, is that they are also much more fascinating characters than his heroes, meaning that if they were to be expelled from his narratives, the Dickensian system would end up as a bland one, indeed. Such simple dichotomies are not for Melville, whose parasites are usually difficult to judge in a clear and unambiguous manner. And since many of them combine the positive and inventive with the dependent and base, it is often far from easy to figure out how to understand them, or whether to sympathize with them or not. In the end, not even a minor character like Kooloo is presented in quite as negative a manner as my discussion of *Omo* in Chapter 1 might indicate—after having been dumped and increasingly ignored by the youth, Typee has to grudgingly admit that “[a]fter several experiences like this, I began to entertain a sort of respect for Kooloo, as quite a man of the world” (O 158).

Another difference between Melville and Dickens is that, to the latter, characters are either parasites or they are not; there is little middle ground and few shades of gray. What is entirely lost from view in *Bleak House* is the important question of perspective addressed in the discussion of Shakespeare’s *King Richard II*, namely that one must always take into consideration who is speaking when others are accused of parasitic behavior. That something similar had been realized by Melville becomes evident in his final work of prose, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, posthumously published in 1924. This is not the occasion for a thorough reading of the tale of the handsome and popular title character, who is impressed into service as a foretopman aboard the British man-of-war *H.M.S. Bellipotent* in 1797. Instead, I want to offer some brief remarks on the novella’s ending, just after Billy has been executed after having struck and killed the ship’s Master-at-arms, John Claggart, who had wrongfully accused him of planning a mutiny. From the perspective of this book, the most interesting aspect of the story is the afterlife of the incident, which led to Claggart and Billy’s deaths, as recollected by the narrator:

Some few weeks after the execution, among other matters under the head of “News from the Mediterranean,” there appeared in a naval chronicle of the time, an authorized weekly publication, an account of the affair. It was doubtless for the most part written in good faith, though the medium, partly rumor, through which the facts must have reached the writer served to deflect and in part falsify them. (*BB* 70)

This naval chronicle presents what will come to stand as the official version of the events leading up to Billy’s execution. The account wrongly claims that after Claggart had discovered his plotting and notified the captain, he “was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn sheath knife of Budd” (*BB* 70). The chronicle then offers the following description of Billy’s supposed background, which—it is strongly indicated—helps explain his violent actions:

The deed and the implement employed sufficiently suggest that though mustered into the service under an English name the assassin was no Englishman, but one of those aliens adopting English cognomens whom the present extraordinary necessities of the service have caused to be admitted into it in considerable numbers. (*BB* 70)

In other words, Billy is presented as an “alien,” a foreign body who has infiltrated the British navy to damage it from within. Even though the word “parasite” is not used here, this type of discourse closely resembles that which near the end of Melville’s life was becoming increasingly common among anti-Semites, and which would about fifty years later help legitimate the Holocaust in Germany: the idea of the Jew as a damaging parasite threatening to destroy the social body. Claggart, on the other hand, is portrayed as the incarnation of patriotism and responsibility: “His function was a responsible one, at once onerous and thankless; and his fidelity in it the greater because of his strong patriotic impulse” (*BB* 70). For all patriotic citizens reading this brief report, it would have been a relief to learn that “[t]he criminal paid the penalty of his crime. The promptitude of the punishment has proved salutary. Nothing amiss is now apprehended aboard H.M.S. *Bellipotent*” (*BB* 70). The damaging foreign body having been effectively eradicated, the system is therefore

free to return to its normal state—or so runs the official story—with this incident quickly fading from the public’s memory. As the narrator puts it: “The above, appearing in a publication now long ago superannuated and forgotten, is all that hitherto has stood in human record to attest what manner of men respectively were John Claggart and Billy Budd” (*BB* 70).

That is, it would have faded entirely from the public’s memory, were it not for the fact that a counter-narrative exists. While not powerful enough to challenge the official version of the incident, it is still the one that is allowed to conclude *Billy Budd, Sailor*. This is the poem “Billy in the Darbies,” said to have “found rude utterance from another foretopman, . . . gifted, as some sailors are, with an artless *poetic* temperament” (*BB* 71; emphasis in the original). Offering a compassionate look at Billy’s last hours, it is very different from the dehumanizing, official discourse of the naval chronicle. That the narrator’s own sympathies are not to be found with the latter is obvious in light of the poem’s ending, where Billy addresses his guard, asking him to ease his handcuffs “at the wrist,/ And roll me over fair!/ I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist” (*BB* 72). Here it becomes clear that Melville, too, must have felt some of the skepticism toward official statements about who should be considered parasitical foreign bodies, as expressed by Shakespeare in *King Richard II*. Just as Melville makes his proper entry on the literary scene with Tommo’s elegy for (free) meals, he makes his final bow with the narrator of *Billy Budd* enjoining readers not to be too hasty in condemning others as damaging foreign bodies. The parasite thus seems to have been there with him from the beginning of his career and to the very end.

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Melvillean Parasites addresses an aspect of Herman Melville's authorship largely overlooked by previous scholars: the abundance of narrators and characters in his writings in search of food—an aim they typically pursue through sponging off the people they encounter. Deploying the conceptual figure of the parasite as its primary analytical tool, the book interprets how the dream of a free meal plays out and is given literary form in *Typee* (1846), “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853), “Jimmy Rose” (1855), and *The Confidence-Man* (1857). In so doing, *Melvillean Parasites* aims to explain how Melville's engagement with ethico-political issues concerning nourishment, dependency upon others, hospitality, and responsibility toward strangers, evolved and changed over time. Compared to the tendency of dehumanizing the parasite found in many of his contemporaries, the book claims that what sets him apart, is his insight into the unavoidable parasitic tendencies of us all: Herman Melville—patron saint of the parasite.

Melvillean Parasites is intended for scholars, students, and general readers with an interest in the concept of the parasite, as well as Herman Melville's authorship, American literature, and 19th century studies in general.

Anders M. Gullestad is Associate Professor at the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies at the University of Bergen.

“Gullestad's very strong book stands as a novel and important contribution to Melville scholarship. In connecting questions raised by concepts such as friendship, relationality, welcoming, exploiting, and laboring into a single question—that of parasitism—it not only casts new light on how we understand those concepts, but also on what appears to be Melville's own theory of the phenomenon of parasitism.”

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