

## The Notion of Heroism Reflected in Herman Melville's *Pierre, Or the Ambiguities*

Kaoru Sugai Katsuta

"Hamlet and Lear are gay," declares William Butler Yeats in a famous poem called "Lapis Lazuli" (1938). These tragic heroes at least gain full self-knowledge which compensates for their total deprivation. ('Heaven blazing into the head', we are told, and 'Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.') Hamlet, who can bring himself to the intended revenge only after his mother is irrevocably removed beyond his reach, understands the cause of his misgivings; he has been sexually attracted toward the queen and has been (subconsciously, of course) afraid that he might possess her if he disposes of his uncle. Lear becomes able to view himself from viewpoints other than those of a king and of a father after he is initiated, rather in a cruel way, by the omniscient Fool. The absence of such redeeming self-knowledge precisely defines the quality of Ferdinand's plight in *The Duchess of Malfi*. He does not understand, for example, why he pretends madness toward the object of his revenge; his twin sister is a fragile woman, not a powerful king, who is not likely to counteract him even if he does not take such a precaution. Ferdinand is perplexed at his own tendency to delay the act of revenge, devising the superfluous torments of fake corpses and madmen's orgy.

Thus, in a pre-modern tragedy, self-awareness is a part of a person's achievement of a heroic status. Modern writers sometimes use this device, too. Henry James, for example, defines tragic grandeur as a person's ability to analyze his situation, disinterestedly and un sentimentally, while he adopts himself perpetually to the disciplines of a slow process of disintegration. The 'little' Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima* is praised for his 'lucidity, composure and good-humour' while he is undergoing a purgatory experience. Another great American writer, Herman Melville, is also concerned with the achievement of heroism in his *Pierre, Or the Ambiguities* (1852). The story takes the form of an 'initiation' process of a unworldly young man into an adult life—from an unthinking innocence to an embittered disillusionment and, ultimately, an unheroic death. Here, the hero's status dwindles from, say, Lear's rage against the indifferent cosmic forces to a sullen and impotent anger of a spoiled youth at everything which conspires to make things hard for him. Likewise, the evil against which the hero wages a war is not a cosmic conflict of medieval and modern Natures. Nor the evil is given a tangible shape of an Iago, a Goneril, or even a Moby-Dick. It is petty convention of the world and the dehumanizing materialism of an urban life. The hero Pierre is entrapped in the discrepancy

between the menace of a powerful *amor* and the necessity of pursuing an unqualified virtue. Much of the hero's trouble arises from his refusal to compromise with existence which, the author implies, grown-up people have to accept as an inescapable condition of life. The tragedy, then, figured here is essentially that of a young man who is doomed because he denies an aspect of truth and, along with it, an opportunity of maturity.

There are other things which complicate Pierre's problem. Ironically, in the name of the right which he proposes to stand by, Pierre does not hesitate to employ certain corrupted guiles. Because of this falsity involved, it is somewhat difficult to see anything positive in his undertaking beyond his ultimate goal—the championing of Isabel. Melville himself does almost nothing to present his hero as a very loveable character. Because of the limitation in Pierre's vision, Melville enters into the story as a relentlessly ironic and lucid narrator—observer, offering a series of analyses of Pierre's motives. Melville stands somewhat aloof from his hero's ordeal. But Melville is by no means detached from Pierre's situation. On the contrary, he is very angry. He is angry at the cold reception of his masterpiece *Moby Dick* which precedes this novel by the uncomprehending world. He is angry at the prospect of his own reputation as an author of juvenile adventure narrative. And at the silver domestic cord pulling a writer away from free play of mind. And, finally, he is impatient at the inadequacy of his own immature protagonist.

Thus, Melville is emotionally involved to a considerable extent with Pierre; the way of involvement, though, is not that which we usually expect from a writer; yet, Pierre is obviously not the object of amused contempt in the way Vanderbank, for example, in *The Awkward Age* is dismissed by the author Henry James. Perhaps Melville's strangely personal and ambiguous attitude toward Pierre has something to do with his assumption of a hero which he tries to convey in this novel. The primary purpose of my paper, then, is to examine Melville's idea on heroism.

The episodes which take place in Saddle Meadows, the family seat of the Glendinnings, are described in a series of rather sickeningly beautiful clichés and are, accordingly, meant to imply how blind Pierre has been before his fortunate fall. He is as happy, healthy, and mindless as a young colt is and his mother who is as magnificently vulgar as she is magnificently heartless treats him exactly like a docile, domesticated animal. As an only child, he is in an undisputed possession of what had belonged to his deceased father—property, a prestigious name, and a sensual widow of a mother. Pierre's only cause of discontent is that Mrs. Glendinning does not easily give her permission to his intended nuptial. Pierre's vague, youthful idealism finds an expression in chivalry. (Pierre, we are told, “glared round for some insulted good cause to defend.”)

Pierre finds “some insulted good cause” in a totally unexpected way and it is not exactly what he wishes it to be. (Throughout the novel, the parallel to Hamlet is clear. Like Hamlet who can no longer believe single-mindedly in the righteousness of the revenge, Pierre is troubled with misgivings which partly arise from the guilt toward his mother and fiancée, but mostly from his failure to grasp, with any certainty, what is going on in his own mind. He reluctantly takes up the cause and indulges in self-pity. “The time is

out of joint—Oh cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!") Isabel's appearance has an educational significance; it completely shatters the various illusions he has cultivated. Chief among these illusions is the questionable nature of the tie between himself and his mother. Despite their seemingly innocent role—playing, the sexual attraction between the two is sufficiently recognizable. Pierre is always in need of a powerful maternal figure—a darkly mysterious female. He is unsatisfied with the ethereal, other—worldly being of his fiancée, Lucy, who is exactly the opposite of Mrs. Glendinning and who, one suspects, has no real power to engage his stronger emotions. He sublimates his discontent in his imagined unqualification as Lucy's suitor:

I to wed this heavenly fleece? Methinks one husbandly embrace would break her airy zone, and she exhale upward to that heaven whence she hath hither come, condensed to mortal sight. It cannot be; I am of heavy earth, and she of airy light. By heaven, but marriage is an impious thing!<sup>(1)</sup>

At one point, Pierre goes into Lucy's bedroom and emerges without violating its virginal sanctity. From such a passage, it is quite clear that he is not physically attracted to an unearthly woman. Later, the spiritual incest between mother and son is vicariously consummated by Pierre and his alleged sister, another motherly figure. Through this experience, Pierre comes to know something of his obscure appetite, but he seems to remain unaware of its fuller implication to the last. (Doesn't he talk to himself in a low dungeon of the city prison, "Nor book, nor author of the book, hath any sequel. . . It is ambiguous still.>") Thus, the unhealthy sexuality becomes an index to Pierre's innermost mystery of his mind—a riddle which he fails to solve.

There are other illusions, however, which are exposed by the impact of Isabel's appearance in Pierre's life. One is the true nature of Mrs. Glendinning's maternal love. She sees him, Pierre comes to understand, not as an independent personality but as an extension of herself. Her love is, in this respect, really a self—love. ("before my glass she stands, —pride's priestess—and to her mirrored image, not to me, she offers up her offerings of kisses.") As such, his mother does not recognize the autonomy of his imagination; indeed, she is a woman who makes herself felt by her lack of imagination. On the moment his slightest act of self—assertion does not conform to her own purposes, Pierre is deprived of the illusion of his freedom.

Pierre's painful education does not stop here; he further learns about the unspiritual nature of the Christianity which he has hitherto accepted. At one point, he desperately seeks an advice on how to behave from Reverend Falsgrave and finds the minister exasperatingly evasive. Pierre's subsequent action, in one way, can be interpreted as his effort to revitalize the codified religion of which the minister is a representative. Mr. Falsgrave's equivocal nature is fully expressed in his appearance; one cannot know whether he is young or old; he looks like both. Mr. Falsgrave represents one type of compromise with existence. He has long come to terms with this world where pure virtue which Pierre

seeks is neither practicable nor desirable. He thinks of ethical choice in terms of personal security. He can drop people whom he is supposed to guide completely on the moment they begin to make onerous demands. With Plotinus Plinlimmon who later comes across Pierre, Mr. Falsgrave more or less adopts the pose of a cynical epicurian which is his defense mechanism in the world.

Thus, only "enlightened" self-interest prevails in this world and people in it are more or less predatory. Hypocrisy and disguise, Pierre learns, cover the worst kinds of desire in a seemingly peaceful Saddle Meadows genteel society. At this point, Pierre understands the heartlessness and hypocrisy in the conventional morality and religion, and, like Hamlet, he begins to pierce through appearances;

Henceforth I will know nothing but Truth; glad Truth, or sad Truth; I will know what *is*, and do what my deepest angel dictates.<sup>(2)</sup>

However, people are comfortable with appearances and do not wish to be informed of the reality. People resent any such attempts. That is why the attempts of the long line of idealists including Christ, Hamlet, and the faceless hero in *The Stranger* are always doomed to a failure. Moreover, what Pierre relies upon is his inexperienced and undisciplined intuition. An intuitive knowledge is valid only as long as the perception is clear. As we see later, Pierre's perception is perpetually distorted. As such, he is still a victim of new kinds of illusions.

The championing of Isable is, of course, morally a right thing to do. But Pierre is never concerned with the means with which he achieves his supreme goal—to expose the world's lies through his symbolic protest. Almost immediately he finds the cause, Pierre confounds the championing of Isabel with his ultimate objective. To some extent, his logic allows for justification. Given the character of Mrs. Glendinning, for example, who is obsessed with the public image of her family, she might have violently objected against the open avowal of Isabel. But had Pierre straightened matters out at this early stage, he would not have falsely presented a moral problem to the world. Again and again, Pierre is given an opportunity to confess, and he always persuades himself into the desirability of sparing his mother's feeling and of maintaining the good reputation of his father. It is at such an occasion that we become uneasily aware of his false evasiveness and begin questioning the moral quality of this apostle of the absolute.

Melville gives us an invaluable comment on the psychological make-up of his hero:

. . . thoroughly did his infallible presentiments paint his mother's character to him, as operated upon and disclosed in all those fiercer traits,—hitherto held in abeyance by the mere chance and felicity of circumstances,— . . . indeed there was a reserved strength and masculinenss in the character of his mother, from which on all these points Pierre had every thing to dread.<sup>(3)</sup>

Thus, Pierre's decision not to confide in his mother comes from his fear of her. He is likewise secretive toward Lucy and we learn that his motive in this respect is no less shabby:

... To her, above all others, would he now uncover his father's tomb, and bid her behold from what vile attainings he himself had sprung? So Pierre turned round and tied Lucy to the same stake which must hold himself. . . <sup>(4)</sup>

As this passage clearly indicates, Pierre's basis of conduct is tainted by certain worldly considerations; vanity and fear are in his mind and together decide his subsequent actions. At this point, Pierre has almost no insight into the working of his own mind. Around his emotional basis of judgement, Pierre busily clusters some rationalizations to eluminate his guilt. But, of course, this does not work; his imagination and conscience repeatedly threaten to disrupt his barely sustained self—deception. Thus, Pierre is culpable in two aspects. For one thing, he is insensitive to the anguish which he causes in the minds of those he loves. On the other hand, he deceives himself in believing that this is the only possible means to make an extraordinary act of loving—kindness; he becomes another hypocrite. He put himself into an impossible position to be fully humane by depriving himself of any humanely feelings. ('The heart! the heart! 'tis God's anointed; let me pursue the heart!') The book is full of the ironical references to Pierre's pathetic efforts of self—deception. At one point, he shrinks from the implications of his behavior. ('as yet, he could not bear the thought of Lucy, because the very resolution that promised balm to Isabel obscurely involved the everlasting peace of Lucy'.) But the recognition does come, regardless of his resistance. What delays the recognition is Pierre's passion which distorts his clear perception of the true relationship between himself and Isabel.

Isabel, who is often associated with "an almost impenetrable blackness", represents the encroachment of sensuality which obscures human consciousness.<sup>(5)</sup> Late in the story, when Pierre begins to understand the incestuous passion which ties him to her, she jerks him back from the clear self—awareness into the all—consuming and self—absorbed sensual gratification. Isabel, we are told, has an 'imperial' appearance and, as the story advances, she throws away her mask of humility and increasingly becomes like a dangerous personification of Pride. What she represents, then, is what the religious says 'passion' which disrupts the clear stream of human consciousness and its components are sexual passion and pride. Thus, Isabel figures the antithesis of civilized nature and therefore is a threat to Pierre's moral self—awareness. But her destructiveness is inseparably mixed up with her charm and is all the more dangerous to the victim. By the mere fact that association with Isabel happens to involve an exposure of the world's lies, she originally seems to Pierre the irruption of the divine order into the natural. It, traditionally we are told, pierces through the apperances, exposing to view the reality that lies beneath—the real identities constituting the natural order; and by the sheer truth of its revelation commands the obedience of those who have received it. Something like this is the enthusiastic interpretation of Pierre's. Thus, Lucy comes to represent all ordinary human attachments in

his mind and Isabel comes to represent transcendental values. Lucy becomes man's earth-bound vision. Isabel becomes man's heaven-aspiring tendency. "Lucy or God?" is, then, his impossible alternatives.

The life at the desolate rooms at The Church of the Apostles initiates Pierre further into the adult life. There are people who come in terms with imperfect earthly conditions by adopting evasive strategies. Mr. Falsgrave has been one of them. There is Charlie Millthorpe, Pierre's childhood friend. He is a flamboyant egoist who wishes to show to the world that he despises it; but he is worldly enough to know how to get along with it; in fact, he is shallow but good-natured and everybody likes him if not respect him. Then there is Plotinus Plinlimmon, the author of "Chronometricals and Horologicals", a pamphlet which seems to offer a solution to the anxiety of human existence but in fact merely affirms the relativity of the world. According to his doctrine, God himself does not expect the fallible human being to practise the absolute virtue; so it is wise to let the insolvable alone; in the mean while, one can practise small acts of personal charity. It emphasizes the importance of personal security and Plinlimmon himself seems to prefer personal comfort to the betterment of human lot. Whatever truth he has grasped, he has no intention of communicating his knowledge to the world and retreats into an inscrutable silence. Plinlimmon's complete lack of interest in this world is symbolized in the total absence of family ties. His figure is associated in Pierre's mind with God in His eternal repose and his face seems to mock Pierre in his struggle with the relativity of the world.

By the time Pierre comes to the town, Pierre's idea of heroism has changed from Christ-like altruism to pagan hedonism. He is writing a book which is beyond his capacity. He must contend with his sordid circumstances; poverty, hunger, and his too easily bruised masculine ego. Characteristically, he starts from an unexamined emotional response to reality; he accepts the tremendous sway Isabel has over his mind and body. Did not the gods also commit incest? He asks himself. If he has incestuous tendency within himself, be that his guide. By violating this last social taboo, he can achieve a god-like narcissism:

Call me brother no more! [Pierre tells Isabel] How knowest I am thy brother? Did thy mother tell thee? Did my father say so to me?—I am Pierre, and thou Isabel, wide brother and sister in the common humanity,—no more. For the rest, let the gods look after their own combustibles. If they have put powder—casks in me—let them look to it!<sup>(6)</sup>

Because of Pierre's susceptibility to Isabel's physical allure, the perfection he seeks after is forever beyond his reach. On the other hand, the heaven-aspiring tendency within him has never allowed him to be satisfied with a comfortable compromise. By estranging himself from any warmth of the ordinary, Pierre becomes a dehumanized being. Thus, he is a false hero. A person who realizes true heroism is not a person who inherits Christ's idealism but one who, according to St. Paul's scheme, one might say, can give help or

'grace' to deliver people from their sinful state. One of the themes in this story is, I believe, the redemptive power of human love. And the agent is Lucy.<sup>(7)</sup>

There is nothing extraordinary about Lucy. When she undertakes what she calls a 'superhuman office', that is, to sustain Pierre by her love, she is diffident and abjectly lacks self—confidence. She is always afraid of Isabel's hauteur. But she draws her strength from her simple faith in Pierre; she has no theories to alter him; she sees him, steady and whole, and does not work from any dogma or morality. But, we are expected to understand, this love seeks to preserve what is splendid in Pierre's quality and even is willing to lose the very object of its passion, if this quality in the beloved is in any degree impaired. Such is the very paradox of the true love and Lucy's love is selfless; she does not seek to assert any 'prior' claim on Pierre. Thus, Lucy is working on the inspiration which comes from above and is beyond her comprehension. The ultimate capacity of this love is its power to transform the recipient of its grace. Pierre, we are told, is aware of certain change in himself after Lucy comes to live with him. Even the haughty Isabel recognizes Lucy's unobtrusive influence and "as if seized by some spiritual awe," falls on her knees before Lucy, and "made a rapid gesture of homage".

But the recipient of her grace is not up to its saving power. Pierre is too proud to be subdued by love. Here, again, the image of Hamlet surfaces itself. In order to ensure his final confrontation with his uncle, Hamlet commits the indirect murder of his two friends who are certainly treacherous, but not so treacherous as to deserve their death. Hamlet does this merely to enrage the king. Thus, he contrives certain necessity so as not to escape the fate. Pierre behaves according to the same logic. He willfully kills his cousin so as to ensure the subsequent self—destruction. As in the cases of tragic heroes of the previous ages, the act constitutes his final self—assertion. Pierre denies further tyranny of his physical necessity by becoming 'neuter'—a being without sex. At the same time, he wipes out any future possibility of progeny by his kindred—killing and suicide. At this point, he gains something of a status of an overreaching hero:

Now 'tis merely hell in both worlds. Well, be it hell. I will mold a trumpet of the flames, and, with my breath of flame, breathe back my defiance!<sup>(8)</sup>

Pierre commits suicide. Isabel collapses upon his heart, enveloping his frame by her black hair; in death, as in life, he is still her captive. Thus, the tragedy here is one of a hero who is denied the possibility of growth by the author. Life, Herman Melville wishes us to understand, is an irreducible mixture of the ideal and the compromise, the heavenly and the earthly. You can not choose one in place of the other. Extracting an abstract virtue and clinging to it is an act of an adolescent. ('sophomorean', Melville chooses to call it.) What Pierre would not see is a matured vision which is possible to the author, yet another quester for the truth:

Moreover, everyone knows that tortoises as well as turtles are of such a make, that if

you but put them on their backs you thereby expose their bright sides without the possibility of their recovering themselves and turning into view the other. But after you have done this, and because you have done this, you should not swear that the tortoise has no dark side. Enjoy the bright, keep it turned up perpetually if you can; but be honest, and don't deny the black. Neither should he, who cannot turn the tortoise from its natural position so as to hide the darker and expose this livelier aspect, like a great October pumpkin in the sun, declare the creature to be one total inky blot. The tortoise is both black and bright.<sup>(9)</sup>

Melville, it seems, is increasingly aware of the necessity of silence on the irreconcilable dualism of the earthly conditions. "One gets to care less and less," he writes in 1856 to his brother-in-law John Hoadley, "for everything except downright good feeling. Life is so short, and so ridiculous and irrational (from a certain point of view). . . ." "But this path of thought", he immediately proceeds to say, "leads toward those waters of bitterness from which one can only turn aside and be silent."<sup>(10)</sup> If we take this statement as an evidence of the direction which Melville's thought is heading at, this story of a misfortune of a declared rebel can disclose Melville's view on silence as the true voice of God. It is a portrait of American Innocence which has failed to learn the value for the ends of self-preservation in the already competitive American society of curbing its disposition to pursue ideas further than the elders have thought necessary for happiness or virtue. Isn't it a period when various religious and social reformers assert every kind of the extremes which they extract from daydreaming? Can't we see this novel as Melville's oblique criticism of American mind which likes generalization and whose symptom of immaturity Pierre symbolizes? At the same time, writing of *Pierre* must have been an act of purging himself of his questioning spirit which Melville comes to regard as immature. Hence, the author's ambivalence toward his hero; he cannot quite shake off his old self; it is almost a love-hate relationship.

It is not desirable, to be resigned or be disillusioned at seeing life's imperfect state. Reconciliation is a matured attitude, in the positive affirmative spirit of the famous lines in *King Lear*.

Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;  
Ripeness is all;

#### Notes

- (1) Herman Melville, *Pierre, Or the Ambiguities* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 83.
- (2) *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 210.

- (5) Most critics agree that Isabel is a Bad Angel to Pierre. See Merlin Bowen, *The Long Encounter: Self and Experience in the Writings of Herman Melville* (2nd ed. 1960; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 173; Richard Chase, *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 119, p. 124, p. 132, p. 134; H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 99; John Seelye, *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 83—86. Of the opposite views, see Milton R. Stern, *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1957), p. 179.
- (6) *Pierre, Or the Ambiguities*, p. 310.
- (7) Of few critics who see negative qualities in Lucy, see Richard H. Brodhead, *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel* (2nd ed. 1973; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 170, pp. 184—185; Stern, pp. 152—154, p. 157, p. 179.
- (8) *Pierre, Or the Ambiguities*, p. 403.
- (9) Quoted by Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1958), pp. 198—199.
- (10) Quoted by Warner Berthoff, *The Example of Melville* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962) p. 62.

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