

Catnip and Amaranth

PIERRE, OR THE AMBIGUITIES. By HERMAN MELVILLE. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LEWIS MUMFORD
Author of "Herman Melville"

"PIERRE" is the last important work of Herman Melville to be made available to the general reader. For the sake of all that is valid in "Pierre," one trusts that no new reader of Melville will approach this novel until he has read "Moby-Dick" and "White-Jacket" or "Typee." For "Pierre" is a volcanic fragment of Melville's personality, an uncontrolled eruption, splendid and spectacular at one moment, but obscure and sulphurous and ashen at another. It is without doubt his most ambiguous achievement—so good that it cannot be neglected, and so verbose, high-flown, hectic, weakly theatrical, that one is at loss to pick out a romantic work, from Byron onward, that can rival it in loud ineptitude.

The first person to see any literary merit in "Pierre" was, I think, Mr. Arthur Johnson. In 1921 he published an essay on Herman Melville as a stylist in which he made an ingenious comparison of the prose in parts of "Pierre" with the later manner of Henry James, and suggested, with some show of plausibility, that James might have read "Pierre" as a youth and been unconsciously influenced by it. Later, Professor Percy Boynton discovered a number of prose poems in "Pierre," and arranged them as free verse. "Pierre" is, indeed, a book of fragments, and the fragments are worth mining and extracting. In his very wise preface to the present edition, Mr. H. M. Tomlinson says: "I have quoted from it a displeasing example of English. But if you want to be sure that Melville must take his place with the masters, then turn in this book to the passages he calls Enceladus, and to the discourse by Plotinus Plinlimmon on Chronometricals." For the sake of such passages, and many minor ones on the way, and for the sake of the intention that broods over the whole book, "Pierre" deserves to be read.

What was that intention? Of what platonic idea is "Pierre" the blurred and distorted counterpart?

"Pierre" is a complicated symbol of Herman Melville's dilemmas as a man and his explorations as an imaginative writer and a philosophic thinker. Much of the materials of "Pierre" are plainly autobiographical: the hero's patrician background, his relation to his father and mother, the effect of his father's image, his attachment to his cousin, his career as a writer: the novel, in fact, is full of identifiable landscapes and people, and, according to Dr. Henry Murray, Jr., whose researches into the actualities of Melville's life have gone farther than either Mr. Weaver's or my own, there is even a certain amount of evidence which might link the dark, mysterious Isabel, half-sister to Pierre, with the real sister who during the early part of his literary career had so patiently made fair copies of his manuscripts.

Melville pictures Pierre's disenchantment with the conventional world of his youth, his revolt against his mother's worldliness, and his chivalrous protection of his half-sister under the form of marriage. With the insight and medical directness of Freud, Melville discloses the ambiguity of Pierre's sexual relations; there is courtship and flirtation in Pierre's relations with his mother, and in his espousal of Isabel he is driven by an unconscious physical passion—in both cases a disguised incest-relation. When Pierre becomes aware of the ultimate bearings of his "pure" and "noble" conduct, when he acknowledges to himself that a crippled or ugly half-sister would not have wrenched him so easily from his plighted love to Lucy, he is horrified; and Melville himself participated in that feeling. His mental health was shattered when he finished "Pierre"; in the book the hero and all who are involved in his career either die of shock or are murdered. The story is plainly autobiographical even in its fantastic melodramatic conclusion. So much for its sources.

These facts, however, are not themselves free from ambiguities: if they are facts in one relation, they may in turn serve as symbols in another: for the incest, the sterility, the black despair of the fable point to the impasse Melville had reached as a writer and thinker. The chief importance of "Pierre" for us today lies not in the adolescent revolt of

the hero, a revolt which discloses chiefly Melville's failure to achieve complete sexual maturity, but in the insight into certain ultimate truths that had come forth as by-products of his personal dilemma. If the autobiographical parts show Melville at his weakest, a poet in the fashion of Thomas Moore, a romantic like Byron, a hopeless adolescent like Werther, there are other sections that reveal to us the great mind that conceived "Moby-Dick," and that now turned back into the ego with the same heedless audacity that it had attacked man's external relation to the universe.

The principal moral of "Pierre," perhaps, is the relativity of Vice and Virtue, and, what is even more vexing to one who wants plain signposts and hard-and-fast directions, their strangely interchangeable rôles. Melville had grown up in the hard Protestant conviction that Good and Bad, Right and Wrong, Virtue and Vice had separately embodied existences: each had an intrinsic character, each was readily identifiable. Was not he himself a "good" man: did he not honorably cleave to his wife, strive to gain a livelihood for his family, fulfil all his



Barrie

SIR JAMES BARRIE

A caricature by Low.

From "Lions and Lambs." (Harcourt, Brace.)

duties as a son and a citizen? On the surface, yes; but when he peered below the surface, honestly, remorselessly, holding back nothing and unconcerned about his reputation, he was amazed at his discoveries. Was not all that was valid in his career a defiance of "virtue"? His experiences had come as a vagabond and a deserter; his happiest love affair had not been sanctioned by church or state; his deepest book was one that he had broiled in hellfire and baptized in the name of the Devil. Vice and virtue were indeed the supreme ambiguities. No honest man could pretend to be a virtuous one. What passed for goodness and righteousness was a convention, like eating with a knife and fork. The convention was useful to society, but in the recesses of his soul Melville realized that Vice and Virtue could not be parcelled out in this fictitious manner. Virtuous courses might lead to ruin, and the "virtuous" man might be driven to madness and suicide. The signposts were down: the identities of Virtue and Vice were dissolved: Virtue was the full and unimpeded flow of life, and Vice was the opposite, and at any moment, if one watched carefully, one quality might turn suddenly into the other.

But what, Melville seems to ask himself in "Pierre," what if thought itself is just as dubious in isolation as virtue: may not the loftiest courses be more baneful than men suppose? He began to suspect this, I think, while making his furthest exploration in "Moby-Dick": perhaps the highest, the least human and earthly truth, was mere destruction and nothingness. The white amaranth that grew in the upland pastures was the symbol of the intellectual life: so pure, so austere, so beautiful, but so sterile: it ruined the pastures and gave no sustenance to any beast. In contrast, consider the catnip; it was a domesticated plant and it clung even to the ruins of old houses, testifying to life, family, habitations,

institutions. "Every autumn the catnip died, but never an autumn made the amaranth to wane. The catnip and the amaranth—man's earthly household peace, and the ever-encroaching appetite for God."

The appetite for God might usurp the place that should be open to other appetites, and in becoming a philosopher or seer one might become something less than a man. Thought that displaced all other form of experience was sterile, as blackly ineffectual as those incestuous wishes that spoiled one's married love. Was not Melville's own mind, particularly his unconscious, his dark half-sister Isabel? That was the final ambiguity. He who quitted the earth, assaulted the sky, sought the ultimate truth, uncontaminated by the local and accidental and personal might, instead of disclosing a more precious realm, discover a wall of blackness. The last reach of thought was emptiness; the final word of literature, silence. Was this profundity—having nothing to say? Mathematically, it was the equivalent of asserting that infinity equals zero. If that be the ultimate destination of thought, wisdom might urge that one tarry at the half-way stations.

"Pierre" suggests, in more than one pregnant passage, the ultimate reaches of Melville's thinking. Mr. Tomlinson does not exaggerate when he says: "This book is bottomless. It is out of soundings. A reader is poised over an abyss of darkness most of the time, to the ultimate depth of which no sounding by man will ever be made." That is true of its core; and in a sense, Melville penetrated in "Pierre" farther than he himself was aware: the book perhaps means more to us, in the light of what modern science has taught us of physics and psychology, than it did to its own author: his hints and dim intuitions come to us now clarified by appropriate concepts. One may view with tolerance the patent, the almost laughable defects in "Pierre." The wreckage of a great mind has more valuable treasures than the tidy bulk of a small one. If in "Pierre" Melville often seems one of the last and weakest of the Romantics, he is also one of the first, and surely one of the most profound, of the moderns.

Salt in Her Veins

SALT WATER TAFFY. As Told to COREY FORD by JUNE TRIPLETT. New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons. 1929.

Reviewed by DR. WALTER E. TRAPROCK,
F.R.S.S.E.U.

IT was on the cards that June Triplett, the daughter of my old navigator, Ezra Triplett, should do just what she has done, namely knock the world for a cockeyed loop with her amazing recital of sea wanderings. She has salt in her veins, that child, and not a little of it has seeped into the pages dictated to her amanuensis, Corey Ford. Naturally, since the publication of this sprightly log I have heard the usual doubts expressed as to its veracity. It is ever so. Let a person do anything out of the ordinary and whimpering stay-at-homes, swivel-chair critics, and tea-table travellers at once raise yowls of doubt. I have had the same experience in reference to some of my own reports of doings in odd and unusual corners of the globe. I can only urge little June to be of stout heart and to treat her critics with the scorn they deserve. Truth will prevail in the end.

How could June Triplett lie, sired as she was, and is, by a man like Ezra, the soul of honesty and acme of accuracy! And Junie is the very spit of her father. Argument aside, I personally know most of the incidents in the book to have been as stated . . . or very near it. Let me mention a few specific items. In the first chapter little Junikins refers to her father's way with a whale, which he tackles by the dorsal fin. I can add with emphasis that this is less . . . not more . . . than the truth. Dorsal or pectoral, all fins look alike to Ezra and, when thoroughly irritated by a whale, I have seen him grab one fin in each of his hairy paws and kick the defenseless mammal to death. And yet what kindness, what gentleness lay in the heart of the man.

June tells us that "when he had shattered the jawbone of a sailor with a single blow of his fist, he would always stoop down and lift the fallen offender gently to his feet before he hit him again." I remember this trait well. He did it to me once . . . but only once. No match for him in physical strength, I was his master in strategy. When we set sail on the first voyage undertaken by Traprock Expeditions, Inc., I saw at once that Ezra and I must come to

grips, not once but often. It was the old story of Ulysses against Hercules, brain against brawn, me against Ezra. After having felt the might of his fist I gave this a wide berth, but a few days later, slipping silently up behind him in my stocking feet, I cracked him with a marlin spike and he went down like the bridge of St. Louis, Mo.

A week later, as we were leaving Wangawanga, the largest (and loudest) of the Audible Islands, I scooped up a hatful of red ants, which I put in Ezra's berth. It was not long before he actually cringed in my presence and it took me some time to restore his shattered morale. But I digress. . . .

I note certain inaccuracies in June's use of sea terms, which is understandable in a lassie of her tender years. She refers frequently to the ship's raffletrees when obviously she means whiffletrees. She quotes Ezra as giving the command to "reef the shrouds" when any sea-wise writer would know the correct expression is to "warp" or, at times, "fold the shrouds." Triplett, by the way, was enormously ingenious in the construction of labor saving devices aboard ship. It annoyed him to see so much time taken and labor expended in shortening or lengthening sail. On the second cruise of the Kawa, when we took her overland through Ukraina, both our main and mizzen masts were hinged closed to the deck level. By merely pressing a button, Triplett could make all the sails lie down. I saluted Prince Olaf of Finland in this way and was decorated for it.

To my mind the high spot of June's narrative . . . and it is all pretty much above sea level . . . is her description of her father's repulse of the attacking waterspouts. How exactly like Triplett to rise to the occasion and send a bullet through the abdomen of the herd leader. June's own words can not be bettered.

Crack! With uncanny aim Father sent a single bullet through the middle of the enemy!

For a moment the waterspout halted dead in its tracks, swaying backward; then slowly it tilted forward, and collapsed with a horrible roar. Hundreds of tons of water, fish, seaweed, and a couple of tourists from a nearby steamer descended on our decks. . . . The rest of the herd had halted, evidently nonplussed by this sudden accident to their leader. Now they turned, panic-stricken at the white-man's magic, and scattered pell-mell toward the horizon, their tails between their legs.

As sea literature, this is all wet, as June would say.

One chapter in the book is woefully inaccurate and that is Chapter Seven which describes the sinking of the Kawa. I categorically deny that this or anything like it ever happened, and I should know, for the Kawa lies even now at the bight of the Gowanus Canal loading a cargo of scurvy for the lesser Antilles. Yet I am far from implying that June wished to misrepresent the facts. One who cons her log closely will note that she is very inaccurate in regard to proper names. With improper names she is adept, but her names of ships are hopelessly confused. Obviously what she says happened to the Kawa really happened to another ship, probably the old left-handed ketch, Cora, a crazy craft which I well remember was subject to just such sinking spells as June describes.

June makes one other slip which I may as well correct while I am about it. In Chapter Eight she tells of visiting the Virgin Islands where my old buddy, Herman Swank, was king. This is wrong. I was king and Herman was Prime Minister and about the primest I have ever had. But after all, why cavil at a few inaccuracies when the volume as a whole fairly reeks with truth. And with what swing and verve young Ford has caught the spirit of the narrator and the tang of spume and scud. There are passages that have all the dizzy surge and swash of a washing machine and I found that I could only read a little at a time until I finally got my sea legs on. It is a sterling performance and I am proud of the little daughter of my old skipper, the little girl whom I personally taught the art of navigation and, the uses of sextant, quadrant, and hydrant. Proud, too, am I to be incorporated in another epic of the sea and to know that old Traprock, thanks to fifty years of clean living, is still able to take care of his share of "Salt Water Taffy."

Sir Hall Caine, who recently celebrated his seventy-sixth birthday, says that when he is well enough he works at a book which has been on his hands for many years. He is keeping its subject a secret.

Cape-Smith's First Book

THE WAVE. By EVELYN SCOTT. New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

FOR a few minutes Miss Scott's book puzzles the reader. It is obviously a piece of Civil War fiction; but the opening sketch of a Charleston lad who witnesses the bombardment of Fort Sumter from a rowboat is suddenly broken off for another brief sketch of a Baltimore clerk who participates in the attack on the Sixth Massachusetts, and this in turn is followed by a sharply-drawn picture of a Virginia family where the father is an ardent Confederate while the mother is a Yankee with brothers in the Union army. Then the reader catches the clue in Miss Scott's quotation at the beginning of the book from Philip Lake's "Physical Geography."

The water of the ocean is never still. It is blown into waves by the wind, it rises and falls with the tides. The waves travel in a definite direction, but a cork thrown into the water does not travel with the wave.

The Civil War was like an immense wave which runs through millions of drops of water; it caught up, churned, exalted, crushed, and transformed millions of human beings, shook them into new positions and gave them new shapes, and passed on. Miss Scott traces the wave, in more than six hundred pages, from Fort Sumter to Lincoln's emancipation, registering its passage in typical impulses of agony and joy, bewilderment and comprehension, courage and fear, as given to perhaps two hundred Americans, North and South, soldier and civilian, black and white. Sketch follows sketch, episode follows episode; not one is related to another save as all are related to the overmastering wave called the Civil War.

It was an ambitious design which Miss Scott formed, and it is ambitiously executed. The Civil War, she implies, was too tremendous and profoundly significant to be apprehended through any of the older forms of art within one's grasp; an epic might serve, or another "War and Peace" might be adequate, but what writer can wield Jove's thunderbolts? The best way to describe it, she says in effect, is by inventing a new form. She will show its impact upon scores of highly diverse persons—soldiers, old maids, children, clerks, farmers, generals, Lincoln, one of Morgan's cavalry, a newspaper correspondent at Gettysburg, a sailor on the sinking *Alabama*; placing each of these individuals beneath her lens at a moment of crisis, and wringing the utmost psychological significance from the episode. By the combined effect of these scores of little personal dramas, she believes, we will gain some genuine realization of the total effect of the war. Her method involves many complete and sudden contrasts, harsh wrenchings of the attention, and sharp transitions in time, place, and mood; it requires that the reader must accept a disjointed, inchoate effect. It means that the reader no less than the writer must make an unusual effort in order to grapple sympathetically with such wide varieties of experience and personality. But if successful, it also means that much of that bewildering welter of events and emotions which made up the human side of the war will be caught for the printed page.

It must be said that an extraordinary talent has gone into Miss Scott's book. The kaleidoscopic succession of descriptions, incidents, stories, bits of drama—only with none of that continuity which the kaleidoscope possesses—required a remarkably agile and versatile imagination. It demanded something more. Miss Scott projects herself into the personalities of her wide array of characters with an intensity that is usually striking and sometimes amazing—though of course intensity is much easier in a brief episode than in a long narrative. She makes us really feel the emotions of the genteel but starving spinster who joins a food riot in hunger-racked Richmond and who horrifies herself by clutching a loaf of bread from a sacked bakery; the wonder of the old darkey whose eye is suddenly riveted, outside Petersburg, by the explosion of the mine which opened up the battle of the Crater; the excitement and terror of the youth who sank with the *Itasca* as Farragut's fleet fought its way into the mouth of the Mississippi. The book is packed with incident, yet its texture is subjective rather than objective; it is always the minds of the characters, rather than their acts, which interest the writer. Obviously

great economy was imperative, and it is notable how quickly Miss Scott transfers us to a definite place and situation—that, for example, of a wounded soldier in the Wilderness:

At first, the heat was no more than is blown out by an oven, warming the face. Then it began to penetrate the clothing most uncomfortably. Mingled with the ache in his slightly wounded leg, Bob felt the scorched sensation which made retreat involuntary. In the glassy wall of the flames he could see men running. Then, like creatures imprisoned in some ruddy amber, they were trying vainly to get out. He could see them wriggling on charred stumps of ankles, waving shrivelled arms at him. Their blistered faces seemed to melt, and their twisted mouths were mobile scars, uttering soundless words of agony. Fortunately for Bob's self-control, the rushing, crackling noises of the fire consumed, as in a great wind, all these other noises. He clung to the colors, and still, when he was abandoned, would not let them go. They seemed to him, in a vague way, to supply his sanity. . . . When a shout for assistance did finally reach him, through the *blat-blat* of the fire, beating like flapping blankets, he hurried on to offer succour relievedly.

Sometimes Miss Scott even achieves an excellent short story; that, for example, of the border raider who holds up a Union train, is taken, and finally escapes from his captors. The episodes are naturally of uneven merit, and when she essays the very highest flights, she fails. She gives us inadequate sketches of Grant and Lee, and her study of Lincoln as he sat in the box at Ford's Theatre before the fatal pistol-shot lacks truth as lamentably as it lacks dignity and power. Though her style for the most part is quiet and simple, sometimes she overwrites. Yet most of the book is kept at a high level; it was well worth writing, and it is well worth reading.

Partly because of its novelty of form, it is one of the most interesting of all the efforts to deal with the Civil War in fiction. But many readers, while granting its power, will lay it down with the feeling that it embodies an artistic fallacy. A fluttering chaos of a hundred episodes and incidents, a rapid flickering of unrelated pictures on the screen, may achieve an arresting effect—but not the higher kind of effect. There is something fundamentally faulty in an art which arouses our interest in a character or scene for a brief moment, and then hurries to another and another. A great organic novel, where the characters are studied through a sustained action and where the interrelation of persons and events leads to a genuine development of individuality, demands an altogether larger and finer kind of talent; and it offers a truer, more penetrating medium for the study of a historical period. In such a book the whole can be far greater than the sum of its parts; here the whole is less than the sum of the parts, for the parts too often merely duplicate one another. They are all surface facets, and the inner truth of the matter—what the Civil War meant to its participants—is left largely unrevealed. Mary Johnston's "The Long Roll" and "Cease Firing" are not great novels; Stephen Crane's "The Red Badge of Courage" and Harold Frederic's "The Copperhead" are both brief studies, limited in scope. But they are better as art than this book, and when one searches for essentials, they give a deeper idea of the war. We do not know a character until we follow him through several scenes and events, not merely one, and till we see him in important relationships with other characters; we cannot understand the human impacts of a war until, abandoning mere panorama and episode, we study these impacts through characters thus fully realized.

During the recent Hungarian "book-week," which was held in connection with the Budapest International Fair, tents were set up in the main streets, and authors and poets sold their own works to the public, while their photographs were given free.

The Saturday Review of Literature

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