Quo Vadis, Pierre, a Failed Messiah-Seeker in Melville’s Delphic Oracle?
— Pierre: or, the Ambiguities

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Read me through and through. I am entirely thine. See!

I have no tongue to speak thee.... My whole being, all my life’s thoughts and longings are in endless arrears to thee.

Introduction
I. The Problematical Knowing ‘I’
II. The Canonical Perspective
III. A Temporary Convert to Gnosticism
IV. An Unintended Swing Back to Anti-Gnosticism
V. The Opposites Merged
VI. Messiah-Seeking and Dystopia-Making

Conclusion

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Introduction

“The impulse in me called thee, not poor Bell. God called thee, Pierre, not poor Bell” (159). These remarks are uttered by Isabel Banford, the putative half-sister to the protagonist of the 19-year-old Pierre Glendinning in Pierre; or the Ambiguities (1852), a novel published by Herman Melville (1819–91) a year after Moby-Dick; or, The Whale. As she herself explains in her flashback remark, “I have nearly always gone by the name of Bell” (148), Isabel is a tolling bell — an instrument of beckoning through which, it seems, the gnosis [knowledge] of the highest God is transmitted only to the esoteric, i.e., Pierre. If Isabel is the messenger of God, or if “the deep voice of the being Isabel called to him from out the immense distances of sky and air” (173), it is unsurprising of Pierre to sense “no veto of the earth that could forbid her heavenly claim” (173). Pierre perhaps retains his unconscious gnostic bent and suppresses his (impious) nature until his meeting with Isabel finally brings it out. Unrestrained at last, he proudly declares, “[I]n the Enthusiast to Duty, the heaven-begotten Christ is born; and will not own a mortal parent, and spurns and rends all mortal bonds” (106).

William B. Dillingham and Maki Ueshiba reiterate that the calling referred to in Pierre betokens Melville’s interest in Gnosticism. According to Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (46), Melville acquired the knowledge of Gnosticism in 1849 when he bought Dictionnaire historique et critique [The Historical and Critical Dictionary] by Pierre Bayle. Takehiko Tareda (111-112) postulates that Melville imbibed some of the near-Eastern doctrines published in documents of the day, such as Anastasius (1819) by Thomas Hope. Gnosticism is defined in Webster’s Dictionary as “the thought and practice of any of various cults...
declared heretical by the church and distinguished chiefly by pretension to mystic and esoteric religious insights, by emphasis on knowledge rather than faith . . . .” In support of Dillingham’s argument, Isabel’s Oriental features, “dark, olive cheek[ed]” (46), designate her racial identity as non-European and her religious identity as non-Christian. To support the argument further, Melville himself refers to Pierre as Magian [Simon Magus], the second-century Samaritan and founder of Gnosticism who accosted Apostle Peter in Acts (8: 9–24) for the simoniacal bargain [Fig. I]. As it happens, Apostle Peter’s name echoes the sound of Pierre. Etiologically, Gnosis has a Greek connotation of knowledge. On this point, Melville’s interest in Gnosis may have had something to do with a knowledge of (un)truth and a heretical/unorthodox/improper mode of knowing/perceiving the way things are. Specifically, “the-way-things-are” in the context of Pierre refers to an ambiguous and unrenderable identity of Isabel, Pierre’s alleged half-sister. To both Melville and the Postmodernists, Gnosticism seems akin to a stepping stone to unlock the door to a realm beyond the wall or a realm hidden behind the mask, the realm insinuated by Ahab as he yells to his crew: “Strike through the mask” (164). Besides, the so-called knowledge of the ages spanning from the
enlightenment to (post)modernism encompasses not inseparable truth and untruth, but inseparable control and possession: in a word, hegemonic power.
Toward this Foucauldian knowledge, Melville was irresistibly lured to depict, for example, the power/knowledge (dis)possessed Captain Ahab and Captain Delano. Melville himself seemed to possess, and to be possessed with, knowledge, but was dispossessed of power as an author of unpopular literature and accordingly destitute person. In this sense, an analysis of Pierre’s perception [knowledge-gaining] mode will also deepen our understanding of Ahab’s (Melville’s) world view.

Dillingham proposed that “Pierre and Ahab are both captive kings, overcome and ruled by their subjects whom they never adequately understood” (238). Mindful of this, I have tentatively adopted the following hypothesis: unbeknownst to himself, Pierre is tempted/forced to subvert the epistemology of subject/object [oneself/the other] categorization by the ambiguous being Isabel, while (mis)believing that he has voluntarily allowed the erstwhile paradigm to drastically change. Is Pierre genuinely successful? Is this change (if he manages to bring it about at all) lasting and effective? Pierre nearly becomes a member of the mysterious mock-commune presided over by Plinlimmon, the “Grand Master of the Apostles” (280) who happens to have the same given name as the third century anti-Gnostic Neo-Platonist, Plotinus. Dillingham asserts that Plinlimmon is strongly anti-Gnostic but neglects to explain how Plinlimmon’s power over Pierre interacts with Isabel’s.

Quo Vadis [Where are you going]? To Pierre, the self-professed “heaven-begotten Christ” who suffers opposing influences first from the Gnostic Isabel and later from the anti-Gnostic Plinlimmon (106), one would be tempted to pose the same question that St. Peter (Pierre in French) asked of Christ:
“Quo Vadis?” [Fig. II] While verifying the above-mentioned hypothesis, this paper will elucidate ① what factor(s) impel(s) Pierre to accept Isabel’s/Plinlimmon’s (anti-)Gnostic influence, ② the direction in which Pierre finally goes, and ③ the pessimistic message, or oracle if you like, that Melville tries to transmit through Pierre’s abrupt suicide, the nullification of his progress towards possible liberation for himself and his half-sister. By elucidating this third point, I will set the groundwork for my next paper, in which I intend to clarify Isabel’s hidden motive for Pierre’s paradigm shift while measuring Melville’s emotional attachment to both Pierre and Isabel.

The first chapter of this paper will review some of the relevant research, as well as Lévinas’ ethics to provide a methodological framework for this paper. In chapter II we will see how Pierre resorts to the Western perception mode in his attempt to disambiguate Isabel’s identity. In chapters III and IV we will
consider how Pierre, impelled by the opposing forces of the pro-Gnostic Isabel and the anti-Gnostic Plinlimmon, is forced to distance himself from or maintain the Platonic notion of Idea or, by extension, the Greco-Roman/Euro-American style of reasoning. Then, after analyzing Pierre’s inner mechanism equating pro-Gnostic Isabel to anti-Gnostic Plinlimmon, in chapter V, we will see how Pierre is awakened to the futility of Messiah-seeking and the risk of utopia-community-making.

I. The Problematical Knowing ‘I’

Before exploring how Pierre sets out to change his style of perceiving reality under Isabel’s Gnostic strategy, let us look at some of the criticism relevant to the issue of Pierre’s perception. Roughly speaking, these criticisms foreground some of the distinguished features of Pierre, the sort of features that would help Pierre forge a distorted image of reality, i.e., bogus masculinity and narcissistic chauvinism. These features are attributed to the character named in the story’s title, Pierre, and presumably reflect, according to the critics in this vein, some (but not all of) of the features of the author. Noteworthy are Henry A. Murray’s remarks that “the ‘ungraspable phantom of life’ is not in Isabel but in Pierre, who is compared to Narcissus plunging to embrace his own image” (60). Murray goes on to assert that what fascinates Pierre is not “the mournful person as the olive girl,” but rather what she evokes in his own soul where “lurked the subtler secret” (51). Granted that Pierre may be Narcissus, it would be next to impossible to absolutely deny the likelihood that Pierre, himself unaware, is either forced or willing to de-identify himself with Narcissus due to the Gnostic influence that Isabel wields over him.

As Eric Sundquist sees it, Pierre turns out to be almost identical with
Melville. But what if Melville was driven to identify with Isabel, a being of a
different gender/class? In the vein of Sundquist, Ellen Weinauer asserts in
*Melville and Women* that “[Pierre] dramatizes one man’s [Pierre’s] doomed
struggle to reinscribe the firm boundaries of antebellum selfhood, to fashion,
through a literary fashioning, a repossessed male self, protected from the
gothic indeterminacy that has come to trouble it” (127). Weinauer’s
feministic criticism and Sundquist’s socio-psychological criticism may facilitate
the view that Melville criticizes himself through Pierre for male narcissism,
but this view sounds insipid if Pierre fails to “repossess male self” (my ital-
ics). Melville held lifelong feelings of homosexual love for Hawthorne, even
after Hawthorne forsook him and died a quarter century before his own death.
Also, Melville idealized the androgynous Billy Budd in his posthumously pub-
lished novella of the same name. These facts allude to the author’s anti-
patriarchic and therefore anti-heterosexual posture, cautioning us against an
unconditional adoption of Weinauer’s and Sundquist’s criticisms. Rather, one
should not exclude the possibility that Melville was driven to identify himself
with Isabel despite the gender difference, and that Melville’s gender-wise
schizophrenic tendency separated his psyche into two spheres to which he felt
emotionally attached, Pierre’s and Isabel’s. My next paper will deal with the
relevancy of Isabel to Melville. More significant, in the present paper, are the
Gnostic aspects Pierre makes known. Gnosticism has the power to decon-
struct metaphysics, including, if you like, the Narcissus myth, and is closely
relevant to knowledge/perception, subject/object [the other being], and or-
thodoxy/heterodoxy. Pierre is under the sway of Gnosticism, albeit on a tem-
poral basis.

Wai Chee Dimock broadens her critical perspective to include a politico-
historical dimension and depicts narcissistic subjectivity as a mindset augmented by nineteenth-century American imperialism. If we are to perceive narcissistic subjectivity as a by-product, of sorts, of the synergism between American imperialism and European ontology, we should not forget that an extraordinary interest in Occidental thinking (Gnosticism included) grew on Melville’s contemporaries, the Transcendentalists from the intelligentsia of mid-nineteenth-century America. William B. Dillingham’s research into the Gnostic factors of *Pierre* holds great significance here, though Dillingham fails to clarify Melville’s own critical posture toward Western metaphysics and Gnosticism as well. Noteworthy, here, is the riveted attention the Postmodernists pay to Emmanuel Lévinas, the prominent Ethical Deconstructionist known for his formulation of the ethics of the subject/other relation, the relation between the ‘I’ who occupies the Subject position and the Other being(s) whom ‘I’ exploit as my foil(s) to the Subject ‘I’. Lévinassien ethics is a criticism against the narcissistic self reinforced by the traditional European ontology, and the Lévinassien ethics found in *Pierre* merits consideration. Lévinas unfolds an interesting ethical theory stressing a need to evince solicitude to other beings. Other beings, according to Lévinas, expose their vulnerable faces, which associates in my mind with the repeated appearances of the Gnostic Isabel and the anti-Gnostic Plinlimmon. Curiously, Isabel’s face “reveal[s] [to Pierre] glimpses of fearful gospel” (43), and Plinlimmon’s “mystic-mild face ... domineer[s] upon Pierre” (292). This paper will partly dwell on critical views from Dimock, Dillingham, and Lévin as. These views strike me, however, as incautiously formed, as they fail to consider the configuration of Pierre, Isabel, and Plinlimmon, a configuration that makes the matter more complicated than it appears to be.
II. The Canonical Perspective

Melville slyly inserts an intermediary episode of improbable guesswork: Solomon, the King of the Pre-Christian Israel, “rudely hammered in the rock [the Memnon Stone]” the letters “S. ye W”, an abbreviation for “Solomon the [ye: pseudo-archaic term for ‘the’] Wise” (133). The signification of the “S. ye W” is made known to Pierre by “a white-haired old gentleman, his city kinsman” (a figure probably beginning to show symptoms of senile dementia) who, after … “[an] unfortunate life, had at last found great solace in the Old Testament, which he was continually studying with ever-increasing admiration” (133). As the suspicious nature of this old man evinces, Melville ultimately takes a sarcastic posture towards Pierre’s obsession for knowledge (or “truth,” if you like) and his uncritical acceptance of the knowledge/information he acquires. Moreover, the author does not fail to demonstrate, as Dillingham indicates, that even Solomon, the wisest king, could not foresee the ruination of Palmyra, the Syrian city supposedly built by Solomon, or to imply that the fate of ruination that awaited Solomon also awaits Pierre. This also implies, by extension, that the Judeo-Christian metaphysics that Pierre represents and clings to will collapse.

Similarly, Melville satirizes the apparently intelligent Captain Delano in “Benito Cereno” (1855) for his fragile intellect or blindness to the reality of insurrection in the Spanish slave ship. Melville has Delano erroneously define the black as a “Sambo” equivalent to a happy-go-lucky imbecile. As an American from the North, Delano is so naïve about (albeit not innocent of) the racial tension that he is disinclined to disbelieve either the stereotypical image of the black or the loyalty feigned and displayed by the resentful blacks. If an
explanation in the style of the feminist critic Judith Butler is permissible, it follows that Delano takes too much time in realizing the hidden fact that “[racial/gender] reality [meaning the Sambo ideology] is performative,” and that “it [racial/gender reality] is real only to the extent that it is performed” (527). In both “Benito Cereno” and Pierre, the reality or truth — if called as such — is distortedly perceived by those in the prerogative position under the influence of composites made up of these factors: the Western binary system, imperialism, and nationalism (then approaching its peak in mid-nineteenth-century America). American society of the day was binaristically constructed with the ruling/controlling and the ruled/controlled, the former comprising upper-middle-class Anglo-Saxon males and the latter comprising minority or disenfranchised groups such as nonwhites, women, children, and homosexual men. In Pierre, the contrast between the two is vividly but somewhat melodramatically portrayed: “the brilliant chandeliers of the mansion of Saddle Meadow” where Pierre is snugly bathed as an inheritor-to-be of the manor along with tenant farmers, versus the “wretched rush-lights of poverty and woe” (111) likely to be found in the shack-like tenant farmhouse where Isabel lodges. The specious “reality” in this society forged by and for the prerogative members was so fabricated as to help the hegemonic class establish and maintain its own identity in the superior position of the white middle-class male.

We may surmise that Pierre partially shares with Delano the fate that a white male unwillingly (is forced to) makes, the mode that perpetually (de)stabilizes his subject position, with recourse to false reality/identity perception and/or reality/identity fabrication. Just as Delano struggles to disambiguate the reality of the slave ship, so Pierre struggles to “condense her [Isabel’s] mysterious haze into some definite and comprehensible shape”
Delano is exposed to the gaze of Babo, the ringleader of the slave insurrection, and consequently forced to (de)construct the previous reality around him and his own status of subjectivity. The same is said of Pierre, who (de)constructs the (anti-)heroic subject position under the gaze and desire of the other, his putative sister, Isabel. Thus, both Pierre and Delano turn out to share an almost identical socially prerogative yet bogus position. If we may borrow the phraseology of Takayoshi Ishiari (53), it follows that they try in vain to grasp and represent the unrepresentable other beings with their power of Reason [/Foucauldian ‘Power of Knowledge’]. From this bogus subject position, Pierre is dethroned by Isabel through a process to be discussed later.

Given the prerogative but suspicious subject position of Pierre described earlier, we are not surprised to read that Pierre, too embarrassed to calm himself after hearing Isabel recount her life story, probably figures out a strategy for regaining his self-control. He does this by stealing and lying beneath “the menacingly impending Terror Stone” (135), or “the whole enormous and most ponderous mass” (132) that “touched not another object in the wide terraqueous world” (132) beside “that one obscure and minute point of contact” (132) [Fig. III]. “[S]haped something like a lengthened egg” (132) this “Terror Stone” or “the Memnon Stone” reminds us, according to Dillingham (217), of the Delphi Omphalos, the religious stone artifact that takes its name from Greek work for “navel,” the symbolic center of the world. Citing H. W. Parke, Dillingham emphasizes the similarity between the Memnon Stone and the Omphalos, “an egg-shaped stone which was situated in the innermost sanctuary of the temple [of Apollo at Delphi]” (217). In light of this geopolitical nature of “navel,” one could argue that Pierre is unconsciously compelled to lie beneath the Memnon Stone by his own self-
complacence and self-centeredness, the mindsets that help him exploit other beings who live on the fringes of society, such as Isabel.

Apollo, a symbol of the Euro-American Andro-centric features of the day, also represents the Memnon Stone at Delphi. To put it differently, Apollo is the reference point by which males in prerogative positions metaphysically understand (by idealizing themselves) and judge the activities and appearances of others from their physical aspects. Bluntly put, the Memnon Stone represents Pierre’s self-centered attitude (though ultimately the stone has more integrity, as we see Pierre’s self-centrism erode at the hands of Isabel, the girl on the fringe of society who utters “the long-drawn, unearthly, girlish shriek” (45) — a “Delphic shriek” (48) — at the moment she meets him in person for the first time). From this supposed center/“navel” of all existence, Pierre unfurls the metaphysical reasoning, the sort of thinking that post-colonialists and feminists keep criticizing for overlooking the particularities of each being, for decorporealizing exclusively middle-class White Euro-American men, and conversely for corporealizing inferior others. This posture of Pierre’s, though
Quo Vadis, Pierre, a Failed Messiah-Seeker in Melville’s Delphic Oracle?

gradually but not completely redressed by Isabel’s appearance, leads him to adopt, to use the phrase of Wai Chee Dimock, “the logic of empire” (165).

Pierre says to Isabel, “[T]ell me every thing and any thing. I desire to know all, Isabel” (145). His burning desire for knowledge about Isabel’s identity — ambiguous race-wise (probably interracial), class-wise (destitute immigrant), and family-wise (begotten by Pierre’s father before marriage) — has a great deal to do with what Michel Foucault defines as knowledge: knowledge comparable to power. Putting it in the most extreme terms, this sort of knowledge turns out to be Western metaphysical knowledge. In the case of antebellum America, the “society of ‘possessive individualism’” (Dimock 147–49), this cognitive style becomes politicized; and, if applied to the subject in the prerogative position, Pierre included, it takes the form of imperial self. The imperial self is the personification of an imperial polity in the notion of Manifest Destiny, the American imperial slogan of the day. In the name of Manifest Destiny, imperial America justified itself in appropriating the western and southern territories. Simultaneously, this imperialistic tone of the nation penetrated into the realm of human relations, especially the otherwise incomprehensible field of love. Thus, “[Isabel] ends up being known and owned by her brother” as “a sister to be ‘owned,’” “as a child to be ‘formed,’” as a needy immigrant to be financially helped (Dimock 165, 167).

Furthermore, it is not entirely nonsensical that Isabel was institutionalized in a lunatic asylum for much of her childhood, as she suggestively confesses to Pierre.

I stayed in that house [asylum] for several years—five, six, perhaps, seven years—and during that interval of my stay.... some went
moping all the day; some grew as savages and outrageous, and were
dragged below by dumb-like men into deep places, that I knew nothing
of, but dismal sounds came through the lower floor, groans and clanking
fallings, as of iron in straw. Now and then, I saw coffins silently at
noon-day carried into the house ... But the numbers of those invisible
persons who thus departed from the house, were made good by other
invisible persons arriving in close carriages. Some in rags and tatters
came on foot, or rather were driven on foot. Once I heard horrible out-
cries, and peeping from my window, saw a robust but squalid and dis-
torted man, seemingly a peasant, tied by cords with four long ends to
them, held behind by as many ignorant-looking men who with a lash
drove the wild squalid being that way toward the house. (119–20)

Isabel’s institutionalization is not improbable when we recall the historical fact
that, prisons, hospitals, schools, and troops — as Michel Foucault demon-
strates — were extensively being reformed in the 18th and 19th centuries.
From the vantage point of Postmodernism, the reformation movement of the
day was not necessarily motivated by humanistic consideration. On the con-
trary, the reform was pushed ahead solely to facilitate the effective control and
regimentation of potentially subversive elements under the modern [imperial-
istic] nation/empire. Motivated ostensibly by a humanistic consideration for
the unfortunate, but more genuinely by a political will to reinforce its other-
wise fragile social position and ensure its hegemony as a ruling class, the
emerging middle class of the antebellum period launched and favored various
social reform movements such as abolitionism, the temperance movement,
and the prison reform movement. One instance of these movements is the
already mentioned sewing gathering for poor immigrants, the gathering of tenant women supervised and controlled by Mary Glendinning. Pierre, wholly ignorant and uncritical of the hierarchy-maintaining features of the social reform movement, assents to his mother’s request to escort her to the gathering solely out of curiosity to see the tenant girls whom “[he] shall one day be lord of the manor of” (45). This leads to the inference that Pierre unconsciously, but not innocently shares and endorses “the logic of empire and the logic of reform” (Dimock 167). To the eyes of Pierre, the well-to-do young man who can symbolically stay in the position of reformer, Isabel appears to be an entity “as both problem and cure, both the seat of malaise and the vehicle of regeneration” (Dimock 167). Just as the white middle-class find it justifiable to segregate the allegedly inferior beings as abject others, Pierre convinces himself that he should take care of Isabel exclusively, and that Isabel’s identity should be made knowable and known as a preliminary step. Abject others should be supervised, subordinated, corrected, disciplined, and, as the case may be, institutionalized in the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham’s concept of a prison where all prisoners are visible from a single point, a concept Foucault finds noteworthy for its parallels in the modern surveillance state [Fig. IV]. As Michel Foucault directly and Julia Kristeva indirectly indicate, the hegemonic group [i.e., the emergent middle class] were eager to drive out of their domain the potentially subversive elements and incarcerate them in institutions that would not only render these elements invisible and virtually non-existent, but discipline them and wrest them of their erstwhile threatening power. If those socially lower beings pose a potential threat and disrupt the binary structured system of logic/reason/metaphysics, i.e., the frame of perception by which identities can be defined, then Pierre probably sees Isabel as an equal to such beings. Thus,
by excluding the other (variable/changing/chaotic) being [Isabel] or by translating the variable to the invariable, the otherwise less invariable subject [Pierre] manages to falsely establish his own subjectivity.

With his superior position over his half-sister, it turns out that Pierre can act as both a seer and overseer of Isabel in this chapter. We also find, conversely, that Pierre, though half aware of it, is both seen and overseen by the all-seeing and ever-present Isabel (and Plinlimmon as well). This infers that within the Gnostic field of Isabel, the effects on Pierre are so vital, they demote him from his apparently advantageous position. In inverse proportion to the magnifying power of Isabel, his subjective authority is reduced and his previous canonical

Fig. IV. Panoptic Prison. “Foucault was fascinated by Jeremy Bentham’s model of the ideal prison, the Panopticon ... The prisoners in the cells are perpetually exposed to the gaze of the guards in the tower, yet since they cannot themselves see into the tower, they are never certain whether or not they are being watched” (Rayner).
perspective into the Gnostic is drastically changed. As forces who put Pierre under their control or manipulation, the two eerie beings, Isabel and Plinlimmon, appear to have something in common. Yet as we will see later, they turn out to be starkly opposite. The next chapter will discuss their respective influences over Pierre, beginning with Isabel’s.

III. A Temporary Convert to Gnosticism

After his initial embarrassment at the unexpected appearance of Isabel, Pierre intuitively perceives himself to be involved in a consanguineous relationship with Isabel in the absence of any concrete evidence bearing out Isabel’s true identity. His intuition is activated partly by the creepy circumstances he is thrown into and partly by Isabel’s exploitation of the circumstances.

Gnosticism was revived in the mid-nineteenth century either in spite of, or because of, its branding as heretical on this account. It was probably revived by the overseas imperialistic expansion of America and America’s enfeebled/ secularized/ liberalized Puritan orthodoxy and romantic individualism, and by the importation of mysticism from abroad, from both West and East. Boosted by the tailwind of the mid-nineteenth-century occult revivalism and its positive absorber, Transcendentalism, Melville filled the literary sphere of Pierre with esoteric elements, letting Isabel appear in the occult atmosphere that the two physically handicapped Penny sisters heighten. Though “gifted with the most benevolent hearts in the world,” the two old spinsters (the Penny sisters) “abstained from church” because “at mid-age deprived by envious nature of their hearing,” they lacked the God-given “power to hear Christ’s gospel” (44). To amplify the sound they use “a long coiled trumpet” (45) with a wide
opening applied on the mouth of a speaker and a small opening on their own ear, a device which, “when not in use,” hangs “like a powder-horn from their girdle” (45). These women appear to be not just freakish, with overwrought physical disabilities, but also heathenish, as truants from regular church attendance. Paradoxically, however, they are devout, as attested by the acts of mercy they perform for “the poor people of the parish” (44) and in the service of the minister. Dizzied in this realm of the Freudian unheimlich [unfamiliar] [/heretical], losing himself in hallucination as observed the Penny sisters, Pierre wonders which party is derailed from the Foucauldian conception of normalcy, the sisters or Pierre himself. This makes it easier and more convenient for Isabel to put him under her control.

The Penny sisters organize a welfare gathering with the financial help of the landlady [Pierre’s mother, Mary Glendinning] for the newly arrived poor immigrants in the parish. Incidentally, the presence of these immigrants from France is strongly suggestive of both Isabel and Melville’s own putative half-sister

3) Isabel infers so when she professes to remember days spent “some where in Europe; perhaps in France,” long ago in childhood (115). She remembers “chatting two different childish languages; one of which waned in me as the other and latter grew” (116). Moreover, Isabel revives a forgotten memory of the immigrant ship in the penultimate chapter when Isabel, Pierre, and Lucy take a boat “bound for a half-hour’s sail across the wide beauty of that glorious bay” (354). When “[t]he waves begin[s] to gather and roll,” and when the boat “gain[s] a point, where ... the wide bay visibly sluiced into the Atlantic,” “Isabel convulsively grasped the arm of Pierre and convulsively spoke” : “I feel it! I feel it! It is! It is!” (355). Hearing this utterance, Pierre finally admits that she maintains “her vague reminiscence of the teetering sea”
Let us observe the occult atmosphere surrounding Isabel, the atmosphere Isabel takes advantage of, in more detail.

In the gathering Pierre hears “a sudden, long-drawn, unearthly, girlish shriek” (45). A shriek has the power to open the door to the unusual. The narrator recounts, “[n]ever had human voice so affected Pierre before … [and] the sudden shriek seemed to split its way clean through his heart, and leave a yawning gap there” (45). To take this at its face value, it follows that Isabel is forcefully made to know the existence of her long sought-for brother by the “gratuitous old body” who “squeaked out shrilly—‘Ah! dames, dames, —Madam Glendinning!—Master Pierre Glendinning!’” (45). The moment she hears this announcement, Isabel swoons on the spot and issues a shriek that surprises Pierre. Although she expected to encounter Pierre sooner or later, Isabel is aghast by the sudden realization. There is an undeniable chance, however, that Isabel intentionally shrieks and performs in such a manner to draw Pierre’s attention and implant an unforgettable scene into his memory. From the very beginning, Isabel may have harbored designs to suddenly show up before Pierre and leave him with an impression of epiphany, a prompt towards Gnosticism.

“I can not but talk wildly upon so wild a theme” (115). Isabel confesses to Pierre that she may be recounting her life story too confusedly and incoherently to present an account Pierre can accept at face value. Both Isabel’s confession and her shriek validate the arguments developed by the French Feminist literary critics Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva: when one enters the realm of so-called Parole (“speech” in French), the prerogative realm of language, one is prone to label those who remain at the fringes of society, or put differently, those who are out of the realm of Parole, with marks of non-
beings or features such as expulsion, falsehood, death, and insanity. One can understand this if one recalls the essential features of the Parole and its users [meaning adults in developmental psychology; or only male adults in feminist readings]. What the inferior being verbalizes cannot be categorized into the realm of Parole, because it is nonsensical to the ears of the rational superiors adult male. These seemingly inferior beings as represented by Isabel do not merely remain incarcerated, but to the contrary turn their seeming handicap to their own advantage. Isabel misuses the esotericism [Gnosticism] as an alternative to the Parole/Logic/Christianity, and one of her Gnostic strategies is her letter to Pierre.

In stirring up Pierre’s eagerness to know the facts/knowledge about his father and half-sister, Isabel misuses Gnosticism as a strategic tool, luring Pierre into her trap as she expects. Misusing Gnosticism, she succeeds in changing the way Pierre sees the (now dysfunctional and feminized/sentimentalized) patriarchic world of his deceased father, where the previous mode of seeing the world, that of his father, is the mid-nineteenth-century Euro-American middle-class mode of perception. Consequently, Pierre becomes more unstable, more chaotic, and more subject to the influence of Isabel.

The Gnostic asserts that the call from beyond/without or spiritual venue awakens a slumberer and enables him to respond to the Godly within. This gnostic call from beyond/without corresponds to the letter from Isabel delivered to Pierre by a mysterious messenger, the provocative letter that says: “Read no further. If it suit thee, burn this letter; so shalt thou escape the certainty of that knowledge, which, if thou art now cold and selfish, may hereafter, in some maturer, remorseful, and helpless hour, cause thee a poignant upbraiding” (64). This letter had a tremendous effect: “so small a note” from
Isabel, “had thrown [him] into” “that tumultuous mood” (68).

After reading Isabel’s letter and leaving his family estate, Pierre dethrones his departed father from the status of God to that of Demiurge in the following process. Pierre’s departed father is previously enshrined as the statue “in the fresh-foliaged heart” of Pierre (68). Pierre worships his father as his “fond personification of perfect human goodness and virtue,” “without blemish, unclouded, snow-white, and serene” (68). This fondness can be attributed to the unrealistic image of Pierre’s father [or Mary’s husband] rendered in the parlor picture, the picture drawn “at the particular desire of my mother; and by a celebrated artist of her own election, and costumed after her own taste” (83). The painter of this portrait conceded to the feminizing and sentimental middle-class domestic ideology in the emerging capitalism of mid-nineteenth-century American society, and the client [Mary Glendinning] was in fact persistent in requesting a depiction of her husband with a gentlemanly demeanor. Hence came the overly sophisticated/domesticated face of the now dead Pierre Glendinning, Pierre’s father or Mary’s husband. Out of preference, Mary hangs it in the parlor, the very place that proves the (upper-)middle-class position of the residents (Hobsbawm). “[I]n the great drawing-room below” the picture “occupied the most conspicuous and honorable place on the wall” (72). Mary invokes the image of her dead husband every time she gazes at this picture, the portrayal of “the supposed perfect mould in which his virtuous heart had been cast” (69).

Yet we find another portrait of Pierre’s father in the story, a picture exposing his licentiousness in bachelorhood. Mary hides this second picture [“the chair-portrait” (78)] in the closet. “The mother of Pierre could never abide this picture which she had always asserted did signaly belie her husband”
“Her fond memories of the departed refused to hang one single wreath around it” (72). Pierre is so confounded by these two pictures, he blurts out a passage from Canto 25 of Dante’s *Inferno*: “Ah! how dost thou change, Agnello! See! thou art not double now, Nor only one!” (85). The polar-opposite features of Pierre’s/Isabel’s father portrayed in the second picture imply the siring of an illicit child before marriage to Mary. Meeting his half-sister Isabel in person, Pierre draws the second picture out of the closet and defiantly upbraids his dead father in the chair-portrait: “[W]ill I now a second time see thy obsequies performed, and by now burning thee, urn thee in the great vase of air!” (198) To the now Gnostic-minded Pierre, his father appears unmistakably as the fake-god Demiurge who, according to the Gnostic doctrine, fails to reproduce the celestial world but instead creates this evil-ridden world (concretely speaking, his illicit daughter Isabel). The father appears to the son worthy to be destroyed by the Gnostic, who happens to be Pierre. Pierre debunks his father’s genteel middle-class image, and thus revokes Captain Ahab, the exclaimer of the words, “All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks” (164). The sort of mask that the wife [Mary] puts on her husband is taken off and put into flame by the son [Pierre]: “he rolled the reversed canvas into a scroll, and tied it, and committed it to the now crackling, clamorous flames” (198).

We can find further signs to prove Pierre’s transformation into the Gnostic, as well. Pierre “feel[s] — what all mature men, who are Magians, sooner or later know, and more or less assuredly — that not always in our actions, are we our own factors” (51, my italics). Critical of the Western ontology or the Descartian mindset that assumes the I-think-therefore-I-am axiom, and awakened to his new identity as “a youthful Magian” (45), Pierre resorts to the
Gnostic strategy as an alternative to Western thinking in order to decipher Isabel’s identity. Exegetically, Pierre reminds us of the two personages, Simon Magus, the founder of Gnostic heresy, and St. Peter (Pierre, in French), the apostle who remonstrates Simon Magus for his proposition to buy out God’s power (Acts 8: 9–24).

Just as St. Peter suspects and distances himself from Simon Magus, the implied narrator distances himself from Pierre and ridicules him lightly with an offhand comment: “[Pierre] seemed a youthful Magian, and almost a mountebank together” (45). At this stage, the narrator and the author behind the narrator stay hidden at the wings, somehow managing to appear either neutral toward Pierre or to disclose to the reader their critical posture against Pierre as Gnosticism begins to pervade him under Isabel’s mesmeric power. This, however, does not discredit Dillingham’s cogent statement that “[i]t would not be surprising, then, if Melville had in mind the Gnostic Simon when he plotted the events in the strange career of his Gnostic Pierre” (199). To the contrary, Dillingham convinces us of a striking resemblance between Simon in the Bible and Pierre in Melville’s work, which we will see below.

According to Dillingham, Simon and Pierre are both led to their downfalls through their connections with suspicious women, Helena and Isabel, respectively. Simon is said to have been inspired by Helena not just physically, but spiritually, as a sort of woman comparable to Sophia in his eyes (the name Sophia, as already explained, connotes knowledge or truth etymological, if you like). Isabel resembles Helena, the reincarnation of Sophia [meaning knowledge], within whom Simon allegedly saw the spirit of God. This coincides with the impression and knowledge Pierre obtains from the God-inspired/God-invoking or even the godlike Isabel when he hears her life story for the first
time: “To Pierre, she seemed half unearthly” with “[h]er immense soft tresses of the jettest hair...slantingly fallen over her as though a curtain were half drawn from before some saint enshrined” (118). The enshrined god-like being is Isabel, suffused with “the sun-like glories of god-like truth and virtue” ensconced “upon the sapphire throne of God” (111). Besides, Helena (Helen), a prostitute and slave, is said to have been rescued by Simon Magus just as Isabel is by Pierre. Thus, we assume that Melville resurrects Helena and Simon, the founder of Gnosticism, and embodies them in the personages of Isabel and Pierre.

Church Fathers such as Irenaeus and Justinus regarded Simon as lecherous for accompanying the disreputable Helen and convicted him as a heretical fanatic for boldly proclaiming himself to be the Son of God. Hence came the virtual excommunication of Simon Magus and Helen. Similarly, Pierre and Isabel are both expelled from “Saddle Meadows [the manor of the Glendinnings, whose tenants include the Ulvers and their lodger Isabel]” by the figure sarcastically recalling Virgin Mary, Mary Glendinning (the widowed mother of Pierre and large-scale landowner), and her stipended underling of a sort, the parish minister. Thus expelled, Pierre and Isabel, both Gnostic, become reprobate pariahs. Hence, if Pierre is a Gnostic seeker of knowledge about his father (about the pre-marital behavior of his father and its consequence, Isabel’s illegitimate daughter), then Isabel is also described as such, seeking the whereabouts of her dead father. Hence, there is no obvious difference between the two putative siblings in terms of their Gnostic bent.

IV. An Unintended Swing Back to Anti-Gnosticism

Melville, it seems, felt no difficulty in conjuring up the image of (anti-)
Christ from the *newly awakened* Pierre. This demonstrates Pierre’s volatile status, inability to control himself, and delusion of grandiose subjectivity. The images of both Christ and anti-Christ under his newly acquired status as a Gnostic convert clearly evince his self-contradictory mentality. Let us succinctly observe some of Pierre’s images of (anti-) Christ. Not a few critics (Sundquist, for example) indicate that Pierre/Peter implies “stone” by way of the Greek etymological root, Πέτρος [stone/rock]. Biblically, the stone reminds Christians of Christ, Jacob’s pillow, and the kingdom of heaven (Eph. 2: 20, Gen. 28:10, Acts 4:11) (Bercovitch 268). Melville resorts to the blatant contrivance so that Pierre as “the heaven-begotten Christ” (106) becomes easily evocable in the minds of possible readers of the day, middle-class Christians raised and nurtured in the then-prevailing feminizing domestic ideology.

The image of Pierre as the second Christ [anti-Christ] is further reinforced when we recall other biblical images found in the text. The Saddle Meadows estate from which Pierre is disinherited is so depicted as to invoke the image of hell. “Locust Lane” (57), the name of the road leading to the Glendinning mansion, has an immediate association with the plagues of the Latter Days (Rev. 9: 3). The family phaeton, meanwhile, signifies 666, the number of the anti-Christ (Rev. 13: 18): “Though the vehicle was a sexagenarian [60s], the animals that drew it, were but six-year colts [two colts: 6+6]” (Bercovitch 297). After his mock-elopement with Isabel, Pierre suspects that his mother Mary is thrown into the land of toads and scorpions (Rev. 11: 7, 18: 4), and some readers may imagine Mary to be a Whore of Babylon when she curses the Reverend Falsgrave, “Begone! and let me not hear thy soft, mincing voice, which is in infamy to a man! Begone, thou helpless, and unhelping
one!" (194) At the Black Swan Inn, Pierre realizes he has lost the key for the chest. This proves that Pierre is quite different from Saint Peter/Pierre who is given the keys to the kingdom of heaven by Jesus Christ (Mat. 16: 13–19) [Fig. V]. Thus, Pierre imitates the Gnostic and dethrones his Demiurgeous father, flagrantly comparing himself to “the heaven-begotten Christ” (106) and falling into the fallacy of becoming the Demiurge or anti-God.

Historically, the impacts of Jesus’ wandering radicalism, of his abandonment of his family, wealth, and birthplace [Fig. VI], enabled the UR-Christian community to maintain its centripetal force, but this force was gradually lost with the passage of time, as the present day theologian Gerd Theissen makes clear. The Christian community thus veered into paternalism. A similar change in the nature of Christianity seemed to repeat itself in America from the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century, when the theocracy gave way to the capitalism-endorsing practical Puritanism in the vein of Max Weber and the feminized Puritanism best represented by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Based as it is on the hierarchic binarism of the superior giver and the inferior receiver, the protector and the protected, the ruler and the ruled, Paternalism is not neces-
sarily incompatible with the missionary-sending imperialism, gynocentric sentimentalism, and Christian humanism (mis)used by both the pro- and anti-slaverists of the day. Melville must have thought that references to Pierre’s Christ-like abandonment of his family, wealth, and birthplace would effectively warn and sway his contemporary readers, complacent with their middle-class environment. This does not necessarily mean, however, that Melville endorses Pierre’s overconfident attitude. The author seems to be aware that Pierre, the second born Christ, is equivalent to the Demiurge accused by the Gnostics for imitating God. As an incomplete Gnostic, Pierre is easily taken advantage of by the anti-Gnostic Plinlimmon.

The exposed identity of Pierre as a mere half-hearted illusive-minded Gnostic recalls Captain Ahab, the revengeful whaler captain defiant against the pseudo-God, Moby Dick. In Chapter 41 of *Moby-Dick*, Melville compares the Ophites [members of any of several Gnostic sects that flourished in the Roman Empire during the 2nd century A.D. and for several centuries thereafter] to Ahab, who believes that “intangible malignity” has existed “from the
beginning.” The Ophites “feel [the malignant agencies] eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung” (184). The Ophites [from ophis, snake in Greek], the members of a heretical Christian Gnostic sect, audaciously stressed the snake’s mission as “messenger of knowledge” (Nojima 127–28) and went so far as to revere the snake, a creature otherwise reviled as Satan’s underling. Ahab’s Gnostic [/Oriental] mindset coincides with the high regard he holds for certain sailors in the uncivilized non-European Pequod crew and his decision to appoint them as his aids. Ahab’s penchant for Eastern values implies a diatribe against and detachment from the Anglo-European-centric perspective. Timothy B. Powell recognizes Ahab’s multi-cultural stance in the age of white mono-culturalism. Yet Ahab has no apparent qualms about the exploitative mentality he holds towards his men, a mentality typical of the white imperialist of the day. Hence, Ahab is an incomplete heretic / Gnostic.

Ahab has been long criticized for not attempting to conceal his exploitative attitude toward his men in the sweatshop-like whaler. Charles H. Foster regards Ahab as Daniel Webster, the Union politician who evinced a compromising attitude toward the pro-slavery South. As I see it, the unsettled reputation of Ahab comes from the fact that Ahab, neither gnostic nor anti-Anglo-European-centric to the core, consciously or unconsciously assumes the mask of the Gnostic for the sake of his personal interest, i.e., vengeance against the white whale. Similarly, there looms a possibility that Pierre, like Ahab, is both an opportunist and halfway radical.

The exposed identity of Pierre as a mere half-hearted Gnostic rouses our suspicion that Pierre has relapsed into the previous mentality that supports Anglo-European-centric or Andro-centric metaphysics. Worse, we may even...
suspect that Pierre deliberately reinforces his own symptoms of this mindset while suffering from its recurrence. If this is so, it might explain Pierre’s otherwise self-contradictory behavior: as if returning to his starting point or resuming the discarded behavioral/thinking pattern, Pierre accepts his ex-fiancé Lucy against Isabel’s wishes and allows Lucy to live with the pretended wife and husband [Isabel and Pierre] in the same apartment. Pierre’s retreat also seems to be linked with his attraction to Plinlimmon, the inscrutable man with an anti-Gnostic/Anglo-European-centric mentality, as shown below.

Let us take a moment to turn tangentially to the heightened effect that Melville intends by bringing the anti-Gnostic Plotinus Plinlimmon up to the stage. Melville must have in mind the association between Plinlimmon’s first name, Plotinus, with the Hellenistic Neo-Platonist from third-century Greece well-known for his anti-Gnostic stance in his “Against the Gnostics” (or “Against Those that Affirm the Creator of the Cosmos and the Cosmos Itself to Be Evil.”

Let us recall here that the pamphlet that Pierre happens to read in the metropolitan carriage is allegedly written by Plinlimmon. This pamphlet, according to Dillingham, is “[i]n spirit ... strongly anti-Gnostic” (205). Dillingham’s construal sounds convincing and worth citing: “both [‘Against the Gnostics’ and Plotinus’s pamphlet] say essentially the same thing, namely that it is an error of the greatest magnitude to think oneself uniquely special and to seek God without regard for rational self-knowledge and respect for the natural world” (206). In the sequel of reading this anti-Gnostic pamphlet, Pierre begins to lose confidence in his Gnostic principles. Plotinus and the early church fathers, including Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, paved the way for the accusation against Gnosticism for its heretical theology.
As Dillingham points out (236), “Plinlimmon is close in sound to ‘Memnon [of the Memnon Stone],’” the Omphalos Stone at Delphi. This is the stone that the Greek once believed to be located at the center of the Earth. To assign both Plinlimmon and Pierre (the name Pierre signifies stone in French and Greek) at the center of the earth, the narrator resorts to the following logic: First, comparing Plinlimmon / Pierre to the stone / Memnon / Omphalos; Second, seeing the Omphalotic Plinlimmon / Pierre symbolically occupy the hegemonic position; Third, connecting the two with the historical fact, the reinforcement of the self-centricity during the antebellum period of (flawed) Individualism, Utilitarianism, Romanticism, and the Transcendentalist’s motto of “Self-Made” / “Self-Reliant” Man.

If Pierre and Plinlimmon are lookalikes, then why does Pierre find Plinlimmon unbearable?

Vain! vain! vain! said the face [Plinlimmon] to him[Pierre]. Fool! fool! fool! said the face to him. Quit! quit! quit! said the face to him.

(293)

Pierre suspects that “the face [Plinlimmon] knows that Isabel is not my wife! And that seems the reason it leers” (293). Plinlimmon [/Omphalos] reproaches Pierre [/also Omphalos] for his reprobative change into the non-Omphalotic/heretic/Gnostic under Isabel’s sway. Plinlimmon’s tacit accusation achieves success, judging from Pierre’s behavior in distancing himself from the Gnostic Isabel and allowing his ex-fiancée Lucy to live in a *ménage à trois*. Plinlimmon adamantly reawakens Pierre’s Euro-American-centricity with the pamphlet, the document that Plinlimmon has allegedly writ-
This document is a fragmented lecture pamphlet Pierre happens to find and reads in the metropolitan carriage. The pamphlet is entitled “EI.” The Word EI, engraved over Apollo’s tomb at Delphi (Dillingham 207), where the Omphalos Stone lies, the center of the universe (to the Greek, and by extension, to the Euro-American-centric-minded). Moreover, one is quick to recall that “[i]n that [Plinlimmon’s] eye, the gay immortal youth Apollo, seemed enshrined” (293). This implies that Apollo, the young Greek god, represents the positive value of Western Civilization: masculine beauty, reason, and order in contrast to the chaos of Dionysus. It follows, then, that Plinlimmon is on the side of Apollo/West/Reason-[Andro-centric] metaphysics [perspective]. Physically, “the blue-eyed” Plinlimmon represents the European against the “the dark-eyed” (37) Oriental Isabel. Plinlimmon’s influence over Pierre is inversely proportional to that of Isabel: degree by degree Plinlimmon dominates Pierre more completely, compelling Pierre to retreat to his previous pattern of behavior and thinking.

Isabel’s weakened power over Pierre’s mentality or the resurgence of Pierre’s Anglo-European centrism is suggested not just by Plinlimmon’s appearance, but also by Pierre’s hallucination during his stay in the Apostles’ community. Pierre compares himself, in this dream, to the tragic hero Enceladus, one of the Giants [Gigantes] defeated in the war against the Olympians [Gigantomachy] in Greek mythology. Melville may well have unconsciously confused Enceladus for a member of the Titans (to speak correctly, the Giants), but he must have deliberately written it down incorrectly for artistic effect. As the author must have surely known, dreams often take several illogical steps like mistaken short-cuts toward conclusions or reconfigurations of similar but different elements connected, separated, and replaced.
in nonsensical ways. A dreaming sleeper or a person entranced in dreams can directly approach the core of an issue in this way. Let us now take a hasty peep into Pierre’s dream and the Greek Myth that gives it a framework, and see how his dream reflects the reality or how Enceladus and the Titans relate to Pierre.

Fig. VII. *Titanomachy*, 1637–38. Peter Paul Rubens. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium Museum of Fine Arts, Belgium.

According to the myth, the Titans are, as the narrator himself reminds us, the offspring of incestuous unions, starting with the union between *Coelus* [or Uranus, the sky] and *Terra* [the earth]. Pierre, meanwhile, commits incest with Isabel. The Titans are defeated by the Olympians in the war [called *Titanomachy*] [Fig. VII] to become rulers of the universe, and consequently imprisoned by the victorious Olympians in the abysm or the hell called Tartrus. When one turns to *Pierre*, one notices that the ancient Greek story of the Titans corresponds to Pierre’s own experience, or repressed emotion, during his engagement with Lucy, the blue-eyed and blonde-haired girl who submits to his widowed mother Mary, the Goddess/mock Virgin Mary figure in Saddle Meadows [the Glendinnings’ manor]⁴. The association of Lucy
Tartarn to the abysmal hell [Tartrus] is not at all preposterous: the name of “Lucy” partially echoes the sound of Lucifer, a fallen angel in Hell, while her family name Tartan reminds us of Tartarus, the underworld or Hell. Pierre is trammeled by Lucy (and her mother) and incarcerated in the Saddle Meadows mansion by his domineering mother.

Another correspondence between the Titans and Pierre is their blindness. The Titans have their eyes blinded by the archenemy Zeus, while Pierre is stricken half-blind after “a sudden, unwonted, and all-pervading sensation seize[s] him” (341), probably because of inebriation or over-fatigue:

He [Pierre] could not see; though instinctively putting his hand to his eyes, he seemed to feel that the lids were open. Then he was sensible of a combined blindness, and vertigo, and staggering; before his eyes a million green meteors danced; he felt his foot tottering upon the curb, he put out his hands, and knew no more for the time. When he came to himself he found that he was lying crosswise in the gutter, dabbled with mud and slime. (341)

Now, let us return to the correspondence between Enceladus and Pierre. Though dissimilar to the counterpart in Pierre’s dream, the Greek mythological Enceladus is not armless. Both are the defeated “heaven [/society]-assaulters” (346), and for that matter Captain Ahab is also described as such. As one of the children of the incest-committing Goddess Gaia, Enceladus is easily associated with Pierre (and Isabel). Pierre learns, through his dream, that just as the heaven-defiant is defeated, so too is he. Moreover, if Pierre is a domestic version of Ahab, the two are “heaven-assaulters.”
Thus far we have seen the shift of Pierre’s mindset from Anglo-European [Logo-/Andro-] centrism to Eastern Gnosticism, but not a lasting shift: Pierre’s mentality retreats back to his (probably or probably not) initial state. In other words, Pierre ends up in his previous subject position, or more correctly, is forced by Plinlimmon to resume it. *Quo Vadis,* Pierre? Has Pierre returned exactly back to square one? Hasn’t Pierre (in)voluntarily let the erstwhile paradigm drastically change? The answer seems to be relevant to the strange similarities between the pairs of opposite beings, in one case Isabel and Plinlimmon, in another Plinlimmon and Pierre, with which the next chapter will deal.

V. The Opposites Merged

Curiously, Plinlimmon the anti-Gnostic is represented similarly to the Gnostic Isabel, the character diametrically opposite to Plinlimmon. The two turn up in front of Pierre in almost identical ways: Isabel lets a strange messenger hand her letter to Pierre as a preliminary step before meeting him, while Plinlimmon somehow manages to have Pierre read his pamphlet before their chance encounter. Moreover, the somewhat grotesque half-deaf old spinster sisters show up as harbingers for Isabel’s appearance, while in the later stage “Pierre in person had accosted a limping half-deaf old book-stall man, not very far from the Apostles,” in his search for the book that might contain the chapter dealing with “Chronometricals and Horologicals” (292), the same content of the pamphlet Pierre has presently lost. With “the gay immortal youth Apollo...enshrined” in his eye[s] (290), Plinlimmon appears to be in the camp of the Order-representing Olympian Gods (e.g., Apollo and Zeus), but with “old Saturn [equivalent to the Greek Cronus] cross-legged” sitting “on
Quo Vadis, Pierre, a Failed Messiah-Seeker in Melville’s Delphic Oracle?

[his] ivory-throned brow” (293), he also seems to be on the side of Cronus. Cronus is one of the chaos-representing Titans, defeated and expelled by Zeus. He is also regarded as the god of time, which incidentally makes him a plausible author of the pamphlet “Chronometricals and Horologicals” (210). Plinlimmon thus appears, to the reader’s eye, to partially intersect with Isabel, a loser expelled to the fringe of society by Pierre’s mother Mary. Isabel and Plinlimmon both appear vague and ghostly to Pierre’s eye, as well.

In Freudian psychology, something unheimlich can be taboo-ridden, repressed, excluded into the dark unconscious, and therefore indescribable. From a feminist and post-colonialist perspective, the unrepresentable is allotted to the inferior other beings who should be, in the eyes of those with hegemonic power, divested of power to preempt their disruptive and subversive threats. If one applies the Freudian psychology to Pierre along with the above-mentioned political criticisms, one will see Isabel as a representation of the exposers of hidden patriarchal injustice, accusing her own father who disowns her, and desecrating his authoritative patriarchal status. Plinlimmon, on the other hand, can be seen as a dishonest hermit who ridicules smug elitism. Plinlimmon’s smug or noncommittal attitude may rouse suspicion that his anti-Gnostic attitude is less sincere and morally honest, but rather hedonic. This suspicion is strengthened when the “noble foreign scholar” sends Plinlimmon “a very fine set of volumes,—Cardan [a Renaissance Italian mathematician], Epictetus [a Greek philosopher], the Book of Mormon, Abraham Tucker [an eighteenth-century English philosopher], Condorcet [an eighteenth-century French philosopher, mathematician, and early political scientist] and the Zenda-Vesta [sacred texts of Zoroastrianism]” (291). For these presents, Plinlimmon merely replies, “Missent.... if anything, I looked for some choice
Curacao from a nobleman like you” (291). Plinlimmon’s attitude implies that as a possible subversive element he is ready for violent revolution against patriarchy or patriarchic middle-class American society. Plinlimmon, as a matter of fact, is called the Grand Master of the Apostles, and hence can be likened to charismatic leader or possible revolutionary. But as a counterpoising fact, the Apostles’ community smells of anarchy, reminiscent of Plinlimmon’s opponent, the Gnostics, who are also said to have fallen into a kind of defeatist anarchism (Arai 53–54). To the eyes of “some zealous conservatives and devotees of morals” [i.e., those in hegemonic position], these community members appear to be “vaguely connected with the absolute overturning of Church and State, and the hasty and premature advance of some unknown great political and religious Millennium” (269). The police-office several times receives “warning ... to keep a wary eye on the old church” (269).

It follows then that Plinlimmon is antagonistic not only to the heretical Gnostics, but legitimate Christianity as well. According to Ueshiba (26), Plinlimmon contends, as a mere Utilitarian, that the practicing Christian dogma of love, and for that matter, the Gnostic seeking of knowledge, are next to impossible, and that the realizable good should be practiced instead. Plinlimmon, though anti-Gnostic, derides the legitimate (anti-heretical and hence anti-Gnostic) Christianity, the orthodox Christianity established in the Roman Empire in the fifth century, when St. Augustine wrote his *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos* [*The City of God Against the Pagans*] to distinguish the city of God from the city of man, the two realms comparable to chronometer and horologe, respectively, in Plinlimmon’s pamphlet. As Ueshiba indicates (27–30), Plinlimmon, the outsider of society, sees deep similarities between the Roman Empire of the fifth century, a land thrown into chaos by the beleaguer-
Quo Vadis, Pierre, a Failed Messiah-Seeker in Melville’s Delphic Oracle?

ing, invading Germanic race, and nineteenth-century America, a land thrown into turmoil by profit-seeking capitalism in the making. In a word, Isabel and Plinlimmon are both outsiders and therefore possible threats to the established patriarchy. Hence, we are wholly unsurprised to see Plinlimmon as a heretic who suffers expulsion and defeat, the fate shared by Saturn/Cronus. Thus, Isabel shares with Plinlimmon what is *unheimlich* (uncanny in German)/unrepresentable: both are dis-identified with their supposed qualities, the Gnostic or anti-Gnostic; and by extension — to commit a synecdoche fallacy — become two identical beings. The vectors of the two, Isabel and Plinlimmon, take opposite directions, but the opposite two are of equal value in absolute terms. Both of their magnificent influences over Pierre are extraordinary; both stay out of ordinary society. Irrespective of whether he is pro- or anti-Gnostic, Pierre yearns for something magnificent and irrational that can open the rift in the ordinary and take him beyond it, something that promises to give him a new perspective. Both the process and goal of this something will turn out to Pierre to be unrealistic and overly speculative, as will be shown later. At the most critical moment of his life — at the age of nineteen on the eve of marriage, preparing for his initiation into mature adult life, he catches sight of the fraud of the adult world as represented by the suddenly appearing Isabel, the illegitimate daughter of his deceased sacrosanct father. Pierre desperately needs something to prop him up. As seen in Chapter II, the first force to drive him is the identity confirmation of the two beings, Pierre himself in the prerogative subject position of the colonizer and Isabel in the inferior position of the colonized other. This identity confirmation would be made possible, in theory, with the power-possessing superior’s knowledge/ control of the inferior’s identity, but this kind of knowledge of Pierre’s bears no
fruit. In Pierre’s psyche, seeking knowledge about Isabel’s identity, or simply put, seeking Isabel, is interchangeable or confused with seeking the Messiah that Isabel somehow manages to represent, the Messiah also represented by Plinlimmon.

Here, turning our attention back to the relationship between Pierre and Plinlimmon, we are likely to see two only partially identical beings. When Pierre articulates himself as the reincarnation of “the heaven-begotten Christ,” he means by the “Christ” not the authoritative image of God who confers sanction to the patriarchic family system adopted by the (upper) Middle-Class American of the day and ideally represented by Pierre’s mother Mary, but on the contrary, the anti-God who endorses Pierre’s incestuous marriage with Isabel. Meanwhile, Plinlimmon presides over the mock-commune composed of the socially disenfranchised. The commune members are residents of “the supplemental edifice,” the apartment house “invad[ing]” into the yard of the ex-church [The Church of The Apostles] after the church stops its religious services: “some seven stories; a fearful pile of Titanic bricks, lifting its tiled roof almost to a level with the top of the sacred tower” (260). From these circumstances, Plinlimmon appears to be anti-Christ/Messiah with the commune members as his followers. If allowed to resort to the fallacious synecdoche again, one may identify Pierre with Plinlimmon in terms of their anti-Christ features. There is no contradiction in identifying Pierre with Plinlimmon, even though Pierre places himself under Plinlimmon’s umbrella, as if making himself subject to Plinlimmon, after proudly declaring himself “the heaven-begotten Christ.” This Pierre-Plinlimmon identification becomes still more possible by recalling that if Plinlimmon’s followers correspond to Christ’s twelve apostles, with Peter/Pierre, John, and James taking the lead-
ing roles, then we find the correspondence between Peter the leading disciple of Christ and Pierre as a leading disciple of Plinlimmon. Hence, Plinlimmon and Isabel can both be seen as symbolic Messiahs to Pierre, and merge into one.

VI. Messiah-Seeking and Dystopia-Making

To more fully understand Pierre’s inner mechanism that makes it possible to merge Isabel with Plinlimmon, we need to probe into the metaphysical/mythological/psychological condition. Here, we turn our attention to Plinlimmon’s Janus-like face. We have already mentioned that Plinlimmon’s face is a mixture of both “the gay immortal youth Apollo (defined as one of the Greek Olympian/Roman Gods)” and “old Saturn (the Roman Saturn equivalent to the Greek Cronus, one of the Titans defeated in the war (Titanomachy) and expelled by the Olympians)” (291). This means that Plinlimmon partakes of the distinguished features of Isabel, the losing party. Though Saturn/Cronus is known to represent chaos and agriculture in contrast to Jupiter/Zeus as the omniscient and omnipotent God of sky and thunder, similar, or much more famous, is the contrast between Apollo and Dionysus, the former representing order, reason, and logic; the latter, chaos and fertility.

Believers in Dionysus have the potential to form a democratic community, as no truly believing Dionysian is denied access to ritual participation. In the ritual they become entranced, which leads them to the illusion of self-integration and even omnipotence. This sort of occult community, with its mask of pseudo-democracy, can easily change into a radically violent group. The Nazis serve as a terrifying example. Liberal and open in its early stages,
the Dionysian community is likely to be exclusive of others and maintain homogenous features. It readily attributes to Dionysus a Hitler-like charisma and submits to his mesmerizing power. Friedrich Nietzsche entrusted to Dionysus the task of reinvigorating Europe(Ans) or, in the phraseology of Nietzsche, enervated Christian Europeans. Turning back to Pierre, we may argue that Plinlimmon gathers followers who are probably embittered against society for ignoring their intelligent talent and leaving them destitute. Plinlimmon, as anti-Christ, probably mesmerizes his followers in order to lord over them as an autocratic leader them in a Nazi-like community. The police several times receives “warning…to keep a wary eye on the old church” (269). Judging from the sarcastic style the narrator adopts in depicting Plinlimmon and the Apostles’ community, however, we can infer that Pierre holds himself so as not to entirely commit himself to the Apostles’ community or become engulfed by Plinlimmon’s underhand intrigue. Generally speaking, utopian societies of the day could only ephemerally sustain themselves with their unrealistic aspirations left undone.

Melville and Pierre probably detect where the pseudo-utopian community is heading. Or, to put it differently, Melville and Pierre probably finally recognize the futility of utopia-making and Messiah (utopia presider)-seeking and feel no longer able to hide their despair at (a) Messianic Being(s), the Messiah(s) who were supposedly to have presided over the Utopia. This is the psychic mechanism of Pierre/Melville that outdoes and nullifies the otherwise unmergeable nature of the two opposing elements, “pro-Gnostic” and “anti-Gnostic.”

Only a year after the publication of Moby-Dick, a beautiful rendering of a proto-democratic brotherly commune and homosocial comradeship of an all-
male whaler crew, Melville sarcastically exposed the illusory aspect of the comune in his next breath. Three distinguishing elements separate *Moby-Dick* from *Pierre*: first, the abovementioned style of depiction, second, the shift of the main setting (i.e., from the water in *Moby-Dick* to the domestic in *Pierre*), and third, the transference of dedicatees (i.e., from Nathaniel Hawthorne in *Moby-Dick* to “Greylock,” “the majestic mountain,” or “my own more immediate sovereign lord and king,” in *Pierre*). The gap between the two stories can be explained by Melville’s unrequited love for Nathaniel Hawthorne, the already canonical writer whom Hawthorne likened to a Supreme Being or Messiah, the mentor who suddenly deserted Hawthorne, exacting upon him a traumatic emotional injury.

Hoping upon the Messianic Being [the justice and absolute] to come, Jacque Derrida the Deconstructionist and Emmanuel Lévinas the postmodern Ethicist are both eager to see the unforeseeable and unknowable, the Beings who are other to and different from those who are disciplined, as Foucault would contend, into normal beings. Like Derrida and Lévinas, Pierre initially expects (a) Messianic Other(s) (Isabel and Plinlimmon, as chance would have it) to emerge, only to find that that the Derridean/Lévinassian dependence upon the Messiah is too optimistic to liberate him. For that matter, Melville felt himself deserted by a Messiah/Hawthorne. Hawthorne did not help Melville in distress when everyone else lambasted Melville’s works and virtually ousted him from literary society.

Meeting Isabel the Gnostic, Pierre deserts his own narcissistic solipsism, the solipsism forged by Euro-American/Logo-/Andro-centrism. Facing the accusatory look of Plinlimmon the anti-Gnostic, he reverts to his previous status. As a last and final solution for this, Pierre accepts a vicious circle and
deliberately leaves for himself only one means to break it: suicide, or a dose of poison in prison. Mistaking Isabel’s swoons for her death, Pierre says, as if speaking to her, “in thy breasts, life for infants lodgeth not, but death-milk for thee and me! — The drug!” and “tearing her bosom loose, he seized the secret vial nestling there” (360). Clearly visible in this final scene is Pierre’s determination to halt the vicious circle by rejecting life-giving milk, life/fertility symbolizing Dionysus, and Dionysus worshippers, including (as if prophesying Friedrich Nietzsche, junior to Melville by a generation) the philosophy that was to open the way to Nazism and Adolf Hitler’s Pseudo-Socialistic Party (National Socialist German Workers’ Party). In this sense, Pierre is Melville’s warning oracle. Melville’s determination as the author to dedicate Pierre not to Hawthorne but to Mount Greylock, evinces his deep disappointment at Hawthorne, the mentor he mistook for his Messiah.

One may ask, “Quo Vadis, Pierre? [Where are you going?]” — the same question put forth to Jesus Christ by St. Peter/Pierre. As it happens, Pierre’s final destination is his starting point, a state of incarceration. He reverts to his

Fig. VIII.  *St. Peter’s Crucifixion and his Disputation with Simon Magus*, 1482. Filippo Lippi’s Frescoes in the Bancacci Chapel of Sta. Maria del Carmine, Florence.
initial status but ends the circuit by committing suicide in prison after his arrest for the killing of his cousin. Pierre, who suffers an ignominious death in prison, is both similar to and ironically different from St. Peter, who returns to Rome to be killed/crucified, and consequently sanctified, after receiving Christ’s answer [Fig. VIII].

**Conclusion**

In the analysis thus far, this paper has not encountered any antithetical phenomenon that contradicts the hypothesis that unbeknownst to himself, Pierre Glendinning is tempted/forced to subvert the epistemology of the subject/object [oneself/the other] categorization by the ambiguous being Isabel. The force that first drives Pierre towards his tragic end is his desire to learn the true identity of Isabel Banford [the self-alleged half-sister]. This desire simultaneously reinforces his own identity, the identity unsettled by the appearance of Isabel, the unknowable being. Pierre begins as a knowledge investigator and resorts to the Western binary epistemology, which fails him. As his involvement in the mock-elopement with Isabel deepens, he is divested of what has been vital to him, his subjectivity and previous epistemology — both Anglo-European- and Andro-centric — and consequently veers toward Isabel-representing Gnosticism. Interestingly, Gnosticism is etiologically and theologically related to knowledge. Yet by declaring himself to be the heaven-begotten Christ, he ironically becomes the equivalent to Demiurge, the anti-God, the archenemy of the Gnostics. After being disinherited by his own mother Mary and arriving at the Apostles’ commune, Pierre plunges himself under the influence of Plotinus Plinlimmon, the anti-Gnostic. Irrespective of his leaning toward pro- or anti-Gnosticism, it follows that he needs something
magnificent and irrational that will open the rift in the ordinary and take him beyond it. He needs something to prop him up. In other words, he seeks (a) Messiah(s) in peculiar beings, the other beings embodied by Isabel and Plinlimmon. In time, however, Isabel the first pseudo-Messiah is outdone by Plinlimmon the second, and Plinlimmon exerts subversive power over the mesmerized pseudo-commune members. Pierre’s second movement toward a Messiah-like being fails him. He thus proceeds as follows: in the first stage, he realizes how the ineffectiveness of his knowledge-seeking and the futility of his attempt to establish his own power-based identity; in the second, he passes through pro- and anti-Gnosticism and returns to the starting point in a still-un-liberated state; and in the last, he breaks the vicious circle by seizing a vial of poison from the bosom of the swooned Isabel. Unlike Foucault, Pierre exposes the inefficiency of Western knowledge, power, and illusory patriarchic male subjectivity; unlike Derrida and Lévinas, Pierre exposes his pessimistic view about the futility of seeking (a) Messiah(s) in other being(s).

Let us reconsider the historical atmosphere of the age when this story was published, the age that presaged the postmodern impasse. The master narrative, called as such by the postmodern sociologist Jean-François Lyotard, began to show signs that its functions would cease. Put differently, both premodern god and modern-day knowledge, whether the Foucauldian knowledge equated with power or the knowledge promising for enlightenment, began to lose the convincing powers they once possessed.

To the question of “Quo Vadis? [reminiscent of the question that St. Peter/Pierre puts forth to Jesus Christ: Where are you going?]” Melville would have let Pierre answer like this: “To a postmodern nowhere where no one should or could expect the epiphany of a Messiah.” Let us assume that the two docu-
ments in the story — Isabel’s letter addressed to Pierre and “Chronometricals and Horologicals,” the pamphlet allegedly written by Plinlimmon targeting Pierre — correspond to the entire story addressed to unknown readers. Thus, it may be valid to hypothesize that Melville was provocatively exposing himself to his future readers just as Isabel exposes herself to Pierre. Melville may have aptly uttered an exclamation: “Read me through and through. I am entirely thine. See!” (54). So, too, could Melville have added Isabel’s half-apologetic and half-fretful plea, “I have no tongue to speak thee.... My whole being, all my life’s thoughts and longings are in endless arrears to thee” (113). Pierre is sort of an oracle Melville expected readers to read in the postmodern future.

In other words, the story of Pierre (original meaning: stone) is analogous to either the Delphic Oracle allegedly transmitted from the “the Memnon Stone [Delphi Omphalos]” on the one hand, or, on the other, Isabel’s “long-drawn, unearthly, girlish shriek,” the “Delphic shriek” that she utters when she meets her brother face to face for the first time (48). From a different perspective, the story suggests that Melville may have filled his oracle with the oracular ravings of Pierre’s own father on his deathbed, “the long-hushed, plaintive and infinitely pitiable voice — ‘My daughter! My daughter!’ followed by the compunctious ‘God! God!’” (71), in anticipation that future readers would decipher these ravings.

A year before publishing Moby-Dick, Melville wrote a paean to Hawthorne, titled “Hawthorne and His Mosses.” There, Melville compared Hawthorne to Shakespeare, “our Anglo Saxon superstiti[ous]” master who could deserve the “absolute and unconditional adoration,” and simultaneously made Hawthorne approachable by saying, “The smell of your beeches and hemlocks
is upon him; your own broad prairies are in his soul” (44). Melville saw Hawthorne as sort of a Messiah. Even after deserted by Hawthorne, Melville would have wished his ex-Messiah to hear this oracle, partly out of his still irrepressible love for Hawthorne, partly out of shame for mistaking Hawthorne for his Messiah, and partly for his resentment and anger at Hawthorne for appearing like his promising Messiah. Though Pierre might be allowed to solve his Messiah problem, Melville was unable to solve his. The issue was so deeply rooted in his personal traumatic experience with Hawthorne that the Messiah-like figure appears even in his posthumous novella *Billy Budd.*

**Notes**

1) All subsequent references to this story will be parenthetically included in this paper. Herman Melville, *Pierre: or, the Ambiguities.* Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP; Chicago: The Newberry Library, 1971.

2) The Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America was classified into the same category.

3) According to Melville’s biographer Filip Young (12-13), Melville’s own father, Allan Melvill [incidentally, with no “e” at the end], begot an illegitimate daughter with a Boston businesswoman named Martha Bent and then married the author’s mother to start a business importing ladies’ goods from France.

4) Just like an underling, Lucy helps Pierre’s mother Mary maintain her sense of self-worth and allows her to exclaim, somewhat patronizingly and condescendingly, “in the manner of the resplendent, full-blown” widow “followed by a train of infatuated suitors” (5): “Yes, she’s [Lucy is] a very pretty little pint-decanter of a girl: a very pretty little Pale Sherry pint-decanter of a girl; and I — I’m a quart-decanter of — of — Port — potent Port! Now, Sherry for boys, and Port for men — so I’ve heard men say; and Pierre is but a boy” (60).

5) Melville intensified his critical attitude against the homosocial society in “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” the short fiction written four
Quo Vadis, Pierre, a Failed Messiah-Seeker in Melville’s Delphic Oracle?

years after publishing Moby-Dick.

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Quo Vadis, Pierre, a Failed Messiah-Seeker in Melville’s Delphic Oracle?


Melville acquired the knowledge of Gnosticism in 1849, when he bought *Dictionnaire historique et critique [The Historical and Critical Dictionary]* by Pierre Bayle. Gnosticism may have helped Melville unlock the door to a realm beyond the wall or the realm hidden behind the mask, the hidden knowledge. According to Foucault, knowledge in the ages from enlightenment to (post-) modernism was not so much truth or untruth as control and possession, in short, hegemonic power. Melville’s attraction to Gnosticism is unsurprising if we recall that he possessed and was possessed with *knowledge*, but dispossessed of power (unpopular in literary circles) and destitute as a consequence. Curiously, however, the author allowed Pierre to nearly become a member of the mysterious mock-commune presided over by Plinlimmon, the man who happens to have the same given name as the third century anti-Gnostic, Plotinus. This paper tries to clarify 1 what factor(s) impel(s) Pierre to accept Isabel’s/Plinlimmon’s (anti-)Gnostic influence, 2 the direction in which Pierre finally goes, and 3 the pessimistic message, or oracle if you like, that Melville tries to transmit through Pierre’s abrupt suicide, the nullification of his progress towards possible liberation for himself and his half-sister.

Pierre is snugly bathed in “the brilliant chandeliers of the mansion of Saddle Meadow” as an inheritor-to-be. Pierre unknowingly follows the mode a white male (is forced to) make[s], the mode that perpetually (de)stabilizes his subject position, with recourse to false reality/identity perception and/or reality/identity fabrication. Pierre is too embarrassed to stay calm after hearing Isabel
recount her life story. He tries to regain his subject position by stealing and lying beneath the “Terror Stone” or the “Memnon Stone” of the Delphi Omphalos (the “navel,” or center of the world, in Greek). From there, Pierre says to Isabel, “[T]ell me every thing and any thing. I desire to know all.” His burning desire for knowledge about Isabel’s identity has a great deal to do with Foucauldian power-compared knowledge. As the intimacy with Isabel deepens, Pierre loses his subjective authority and veers towards Isabel, the representation of Gnosticism.

Isabel appears in the occult atmosphere and misuses esotericism/Gnosticism as an alternative to orthodox Christianity, leaving Pierre with an impression of epiphany, and thus prompting him to lean toward Gnosticism. Under her influence, he debunks his deceased father’s genteel middle-class image, dethroning him to the equivalent of Demiurge. Moreover, Pierre is a symbolic look-alike of Simon Magus, the founder of Gnostic heresy, in gleaning inspiration from a suspicious (licentious) woman, Isabel (as Simon does from Helen(a)/Sophia). Imitating the Gnostic and dethroning his Demiurgeous father, Pierre flagrantly compares himself to “the heaven-begotten Christ” and falls into the fallacy of becoming the Demiurge or anti-God.

Pierre happens to read a lecture pamphlet allegedly written by Plinlimmon and relapses again into the Anglo-European-centric mentality. This retreat is incited by Plinlimmon, the mysterious man whose surname sounds like Memnon (recalling the Memnon Stone that lies, according the Greek, in the center of the earth) and who shares the same given name as the anti-Gnostic Plotinus. Thus, Plinlimmon, the blue-eyed anti-Gnostic, is a stark opposite to Isabel, the “dark, olive cheek[ed]” (46) pro-Gnostic. Seen from another angle, this implies that Pierre, the nineteen-year-old preparing for initiation into mature adult life, desperately needs knowledge and mock-Messiahs to prop him up. The opposite two, the pro-Gnostic Isabel and the anti-Gnostic Plinlimmon, merge in Pierre’s psyche. This is not necessarily to say that Pierre retreats to his starting point. Pierre holds himself so as not to entirely commit himself to the community provided over by Plinlimmon, the mock-
utopia of sorts with its potential to change into a radically violent group.

Pierre breaks this apparent vicious circle by taking poison from the bosom of Isabel. Thus, it turns out that unlike Foucault, Pierre exposes the inefficiency of Western knowledge, and that unlike Derrida and Lévinas, Pierre exposes his pessimistic view about the futility of seeking a Messiah(s) in other being(s). He finally realizes that he is heading for a postmodern nowhere where one cannot or should not expect epiphany of a Messiah.

In *Pierre*, Melville warned of the futility of Messiah-seeking. Melville could textually allow Pierre to solve his Messiah problem, but the author could not solve his own Messiah problem, the problem attributed to his traumatic experience of being virtually deserted by Hawthorne, the object of his love and worship.