MELVILLE'S *REDBURN:* INITIATION AND AUTHORITY

MICHAEL DAVITT BELL

RECENT criticism of Melville's *Redburn,* when it has not been simply concerned with gauging the achievement of the novel, has involved itself in a debate which illuminates not only *Redburn* but also certain general and almost unconscious tendencies in American literary criticism. On the one hand, there are those who agree with Newton Arvin's "mythic" reading of *Redburn,* which asserts that its "inward subject is the initiation of innocence into evil." On the other, there are those critics, represented by James Schroeter, who argue that "the difficulty with the mythic method, certainly as applied to *Redburn,* is . . . that it is contradicted repeatedly by some of the most important tonal and structural features of the novel."[1] It is the intention of this essay to argue that while the action and tone of *Redburn* carefully limit the implications of such terms as "innocence," "evil," and "initiation," they do not dismiss the terms, which remain essential to the meaning. Moreover, the debate whether or not *Redburn* is a novel of "initiation" is generated more by certain critical assumptions than by any intrinsic peculiarity or ambiguity in the novel. For not only have American critics tended to find "the initiation of innocence into evil" in nearly every work of American literature, they have also tended to agree in viewing initiation as a *metaphysical* process. It has been characteristic of Melville criticism, in particular, to view the theme of initiation as a ladle with which to stir up once again the problem of evil—the metaphysical altercation between innate virtue and original sin.

[1] Arvin, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1957), 103; Schroeter, "*Redburn* and the Failure of Mythic Criticism," *American Literature,* XXXIX, 283 (1967). Schroeter's article contains a useful summary of criticism viewing *Redburn* as a "mythic" novel of initiation, obviating the need for including such a survey here. One might compare to Schroeter's own view Warner Berthoff's assertion that *Redburn* "does not . . . make its impression as a novel of 'initiation,' as has been claimed; its hero's experience is simply not given to us in sufficient depth. . . . Certainly he does not 'fall,' and is not 'reborn.' " (*The Example of Melville* [Princeton, 1962], 32, 33.

It is small wonder that such criticism has had trouble swallowing *Redburn*. For one thing it is hard to see Redburn's "innocence" as representing Adamic metaphysical virtue. It is, rather, little more than a collection of puerile illusions, a compound of ignorance, prudish scruple, and reverence for outworn or false symbols of authority. And while Redburn surely does confront "evil," he can hardly be said to be "initiated" into the experience of it. His characteristic reaction to evil is to shun it or attempt to correct it. To say that he is "Adamic" is to imagine an Adam who watched Eve eat the apple but righteously refused to partake himself. In the gilded lobby of Aladdin's Palace, Redburn may discover that "though gilded and golden, the serpent of vice is a serpent still" (234)[2]; but throughout his visit to this house of corruption he never even discovers what sins are being committed there. It is thus far from surprising that Redburn's "first voyage" fails to satisfy those critics who assume that "initiation" requires the introduction of a virtuous character into the experience of metaphysical evil.

In fact, however, their assumptions hardly seem warranted. Whatever its ultimate metaphysical overtones, initiation is most essentially a social or psychological process. In anthropological or psychological terms, and these fields provide our most pertinent models of the experience, initiation involves not so much the movement from good to evil as the movement from untried adolescence to responsible adulthood—from the mother's home to the father's world. In rituals of initiation the youth, who has heretofore only revered the fathers, joins their company. He grows up. It is with this social or psychological process of initiation that Melville is concerned in *Redburn*. Young Wellingborough is not so much virtuous as naive. He can imagine becoming a father, an adult, only in terms of the naive reverence with which he himself regards figures of authority. He imagines returning home to tell his "adventures" to his brothers and sisters, "and with what delight they would

[2] All parenthetical page references are to *Redburn: His First Voyage,* Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, editors (Evanston and Chicago, 1969).

listen, and how they would look up to me then, and reverence my sayings" (32). This combination of naiveté and boastfulness, soon driven out of Redburn by the shock of experience, appears later embodied in the figure of Harry Bolton.

Redburn moves into the world, leaving his mother's home, with the intention of becoming himself the sort of adult to whom he has previously been subject, and of whom he has previously been in awe. He does, in the process, encounter evil. But his real confrontation is with the process of initiation itself, with the image and authority of those fathers he has been taught to revere. The question facing the reader is not whether Redburn manages to assimilate or overcome his experience of evil, but whether he manages to secure for himself the power and responsibility of adulthood. To understand Redburn's initiation in these terms is to understand the relationship between the story of his voyage into the world and the picture of that world in all its corruption which fills so much of the novel.

The world into which Redburn moves *is* corrupt. But its corruption takes two forms.[3] On the one hand there is the apparently metaphysical evil Melville would describe in *Billy Budd,* referring to Claggart, as "a depravity according to nature."[4] In *Redburn* the fullest embodiment of this innate evil is the sailor Jackson who, according to his own account, "had passed through every kind of dissipation and abandonment in the worst parts of the world" (57). But there is another sort of evil in *Redburn,* at least as important as natural depravity, an evil resulting not from nature but from the institutions of man. If Redburn's naive moral and religious scruples are challenged by the depravity of Jackson, so his naive reverence for authority, his identification with the ruling class, finally succumbs to his discovery of the evil perpetrated upon the masses in the name of authority. This social evil appears everywhere. Its dimensions and implications are suggested by Redburn's

[3] On this distinction compare John Bernstein, *Pacifism and Rebellion in the Writings of Herman Melville* (The Hague, 1964), 57-58.

[4] *Billy Budd, Sailor,* Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr., Editors (Chicago, 1962), 75.

reaction to the statue of Nelson, symbol of just the sort of authority he revered as a child. "At uniform intervals round the base of the pedestal," he writes, "four naked figures in chains, somewhat larger than life, are seated in various attitudes of humiliation and despair. . . . These woe-begone figures of captives are emblematic of Nelson's principal victories; but I never could look at their swarthy limbs and manacles, without being involuntarily reminded of four African slaves in the marketplace" (155). So, throughout *Redburn,* heroic symbols of authority and tradition are transmuted into emblems of raw power and social injustice. And it is this process of transmutation that constitutes the principal "inward subject" of Melville's novel. To say that Redburn is initiated from "innocence into evil" is to say that he moves from a naive reverence for the fathers into a shocking and finally enervating realization of the social evil behind or beneath their authority.

To understand *Redburn,* then, is to understand the complex ways in which Wellingborough's belief in authority is undermined. One can distinguish various causes for his disillusionment. Most obviously it results from the discovery of actual corruption in authority figures. "I had heard," writes Redburn of Captain Riga, "that some sea-captains are fathers to their crew" (67). After being rejected by Riga, however, and after seeing him on deck in a storm wearing only a shirt and a night-cap and swearing like a sailor, Redburn draws a different conclusion: "I put him down as a sort of imposter; and while ashore, a gentleman on false pretenses; for no gentleman would have treated another gentleman as he did me" (71). A second cause of Redburn's disillusionment has already been mentioned—namely, his discovery that authority is in fact built upon a system of social inequality and oppression. The arbitrary tyranny of Captain Riga rests on the arbitrary subjection of the crew. The theme of inequality becomes more overtly social when Redburn arrives in Liverpool, to be confronted with the poverty and disease of urban masses. And on the return voyage these masses are actually incorporated into the ship-microcosm as steerage passengers. Ill-fed, ill-clothed,

ill-housed, they suffer without help or sympathy from the upper classes in the cabin. "However it was," declares the disillusioned Redburn, whose father had travelled in the cabin, "I cherished a feeling toward these cabin-passengers, akin to contempt" (261).

But if Redburn's disillusionment results from outward discoveries of corruption and social oppression, it also results, perhaps more significantly, from processes within Redburn himself. The fundamental rhythm of Redburn's experience, at least within the first half of the novel, is between a sense of desperation and a sense of contented acceptance.[5] For instance on the Hudson River packet, excluded from the genteel society of the cabin, young Wellingborough is possessed by "demoniac feelings" (13). These are "ejected" when he is accepted and fed by his brother's friend, Mr. Jones. Similarly, on board the *Highlander,* Redburn alternates between "a hatred growing up in me against the whole crew" (62) and the "delight" and "wild delirium" (115) of being part of that same crew in action.

This emotional vacillation is important because it is Redburn's "demoniac" feeling of exclusion that first threatens his reverence for authority. The opening of the novel is dominated by the strange symbolic glass ship, whose decrepitude foreshadows Redburn's disillusionment:

> Her figure-head, a gallant warrior in a cocked-hat, lies pitching head-foremost down into the trough of a calamitous sea under the bows—but I will not have him put on his legs again, till I get on my own; for between him and me there is a secret sympathy; and my sisters tell me, even yet, that he fell from his perch the very day I left home to go to sea on this *my first voyage* (9).

The figure-head is fallen, a victim of time. And Redburn par-

[5] This fundamental rhythm is characteristic of many of Melville's characters, notably of the Ishmael of Chapter 96 of *Moby-Dick,* "The Try-Works." That it was also characteristic of Melville himself is clear in the June, 1851 letter to Hawthorne in which he admits both the truth and falsity of Goethe's admonition, *"Live in the all,"* on the premise that "what plays the mischief with the truth [of the *"all* feeling"] is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion." (Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman, Editors, *The Letters of Herman Melville* [New Haven, 1960], 130-131).

ticipates, at least as far as collusion, in time's destruction of authority: "I will not have him put on his legs again." That Redburn is also an active threat to this ship is suggested somewhat earlier:

> When I was very little, I made no doubt, that if I could but once pry open the hull, and break the glass all to pieces, I would infallibly light upon something wonderful, perhaps some gold guineas, of which I have always been in want, ever since I could remember. And often I used to feel a sort of insane desire to be the death of the glass ship, case, and all, in order to come at the plunder; and one day, throwing out some hint of the kind to my sisters, they ran to my mother in a great clamor; and after that, the ship was placed on the mantle-piece for a time, beyond my reach, and until I should recover my reason.
>
> I do not know how to account for this temporary madness of mine (8).

Redburn's conscious reverence for authority, this memory makes clear, is in conflict with his unconscious desire to have some of the "plunder" for himself. Redburn longs for wealth and power, but because of his reverence for the fathers he can acknowledge his longing only as a "sort of insane desire," a "temporary madness." This "madness" is one with the desperation he feels on the Hudson River packet or on the *Highlander*. And while Redburn never comes consciously to hate his father, his loathing of the once-fatherly Captain Riga clearly owes as much to a personal sense of exclusion as to an objective sense of corruption in the captain. "No gentleman," Redburn complains, "would have treated another gentleman as he did me" (71).

The psychological contours of this conflict between conscious reverence and unconscious hostility toward father-figures are obvious and significant. But the historical contours of Redburn's internal division may be even more significant. Redburn, like Melville, belongs to the generation described by Emerson as "young men . . . born with knives in their brain," the generation raised under the oppressive shadow of the Founding Fathers and frustrated by the failure of these

Fathers and their traditions to pass on power to the sons. Melville grew up at a time when, at least in America, initiation of the sons into the world of the fathers was peculiarly difficult. "Authority falls . . . ," wrote Emerson; "antiquity is grown ridiculous."[6] Redburn's situation is thus typical of his generation. The "plunder" has been placed out of his reach. He must worship the fathers (whether Lord Nelson, Captain Riga or his own father) without the expectation that he himself will ever reap the rewards of fatherhood, the rewards of access to power and authority. It is out of this frustration that he turns, albeit unconsciously, on the fathers themselves. "I will not have him put on his legs again," he writes of the fallen figurehead, "till I get on my own."

The authority of the fathers, then, is undermined by their own corruption, by their oppression of the masses and by Redburn's own unconscious "insane desire" to seize their power from them or at least to "break . . . all to pieces" the relics of their power. To understand Melville's novel we must understand what happens on each of these levels of disillusionment. Does Redburn, for instance, ever discover any uncorrupted figure of authority—any figure combining the virtue he ascribes to his father with the power society has vested in Captain Riga? On the personal level, does Redburn ever resolve the conflict between his reverence for authority and his will to power? And we must ask, finally, how and whether Redburn adjusts to his sense of social evil and inequality. Does he find appropriate centers of just social power? Or does he, on the other hand, embrace the democratic faith in equality, to be secured by vesting power and authority in the masses through a revolution against the fathers—a revolution which would also release Redburn's own unconscious hostility toward figures of authority?

Once his disillusionment begins, Redburn never does find a figure in whom he can reverence the exercise of power. He dis-

[6] "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," in Perry Miller, Editor, *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry* (Garden City, N. Y., 1957), 7. For a fuller discussion of this generation's ambivalent feelings toward the Founding Fathers see my book, *Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England* (Princeton, 1971), esp. 38-44.

covers those authorities he reveres to be powerless, and he is unable to revere those who have power. The first sort of disappointment is registered in the incident of the old guidebook, handed down from Redburn's father, and by whose means the son attempts to find his way in Liverpool. Of the author, significantly anonymous, we learn that he "must have been not only a scholar and a gentleman, but a man of genteel disinterestedness, combined with true city patriotism" (147). Here is Redburn's ideal "gentleman." But this particular gentleman can only teach Redburn the bitter lesson that undercuts all revered tradition: "Guide-books, Wellingborough, are the least reliable books in all literature; and nearly all literature, in one sense, is made up of guide-books" (157).[7]

Redburn's experience with books also makes clear his inability to accept the new forms of power that have supplanted the order of gentlemen. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations,* donated by Mr. Jones, seems to promise access to the "plunder" hidden in the mysterious glass ship. In it, Redburn fancies, "lay something like the philosopher's stone, a secret talisman, which would transmute even pitch and tar to silver and gold" (86). But Redburn is incapable of reading Smith's book, let alone of mastering its mysteries of modern economic power. Another book, introduced in the same chapter as *The Wealth of Nations,* offers to unfold the secrets of modern political power. Blunt's Dream Book, we are told, "purported to be the selfsame system, by aid of which Napoleon Bonaparte had risen in the world from being a corporal to an emperor" (90). Yet Blunt himself finds in this book, not the secrets of politics, but an ominous foreshadowing of the Day of Judgment.

Although Redburn does not find in his voyage symbols of the sort of external authority he has been raised to worship,

[7] Redburn goes on to make an exception of the Bible: "But there is one Holy Guide-Book, Wellingborough, that will never lead you astray, if you but follow it aright." (157) As Lawrance Thompson first noted, however, it is the unmistakable ironic effect of this "exception" to *include* Scripture and God the Father in the novel's general repudiation of traditions and fathers. (*Melville's Quarrel with God* [Princeton, 1952], 82-84.) It is worth noting that in the terms of the opening of the present essay, and if Thompson's ironic reading is valid, metaphysical evil (evil from God) is simply a sort of corollary to the social evil (of authority figures) with which the novel is more immediately concerned.

there are suggestions that in mastering the lore of sailing, he finds within himself the sort of authority he has heretofore sought in others. It is in the rigging that he most nearly approaches a sense of contentment. *Redburn* might be read, in this light, as the sort of initiation novel in which the hero gains maturity and self-mastery by learning a particular craft or trade, as the Cub masters the lore of the Pilot in Mark Twain's *Old Times on the Mississippi*. Such a reading would find great significance in Redburn's reflections on the importance of the steersman:

> And [the cabin-passengers] little think, many of them, fine gentlemen and ladies that they are, what an important personage, and how much to be had in *reverence,* is the rough fellow in the pea-jacket, whom they see standing at the wheel, now cocking his eye aloft, and then peeping at the compass, or looking out to windward.
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> Why, that fellow has all your lives and eternities in his hand; and with one small and almost imperceptible motion of a spoke, in a gale of wind, might give a vast deal of work to surrogates and lawyers, in proving last wills and testaments (117) [my emphasis].

Although there is an ominous note of violence in this image, Redburn's steersman, like Twain's, does combine the qualities of authority (deserving "reverence") and power.

And yet Melville's innocent, unlike Twain's, cannot be said to find lasting comfort and power in the mastery of his trade. For one thing, Redburn is excluded from the psychological rewards of the common sailor. Mastery does not lead to acceptance. The picture of the sailor at the wheel is followed shortly by the admission that the crew "would not let me steer" (118). Here again the "plunder" is withheld. And the sailor's more tangible rewards are withheld by Captain Riga. His wages are denied in an act of petty tyranny. Redburn may foresake his ideal of the gentleman and may refuse to read *The Wealth of Nations,* but corrupt social power is given the last word. Redburn cannot resolve or escape his own personal dilemma without dealing first with the larger question of social inequality.

His sense of the "reverence" due the sailor at the wheel is,

of course, implicitly democratic. The image of the sailor's power grows directly out of Redburn's own exhilaration at mastering the sailor's art—his feelings of "wild delirium" in "furling the top-gallant sails and royals in a hard blow" (115). And the potential violence of the steersman toward the cabin-passengers reveals the revolutionary possibilities of Redburn's own "demoniac feelings" of frustration. Redburn is consciously quite skeptical of the hopes for improving the lot of sailors, at least within society as presently constituted. "Can sailors," he asks, ". . . be wholly lifted up from the mire? There seems not much chance for it, in the old systems and programmes of the future, however well-intentioned and sincere" (140). In another mood, however, Redburn can imagine, in the ideal society of his native America, a new order of social equality. The failure of the fathers to pass on their authority will be overcome by dispensing with the fathers altogether:

> We are not a nation, so much as a world; for unless we may claim all the world for our sire, like Melchisedec, we are without father or mother.
>
> For who was our father and our mother? . . . Our ancestry is lost in the universal paternity. . . . We are the heirs of all time, and with all nations we divide our inheritance (169).

"The whole world," Redburn writes later, "is the patrimony of the whole world; there is no telling who does not own a stone in the Great Wall of China" (292).

To some extent Redburn's democratic optimism, like Ishmael's in *Moby-Dick,*[8] grows out of his identification with common sailors. This being the case, it is important to observe a curious doubleness in the sailors of *Redburn.* On the one hand they are highly skilled craftsmen, giving them immediate con-

[8] One thinks particularly of Ishmael's hymn to the democracy of sailors at the end of Chapter 26 of *Moby-Dick:* "If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark . . . ; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God! . . . Thou who didst pick up Andrew Jackson from the pebbles; who didst hurl him upon a warhorse; who didst thunder him higher than a throne!" (*Moby-Dick,* H. Hayford and H. Parker, Editors [New York, 1967], 104-105.) For Redburn, too, democratic optimism leads inevitably to the figure of Jackson.

trol over the true sources of social power. But these sailors are also somehow connected with depravity, with Original Sin. This doubleness is most fully elaborated in the character of Jackson, at once the most highly skilled seaman on the *Highlander* and its most complete embodiment of innate evil. Which is to say, recalling my initial distinction between the two sorts of evil in *Redburn,* that while Jackson and the sailors are *victims* of social evil inflicted from above, they are at the same time *agents* of "depravity according to nature." As victims they represent Melville's hopes for democracy. As agents they represent his fears.

And one of Melville's primary concerns in *Redburn* is to understand the relationship between the victimization of the sailors and their depravity. At one point Redburn writes of Jackson: "But there seemed even more woe than wickedness about the man; and his wickedness seemed to spring from his woe" (105). Depravity, this is to say, is the *result* of victimization; metaphysical evil is but a product of social evil. Thus revolution, in disposing of victimization, should also dispose of evil. This is the classic revolutionary ideology—that all evil, finally, is social evil.

But the situation in *Redburn* is more complex than the statement about "wickedness" and "woe" at first suggests. If Jackson and the sailors represent the oppressed class in a totalitarian society, they also represent in embryonic form the sort of democracy envisioned by Redburn as supplanting totalitarianism. It is here that Jackson's name becomes important. For like the hero of New Orleans—to whom he claims kinship and whom he also resembles in his illness and wasted appearance—the sailor Jackson is a democratic leader, exerting power not through the channels of institutionalized authority, as does Captain Riga, but through his almost magnetic authority over the minds of the men. In part Melville is simply embodying in Jackson the insight presented for all by the rise of Napoleon and for many by the rise of Andrew Jackson— namely, that the toppling of tyrants in the name of democracy leads inevitably to the elevation of new despots in their place. Yet Redburn also hints at the source of this new despotism:

It is not for me to say, what it was that made a whole ship's company submit so to the whims of one poor miserable man like Jackson. I only know that so it was; but I have no doubt, that if he had had a blue eye in his head, or had had a different face from what he did have, they would not have stood in such awe of him (59).

The power of democracy is the power of innate evil. If Jackson's skill as a seaman represents the hope of democracy, his demonism represents the peril of democratic revolution, of the unleashing of the primary depravity in human nature. For all the "woe" in Jackson to which Redburn compassionately responds, it is to Jackson's "wickedness" that the sailors "democratically" subordinate themselves.

Thus Jackson's diabolical power provides a chilling counter-image to Redburn's vision of the "universal paternity" of democracy:

And though Tiberius came in the succession of the Cæsars, and though unmatchable Tacitus has embalmed his carrion, yet do I account this Yankee Jackson full as dignified a personage as he, and as well meriting his lofty gallows in history; even though he was a nameless vagabond without an epitaph, and none, but I, narrate what he was. For there is no dignity in wickedness, whether in purple or rags; and hell is a democracy of devils, where all are equals (276).

Jackson, in his democratic diabolism, is finally not so much the opposite as the equivalent of aristocratic Captain Riga. And just as Redburn's hopes for self-realization founder on the actual nature of social authority, as represented by Riga, so his vision of democratic power founders on the actualities of human nature, as represented by Jackson. "Hell," established by the first rebel of them all, "is a democracy of devils."[9]

In his more ebullient moods Redburn may hold to his sense of the promise of democracy. He may insist that in America "there is a future which shall see the estranged children of

[9] A comparable interpretation of Melville's attitudes toward democratic revolution, based on an analysis of *Billy Budd,* occurs in Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* (New York, 1965), 74-83. It is clear that in *Billy Budd,* in the complex inter-relationship of Vere, Claggart and Billy, Melville was returning to the issues, and to some extent to the situation, represented by Riga, Jackson and Redburn.

Adam restored as to the old hearth-stone in Eden" (169). In this view, which insists on the contrast between American simplicity and European urban corruption, the movement of American history is to be toward the restoration of a pastoral Eden. But the actual movement of Melville's novel undermines this vision of history. Redburn begins by leaving home. Jackson is no European but a "Yankee," an American. The actual "democracy of devils" comes to supplant the democratic dream of "Earth's Paradise." Redburn's vision distinguishes the Arcadian American future from the urban European present, but his growing sense of reality proposes a different future for America:

> And even as this old guide-book boasts of the, to us, insignificant Liverpool of fifty years ago, the New York guide-books are now vaunting of the magnitude of a town, whose future inhabitants, multitudinous as the pebbles on the beach, and girdled in with high walls and towers, flanking endless avenues of opulence and taste, will regard all our Broadways and Bowerys as but the paltry nucleus to their Nineveh (149).

It is to this "Nineveh," to the "obscure and smoky alleys of the Fifth Avenue and Fourteenth-street" (149), that Redburn and Harry return at the close. On their arrival they discover not the garden of Adam but the city of Bartleby, whose fate is foreshadowed in Harry's efforts to find work as a clerk.[10] This is

[10] Harry's story provides a curious counterpart or counterpoint to Redburn's. Most simply, his aborted initiation into the skills of the sailor provides the "plot" of the return voyage, as Redburn's more successful initiation provides the plot of the voyage out. Numerous readers have complained of the unreality of the London scenes in which Harry acts as Redburn's guide, but this unreality seems to be their point. As has already been mentioned, Harry embodies in the second half of the book the naive ideas of gentility, even of evil, which Redburn entertains in the earlier chapters. Thus Harry's inability to withstand the experience of life on the *Highlander,* and his ultimate disappearance and death, represent in some sense the disappearance of Redburn's naive reverence for adventurous excitement and gentility. But if Redburn's equivocal abandonment of Harry has symbolic connotations of the loss of illusion, on the personal level its implications may be more significant. For if Harry, in his defeat and in his attempt to find work as a clerk, foreshadows Bartleby, surely Redburn recalls the lawyer who for all his good intentions deserts Bartleby. Redburn's guilt is underlined by the final question of the stranger who recounts the circumstances of Harry's death: "Harry Bolton was not your brother?" (312) It may be important, too, that Redburn abandons Harry, not to seek his own place in the

the actual American future, and it offers no solace to Redburn's dilemma.

Redburn portrays, then, only the most incomplete sort of social initiation. While Redburn does discard the naive illusions of his childhood, he discovers no true image of authority, either in his world or in himself, to take their place. On the political level the hope of revolution, of democracy, is undermined by the depravity of Jackson and by the urban reality of the new America. On the personal level Redburn is left at the close with the same "demoniac feelings" of frustration with which he began. The pattern and its perils are clear. "At last," Redburn writes of his "initiation" into the crew of the *Highlander,* "I found myself a sort of Ishmael in the ship, without a single friend or companion; and I began to feel a hatred growing up in me against the whole crew—so much so, that I prayed against it, that it might not master my heart completely, and so make a fiend of me, something like Jackson" (62). The frustration of Redburn's political and personal urges threatens to make permanent the "temporary madness" and "demoniac feelings" of the early chapters—and thereby to turn Redburn into another Jackson. Those who find "growth" in *Redburn* miss the chilling effect of the protagonist's admission, near the beginning, that "I had learned to think much and bitterly before my time; all my young mounting dreams of glory had left me; and at that early age, I was as unambitious as a man of sixty" (10). Redburn's "initiation" simply confirms and deepens this early sense of despair.

All this is to give a grim reading to Melville's novel, and it might be objected that such a reading is belied by the humorous tone of much of the book.[11] No reader of *The Confidence-Man,* however, can really hold that for Melville humor was incompatible with despair. And there is surely a kinship be-

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adult world, but in a final effort to return home to his mother. John Seelye, who has suggested the importance of Redburn's desertion of Harry, also nicely describes the essential difference between the two youths: "Harry goes on, like all of Melville's absolute characters, to his death, while Redburn makes the return trip of the relativist." (*Melville: The Ironic Diagram* [Evanston, 1970], 45.)

11 See especially, for such an objection to mythic and "serious" readings in general, Schroeter's "*Redburn* and the Failure of Mythic Criticism."

tween the humor of *Redburn* and the humor of *The Confidence-Man.* One might note, for instance, the brief portrait of one of the more incidental isolatoes in *Redburn,* the solitary cabin-passenger on the voyage out:

> He was an extremely little man, that solitary cabin-passenger—the passenger who came on board in a business-like manner with his baggage; never spoke to any one, and the captain seldom spoke to him.
>
> Perhaps he was a deputy from the Deaf and Dumb Institution in New York, going over to London to address the public in pantomime at Exeter Hall concerning the signs of the times (107).

The Confidence-Man begins with the "advent" of just such a deaf-and-dumb stranger. And although the passenger in *Redburn* is hardly so important as the lamb-like first avatar of confidence, one sees in him the same qualities of submission, defeat, and despairing silence. This strange passenger seems a fit emblem of "bitter" and "unambitious" Redburn. And perhaps in his silence he "speaks" for Melville too; because if the present reading has itself any authority, *Redburn* is certainly Melville's own dark statement concerning "the signs of the times."