The Dialogue of Gender in Melville's *The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids*

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In the fierce arena of critical discourses about gender and sexuality, Herman Melville can be hardly called an innocent bystander. While many critics and historians persist in trying to examine how Melville's own ambiguous sexual identity may or may not correspond to sexual themes present in his texts, the past 25 years have also seen only perfunctory discussions devoted to "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." Alvin Sandberg, for example, argues that Melville's description of an idyllic bachelor life is, in reality, "an exploration of impotency, a portrayal of a man retreating to an all-male childhood to avoid confrontation with sexual manhood" (2). Michael Paul Rogin's critique of the story contrasts, on one hand, the Bachelors' material excess and, on the other hand, the maids' labored drudgery. Rogin compares the commodification of women's reproductive systems with the advent of industrial capitalism in New England during the 19th century (120–23). Both of these issues—the narrator's unstable sexuality, and Melville's critique of political or economic power—are taken up by Robyn Wiegman in her essay "Melville's Geography of Gender."

Wiegman argues that Melville's stories do not challenge either male power or capitalism; in fact, for Wiegman the stories are a perfect example of how what might be reductively called "patriarchal authority" can be mistaken for other, more subtle expressions of male sexual politics:

> Although the democratic mythos of brotherhood is maintained "without women," it is constructed, as in Melville's diptych, by her difference and by her necessary exclusion, for only through a masculinization of the bond—its construction as an uncompromisingly "masculine space"—can power relations among men be negotiated. (747–48)

According to Wiegman, the bachelors and maids are defined by their essential relation to male power; that is, the bachelors enjoy an exclusively male social economy, just as the maids are enslaved by a male-controlled labor system. Both of Melville's stories, in this case, form a "diptych," a cohesive unit that, when examined together, insulates male access to power and isolates female access. In other words, by virtue of their male privilege, even by calling them homosexual, the "Brothers of the Order of Celibacy" do not subvert patriarchal authority, but simply reinvent a new form of patriarchy in order to reinscribe themselves within it. Thus, for Wiegman, Melville's story demonstrates "the ability of the masculine point of view to cloak its own ideological investments while continuing to envision itself everywhere" (755).[1]

But if we buy this argument that the Bachelors constantly assert

their male power—even within a narrative that proports to critique social constructions of gender—Wiegman does not truly or comprehensively consider Melville's narrator or, indeed, the formal structure of "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." In fact, the critical term used to describe the pair of stories, a "diptych," suggests much more about the stories' construction than the use of a simple narrative technique that joins both halves. It is possible to see Melville's stories as interdependent portraits, hinged together like medieval diptychs, which are locked in a dialectical relationship that maintains narrative control while it questions its own authority. In this sense, Melville's narrator is more than simply "unreliable." The diptych works, as Robert Martin argues, "as if Melville had found in the form a way to express a sense of irreconcilable opposites . . . [it] traces the connections between a series of dualisms, nature/society, female/male . . . body/mind" (105–06).

As the locus of the stories' consciousness, the narrator remains always a visitor, a traveler, an observer; and his voice and point-of-view changes constantly. It may be true that, by the end of the stories, the narrator does not attain a feminist perspective—but neither does he maintain a "phallocentric" perspective, nor does he comply unyieldingly with whatever his surrounding environment imposes upon him. If we examine the construction of Melville's "diptych" more thoughtfully, and endow Melville's narrator with a fuller range of expression, and a more complex set of reactions, it is possible to see "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" set within a liminal space in which the privileging of sexuality, or gender, or power is never absolutely maintained.

It is important that we recognize Melville's narrator as a fluid persona: he (and we presume it is a he) not only mediates between the Bachelors and the Maids, but he himself is responsible for generating many of the dichotomies that set the stories' oppositions in motion. Although the gender and class politics posited in the stories can be said to exist independently of the narrator, the narrator's own transitional status provides the means for the stories' ideological polarization. Throughout the stories, he remains the central figure in a range of gendered discourses struggling for power.

When "The Paradise of Bachelors" opens, it introduces Melville's narrator in London. The Temple, the scene and arena of idyllic bachelorhood, is quietly isolated not only from the physical geography of the city, but from its action and movement:

> Sick with the din and soiled with the mud of Fleet Street—where the Benedick tradesmen are hurrying by, with ledger-lines ruled across their brows, thinking upon the rise of bread and fall of babies—you adroitly turn a mystic corner—not a street—glide down a dim, monastic way . . . [and] stand beneath the quiet cloisters of the Paradise of Bachelors. (261)

The Temple is seen as a safe, sane refuge, free from the "din" and "mud" of urban life, and the narrator tries to distinguish its pre-

industrial, almost Wordsworthian natural order from the industrial, almost Blakean unnatural disorder he expects from a metropolitan center like London. The narrator describes the Temple as a series of "courts and vaults, lanes and passages, banquet halls, refectories, libraries, terraces, gardens, broadwalks, domiciles, and dessert-rooms . . . all grouped in a central neighborhood" (263). Here the "monastic" metaphor is a crucial one: difference between the external world of London and the internal world of bachelorhood is not only manifested in the Temple's architecture, but is posited as the spatial equivalent of male difference, male order, and male privilege. Since the Bachelors refute the external world, the Temple is emptied completely of anything that Melville, like Thoreau, might have identified as domestic, heterosexual space. Such space is idealized by the Bachelors as a prototype of patriarchal order. By virtue of its inaccessibility, the Bachelors' Paradise fulfills what Wiegman sees as an "utopian alternative to the heterosexual hierarchy" (747).

But however solid or convincing this description of an exclusively male space may appear, throughout the story the narrator insists that the Temple has assumed many facets of "the city," and thus all the characteristics and functions of a heterogeneous community. Within the Temple's walls, the Bachelors have created "[a] city with a park to it, and flower-beds, and a riverside—the Thames flowing by as openly, in one part, as by Eden's primal garden flowed the mild Euphrates" (264). This contrast between such natural landscape and man-made architecture implies something much more provocative than mere physical difference. The fertile flowers, the sensual and "flowing" Thames, are regenerative forces, and it could be said that they threaten the homogeneous symmetry of the monkish Bachelors and the Temple's buildings. Here, as elsewhere, Melville's narrative identifies these natural forces as "female." Suddenly, these seemingly banal details signify something completely different: they expose the heterogeneity of the natural world as synonymous with the heterosexual world of London. Both the garden and London are constant reminders of physical forces beyond the Bachelors' collective control, of dangerous, abstract sexuality, and of the cobwebs and cloisters of their own repressed desires.

As a visitor to the Temple, the narrator recognizes that the gardens, the flowers, even the flowing waters hold a certain heterosexual symbolism and energy that seems to subvert and ultimately displace the Bachelors' constructed ideal of themselves and how they represent themselves publicly. And more than anything else in the portrait, it is Melville's narrator who is responsible for intuiting and articulating these gendered concepts in what Melville calls his "congenial" digressions. As a traveler, as an American abroad, even as a Yankee entrepreneur among British men of leisure, his status as the arbiter of truth remains always temporary, evanescent, and subjective. In fact, as we come to learn, the narrator recognizes that he himself is freed from domesticity and obligation for the very same reasons as the Bachelors: "Almost all of them were travelers, too; for bachelors alone can travel freely, and without any twinges of their consciences touching desertion of the fireside" (269).

If Melville's narrator implies that what constitutes power or privilege is essentially a gendered construction, then the basic critique of masculinity or patriarchy or even homosociality as a basis for understanding Melville's stories is severely limited. The "masculinized" Temple, and the "feminized" natural forces, not only co-exist in the Bachelor's Paradise, but perpetually reverse, redefine, and requalify each other so that whatever patriarchal power or privilege seems to be conferred upon the Bachelors can never be reconciled completely with the fertility that surrounds them. How then, does Melville's narrator schematize this interdependent relationship, or competition, between male and female forces; between homosocial exclusivity, on one hand, and heterosexual community on the other? How does this male difference and privilege, which Melville seems to convey so overtly, and which critics see so explicitly, become decentered in and by the text?

One possible site of contention discovered early on by Melville's narrator is made through his references to the male body. Of the Bachelors, he says: "The thing called pain, the bugbear styled trouble—those two legends seemed preposterous to their bachelor imaginations . . . Pain! Trouble! As well talk of Catholic miracles. No such thing.—Pass the sherry, sir" (269). Here the narrator describes one of the strongest compulsions in the Bachelors' lives: they deny the existence of emotional and physical pain, and treat it satirically as a mythic trope or an abstract topic, like "Catholic miracles." This repudiation of pain is, of course, the perfect metaphor for the Bachelors. If pain, instinctual and visceral, exists outside the realm of their "bachelor imaginations," then it must be outside the realm of true masculine experience. Their bachelorhood, their isolation, and their homoerotic fraternalism remains inaccessible, irretrievable—"no such thing."

In the second half of Melville's diptych, "The Tartarus of Maids," Melville carries this awareness of the physical body to the next level—it becomes the ideal metaphor through which Melville illustrates differences in gender and power relations. Within the Tartarus of Maids, the narrator wavers between emotion and rationality, and in doing so mediates between the Maids' blank minds and reproductive bodies. Melville's attention to the Maids' physical attributes seems inversely proportional to how he represents the Bachelors themselves. Indeed, I would argue that the narrator experiences an aggregation of both mental and physical pain that seems to parallel, if not exactly equal, the pain suffered by the Maids. The narrator becomes the only person—and, perhaps most significantly, the only *man*—who can absorb the Maids' silence and give voice to their exploited position.

When Melville's narrator first arrives in the valley known as the "Devil's Dungeon," he travels through an exaggerated terrain of female sexual symbols. He rides by the "Mad Maid's Bellows-pipe," across "Blood River," and arrives finally at a place called the "Black Notch" (271–75). While in transit, the narrator explains that

> . . . something latent, as well as something obvious in the time and scene, strangely brought back to my mind my first sight of dark and grimy

> Temple Bar. And when Black, my horse, went darting through the Notch. . . . I remembered being in a runaway London omnibus. . . . Though the two objects did by no means completely correspond, yet this partial inadequacy but served to tinge the similitude not less with the vividness than the disorder of a dream. (275)

Here, the narrator succumbs to feelings that are anything but the controlled and rational thought processes that previously governed him and—we are to assume—the Bachelors, those stand-in models (however exaggerated) for Melville's psychology of masculine experience. The narrator does not seem to understand what these connections might suggest for him, but at least he intuits something beyond rational or logical understanding. What, exactly, does the grotesque sexual terrain have to do with the closeted, cloistered Bachelors? What impalpable, but no less terrifying, sexual tension does the narrator try to express; and what, therefore, remains inexpressible? If the Devil's Dungeon suggests uncontained, uncontrollable female sexuality, then how does it remind the narrator of a "runaway London omnibus"? Perhaps this explains Melville's technique for distinguishing between male and female experience: unable to transform feeling into logical thought, the narrator must attribute this "vividness" of bodily experience to what he calls the "disorder of a dream."

Further on, when he reaches the Maids' paper-making factory, the narrator is again reminded of the Temple: " 'The sweet, tranquil Temple garden, with the Thames bordering its green beds,' strangely meditated I. But where are the gay bachelors?" (276). Here, what was inexpressible only moments ago seems now much more clear. The narrator has formed a mental bridge between the Devil's Dungeon and the gardens and waters of his London experience; and, by doing so, he invokes the imposing threat of sexuality, both male and female. But more than simply act as metaphors for sexual repression, repulsion, or desire, these images reveal how easily Melville's narrator naturally polarizes instinct and logic, sense and thought. His mind must by needs equate these strange sexual impulses with female irrationality, just as the Bachelors equate London with female, or heterosexual, disorder.

At this stage of the story, this explanation for emotion may seem nothing more than a way to excuse masculine negligence that borders on effeminate hysteria. As the Bachelors themselves demonstrate, an exclusively and self-consciously masculine discourse cannot articulate the female body, let alone articulate the male body. Bodily sensation, or pain, is shown here as mental irrationality, a constitutional deficiency, and is here inscribed as a female characteristic. But, one wonders, does Melville's narrator always keep these ontological processes polarized—are the hysterical and irrational in this narrative only attributed to female experience? It seems to me that, as the narrator progresses through the Tartarus of Maids, Melville's position on male and female experience is far less constant, and far more negotiatiable, than perhaps we give him credit for.[2]

As the narrator gradually indulges and explores the intuitive and

visceral, he is able to supply the women with a voice; of the Maids' workroom, the narrator observes that

> Not a syllable was breathed. Nothing was heard but the low, steady overruling hum of the iron animals. The human voice was banished from the spot. Machinery—the vaunted slave of humanity—here stood menially being served by human beings, who served mutely and cringingly, as the slave serves the Sultan. (277–78)

As other scholars have noted, the "slave" image here has two clear connotations. One describes the exploitation of the women's physical labor, and the other describes the exploitation of the women's reproductive organs. Of course, as models of women's oppression, the two are clearly intertwined, if not sustained by their interdependence. Robert Martin, for example, suggests that "The hellish factory is presided over by a bachelor [named Old Bach], so that the erotic transformation that underlies the tale is made explicit; female sexuality is employed to produce a commodity, the sale of which provides profit for the male owners" (106). But since the operating metaphor of male domination—which reminds us again of the Bachelors' implicit desire for male control—is strangely and mysteriously mediated through the narrator, it seems to me that any attempt to make the narrator mindlessly complicit with "patriarchal authority" must be questioned. In fact, I would argue that his simultaneous access to both bodily pain *and* rational language—to both the oppression of women *and* the systematic questioning of male power—seems to challenge such easy conclusions.[3]

Towards the end of "The Tartarus of Maids," the narrator's emotions more or less consume his perception, and he seems to abandon whatever presumption of male power he flaunted in "The Paradise of Bachelors." When he describes one of Old Bach's machines as "multitudinous and mystical . . . like some long Eastern manuscript" (281), his speech seems to be emptied entirely of what we might call "rational discourse" and filled copiously with metaphor. This signals (at least to me) Melville's attempt to institute a new model or category of perception for his male narrator. The narrator's own curious and awkward verbal vascillations seem more than mere exclamations of outrage, panic, or even pain—his language very consciously demonstrates how the differences between "male" rationality and female "emotion" are constructed ones.

Even more spectacular during this transition is that the narrator is not only the site of gendered difference from the Maids, but the site of gendered difference from the other men of the factory. Indeed, it could be argued that the narrator experiences alienation from both male and female communities. Not only is he the singular conduit through which female pain is disseminated throughout the rest of the story—he is also the conduit for the inarticulated realm of male pain.

When Cupid, Old Bach's assistant, makes a "heartless" comment about the Maids, the narrator's observation clearly delineates the manifest differences between him and his male contemporaries: "More tragic and more inscrutably mysterious than any mystic sight, human or

machine, throughout the factory, was the . . . cruel-heartedness in this usage-hardened boy" (281). The narrator resigns almost involuntarily from the arrogance and separatism that affected his earlier encounters with the Bachelors, and his narrative voice attains a more fluid and dynamic range of sensation and perception. Indeed, Melville's narrator uses the words "mystical" and "inscrutable" several times to describe what he sees, adjectives that defy the rules of common sense and masculine decorum established by the Bachelors of Paradise. One need only compare Melville's impenetrable use of "mystical" here with the assured, ironic "mystic corner" (261, quoted above) that describes the path to the Bachelor's Temple. The malleability of such adjectives within the space of twenty-odd pages signifies something much more provocative, if more impalpable, than any gender-specific reading of Melville's diptych can invoke. Since these two opposed models of thought and experience are never entirely reconciled, but constantly reckoned *with*, the narrator becomes something larger than that for which his biological gender destines him.

What, then, should we make of the narrator in Melville's curious diptych? Is he an enlightened pre-*Iron John* male feminist? Is he merely a Northern entrepreneur reacting to the ways in which industrial capitalism has wreaked havoc on the New England landscape and on the American body politic? Is he, when all is said and done, just another white male whose behavior and language valorize that convenient though abstract term called "patriarchy"? Or is he, like Bartleby, or Billy Budd, or even Ahab, a blurry, ethereal, androgynous enigma, who refutes categorization precisely because he no longer fits neatly with the paradigms of masculine "logic" or female "pain" that Melville has set out, like a shrewd card dealer, before us?

In the last few pages, the narrator tries desperately to make sense of these ontological shifts; he explains that, "For one moment, a curious emotion filled me, not wholly unlike that which one might experience at the fulfillment of some mysterious prophecy. But how absurd, though I again; the thing is but a mere machine, the essence of which is unvarying punctuality and precision" (283). As these few lines suggest, the process by which this one figure has achieved this new perspective, this new height of consciousness, was not, and may never be, absolutely complete. Melville's narrator never seems to recover from the cumulative effects of these dual emotional and physical experiences, and his role as mediator has far reaching implications for the story's conclusion. When he leaves the factory, he tells Old Bach that, " 'Yours is a most wonderful factory. Your great machine is a miracle of inscrutable intricacy' " (285). The quotation neatly encapsulates the diptych. For the narrator of "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" has not only been himself the principal machine in the diptych's dialogue of gender, but his very presence, his very consciousness, has become the diptych itself: the ideological see-saw by which Melville's two stories have been alternately conveyed.

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NOTES

1. According to Wiegman, whether or not the Bachelors are homosexual does nothing to interfere with their access to patriarchal power, despite the frequent conflation of homosexuality with radical or feminist critiques of the dominant culture. While I do not subscribe to this reductive view of reified male power, an elaboration of this argument may be found in Eve Kosofsky Sedwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977).
2. This assumption owes its intellectual origins to feminist historians such as Mary Poovey, Leonore Davidoff, Mary Ryan, Sally Shuttleworth, and Judith Walkowitz. In brief, much of their work surmises that the poor and inadequate medical treatment of middle-class women in 19th-century England was based upon the assumption that women were, biologically speaking, more volatile and dangerous than men. Their containment and suppression in social, political, and economic issues were valorized by this medical reasoning, and enforced strictly by male codes of health and propriety.
3. See Julia Kristeva's famous essay, "Women's Time" (1981). Kristeva explores how the recognition of pain in women's daily lives, by women themselves, has the potential to mobilize them towards certain forms of self-affirmation and collective identity. Could Melville have attempted to negotiate with this form of empowerment 125 years earlier?

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