

## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

“Almost  
All the wise world is little else in nature  
But parasites or sub-parasites.”

Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, Act 3, Scene 1, Line 11–13

“Scientists ... have no idea how many species of parasites there are, but they do know one dazzling thing: parasites make up the majority of species on Earth. According to one estimate, parasites may outnumber free-living species four to one. In other words, the study of life is, for the most part, parasitology.”

Carl Zimmer, *Parasite Rex*, p. xxi

“There is no system without parasites. This constant is a law.”

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 12

There can be no doubt that Herman Melville (1819–1891) was keenly interested in all manner of living creatures—as Johan Warodell has noted, not only did he write “one of the world’s most famous books about an animal,” one can find references to more than 350 different species in his works (68–9). For this reason, please take a moment to consider the following question: If the relationships—be they between humans, or between humans and animals—depicted in Melville’s texts were to be described in biological terms, which type of relationship would be the most relevant?

To readers of *Moby-Dick*, in particular, the answer might seem obvious: Ishmael’s description of the “universal cannibalism of the sea; all

whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began” (*MD* 274) points to *predation*. Not only is it easy to understand the battle between Ahab and Moby Dick as a clash between two mighty predators trying to defeat each other, but, as Elizabeth Schultz has pointed out, imagery supporting such a reading abounds in the novel, where Ahab is repeatedly associated with predatory animals like leopards, tigers, bears, and wolves (102). Crucially, in the “wolfish world” portrayed by Ishmael (*MD* 51), man does not only prey upon the creatures of the sea, but also upon his fellow men: *Homo homini lupus est*.

While there is no doubt that the relationship between predator and prey is relevant to *Moby-Dick*, as well as to a work such as “Benito Cereno,” to my mind, there is another type of biological interaction that might prove to be equally important—if not more so—if the aim is a better understanding of what typically defines relationships in Melville’s writings. This is the parasitical relationships referred to in the three epigraphs from Shakespeare’s great contemporary, Ben Jonson, the popular science writer Carl Zimmer and the French philosopher and historian of science Michel Serres.<sup>1</sup> Whereas predation involves either an individual or a group of predators killing the prey—think of a lion attacking an antelope—parasitism instead involves smaller organisms feeding on a larger host. While this might, in certain cases, result in the death of the host organism, oftentimes the loss caused by the parasite is minor, and may not even be noticeable to it at all. As I see it, such uneven relationships, where the weaker try to feed off the more powerful—who, in turn, might be sponging off *their* superiors—are, in fact, everywhere in Melville’s writings. Taking my cue from Serres’ book *The Parasite* (1980), my contention is therefore that the common image in Melville is that of human affairs as “parasitic chains” where “the last to come tries to supplant his predecessor” (4). To elaborate on the importance of the conceptual figure of the parasite in Melville’s writing, in this book I will

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1 In addition to predation and parasitism, the relationships in Melville’s works might also be analyzed from a perspective of what Schultz has termed “an intrinsic and irresistible interdependency among diverse species of life” (100), or what biologists usually term symbiosis. For an example of such a reading, see Sanborn (“Melville”).

offer detailed analyses of the parasitical relationships found in two of his novels—*Typee* and *The Confidence-Man*—and two of his short stories: “Bartleby the Scrivener” and “Jimmy Rose,” as well as briefer reflections upon *Omoo* and *Billy Budd, Sailor*.

A more detailed history of the figure of the parasite will be offered in Chapter 2, but a few basic details are here in order: Stemming from the Greek *parasitos* (later *parasitus* in Latin), the word means next to (*para*) the food or the grain (*sitos*).<sup>2</sup> Having its origin in a religious context, it eventually came to designate a type of stock character in Greek and Roman comedies whose *raison d'être* was that of acquiring a free dinner from others. Particularly famous in this regard are the parasites of Plautus and Terence. The parasite can be defined as a figure lacking a proper place at the host's table—he is a “foreign body” who does not really belong, and who is at the mercy of those who feed him.<sup>3</sup> Even though he received a dinner invitation yesterday, he can never be sure that another one will be forthcoming today; hence, he is forced to apply a variety of tactics if he is to avoid going hungry, and typically has to depend upon his wit, inventiveness and a sharp tongue. In addition to flattering his patrons, performing various types of services for them, or providing other kinds of entertainment, the comedic parasite often has to be willing to suffer all kinds of abuse—physical as well as verbal—to ensure access to meals. Most often functioning as types in ancient comedy, rather than individualized characters, they were frequently made to serve as the butts of jokes and as moral exempla of unethical behavior to be avoided. Still, they were not always presented in a negative light, but were sometimes portrayed as intelligent opportunists excelling at taking advantage of others and, on occasion, also allowed to play leading roles.

However, the concept of the human parasite described so far—the concept Ben Jonson had in mind when he wrote that “[a]lmost/ All the wise

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2 On the etymology of “parasite,” as well as of “host,” see Miller (“The Critic”).

3 Even though a few female exceptions exist, I use the word “his” because the classical parasites were almost always male. Anna Watkins Fisher oversimplifies matters when she claims that the parasite is “a historically feminized metaphor for an intruder that is overly dependent, ungracious, and unwelcome” (“We Are Parasites”). While some comedic male parasites have been portrayed as feminine, the parasite was still characterized by such typically masculine traits as gluttony and a voracious appetite.

world is little else, in nature,/ But parasites or sub-parasites”—is not the only one available, neither today nor in Melville’s era. As Chapter 2 will explore in more detail, botanists had begun using the adjective “parasitical” and the noun “parasite” to describe certain kinds of plants in the mid-seventeenth and the early eighteenth century, respectively, whereas from the end of the eighteenth century, naturalists came to adopt the noun for insects and animals that, according to a fairly typical contemporary definition, “live for an appreciable proportion of their lives in (endoparasites) or on (ectoparasites) another organism, their host, are dependent on that host and benefit from the association at the host’s expense” (Matthews 12). Over time, this new biological understanding would become not only dominant, but eventually also taken for granted. As the word “parasite” came to be primarily associated with entities like lice and tapeworms, rather than with people looking for free dinners, the classical concept was relegated to comparative obscurity. Exactly when this shift took place is difficult to decide, but it had obviously not yet occurred in 1829, when the pseudonymous Dick Humelbergius Secundus offered the following definition: “in plain English, at the present day, [parasite] means neither more nor less than what is generally understood by the word *spunger*, or *hanger-on*, a personage at times not easily affronted, and of whom, at all times, it is not easy either to dispense with or to shake off” (93; emphasis in the original).

It was only in the last half of the nineteenth century that the biological concept came to be the standard one, due to the establishment of parasitology, the biological subfield dedicated to the study of the life cycles of parasites and their relationships to their hosts. A comparison with the life and work of the naturalist usually held to be the father of American parasitology, Joseph Leidy (1823–1891), shows that Melville’s career as a professional author is almost exactly coterminous with the first American scholarly research on biological parasites. Born four years after Melville, and dying a few months before him, Leidy first made a name for himself with the identification of the parasitic worm *Trichinella spiralis* in 1846, the year *Typee* was published. Furthermore, he had his first classic monograph on parasites, *A Flora and Fauna within Living Animals*, accepted for publication in 1851, the year

*Moby-Dick* came out, and published in 1853, the same year as “Bartleby, the Scrivener.”<sup>4</sup>

As Tyrus Hillway has argued in several publications, even though his descriptions are often critical and sometimes inaccurate, the largely self-taught Melville was a keen student of science, “of which he was much more thoroughly aware than most of his literary contemporaries” (“Critic of Science” 411).<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that he was also familiar with the new scientific concept being shaped by Leidy and others. While he himself only used the noun “parasite” or the adjective “parasitical” a handful of times in his literary writings, these references are particularly relevant because they indicate that he was writing during a transitory phase when the new biological concept seems to have co-existed on more or less equal terms with the older, classical one; a phase, in Gillian Beer’s words, “when ‘a fact is not quite a scientific fact at all’ and when ‘the remnant of the mythical’ is at its most manifest” (4). To be precise, in *Typee*, there is a reference to “parasitical plants” (*T* 40). In *Mardi*, the sucking-fish, or Remoras, which cling to the backs of sharks, are described (wrongly, as it were) as

snaky parasites, impossible to remove from whatever they adhere to, without destroying their lives. The Remora has little power in swimming; hence its sole locomotion is on the backs of larger fish. Leech-like, it sticketh closer than a false brother in prosperity; closer than a beggar to the benevolent; closer than Webster to the Constitution. But it feeds upon what it clings to; its feelers having a direct communication with the esophagus. (*M* 54)<sup>6</sup>

Later in the book, Babbalanja makes the claim that “as the body of a bison is covered with hair, so *Mardi* is covered with grasses and vegetation, among which, we parasitical things do but crawl, vexing and tormenting

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4 On Leidy’s life and work, see Warren.

5 Much has been written on Melville’s relationship to the various natural sciences and pseudo-sciences of the nineteenth century. Examples include Hillway (“Spirit of Science”; “Amateur Zoologist”; “Critic of Science”; “Education in Science”; “Geological Knowledge”; and “Two Pseudo-Sciences”), Karcher, Marovitz, Otter (*Melville’s Anatomies*), Schultz, Wilson, Barnum, Rebhorn, Calkins, as well as my “Man or Animal?”

6 On the factual inadequacy of the quoted passage, see Hillway (“Amateur Zoologist” 160–61).

the patient creature to which we cling” (*M* 458).<sup>7</sup> In *Clarel* (1876), the Greek Banker travelling from Smyrna is said to like not only Glaucon, his son-in-law-to-be, but also “his clan,/ His kinsmen, and his happy way;/ And over wine would pleased repay / His parasites: Well may ye say/ The boy’s the bravest gentleman!—” (*C* 2.1.162–66). Also, during a discussion between Rolfe and Derwent about Rome, Catholic monks are likened to “Parasite-bugs—black swarming ones” crawling over a vine (*C* 2.26.181).<sup>8</sup>

To Melville, in other words, the parasitical does not only refer to interactions among humans and to sponging animals, insects, and plants, but it is also used to indicate similarities between these different registers, as the quotations from *Mardi* and *Clarel* indicate. To understand the importance of the figure of the parasite in Melville’s writings, one must therefore consider its dual belonging to culture and nature, as well as its capability of metaphorically transferring meanings between these two domains. In my opinion, the most relevant thinker for this task is Michel Serres, who has ceaselessly traversed the boundaries between the soft and the hard sciences, as well as between the natural and the cultural, showing how they are always mixed up in each other; in his words, “[v]ery little literature strays far from science, and much brings us back to science. Very little science strays far from literature, and much brings us back to literature” (*Parasite* 211).

Serres’ work is relevant for the analysis of the “parasitical relationships” found in Melville’s writings for several reasons. I will return to his

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7 Another passage where humans are indirectly likened to biological parasites can be found in Chapter 48, where the narrator attempts to describe the strangeness of the school of bonito swimming alongside the *Chamois*. He then inquires what the craft and the humans aboard it look like to the bonito, which are said to consider the *Chamois* as a strange sort of fish: “What a curious fish! what a comical fish! But more comical far, those creatures above, on its hollow back, clinging thereto like the snaky eels, that cling and slide on the back of the Sword fish, our terrible foe. But what curious eels these are!” (*M* 149).

8 There are also many references that bring the figure of the parasite to mind without naming it, or that concern specific species of parasitic animals, such as leeches. In what is surely a pun, meant to invoke both doctors and blood-sucking worms, the narrator of *Typee*, Tommo, offers this description of the native who tries to heal his swollen foot: This old “leech” had “fastened on the unfortunate limb as if it were something for which he had been long seeking” (*T* 80). Ishmael claims that the killer whale “sometimes takes the great Folio whales by the lip, and hangs there like a leech, till the mighty brute is worried to death,” and also describes a harpooned whale trying to “rid himself of the iron leech that had fastened to him” (*MD* 143, 385). For additional references, see (*R* 269), and (*P* 304).

arguments in more detail, but two deserve immediate mention. First, his theoretical contribution helps shift focus away from the question of the *identity* of the parasite to its *relationship* with its host(s) and its *effects* on its surroundings. Through reconceptualizing the parasite as a “thermal exciter” nudging the systems it enters away from an equilibrium state, Serres helps explain how even the actions of small and seemingly insignificant foreign bodies can have a major impact on their surroundings (*Parasite* 190). Even though the consequences differ greatly, this is something that holds true for all the texts I interrogate in this book. Second, his concepts of the “parasitic chain” and “cascade” help examine how the manifestations of parasitism in Melville’s works gradually become more complex, in the end coming to include almost all of society within their purview. I therefore concur with a claim made by Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, who belong to the very limited number of previous scholars who have deployed the conceptual figure of the parasite to analyze Melville’s writings.<sup>9</sup> As they at one point argue, “[i]n Melville’s universe, parasites exist in every social interaction” (“Masquerades” 50). The only thing I would add is that whereas they are specifically talking about the literary universe of *The Confidence-Man*, their words are equally relevant to many of his other texts, where, as soon as one starts looking for them, parasites turn out to be almost everywhere.

At this point, a potential objection must be addressed. If my last claim is correct, why is it that Melville only uses the words “parasite” and “parasitical” five times in his works? While this limited number might seem to counter the validity of my claim, to me, the crucial factor is not the presence of these words in his writings, but rather the presence of character traits typically associated with the figure of the parasite. *The Mask of the Parasite: A Pathology of Roman Patronage* (1997) helps explain why this

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9 Several Melville scholars have mentioned the parasite in passing, and many biologists have spiced up their writings on whale parasites by referring to Melville; to quote Jennifer Calkins: “You would be hard pressed to find a single book describing the natural history of the sperm whale that does not use extensive quotes from *Moby-Dick*” (40). To my knowledge, there are only a handful of contributions that explicitly treat the topic. Two texts that briefly touch upon similar issues will be addressed in Chapter 4: Little, and Vismann. Chapter 6 discusses the most thorough contributions: the Serres-inspired readings of *The Confidence-Man* by Gelley (“Parasitic Talk”; “Talking Man”), and by Snyder and Mitchell (“Masquerades”; *Cultural Locations*).

is so. Here, Cynthia Damon argues that the word “parasitus” was rarely used outside of the genres of comedy and the declamation in ancient Rome. Still, authors in other genres had at their disposal a variety of means of indirectly eliciting the type of the sponger: “many postcomedy references to parasites evoke the type by its distinguishing characteristics or behaviors rather than by the label *parasitus*” (Damon 24). The traits that allowed playwrights and authors to create characters that audiences and readers would recognize as belonging to the type of the parasite will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 2, but two of the most important ones must here be mentioned: an excessive interest in food and a willingness to do more or less anything to acquire free meals.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the word “parasite” is seldom used by Melville, such traits are everywhere in his writings.

## On Food in Melville

To approach these parasitic traits, I want to highlight a theme that for a long time received meagre critical attention from Melville scholars: *food*—that is, food of other kinds than human flesh.<sup>11</sup> Given the enduring ability of this most forbidden dish to thrill the reader’s imagination, it is no wonder that a lot of criticism has concentrated on the different uses Melville made of it in works such as *Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, and “Benito Cereno.”<sup>12</sup> The quality of the best of these contributions aside, the focus on

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10 As Damon argues, it was common to highlight such traits in others in the genres of satire and forensic oratory: Horace, Martial, and Juvenal drew on typically parasitic traits to satirize their targets, yet without openly accusing them of being parasites, whereas Cicero frequently did something similar in his legal speeches to undermine the credibility of his opponents (105–251).

11 Among the scholarly writings that have considered the question of food in Melville without a focus on cannibalism, see Stein, G. Brown, Savarese, and Hughes. Even though she only makes a few references to Melville, for a thorough exploration of the importance of food and eating in nineteenth-century American literature, see Tompkins.

12 For a general overview of the importance of cannibalism to Western thought, see Avramescu, and Sanborn (*The Sign* 21–73). Sanborn’s *The Sign of the Cannibal* stands as one of the best approaches to anthropophagy in Melville. See also several of the contributions in the anthology *Critical Essays on Herman Melville’s Typee* (1982), edited by Milton R. Stern, as well as Crain, Hughes, Herbert, and Pollock.



anthropophagy might nevertheless have helped overshadow that human flesh is far from the only dish of importance in Melville's works.

Recently, however, the analytical perspective on food has started to widen. Particularly important here is Édouard Marsoin's work on the concept of *pleasure*.<sup>13</sup> While delight in eating is only one of the many, often interconnected pleasures explored by Marsoin, he has not only shown how important food (of the non-cannibalistic kind) is in Melville's work, but also how he frequently invokes other pleasures through metaphors related to nourishment, for example having to do with taste and touch. In fact, even a cursory reading of Melville's writings clearly indicates how important the topics of dinners and feeding are to many of his narrators and characters. For example, the narrator of *White-Jacket* (1850) puts it in no uncertain terms: "let us candidly confess it, shipmates, that, upon the whole, our dinners are the most momentous affairs of these lives we lead beneath the moon. What were a day without a dinner? a dinnerless day! such a day had better be a night." (*WJ* 29). The narrator of *Mardi* asserts that "no sensible man can harbor a doubt, but that there is a vast deal of satisfaction in dining. More: there is a savor of life and immortality in substantial fare. Like balloons, we are nothing till filled" (*M* 170), whereas the eponymous narrator of *Redburn* (1849) claims that "I never felt so bad yet, but I could eat a good dinner," before continuing: "And once, years afterward, when I expected to be killed every day, I remember my appetite was very keen, and I said to myself, 'Eat away, Wellingborough, while you can, for this may be the last supper you will have'" (*R* 23). And in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael offers the advice that "when cruising in an empty ship, if you can get nothing better out of the world, get a good dinner out of it, at least" (*MD* 447).

Moreover, Melville's characters often take an almost sensual delight in consuming and in thinking about meals. That they frequently linger on the taste and smell of what they eat, can be seen in the following tribute to the pork that Tommo, the narrator of *Typee*, is served by his savage hosts on the island of Nukuheva, "a morsel of which placed on the tongue melts like a soft smile from the lips of Beauty" (*T* 159). Through

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13 See Marsoin (*Melville*; "The Belly Philosophical"; "No Land" and "Billy Budd").

this hyperbolic description, he is not simply drawing our attention to an objective fact about his meal or about the cannibal tribe supplying it. More significantly, he is clearly expressing his own fundamental, subjective *hunger*—a hunger which, I contend, must be taken into consideration to understand his actions and his narrative.<sup>14</sup>

These quotes indicate that many of Melville's different narrators and characters seem to be uncommonly preoccupied with their dinners, time and again expressing their strong cravings and "genuine relish" for nourishment (*MD* 292). Hence, his novels and stories abound not only with situations where characters exchange table-talk during meals, but also with detailed references to various types of foods and foodstuffs; to meals meager and festive; to a lack of nourishment or an abundance thereof; to the taste and flavor of food; to expectations of good meals to come; and reflections on how best to acquire them. For example, the entire first half of "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855) essentially consists of detailed descriptions of a single, sumptuous dinner that the narrator attends in the company of a band of merry, well-off bachelors in London. In addition, "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" (1854) juxtaposes two very different meals where the narrator gets to sample and compare the hospitality of the poor and the largesse of the rich, finding them equally unappealing.

Obviously, these aspects have not gone entirely unnoticed among Melville scholars, some of whom have touched upon them in their writings. Newton Arvin has for example noted that the extensive "praise of eating and drinking [in *Mardi*] is highly Rabelaisian in intention" (73); Richard Chase claims that in order to understand the deeper meanings of *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924) one "might well begin with the large number of figures of speech having to do with the act of eating" (Introduction xiv);

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14 That Melville frequently uses hunger (or lack thereof) to characterize his characters is also evident in *Pierre* (1852). Here, the narrator initially notes that the title character "always had an excellent appetite, and especially for his breakfast," but after the incidents that lead to his self-destructive pursuit of a career as an author in New York, it is remarked that "his is the famishing which loathes all food. He can not eat but by force. He has assassinated the natural day; how can he eat with an appetite?" (*P*: 16, 305). *Pierre's* changing relation to food thus becomes one of the narrator's means of tracing his fall and destruction. For a further analysis of *Pierre's* changing dietary habits, see Marsoin ("The Belly Philosophical" 1715–17).

whereas Dan McCall argues that dining “appears so persistently and with such prominence that it constitutes a major theme of [Melville’s] work” (41). These insights notwithstanding, this “major theme” has seldom been pursued in a sustained manner. Instead, it tends to be either mentioned in passing or in a way that only accords it importance insofar as it is treated as a symbol of something less mundane. A good example of the latter tendency can be found in Thomas J. Scorza’s “Tragedy in the State of Nature: Melville’s *Typee*” (1979). Commenting on the lack of food experienced by Tommo aboard his ship, the *Dolly*, Scorza claims that “the fact that ‘weeks ago’ the ship’s ‘fresh provisions were all exhausted’ is important only because it points to the more crucial fact that the ship’s society has exhausted its *moral* stores in its cruise” (227; emphasis in the original). Something similar might be said of the Melville scholars who have treated references to food and eating as veiled allusions to socially unacceptable sexual practices and desires, as does Robert K. Martin when he claims that “Melville makes frequent use of food as a metaphor for love” (46).<sup>15</sup> The problem is that whenever a textual description of (lack of) food is seen as nothing but a sign or a coded reference, the importance of what is explicitly there in the text risks being overlooked.

The end of Chapter 33 of *Moby-Dick*, “The Specksynder,” can begin to indicate why the topic is far more important than Scorza realizes, as well as important for different reasons than those suggested by Martin. Here Ishmael reflects upon how the distinctions between officers and sailors are upheld at sea. While acknowledging that the crew aboard the *Pequod* was in many ways treated leniently, he notes that “yet even Captain Ahab was by no means unobservant of the paramount forms and usages of the sea” (*MD* 147). As becomes clear, these forms and usages were something the captain took advantage of for his own ends. For, as Ishmael puts it:

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15 For similar arguments, see Crain, and Hughes. To treat food as a metaphorical substitute for something forbidden is common in psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud has argued that dreams of food signify “an innocent desire” used “as a screen for a more serious one which could not be so openly displayed,” such as “a child’s longing for his mother’s breast” (233).

That certain sultanism of his brain, which had otherwise in good degree remained unmanifested; through those forms that same sultanism became incarnate in an irresistible dictatorship. For be a man's intellectual superiority what it will, it can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other men, without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments, always, in themselves, more or less paltry and base. (*MD* 148)

Exactly which “external arts and entrenchments” Ishmael has is mind is never really spelled out. It is striking, though, that the next chapter, “The Cabin-Table,” is dedicated to a contrasting discussion of how dinner is consumed by the captain and his three officers—Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask—and then, after they have finished eating, by the ship's three harpooners. As Ishmael makes clear, meals aboard the *Pequod* are served according to old maritime customs where the steward first alerts the captain that dinner is ready. The captain then makes the announcement to the first mate, the first mate to the second, and finally the second mate to the third. In this order, and with a suitable pause between each, in silence they enter the cabin, are served, and begin to eat. Under Ahab's stern gaze, Starbuck is said to receive “his meat as though receiving alms,” whereas Flask, the last to enter, is said to do so “in the character of Abjectus, or the Slave” (*MD* 150). The end of the meal reverses the order of the entrance, meaning the third mate must finish first:

Flask was the last person down at the dinner, and Flask is the first man up. Consider! For hereby Flask's dinner was badly jammed in point of time. Starbuck and Stubb both had the start at him; and yet they also have the privilege of lounging in the rear. If Stubb even, who is but a peg higher than Flask, happens to have but a small appetite, and soon shows symptoms of concluding his repast, then Flask must bestir himself, he will not get more than three mouthfuls that day; for it is against holy usage for Stubb to precede Flask to the deck. Therefore it was that Flask once admitted in private, that ever since he had arisen to the dignity of an officer, from that moment he had never known what it was to be otherwise than hungry, more or less. For what he ate did not so much relieve his hunger, as keep it immortal in him. (*MD* 151)

Even though this practice seemingly only follows “holy usage,” here it becomes evident that access to food functions as one of Ahab's practical

means of keeping those closest to him in rank aboard the *Pequod* under his control; to quote Ishmael: “They were as little children before Ahab” (*MD* 150).<sup>16</sup> In other words, the distribution of nourishment and the regulation of its consumption function precisely as examples of those “external arts and entrenchments” that allow the captain to strengthen and maintain his “practical, available supremacy over other men.” However, it is not obvious why, day after day, the three officers consent to hurriedly eat in “awful silence” (*MD* 151), especially since Ahab has never explicitly forbidden conversation during the meals. Ishmael’s attempt to explain this puzzling fact invokes Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon:

he who in the rightly regal and intelligent spirit presides over his own private dinner-table of invited guests, that man’s unchallenged power and dominion of individual influence for the time; that man’s royalty of state transcends Belshazzar’s, for Belshazzar was not the greatest. Who has but once dined his friends, has tasted what it is to be Cæsar. It is a witchery of social czarship which there is no withstanding. (*MD* 150)

As Ishmael puts it, there is something about the act of sharing a meal that places the host in a curiously elevated position, giving him “unchallenged power and dominion of individual influence for the time.” That the distribution of edibles in Melville’s works is often intimately connected to *power* and *power relations* thus becomes clear.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, nourishment is not only an opportunity for the mighty to control their subordinates, as in this case, but it can also offer unexpected transgressive possibilities for the latter. Chapter 181 of *Mardi*, “They sup,” explains why. Here it is forcefully stressed that if there is one thing the mighty have in common, it is the tendency to throw lavish feasts. As the narrator sees it, this holds true no less for gods than it does

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16 The meals of the harpooners are quite different since they eat on their own, out of Ahab’s commanding sight. Their dinners are filled with an “almost frantic democracy”: “the harpooners chewed their food with such a relish that there was a report to it. They dined like lords; they filled their bellies like Indian ships all day loading with spices,” all the while keeping the unlucky steward, Dough-Boy, in a state of constant terror through their playful threats (*MD* 152).

17 See also Chapter 6 and 7 of *White-Jacket*, where the narrator discusses the importance of rank to the dinner arrangements on board the *Neversink*: Those more or less on an equal footing dine together, but rank also decides “the dinner hour. He who dines latest is the greatest man; and he who dines earliest is accounted the least” (*WJ* 28).

for “distinguished mortals” of all nationalities and ages, leading him to offer an extensive list of the famous “Sultans, Satraps, Viziers, Hetmans, Soldans, Landgraves, Bashaws, Doges, Dauphins, Infantas, Incas, and Caçiques” who have done so throughout history (*M* 603, 604).

While to the host, giving a sumptuous feast may serve as an opportunity to put others in debt or to solidify power, to the guests, it may offer the possibility of nourishment at the host’s expense. To draw upon Michel de Certeau’s distinction from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), meals can be said to function as arenas for the *strategies* of those in power, but they can also provide opportunities for the *tactics* of those lacking it. Whereas the first concept involves having control over a given place (the way Ahab has control over the *Pequod*), to de Certeau, the second is marked by the lack of such spatial ownership. To him, a tactic is defined by

a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak. (de Certeau 37)

In *Moby-Dick*, one of the best examples of such tactical appropriations of the nourishment of others is found in Chapter 91, “The *Pequod* meets the *Rose Bud*,” where Stubb proves his craftiness in a comic encounter with the *Bouton de Rose*, a French ship that has come into possession of two dead whales said to smell “worse than an Assyrian city in the plague, when the living are incompetent to bury the departed” (*MD* 402). Stubb, who is sent by boat to inquire whether the French whalers know anything about *Moby Dick*, takes an interest in the second of the reeking carcasses, which he thinks might contain ambergris, the valuable substance produced in the digestive system of cachalots, most famous for its use as a fixative in perfumery. Suspecting that the French whalers are not aware of this, he comes up with a sly plan. When he realizes that the only sailor aboard the *Bouton de Rose* who speaks English would like nothing more than to get rid of the nauseating smell, the two work together to trick the inexperienced captain, who insists that the two whales must be flensed,

not realizing that this will yield little oil. The mate pretends to translate into French what Stubb is saying. Whereas the latter is happily accusing the captain of being “no more fit to command a whale-ship than a St. Jago monkey” (*MD* 406), the former claims that their guest is warning them that they might catch a deadly fever from the reeking whales. As a result, the captain orders his men to get rid of their catch. Stubb offers to help drag the cachalot away from the ship with his boat, and, when the *Bouton de Rose* is out of sight, proceeds “to reap the fruit of his unrighteous cunning” (*MD* 407). Having cut a hole beside one of the whale’s side fins, Stubb is finally rewarded with “a faint stream of perfume” emerging from the foul odor:

“I have it, I have it,” cried Stubb, with delight, striking something in the subterranean regions, “a purse! a purse!”

Dropping his spade, he thrust both hands in, and drew out handfuls of something that looked like ripe Windsor soap, or rich mottled old cheese; very unctuous and savory withal. You might easily dent it with your thumb; it is of a hue between yellow and ash color. And this, good friends, is ambergris, worth a gold guinea an ounce to any druggist. (*MD* 407)

While Stubb is elsewhere said to be “somewhat intemperately fond of the whale as a flavorish thing to his palate” (*MD* 292), the ambergris he tactically misappropriates is obviously only nourishment in a metaphorical sense. Even so, it is not insignificant that Ishmael likens it to “rich mottled old cheese”. Wherever trickery is to be found in Melville, food seems never to be far away. To borrow a term used to describe pursers in *White-Jacket*, Stubb might be seen as belonging to the class of sneaky opportunists known as “nip-cheeses” (*WJ* 206)—that is, someone who has made a career out of nibbling the resources of others, which is exactly what the parasite is famous for. Thus, whereas the word “parasite” is seldom used in Melville, on closer examination, his writings turn out to be full of parasitical “nip-cheeses” and other “unprincipled gourmands” (*WJ* 133) lacking power and provisions of their own, but who are always on the lookout for the opportunity to acquire free meals at the expense of others.

Since such “nip-cheeses” can also be found elsewhere in Melville, my approach could easily have been extended to other texts than those

I analyze in this book. Let me therefore indicate a few of the possible paths I have not pursued. First of all, even though the figure of the parasite is relevant to several of his poems, I have decided to limit myself to his prose writings.<sup>18</sup> This is because one of the key characteristics of the literary parasite is his ability as a teller of tales: Wherever parasites are found, so are stories, functioning as one of the most important types of “currency” that they use to acquire their nourishment. In the words of Redburn, after he encounters “a party of rustics” in England: “They treated me to ale; and I treated them to stories about America” (R 211). It therefore seemed most relevant to turn to Melville’s narrative texts.

Second, I have refrained from trying to offer an overview of the role of the parasite in all his narratives.<sup>19</sup> Instead, I have limited myself to analyses of those narratives where the figure becomes so central that they may be read as literary experiments with the classical stock character of the parasite. Through infusing different characters with parasitic traits, which are then tested out in various settings and contexts, Melville’s texts can be said to adapt the classical figure to their own time, bringing it to bear upon the different questions they set out to explore.

This brings us to a final point: The parasite cannot be understood in isolation. The reason is that it is so intimately connected to several other concepts that it is nearly impossible to address, without also addressing

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18 Among the poetry, the posthumously published *Burgundy Club* material is particularly relevant. It is made up of a combination of poems and prose sketches concerning the exploits of the Marquis de Grandvin and his follower, Major Jack Gentian, see Sandberg, and Dryden (“Poet”). The figure of the parasite can also shed light on “Falstaff’s Lament over Prince Hal Become Henry V,” from *Weeds and Wildings* (1924), where Shakespeare’s famous braggart and parasite, Sir John Falstaff—to be addressed in Chapter 2—drowns his sorrows in ale after having been disowned by his patron, Hal. Moreover, the biological concept of symbiosis—to be addressed in Chapter 5—is highly relevant to “The Maldive Shark” from *John Marr and Other Sailors with Some Sea-Pieces* (1888).

19 To give a few examples of other texts by Melville that the conceptual figure of the parasite might illuminate, in *Mardi* the narrator receives steady access to food and hospitality after successfully passing himself off as the demi-god Taji. “Benito Cereno” takes place aboard a ship, the *San Dominick*, described almost as if it were the host of a parasitical foreign body hidden from view; under water, “a huge bunch of conglobated barnacles” adheres to it “like a wen” (“BC” 49). It also features a memorable meal where it is far from clear who is feeding at the expense of whom, and who is the true host and who is the guest. Both “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” and “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” revolve around issues of hospitality, and both are told by narrators who end up nourishing themselves on others, literally and perhaps also metaphorically.



them.<sup>20</sup> I have already briefly touched upon how questions of parasitism for Melville are typically interwoven with questions of *power* and *power relationships*. Among other key concepts that are both crucial to Melville's work and directly linked to the parasite, we find, for example, *the host*, *hospitality*, *responsibility*, *hunger*, *dependence*, *patronage* and *the gift*, just to name some of the auxiliary concepts that will become central to the analyses presented later in this book. When these concepts are considered in conjunction, with the parasite as a point of entry and main analytical tool, they allow us to delineate a field of related ethico-political issues that runs throughout Melville's writings.

## A First Peep at the Melvillean Parasite: *Omoo*

At this point, readers likely wonder what the Melvillean parasite might look like in practice. Before offering an outline of the cultural history of the parasite in the next chapter, I will therefore give a preliminary answer to this question through a brief reading of Melville's second book, the semi-autobiographical travel-narrative *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847). Here we find several characters with easily recognizable parasitic traits. Perhaps the clearest example in all of Melville's writings is Kooloo, a native who befriends the beachcombing narrator, who goes by the name "Typee," during his adventures on Tahiti. Just prior to introducing this "comely youth" (O 157) at the beginning of Chapter 40, the narrator takes the opportunity to reflect on the peculiarities of Polynesian customs concerning friendship:

The really curious way in which all the Polynesians are in the habit of making bosom friends at the shortest possible notice, is deserving of remark. Although, among a people like the Tahitians, vitiated as they are by sophisticating influences, this custom has in most cases degenerated into a mere mercenary relation, it nevertheless had its origin in a fine, and in some instances, heroic sentiment, formerly entertained by their fathers. (O 152)

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20 With the following claim, the editors of the journal *Mafté'akh* aptly describe the tendency of concepts to cluster: "Concepts, like people, are never alone, they are nothing as singulars—they always need the company of others" (Edelman et al. viii). My understanding of concepts is primarily indebted to Mieke Bal's *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*.

Thus, the narrator introduces the crucial distinction between the noble and the mercenary “tayo,” a Tahitian word that roughly translates as “friend,” but which indicates a type of relationship falling somewhere between a friendship and a tactical alliance.<sup>21</sup>

Typee exemplifies this opposition between different types of “tayos” by reference to two Tahitian acquaintances. The first is Poky, “a handsome youth, who could never do enough for me. Every morning at sunrise, his canoe came alongside with fruits of all kinds” (O 152). Even though it is indicated that he perhaps expects to be remunerated for his services, he never asks for anything in return: “Though there was no end to Poky’s attentions, not a syllable did he ever breathe of reward; but sometimes he looked very knowing” (O 153). While this might indicate a degree of calculation at odds with Western ideas of friendship, the narrator never expresses doubt about the sincerity of the youth’s feelings. Poky therefore seems the perfect embodiment of the true and honorable “tayo.”

This is clearly not the case for Kooloo, whom Typee later encounters. After first assuring him “that the love he bore me was ‘nuee, nuee, nuee,’ or infinitesimally extensive,” the native’s feelings sour as soon as he has “cajoled” him out of his belongings (O 157, 158).<sup>22</sup> At last, when the source has run completely dry and there is no more to be had, he matter-of-factly makes it clear to Typee that their relationship has come to an end:

As for Kooloo, after sponging me well, he one morning played the part of a retrograde lover; informing me, that his affections had undergone a change; he had fallen in love at first sight with a smart sailor, who had just stepped ashore quite flush from a lucky whaling-cruise.

It was a touching interview, and with it, our connection dissolved. But the sadness which ensued would soon have dissipated, had not my sensibilities been wounded by his indelicately sporting some of my gifts very soon after this transfer of his affections. Hardly a day passed, that I did not meet him on the Broom Road, airing himself in a Regatta shirt, which I had given him in happier hours. (O 158)

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<sup>21</sup> On the differences between Western and Polynesian understandings of friendship, see V. Smith.

<sup>22</sup> For an interesting analysis that addresses the opposition between Poky and Kooloo in economic terms, but without reference to the parasite, see Marsoin (“No Land” 234).

Not only does the once affectionate youth brazenly flaunt the gifts he has received, but as the days go by, he even stops greeting his former “tayo” when the two happen to meet, causing the narrator to conclude that “[h]e must have taken me for part of the landscape” (O 158).<sup>23</sup>

In other words, like the traditional Greek and Roman comic parasites, the sponging Kooloo is someone who obviously hopes to gain from flattering his host with fair, but empty words. Since he only appears very briefly in the narrative, at first glance he functions as little more than an insignificant comic interlude. However, even though this has not been acknowledged by scholars, the crucial thing about his relationship to the narrator is that the two share quite a few traits. This is not to say that there are not important differences between them. As opposed to Kooloo, Typee, who often expresses seemingly heartfelt gratitude and respect for those who serve as his hosts, does not strike readers as callous. Still, as he tends to treat others in a manner not fundamentally different from the way his own ungrateful “tayo” treats him, this difference is one of degree, rather than of kind. Along with his roguish companion, Doctor Long Ghost, Typee repeatedly takes advantage of local customs regulating interactions with strangers; in Polynesia, “hospitality without charge is enjoined upon every one” (O 118–19).<sup>24</sup> Or, as he will later put it after he and the Doctor have benefited from the kindness of an old couple they meet:

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23 Even though Typee is only a poor sailor by Western standards, to the natives he is still wealthy. His relationship to Kooloo illustrates a point made by Plutarch in the essay “How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend”: “flatterers are never so much as to be seen coming near where succulence and warmth are lacking, but where renown and power attend, there do they throng and thrive; but if a change come, they slink away quickly and are gone” (49d). Chapter 2 returns to the figure Plutarch warns his readers against: the *kolax* or flatterer. For the moment, the crucial point is that when he uses this term, it is as a synonym for parasite—to quote Athenaeus’ *The Learned Banqueters*: “there is not much difference between the words ‘flatterer’ and ‘parasite’” (248c). On Melville’s familiarity with Plutarch, see Sealts Jr. (205). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from classical Greek and Latin works are taken from the translations in The Loeb Classical Library, using the references found in the different works, rather than page number. Note that in several cases, the Greek *parasitos* and the Latin *parasitus* have been translated as “hanger-on,” probably to avoid confusion due to the contemporary understanding of parasite as a biological concept. In such cases I have slightly modified the quotes.

24 Marsoin offers interesting reflections on Typee and Doctor Long Ghost’s tactics for avoiding labor, but taking the parasite into account would have further enriched his analysis (“No Land” 236).

They gave us a hearty meal; and while we were discussing its merits, they assured us, over and over again, that they expected nothing in return for their attentions; more: we were at liberty to stay as long as we pleased; and as long as we *did* stay, their house and every thing they had was no longer theirs, but ours; still more: they themselves were our slaves—the old lady, to a degree that was altogether superfluous. This, now, is Tahitian hospitality! Self-immolation upon one’s own hearth-stone for the benefit of the guest. (O 254; emphasis in the original)

In this way Typee and Doctor Long Ghost feed on the people they encounter, including Captain Bob, Father Murphy, Marharvai, and Ereemear Po-Po, as well as countless unnamed others. Nor can there be any doubt that the two companions actively seek out those situations “where we could get plenty to eat without pay” (O 250). Addressing their lack of food while on Tahiti, it is said that “we managed, by a systematic foraging upon the country round about, to make up for some of our deficiencies. And fortunate it was, that the houses of the wealthier natives were just as open to us as those of the most destitute; we were treated as kindly in one as the other” (O 132).

Potentially to absolve himself from any criticism for ungrateful and unethical behavior, Typee directs the reader’s attention to Doctor Long Ghost’s appetite and his role as the chief instigator behind these expeditions: “Like all lank men, my long friend had an appetite of his own. Others occasionally went about seeking what they might devour, but *he* was always on the alert” (O 132; emphasis in the original). Nonetheless, there is little to indicate that his own qualms about playing the parasite exceed those of his companion. This for example becomes evident in the part of the narrative that deals with their attempt to attach themselves to the court of Queen Pomaree III in Taloo on the island of Imeeo. Even though the plan ultimately fails, Typee initially considers it very promising, showing that he, too, knows how to recognize an opportunity to feed when he sees one:

All things considered, I could not help looking upon Taloo as offering “a splendid opening” for us adventurers. . . . there were hopes to be entertained of being promoted to some office of high trust and emolument, about the person of her

majesty, the queen. Nor was this expectation altogether Quixotic. In the train of many Polynesian princes, roving whites are frequently found: gentlemen pensioners of state, basking in the tropical sunshine of the court, and leading the pleasantest lives in the world. Upon islands little visited by foreigners, the first seaman that settles down, is generally domesticated in the family of the head chief or king ... These men generally marry well; often ... into the royal blood.  
(O 246–47)

Having as their explicit aim the “pleasantest lives in the world,” where food is always forthcoming and very little work is expected in return, Typee and Doctor Long Ghost prove themselves true heirs of the classical parasites.<sup>25</sup> In fact, since the original comedic parasites were above all else defined by their literal hunger, the two companions are both truer heirs than the narrator’s fair-weather “tayo,” whose aim was to wheedle him out of his earthly riches, rather than food.

For this reason, I am not entirely sure whether to agree with Wyn Kelley’s description of the difference between Typee and the other white beachcombers appearing in the narrative: “Only by a slight degree of decorum and wit in his narration does Typee avoid falling into the debased condition of [these] broken-down white parasites of the Pacific” (81). If what Kelley has in mind is that the narrator is not a debased and broken-down parasite, but rather an eloquent and resourceful sponger, I agree. If, on the other hand, she means that, unlike his shipmates, he is not a parasite at all, I disagree. When Kooloo leeches off someone who himself survives by living off others, it is accordingly not only a fitting punishment, but also exemplifies a point well known to biologists: Parasites can often have spongers of their own, so-called “epi-” or “hyperparasites.”

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25 The narrator claims that “we expected to swell the appropriations of bread-fruits and cocoa-nuts on the Civil List, by filling some honorable office in her gift,” and also indicates that they were ready to take part in the queen’s planned campaign against the French (O 248). While this might seem to counter my claim that the companions are out to get an abundance of food in return for as little work as possible, there is an undeniable ironic ring to the term “honorable office” due to the narrator’s earlier reflections on the “work” traditionally done by the runaway sailors who had attached themselves to local courts (O 247).

To conclude, this preliminary analysis has resulted in several insights that will prove relevant to the readings to come of *Typee*, “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” “Jimmy Rose,” and *The Confidence-Man*. First, Melville’s writings are full of characters with typical parasitic traits, but what *Omoo* clearly shows, is that the most obvious parasites are not always the only ones in the texts, nor the most important ones. In addition, *Typee* exemplifies how many of his first-person narrators show a strong concern with food at the same time as they are also very much in favor of idleness and leisure—to quote Ishmael: “For my part, I abominate all honorable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever” (*MD* 5). One way of getting access to both is by playing the parasite. Nevertheless, these narrators are typically interested in presenting a positive image of themselves and therefore often try to downplay or make light of anything that could be held against them, as does *Typee* when he blames Doctor Long Ghost for their sponging.

In addition, whereas *Kooloo* comes across as a fairly typical comedic parasite, much like the ones found in Greek and Latin comedy (albeit one found in an unusual setting), the narrator is a much more three-dimensional parasite. This alerts us to a fact that we will encounter repeatedly in this book: Melville’s parasites tend to be much more complex than the original stock characters whose defining traits they have been endowed with. As I will argue, he time and again takes up the traditional comedic figure not to reproduce it, but to do something new, be it by probing and modifying it, adding new traits to it, removing old ones, or by combining different traits in unexpected ways. Thus, he ends up testing how it functions in various contexts and genres, as well as experimenting with its ability to illuminate different ethical questions concerning hospitality and dependency upon others. This willingness to experiment with a standard figure is also evident from the complex relationships between the Melvillean parasites and their hosts, relationships which not only problematize who dines at the expense of whom, but also if what the parasite offers the host might not in the end be more valuable than what it tactically poaches.