

“Povertiresque”: The Representation of Irish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America

Mikayo SAKUMA*

INTRODUCTION

At the end of his novella *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) Edgar Allan Poe has his shipwrecked victims encounter a mysterious white object: “And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.”¹ The whiteness of the eerie figure, unearthly but imminently real, overwhelms the crew by its power to appeal and appall. But the fear that whiteness causes here lies, perhaps, not so much in its apparent strangeness as in its innate familiarity.

Thirteen years after Poe’s novella, Herman Melville also identifies the fearful qualities of white in *Moby-Dick* (1851):

[Y]et for all these accumulated associations, with whatever sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more panic to the soul than redness which affrights in blood.

This elusive quality it is, which causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds.²

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*Associate Professor, Wayo Women’s University

These fictional instances, devoid of the “kindly associations” more generally attached to the color white in Western culture, are considered in this essay as part of a significant mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-American disquietude; this could be related to the dramatic rise in European emigration to the United States and to the subsequent national anxiety reserved for the disproportionate numbers of impoverished immigrants from Catholic Ireland. Unlike deported slaves, these newly arrived immigrants were as white as the American people, but their way of life and culture were not so much similar as unfathomable. Fear of whiteness caused by the inscrutable existence of such immigrants will be considered in this account as a cultural concomitant to this historic immigration boom.³ Nineteenth-century American journalism was often vitriolic in its depiction of Irish immigrants, with an emphasis on this people’s otherness and on their degraded circumstances. This can partly be explained by the upsurge in nativism,⁴ which was manifest in the prejudiced stereotyping directed against immigrants and aimed at marking a clear division between those born in the United States and recent immigrants. The latter inevitably suffered various disadvantages despite becoming U.S. citizens, and it is a commonplace of mid-nineteenth-century fiction to find poor immigrants depicted as living below the national standard. Irish Catholicism, with its significant differences from Protestant Christianity, became a standard source of discrimination against Irish immigrants, furthering the nativist agenda of legitimate origin and racial purity.⁵ Noel Ignatiev records that Irish immigrants were not considered to be “white,” with their racial origins distorted and replaced by an iconography of otherness, such as in slurs against their rustic outfits and anomalous religious practices that easily distinguished them from the style of Anglo-Saxon Americans.⁶ A racial prejudice, not easily based on skin color, placed Irish immigrants as given to fastidious adherence to Catholic religious beliefs and rituals and to a poverty-stricken lifestyle. The Irish socioeconomic situation, cultural characteristics, and religious background resulted in an exaggerated stereotype of Irish immigrants that served to consolidate their poverty. Shunned by a conservative American citizenry, Irish immigrants were forced to rely on the traditional Gaelic humble way of life that the majority of them had sought to escape in exile from Ireland. Kerby Miller argues that the Irish emigrants tended to define themselves as involuntary emigrants and to “accept poverty” as “rewarding in nonmaterial ways.”⁷ The Irish might have been conceived by nature as spiritually rich in their poverty.

An examination of the Irish in the literature of the American Renaissance predictably results in subtler and distinct representations of Irish poverty. I

argue here the ambivalence of Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville’s acknowledgment of the oppressed consciousness of the Irish people as stimulating American culture. Irish poverty threatened America while at the same time introducing and revitalizing unconventional cultural forms.

I. IRISH PAUPERISM AND THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE

Writers of the American Renaissance varied images of impoverished Irish immigrants, and their depictions inevitably reflect a general national anxiety about race and poverty. Irish immigration became a further major context for the consideration of racial and cultural identity, in turn testing the general American response to the ongoing upheaval of the construction of the nation’s identity. The transcendentalists assessed the conditions of the poor in relation to the culture of benevolence. Henry David Thoreau, while living in New York City, wrote back to Ralph Waldo Emerson in Massachusetts his impression of Emerson’s depiction of the degenerated condition of the Irish: “The sturdy Irish arms that do the work are of more worth than oak or maple. Methinks I could look with equanimity upon a long street of Irish cabins and pigs and children reveling in the genial Concord dirt, and I should still find my Walden wood and Fair Haven in their tanned and happy faces.”⁸ Thomas Woodson points out Thoreau’s sentimentalism, since Thoreau clearly identifies the Irish as rustics in a Concord pastoral idyll with an assumed superiority in their innocence.⁹ In *Walden* Thoreau argues against the wrong application of charity, and then he deals with the tactlessness of the poor Irishman, John Field:

Before I had reached the pond some fresh impulse had brought out John Field, with altered mind, letting go “boggings” ere this sunset. But he, poor man, disturbed only a couple of fins while I was catching a fair string, and he said it was his luck; but when we changed seats in the boat luck changed seats too. Poor John Field! . . . With his horizon all his own, yet he a poor man, born to be poor, with his inherited Irish poverty or poor life, his Adam’s grandmother and boggy ways, not to rise in this world, he nor his posterity, till their wading webbed bog-trotting feet get talaria to their Heels.¹⁰

Walden often highlights the miserable conditions of the Irish, and the text is frequently constructed around stereotypical racial images. As such it is not possible to disregard Thoreau’s principle of simplicity when considering the meaning of poverty in *Walden*. As he conceives of the happiness of the stubborn “bog-trotting” Irish farmers, their simplemindedness is not so much the

target of censure as the object of tribute.¹¹

Emerson also noticed the emergence of poverty and began to record a degraded urban scenery. His depiction of contemporary Boston is cited by historian Howard Zinn. Zinn stipulates the problem of the poor in antebellum America using Emerson's comment: "There is a certain poor-smell in all the streets, in Beacon Street and Mount Vernon, as well as in the lawyers' offices, and the wharves, and the same meanness and sterility, and leave-all-hope-behind, as one finds in a boot manufacturer's premise."¹² Emerson's perspective contains not only a reformist's motives but also his moral belief expressed in his essay "Nature": "The misery of man appears like childish petulance, when we explore the steady and prodigal provision that has been made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats him through the heavens."¹³ Emerson witnesses the poor as both evidence of the need for reformation of the social system and as a means of reinvigorating the nation's ethics, as in the aforementioned letter to Thoreau: "Now the humanity of the town suffers with the poor Irish, who receives but sixty, or even fifty cents, for working from dark till dark, with a strain and a following-up that reminds of negro-driving."¹⁴ Emerson's observation duly suggests that poor Irish immigrants suffered a slippage between their racial identity and a degraded economic condition that blacks endured as well.

In the case of Melville, the image of the Irish was largely based on encounters during his transatlantic experience.¹⁵ On visiting England as a sailor on a merchant ship, he witnessed the misery of Liverpool, whose circumstances are reflected in his novel, *Redburn* (1849). It features a mysterious Irishman:

[T]ill early one morning, in the gray dawn, when we made Cape Clear, the south point of Ireland, the apparition of a tall Irishman, in a shabby shirt of bed-ticking, emerged from the fore hatchway, and stood leaning on the rail, looking landward with a fixed, reminiscent expression, and diligently scratching its back with both hands. We all started at the sight, for no one had ever seen the apparition before; and when we remembered that it must have been burrowing all the passage down in its bunk, the only probable reason of its so manipulating its back became shockingly obvious.¹⁶

The otherworldliness of the figure—the use of the ghostly “apparition” and the repetition of the dehumanizing “its”—prefigure later descriptions of Irish immigrants in their obscurity and fearsomeness. Melville's voyage to England should have given him the traditional American experience of Ireland as the first sight of a foreign land. Wellingborough, the protagonist of *Red-*

burn, documents such excitement as follows: “Ireland in sight! A foreign country actually visible!” However, this is soon made to descend into disappointment: “I peered hard, but could see nothing but a bluish, cloud-like spot to the northeast. Was that Ireland? Why, there was nothing remarkable about that; nothing startling. If that’s the way a foreign country looks, I might as well have staid at home” (*Redburn*, 124). The bathos continues in the subsequent impression of Wales, the sight of which recalls the banal, familiar scene of rural New York such as “the Kaatskill Mountains on the Hudson River” (*Redburn*, 126). High expectations for foreign countries collapse in the recognition of the similarity between Britain and America, and the disappointment is especially profound as it occurs even before reliable knowledge and experience can ground it. This intriguing paradox becomes a familiar but important strain in many of Melville’s travel observations, implying the folly of uncertain negotiation of alien culture in ignorance and condemnation, while holding back from recognizing cultural prejudice as a contemptible moral form in itself.

After embarking at Liverpool, Wellingborough sees the miserable situation of the poor, the most striking event being the death of a mother and her babies caused by extreme poverty and public negligence, which parallels the suffering family of Melville’s later short story, “Cock-A-Doodle-Do!” (1853). Poverty and misery rise before him, and, in a later grimly ironic passage, most of the poor are finally identified as Irish, with the United States as their likely destination and savior:

When I thought of the multitudes of Irish that annually land on the shores of the United States and Canada, and, to my surprise, witnessed the additional multitudes embarking from Liverpool to New Holland; and when, added to all this, I daily saw the hordes of laborers, descending, thick as locusts, upon the English cornfields; I could not help marveling at the fertility of an island, which, though her crop of potatoes may fail, never failed in bringing her annual crop of men into the world. (*Redburn*, 198–99)

The great potato famine (1845–52) enormously accelerated the migration of the Irish and exacerbated the problem of poverty because of the low wages available to immigrants. In contrast to other white immigrants to the United States, the Irish are singled out in *Redburn* as strangers. While Wellingborough claims that “our blood is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble current all pouring into one,” this leads to a world of diversity not united but fragmented:

Then shall the curse of Babel be revoked, a new Pentecost come, and the lan-

guage they shall speak be the language of Britain. Frenchmen, and Danes, and Scots; and the dweller on the shores of the Mediterranean, and in the regions round about; Italians, and Indians, and Moors; there shall appear unto them cloven tongues as of fire. (*Redburn*, 169)

In acknowledging racial as well as cultural diversity, Wellingborough sensed a visionary amalgamation of races as well as a monocultural force that facilitated “the language of Britain,” a monocultural force that provides a way to restore fragmentation but also contains the possibility of exclusion.¹⁷

The mid-nineteenth century saw a transformation of workers’ conditions, and this change also foreshadowed the stratification of cultures and races according to their economic status. The capitalistic eastern portion of the country produced prosperous businessmen who became established through the security of property, while the working classes were forced to live in low-quality temporary housing. Zinn, proposing an American history from the view of the common people, has pointed out that “‘Jacksonian Democracy’ had tried to create a consensus of support for the system to make it secure,” but that “Blacks, Indians, women, and foreigners were clearly outside the consensus.”¹⁸

Melville’s account of the poor in his later stories may be read as having a radical potential in its humorous representation of humanity enduring poverty while revealing the very real social threat arising from destitute conditions.

In his short story “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” the narrator, who is told about the poor man’s diet, is actually entertained at a needy family’s table: “The mouthful of pudding now touched my palate, and touched it with a mouldy, briny taste. The rice, I knew, was of that damaged sort sold cheap; and the salt from the last year’s pork barrel.”¹⁹ Later, the narrator adds his own heartfelt emotion: “Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity over humanity, nothing exceeds most of the criticism made on the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed, and well-fed” (*PT*, 296). Melville, encountering various forms of poverty through his travels and voyages, conceived his own philosophical and aesthetic propositions for the poor, as in *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*:

If the grown man of taste, possess not only some eye to detect the picturesque in the natural landscape, so also, has he as keen a perception of what many not unfitly be here styled, the *povertiresque* in the social landscape. To such an one, not more picturesquely conspicuous is the dismantled thatch in a painted cottage of Gainsborough, than the time-tangled and want-thinned locks of a beggar, *pover-*

tiresquely diversifying those snug little cabinet-pictures of the world, which, exquisitely varnished and framed, are hung up in the drawing-room minds of humane men of taste, and amiable philosophers of either the ‘Compensation,’ or ‘Optimist’ school.²⁰

Melville’s ambivalence continues in his extension of the concept of the picturesque from contemporary popular aesthetics to an aesthetics of poverty, a humanist gambit that frees us from any political and social accusation and that is in line with Thoreau’s depiction of spiritually uplifting poverty.²¹

II. “NIGGERS TURNED INSIDE OUT”: IRISH IMMIGRANTS IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

The increasing attention paid to Irish immigrants reflected the radical social and cultural changes of nineteenth-century America and may perhaps have been based on some more positive feeling, such as a deep-rooted nostalgia for the pastoral life that was an ideal for the people in the new continent. The Irish presence revisited the earliest examples of the pioneer spirit, as they personified the unstable and audacious essence of the American migration movements. In distant and not so distant senses, Ireland was familiar to the American people, not least through Jonathan Swift’s great anti-British satire, *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), which always recalled America’s own political antagonism to England and evoked the triumphant struggle for American independence from British rule. The complex image of Ireland sustained in the American mind could be congenial as well as opaque and mysterious, as in Wellingborough’s first impression of an Irishman in *Redburn*. Ireland was, to the American people, near as well as far in terms of political circumstance and cultural otherness.

What America was to Great Britain was comparable to what Ireland was to Great Britain, and, interestingly, even though ethnically and geographically the two countries had few similarities, Ireland appealed to Americans—though at distance. During the beginning of the Westward movement under the call of Manifest Destiny, plausible justification needed a relevant historical precursor, and Ireland, which had been conquered by England and had then been fighting for independence, was a model with double-faced rhetorical relevance in its rebellious and free spirit. In 1847, during the Mexican War, Jedediah Auld, Melville’s friend, wrote in his letter to George Duyckinks and William Allen Butler: “I wish it [the Mexican War] was over for the sake of humanity and the interest of every section of the country but I

suppose that a military occupation of the northern portion of Mexico will be inevitable till we fill it up with the Anglo Saxon & the Saxon stock not forgetting the Gael from old Ireland.”²²

Mid-nineteenth-century America faced its first major racial crisis, culminating in the interconnected conflicts surrounding abolitionism and nationalism, which led in due course to the Civil War. In the era of the Mexican War, the transcendentalists were initially opposed to violence. Liberal intellectuals criticized President James K. Polk, who waged a successful but nasty war, and Emerson cautioned that “devouring Mexico would prove to be like devouring arsenic—easy to do, but fatal.”²³ Imperialistic motives toward Mexico resulted in outspoken disquietude among literati and their followers, who throughout the war and in the wake of victory had to undergo virulent criticism. The war, however, resulted in the acquisition of a vast territory including Nevada, California, Utah, and New Mexico, and much of the new land bore a fortune in natural resources for industrial America. National sentiment was encouraged to acknowledge that the war had been worth winning, as confirmed in the next presidential election, in which the voters chose the Mexican War hero Zachary Taylor. The abolitionists revived themselves and insisted that slavery should not be introduced into the new territories, though some intellectuals agreed that “the United States had the inalienable right to wage wars of conquest.”

Senator Henry S. Foote, who had strongly advocated a war of conquest, was giving a speech to a large audience in Tammany Hall, and he instanced England’s history, saying that if the United States did not seize Mexico, England would. An assertive voice from a crowd arose: “If England attempts to annex Mexico, we shall annex Ireland to be even with her.”²⁴ This provocative remark exploited the received condemnation of the relationship between England and Ireland and extrapolated it to the United States and Mexico. While some Irish immigrants joined the army in the Mexican War for and against the United States,²⁵ the vast majority of immigrants came to America because of the potato famine.

For the majority of Americans, the civil disturbance in Ireland was congenial owing to the nation’s self-proclaimed economic and cultural trajectory away from Great Britain. Nevertheless, the subsequent bitter misfortune of the potato famine propelled poor Irish farmers to a situation in the New World reminiscent of their bitter relations with Britain. In the first wave of Irish migration, according to Ignatiev, the Irish “were frequently referred to as ‘niggers turned inside out’”; they were put in the same category with negroes, whether free or still enslaved, and with whom the Irish might have

developed a logical sympathy, although in reality they were competing each other for low wages.²⁶ This created an unpredictable situation, since social uplift for Irish immigrants, who needed moral recognition “to guarantee their admittance” to American society, came to be involved in the antislavery movement without mutual appreciation between Irish immigrants and blacks of their exploited status.

The Irish political leader Daniel O’Connell, who had succeeded in getting equal rights for Irish Catholics, criticized the United States because it still sustained slavery in spite of the worldwide trend toward emancipation. The abolitionists manipulated his name as a great supporter of the antislavery movement and appealed to Irish immigrants to join them. The Irish, however, found themselves in a complex and somewhat indeterminate position as a result of the social flexibility of their racial status combined with low economic income and religious differences. This situation, affecting the majority of the Irish diaspora and antagonistic to the socially advanced white middle-class Anglo-Saxons, has its literary counterpart in the works of Poe and Melville in their anxious representations of indeterminate identity characterized by whiteness, that evokes the problem of new white immigrants and also reflects the fear of native white Americans threatened by the probable change in their own status.

III. “POVERTIRESQUE”: POSITIONING IRISH CULTURE IN AMERICA

Along with the major social upheavals that followed the twin forces of emancipation and industrialization came a new interest in alternative ethnicity. In contrast to the more conservative strictures of nativism, an engaged response to the national quest for identity emerged with an increased awareness of cultural and genetic origins. However, this progressive situation was preceded by the violence of the antislavery movement, which was excused as part of a moral agenda, and by the political and philosophical schisms between the North and the South, which led to a major national conflict, the Civil War and reinforced the structures of local communities and social relations. The latter phenomenon, in particular, promoted a sense of community and eventually made mainstream American society inaccessible to Irish immigrants who had pressing demands for inclusion.

Herman Melville’s brother, Gansevoort, entered New York’s political scene and was influenced by O’Connell’s proclamation of the “Year of Repeal” (1843), a call for independence for Ireland. According to Parker, Gansevoort, like politically conscious young Irishmen, was excited by such an

agenda, since he himself “could see on the docks that the immigrants from Ireland were overwhelmed and heartbreakingly young—in their teens, in their early twenties, the surviving youth of Ireland, sent singly across the Atlantic, not arriving, like stalwart German immigrants, as intact families.”²⁷ Against the wishes of his family, Gansevoort made speeches on behalf of the Irish at the Great Repeal Meeting in New York and began to commit himself to his political ambitions. It is quite possible that Herman pondered the political issues that were common to both Gansevoort’s preoccupations and the “Irish question.” The beginnings of Irish immigration foreshadowed the country’s political transformation and the turnabout of the American conception of class and race: from this perspective the growing Irish presence may be considered as a central anxiety-inducing force within American consciousness.²⁸

In Melville’s imagination, Ireland was symbolically partnered with the United States as rebels in a quest for freedom. Yet outside literary symbolism, the partnership was fraught: unlike in Ireland, where Catholics form the majority of the population, in the United States, Protestantism claimed a special place in the nation’s origins. When nativists finally became more powerful in the mid-nineteenth century, they excluded Catholics as an alien and belated people.

In *Redburn*, the Irish widow who prays on the ship’s deck earns the superstitious dislike of the sailors, who define her through the religion she practices:

Meanwhile, Mrs. O’Brien would be standing on the boatswain’s locker—or rope and tar-pot pantry in the vessel’s bows—with a large old quarto Bible, black with age, laid before her between the knight-heads and reading aloud to her three meek little lambs.

The sailors took much pleasure in the deck-tub performances of the O’Regans, and greatly admired them always for their archness and activity; but the tranquil O’Briens they did not fancy so much. More especially they disliked the grave matron herself; hooded in rusty black; and they had a bitter grudge against her book. To that, and the incantations muttered over it, they ascribed the head winds that haunted us; and Blunt, our Irish cockney, really believed that Mrs. O’Brien purposely came on deck every morning, in order to secure a foul wind for the next ensuing twenty-four hours. (*Redburn*, 268)

Mrs. O’Brien’s Catholicism is conveyed within the Protestant anti-Catholic convention that ascribes witchcraft and, paradoxically, anti-Christian practice (“incantations,” “haunted”) to Catholicism, a slur finally consummated

by the anglicized and culturally alienated Irish sailor Blunt. For the Irish, who were never to see their homeland again, daily spiritual observance was a psychological means to recall the physical world now available to them only as a mental landscape, or as an artistic construct, as exemplified by the Gaelic poets of long ago who chanted of Ireland’s “vivid green field, the brown and purple shades of its mountains.”²⁹

However, it was to be generations before Ireland’s mental landscapes were absorbed into mainstream American culture, and, in the meantime, the unfamiliar practices of Catholic Christianity contributed to the social dislocation of the growing Irish diaspora. Indeed, the Irish immigrants can be proposed as the major post-Revolution disturbance to the burgeoning nativist American consciousness, despite their unique overall trajectory from ominous poverty and exclusion to centralized social integration and importance in cultural revitalization.

This confused and complex progress was behind the ambivalence and paradox of transcendentalist aphorisms in praise of poverty, as in the witty punning in *Walden*: “Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage.” Interestingly enough, Thoreau’s poor people are, in most cases, Irish immigrants, and he depicts them using two conventional methods for endowing carefree rusticity on humanity: praising their simplicity, or caricaturing them as having endearing childishness.

Similarly, Melville extends his aesthetic of “*povertiresque*” in the *Piazza Tales*, a collection of short stories that originally appeared in magazines such as *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, a publication appealing specifically to the middle classes, and which contains “Cock-A-Doodle-Do!” a humorous account of Irish poverty by an anonymous narrator who lives somewhere in New England:

I can’t pay this horrid man; and they say money was never so plentiful—a drug in the market; but blame me if I can get any of the drug, though there never was a sick man more in need of that particular sort of medicine. It’s a lie; money ain’t plenty—feel of my pocket. Ha! Here’s a powder I was going to send to the sick baby in yonder hovel, where the Irish ditcher lives. That baby has the scarlet fever. They say the measles are rife in the country too, and the varioloid, and the chicken-pox, and it’s bad for teething children. And after all, I suppose many of the poor little ones, after going through all this trouble, snap off short; and so they had the measles, mumps croups, scarlet-fever, chicken-pox, cholera-morbus, summer-complaint, and all else, in vain! (*PT*, 270)

Poverty and the Irish are established as congruent issues, and Melville

consolidates a literary tradition of stereotyping poverty. However, it is worth noting that here and throughout his short story, material destitution is raised to a condition of spiritual affluence and granted a hyperbolic divinity. The eccentric poverty-stricken hero, Merrymusk, lives in a miserable hut with his family, all of whom suffer from various ailments associated with the poor. Merrymusk is not specified as Irish, but this is implied in the narrator's belief that he originates from Maryland where many Catholic immigrants had dwelled since the time of colonization. The thematic trope of the pauper's inner affluence is maintained in the cock, which, in the presence of indigence, has acquired the mythical attributes of a singing chanticleer from the narrator addressing the farmyard animal as "the Signor Beneventano" after the famed opera singer. The narrator is turned down by Merrymusk in his offer to buy the cock, despite his poverty:

"Just the import I first ascribed to his crow, Merrymusk, when first I heard it from my hill. I thought some rich nabob owned some costly Shanghai; little weening any such poor man as you owned this lusty cock of a domestic breed."

"*Poor* man like *me*? Why call *me* poor? Don't the cock I own glorify this otherwise inglorious, lean, lantern-jawed land? Didn't *my* cock encourage *you*? And I give you all this glorification away gratis. I am a great philanthropist. I am a rich man—a very rich man, and a very happy one. Crow, Trumpet." (*PT*, 286)

Merrymusk's defiance has the increasing American affluence of industrialization as its context and alludes to the emergence of the new rich and the cult of charity and philanthropy. Charity was not only given to alleviate the suffering of the poor but also to assuage the consciences of the rich, who were eager to be reassured of their own spiritual well-being. Susan Ryan, in her examination of the culture of benevolence, concludes that "[a]ntebellum charity texts, from the conventional to the radical, revealed that benevolent projects were always in some sense about power and its pleasure—the power to give or to withhold, to identify the needy and the deserving, to alter the distribution of comfort and pain within American society."³⁰ Ryan's perception can be extended to include and consider those on the receiving end of the randomly distributed benevolence. Merrymusk's logic incisively subverts the relationship between the poor and the rich, as the narrator's sureties are opposed in divulging the irony of Merrymusk's peculiar and unexpected philosophy. In the narrator's admiration for the exotic animal, an alternative of poverty emerges as the enchantment of foreign culture. Through his familiarity with the Italian opera singer, the patronizing narrator cannot predict the truth of the animal's more mundane domestic origins. As Merry-

musk himself says, “I chipped the shell here. I raised it.”

Melville suggests that an internalization or naturalization of foreign culture is enacted. However, with Melville ambivalently maintaining the fastidious distance of a connoisseur, we could define his new perception of poverty as a culture of poverty in which the narrator appreciates but suspends any judgment about the force of a subordinate and alien people. The elements of mischief and masquerade in the name Merrymusk might be read as hinting at deception and accommodating the charge of racial condemnation of a character of putative Irish descent. Conversely, just as Merrymusk prefigures the prospering Irish immigrant who will climb the ladder of success in America, his representation prepares the reader for a multicultural society in which each culture will be on a road to equal consideration. At the beginning of the tale, Melville posits the narrator as a typical follower of benevolence with an urgency to help the poor, although he himself suffers from the casualties of locomotives, steamers, mortgages, and creditors. Indeed, he too has been collectively victimized by economic expansion. Without having any means to help the poor family other than through his benevolent frame of mind, the narrator witnesses the death of Merrymusk from putative malnutrition, with the cock crowing to give the last blessing to the remaining family whose deaths are also imminent. The ethereal exuberant sound has a redemptive effect that leads to the children’s transfiguration:

The pallor of the children was changed to radiance. Their faces shone celestially through grime and dirt. They seemed children of emperors and kings, disguised. The cock sprang upon their bed, shook himself, and crowed, and crowed again, and still and still again. He seemed bent upon crowing the souls of the children out of their wasted bodies. He seemed bent upon rejoicing instanter this whole family in the upper air. (*PT*, 287–88)

The narrator profits emotionally from his goodwill, and the benevolent code of antebellum society is finally congratulated:

The wood-sawyer and his family, with the Signor Beneventano, lie in that spot; and I buried them, and planted the stone, which was a stone made to order; and never since then have I felt the doleful dumps, but under all circumstances crow late and early with a continual crow.

Cock-A-Doodle-Do!—Oo!—Oo!—Oo! (*PT*, 288)

Ultimately, the poor family is glorified and transfigured in place of the benefactor, and in the universal stress of economic change, the narrator is in turn oppressed by his failure to sustain his own welfare. In a final trium-

phant irony, his salvation comes from the poor whose sufferings are greater than his own. As Melville's "Cock-A-Doodle-Do!" foresightedly suggests, social positioning was far from rigidly prescribed, but was instead dependent on arbitrary political and economic factors.

CONCLUSION

During the Civil War, Irishmen found themselves elevated to "white" status, in most cases prior to improving their conditions of poverty. The transformation of the situation, however, was not caused by an upsurge of Irish nationalism. Nor did the Irish immigrants suffer the racist extremities of extermination like Indians or slavery like blacks. Irish immigration can in part be examined through the complexities of white intercultural encounter, and through the socioeconomic construction of racial stereotypes.³¹ Nativism's negative image of Irish immigrants—poor, rustic, and weird—is both preserved and countermanded in the textual ironies of Melville and Thoreau. Irish immigrants' way of life could be viewed as having a multicultural value caused by the subversion of cultural values. Their representations of the poor interrogate the economic exclusionism affecting all racial and cultural minorities in antebellum America and foreshadow the multicultural awareness of the next century.

NOTES

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 882.

² Herman, Melville, *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, Vol. 6 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1971), 189.

³ See Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3. Anbinder explains the Irish immigration boom: "From 1845 to 1854, some 2,900,000 immigrants landed in United States, more than had come in the seven previous decades combined" (3). Beginning with the problem of Irish immigrants, he explores the intricacy of nativism and the antislavery movement.

⁴ *Ibid.*, x–xi. Anti-immigrant sentiment enhanced the popularity of the Know Nothing movement that was anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii. Anbinder explains anti-Catholicism and points out: "The depth of anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States forms a second theme of this study. . . . Many in nineteenth-century America believed that Protestantism was responsible for the freedom and prosperity that the nation's inhabitants enjoyed. Conversely, Catholicism seemed hostile to everything they valued."

⁶ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8–38. Ignatiev has analyzed the change in racial positioning of the Irish immigrants in terms of politics in nineteenth-century America. His theme is, as his title indicates, "how the Irish became

white.” Peter Quinn rejects Ignatiev’s premise and proposes instead the thesis: “how the Irish stayed Irish” (682). Peter Quinn, “The Future of Irish America,” in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, ed. J. J. Lee and Marion Casey (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 682.

⁷ Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 132. Miller explains the Irish exodus and points out the characteristics of the Irish emigrants: “Among the Irish-speaking peasantry, and many whose families had recently abandoned the old language but not the worldview it expressed, their culture’s emphasis upon stasis combined with the inertia of accepted poverty to restrain emigration from self-sufficient, traditional communities where life was tolerable, even rewarding in nonmaterial ways” (132).

⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carol Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), 146.

⁹ Thomas Woodson, “Thoreau on Poverty and Magnanimity,” *PMLA* 85 (1970): 21.

¹⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; Walden; or Life in the Woods; The Main Woods; Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayere (New York: Library of America, 1985), 489.

¹¹ Woodson, “Thoreau on Poverty and Magnanimity,” 34. Although Woodson admits Thoreau’s limitation by pointing out his tendency toward mythopoetic perception rather than realistic notions, he concludes: “We should judge the aesthetic achievement of his magnanimity, and the aesthetic shortcomings as well.”

¹² Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492–Present* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1999), 221.

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 221.

¹⁴ Woodson, “Thoreau on Poverty and Magnanimity,” 21.

¹⁵ See Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980). Karcher argues that Melville’s treatment of the victims of oppression and his strong social critique were nurtured by his experience as a seaman. See also Katsunori Takeuchi, “Melville ni okeru Yoo-roppian Innpakuto: Airisshu Iminn to Aidealizumu no Kaitai” [The European impact in Melville: Irish immigrants and the fall of idealism], *Kakenhoukokusho 2008–2010* [Report of research results of the grant-in-aid 2008–2010], <http://mstudio.kuas.kagoshima-u.ac.jp/moodle/>. Takeuchi discusses the meaning of Melville’s Irish immigrants in a European context and elucidates the politics of nation and race.

¹⁶ Herman Melville, *Redburn: His First Voyage*, vol. 4 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1969), 111. Further citations of this work are given in the text.

¹⁷ See Timothy Powell, *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4. Powell, trying to reconfigure the American Renaissance, describes the cultural aporia as “the seemingly unresolvable conflict between the multicultural history of the country and the violent will to monoculturalism that prevents the nation from coming to psychological terms with its own ethnic diversity”(4).

¹⁸ Zinn, *People’s History*, 221.

¹⁹ Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, vol. 9 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1987), 295. Further references to this book are cited parenthetically in the text as *PT*.

²⁰ Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, vol. 7 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1971), 276–77.

²¹ See Woodson “Thoreau on Poverty and Magnanimity,” 22. Woodson argues that “more often in *Walden*, Thoreau gives ‘poverty’ a positive, creative meaning.”

²² Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography*, vol. 1, 1819–1851 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 535. Parker explores the Melvilles’ relation to the Mexican War.

²³ Barbara Packer, “Emerson, Thomas Cary, and the Mexican War,” *Emerson Society Papers* 19 (2008): 6.

²⁴ Parker, *Herman Melville*, vol. 1, 581.

²⁵ See Marc Cramer, “The Fighting Irish of Mexico,” *Americas* 48 (1996): 8–28. Cramer discusses the Irish in the Mexican War: General Zachary Taylor “drew many of his enlisted men from the ranks of immigrants, often impoverished Irish Catholics.” However, interestingly, one of them fled to Mexico and formed a troop called the Saint Patrick Battalion that many Catholic Irish immigrants joined. After the defeat of Mexico, they were sentenced to death (22–27).

²⁶ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 49. Ignatiev describes the condition of the Irish: “In early years Irish were frequently referred to as ‘niggers turned inside out’; the Negroes, for their part, were sometimes called ‘smoked Irish,’ an appellation they must have found no more flattering than it was intended to be” (49).

²⁷ Parker, *Herman Melville*, vol. 1, 318.

²⁸ See Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Irish,” in *Making the Irish*, 476. Moynihan surveys the change around the Irish in the nineteenth century and calls it “the green wave.” He notes that “by 1855, 34 percent of the city voters were Irish. By 1890, when 80 percent of New York City was of foreign parentage, a third of these (409,924 persons of 1,215,463) were Irish, making more than a quarter of the total population” (476).

²⁹ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 9.

³⁰ Susan Ryan, “Melville, Race, and the Ambiguities of Benevolence,” *American Literary History* 12 (2000): 685–712. Ryan explicates Melville’s stories in the light of charity society and racial identity in antebellum America.

³¹ See Linda Dowling Almeida, “Irish America, 1940–2000,” in *Making the Irish*, 553. “Around the phenomenal growth and visibility of St. Patrick’s Day parades across the country in the twentieth century was the transformation of March 17th, from a civic and religious celebration of ethnicity into a secular and commercial holiday in the American calendar.”