HERMAN MELVILLE'S MIGHTY, MISTY MONSTER: A DEVICE OF LITERARY ART

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PREFACE

This thesis on the metaphysical function of the White Whale in Moby-Dick is the outgrowth of preliminary research related to Herman Melville's dramatic technique in the same book - in some particulars, a technique seemingly incohesive with a unity of style. Melville, however, had been accused of lack of unity in his writing before he began composition of The Whale. In fact, his own outright comments, along with other literary methods related to incorporated cohesion in writing, indicate that Melville, an observant, intelligent writer, was aware and calculating in structuring his book. Research then supports a conclusion that in Moby-Dick, Melville's form as well as his major symbol was not, by any means, a matter of chance. In every particular, the dramatic mode in that book seems to be related to the goal of its author, and that goal was to produce "a mighty book."

Furthermore, wide critical divergence and polarity of interpretation by the illustrious critics of Melville's major work proved paradoxically to encourage wide reading and at the same time to generally restrict interpretation to primary evidence. For that reason, this work is fundamentally reliant upon Jay Leyda's The Melville Log and upon the novel Moby-Dick itself.

A special gesture of appreciation for their encouragement is, with this work, rendered to Dr. Charles E. Walton and to Dr. Green D. Wyrick. For stimulating independent thinking and promoting my interest in Melville, gratitude is herewith especially expressed to Dr. Wyrick, my first reader.

M.M.C.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

THE PRELUDE

> OTHER poets have warbled the praises of the soft eye of the antelope, and the lovely plumage of the bird that never alights; less celestial, I celebrate a tail.[1]

Literally the "tail" to which Herman Melville referred in Moby-Dick was the ponderous, flaying tail of the sperm whale. Metaphysically, it was a tale, a story, a philosophy, an explanation of life.

Using a functional image divergent in its nature but united as an extension of the symbolistic White Whale, the major protagonist in Moby-Dick, Melville developed his master work; and the tale of the whale become an expanded metaphor typical of seventeenth-century literary examples, which the self-taught Melville had perused, and conducive to a subtle, witty, paradoxical style ideally suited to obscurity in meaning and a conceit far-fetched.[2]

A metaphysical style of writing enticed Melville for more than one reason. It allowed for dramatic narration but

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[1]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 481.

[2]F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance, p. 121.

Of Melville's writing style, Matthiessen says, "His own acquaintance with the seventeenth century dated back as early as the first piece of his work that we have, for the opening lines of 'Fragments from a Writing-Desk,' which he wrote at nineteen, contain an offhand mention of 'old Burton.'"

permitted subtle, obscurely retained philosophy. Written on two levels of interpretation and transmitting Melville's idea, it quaranteed a degree of immunity from the more vocal criticism of the mass and at the same time it provided in its ambiguous nature an intriguing challenge for the intellectually curious. Finally, in the mode of previous literary masters, handled aptly, it was a style indicative of intelligence, wit and knowledge of literary technique. For Melville, the disciple of magnanimous but seemingly vitriolic truth, the style was ideal; for " . . . in a truly materialistic society, poets, writers, artists, dreamers and elephants are a mere nuisance."[3]

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[3]Romain Gary, "Dear Elephant Sir," Literary Cavalcade, XXIII (October, 1971), Jerome Bronfield, (ed.), p. 23.

CHAPTER II

THE AMBIGUOUS PARADOX

"I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb,"[4] Herman Melville wrote in the middle of November, 1851, to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. The book was Moby-Dick and the general tone of Melville's intimate, somewhat shocking confession was strangely a tone of complacency, self-satisfaction and even exuberance:

> . . . A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book. . . . It is a strange feeling - no hopefulness is in it, no despair. Content - that is it; and irresponsibility; but without licentious inclination. I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling. . . . Knowing you persuades me more than the Bible of our immortality. . . . The divine magnet is on you, and my magnet responds. Which is the biggest? A foolish question - they are One.[5]

The Wicked Truth:

Melville's identification with Hawthorne, a friend whom he admired, was actually a manifestation of faith in himself. Consciously or sub-consciously, the letter to his confident reflects a final, undoubting assurance in the durable -- perhaps immortal essence of his own work. And Melville was happy, for having painfully suffered public derision and the misunderstanding of Mardi, he seemed, upon completion of Moby-Dick, confident and

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[4]Jay Leyda, The Melville Log, p. 435.

[5]Ibid., pp. 435-436.

undaunted by any inevitable repercussion with which his new work would be greeted.[6] Maintaining self-respect through courage, he had dared tell what he sincerely believed to be the truth; and in the telling of that truth, he had fulfilled a duty: He had performed a service to his brother,[7] in a way he had met an obligation to his family and he had satisfied himself.

Previous repercussion related to exposition of hypocrisy, vice and moral inconsistency in Typee (1846), Omoo (1847) and Mardi (1849) had made Melville wary, a wariness specifically intensified by added responsibility and barbed criticism of the latter book which did not sell. (Mardi was written shortly after Melville's marriage to Elizabeth Shaw and published a month after the birth of his first son, Malcolm.)

Indicative of Melville's torment, an outgrowth of family responsibility, hurt, wounded pride and a moral obligation to his own personal literary integrity, in turn a product of human compassion and a regard for truth, he wrote, "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, - it will not pay. Yet altogether, write the other way I

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[6]Mardi was accepted for English publication on March 3, 1849, and was published in the united States in June of that year.

[7]A member of mankind humanly united by a similar bond.

cannot."[8] Specifically revealing subjective torment in Melville's nature is a quotation from Moby-Dick itself:

> But when a man's religion becomes really frantic; when it is a positive torment to him; and, in fine, makes this earth of ours an uncomfortable inn to lodge in; then I think it high time to take that individual aside and argue the point with him.[9]

And argue he did. By the time Melville had written five books, however, he well knew the consequence of truth.[10] Nevertheless, he obstinately remained a dedicated thrall to an old master. Fervently, but with established subtlety, Melville in Moby-Dick was in degree doing what he had in relatively direct fashion done in Mardi wherein he had written "for conscience, not ostantation"; in fact, Babblanja, disciple of candid truth in that book, explains,

> I but fight against the armed and crested Lies of Mardi, that like a host, assail me. I am stuck full of darts; but, tearing them from out me, gasping, I discharge them whence they came.[11]

From Melville there were no apologies offered for the "wickedness" in Moby-Dick, a tale metaphorically, dramatically built around a "mighty, mystic monster" explicitly

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[8]Eleanor Melville Metcalf, Herman Melville, Cycle and Epicycle, p. 108.

[9]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 125.

[10]Redburn (1849) and White-Jacket (1850) had followed the publication of Mardi.

[11]Herman Melville, Mardi, P. 375.

and concretely incorporated in a mythical theme of dark truth.

Its Repercussion:

Stripped to a fundamental basis, underlaying setting, description, incident, character and plot, each fictional product generally may be reduced to a central theme. In Moby-Dick Melville urgently had something to say to the world; but the essence of his message, his general theme, was not one to be readily accepted by Western civilization. Mardi, a book close to Melville's heart, had been poorly received because of opposition to its subject matter as well as opposition to its form, and Melville was in no position to alienate publishers. Somewhat apologetically, in a letter to his publisher Richard Bentley, he defended Mardi by saying:

> You may think, in your own mind that a man is unwise, - indiscreet, to write a work of that kind, when he might have written one perhaps, calculated merely to please the general reader, & not provoke attack, however masqued in an affection of indifference or contempt. But some of us scribblers, My Dear Sir, always have a certain something unmanageable in us, that bids us to this or that, and be done it must - hit or miss.[12]

That Mardi was not a money-making project for either Melville or his publishers is borne out by documentary evidence. Accepted for United States publication by Harpers on November 15, 1847, Mardi was rejected by Murray

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[12]Leyda, op. cit., p. 306.

in England[13] and not accepted for English publication until March 3, 1849, when Richard Bentley contracted to publish it.[14] An account sheet drawn up in September, 1851, by Allan Melville, Melville's attorney-brother, showed only 2,291 copies of Mardi sold out of 3,000 printed. The same account indicated one-half of an equally divided profit which would have been an identical sum received by Melville and by Harpers to be but $402.25.[15] On July 20, 1849, Melville wrote to Bentley:

> . . . I need not assure you how deeply I regret that, for any period, you should find this venture of "Mardi" an unprofitable thing for you; & I should feel still more grieved, did I suppose it was going to eventuate in a positive loss to you. But this can not be in the end.[16]

Metaphysical Safety:

Thematically incorporating in Moby-Dick a Christian Biblical myth but projecting it in a rather unorthodox manner, Herman Melville had no doubt whatsoever about the theme's emotional impact upon the general public. In prophetic fashion, he felt secure that its truth would be a "hit" eventually. Nevertheless, he had learned a lesson from unprofitable Mardi, and conscientiously,

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[13] Ibid., p. 291.

[14] Ibid., p. 292.

[15] Ibid., p. 426.

[16] Ibid., p. 308.

ambiguously writing his new novel on a intricate metaphysical level, he strove through symbolistic writing to avoid the catastrophe of a contemporary "miss."[17] Implying analogy to the Bible, in Moby-Dick Melville used Biblical names for many of his characters, but he chose a great sperm whale, mystically symbolized by its whiteness as the major protagonist of that allegorical narration. Not divorced from tragic implication, of epic proportion, the White Whale became the "hero"[18] of the book's "wicked" statement and, at the same time, was also the factor which lent an "odour"[19] of reality to the romance.[20] Consciously ambiguous, the radical image in metaphysical writing is created dually; and, as Melville would ironically say: "Whatever is not, is. Whatever is, is not."[21] In other

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[17]Ibid., p. 306.

[18]Ibid., p. 427.

Writing to Bentley about the book's title, Allan Melville said: "Moby-Dick is a legitimate title for the book, being the name given to a particular whale who if I may so express myself is the hero of the volume."

[19]Henry James, The Portable Henry James, Morton Dauwen Zabek, (ed.), pp. 391-418.

[20]Leyda, op. cit., p. 376.

Melville called the book "a romance of adventure founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries."

[21]Herman Melville, Mardi, p. 333.

words, the basic metaphor, which in the case of Moby-Dick would be the actual white whale, is minor in inference to a suggested or implied meaning. And in creating Moby-Dick, Melville orientated by disillusionment with the practiced form of Christianity and conditioned by worldly circumstance, in misanthropic search for the fundamental in life, was reaching back in time, back to the beginnings, back to Genesis. In fact, using the whale as a complimentary symbol, he was

> . . . horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale, which, having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over.[22]

Considering the subtlety emotional subject matter and taking Melville's personal circumstances into account, the penning of anti-orthodox Christian literature for an English-speaking public of the Victorian Age was a "ponderous task" equal to "no ordinary letter-sorter." To "have one's hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and the very pelvis of the world;" that was a fearful thing."[23]

Typical of Melville's double-meaning style of writing, the inference suggested by Biblical symbolism from the Story of the Creation in the Book of Genesis is significant. And in the "malicious" whale, Melville found an

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[22]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 582.

Note the connotation of a beginning or a genesis in the term "sperm."

[23]Ibid., pp. 181-182.

epitome for an idea permeating his thoughts. The mighty, mystic "monster" seemed the perfect instrument by which to project a perpetually searching, wandering, Ishmaelic theme which had been, and was to be, a part of all his work. Couched in metaphysical ambiguity, the mighty, destructive sperm whale like some mystical matters was, indeed, an awesomely provocative subject upon which to write.

CHAPTER III

MYTHICAL ICONOCLAST OR BRIGHTNESS OR WHITENESS OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

> Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the liveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.[24]

The sea to Herman Melville like all tangible objects in Moby-Dick was but another symbol. "All visible objects, man," he wrote, "are but as pasteboard masks."[25] But the sea was a special sort of symbol - it like the white whale, its inhabitant, symbolized truth or the actual state of nature wherein man, part of nature himself, might, if he exerted right reason, catch a glimpse of destiny. Contrasted to the land which seemed "scorching" to Bulkington's feet, in "landlessness alone," Ishmael the wanderer, typical of man's state in general, found "the highest truth," a truth "shoreless, indefinite as God"; and like Bulkington up from the "spray" of his "ocean-perishing" leaped Ishmael's "apotheosis."[26]

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[24] Ibid., pp. 363-364.

[25] Ibid., p. 220.

[26] Ibid., pp. 148-149.

The Shock of Recognition:

Writing from experience, conditioned by life, an author's work is to a degree necessarily somewhat of a biographical revelation. Herman Melville, born in an era of paradox, ironically, in his formative years, reared as a God-revering Christian from an aristocratic family in an era of ever-increasing, often velvet-pawed utilitarianism, like Pierre, "Suddenly . . . discovers that the kindness and charity and sweetness of the world is a poisonous mushroom whose delicate shape is embedded in the ordure of malice, pride, cold restraint" and "heartlessness."[27] Opiated by Christian ideology of humbleness, meekness, and just restitution for good, Melville, upon traumatic recognition, was shocked by circumstantial evidence. Misanthropically, but, nevertheless, refusing to relinquish an embued idea of the benevolent nature of the Divinity, he "began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken."[28] Contradicting the optimistic goodness of the transcendentalistic era of his "salad-days,"[29] there lingered for him a torturing death-like torment; for:

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[27]Herman Melville, Pierre, p. 203.

[28]Jay Leyda, The Melville Log, II, p. 529.

[29]William Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra I.v.70-74.

> Beneath the unclouded and mild azure sky, upon the fair face of the pleasant sea, wafted by the joyous breezes, that great mass of death floats on and one, till lost in infinite perspectives.[30]

As F. O. Matthiessen says:

> The necessity to come to a reckoning with . . . problems became severe for Melville, as it could not be for the transcendentalists, whose serene affirmations were never tested by as much suffering and evil as he had seen.[31]

Tried by fire of circumstance and experience, intelligent and a pronounced individualists, Herman Melville personally found it difficult to ride the wave of optimism surging the nation. Specifically, for him, professed Christianity and democratic philosophy did not quite correlate with the institution of slavery operating in the South; and there were other national examples which were incompatible with the American Christian ideology. It was as difficult to overlook a social advantage based on status of family and wealth as it was to be incognizant of cruelty enforced at sea by merchant marine officers upon "common" seamen. Grievance and exploitation under the banner of laissez-faire and imperialism through a doctrine of "manifest destiny" was not easily concealed.[32] In Typee Melville

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[30]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 402.

[31]Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 123.

[32]In relation to the policy of "manifest destiny," the Mexican War was especially viewed equivocally by some Christians.

condemns Christian exploitation in Hawaii; but it was not unapparent that minority groups (unorthodox religious sects, some ethnic divisions, women and children) were viewed in less than a Christian, democratic manner in the "land of equal opportunity" itself.[33]

Seizing upon the metaphysical symbol of the color white as a sort of whitewash for nondenounced but subtle paralyzing horror wrought by misleading or unrecognizable truth, Melville, an apostle of the humane, as a matter of "conscience" felt it his brotherly obligation - actually, in the highest sense, his Christian duty to enlighten his burdened brother.

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[33]*Typee*, published in 1846, was Melville's first novel. Its denunciation of foreign degradation is wide and not limited to the activities of one nation.

Truth to the Face of Falsehood:

> . . . -Jonah did the Almighty's bidding. And what was that shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood! That was it![34]

As with the Biblical figure of Job, there is a certain negative connotation associated with the fortunes of another Biblical figure, Jonah. In exploding national American myths, particularly in defacing the practiced philosophy of American Christianity, Melville was fully aware that he, another Jonah, was treading on treacherous ground; and transferring first person for second person you, he was actually commenting upon himself when he characteristically wrote in Mardi: "Your tongue is forked. You speak two languages: flat folly for yourself, and wisdom for others."[35] Nevertheless, in Moby-Dick, Melville meant to give the truth of the thing in spite of this.[36] And the truth of the picture was a portrayal of the dark side underneath the mask, a revelation of the "foundling" state of man - it was the exposure of the "little lower layer."[37] As applied to optimistic, transcendental, self-righteous America, it was a realistic projection of universal status as interpreted

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[34]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 79.

[35]Herman Melville, Mardi, p. 374.

[36]Leyda, op. cit., p. 374. (Paraphrased.)

[37]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 220.

from an historical understanding and consequential implication; for, prophetically, Melville was "one upon whom nothing was lost."[38]

Herman Melville, aware of the foundation of American culture and conscious of the American promise for the future, was realistic enough, however, to recognize a few facts. He knew that a frontier country isolated from established civilization by the broad expanse of oceans and a wilderness frontier of its own, exercised by its very nature a kind of selective process in relation to its settlers. In turn, he realized the inhabitants of a land tend to establish a general tone for the country and that isolated, untamed, rugged but bountiful America promised much for the hard-determined individualist. From the vantage of history, Melville was aware that it was American optimism and American confidence in provincial competency that turned the condition of servitude to England into a state of erratic resistance and finally into formally organized rebellion itself. In the Ordinance of 1785, a nationalistic demonstrated concern which provided for survey and sale of public lands in the West, Melville, like other proud inhabitants of the young nation, recognized

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[38]James, op. cit., p. 403.

a precedent indicative of diplomatic action which would before 1860 establish all land presently within contigious boundary as property of the United States. For Melville the frontier was enticing; and, paradoxically, it was not limited by oceanic boundary.

Indirectly associated with the frontier and the character of the frontiersmen themselves, Melville recognized other reasons which raised the optimistic level of the average early nineteenth-century American. Probably "somewhat" in the fashion of Frederick Jackson Turner, he might have seen in the open or sparsely populated areas, a sort of an escape safety valve, an asylum for the distraught or unhappy segment of the populace, which served to alleviate social, political, economical or religious distress.[39] As such an asylum, the frontier served generally to temper and control overt reaction toward social or political injustice. More than a little, it was the frontier which made the Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments of the Constitution of the United States) a seemingly integral and firmly functioning governmental instrument. Steadfastly seeming to offer opportunity or new beginnings, the frontier

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[39]Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" was highly optimistic and saw the frontier as an everlasting safety valve. Turner was born in 1861 and died in 1932. By 1891, however, the American frontier had been officially declared closed.

tended to generate confidence in individualism, faith in a protective democratic government and seemingly a manifestation of Divine favor to a Christian people.[40]

But an old adage suggests there is always two sides to a matter; and in Sartor Resartus, Carlyle, a writer whom Melville admired, philosophized that a state of awareness is itself a manifestation of an accompanying ill. Such a philosophy would have been indicative of an unhealthy state underlaying the contemporary transcendental optimism which generally permeated Melville's era.[41]

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[40]Victory in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, somewhat related to England's simultaneous involvement in other foreign problems, must have - considering Christian ideology - been interpreted as intercession of Divine Province toward a favored people or a kind of "manifest destiny."

[41]The transcendental philosophical school formally functioned in Boston from 1836 to 1843. It was organized as the Symposium by a group of thinkers including in its number prominent writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The group was generally known to outsiders as "transcendentalists; and the organization began publication of a magazine called Dial.

The transcendentalists, believing man's capabilities to be infinite, dreamed of an America which would live up to its opportunities by substituting a system of brotherly co-operation for one of selfish competition. They were favorably regarded by a public swept by a democratic spirit supposedly unlimited by social stratification, and their philosophy was easily reconciled with Christian as well as democratic ideals. In America such ideology was firmly entrenched. National Christianity, in fact, was a religion psychologically as powerful in the West as ancient mythology had been in Greece.

Certainly, a nationalistic outlook, unless limited to one's own nation, is generally viewed with a degree of reservation. At any rate, to Herman Melville there was a realistic as well as a romantic side to American life which symptomatically was demonstrated in the practice of unlimited competition and the accompanying consequences of unrestrained individualism. In social discrimination and ruthless capitalism, Melville recognized problems which could neither be solved or completely placated by a transcendental philosophy; for as F. O. Matthiessen points out, Melville, through personal experience, had been a witness as well as a recipient of much suffering and evil.[42]

A result of rational thinking and bitterness; a consequence of disillusionment with previous ideals related to religion, human dignity and a romantic view of national government, Melville's books up until the composition of Moby-Dick; in fact, all of Melville's books have blasted the very institutions which were acclaimed as fundamentally the ideological foundation of the nation. The freedom of speech, the freedom of the press and the freedom of theological outlook - although guaranteed in the Constitution - were, Melville knew, not overtly sanctioned when national,

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[42]Reference previously cited (p. 13 of this work).

mythical mores were violated. And Melville, the social reformer, was treading precariously when in Anacharsis Clootz manner he dared to lay the grievance of mankind before the bar.[43]

Labelled indecent and blasphemous by contemporary Victorian Americans, Melville's social and political satire, at least, finds substance today as is demonstrated by an excerpt from The New Romans which gives candid Canadian opinions of the United States:

> All nation-states live by myths. They are necessary for social cohesion. Yet there is no nation-state in the world today more committed to myths than the United States. The American myths of today are those of eighteenth century liberalism, a philosophy of myths that has died everywhere else but to which the Americans desperately cling.
>
> The United States is the New World where traditional conservatism and power politics are dead. It is the great egalitarian society where everyone is created equal, advancement comes by recognition of ability, and those who do not succeed are judged to have been lazy or not ambitious. It is the nation-state that celebrates Locke and Montesquieu, where the acceptance of

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[43]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 166.

Noting man's grievous inevitable isolated state, Melville writes, ". . . what a set these Isolatoes were! An Anacharsis Clootz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth, accompanying Old Ahab in the Pequod to lay the world's grievances before that bar from which not very many of them ever come back."

"Anacharsis," a pseudo, symbolistic first name, was assumed by Jean Baptiste Clootz. Clootz was an advocate of human right. With a deputation of foreigners, he appeared before the French National Assembly in 1790 to dramatize universal sympathy with the French Revolution.

> pluralism sees to it that no group or class can dominate society. Free enterprise and competition assure that the customer will get the best product at the lowest price. It is the nation of peace that rejects war and imperialism. It is the great melting pot, the haven for oppressed masses, the tired, and the weak. It is the society that has proved Marx wrong. It is the individual's paradise. It is the land of the free. It is the Great Society.
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> In the past, Americans have felt a profound need for these myths. This is still true today, but there is a rising group in the United States which is finally beginning to accept the truth. Two things in particular have contributed to this: the rebellion of the blacks and the vicious war that is being waged against the Vietnameses . . . .
>
> However, the American establishment can no longer adequately deal with criticism of the American system by issuing those familiar pious pronouncements. Even in the United States, it is becoming public knowledge that in the richest country the world has ever known there are vast inequalities of wealth, with millions living in the state of starvation, poverty, and deprivation.[44]

Prophetically, in the same tone, Melville unorthodoxically had jolted the pious, nationalistic halo by defacing the same myths. Ironically, he chided the sham and hypocrisy of society. He exposed social inequality and, in actual practice, neglect of Christian ethics and lack of concern for the needy, the hopeless and the underprivileged. In Redburn, Melville wrote:

> I inquired of some gentlemen and ladies where the missing hotel was; but they only

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[44]John W. Warnock, "The Great Liberal Myth," The New Romans, A. W. Purdy, (ed.), pp. 42-43.

> stared and passed on; until I met a mechanic, apparently, who very civilly stopped to hear my questions and give me an answer.[45]

Similarly, Melville pictures himself (or Redburn) as being ousted from a lyceum "as if he were a strange dog with a muddy hide, that had stolen out of the gutter into a fine apartment," because his clothes were shabby.[46] Writing of passenger-segregation on ship and further illustrating lack of Christian concern and undemocratic social stratification, Melville says:

> Bad enough is it at such times with ladies and gentlemen in the cabin, who have nice little staterooms; and plenty of privacy; and stewards to run for them at a word and put pillows under their heads . . . .
>
> How, then, with the friendless emigrants, stowed away like bales of cotton, and packed like slaves in a slave-ship; confined in a place that, during storm time, must be closed against both light and air; who can do no cooking, nor warm so much as a cup of water; for the drenching seas would instantly flood their fire in their exposed gallery on deck . . . .
>
> Nor is this all: for in some of these ships, . . . the emigrant passengers are cut off from the most indispensible conveniences of a civilized dwelling. This forces them in storm time to such extremities, that no wonder fevers and plagues are the result. We had not been at sea one week, when to hold your head down the fore hatchway was like

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[45]Herman Melville, Redburn, p. 156.

The italics added for communicative purposes are not Melville's.

[46]Ibid., p. 209.

holding it down a suddenly opened cess-pool.

But still more than this. Such is the aristocracy maintained on board some of these ships, that the most arbitrary measures are enforced, to prevent the emigrants from intruding upon the most holy precincts of the quarter-deck, the only completely open space on ship-board. Consequently - even in fine wheather - when they come up from below, they are crowded in the waist of the ship, and jammed among the boats, casks, and spars; abused by the seamen, and sometimes cuffed by the officers, for unavoidably standing in the way of working the vessel.[47]

In Mardi, with sharp satire, Melville criticizes the capitalistic inhumane institution of slavery which flourished in a land of the "unoppressed free":

It was a great plain where we landed; and there, under a burning sun, hundreds of collared men were toiling in trenches, filled with the taro plant; a root most flourishing in that soil. Standing grimly over these, were men unlike them; armed with long thongs, which descended upon the toilers, and made wounds. Blood and sweat mixed; and in great drops, fell.

. . . Babbalanja advanced toward the foremost of those with the thongs, --one Nulli: a cadaverous, ghost-like man; with a low ridge of forehead; hair, steel-gray; and wondrous eyes; --bright, nimble, as the twin Corposant balls, playing about the ends of ships' royal-yards in gales.

The sun passed under a cloud; and Nulli, darting at Babbalanja those wondrous eyes, there fell upon him a baleful glare.

"Have they souls?" he asked, pointing to the serfs.

"No," said Nulli, "their ancestors may have had; but their souls have been bred out of their descendants; . . .

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[47] Ibid., pp. 243-244.

> Approaching one of the serfs, Media took him by the hand, and felt of it long; and looked into his eyes; and placed his ear to his side; and exclaimed, "Surely this being has flesh that is warm; he has Oro[48] in his eye; and a heart in him that beats. I swear he is a man." . . .
>
> "Just Oro! cried Yoomy, "do no thunders roll, --no lightnings flash in this accursed land!"
>
> "Asylum for all Mardi's thralls!" cried Media.
>
> "Incendiaries! cried he with the wondrous eyes, "come ye, firebrands, to light the flame of revolt? Know ye not, that here are many serfs, who, incited to obtain their liberty, might wreak some dreadful vengeance? Avaunt, thou king! thou horrified at this? Go back to Odo, and right her wrongs! These serfs are happier than thine; though thine, no collars wear; . . . ."[49]

Inconsistency of ethical Christianity and cruelty unprohibited but at the same time inconsistent with American idealism is exposed in White Jacket wherein Melville outlines ills related to militaristic discipline. Specifically speaking of the chaplain on a man-of-war, Melville points out that his calling is paradoxical to his professed function which in reality only sanctions a practice adverse to Christian principle. Related to the situation and status of "the people,"[50] Melville denounces the condition under which they were forced to live. The ship

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[48]The Supreme or Divine.

[49]Herman Melville, Mardi, pp. 465-466.

[50]Term used to differentiate the seamen from the officers.

itself with its poor food, cramped quarters, severe discipline and subsequently demoralized seamen is pictured as a sort of "floating hell." In no instance in White-Jacket, however, was Melville's protest so great as it was against the practice of flogging, especially the practice of "flogging through the fleet."[51] He could find no excuse for that brutal practice, and he lashed out against a clause in the United States' Articles of War which authorized the authorities of a ship - in certain indefinite cases - to correct the guilty according to practices of sea-service. Commenting on the after-effects of one barbarously flogged, Melville says:

> To say, that after being flogged through the fleet the prisoner's back is sometimes puffed up like a pillow; or to say that in other cases it looks as if burned black before a roasting fire; or to say that you may track him through the squadron by the blood on the bulwarks of every ship, would only be saying what many seamen have seen.
>
> Several weeks, sometimes whole months, elapse before the sailor is sufficiently recovered to resume his duties. During the greater part of that interval he lies in the sickbay, groaning out his days and nights; and unless he has the hide and constitution of a rhinoceros, he never is the man he was before, but, broken and shattered to the marrow of his bones, sinks into death before his time. Instances have occurred where he has expired the day after the punishment.[52]

Melville with subtle wittiness further exposes the wide divergence between Christian philosophy and its actual application by writing:

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[51]Herman Melville, White-Jacket, pp. 347-350.

[52]Ibid., p. 350.

> I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church. How then could I unite with this wild idolator in worshipping his piece of wood? But what is worship? thought I. Do you suppose now, Ishmael, that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth - pagans and all included - can possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood? Impossible! But what is worship? - to do the will of God - that is worship. And what is the will of God? - to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me - that is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must turn idolator.[53]

In the same vein, ridiculing Christian hypocrisy and bigoted unbrotherliness, Melville portrays "pious" Bildad, a character in Moby-Dick, addressing the pagan harpooner:

> ". . . Son of darkness," he added, turning to Queequey, "art thou at present in communion with any christian church?"
>
> "Why, said I, "he's a member of the first Congregational Church." . . . .
>
> "How long hath he been a member?" he then said, turning to me; . . . "is this Philistine a regular member of Deacon Deuteronomy's meeting? I never saw him going there, and I pass it every Lord's day."
>
> "I don't know anything about Deacon Deuteronomy or his meeting," said I, "all I know is, that Queequeg here is a born member of the First Congregational Church. . . ."
>
> "Young man," said Bildad sternly, "thou art skylarking with me - explain thyself, thou young Hittite. What church dost thee mean? answer me."
>
> Finding myself thus hard pushed, I replied. "I mean, sir, the same ancient Catholic Church to which

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[53]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 85.

> you and I, and Captain Peleg there, and Queequeg here, and all of us, and every mother's son and soul of us belong; the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world; we all belong to that; only some of us cherish some queer crotchets noways touching the grand belief; in that we all join hands."[54]

Melville's outright condemnation of hypocrisy and inconsistent Christian behavior is demonstrated by the American symbol of capitalism as personified in Bildad, one of the owners of the Pequod, a whaling ship:

> Still, for all this immutableness, was there some lack of common consistency about worthy Captain Bildad. Though refusing, from conscientious scruples, to bear arms against land invaders, yet himself had illimitably invaded the Atlantic and Pacific; and though a sworn foe to human bloodshed, yet had he in his straight-bodied coat, spilled tuns upon tuns of leviathan gore. How now in the contemplative evening of his days, the pious Bildad reconciled these things in the reminiscence, I do not know; but it did not seem to concern him much, and very probably he had long since come to the sage and sensible conclusion that a man's religion is one thing, and this practical world quite another. . . . For a pious man, especially for a Quaker, he was certainly rather hard-hearted, to say the least. He never used to swear, though, at his men, they said; but somehow he got an inordinate quantity of cruel, unmitigated hard work out of them.[55]

Amicably deceiving but nevertheless indicating a sort of "white" below-the-surface horror, Melville reveals exploitation ironically rationalized upon Biblical passage itself:

> . . . Bildad never heeded us, but went on mumbling to himself out of his book, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth -"

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[54] Ibid., pp. 128-129.

[55] Ibid., pp. 112-113.

> "Well, Captain Bildad," interrupted Peleg, "what d'ye say, what lay shall we give this young man?"[56]
>
> "Thou knowest best," was the sepulchral reply, "the seven hundred and seventy-seventh wouldn't be too much, would it? - 'where moth and rust do corrupt, but lay - '" . . . .
>
> "Why, blast your eyes, Bildad," cried Peleg, "thou dost not want to swindle this young man! he must have more than that."
>
> "Seven hundred and seventy-seventh," again said Bildad, without lifting his eyes; and then went on mumbling - "for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."[57]

In denouncing social discrimination and social stratification, in denouncing man's inhumanity to man; in fact, his downright cruelty and degradation of the human soul, Melville was indeed exploding American mythological ideals of democracy, individual equality and pious brotherhood. Directly contrasting pagan Queequeg's action to that of the Christians, Melville wrote that Queequeg, had alas, been convinced that:

> ". . . even Christians could be both miserable and wicked; infinitely more so, than all his father's heathens. ... Thought he, it's a wicked world in all meridians; I'll die a pagan. . . he was fearful Christianity, or rather Christians,

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[56]Using terminology related to the whaling industry but perhaps generally perplexing today, a footnote (Moby-Dick, p. 112) defines a tun as "a cask holding about two hundred and fifty gallons." A footnote (Moby-Dick, p. 116) indicates that the smallest lay was the highest rate of payment.

[57]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, pp. 115-116.

> had unfitted him for ascending the pure and undefiled throne of thirty pagan Kings before him.[58]

And the same Queequeg, after risking his own life to rescue a derisive white sailor from a Christian Nantucket ship -- expecting to receive no distinction for what he considered man's natural obligation to his fellow -- commented, "It's a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridans. We cannibals must help these Christians."[59] Melville's Queequeg, like Matthew Arnold, had reached the conclusion that in a succinct, natural state all men are kin; and beyond any authencity in the New Testament there is, as confirmed by the status of the Jobs, the Abrahams, the Jonahs and the Ishmaels, a certain logical "sweet reasonableness in Jesus" that finds no restriction to any organized religion.[60] In fact, directly weighing the benefits resulting from specific religious "benefice," in Typee Melville asks:

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[58] Ibid., pp. 89-90.

[59] Ibid., p. 96.

[60] Quoted in Charles Frederick Harrold and William D. Templeman (eds.). "God and the Bible," English Prose of the Victorian Era, p. 1197.

Arnold says: "But Literature and Dogma had altogether for its object, and so too has the present work, to show the truth and necessity of Christianity, and its power and charm for the heart, mind, and imagination of man, even though the preternatural, which is now its popular sanction, should have to be given up."

> But the voluptuous Indian, with every desire supplied, whom Providence has bountifully provided with all the sources of pure and natural enjoyment, and from whom are removed so many of the ills and pains of life - what has he to desire at the hands of Civilization? She may "cultivate his mind," may "elevate his thoughts" - these I believe are the established phrases - but will he be happier? Let the once smiling and populous Hawaiian Islands, with their now diseased, starving, and dying natives, answer the question. The missionaries may seek to disquise the matter as they will, but the facts are incontrovertible; and the devoutest Christian who visits that group with an unbiased mind, must go away mournfully asking - "Are these, alas! the fruits of twenty-five years of enlightening?"[61]

Melville's era, surfacely an era of optimistic and transcendental outlook, at times rosily tended to gloss over morbidity and disregard the natural state. A kind of metaphysical utopia itself, under its umbrella, romantic nationalism assumed certain mythical values which Melville, in brotherly debt of truth to misanthropic outcasts, felt obligated to expose; and his implication is not unrecognized when Ishmael's whaling voyage is commenced on a day remembere as:

> . . . a short, cold Christmas; and as the short northern day merged into night, we found ourselves almost broad upon the wintry ocean, whose freezing spray cased us in ice, as in polished armor . . . the cold, damp night breeze blew between; . . . we gave three heavy-hearted cheers, and blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic.[62]

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[61]Herman Melville, Typee, p. 240.

[62]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, pp. 145-147.

CHAPTER IV

SYMBOLISTIC RECOMPENSE, A NATIONALISTIC EMBLEM

> If you want to deal with language
> beware
> before you know language deals with you[63]

In addition to metaphysical implication with reference to the hunt, Melville found in whaling symbolism a substantial palliatiative for his unorthodox truth which was generally construed as heretical blasphemy or anti-nationalistic satire. A disparager of mass decision, a satirizer of Western organized religion, a critic of the professed democratic state and the polarity of its philosophy, Herman Melville, seemingly an iconoclast, was fundamentally nationalistic. In addition, he had, if not a conscious at least sub-conscious personal motivation related to a feeling of nationalism. Fortunately, for him, the sperm whale literally represented national strength, power, vitality, individuality and a pioneering spirit. Actually, the subject of whaling was a "mighty" theme, and mighty themes make great books.

For Melville the subject of whaling quite appropriately met his literary need. Whaling, glorious and

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[63]Johan P. Snapper, Post-War Dutch Literature: A Harp Full of Nails, p. 22.

honorable, a profession of the common man was truly a vital part of the contemporary picture and:

> ". . . great geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the times, and possess a correspondent coloring. It is of a piece with the Jews, who, while their Shiloh was meekly walking in their streets, were still praying for his magnificent coming; looking for him in a chariot, who was already among them on an ass."[64]

Unable to support general nationalistic myths or to condone, opiate-like, the prevalent romantic philosophy, happily, Melville, a practical nationalist himself, found, after the fashion of Whitman, much to exalt about America.[65] His heroes are the "common" great, independent individualists; and they are set against an American background. Pioneer-like, they are voyagers or vagabonds of the Great Lakes, the Erie Canal, the mighty Mississippi. They are American sailors in the sea of life often symbolized as the great Pacific, a mysterious, deceptively calm Western

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[64]Jay Leyda, The Portable Melville, p. 410.

[65]Newton Arvin, Herman Melville, p. 183.

Arvin says: "He (Melville) was unique, moreover, among American writers of his time in the particular quality of his intellectual and moral seriousness; unique in his troubled preoccupation with problems that Emerson and Thoreau simply passed by . . . Melville's imagination was obsessed by the spectacle of a natural and human scene in which the instinctive need for order and meaning seems mainly to be confronted by meaninglessness and disorder; in which the human will seems sometimes to be sustained but oftener to be thwarted by the forces of physical nature, and even by agencies that lie behind it; in which goodness and evil, beneficence and destructiveness, light and darkness, seem baffingly intermixed.

calm Western body which Charles Olson labels a contemporary vision of the American extended frontier.[66]

A philosopher in a greater sense than a narrator, Melville's other metaphors like that of whaling are also generally American. The Pequod in Moby-Dick is named after a vanished primitive race of America. In Moby-Dick, also, the "great Kentucky Mammoth Cave," the Hudson River, the plantation in Alabama, the broad prairies, the buffalo, the White Steed, the Catskill eagle, and the "sacred White Dog of the Iroquois" are national references. Melville's greatest hero,[67] Captain Ahab of the whaler the Pequod, like Andrew Jackson whom he praises in the same work, incorporates in his personality the exalted American values:

> But this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself.

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[66]Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael, p. 114.

Olson claims that the sperm whaling industry was uniquely American; and, as a consequence of whaling exploration, some territory in the Pacific was eventually claimed by the United States: "The Pacific is for an American, the Plains repeated, a 20th century Great West. Melville understood the relation of the two geographies."

[67]Here the term is used in a customary fashion and should not be construed with Allan Melville's citation of the hero of Moby-Dick.

> The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality![68]

But Melville's greatest American reference was the great sperm whale itself, a representative of the industry around which Moby-Dick revolved, an industry in the early nineteenth-century which was basically American. Charles Olson substantiates this claim with some facts:

> Whaling was production, as old as the colonies . . . . As early as 1688 there is a record at Boston of a New York brig petitioning Governor Andross for permission to set out "upon a fishing design about the Bohomes Islands, And Cap Florida, for sperma Coeti whales and Rocks."
>
> This was new to whaling, BRAND NEW, American. A FIRST. All the way back to French and Spanish Basques of the Middle Ages it had been cold water whales, the black, right or Greenland whales of northern waters, which had been hunted. But the Yankees had discovered that the Sperm whale had the finest oils and, brought the biggest price.[69]

"The Advocate," a nationalistic chapter in Moby-Dick, is also a testament to the vitality and greatness of the sperm whale and the industry of sperm-whaling. In that chapter Herman Melville wrote:

> And lastly, how comes it that we whalemen of America now outnumber all the rest of the banded whalemen in the world; sail a navy of upwards of seven hundred vessels; manned by eighteen thousand men; yearly consuming 4,000,000 of dollars; the ships worth, at the time of sailing, $20,000,000;

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[68]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 160.

[69]Olson, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

> and every year importing into our harbors a well reaped harvest of $7,000,000? How comes all this, if there be not something puissant in whaling?[70]

Documenting Melville's claims, Olson says:

> . . . by 1833, 70,000 persons and $70,000,000 were tied up in whaling and such associated crafts as shipbuilding, sail-lofts, smiths to make toggle irons, the thieving outfitters, their agents and the whores of ports like New Bedford; by 1844 (peak years roughly 1840-1860) the figure is up to $120,000,000, whaling competes successfully in attracting capital to itself with such opening industries as textiles and shoes, and the export of whale products - one-fourth of the catch - is third to meat products and lumber . . . About this outnumbering of 900 whaling vessels of all nations in 1846, 735 were American.[71]

Further elaborating upon the glories of sperm-whaling, the same author wrote:

> . . . consider whaling as FRONTIER, and INDUSTRY. A product wanted, men got it: big business. The Pacific as sweatshop. Man, led, against the biggest damndest creature nature uncorks. The whaleship as factory, the whaleboat the precision instrument. The 1840's: the New West in the saddle . . . The American whaling era - in contrast to Basque, French, Dutch and English - developed independently concentrated on different species of whale covered all seas including the Artic yielded on a larger scale than in any other country or group of countries before.[72]

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[70]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 152.

[71]Olson, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

[72]Ibid., pp. 23-25.

CHAPTER V

THE MIGHTY, MYSTIC MONSTER, AN AGENT OF LITERARY UNITY

The Whale Scientific and Poetic:

Having selected the sperm whale as a factual, supportive means of projecting a primitive, mystical principle, and having created a logical setting and a dramatic yet relative mood, Melville introduces his major characters; and then, in Chapter XXXII, he gets down to the serious business of explaining the role of the hero, Moby Dick.[73] Subtly, the narrator Ishmael-Melville says:

> . . . as yet, however, the sperm whale, scientific or poetic lives not complete in any literature. For above all other hunted whales, his is an unwritten life.[74]

Moby-Dick, a revelation of the whale realistically as well as poetically, was, Melville says, a romance.[75] But as the "architect" intended, philosophy, cetology, and manufacturing description play their roles along with that of a narrated adventure.

Often criticized as being a book bulkily disunified, the scientific and the metaphysical (poetical) diversions (sometimes, as James E. Miller, Jr. indicates, referred to as blubber of the whale), the very factors which "swells

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[73]Moby-Dick is composed of 135 chapters plus the "Epilogue."

[74]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 181.

[75]Leyda, op. cit., p. 376.

the book to its enormity," are also the factors which "keeps it afloat" or gives it permanence.[76] In his critical work, A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville, Miller writes:

> If all the material on whaling were presented simply as information and nothing more, the often-voiced objections to it might well have substance. But rare is the episode which does not set Melville off on a flight of fancy that leads him far from the decks of the Pequod. There is so much sense and consistency in Melville's recurring movement from scene to philosophy that it seems appropriate to designate his method as "metaphysical." It is the basic method he uses in plotting Ishmael's progressively deeper insights in the novel. And it provides a kind of musical foundation which weaves together and unites in intricate pattern all of the book's major themes. His chapter on the whale's thick blanket of blubber concludes with the observation that it is this "wall" that enables the whale, a warm-blooded creature, to survive in Arctic waters: . . . .[77]

More than a little, it is the "blubber," especially as related to the chapters dealing with cetalogy and description of the practical process related to the whaling industry, which gives credence to the mythological characters of Melville's fiction:

> This material provides the means for Melville's myth-making strategy. Through the manipulation

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[76] James E. Miller, Jr., A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville, p. 96.

[77] Ibid., p. 99.

Miller's reference to "musical foundation" is probably an analogy to Greek-chorus technique.

> and maneuvering of this material, Melville provides - indeed creates - a leviathan world of the imagination that has its own vast magnitudes and its own immeasurable terms of consistency. The materials of this world had since time began accumulated in the epics and bibles and wondrous handbooks of the world's cultures, but Melville was the first to assemble them all in one place to see what he could make of them. And he massed these materials at the front of his book as a signal that the world it described offered new deities and new dimensions.[78]

In outlining criteria for judging a creative writer, Henry James, in the "Art of Fiction" explains:

> The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting.[79]

And the same literary critic adds, "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life."[80] Clarifying the latter statement, James further adds:

> It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being. Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odour of it, and others have not; as for telling you in advance how your nosegay should be composed, that is another affair.[81]

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[78] Ibid., pp. 100-101.

[79] James, op. cit., p. 398.

[80] Ibid., p. 393.

[81] Ibid., p. 401.

A master craftsman of his trade, Herman Melville was indeed careful to anchor his narrated tale on facts and documentation based on representative life. And the nature of his fearful protagonist, in conjunction with Melville's own great gift for creative imagery would seem to guarantee dramatic interest. Subsequently, in Moby Dick, the White Whale, Melville found a literary symbol which could incorporate interesting drama, factual stamina and his own "dark" philosophical romance; for the whale, used as a point of mythical reference, romantic adventure and concrete objectivity, became in Melville's hands a unifying agent, scientific as well as poetic in essence.

The Poetic or A Romance of Certain Wild Legends:

With dual meaning and quasi-documentation, Melville intimated that Moby-Dick was a

> . . . romance of adventure founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries, and illustrated by the author's own personal experience, of two years & more, as a harpooner.[82]

In writing this in a letter to his publisher Richard Bentley on June 27, 1850, Melville no doubt was remembering again, as he had remembered in the early days of Moby-Dick composition, having once read as it was first published in the Knickerbocker Magazine a legendary account of destruction by a sperm whale which was named "Mocha Dick."[83]

Lending credence to his dramatic romance, excerpts from "The Career of Mocha Dick," as presented by Leyda bear a striking resemblance to the narrative plot of Melville's own masterpiece. Presented in documentary manner as verifying evidence, the excerpts follow:

> THE PACIFIC July 5
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> On the 5th day of July, 1840, the English whaling brig Desmond, being then 215 miles due west of the port of Valparaiso, Chili, sighted a lone whale which breached his full length above

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[82]Leyda, op. cit., p. 376.

[83]Ibid., pp. 106, 108 and 154-155.

Reports of this legendary whale were reprinted in the Detroit Free Press during the year of 1892.

the surface about two miles away. The boats were lowered, but before they were within half a mile of the whale he slewed around head on to them and advanced to meet them. He struck one boat with his head and drove her under stern first and then chewed her up. He then sounded, and was lost to sight for fifteen minutes. When he came up he was to lift the other boat thirty feet high on his head, and of course she was completely shattered . . . That was "Mocha Dick's" introduction (?) to blubber hunters. He was the largest whale any one aboard the brig had ever seen, and across his head was a scar about eight feet long, which showed almost white on the gray-black background. It was by this scar he was ever afterward identified. ("The Career of Mocha Dick," Detroit Free Press, April 3, 1892).[84]

THE PACIFIC August 30.

The next craft to encounter "Mocha Dick" was the Russian bark Serepta. That was on the 30th of August . . . and she was fully 500 miles to the south of the spot where he was first seen. She lowered two boats for a lone whale and killed him. The bark was three miles away, and beating down to the whale under a light breeze, when "Mocha Dick" suddenly shot out of the water between the vessel and the boats. Such was his impetus that nearly his full length could be traced before he fell with a crash which could have been heard for miles around. As soon as he had righted himself he made straight for the boats . . . ("The Career of Mocha Dick").[85]

THE PACIFIC October?

["Mocha Dick"] was not seen again for seventeen months . . . he turned up in the Pacific Ocean off the east coast of Japan for the battle of his life.

A coasting craft had been blown off the coast by a heavy gale and was making her way back. It was about an hour before daylight when a big whale

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[84] Ibid., pp. 106-107.

[85] Ibid., p. 108.

As used here, the spelling and punctuation from Leyda's description of "Mocha Dick" is representative of spelling and punctuation used in the primary source. Actually, in constructing this paper punctuation and spelling in quoted material is presented as it was given.

was seen to breach about two miles away. It was passed over as a trifling incident, but ten or fifteen minutes later the leviathan was discovered rushing down in the wake of the craft with all the steam he could put on. . . He struck the craft in her stern and wrecked her in an instant, and pieces of the wreckage were carried away in his jaws as he swerved to port and swam slowly away. . .The craft did not go down, but sank until her decks were awash, and the men had not yet put off on their raft, when three whaling vessels appeared in sight all at once - the Glasgow whaler Grieff, the New Bedford whaler Yankee, and the English whaler Dudley . . .

. . . By 8 o'clock the three whalers were up and had heard the story, but "Mocha Dick" had disappeared an hour before. It was agreed to separate and search for him, and that if he were found all three ships should take part in the attack and share in the credit of ridding the deep of such a terror. They did not have to hunt for the fellow, however. While the Captains were planning he showed up about a mile to windward. After his usual fashion he came to the surface under such headway that he seemed to stand upright on the tip of his flukes before he fell over on his side with a crash like the fall of a great building . . .

It was twenty minutes before "Mocha Dick" showed up again. He had hoped to catch a boat, but all were too lively for him, and while he lay wallowing in the seas his fall had created the mate of the Yankee put a harpoon into him. The old fighter humped up as the iron went in, and for five minutes seemed to have been struck dead. Then he made a rush for the Scotchman's boat, ran right over it, and slued about for the Englishman. It was pulling away from him when he rushed again, caught it with a swing of his long under jaw, and the onlookers beheld a spectacle none of them ever forgot. The whale lifted his great head clear out of the water with the boat in his mouth, and at one bite made matchwood of it and pulp of two of the crew, who had been unable to tumble out . . . ("The Career of Mocha Dick")[86]

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[86] Ibid., pp. 154-155.

Dramatic Verification of Moby-Dick:

In addition to legendary documentation, "The Affidavit," Chapter XLV of Moby-Dick, actually is an affidavit "establishing in all respects the reasonableness of the whole story of the White Whale, more especially the instances where truth requires full as much bolstering as error.[87] The purpose of this chapter declares Melville-Ishmael is "to take away any incredulity which a profound ignorance of the entire subject may induce in some minds, as to the natural verity of the main points of this affair."[88]

In the 1850's, however, such explanation seemed hardly necessary; for, during Melville's lifetime, as has been pointed out, whaling was an important contemporary industry in America. In fact, the dramatic destruction of the whaleship Essex by a sperm whale occurred but a little over a year after his birth. (Melville was born August 1, 1819, and the Essex was sunk on November 20, 1820.) Strangely, indeed, an almost identical happening occurred on August 20, 1851, when the Ann Alexander of New Bedford was rammed and sunk in the Pacific by a whale.[89]

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[87]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 273.

[88]Ibid., p. 273.

[89]Moby-Dick was completed in July 1851, and published in England in October. The American edition appeared in November of the same year.

Considering the phenomenal dates of these major tragedies, the catastrophic details of both incidents and the similarity to the final dramatic episode in Moby-Dick, one, to a degree, might sense Melville's emotion when on November 7 (?), 1851, he wrote to Evert Duyckinck:

> Your letter received last night had a sort of stunning effect on me. For some days past busy engaged in the woods with axe, wedge, & beetle, the Whale had almost completely slipped me for a time (& I was the merrier for it) when Crash! comes Moby Dick himself (as you justly say) & reminds me of what I have been about for part of the last year or two. It is really & truly a surprising coincidence - to say the least. I make no doubt it is Moby Dick himself, for there is no account of his capture after the sad fate of the Pequod about fourteen years ago. --Ye Gods! what a Commentator is this Ann Alexander whale. What he has to say is short & pithy & very much to the point. I wonder if my evil art has raised this monster.[90]

But Melville's era has passed; sperm whale oil has been replaced by commodities more easily obtainable. And now, out of regard to the "creator" of the White Whale - to establish credence and to better understand that Whale's veracity, the following documentary reports are hereby presented:

> NANTUCKET May 10 Ralph Waldo Emerson writes to his daughter, Ellen:
>
> All the people here live by killing whales . . . now they go to the Pacific Ocean for them in great ships. But one day when the ship Essex was sailing

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[90]Leyda, op. cit., pp. 431-432.

there, a great sperm whale was seen coming with full speed towards the vessel: in a moment he struck the ship with terrible force, staving in some planks, and causing a leak: then he went off a little way, & came back swiftly, the water all white with his violent motion, & struck the ship a second frightful blow; the crew were obliged instantly to escape in boats, and the ship sunk in a few minutes. The Captain is now here.[91]

M's memoir of Owen Chase:

. . . before seeing Chace's (?) ship, we spoke another Nantucket craft [the Lima?] & gammed with her. In the forecastle I made the acquaintance of a fine lad of sixteen or thereabouts, a son [William Henry] of Owen Chace! I questioned him concerning his father's adventure; and when I left his ship to return again the next morning (for the two vessels were to sail in company for a few days) he went to his chest & handed me a complete copy . . . of the Narrative [of the Essex catastrophe]. This was the first printed account of it I had ever seen . . . The reading of this wondrous story upon the landless sea, & close to the very latitude of the shipwreck had a surprising effect upon me.[92]

. . . In the year 1820 the ship Essex, Captain Pollard, of Nantucket, was cruising in the Pacific Ocean. One day she saw spouts, lowered her boats, and gave chase to a shoal of sperm whales. Ere long, several of the whales were wounded; when, suddenly, a very large whale escaping from the boats, issued from the shoal, and bore directly down upon the ship. Dashing his forehead against her hull, he so stove her in, that in less than "ten minutes" she settled down and fell over. Not a surviving plank of her has been seen since. After the severest exposure, part of the crew reached the land in their boats. . . I have seen

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[91] Ibid., p. 244.

[92] Ibid., p. 119.

Owen Chace, who was chief mate of the Essex at the time of the tragedy; I have read his plain and faithful narrative; I have conversed with his son; and all this within a few miles of the scene of the catastrophe.[93]

LAT 45.5S, OFF CHILE December 24 "Doings of the Acushnet," a Journal kept by Ansel Weeks, Jr:

. . . at half past 12 Raised two whales on the Ice-bow dist one mile laying still on fighting, being surrounded by Porpoises. Being so poor and confident of strikes we lowered although quite rugged: agreeable to our expectations we struck the calf or small one, to the starbord boat. Mr. Taber, header Henry Johnson steersman Manuel, a Portuguese John Pease Kanaka Joe, another and Locket an Englishman the oarsmen. After being fast a short time Mr. Lawrence struck the Cow Whale, but drawed shortly . . . While Thus employed they lost sight of Mr. Taber, from the boats. Observing the signal of distress we run to the assistance of them. While thus employed we seeing nothing of the other boat, became alarmed for their safety. We made sail and worked to windward keeping the best possible lookout. at 5 P M. we discovered the Kanaka Joe a short distance on the weather bow, floating on a Polle. He says that Mr Taber having killed the Cow he cut off to strike her, in endeavouring to do which the whale stove the boat and killed Mr Taber, the rest of the crew succeeded in gaining the bottom of the boat. The whale then came back and hit the boat. knocked off the crew. Johnson being no swimmer sank. The rest gained the boat again but the whales not yet satisfied with their hellish work came back, ran his head over the poor boy and he sank to his final home. The rest then abandoned the fragments and swam to the leeward John Pease with the Polle and boat Rig Manuel with an oar which was obtained for him by the Kanaka, he with nothing After swimming a short time John Pease called Joe and told him he could swim no farther gave up his

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[93]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, pp. 277-278.

Polle and sank! A short time after Poor Manuel a fine fellow disappeared! . . . What our feelings were I leave every one of feeling to judge. One fifth of our little company taken from us without any warning in the prime of life made an impression on my mind never to be effaced.[94]

NEW YORK May 17

Capt. [Joseph] Dias [of the whale ship Pocahontas] says that on the 12th of December, 1850, in latitude about 33° 47 south, and longitude 48° 35 west . . .

When about two boats length off, the whale rounded towards the vessel's bow, and struck it with such force as to start one or two planks, and break one or two timbers on the starboard side of the bow at the water line, causing the vessel to leak at once at the rate of 250 strokes per hour.[95]

THE PACIFIC August 20 The Ann Alexander, of New Bedford, is rammed & sunk by a whale.[96]

PANAMA October 16 A news item in the Panama Herald:

We have just received the following thrilling account of the destruction of the whale ship Ann Alexander. Capt. John S. Deblois, of New Bedford, by a large sperm whale . . . A similar circumstance has never been known to occur but once in the whole history of whale-fishing, and that was the destruction of the ship Essex . . . .[97]

HONOLULU May 6 An item in The Friend:

TAKEN AT LAST

Our readers will doubtless recollect the narrative published in the year 1851, respecting the whale ship "Ann Alexander," Capt. Dublois, being stove by a sperm whale in the Pacific ocean. Recently

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[94]Leyda, op. cit., pp. 267-268.

[95]Ibid., p. 411.

[96]Ibid., p. 426.

[97]Ibid., p. 429.

> Capt. D. visited Honolulu . . . We learned from him many striking and remarkable circumstances respecting the attack . . . Without repeating the story we would state, that about five months subsequently, the same whale was taken by the "Rebecca Sims" Capt. Jernegan. Two harpoons were discovered in the whale, marked "Ann Alexander." The Whale's head was found seriously injured, and contained pieces of the ship's timbers. He had lost his wildness and ferocity, being very much diseased . . . .[98]

The latter account was written in 1854, almost three years after the actual sinking on August 20, 1851, of the Ann Alexander and three years after Herman Melville had completed his own fictional account of the White Whale. With feeling, Melville had remarked, "what a Commentator is this Ann Alexander Whale"; but in a Literary World review (November 14, 1851), Evert Duyckinck credited and summarized the role of Melville's sperm whale by writing:

> By a singular coincidence this extreme adventure [of the Ann Alexander] is, even to very many of the details, the catastrophe of Mr. Melville's new book, which is a natural-historical, philosophical, romantic account of the person, habits, manners, ideas of the great sperm whale . . . Nothing like it has ever before been written of the whale . . . .[99]

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[98] Ibid., p. 487.

[99] Ibid., p. 434.

Cetalogical Inference or the Whale Scientific:

Melville's concern related to credibility of the dramatic action of his "malicious" protagonist was further alleviated by methodical description of the mighty physiology of the sperm whale. After describing the colossal skull, the "spout-hole, jaw, teeth, tail, forehead, fins, and divers other parts,"[100] still maintaining customary dual-level communication, he constructs a final picture of the magnitude of the creature.

With some relevant consistency but not as presented by the author, the following excerpts from Moby-Dick make the near-final, dramatic incident in the same book plausible:

His mass:

> FROM HIS MIGHTY BULK THE WHALE AFFORDS A MOST congenial theme whereon to enlarge, amplify and generally expatiate. Would you, you could not compress him. . . . Not to tell over again his furlongs from spiracle to tail, and the yards he measures about the waist; only think of the gigantic involutions of his intestines, where they lie in him like great cables and hausers coiled away in the subterranean orlop-deck of a line-of-battle-ship.[101]

His skeleton:

> The skeleton dimensions I shall now proceed to set down . . . according to my careful calculation, I say, a Sperm Whale of the largest

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[100]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 577.

[101]Ibid., p. 579.

magnitude between eighty-five and ninety feet in length, and something less than forty feet in its fullest circumference, such a whale will weigh at least ninety tons; so that, reckoning thirteen men to a ton, he would considerably outweigh the combined population of a whole village of one thousand one hundred inhabitants.[102]

His brain:

But if from the comparative dimensions of the whale's proper brain, you deem it incapable of being adequately charted, then I have another idea for you. If you attentively regard almost any quadruped's spine, you will be struck with the resemblance of its vertebrae to a strung necklace of dwarfed skulls, all bearing rudimental resemblance to the skull proper. It is a German conceit, that the vertebrae are absolutely undeveloped skulls. . . .

Apply this spinal branch of phrenology to the Sperm Whale. His cranial cavity is continuous with the first neck-vertebra; and in that vertebra the bottom of the spinal canal will measure ten inches across, being eight in height, and of a triangular figure with the base downwards. As it passes through the remaining vertebrae the canal tapers in size, but for a considerable distance remains of large capacity. Now, of course, this canal is filled with much the same strangely fibrous substance - the spinal cord - as the brain; and directly communicates with the brain. And what is still more, for many feet after emerging from the brain's cavity, the spinal cord remains of an undecreasing girth, almost equal to that of the brain. Under all these circumstances, would it be unreasonable to survey and map out the whale's spine phrenologically? for, viewed in this light, the wonderful comparative smallness of his brain proper is more than compensated by the wonderful comparative magnitude of his spinal cord.[103]

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[102] Ibid., pp. 576-577.

[103] Ibid., p. 451.

The hump:

Regarding the Sperm Whale's head as a solid oblong, you may, on an inclined plane, sideways divide it into two quoins, ...

The lower subdivided part, called the junk, is one immense honeycomb of oil, formed by the crossing and re-crossing, into ten thousand infiltrated cells, of tough elastic white fibres throughout its whole extent. The upper part, known as the Case, may be regarded as the great Heidelburg Tun of the Sperm Whale. And as that famous tierce is mystically carved in front, so the whale's vast plaited forehead forms innumerable strange devices for the emblematical adornment of his wondrous tun . . . the tun of the whale contains by far the most precious of all his oily vintages; namely, the highly-prized spermaceti, in its absolutely pure, limpid, and odoriferous state. Nor is this precious substance found unalloyed in any other part of the creature.[104]

His forehead:

You observe that in the ordinary swimming position of the Sperm Whale, the front of his head presents an almost wholly vertical plane to the water; you observe that the lower part of that front slopes considerable backwards, so as to furnish more of a retreat for the long socket which receives the boom-like lower jaw; you observe that the mouth is entirely under the head, much in the same way, indeed, as though your own mouth were entirely under your chin. Moreover you observe that the whale has no external nose; and that what nose he has - his spout hole - is on the top of his head; you observe that his eyes and ears are at the sides of his head, nearly one third of his entire length from the front. Wherefore, you must now have perceived that the front of the Sperm Whale's head is a dead, blind wall, without a single organ or tender prominence of any sort whatsoever. Furthermore, you are now to consider that only in the extreme, lower, backward

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[104]Ibid., pp. 438-439.

sloping part of the front of the head, is there the slightest vestige of bone; and not till you get near twenty feet from the forehead do you come to the full cranial development. So that this whole enormous boneless mass is as one wad. Finally, though, as will soon be revealed, its contents partly comprise the most delicate oil; yet, you are now to be apprised of the nature of the substance which so impregnably invests all that apparent effeminacy. In some previous place I have described to you how the blubber wraps the body of the whale, as the rind wraps an orange. Just so with the head; but with this difference: about the head this envelope, though not so thick, is of boneless toughness, inestimable by any man who has not handled it. The severest pointed harpoon, the sharpest lance darted by the strongest human arm, impotently rebounds from it. It is as though the forehead of the Sperm Whale were paved with horses' hoofs. I do not think that any sensation lurks in it.[105]

His jaw:

But . . . look at this portentous lower jaw, which seems like the long narrow lid of an immense snuff-box, with the hinge at one end, instead of one side. If you pry it up, so as to get it overhead, and expose its rows of teeth, it seems a terrific portcullis; and such, alas! it proves to many a poor wight in the fishery, upon whom these spikes fall with impalling force. But far more terrible is it to behold, when fathoms down in the sea, you see some sulky whale, floating there suspended, with his prodigious jaw, some fifteen feet long, hanging straight down at right-angles with his body, for all the world like a ship's jib-boom. . . . There are generally forty-two teeth in all; in old whales, much worn down, but undecayed; . . . .[106]

His spout:

. . . owing to his marked internal structure which gives him regular lungs, like a human being's the

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[105] Ibid., p. 436.

[106] Ibid., pp. 430-431.

whale can only live by inhaling the disengaged air in the open atmosphere. Wherefore the necessity for his periodical visits to the upper world. But he cannot in any degree breathe through his mouth, for, in his ordinary attitude, the Sperm Whale's mouth is buried at least eight feet beneath the surface; and what is still more, his windpipe has no connexion with his mouth. No, he breathes through his spiracle alone; and this is on the top of his head. . . . Assume it, and it follows that if all the blood in a man could be aerated with one breath, he might then seal up his nostrils and not fetch another for a considerable time. That is to say, he would then live without breathing. Anomalous as it may seem, this is precisely the case with the shale, who systematically lives, by intervals, his full hour and more (when at the bottom) without drawing a single breath, or so much as in any way inhaling a particle of air; for, remember, he has no gills. How is this? Between his ribs and on each side of his spine he is supplied with a remarkable involved Cretan labyrinth of vermicelli-like vessels, which vessels, when he quits the surface, are completely distended with oxygenated blood. So that for an hour or more, a thousand fathoms in the sea, he carries a surplus stock of vitality in him, just as the camel crossing the waterless desert carries a surplus supply of drink for future use in its four supplementary stomachs. . . . How obvious is it, too that this necessity for the whale's rising exposes him to all the fatal hazards of the chase. For not by hook or by net could this vast leviathan be caught, when sailing a thousand fathoms beneath the sunlight.[107]

His tail:

Reckoning the largest sized Sperm Whale's tail to begin at that point of the trunk where it tapers to about the girth of a man, it comprises upon its upper surface alone, an area of at least fifty square feet. The compact round body of its root expands into two broad, firm, flat palms or flukes, gradually shoaling away to less than an inch in thickness. At the crotch or junction, these flukes slightly overlap,

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[107] Ibid., pp. 475-477.

then sideways recede from each other like wings, leaving a wide vacancy between. . . . At its utmost expansion in the full grown whale, the tail will considerably exceed twenty feet across.

The entire member seems a dense webbed bed of welded sinews; but cut into it, and you find that three distinct strata compose it; - upper, middle, and lower. The fibres in the upper and lower layers, are long and horizontal; those of the middle one, very short, and running crosswise between the outside layers. This triume structure, as much as anything else, imparts power to the tail. . . .

But as if this vast local power in the tendinous tail were not enough, the whole bulk of the leviathan is knit over with a warp and woof of muscular fibres and filaments, which passing on either side the loins and running down into the flukes, insensibly blend with them, and largely contribute to their might; so that in the tail the confluent measureless force of the whole whale seems concentrated to a point. Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it.[108]

The near-final, dramatic incident:[109]

As if to strike a quick terror into them, by this time being the first assailant himself, Moby Dick had turned, and was now coming for the three crews. Ahab's boat was central; and cheering his men, he told them he would take the whale head-and-head, - that is pull straight up to his forehead, - a not uncommon thing; for when within a certain limit, such a course excludes the coming onset from the whale's sidelong vision. But ere that close limit was gained, and while yet all three boats were plain as the ship's three masts to his eye; the White Whale churning himself into furious speed, almost in an instant as it were, rushing among the boats with open jaws, and a lashing tail,

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[108]Ibid., pp. 481-482.

[109]Previously used phrase in introductory material to this cetalogical unit used to substantiate plausibility.

offered appalling battle on every side; and heedless of the irons darted at him from every boat, seemed only intent on annihilating each separate plank of which those boats were made. But skillfully manoeuvred, incessantly wheeling like trained chargers in the field; the boats for a while eluded him; though, at times, but by a plank's breadth; while all the time, Ahab's unearthly slogan tore every other cry but his to shreds.[110]

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[110] Ibid., pp. 702-703.

CHAPTER VI

POETRY "HARD AS SAP FROM A FROZEN MAPLE TREE"

Intensely aware of the important role of credibility and consistency in creative writing, factors which for Melville assumed weighted importance in fictional "romance,"[111] the narrating author of Moby-Dick was extremely careful to document action and biologically detail the sperm whale. Considering his care in this respect and taking into account the subtle ambiguity with which he wrote about his "monster," from a literary,

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[111]Finding the public somewhat incredulous relative to the "authenticity" of Typee and Omoo, Melville in referring to the credibility of his forthcoming book Mardi wrote Murray on March 25, 1848:

> To be blunt: the work I shall next publish will be down right & out a "Romance of Polynesian Adventure" --But why this? The truth is, Sir, that the reiterated imputation of being a romancer in disguise has at last pricked me into a resolution to show those who may take any interest in the matter, that a real romance of mine is no Typee or Omoo, & is made of different stuff altogether. . .

In the "Author's Preface" to Mardi itself, Melville wrote:

> Not long ago, having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity, the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as such; to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity: in some degree the reverse of my previous experience.

stylistic standard as well as a factual viewpoint, Herman Melville's whale was indeed scientifically constructed.

Inasmuch, however, as this same whale (a symbolistic agent for Melville's "dark," allegorical myth of life) was basically created to move one's imagination and engender emotion, the White Whale was foremost a dramatic poetic device as well. Nevertheless, from a contemporary viewpoint of literary criteria, Melville was quite aware of the then considered complication related to poetic style and stark realism.[112] Writing to Richard Henry Dana, Jr., in April of 1850, Melville said:

> ". . . blubber is blubber you know; tho' you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree; - & to cook the thing up, one must needs throw in a little fancy, which from the nature of the thing, must be ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves. Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this.[113]

And in Moby-Dick Melville's "truth" was metaphysically (scientifically and poetically) projected by means of his great protagonist, the White Whale. Concretely, scientifically - on a minor basis - the whale was a mighty though exalted monster; and metaphorically poetic - on a major basis - that same whale was an agent of

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[112]Up until Melville's era, poetry was generally construed on a transcentental or romantic level: "the embodiment in appropriate language of beautiful or high thought, imagination, or emotion . ..." (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, p. 651.)

[113]Leyda, op. cit., p. 374.

of the mystical darkness which lit the candles of the world.[114]

By the author's own admission, Moby-Dick is the celebration of "truth" or the tale of its "real Hero," a specific sperm whale transcending in mythical implication physical limitation. Indeed, for Herman Melville, the White Whale was metaphorically, paradoxically and most of all subtly a symbolization of "wickedness" and truth:

> But in a matter like this, subtlety appeals to subtlety, and without imagination no man can follow another into these halls. And though, doubtless, some at least of the imaginative impressions about to be presented may have been shared by most men, yet few perhaps were entirely conscious of them at the time, and therefore may not be able to recall them now.[115]

A white and supernatural monster, Moby Dick was basically a symbol, a ghost of the "principal" behand an image. Maliciously cunning, seemingly inhuman, he was like a "snow hill in the air." Part of nature, a ubiquitous phantom, immortally, ever present, to Ahab (protagonist

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[114]Herman Melville, Mardi, p. 1

Mardi also was a book structured around a quest or a voyage for truth. Chapter I begins:

> We are off! . . . We sail from Ravavai, ... At Ravavai, I had stepped ashore some few months previous; and now was embarked on a cruise for the whale, whose brain enlightens the world.

[115]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 259.

in Moby-Dick) he represented the force of "all the subtle demonisms of life and thought."[116] Supporting this assertion are the appellations which Melville uses to denote the Whale. That representation of the "intangible" unknown is called an "appariation," "that demon phantom," "a dumb brute," "a grand hooded phantom," "the gliding great demon of the seas of life," a "mighty, misty monster," and finally a "symbol" itself. Understanding that poetic symbol with all its ramifications is understanding Moby-Dick:

> And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye than at the fiery hunt?[117]

Further uniting poetic symbolism with seemingly innuendoistic inference, Melville's tragic hero, Ahab, views Moby Dick as a mask of the principal. To him, the White Whale is a wall needing penetration in order to reach "the little lower layer" of truth.[118] And that voyage to truth, the underlaying agent of understanding life's mystical secret was related to philosophical beginnings - related to a reasonable interpretation of

> All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with

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[116]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 247.

[117]Ibid., p. 264.

[118]Ibid., pp. 220-221.

> malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.[119]

In making Moby Dick into a specific whale and in his whiteness the "most appalling of all brutes," a "hated fish" associated with the "deadliest ill," an "immortal," "ubiquitous" "monster" symbolistic of the "subtle demonisms of life," Melville establishes his "hero" as a preternatural agent. To his Ishmaelic pursuers, the White Whale elicited a "vague, nameless horror." But mutely, Melville says, the whale "wears a false brow to the common world."[120]

Thus, in the malicious nature, in the false brow of the Whale, lies the ambiguous, metaphysical riddle, the "wicked" truth which Melville subtly presented in his controversial monument, Moby-Dick, the book itself a manifestation of unity woven round a symbol both scientific and poetic.

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[119] Ibid., p. 247.

[120] Ibid., p. 450.

CHAPTER VII

THE WHALE, ITS CLASSIC DIMENSION[121]

That Melville was a bit facetious in announcing Moby-Dick to be a "romance" is substantiated, for in the same book he paradoxically denounces romantic aspirations of transcendentalism.[122] Intelligent, ferretively persistent and endowed with an innate awareness of the technique incorporated in creative literature, Melville, although seldom acting in the role of actual critic was very much aware of and drawn to ever-enduring examples of literary art.[123] As a peruser of classical writers, he was entranced

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[121]After sending proofs of The Whale, original title of Moby-Dick, to Richard Bentley in England, Melville decided to change the title; for Allan Melville wrote to the publisher: "Since sending proofs of my brothers new work by the Asia on the 10th he has determined upon a new title & dedication . . . ." (Leyda, op. cit., p. 427.)

[122]Reference is made to introductory quotation of this work:

> OTHER poets have warbled the praises of the soft eye of the antelope, and the lovely plummage of the bird that never alights; less celestial, I celebrate a tail.

[123]Melville's most famous criticism "Hawthorne and His Mosses" is actually a subjective revelation of his own ambition; and a letter of regret for once critically denouncing another's work would indicate reluctance on Melville's part to overtly serve in the critic's role.

by and cognizant of their technique. Long before the advent of James' "Art of Fiction," a consequence of his own innate talent, Herman Melville was quite aware of the importance of interest, reality, consistency, imagery and drama as applied to the art of literature.[124] A classic writer himself, he was primarily a realist; and working with the fundamental in life, man's nature and his lot, Melville, in a bond of brotherhood, was generally man's sympathizer rather than his critic.

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[124]Henry James' monumental critical evaluation, first appeared in Longman's magazine in 1884; but Melville's tenth book, The Confidence Man, finished in the fall of 1856, gives in one paragraph what might be construed as a sort of genitive resume of the basic ideas in "The Art of Fiction" which itself did not appear until almost thirty years later:

> And as in real life, the proprieties will not allow people to act out themselves with the unreserve permitted to the stage; so, in books of fiction, they look not only for more entertainment, but, at bottom, even for more reality, than real life itself can show. Thus, though they want novelty, they want nature, too, but nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed. In this way of thinking, the people in a fiction, like the people in a play, must dress as nobody exactly dresses, talk as nobody exactly talks, act as nobody exactly acts. It is with fiction as with religion; it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie. . . . Yes, it is indeed, strange that any one should clamor for the thing he is weary of; that any one, who, for any cause, finds real life dull, should yet demand of him who is to divert his attention from it, that he should be true to that dullness. (Herman Melville, The Confidence Man, p. 199.)

Of previous or contemporary American writers, however, Melville appears to have been most drawn to the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne. In fact, with ambiguous overtones but definitely nationalistic implication, he inscribed Moby-Dick, his own work of classic dimension to that writer:

In Token
of my admiration for his genius,
This book is inscribed
to
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Outside of being an American which had in itself for Melville an independent significance, Hawthorne's appeal to Moby-Dick's author lay, as Melville at least outwordly attributed it, to his friend's thematic realistic kinship to the work of Shakespeare, the acclaimed greatest bard of England or more specifically the English language.

According to Melville, in his review "Hawthorne and His Mosses," it was Hawthorne's melancholy insight into a state of blackness, his compassion for the human state which touched a kindred spring and sparked Melville's admiration for his neighbor-author:

> All over him, Hawthorne's melancholy rests like an Indian summer, which, though bathing

> a whole country in one softness, still reveals the distinctive hue of every towering hill, and each far-winding vale.[125]

In Hawthorne's work Melville found true pictures of life borne of "a great, deep intellect, which drops down into the universe like a plummet."[126]

> For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side--like the dark half of the physical sphere --is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black. But this darkness but gives more effect to the ever-moving dawn, that forever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world. . . . Certain it is, however, that this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Deparvity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free. For, in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance . . . this black conceit pervades him, through and through. You may be witched by his sunlight, transported by the bright fildings in the skies he builds over you, but there is the blackness of darkness beyond; and even his bright gildings but fringe and play upon the edges of thunder-clouds.[127]

And in Hawthorne's non-transcendental recognization of the natural state -- in his "power of darkness" -- Melville related Hawthorne, an American writer, to the great Shakespeare himself:

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[125] Jay Leyda (ed.), The Portable Melville, op. cit., p. 404.

[126] Ibid., p. 405.

> Now it is that blackness in Hawthorne, of which I have spoken, that so fixes and fascinates me . . . this blackness it is that furnishes the infinite obscure of his background --that background, against which Shakespeare plays his grandest conceits, the things that have made for Shakespeare his loftiest but most circumscribed renown, as the profoundest of thinkers . . . it is those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality; --these are the things that make Shakespeare Shakespeare. Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates, the things which we feel to be so terrifically true that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. . . . And few of his endless commentators and critics seem to have remembered, or even perceived, that the immediate products of a great mind are not so great as that undeveloped, and sometimes undevelopable yet dimly discernible greatness, to which these immediate products are but the infallible indices. In Shakespeare's tomb lies infinitely more than Shakespeare ever wrote. And if I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do, as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing. For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth--even though it be covertly, and by snatches.[128]

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[128] Ibid., 407-408.

As with Hawthorne, Melville was attracted by Shakespeare's great heart or his compassionate view of man, a sort of pawn of Fate. In a letter to Evert Duyckinck dated February 24, 1849, he wrote of Shakespeare: "Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired . . . ."

Despite Melville's comment, "But already I feel that this Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul,"[129] praising Hawthorne's power of blackness must not be construed as a new insight into natural truth on the part of Melville. In Hawthorne's work Herman Melville merely found affirmation of the burning recognition which haunts all his own literature and which is even recorded in his first book, Typee, a picture of Eden in a confirmed anti-Edenistic state.

Melville's personal recognition of a state of blackness and its capacity for wrecking tragic havoc upon the vulnerable is portrayed in all his successive novels; so -- even before the composition of Moby-Dick -- Omoo, Mardi, Redburn and White Jacket were all works dramatizing a condition of dark depravity as it was related to life.[130]

Undoubtedly, it was true that Herman Melville found Hawthorne's work indeed refreshing in an age of stereotyped, shallow optimism. Undoubtedly, also, Melville was genuinely impressed by Hawthorne's literary merit. But

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[129] Ibid., p. 417.

[130] The fact that Melville may be taken somewhat subjectively rather than completely literally in his comments in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," is borne out by his declination of personal knowledge of that author: ". . . for I never saw the man, and . . . perhaps never shall . . . ."

Herman Melville's praise of Hawthorne was especially voluble; and it implies a nationalistic suggestion drawing attention to the fact that at some time in the future, America, like England, would have a great native author of its own; and borne of a new era and a new locality, that author, like the Bard of England, would eventually be recorded as the classicist of a potentially great nation and quite possibly as another world-renowned example of classic writing. For this reason, Melville did not feel it amiss to advise in "Hawthorne and His Mosses":

> Let us away with this [Bostonian] leaven of literary flunkyism towards England. If either must play the flunky in this thing, let England do it, not us. [And the time is not far off when circumstances may force her to it.][131]

Further indicative of what might be construed as a subjective personal plea, Melville in the same source wrote:

> It is for the nation's sake, and not for her authors' sake, that I would have America be heedful of the increasing greatness among her writers. For how great the shame, if other

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[131]Jay Leyda (ed.), The Portable Melville, op. cit., p. 413.

Related to the brackets, Jay Leyda, editor of the above cited work, says (footnote 1, p. 411):

> This and other bracketed passages and names indicate cancellations in the manuscript that seem too interesting to be omitted.

> nations should be before her, in crowning her heroes of the pen![132]

In praising Hawthorne, though, Melville did not conclude or actually prophesy that Hawthorne would wear "the" literary Laurel of America. Despite writing,

> . . . I am Posterity speaking by proxy--and after times will make it more than good, when I declare that the American, who up to the present day, has evinced in literature, the largest brain with the largest heart--that man is Nathaniel Hawthorne.[133]

Melville's praise was subtly restricted by his declaration in the same work:

> And would it, indeed, appear so unreasonable to suppose that this great fullness and overflowing may be, or may be destined to be, shared by a plurality of men of genius? Surely, to take the very greatest example on record, Shakespeare cannot be regarded as in himself the concretion of all the genius of this time. . . . For one, I conceive that there were dramatists in Elizabeth's day, between whom and Shakespeare the distance was by no means great.[132]

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[132] Ibid., p. 412.

Considering relative circumstances of American authors, contemporarily illustrated by the example of Robert Frost, Melville in this, as well as other matters, seemed to demonstrate a quality of prophecy.

[132] Ibid., p. 421.

[134] Ibid., 420.

More directly, however, Melville, although writing as a "Virginian Spending July in Vermont,"[135] directly links his own ability with that of the author he was reviewing by saying, ". . . and however great may be the praise I have bestowed upon him, I feel, that in so doing, I have more served and honored myself than him."[136] In the same vein but perhaps more explicit, in referring to a character in "A Select Party," a tale incorporated in The Mosses, Melville wrote:

> Now the page having reference to this "Master Genius" so happily expresses much of what I yesterday wrote, touching the coming of the literary Shiloh of America, that I cannot but be charmed by the coincidence; especially, when it shows such a parity of ideas, at least in this one point, between a man like Hawthorne and a man like me.[137]

As Hamlet's mother, even in denial,[138] Melville in his review of "Hawthorne and His Mosses" was basically

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[135] Ibid., p. 400.

Under the title, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," implying authorship, is the phrase "By a Virginian Spending July in Vermont."

[136] Ibid., p. 415.

[137] Ibid., pp. 419-420.

[138] William Shakespeare, Hamlet II.ii.240.

Witnessing a profuse and deceitful demonstration of false integrity by an actor, subjectively Hamlet's mother says, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

exalting William Shakespeare whose art, in a way, represented the reviewer's own emulated ambition. Without a doubt, Melville was impressed by Shakespeare's universal themes. Assuredly, he recognized the solidarity of Shakespeare's reputation; while Melville's personal faith in his own native ability perhaps did not quite dispel an insecurity, public and personal, which resulted from lack of formal schooling. With implication, indirectly uniting the name of Hawthorne, an American whose work was accepted in comtemporary literary circles, with ideas of his own and then, in turn, connecting the name of the same author with that of Shakespeare, in a manner of prognostication, Melville explained:

> Some may start to read of Shakespeare and Hawthorne on the same page. . . . But I am not, willingly, one of those who, as touching Shakespeare at least, exemplify the maxim of Rochefoucauld, that "we exalt the reputation of some, in order to depress that of others"; who, to teach all noble-souled aspirants that there is no hope for them, pronounce Shakespeare absolutely unapproachable. But Shakespeare has been approached. There are minds that have gone as far as Shakespeare into the universe. . . . We must not inferentially malign mankind for the sake of any one man, whoever he may be. . . . Besides, this absolute and unconditional adoration of Shakespeare has grown to be a part of our Anglo-Saxon superstitions. . . . Intolerance has come to exist in this matter. You must believe in Shakespeare's unapproachability, or quit the country. But what sort of a belief is this for an American, a man who is bound to carry republican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life? Believe me, my friends, that men not very much inferior to Shakespeare are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio. And the day will come

> when you shall say; who reads a book by an Englishman that is modern? The great mistake seems to be that even with those Americans who look forward to the coming of a great literary genius among us, they somehow fancy he will come in the costume of Queen Elizabeth's day, be a writer of dramas founded upon old English history, or the tales of Boccaccio. Whereas great geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the times, and possess a correspondent coloring. . . . Nor must we forget that in his own lifetime, Shakespeare was not Shakespeare, but only Master William Shakespeare of the shrewd, thriving business firm of Condell, Shakespeare & Co., proprietors of the Globe Theatre in London, and by a courtly author, of the name of Chettle, was looked at as an "upstart crow" beautified "with other birds' feathers." For, mark it well, imitation is often the first charge brought against real originality. . . .
>
> This, too, I mean--that if Shakespeare has not been equaled, give the world time, and he is sure to be surpassed in one hemisphere or the other. [For it will never do for us who in most other things out-do as well as out-brag the world to fold our hands and say: In the highest department advance there is none.][139]

Thus, in the optimistic promise of the American frontier, especially the promise related to the uniquely American industry of sperm whaling, Herman Melville espied the substance and the color from which geniuses evolve. Furthermore, in provincialistic restriction related to national and Christian mores, the American culture itself presented foibles which, blessedly for Melville,

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[139]Jay Leyda, (ed.), The Portable Melville, op. cit., pp. 409-411.

Note (p. 67 of this thesis) Leyda's comments on usage of brackets.

served to restrict not the truth, but its candid expression. The result was the metaphysical style from which Moby-Dick evolved.

By using the sperm whale and the great nationalistic industry of whaling, Melville, after the manner of Shakespeare, with added symbolistic egregiousness, wove a tragic-comic drama, a mystical, unorthodox picture of Nature in dark hues which but served the more to elucidate the beneficent light. The Whale, for him, was a symbol of classic dimension. It afforded a means of lending drama, interest, credibility and philosophical surmise to his work. Thus, Moby Dick was a literal, a nationalistic and a legendary creature. Of spectacular proportion, involved in a dramatic industry, that whale served as a concrete anchor as well as a "monstrous" mythological metaphor around which to weave a universal, ever-enduring theme or to present an oft-repeated, paradoxically comic reinactment of life. Certainly in writing to his wife during August, 1850, Evert Duyckinck lacked no substance for his statement, "Melville has a new book mostly done--a romantic, fanciful & literal & most enjoyable presentment of the Whale Fishery--something quite new."[140]

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[140]Leyda, op. cit., 385.

Melville's own unflinching faith in the eventual endurance of his work was demonstrated throughout his entire career by a "universal" inference related to his writing which itself is demonstrated in excerpts from his work and in fragments of his conversation or fragments from his letters; for example, poignantly and sensitively disclosing an injured soul but at the same time revealing a rather confident faith in the merit of his own creative ability, the gift of Mardi and its accompanying letter to Evert Duyckinck was an attempt to securely preserve a personal and an American contribution to the fund of world literature. To Mr. Duyckinck, Melville wrote:

> Tho' somewhat unusual for a donor, I must beg to apologize for making you the accompanying present of "Mardi." But no one who knows your library can doubt, that such a choice conservatory of exotics & other rare things in literature, after being long enjoyed by yourself, must, to a late posterity, be preserved intact by your descendants. How natural then - tho' vain - in your friend to desire a place in it for a plant, which tho' now unblown (emblematically, the leaves, you perceive, are uncut) may possibly - by some miracle, that is - flower like the aloe, a hundred years hence - or not flower at all, which is more likely by far, for some aloes never flower.
>
> Again: (as the divines say) political republics should be the asylum for the persecuted of all nations; so, if Mardi be admitted to your shelves, your bibliographical Republic of Letters may find some contentment in the thought, that

> it has afforded refuge to a work, which almost everywhere else has been driven forth like a wild, mystic Mormon into shelterless exile.[141]

Possibly hurt but, nevertheless, basically undaunted or beset by feelings of inadequacy, previously (April 23, 1849) Melville had written to his father-in-law, Lamuel Shaw, saying:

> I see that Mardi has been cut into by the London Atheneum, and also burnt by the common hangman in the Boston Post. ... These attacks are matters of course, and are essential to the building up of any permanent reputation - if such should ever prove to be mine --"There's nothing in it!" cried the dunce, when he threw down the 47th problem of the 1st Book of Euclid --"There's nothing in it! -" --Thus with the posed critic. But Time, which is the solver of all riddles, will solve "Mardi."[142]

And a few months later (June 5, 1849) Melville's letter to Richard Bentley is another record of optimistic faith regarding the eventual receptance of his literature:

> The critics on your side of the water seem to have fired quite a broadside into "Mardi"; but it was not altogether unexpected. In fact the book is of a nature to attract compliments of that sort from some quarters; . . . while the metaphysical ingredients (for want of a better term) of the book, must of course repel some of those who read simply for amusement. --However, it will reach those for whom it is intended;. . . .[143]

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[141] Ibid., p. 364.

[142] Ibid., p. 300.

[143] Ibid., p. 306.

Further correspondence to Bentley (June 20, 1849) is but more supportive evidence of Melville's persistent optimism:

> Your report concerning "Mardi" was pretty much as I expected; but you know perhaps that there are goodly harvests which ripen late, especially when the grain is remarkably strong.[144]

In overt declaration, clearly revealing an attitude of confidence toward his own writing, Melville buttresses covert implication involving Hawthorne with the title of the American Laureate of Literature and Shakespeare's status as the English Bard. And literary ambition on the part of Melville is easy to understand, for Melville's era was a highly nationalistic era. With bountiful resources and having defeated the "greatest" world power in two wars, the potential of a new nation was not to be underrated. The feeling of nationalistic exuberance could not help but be contagious; and even Melville, an advocate of truth which could not preclude an under layer of "blackness" was impelled to proclaim:

> . . . I would to God Shakespeare had lived later, & promenaded in Broadway. Not that I might have had the pleasure of leaving my card for him at the Astor, or made merry with him over a bowl of the

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[144] Ibid., 308.

> fine Duyckinck punch; but that the muzzle which all men wore on their souls in the Elizabethan day, might not have intercepted Shakespeare from articulation. Now I hold it a verity, that even Shakespeare, was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant universe is, or can be? But the Declaration of Independence makes a difference.[145]

The "difference" Melville was referring to was a difference of truth as related to natural circumstance. And more than a longing for contemporary fame or material compensation, Melville desired to write, as he saw it, that truth. Without a receptive public, however, written truth would have little impact; furthermore, writers too were faced with practicalities related to existence which, in turn, to a degree at least, generally forced them to court contemporary patronage rather than possible fame. The battle between idealistic and practical values, for Melville, was a traumatic battle - taking care of and supporting a family in a society of conformity had a limiting effect upon his freedom while shallowly writing in the popular vein was an injustice to his ability. Forced by circumstance, if for no other reason, into a style of ambiguity, Melville found that Moby Dick afforded him a convenient means of presenting his tale;

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[145]Metcalf, op. cit., p. 59.

and upon completion, that tale left its author with a sense of contentment, "a sense of unspeakable security."[146]

When Herman Melville died on September 28, 1891, little notice was taken of his death. For the most part, an item in The Press, a New York newspaper, seemed to summarize the apathetic attitude with which his work was then viewed. Under the caption, "DEATH OF A ONCE POPULAR AUTHOR," the item stated:

> There died yesterday at his quiet home in this city a man who, although he had done almost no literary work during the past sixteen years, was once one of the most popular writers in the United States. . . . Of late years Mr. Melville - probably because he had ceased his literary activity - has fallen into a literary decline, as the result of which his books are now little known.
>
> Probably, if the truth were known, even his own generation has long thought him dead, so quiet have been the later years of his life.[147]

Time, however, tends to sift the chaff from the grain, and in prophetic fashion, somewhat akin in similarity to the significant, phenomenal destruction of the whale ship Essex in 1819 and the destruction of the Ann-Margaret in 1852 -- two episodes which seemed to usher in and mystically give credence to Moby-Dick --

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[146]Leyda, op. cit., p. 435.

[147]Ibid., p. 836.

almost one-hundred years after Melville's death, there occurred an ever-increasing interest in his work until "flowering like the aloe, a hundred years hence,"[148] he is today hailed as the American literary classicist.[149]

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[148]Previously cited reference (page 73-74 of this work).

[149]Commenting upon Melville's "unshakable reputation," in the "Introduction" to Melville, A Collection of Critical Essays, Richard Chase says:

> He IMelvilleI seems to most readers to be pre-eminent among the American "classic" writers whose genius for prose fiction flowered before the Civil War, ... In Moby-Dick we see one of those unique productions into which have been drawn all of its epoch's significant and freshening currents of mind and imagination. Only Melville was able to perform this culminating act of vision in our classic literary period.

And ending his book, The Spirit Above the Dust, Ronald Mason says:

> No other purely American writer, of Melville's own time or indeed of any other, has attempted either the scope or the profundity of the task that Melville set himself. In a young and expanding literature, reinforced by the ambitious self-consciousness which marks a society whose sophistications are outrunning its spontaneous artistic development, Melville stands out as the first great poetic artist in whom the national genius attained universal stature. American literature is still awaiting a successor to him . . . he commands a power and a vision that there are few to share with him and none to express in language as memorable as his.

Thematically, Herman Melville from the beginning to the end of his career pursued in voyage-fashion a persistent theme, but his "mighty mystic monster," the "hero" of Moby-Dick, was the symbolistic device which solidified his metaphysical intuition and lent drama, ambiguity and credence to his major work. In the story of The Whale, Herman Melville found substance for an American - even a world - "Shiloh"[150] of literature; and prophetic reverberations again resound; for in Moby-Dick, Melville wrote:

> One often hears of writers that rise and swell with their subject, though it may seem but an ordinary one. How, then, with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their out-reaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk. To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it.[151]

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[150]Previously cited reference (page 69 of this work).

[151]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 580.

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