MOBY DICK AS A REACTION AGAINST EMERSONIAN TRANSCENDENTALISM

MOBY DICK AS A REACTION AGAINST EMERSONIAN TRANSCENDENTALISM

by

R. Douglas MacDonald

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts

McMaster University
August 1963

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
Introduction		1
I	Moby Dick and Emerson	7
II	Ahab and Ishmael	24
III	A Conflict in Imagery	53
IV	Conclusion	73
V	Bibliography	80

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a study of the effects of Emersonian transcendentalism on the style and philosophy of Moby Dick. Although the title is "Moby Dick" as a Reaction Against Emersonian Transcendentalism, the similarities between Emerson's and Melville's writings have not been ignored. Melville, as he reacts against nineteenth century transcendentalism, also carries with him a similar mania for metaphysical speculation and for seeing moral and spiritual significance in man's occupations and nature's processes.

There are good reasons for studying "Emersonian transcendentalism" rather than New England transcendentalism. While the whole movement of transcendentalism may be fitted easily into the platonic tradition, it is more difficult to determine a specific meaning or reference for New England transcendentalism: as Frederick Henry Hedge, a member of the Concord group, wrote, "There was no club properly speaking, no organization, no presiding officer, no vote ever taken. How the name transcendental, given to these gatherings and the set of persons who took part in them, originated, I cannot say. It certainly was never assumed by the persons

so-called; I suppose I was the only one who had any first-hand acquaintance with the German transcendental philosophy at the start".[1] Their acquaintance with continental transcendentalism appears to have been largely second hand: "Later many of the transcendentalists were to make some pretense of studying German philosophy directly; but their initial--and probably most enduring--impression of the movement was derived from such secondary sources as Marsh's edition (1829) of Coleridge's Aids to Reflection, Linberg's translation (1832) of Cousin's Introduction to the History of Philosophy, and Carlyle's Sartor Resartus (1836)".[2] The group appears to have been united by similar interests in reading, a belief in an "inner light" or intuition, and a reaction against the rationalism and formalism of the Unitarian church. Owing to the diversity of beliefs held by members of this group and for the sake of simplicity, it has been most practical to restrict the scope of this study to the most eminent and most representative New England transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

When the term "Emersonian transcendentalism" is

---

[1] "The Transcendentalists", in Kenneth Walter Cameron, ed., Transcendental Handbook (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1957), part I, Chapter vii, iii.

[2] David Bowers, "Democratic Vistas", in Robert E. Spiller and others, eds., Literary History of the United States (New York: MacMillan, 1962), p. 349.

used in this dissertation the following cluster of meanings is intended: a faith that the appearances of phenomenal nature correspond to a supernatural reality; an optimistic faith that a single reality, a benevolent principle, or single good lies behind that sign, metaphor or impress which is nature; a confident faith in the power of man's intuition or "Reason" to perceive that unity which underlies the diversity of nature; a tendency to move from observations of nature to metaphysical conclusions.

The contrast between Emerson's and Melville's philosophies is basically a contrast between optimism and pessimism. Although "optimism" is most Emersonian, and although little will be said to balance this one-sided depiction of Emerson, it is recognized that he does occasionally show a healthy awareness of his subjectivity. He praises the skeptic, Montaigne, for his "moderation", his "impatience of pretence", his awareness of man's humble limitations, his lively, questioning mind, and his "abundance of thoughts".[3] In the final dialectical movement of this essay, however, Emerson shows a very non-skeptical faith in the efficacy of the "moral impulse" which permits man to perceive in the "miscellany of facts" an "order

---

[3] "Montaigne", in his Representative Men (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), pp. 158-161.

which makes skepticism impossible".[4] Despite his realization of Montaigne's worth as a healthy antidote to "bigots and hotheads",[5] despite his wish to catch the real subtleties and complexities of nature, Emerson's mind swings inevitably to confident generalization and cosmic optimism.

R.W.B. Lewis has observed in the history of American literature a continuing dialogue of three different parties: (1) "the party of Hope" (for example, the Emersonian transcendentalist); (2) "the party of Memory" (those conservatives whom Emerson castigated in the _American Scholar_); (3) "the party of Irony" (detached observers like Melville and Hawthorne who beheld the complexities of life). Lewis sees a reaction of the party of Irony against the party of Hope: "the vision of innocence stimulated a positive and original sense of tragedy".[6] He continues: "Recent literature has applauded itself for passing beyond the childlike cheerfulness of Emerson and Whitman; but in so doing it has lost the profound tragic understanding--paradoxically bred out of cheerfulness--of a Hawthorne and a Melville".[7] Melville's irony, his sense of the ambiguity and complexity of good and evil--this dualistic vision of

---

[4] _Ibid_., p. 174.

[5] _Ibid_., p. 164.

[6] _The American Adam_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. VIII.

[7] _Ibid_., p. ix.

life is intensified because it is powerfully and consciously opposed to the monism of Emersonian transcendentalism.

As a reaction against Emersonian transcendentalism, Moby Dick looks back to the Puritan era and anticipates the later nineteenth century. To Emerson's metaphysical optimism is opposed a Puritanical God, an incomprehensible, omnipotent, wrathful and vengeful God, a "remorseless emperor" who Ahab believes overrides and rules the natural promptings of his heart. Moby Dick's emphasis upon the precariousness of the "good" or secure life reminds one of Jonathan Edwards's attempts to awaken the hearts of his complacent contemporaries to their sinfulness and their need for salvation by showing the precariousness of the "good life" which is menaced by "hell's wide gaping mouth". Melville's image of the Platonist falling from the serene heights of the crow's nest to the "Descartian vortices" beneath is similar to Edwards's statement that "There is nothing between you and hell but the air; 'tis only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up".[8] Melville's menacing realm is also a conception borne out of the mid-nineteenth century materialistic and scientific philosophy. Although Darwin's Origins of the Species was not published until 1859, the evolutionary climate of ideas

---

[8] "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", in Milton Ellis and others, eds., A College Book of American Literature (New York: American Book Company, 1954), p. 25.

was in the air: one can see Melville's interest in the origins of the whale as recorded by fossil remains. As Darwin saw conflict or the struggle for survival being the key to the evolution of the species; as Marx saw conflict or class struggle being the key to history, so Melville shows conflict, brutal struggle or "sharkism" pervading the fictional world of Moby Dick. During the description of the sharks' feasting upon the dead whale, Ishmael says, "If you have never seen that sight, then suspend your decision about the propriety of devil-worship, and the expediency of conciliating the devil".[9] In this diabolical feast, a Darwinian struggle and Calvinistic hell are joined into one blood curdling image of evil.

The greater part of this dissertation will not be concerned about the general literary, philosophical or historical backgrounds of Emerson and Melville. The focus will be upon the evidence that there was in Moby Dick a reaction against Emersonian transcendentalism, and upon the influence which this reaction exerted upon the style of Moby Dick.

---

[9]Herman Melville, Moby Dick (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 293.

Moby Dick and Emerson

Emerson believed that underlying all philosophy is the problem of "1. Unity or Identity; and, 2. Variety".[1] This problem has created two kinds of thinkers: (1) those who reduce variety to a unity, those who are religious thinkers and who use, in Emerson's terminology, the "Reason"--head and heart, or the intuition; (2) those who see in nature only complexity or variety, who are essentially intellectual thinkers and who use the "Understanding"--the head, rather than the total head and heart. Emerson is of the first order, and he sees evil as being ultimately negligible or as a necessary means to a single, ultimate good.[2] Melville is of the latter order: instead of seeing unity, all tending to a single universal good, he seems aware of the complex ambiguity and irreconcilability of apparent good-and-evil. _Moby Dick_ seems to be the product of a mind which can see only diversity but longs for unity: this is the conflict which tears Ahab, the frustrated transcendentalist. It may be surmised that _Moby Dick_ is the product of the author's inner conflict between skepticism and belief. As Nathaniel Hawthorne observed:

---

[1] _Representative Men_ (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), pp. 49-50.

[2] "Considerations by the Way", in _Emerson's Complete Works_, 2 vols. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1879), II, 416.

> Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated"; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists--and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before--in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be uncomfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.[3]

This is a description of the intellectual thinker rather than the religious thinker, the mind which, in Emerson's terms, tends to diversity rather than unity. More specifically, one may see a description of the psychic conflict which seems responsible for much of the irresolution and ambivalence of *Moby Dick*.

Using William James's terminology to compare Emerson to Melville's Ahab, one may see the antithesis of the "healthy soul" and the "sick soul". Emerson, like James's typical healthy soul, seems "to regard the happiness which a religious belief affords as proof of its truth";[4] Emerson's "cosmic emotion" certainly takes the form of "enthusiasm and freedom".[5] James defines healthy-mindedness as "the tendency which looks

---

[3]"English Notebooks" (November 20, 1856), in Malcolm Cowley ed., *Hawthorne* (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), pp. 588-589.

[4]*The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1958), p. 76.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 77.

on all things and seesthat they are good".[6] In the following passage one may see how closely Emerson fits James's concept of the healthy soul. Observe the energetic style and the supreme self-confidence and enthusiasm:

> Belief consists in accepting the affirmations of the soul; unbelief in denying them. Some minds are incapable of skepticism. The doubts they profess to entertain are rather a civility or accommodation to the common discourse of their company. They may well give themselves leave to speculate, for they are secure of a return. Once admitted to the heaven of thought, they see no relapse into night, but infinite invitation on the other side. Heaven is within heaven, and sky over sky, and they are encompassed with divinities. Others there are to whom the heaven is brass, and it shuts down to the surface of the earth. It is a question of temperament, or of more or less immersion in nature.[7]

The man who accepts the promptings of the soul and the temperament, the man who fully immerses himself in nature, is the one admitted into the heavens and daylight of thought. Although Emerson states, "It is a question of temperament" (in other words, that one's world view is determined subjectively by one's accepting the affirmations of the temperament or soul), the happiness afforded by accepting those affirmations (as seen in "the heaven...within heaven, and sky over sky... encompassed with divinities".) seems to prove for Emerson that belief's validity. Moreover, Emerson seems to be describing

---

[6] Ibid., p. 83.

[7] "Montaigne", in his Representative Men, p. 172.

himself. In "Fate" he does profess to entertain doubts and does seem to speculate on the darker evils or miseries of this world. But, as the pattern shows, he inevitably returns to the chiming conclusion that there is a "Blessed Unity" and "Beautiful Necessity". He leaves behind "the forms of the shark, the *labrus*, the jaw of the sea-wolf paved with crushing teeth, the weapons of the grampus and other warriors hidden in the sea" which give "hints of ferocity in the interiors of nature".[8] He leaves this behind to chant, "Let us build altars to the Blessed Unity which holds nature and souls in perfect solution, and compels every atom to serve an universal end".[9] In *Moby Dick*, however, one finds the "others" to whom "the heaven is brass": Ahab, the frustrated transcendentalist, is not content with these "brass" barriers; he is driven to penetrate with vengeance the enigma of Moby Dick.

It is necessary to determine whether or not Melville was acquainted with Emerson's ideas when he was writing *Moby Dick*. In the novel itself the reader meets only with sardonic wit directed toward dreaming Platonists, bumbling scholars and inexperienced landlubbers. In a letter (February 24, 1849), however, Melville wrote to his friend

---

[8]"Fate", in *Five Essays on Man and Nature*, p. 98.

[9]*Ibid*., p. 120.

Evert Duychink, "I have heard Emerson since I have been here [Boston]. Say what they will, he is a great man". To the same friend he writes again (March 3, 1849): "I was very agreeably disappointed in Mr. Emerson. I had heard of him as full of transcendentalisms, myths, & oracular gibberish; I had only glanced at a book of his once in Putnam's store--that was all I knew of him, till I heard him lecture--To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible, tho' to say the truth they told me that that night he was unusually plain".[10]

From Melville's letters and novels, and Melville's marginal comments in Emerson's Essays: First Series, Essays: Second Series (obtained by Melville in the eighteen sixties) and the Conduct of Life (obtained in 1870), William E. Braswell has studied closely the relationship between Emerson's and Melville's writings. He also points out the following diatribe in Pierre (1852):

> Certain philosophers have time and time again pretended to have found it ["the talismanic secret"]; but if they do not in the end discover their own delusion, other people soon discover it for themselves, and so those philosophers and their vain philosophy are let glide away into practical oblivion. Plato, and Spinoza, and Goethe and many more belong to this guild of self-imposters, with a preposterous rabble of Muggletonian Scots and Yankees, whose vile brogue still the more bestreaks the stripedness of their Greek and German Neoplatonical originals.[11]

---

[10] Jay Leda, The Melville Log I (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), p. 287.

[11] Melville as a Critic of Emerson", American Literature IX (1937), 318.

Braswell shows, however, that Melville seemed sympathetic to Emerson's giving "veracity and honesty the first place among the virtues".[12] Braswell states, "Melville agreed with Emerson that poets are 'liberating gods', in that they present wise views on certain aspects of life, but he did not share Emerson's enthusiasm over the poet's ability to reconcile man to the deepest mysteries".[13] What Melville could not accept was Emerson's serene confidence, his optimism, his apparent glossing over the evils of life: "In Emerson's assertion that 'the first lesson of history is the good of evil' ("Considerations by the Way", The Conduct of Life, p. 157) Melville underlined 'the good of evil' and wrote: 'He still bethinks him of his optimism--he must make that good somehow against the eternal hell itself'".[14] In Essays: Second Series (p. 24, eighteen sixties) Melville marked the passage beginning "Language is fossil poetry" and wrote, "This is admirable, as many other thoughts of Mr. Emerson's are. His gross and astonishing errors & illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name. Another species of Mr. Emerson's errors, or rather blindness, proceeds from

---

[12] Ibid., p. 325.

[13] Ibid., p. 324.

[14] Ibid., p. 330.

a defect in the region of the heart".[15]

This external evidence is not sufficient to prove that Moby Dick was consciously or deliberately opposed to Emersonian transcendentalism. It can only indicate that Melville's close acquaintance with Emerson's ideas came after the writing of Moby Dick, that during the writing of Moby Dick (1850-1851), he felt predisposed to oppose Emerson's "oracular gibberish". Later he found Emerson's sentiment "noble", but believed that Emerson possessed a "blindness", or a "defect" "in the region of the heart" in his incapability of being anything but optimistic.

In his analysis of Emerson's and Melville's literary relationship to each other and to their contemporary conventions, Perry Miller hesitates to state "that Melville and Emerson have common sources in German romanticism", but he does argue that "they were both aware of a configuration of ideas, which popularly identified with Germany, challenged the regrant ethic and esthetic of nature".[16] Miller sees both Emerson and Melville opposing nature to civilization, and declares that Melville could have judged but did not judge

---

[15]Ibid., p. 331.

[16]"Melville and Transcendentalism", Virginia Quarterly Review, XXIX (Autumn 1953), 564. Throughout his essay the popular, American conception of nature seems to be that which is "decent" or "sweet".

Ahab and Pierre "guilty of the sin of pride".[17] He argues, "In the depths of degradation, the dupe of the heart is never blamed; not 'practical unreason' is a fault but only the old enemy of Transcendentalism: 'Civilization, Philosophy, Ideal Virtue! Behold your victim!'".[18] He sees a close similarity between Emerson's and Melville's hero--that is the Byronic figure: "Text books treat him [Byron] as a mere vogue; to those for whom he was authentic he was the heroic natural man at odds with the unnatural, with civilization, with convention, with hardness of heart. He destroyed himself in an unequal combat, which the Ivanhoes of his day shrewdly evaded".[19] Actually, Melville would have found as much in his reading of King Lear. Moreover, as I shall argue later, Melville's and Emerson's heroes, though possessing similarities, are quite different: Emerson's hero is one of hope, the hope of the anarchist who loves man but hates shackling conventions; Melville's hero, Ahab, is one of hatred, the hatred of the anarchist or nihilist who loses even his love for his fellow man in his hatred of all which afflicts man.[20] Miller leans

---

[17]Ibid., p. 571. Ishmael seems to condemn Ahab, however, after Ahab has triumphantly repaired the compass: "In his fiery eyes of scorn and triumph, you then saw Ahab in all his fatal pride". (Moby Dick, p. 511).

[18]Ibid., p. 573.

[19]Ibid., p. 558.

[20]In "The Symphony", p. 532, amid a feminine sea and sky, Ahab

too heavily, moreover, on Melville's respect for Emerson's "nobility", and on those contemporaries "who saw so much of Emerson and transcendentalism in his [Melville's] writing".[21] Although Miller points out that between 1846 and 1852 "there seems to be a mounting loathing of his [Melville's] own premises",[22] he concludes, "The fundamental premises, those of Scott, Cooper, Byron, Rousseau and that 'inconceivable coxcombe of a Goethe', are those that lead Ahab and Pierre to destruction; but they are never declared, by Melville the author, to be false. They are not so reassuring as in the compensation and optimist versions, but they are the same; they are, dare I say, precisely those of Transcendentalism?"[23] If one must apply the term "transcendentalism" to Moby Dick and Ahab, it would be better to describe Ahab as the diabolical transcendentalist who sees blackness rather than light lying behind the masks of nature.

---

is softened to the extent that he "dropped a tear into the sea", and is nearly persuaded by the "good angel", Starbuck, to leave his quest for Moby Dick. Later in Moby Dick, images of machines and hardness are associated with Ahab; the contrast of this momentary "weakness" of love serves to emphasize the inhuman monomania of his quest and (as the catastrophe draws near) serves to draw the reader's sympathies toward the trapped, monomaniacal Ahab.

[21] Ibid., p. 572-573.

[22] Ibid., p. 557.

[23] Ibid., pp. 571-572.

As was previously stated, Emerson is a religious thinker. The means of perception he calls the Reason. Rather than being a faculty of the mind, however, the Reason is the whole mind which perceives objective reality intuitively and subjectively: "A subject and an object--it takes so much to make the galvanic circuit complete, but magnitude adds nothing".[24] Describing the state of being more poetically, Emerson writes: "Standing on the bare ground--my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God".[25] There is a union of subject and object, a transcendance of the "not me" to the "real me", the spiritual principle which is ultimate reality. One may see in this metaphor of Reason the expansiveness which stands in contrast to Emerson's concept of the Understanding--the intellect which applies close attention to details and differences without synthesizing this material into a pattern or unity. In the following quotations one may see Emerson's contempt for this habit of mind, which he identified with the rationalists of the eighteenth century: "I cannot greatly honour minuteness in details, so long as

---

[24]"Experience", in Five Essays on Man and Nature, p. 92.

[25]"Nature", in Five Essays, p. 4.

there is no hint to explain the relation between things and thoughts".[26] Elsewhere he says, "The great gifts are not got by analysis".[27] The following quotation, again showing his contempt for analysis, may also offer by application an interesting commentary on Moby Dick: "Life will be imaged but cannot be divided nor doubled. Any invasion of its unity would be chaos".[28] Melville images life in the occupations of the sailors, in the sea, the Pequod, the chase, and the whale. But in Moby Dick, despite the richness of imagery, the whale is categorized, classified, dissected, analyzed; there is a minuteness of detail which threatens to overwhelm the unity of the book itself; there is no single theme or essence which can be extracted satisfactorily from the book, and in this sense there is "chaos". The psychic conflict between the two proclivities of Reason and Understanding brings about an "imaged" "chaos"; there is a feeling of near allegorical interpretation; yet there is also a sense of rich complexity. One regards a symbolism resting between the allegory of Reason which seeks unity, and the Understanding which studies differences.

Nature, as regarded by Emerson, is the symbol, meta-

---

[26] "Prospects", in Five Essays, p. 34.

[27] "Experience", in Five Essays, p. 82.

[28] Ibid., p. 90.

phor or impress of the spirit:[29] its forms lead the Reason to the apprehension of the spiritual realm which lies beyond the phenomenal. In the following quotation, Emerson comes close to Swedenborg's one-to-one correlating the particulars of nature to the universals of spirit: "There seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms; and day and night, river and storm, beast and bird, acid and alkali, preexist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God, and are what they are by virtue of preceding affections in the world of spirit. A Fact is the end or last issue of spirit. The visible creation is the terminus or circumference of the invisible world".[30] In Emerson's following statement one may see the prototype of Melville's dreaming Platonist who is unaware of the "Descartian vortices", "vulturisms" and "sharkisms" of physical reality which yawn beneath his feet: "Whether nature enjoy a substantial existence without, or is only in the apocalypse of the mind, it is alike useful, and alike venerable to me. Be it what it may, it is ideal to me so long as I cannot try the accuracy of my senses".[31]

Contrary to the "Darwinian" struggle which Melville shows at the centre of his fictional world in Moby Dick,

---

[29] "Nature", in Five Essays, p. 12; p. 16.

[30] Ibid., p. 17. These confident statements stand contrasted to the hypotheses and ambiguities of Moby Dick.

[31] "Idealism", in Five Essays, p. 24.

Emerson sees a moral principle being manifested in the "laws" and "progress" of nature: "Nor can it be doubted that this moral sentiment which thus scents the air, grows in the grain, and impregnates the waters of the world, is caught by man and sinks into his soul".[32] Nature offers moral guidance to man: "every animal function from the sponge up to Hercules, shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments".[33] After having read "Nature", one finds the introductory verse more understandable: "And, striving to be man, the worm/Mounts through all the spires of form".[34] This sense of evolutionary progress, this sense of a oneness in nature as all creatures strive to their apotheosis, man, is quite unlike life in Moby Dick, a precarious life where the hunter (Ahab), chasing the hunted (the whales), becomes himself hunted (by the pirates). Although Moby Dick's ending suggests a mysterious moral law or nemesis, the whole book seems torn by a conflict between order and chaos, between law and rebellion.

As would be expected from the foregoing, Emerson is optimistic regarding good and evil, and the goodness of man's estate. Diametrically opposed in spirit to Ahab's demonism

---

[32]"Nature", in Five Essays, p. 21.

[33]Ibid., p. 20.

[34]Ibid., p. 1.

is Emerson's statement: "That pure malignity can exist is the extreme proposition of unbelief. It is not to be entertained by a rational agent; it is atheism, it is the last profanation".[35] In "Fate" Emerson lists the catastrophic and petty miseries of the world, ranging from the disaster of Lisbon to the slaughter house; he further speculates on all which limits man (heredity, temperament, organization, and those rules of order shown by the new science statistics); but he concludes, "though Fate is immense, so is Power". He possesses a strong faith in man's freedom of will: "Forever wells up the impulse of choosing and acting in the soul. Intellect annuls Fate. So far as man thinks, he is free".[36] Also, Emerson believes that man can rise above fate by harnessing the limiting and regular order of nature: "The annual slaughter from typhus far exceeds that of war; but right drainage destroys typhus".[37] Melville's Ahab, however, questioning the freedom of man and cursing science, throws down his quadrant.

Thus one may see that Emerson's man is potentially free, that he receives moral sustenance from nature, and can in the contact of subject and object perceive reality through

---

[35]"Swedenborg", in Representative Men, p. 132.

[36]Five Essays, p. 106.

[37]Ibid., p. 111.

the impress of nature. "Natural" man is opposed to "conventional" man, and in his leaping, dynamic style Emerson is continually exhorting man to come into being, to utilize positively the latent powers available to every man--for he believes there is "One Man--present to all particular men only partially". He is, of course, opposed to those "particular men" bred by society: "Man is not a farmer, or professor, or an engineer, but he is all".[38] He continues: "The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters--a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow but never a man". In that society the scholar is "the delegated intellect. In the right state he is Man Thinking. In the degenerate state he tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse the parrot of other men's thinking".[39] Emerson is the high priest of the Whole Man and Reason.

Emerson possesses a blind faith in the individual, and the individual's impulse or intuition. At one point he states, "Self-trust is the essence of heroism".[40] Asserting the individual impulse above the social, he says, "Whoso would be

---

[38]"The American Scholar", in Five Essays, p. 41.

[39]Ibid., p. 42.

[40]"Heroism", in Emerson's Complete Works I, 105.

a man, must be a nonconformist".[41] To a hypothetical question put to himself concerning the veracity of these individual impulses being "from below, not from above", Emerson answers, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil".[42] This statement is parallel to Thoreau's assertion that he wished "to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life" and that he wished "to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meaness of it, and publish its meaness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience".[43] Emerson's and Thoreau's assertions are defiant statements of faith and acts of courage--a courageous faith which Melville would see as foolhardy, blind or "defective" in its optimism. The importance placed on emotional impulse may be seen in Emerson's statement: "Heroism feels and never reasons, and therefore is always right".[44] In this statement and the following outcry of Ahab one may indeed see the Byronic hero, the natural man of impulse: "but Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels; _that's_ tingling enough for mortal man!

---

[41]"Self Reliance", in _Major American Writers_, p. 440.

[42]_Ibid_., p. 441.

[43]_Walden_, in Carl Bode, ed., _Thoreau_. (New York: Viking Press, 1960), pp. 343-344.

[44]"Heroism", in _Complete Works_. I, 105.

to think's audacity. God only has that right and privilege. Thinking is, or ought to be, a coolness and a calmness; and our poor hearts throb, and our poor brains beat too much for that".[45] The difference between the Byronic characters is that Ahab has sucked the marrow out of life and found himself to be indeed the Devil's child.

---

[45]*Moby Dick*, p. 554.

AHAB AND ISHMAEL

In a letter written to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville declared that he had written a "wicked book, and [felt] spotless as a lamb".[1] Certainly Moby Dick was, if not evil, unorthodox. Melville's feeling of purity, however, might be attributed to the emotional catharsis he may have experienced as a writer--the experience of having released and transmuted unresolved tensions into a work of art, and having released and projected a dark side of himself into the character of Ahab.

Ishmael's observations on ambergris (which is taken from the foul sickness of a whale) have their parallel in Melville's attaining purity after having written this "wicked" book: "Bethink thee of that saying of St. Paul in Corinthians, about corruption and incorruption; how that we are sown in dishonour, but raised in glory".[2] Despite the possible answer that Moby Dick is a "corrupt" work of art created from a "corrupt" mind, the magnificent catastrophe, Moby Dick's sinking the Pequod and strangling Ahab, seems

---

[1]The Melville Log I (November 17, 1851), p. 435.

[2]Moby Dick, pp. 407-408.

to restore humanity to a more "natural" order--Ahab in his "fatal pride" and noble integrity has been destroyed, but he has apparently achieved his quest, an immediate confrontation with the forces of nature which afflict man. Only Ishmael, the detached, pondering and sympathetic observer of mankind, survives. His survival induces (and is similar to) the release which the reader experiences following the catastrophe. Although throughout most of Moby Dick the reader has been shown the mystery of evil, now he is confronted with an unexpected and mysterious good: "Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I [Ishmael] floated on a soft and dirge-like main. The unharming sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks".[3] It seems a miracle has taken place, but if one were to interpret the book in this manner, he would distort the total effect of the book: the strange suspension of savagery serves to underline Ishmael's and Melville's wonder at the mysteries of man's universe in which good and evil so ambiguously combine; the sea's serenity seems to signify, moreover, the beneficent, cathartic release of agony which had gnawed Ahab's heart and had indirectly ruled the lives of the crew.

---

[3] Ibid., "The Epilogue".

The *Rachel*, searching "after her missing children", picks up Ishmael, "another orphan",[4] and leaves the reader with a final sense of man's loneliness and the universality of his misery. Here, man's expanded horizons have not filled him with Emersonian confidence and enthusiasm: the thoughtful man is an orphan, a hapless wanderer of the universe. Though Ishmael has been "picked up", there is no impression conveyed of happiness or good fortune.

Before discussing Ahab's diabolical transcendentalism or puritanism, I shall contrast Ahab to the Emersonian hero. Both are "self reliant"; both are fully conscious individuals who have exceeded the "average" man; both are concerned about the spiritual significance of this world; and both speak in terms of appearance and reality. This paradigm describes Thoreau as well as Ahab. Thoreau, however, though intensely self-reliant, is more passive than Ahab: as Thoreau sat in Concord jail for not paying his taxes, or as he argued in *Civil Disobedience*, his philosophy was at the most an individualistic, passive resistance. Rather than attempt to roll his universe into a ball, rather than attack directly the apparent evils of his country, Thoreau was willing only (though that in itself is a very significant act) to withhold support of such evil. Ahab,

---

[4] *Ibid*., "The Epilogue".

in his ambitious and proud wilfulness, not only refuses to accept, he also attacks the ambiguities and, to him, the apparent evils of the world--all manifested in the whole.

Another Emersonian hero is Napoleon, but he is more exactly a representative man. He "owes his predominance to the fidelity with which he expressed the tone of thought and belief, the aims of the masses of active and cultivated men".[5] He is the "incarnate democrat".[6] He is "no saint", and "no hero, in the high sense".[7] Unlike Napoleon, Ahab does not follow "prudence";[8] nor does he represent the common man. Through Melville's deliberate manipulation of the reader's sympathies, Ahab becomes, if not a saint, a man of passion, a Byronic and Shakespearian hero, and a man much larger than life.

As a tragic hero unwilling to accept the laws of his universe, Ahab approaches the grandeur of the demi-gods who march through myth and legend. Certainly, Ishmael-Melville is bent upon elevating his whaling tale and whale hunter to the magnitude of tragedy: "Nor will it at all detract from him, dramatically regarded, if either by birth or other circumstances, he have what seems a half wilful over-ruling

---

[5]"Napoleon", in Representative Men, p. 213.

[6]Ibid., p. 214.

[7]Ibid., p. 215.

[8]Ibid., p. 227.

morbidness at the bottom of his nature. For all men tragically great are made so through a certain morbidness. Be sure of this, O young ambition, all mortal greatness is but a disease".[9] Again, one can see Melville's theme of the complex combination of "corruption and incorruption", evil and good. This combination of morbid sickness and greatness of ambition is seen from Peleg's view point: "In fact, he [Ahab] ain't sick; but no, he ain't well either". Peleg's ambivalence may be seen more clearly: "He's a queer man, Captain Ahab--so some think--but a good one. Oh thou'lt like him well enough; no fear, no fear. He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man". But he concludes optimistically: "he's Ahab, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowst, was a crowned king!" While Peleg does not admit to himself the full complexity of Ahab's nature, Ishmael rightly points out that Ahab was a "very vile one. When that wicked king was slain, the dogs, did they not lick his blood?"[10] Through this dialogue, Melville indicates Ahab's complex nature, and his being a tragic figure between the two extremes of good and evil--"a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice, but by some error or frailty".[11] The error or frailty seems to be in Ahab's

---

[9] Moby Dick, p. 73.

[10] Ibid., p. 80.

[11] Aristotle, "Poetics" XII, in James Harry Smith and Ed Winifield Parks, eds. The Great Critics (New York: Norton, 1951), p. 41.

mad passionate excess, his monomaniacal quest for the whale, for the quick of life, and for revenge.

Melville again suggests Ahab's heroic magnitude by constantly depicting Ahab in isolation. Like Hawthorne's Chillingworth, Ethan Brand, Young Goodman Brown, Roderick Elliston and King Midas, Ahab is set apart from his fellow men, from even his crew,[12] those machine-like disciples who are attracted by his diabolical magnetism. The same reasons for isolation and self enclosure are true of Hawthorne's characters and Melville's Ahab: like Chillingworth and Ethan Brand, Ahab is dehumanized by his monomaniacal quest; like Young Goodman Brown, Ahab, owing to his vision of universal depravity, becomes morose and withdrawn from his fellows; like Roderick Elliston, Ahab, owing to his bosom serpent of egoism, sees only a lurking sin of egoism or "vulturism" animating the nature of the universe and man; like King Midas, in his single mindedness, Ahab dehumanizes or turns into machines his fellow man. The morbid introspection, self enclosure or ambition of these "sick souls" is certainly unlike the expansive "healthy souls" of Emerson

---

[12]The one exception is Pip. He is attached to Ahab as the fool is to King Lear. The touching loyalty of both retainers serves to draw the spectator's sympathies toward the central, isolated and morbid characters, Lear and Ahab.

and Thoreau:[13] in Hawthorne's and Melville's fiction may be seen a return to the earlier Puritan traditions with their emphasis upon original sin, a God of wrath, and the precariousness of the "good life" on earth.

In the following passage may be seen Ahab's terrible self enclosure: "in his inclement, howling old age, Ahab's soul, shut up in the caved trunk of his body, there fed upon the sullen paws of its gloom!"[14] In the oppressive silence of Ahab's cabin, one sees this self enclosure again in the absence of communication between Ahab and his officers. The causes of Ahab's isolation are obvious. He seeks higher, more spiritual goals than his shipmates: he exclaims, "Gifted with the high perception, I lack the low, enjoying power; damned, most subtly and most malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise!"[15] In William James's terms, he is the religious zealot who, though a human being, is uninterested in or incapable of human relationships on the horizontal plane; he is obsessed by the spiritual relationship of the vertical plane. Melville, though he does sometimes characterize Ahab as a creature from an Elizabethan revenge melodrama, also associates the painful ascetism of a saint with

---

[13]Like Roderick Elliston, Ishmael is released from the self enclosure of egoism by love. Ahab, however, is totally enclosed by his hatred of Moby Dick.

[14]Moby Dick, p. 151.

[15]Ibid., p. 166.

Ahab's character: "Ah God! what trances of torments does that man endure who is consumed with one unachieved revengeful desire. He sleeps with clenched hands; and wakes with his own bloody nails in his palms".[16]

But Ahab, of course, is no saint; nor has he achieved a psychic or religious integration. In his monomania, his intellect or "Understanding" has wounded and divided his total self or the Emersonian "Reason": "the eternal, living principle or soul in him...in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the scorching contiguity of the frantic thing, of which, for the time, it was no longer an integral". Ishmael then cries, "God, help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart forever; that vulture the very creature he creates".[17] The disturbing implication is that Ahab has been victimized, not by a hostile universe, but by his own morbid and monomaniacal thoughts--the "vulture [which] feeds upon that heart forever; that vulture the very creature he creates".

Not only is Ahab incapable of horizontal communication, not only does his "bosom serpent" or "vulture" seem a

---

[16] *Ibid*., p. 200.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 201.

creation from his self, but he also resents any form of obligation or inter-dependence. Realizing his dependence upon the carpenter for the construction of a new leg, Ahab declaims: "Here I am, proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that moral inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air".[18] This is certainly no Christ-like or Promethean humanitarianism: it is the individualism of the Puritan dissenter and self-reliant Emersonian hero taken to an heretical and insane extreme; his is the self-destructive longing of the tragic hero or saint who cannot tolerate the world's or his own imperfection.

Despite the self enclosure of his self-reliance, Ahab is, nevertheless, a transcendentalist, but a transcendentalist of the black vision. Although his is not an Emersonian transcendentalism, a faith in nature's compensatory and dovetailing order which permits man to live serenely, Ahab does still believe in the one among the many--the single reality lying behind the phenomena of nature. To Starbuck who is appalled by Ahab's seeking revenge upon Moby Dick, "a dumb brute" of "blindest instinct", Ahab replies:

> Hark ye yet again--the little lower layer.
> All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks

---

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 468. [cf. Emerson, "Nature", in Five Essays, p. 4: "Standing on the bare ground--my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space--all mean egotism vanishes."]

> But in each event--in the living act, the undoubted deed--there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me.[19]

Here is Ahab in his megalomaniac pride and his wilfulness. Although it is the inscrutable he chiefly hates, it is an "inscrutable malice" and "a reasoning thing" in his eyes: unlike Blake who saw awesome strength, ferocity and beauty in the fearful symmetry of the tiger while seemingly worshiping its incomprehensible but benevolent source, unlike the Emersonian transcendentalist who believes that ultimately all is good, unlike the Puritan who sees in the battleground of earth the ultimate victory of Christ over Satan, Ahab sees malice at the centre of the whale, the sea, nature. As Ishmael says, "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".[20] To Ishmael it is

---

[19] Ibid., p. 162.

[20] Ibid., p. 183.

a "subtle demonism", but Ahab cannot rest content with the subtlety, the complexity, the mystery or muddle; he must attribute an intelligence, a "reasoning thing", to the disorder of the world; he must focus his frustrated rage upon some absolute in order to make his own life bearable. His state of mind is similar to that seen in Thomas Hardy's poem "Hap":

> If but some vengeful god would call to me
> From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
> Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
> That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"
>
> Then would I bear it, clench myself and die,
> Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
> Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
> Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.[21]

Unlike Ishmael, who takes pleasure in the slippery surfaces of the sperm cells, Ahab needs to clamp onto the slippery surfaces; he needs an absolute. Pressing his hand in the carpenter's vice, he says, "I like to feel something in this slippery world that can hold, man".[22]

While Ahab needs an absolute (and his absolute is the diabolical), his worship is not acceptance, submission or conciliation; it is an admirable, proud and angry defiance. Beside Ahab's stubborn strength, Starbuck's humility, his weak moderation and his refusal to look at the

---

[21]In James K. Robinson and Walter B. Rideout, eds., A College Book of Modern Verse (New York: Row, Peterson and Co., 1960), p. 3.

[22]Moby Dick, p. 466.

darker contingencies of the sea seem shoddy. Captain Boomer (though he does demonstrate wise prudence in saying to Ahab that "He [Moby Dick] 's best left alone"[23]) seems like one of Childe Roland's companions, who have lost their idealism by the roadside. The puzzled, downcast appearance of the beggar who lost his leg to a whale[24] as did Ahab does arouse pity in the reader: but, although the beggar has drawn well the picture of the whaling chase, one feels that he has not sufficiently grasped the significance of what has happened. Similarly, when the men aboard the Bachelor say they do not even believe in Moby Dick, they seem to lack Ahab's spiritual insight: they are lost revellers on the temporal plane. Ahab, the transcendentalist, grasps what seems to be the significance of his hurt and sees a diabolical absolute in the brutish struggle lurking beneath the ruffled and unruffled surfaces of the sea. This conception of universal brutish struggle accounts for the ethical consistency of Ahab's aggressive defiance: his pride becomes almost an assertion of humanity against such an unfeeling, unsympathetic universe. His logic may be seen in the following passage: "Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act

---

[23]Ibid., p. 439.

[24]Ibid., p. 271.

so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed".[25] Although, like Emerson, he does project his own feelings into the metaphysical realm, and although this anthropomorphization seems to be depicted as error, Ahab's conduct is at least consistent with his unfaltering vision of nature's black reality.

Because Ahab has such intense religious aspirations, it is consistent that he mistrusts science, which works only within the phenomenal realm. While smashing the quadrant, he exclaims, "Thou canst not tell where one drop of water or one grain of sand will be to-morrow noon; and yet with thy impotence thou insultest the sun! Science! Curse thee, thou vain toy; and cursed be all things that cast man's eyes aloft to that heaven, whose live vividness but scorches him, as these old eyes are even now scorched with thy light, O sun!"[26] In the Platonic and Christian tradition light has been a religious and literary symbol of the true and the good. Ahab has now reversed the order and made blackness (traditionally error or evil) the ultimate source. As has been

---

[25] Ibid., p. 499.

[26] Ibid., p. 493.

seen in the above passage, light burns or blinds. Thus he defies light: "Light thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee!" And he taunts light: "There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical".[27] The dark chaos of Paradise Lost has been heretically transformed into the final cause or source. Light and whiteness, then, are not Emersonian "symbols", but masks, deceits to be attacked by Ahab in order to attain his black, diabolical absolute. Thus one may see both the diabolical transcendentalist seeking the absolute behind the forms of nature, and the diabolical puritan fighting the deceits of the world.

As diabolical puritan, Ahab again stands opposed to Emersonian transcendentalism. The potential Ahab is present in these lines taken from Father Mapple's masterly sermon: "Delight is to him--a far, far upward, and inward delight--who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self".[28] The sermon is directed probably toward the Yankee-Quaker of Peleg's, Bildad's and Starbuck's stamp--people who have lost or at least merged their spiritual guides in their earthly vocations

---

[27] Ibid., p. 500.

[28] Ibid., p. 48.

as seen in Starbuck's "duty and profit hand in hand".[29] Ahab certainly stands forth inexorable; in his quest for the whale he certainly opposes those earthly gods whose "aghast and righteous souls [would] have wrenched the ship from such a fiendish man! They were bent on profitable cruises, the profit to be counted down in dollars from the mint. He was intent on an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge".[30]

Though he be another iron puritan, Ahab does not follow the course of Jonah which Father Mapple summarizes as follows: "it is a story of the sin, hard-heartedness, suddenly awakened fears, the swift punishment, repentence, prayers and finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah".[31] Ahab admits no sin; accepts no fears; his repentence is for his earlier puerile worship of light; his prayers are defiance; there is no real repentence or reversal of intention; his only deliverance is annihilation.

Yet, as he approaches his doom, his awareness of fate or predestination becomes stronger. Like Jonathan Edwards he becomes conscious that he is not a completely "self determining power":[32]

---

[29] Ibid., p. 219.

[30] Ibid., p. 186. Here, the "pious" Yankees are certainly the butts of Melville's satire.

[31] Ibid., p. 41.

[32] "Concerning the Notion of Liberty and of Moral Agency", in Major American Writers, p. 56.

> What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?[33]

One sees again the fate-ridden Calvinist as Ahab argues with Starbuck that his confronting Moby Dick has been "immutably decreed" a "billion years before this ocean rolled" and that he is "the Fates' lieutenant".[34] Earlier, concerning his non-existent leg, he told the carpenter that he could still feel that leg, and then speculated: "How dost thou know that some entire, living, thinking thing may not be invisibly and uninterpenetratingly standing precisely where thou now standst?"[35] Man, then, is possibly an epiphany of some other Being or God: every being including the whale may be an extension of that Being's thought or will. Thus it would indeed be difficult to know whether the whale be phenomenon or reality, or as Ahab earlier asked, "agent...or...principal".[36] Richard Chase writes, "The predicament of Ahab as Prometheus is in certain senses the Puritan predicament; and his failure is the Puritan failure".[37] Certainly the doctrines of pre-

---

[33] Moby Dick, p. 534.

[34] Ibid., p. 553.

[35] Ibid., p. 468.

[36] Ibid., p. 162.

[37] Herman Melville (New York: MacMillan, 1949), p. 48.

destination, omnipotence and incomprehensibility of that Puritanical God seem reflected in Ahab's nihilism, a nihilism unlike Emersonian transcendentalism. Ahab's inability to separate agent or principal, phenomena or ideal reality, is also a dilemma inherent in transcendentalism, though it may have been ignored by Emerson. While Emerson sought complete immersion in the oneness which transcends this dualism, Ahab is frustrated by his need to distinguish and know both, and yet to transcend this dualism.

Though quite different from Ahab, Ishmael too is no "pantheist", "platonist" or Emersonian transcendentalist. Unlike the transcendentalists, Ishmael is unwilling to take nature as being the "sign" of the spirit: essentially an agnostic, he says "we can hypothesize; even if we cannot prove and establish",[38] and (except for the epilogue, where he does not even hypothesize) throughout Moby Dick, Ishmael extrapolates the facts and incidents of a whaling voyage into symbols of what might be; he is constantly moving from simple, analytical description to metaphysical speculation. After castigating several imperfect sketches of whales, however, in his typically agnostic vein he says, "So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. And the only mode in which you can derive

---

[38] Moby Dick, p. 371.

even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan".[39] Elsewhere, in this same humorous vein, he sees the universe as one "vast practical joke":[40] this jocularity is far from Ahab's religious demonism, but it is again as far from Emerson's faith in "compensation". Ahab, as has been seen, is impatient with science because it does not satisfy his transcendental quest for the absolute: Ishmael, in his typically skeptical and jocular manner, however, states (after a long phrenological analysis of whales), "Physiognomy, like every other science, is but a passing fable", and he concludes, "I put the brow before you. Read it if you can".[41] Ishmael seems much more aware and seems much more content with the flux and relativity of time which limits man's intellectual endeavours. Later, after having followed Ishmael's description of a whale's tail, the reader experiences

---

[39] Ibid., p. 267. This lightly offered advice may be taken more seriously in the context of the whole novel. Ishmael is opposed to Ahab's inordinate curiosity and his vision of life, "a woe that is madness". Ishmael does not seem to believe, as does Emerson, that man can experience objective reality. The imagery and the story of Moby Dick warn one against the dangers of seeking "wonders supernatural".

[40] Ibid., p. 226.

[41] Ibid., p. 346.

the same humorously anti-climactic descent: Ishmael says, "Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep. I know him not and never will".[42] Here one sees the analyzing intellect which Emerson scorned for its incapability of perceiving Unity or Reality.

The best example of Ishmael's ambivalent agnosticism is in his analysis of the colour white. After having indicated its more congenial connotations he says, "yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights the blood".[43] He sees a strange "supernaturalism of this hue";[44] he sees it as "a white veil"[45] as in the "abhorrent mildness" of the polar bear.[46] He sees the "indefiniteness" which suggests "annihilation" and the "charnel-house within". In the hue he observes a paradoxical "visible absence of color", a "dumb blankness full of meaning" and "the colorless, all color of atheism". Apparent beauties are "deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from

---

[42]Ibid., p. 377.

[43]Ibid., p. 188.

[44]Ibid., p. 190.

[45]Ibid., p. 192.

[46]Ibid., p. 188.

without".[47] All this indicates that knowledge is primarily subjective; and yet, almost inconsistently, he asserts that there is an instinctive or intuitive horror of this paradoxical colour: "Though neither knows where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints [of fear]; yet with me as with the colt, somewhere these things must exist. Though in many of its aspects this invisible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright".[48] Ishmael, throughout the whole of Moby Dick, asserts again and again that the beautiful and serene appearances which the Platonist contemplates are actually very deceptive. Appearance and reality do not coincide: apparent nature is not the "impress" or "metaphor" of reality. One could speculate that Ishmael's intuitive fear of the colour white is caused by this absence of congruence; one could also argue that Ishmael's awareness of the incongruity of appearance and reality is even further removed than Ahab's diabolical transcendentalism from Emersonian transcendentalism.

It must be remembered, however, that Ishmael has asserted that these "nameless things...somewhere...must exist". Moreover, his agnosticism is tempered by the follow-

---

[47] Ibid., pp. 194-195.

[48] Ibid., p. 194.

ing statement: "all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye".[49] Similarly, in the sensuous calm of the "Grand Armada", after having looked from that serene core to the periphery of the armada where wounded, enraged whales thrash, Ishmael speculates: "But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy".[50] Although Ishmael has praised the adventure and freedom of the open sea and ridiculed the secure lives of the land lubbers, somehow, he has carried that land-like security into the "the tornadoed Atlantic of [his] being". This concept of self is similar to Emerson's concept of temperament and single vision: "Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung".[51] Throughout the novel, however, the reader is not permitted to ignore the vast sea which sprawls over two thirds of the world.

---

[49]*Ibid.*, p. 372.

[50]*Ibid.*, p. 387.

[51]"Experience", in *Five Essays*, p. 76.

For the most part, Ishmael regards unfalteringly the actual and psychic seas, and the devilish atmosphere surrounding Ahab; he transcends all this through his inner serenity, his meditative and buoyant humour, and his fundamental humaneness, social pantheism, or love.

For Ishmael is unaffected by the harsh knocks of life. He robustly asks, "Who ain't a slave? Tell me that". He observes humorously, "everything else is one way or other served in much the same way--either in the physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other's shoulder-blades, and be content".[52] This robust humour and love are Ishmael's means of transcending the harsh realities which lurk under the sunny surfaces and in the midst of life--dangers like the whale lines which come to represent "the silent, subtle, everpresent perils of life".[53] Instead of Ahab's isolation or Emerson's self-reliance, Ishmael lives and preaches the philosophy of interdependence and mutual obligation: at the beginning of Moby Dick, Ishmael feels "the damp, drizzly November in [his] soul"; he feels "grim around the mouth".[54] But after having overcome his civilized

---

[52] Moby Dick, p. 4.

[53] Ibid., p. 282.

[54] Ibid., p. 1.

repugnance of sleeping with another man, after having pledged his friendship to the noble savage, Queequeg, Ishmael declares, "I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it. There he sat, his very indifference speaking a nature in which there lurked no civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits".[55] Tied by a monkey rope to Queequeg as the two precariously balance and sustain each other over the threshold of death, Ishmael declares, "we two, for the time, were wedded". He finds that his "own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two". He generalizes to say, "I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes".[56] While Ishmael seems to find his redemption in mutual obligation and love, his is not an orthodox Christian message: "I'll try a pagan friend, thought I, since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy".[57] It is a more sensuous love, a more "natural" love than the civilized or "hollow courtesy" of his contemporary Christians, and it is quite unlike the love exhibited by Father Mapple's congregation: "Each silent worshipper seemed purposely setting apart from the other,

---

[55]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 50.

[56]<u>Ibid</u>., pp. 318-319.

[57]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 51.

as if each silent grief were insular and incommunicable".[58] The relationship of Ishmael and Queequeg is almost a homosexual marriage of man to man, and Ishmael looks up to Queequeg as does an adolescent boy to a heroic father. A jocular description of Ishmael's sensuous love for his fellow man is seen in the following passage: "Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I almost melted into it". A "strange sort of insanity" comes over him as he "squeezed [his] co-laborers' hands" as he "exults in such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling".[59] Here, indeed, the cold isolation of the puritan, and of even Thoreau and Emerson, has been broken down: Ishmael's feelings surmount the rigid conventions and inhibitions of his society.

"A subject and an object--it takes so much to make the galvanic circuit complete, but magnitude adds nothing."[60] Ishmael seems to take up this belief and seems to argue that the "galvanic circuit" cannot be completed, except in exceptional cases as in Pip's insanity. Knowledge is usually depicted as being a subjective response. An object is regarded from several perspectives: the object remains the

---

[58] Ibid., p. 34.

[59] Ibid., p. 414.

[60] Emerson, "Experience", in Five Essays, p. 92.

same but each person carries away his own meaning. The best example, of course, is the doubloon which Ahab has nailed to the mast as a reward for the first man who sights Moby Dick: to Ahab it is Ahab; to Starbuck, the trinity; to Stubb, the life cycle; to Flask, 960 cigars. Pip underlines their subjectivity with "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look", but he then exclaims in his divine madness, "God goes 'mong the worlds blackberrying".[61] At the beginning of Moby Dick Ishmael tells the story of Narcissus, "who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all".[62] Ultimate reality, the object, "the ungraspable phantom of life" is inscrutable: one daubs that object with narcissistic projections of himself if he attempt to grasp reality. As Narcissus drowned, so Ahab, the transcendentalist, destroys himself and his crew while attempting to catch "the ungraspable phantom of life". Though Ishmael's cries have risen with the rest of the crew, he is the only one who has understood man's limitations.

---

[61] Moby Dick, p. 432.

[62] Ibid., p. 3.

The best example of unfixed meaning, and Ishmael's ambivalent conceptions of good and evil (which take a subtle position between Emerson's transcendentalism and Ahab's diabolical transcendentalism) occurs as Ishmael falls into day dreams while watching the lurid fire and fire-lit sailors at the try-works. He wakes into "jet gloom" with a "stark, bewildered feeling, as of death", and in his confusion almost capsizes the ship.

The first conclusion is: "Look not too long in the face of the fire....Tomorrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp--all others but liars!" The light of the natural sun and the suggestion that there is a transcendental meaning in the universe which means well seem to place Ishmael within the transcendental school.

The antithetical conclusion is: "the sun hides not Virginia's Dismal Swamp" nor "the ocean which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true--not true, or undeveloped. With books the same. The truest of all men was the Man of sorrows and the truest of books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. 'All

is vanity'. ALL". Pessimism, skepticism and cynicism are opposed to optimism.

The dialectic is much like that of Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain, but Melville resolves his into an explicit synthesis which maintains a subtle balance between the two extremes of optimism and pessimism: "Give not thy self up, then, to the fire lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness."[63] Just as Ishmael sees the superficiality of optimistic pantheism, he also sees the madness of Ahab's woe; Ishmael seeks a golden mean which (though it does seem unheroically pragmatic in its abhorence of that "woe that is madness") still does permit him to view both the good and evil contingencies of the universe. This dialectical movement of Ishmael's mind seems a microcosm of the whole of Moby Dick.

Another image which reveals Ishmael's non-transcendental philosophy is that of the loom. Serenely weaving a mat, Ishmael sees his activity as being symbolical of life. The warp is necessity; the woof, free will; Queequeg's sword, which "fashions both", chance. Thus Ishmael "weave[s] [his] own destiny into those unalterable threads", and he observes that "chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring

---

[63] Ibid., pp. 421-423.

blow at events".[64] Chance, the chance sighting of a whale, causes Ishmael to drop the ball of "free will" from his hand; in a moment he is part of a rowing machine. Here, nature is not fitted to man. Rather than the order of Emerson's doctrine of nature, what one sees emphasized is the last blow of chance. This conception of fate is quite different, too, from Ahab's diabolical predestination: no single emperor moves Ishmael; he has free will within the bounds of necessity--he is as Edwards would say a "moral agent"--but his final actions are dependent upon an aimless chance, similar to Schopenhauer's conception of the blind and irrational will.

Against Emersonian transcendentalism may be opposed Ahab's demonism and Ishmael's "inconclusive manicheism".[65] Because their characters and philosophies seem so different from Emerson's, does this mean Moby Dick is opposed to Emersonian transcendentalism? The author never speaks directly to the reader; he speaks through the mask of Ishmael. Neither does he offer direct, consistent or conclusive philosophical propositions: he places before the reader a fictional world upon which his fictional extension, Ishmael,

---

[64] Ibid., p. 214.

[65] Murray Krieger, The Tragic Vision (New York: Holt Rhinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 259.

speculates. It is dangerous, moreover, to equate Ishmael with Melville. As has been seen, Ishmael is an integral part of the dialect which fires Moby Dick. He is love, and thought, and "inconclusive manicheism" opposed to and superimposed upon Ahab's hate, passion and diabolism. While both their philosophies greatly differ from Emerson's, it will be necessary to study more closely the dialectic which runs through Melville's imagery.

A CONFLICT IN IMAGERY

As has been shown, Melville seemed temperamentally antagonistic to Emerson, although while writing Moby Dick he had no close reading of Emerson's works.[1] What the former sailor seems to oppose generally is the formal pedantry and impracticality of the professional scholar, and the superficial optimism of the Platonist, pantheist or transcendentalist. It is odd that while so antagonistic to this type, Melville was also so strongly influenced by Mr. George J. A. Adler, a "German scholar", "full of the German metaphysics",[2] and a man admired as being an "exceedingly amiable man, & a fine scholar".[3] In his journals and letters which leave a record of his passage to Europe, Melville repeatedly refers to their "talking metaphysics".[4]

Nevertheless, in Moby Dick one sees a satirical contempt for hair-splitting theologians and dreaming, impractical scholars who lose themselves in their verbal gymnastics or metaphysical fantasies: in a humorous attempt

---

[1]Supra, p. 5.

[2]"Melville's Journal" (October 12, 1849) The Melville Log I, 319.

[3]"Melville's Journal" (October 15, 1849) The Melville Log I, 321.

[4]"Melville's Journal" (October 21, 1849) The Melville Log I, 322.

to persuade Queequeg to drop his religious practices (contrary to "Hygiene and common sense"[5]), Ishmael in a satirical attack, reduces the theological concept of hell to "an idea first born on an undigested apple-dumpling; and since then perpetuated through the hereditary dyspepsias nurtured by Ramadans".[6] Later in a jocular aside, while contemplating the pleasure he took in the plentiful food of the _Samuel Enderby_, Ishmael again deflates metaphysical and theological endeavour: "At the time, I devoted three days to the studious digesting of all this beer, beef, and bread, during which many profound thoughts were incidentally suggested to me, capable of a transcendental and Platonic application"[7]--perhaps metaphysical contentment is due to a full stomach? In the following passage, as he attempts to convey his impression of the lurching, empty _Pequod_, Ishmael again relates disparagingly the intellectual state of a scholar to his state of hunger: "Top-heavy was the ship as a dinnerless student with all Aristotle in his head"[8]--the top-heaviness and emptiness of the student suggest instability and unreliability. Earlier in _Moby Dick_, a Right Whale is killed and its head hoisted up on the opposite side of the

---

[5] _Moby Dick_, p. 86.

[6] _Ibid._, p. 86.

[7] _Ibid._, p. 443.

[8] _Ibid._, p. 472.

ship to balance the Sperm Whale's head. Ishmael observes: "As before, the Pequod steeply leaned over towards the sperm whale's head, now, by the counterpoise of both heads, she regained her even keel; though sorely strained, you may well believe. So, when on one side you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds for ever keep trimming boat. Oh ye foolish! throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right".[9] Ishmael sees in this "trimming boat" an intellectual dishonesty: there seems to be an even greater trust in self-reliance and the validity of the individual impulse than that held by the "intuitive" Emerson. Though the following words were published later than Melville's, they are diametrically opposed to Ishmael's statement: Emerson writes, "a new danger appears in the excess of influence of the great man. His attractions warp us from our place. We have become underlings and intellectual suicides. Ah! yonder in the horizon is our help;--other great men, new qualities, counterweights and checks on each other". He sees these counterweights as "human nature's indispensable defence": "The centripetence augments the centrifugence. We balance one man with his opposite, and

---

[9] Ibid., p. 327.

the health of the state depends on the see-saw".[10] Although both Ishmael and Emerson seek to preserve the identity of the thinker, the amateur philosopher places a greater faith in unaccommodated man than does the professional philosopher.

One sees the dreaming impractical Platonist as Ishmael discusses the mechanics and advantages of the crow's nest. Ishmael admits with mock seriousness that he belongs to this dreaming, lazy type: "Let me make a clean breast of it here, and frankly admit that I kept but sorry guard. With the problem of the universe revolving in me, how could I--being left completely to myself at such a thought-engendering altitude--how could I but lightly hold my obligations to observe all whale-ship's standing orders, 'Keep your weather eye open, and sing out every time'". He continues, "Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditativeness; and who offers to ship with the Phaedon instead of the Bowditch in his head. Beware of such a one, I say: your whales must be seen before they can be killed; and this sunken-eyed young Platonist will tow you ten wakes round the world, and never make you one pint of sperm the richer".[11] He humorously describes the type as "romantic, melancholy

---

[10] "Uses of Great Men", in Representative Men, p. 31.

[11] Moby Dick, p. 156.

and absent-minded", and sings in hypnotic, rhythmic rhetoric the beauties of the "mystic ocean". Then comes the grim warning: "But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!"[12] This warning from the mouth of "common sense" echoes Dr. Johnson's answer to Berkeley's idealism--the kicking of a stone to prove it exists. In the passage cited above, one sees a concrete example of Ishmael's "common-sense" acceptance of the material world, the capriciousness of that world, and the dangers of permitting oneself to become totally absorbed in the mind or spirit.

The same point is made again as a digression or final moral extrapolation from an incident within the story. Ishmael has been describing Tashtego's near drowning in the "flagrant spermaceti" of the Sperm Whale's tun: "Only one sweeter end can readily be recalled--the delicious death of an Ohio honey-hunter, who seeking honey in the crotch of a hollow tree, found such exceeding store of it, that leaning too far over, it sucked him in, so that he died embalmed. How many, think

---

[12] Ibid., p. 157.

ye, have likewise fallen into Plato's honey head, and sweetly perished there?"[13] This passage and the previous one indicate, I think, Melville's attraction to the nineteenth-century forms of neo-platonism. The attraction, the sweetness, is the reduction of phenomena or diversity to essence or unity. Against this impulse, however, presses Melville's grim consciousness of evil, and his inability to account for that evil. This same conflict is expressed in what I have taken to be the two fictional extensions of the warring selves within Melville--Ishmael the speculating agnostic, who sees diversity and Ahab the diabolical transcendentalist who sees unity. The conflict is expressed again in Melville's peculiar system of imagery, or, rather, two warring systems of imagery.

The pulsing alternation of hope and despair, serenity and catastrophe, good and evil, and the deceptiveness of apparent good and evil may best be introduced by reference to Melville's Benito Cereno. In this short story, Captain Delano, an American of trusting good nature, boards the dilapidated San Dominick. After meeting the ship's captain, Benito Cereno, after seeing the unusual freedom the Negroes possess, after noticing the discrepancies in Cereno's explanation of the ship's plight, observing the surreptitious

---

[13] Ibid., p. 343.

whisperings between Cereno and his negro servant Dagoo, and catching glimpses of white sailors trying to communicate silently with him, the naive Captain Delano becomes slowly suspicious; he feels tremors of horror, and fears for his life. But, throughout the whole story, his feelings alternate between complacency and tingling horror. The mystery is finally solved when the reader finds that the blacks had taken over the ship, killed several white men, forced Benito Cereno to pretend command of the ship, and intended to capture Captain Delano's ship. A summary of the alternating appearances of nature's "benevolence" and "malevolence" may be seen in the following lines:

> 'You generalize Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.'
>
> 'Because they have no memory', he dejectedly replied; 'because they are not human.'
>
> 'But these mild trades that now fan your cheek, Don Benito, do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the trades.'
>
> 'With their steadfastness they but waft me to my tomb Senor,' was the foreboding response.[14]

In Moby Dick there is no dialogue quite like this. But there is the same impression given of a neutral, colourless nature

---

[14]"Benito Cereno", in Major American Writers, p. 1077.

foreign to man on which man projects the colourings of his own emotional state: this subjectivism is seen in the incidents of the doubloon, Ishmael's analysis of the colour white, and in the different attitudes held by the different ships which cross the Pequod's wake. Indefiniteness or meaninglessness is, imaged, of course, in the sea. As has been seen, the note is struck that "meditation and water are wedded forever"; speaking of Narcissus who drowned himself attempting to grasp "the mild image he saw in the fountain", Ishmael says, "It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to all".[15] The same indefiniteness is concretely shown in the muddled, mysterious painting of the Spouter Inn; Ishmael learns that the "indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity" supposedly contains the picture of a whale impaling himself on a three masted ship.[16] In Father Mapple's Christian chapel, the sea painting contains the definiteness of the ray of Christian hope shining forth from a cloud's silver lining.[17] Once the Pequod has left behind Bildad and Peleg, however, the sea begins to assert itself in a manner closer to Ishmael's first impression of the Spouter Inn painting: "Ship and

---

[15] Moby Dick, pp. 2-3

[16] Ibid., p. 11.

[17] Ibid., p. 39.

boat diverged; the cold, damp night breeze blew between; a screaming gull flew overhead; the two hulls wildly rolled; we gave three heavy-hearted cheers and blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic".[18] The impression is one of vastness and consequent loneliness. Man's smallness and insignificance on the face of the sea and nature is seen again: Ahab "tossed the still lighted pipe into the sea. The fire hissed in the waves; the same instant the ship shot by the bubble the sinking pipe made".[19] This impression is sustained by Ishmael's repeated assertions that the sea dates back to the flood and still covers two thirds of the world. More specifically, when Ishmael and Queequeg have been temporarily lost at sea, Ishmael describes Queequeg's "holding the imbecile candle in the heart of that almighty forlornness. There, then, he sat, the sign and symbol of a man without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair".[20] Pip, however, is also lost at sea and the experience seems more meaningful. "The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul". One could speculate that "the drowning of the in-

---

[18] Ibid., p. 104.

[19] Ibid., p. 127.

[20] Ibid., p. 225. The atmosphere is similar to that sustained in Tennyson's In Memoriam and Matthew Arnold's Dover Beach: nature is seen as being if not neutral, foreign to man.

finite" was caused by the vastness and unhumanness of the sea, but Pip's madness is described as being a divine or spiritual madness: "Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of the waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense".[21] This highly evocative, dream-like description suggests not only physical vastness, but a spiritual insight: "multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects" is a strange phrase without a definite meaning; its very indefiniteness suggests the medium of water, which conveys a wavy, blurred visual image.

Melville, however, does not leave the sea simply incomprehensible, vast and vaguely suggestive; this impression of the sea becomes the denotative meaning, the core meaning, to which he attaches ring upon ring of alternating

---

[21] _Ibid._, p. 413. It seems inconsistent that Ishmael sees _Ahab_'s "woe" not as "heaven's sense" when he sees it as "madness".

and conflicting images. Throughout Moby Dick there are two conflicting systems of imagery: the one represents the sea's surface and the air as being beautiful, serene or seemingly good; the other (often contained within the first) hints at or warns about the deceptiveness of such appearances. Notice the beauties in the following description: "The starred and stately nights seemed haughty dames in jewelled velvets, nursing at home in lonely pride, the memory of their absent conquering Earls, the golden helmeted suns! For sleeping man 'twas hard to choose between such winsome days and such seducing nights. But all the witcheries of that unwaning weather did not merely lend new spells and potencies to the outward world. Inward they turned upon the soul".[22] The nights are seen in terms of feminine analogy ("the haughty dames"), but are described also in terms of magic and deception ("winsome", "seducing", "witcheries", and "spells"). The inward turning of the soul which brings Ahab to the deck seems to indicate that he is of a poetic or "platonic" nature, feminine in his sensitive receptiveness to such beauties, but there is an abrupt altercation between him and Stubb where he reveals an unimaginable ferocity--"his eyes like powder-pans! is he mad?"[23]

Ishmael's description of the "sunken eyed Platonist"

---

[22]Ibid., p. 123.

[23]Ibid., p. 125.

watching the beautiful waters from the masthead suggests that aesthetic mysticism is a dangerous dream: he "takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him, every dimly discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it".[24]

The beauty of the ocean and its mystical significance seem only the mental projection of the Platonist himself. The ambiguity of the phrase "uprising fin" (is it indeed a shark or implicitly a half-perceived thought emerging from the dark, unconscious self?) and the word "seems" indicate the deceptiveness of nature's apparent beauties.

Melville uses the colour blue to suggest serenity, coolness and infinity--a blue which proves to be only the surface appearance of the sea and the sky. For example: (1) "beneath all its blue blandness, some thought there lurked a devilish charm"[25]--and as events prove, the "some" or few were right, for the Pequod meets the dashing storms of the Cape of Good Hope; (2) "As the three boats lay there

---

[24]Ibid., p. 157.

[25]Ibid., p. 233.

on that gently golling sea, gazing down into its eternal blue noon; and as not a single groan or cry of any sort, nay, not so much as a ripple or a bubble came from its depths; what landsman would have thought, that beneath all that silence and placidity, the utmost monster of the seas was writhing and wrenching in agony!"[26]--in Ishmael's eyes, the "landsman", the scholar and the Platonist are one of a kind, and they are held in contempt for their inexperience of life's grimmer contingencies.

The last passage describing the whale writhing in the depths shares in a framework of animal imagery which is used to indicate, as in King Lear, the barbarism, cannibalism and heartless struggle at the heart of nature and man. In the serenity of the sea Ishmael sees the menace of a tiger: (1) "these are the times of dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willingly remember, that this velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang".[27] Pages later, he picks this image up again: "Warmest climes but nurse the cruellest fangs: the tiger of Bengal crouches in spaced groves of ceaseless verdure. Skies the most effulgent but basket the

---

[26]Ibid., p. 354.

[27]Ibid., p. 485.

deadliest thunders".[28] It will be noticed that throughout Moby Dick there is an intensification of this animal imagery, from the "uprising fin of some undiscernible form", to the sharks voraciously attacking a killed whale, to the tiger heart, to the crouching bengal tiger, to the sharks snapping at the very oars of the whale boats as Ahab's crew finally confronts Moby Dick. As has been pointed out, after the catastrophe there is a strange, almost miraculous suspension of "sharkism" as "The unharming sharks they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths".[29]

In "The Symphony" there is a beautiful description of the sea's deceptiveness, again in terms of the masculine and feminine principles, of the colour blue, and of animal imagery:

> It was a clear steel-blue day. The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure; only, the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman's look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong lingering swells, as Samson's chest in his sleep.
>
> Hither and thither on high, glided the snow-white wings of small, unspeckled birds; these were the gentle thoughts of the feminine air; but to and fro in the deeps, far down in the bottomless blue, rushed mighty leviathans, sword-fish and sharks; and those were the strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea.[30]

The description is beautiful in the contrast created between

---

[28] Ibid., p. 494.

[29] Supra, p. 17.

[30] Moby Dick, p. 531.

surface and depth, the duality and complexity of softness and strength, beauty and power, and the suggestion of the mind itself in the delicate "snow-white", "gentle thoughts" of the "unspeckled birds who seem to represent the conscious mind, and the "murderous thinkings of the masculine sea" seen in the "mighty leviathans, sword-fish and sharks" who seem to represent the unconscious mind. One sees Melville's power to visualize concretely and to see poetic or human significance in all. Melville's seeing poetic or human significance in all, however, does not mean that he believes in the "transcendentalist principle that the structure of the universe literally duplicates the structure of the individual self, and that knowledge therefore begins with self knowledge". Although David Bowers believes that Melville's inclination to "personalize impersonal nature itself as an allegory of human experience", is transcendental in that man is seen as being "the spiritual centre of the universe",[31] I have emphasized Melville-Ishmael's awareness of the ungraspable indefiniteness of nature, and the virtual impossibility of a union of subject and object. Though Ishmael draws moral or human conclusions from his observations of nature, he recognizes that though somewhere the nameless things must exist, the meanings taken by the individual are not inherent

---

[31] "Democratic Vistas", in Literary History of the United States, p. 352.

in nature.

Most critics have been concerned about the symbolic meaning of Moby Dick. Actually, his particular significance seems bound up in the same meaning which Melville gives his fictional world: in Moby Dick one sees the various representations and images of the sea, the colour white, and the doubloon pulled into one central image of ambiguity. One sees a strange complexity, a fearful symmetry, shown through the analysis of a whale's tail. Melville describes the delicacy, beauty and yet power of that tail: "In no living thing are the lines of beauty more exquisitely defined than in the crescentic borders of these flukes. At its utmost expansion in the full grown whale, the tail will considerably exceed twenty feet across". From size to strength: "Nor does this--its amazing strength, at all tend to cripple the graceful flexion of its motions; where infantileness of ease undulates through a Titanism of power. On the contrary, these motions derive their appalling beauty from it. Real strength never impairs beauty or harmony, but it often bestows it".[32] Although at this point Melville does see an ideal union of feminine beauty and masculine strength, there is still a consciousness of two combined and harmonious

---

[32] Ibid., p. 373. This is a description of the "largest sized Sperm Whale's tail" and is used by Melville to create in the reader's mind an entire image of the archetypal whale Moby Dick.

qualities, which the "dreaming Platonist" of Moby Dick does not perceive. A deceptive serenity which hides dangerous strength is seen in this description of the first day's chase of Moby Dick: "Like noiseless nautilus shells, their light prows sped through the sea, but only slowly they neared the foe. As they neared him, the ocean grew still more smooth; seemed drawing a carpet over its waves; seemed a moon-meadow, so serenely it spread. At length the breathless hunter came so nigh his seemingly unsuspecting prey, that his entire dazzling hump was distinctly visible".[33] A leisurely, detailed description of the whale's beauty and strength follows:

> A gentle joyousness--a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale. Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished Europa clinging to his graceful horns; his lovely leering eyes sideways intent upon the maid; with smooth bewitching fleetness, rippling straight for the nuptial bower in Crete; not Jove, not that majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified whale as he so divinely swam.
>
> On each soft side--coincident with the parted swell, that but once leaving him then flowed so wide away--on each bright side the whale shed off enticings. No wonder there had been some among the hunters who namelessly transported and allured by all this serenity, had ventured to assail it; but had fatally found that quietude but the vesture of tornadoes. Yet calm, enticing calm, oh, whale! thou glidest on, to all who for the first time eye thee, no matter how many in that same way thou mayst have bejuggled and destroyed before.[34]

---

[33] Ibid., pp. 537-538.

[34] Ibid., p. 358. (cf. "Plato's honey head", Supra, p. 40)

One sees again the conflict manifested within the imagery of a serenity and beauty which masks dangerous power. The whale becomes the epitome of all nature's complexities, the dangerous incongruity of appearance and reality to the unwary hunter of truth seeking the one in the many. Although Emerson might have seen the Whale as being sign, symbol or metaphor of the truth, in Moby Dick he seems to represent the problem of truth.

Ishmael's awareness of the subtle complexities and the ambiguity of good and evil, Ahab's awareness of a malignity at the centre of the universe, the ridicule heaped upon dreaming platonists, and the tensions created by the conflict within the imagery of serenity and horror--together with the external evidence, these indicate Moby Dick's being held against the optimism, the faith in nature's compensatory order, and the single spiritual reality of Emersonian transcendentalism. In a letter written to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville wrote, "Shall I send you a fin of the "Whale" by way of a specimen mouthful? The tail is not yet cooked--tho' the hell-fire in which the whole book is boiled might not unreasonably have cooked it all ere this. This is the book's motto (the secret one). Ego non baptiso te in nomine--but make out the rest yourself".[35] The blasphemous benediction does indeed recur in Moby Dick: "Ego non baptizo

---

[35] The Melville Log I (June 29, 1851), p. 415.

te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli".[36] I think, however, that this motto has relation only to the Faustian, diabolical side of Ahab, and that its significance lies on the surface of Moby Dick. Deeper than this lies Melville's conception and portrayal of the sea's "being as indefinite as God".[37] If there is a secret motto imbedded in Moby Dick, I think it has occurred earlier in the book: "And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all".[38] This seems to be the key to Moby Dick and the key to understanding why Ishmael survived: unlike the monomaniacal Ahab who takes his black vision to be the truth lying behind the whiteness of the whale, and unlike the thoughtless crew who do not really take part in the metaphysical quest except as machine-like parts of their captain, Ishmael as he begins the recapitulation of Moby Dick has recognized "the ungraspable phantom of life"; yet, later in the story he declares that the ungraspable phantoms, those

---

[36] Moby Dick, p. 484.

[37] Ibid., p. 105.

[38] Ibid., p. 3.

"nameless things...somewhere...must exist".[39]

Because he is closest to Melville, because he has recognized the complexity of man's metaphysical problems, Ishmael survives to tell the story of Moby Dick and Ahab, and to speculate upon the significance of his unknown world. Thus, the reader too finds the novel ungraspable and yet filled with meaning. It is this sense of mystery which Melville opposes to the confident metaphysics of Emersonian transcendentalism.

---

[39] _Ibid._, p. 194.

CONCLUSION

In Moby Dick there are two extremes of the naturalistic[1] and philosophical styles, sections of the novel which would seem more appropriate in a monograph on cetology or whaling, and other sections more appropriate in the sermon of a New England preacher. The Calvinistic and transcendental traditions of New England seem partly responsible for this dichotomy in Moby Dick: both the New England preacher and the transcendentalist move habitually from observations of "ordinary" life to theological, philosophical or moral conclusions. Ishmael, too, moves continually from observations of sea life, from dissection and analysis, to meta-

---

[1]By "naturalism" the writer is referring primarily to the style of the novelist who, by the use of detailed description, elaborate documentation, or analysis, seeks to convey a convincingly concrete and accurate representation of his fictional world. Although Melville, unlike Zola, Dreiser, Joyce and Kafka, does not emphasize the squalid side of life or an animalistic nature of man; in Moby Dick, he does dwell on the darker, evil side of life. Although his characters do not become victims of a sociological or psychological determinism, Ahab, like Thomas Hardy's Jude, becomes the victim of his monomaniacal quest and the apparent impossibility of fulfilling that quest. Although Ahab is of a magnitude larger than "life", and although there is a greatness in his assertion of pride in the face of a blank, unfeeling and vast universe, the reader is left with the impression that on the face of the sea or nature, man, like Ishmael, is a homeless wanderer, without any significance beyond his own existence. Although Moby Dick is not a product of Darwinism, like Darwin, Melville shows a brutal struggle pervading nature.

physical speculation. It is this characteristic extrapolation, so similar to Emersonian transcendentalism,[2] which gives Moby Dick much of its artistic unity: once the reader has learned to anticipate this movement of mind, he reads willingly through the plethora of detail and finds direction where formerly there was only chaos.

Although it is the extrapolated symbolism which one remembers after reading Moby Dick, the greater part of the novel is written in the naturalistic style. Dissecting and demonstrating the whale's physical structure, and tracing with fossils the whale's history to pre-historic times, Ishmael creates a very concrete representation of the whale. This extremely detailed or concrete representation seems connected to Ishmael's warning the dreaming Platonist that Descartian vortices lie beneath his feet: against the Emersonian contention that nature is not real, but only ideal, Ishmael shows the material reality of nature. As D.H. Lawrence writes, "he [Melville] is more spell bound by the strange slidings and collidings of Matter than by the things men do". Lawrence continues, "It is the material elements he really was to do with. His drama is with them. He was a futurist long before futurism found paint. The sheer naked slidings

---

[2]The difference between the Emersonian transcendentalist's and Ishmael's modes of thinking lies in the difference between the words "conclusion" and "speculation".

of the elements. And the human soul experiencing it all. So often, it is almost over the border: psychiatry. Almost spurious yet so great".[3] Melville insists upon giving his novel and his whale a material backbone. He is repelled by the Emersonian belief that there is a correspondence of the moral and physical laws of the cosmos, and the similar one-to-one correlation which is characteristic of allegory: Ishmael writes, "so ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical and otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory".[4] On one level, one can see the story teller attempting to palm his fictional lie off as the truth. On another level, one can see Melville's humorous irony directed toward himself, the story teller, and his "ignorant" audience. On a third level, however, a more serious level, this statement is a rationalization of his naturalistic style; moreover, his apparent hatred of "fable" and "allegory" seems to be a hatred of abstraction, that single vision of the Emersonian "Reason".

Rather than allegory or Emerson's confident abstrac-

---

[3]Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: Doubleday, 1951), p. 158.

[4]Moby Dick, p. 204.

tion, in Moby Dick one experiences a symbolism which evokes an atmosphere of mystery or suggestive ambiguity. Melville's first technique in creating this impression of mystery is to suggest (in the imagery of the colour white, Moby Dick and the sea) that for man objective reality possesses the "indefiniteness of God". On this core Melville superimposes two systems of imagery: the first, those deceptively beautiful, serene, benevolent and feminine surfaces or superficial appearances which the Platonist or Emersonian transcendentalist contemplates; the second (often contained in the first) the deeper brutish conflict, malevolence and masculinity which the more "experienced" man perceives. This dangerous incongruity of appearance and reality does create suspense as the reader anticipates imminent catastrophe, but, by implication, another warning is directed to the Platonist, pantheist or Emersonian transcendentalist who, in his cosmic optimism and his ideal conception of the universe, ignores the evil and the material reality of the universe.

Ahab is the transcendentalist who, attempting to suck out the marrow of life, has found himself to be the "Devil's child". Perry Miller believes, however, that the "fundamental premises, those of Scott, Cooper, Byron, Rousseau and that 'inconceivable coxcombe of a Goethe' are those that lead Ahab and Pierre to destruction; but they are never declared, by Melville the author, to be false. They are not

so reassuring as in the compensation and optimist versions, but they are the same, as dare I say, precisely those of Transcendentalism?"[5] I have attempted to show Melville's arousing sympathy for Ahab by associating the pathetically loyal Pip with this isolated, self-enclosed man, by Ahab's moment of irresolution before the sighting of Moby Dick when he drops a tear into the ocean, by Ishmael's assertion that under _all_ greatness and ambition lies a morbid nature, by the ethical consistency of Ahab's defiance with his vision of the brutish struggle pervading nature, and his admirable, but fatal pride, which may be seen as an assertion of humanity against an unsympathetic and brutal cosmos. All this might lead one to agree with Perry Miller that Melville never declares Ahab's transcendental premises "to be false". But it is not Ahab's transcendentalism which Melville finds truthful or attractive; it is Ahab's perverse vision of evil counterpoised to the optimistic transcendentalist's vision of good. Rather than good or evil being shown as the _single_ transcendental principle underlying nature, _Moby Dick_ shows that good and evil are ambiguously, and inextricably combined. Moreover, Ishmael believes that Ahab's "woe...is madness", and the

---

[5] "Melville and Transcendentalism", _Virginia Quarterly Review_, XXIX (Autumn 1953), pp. 571-572.

story seems to declare that Ahab's quest for truth is a self-destructive madness. It is most significant that Ahab does not die a glorious death by the annihilating power of Moby Dick's tail, that he does die an unheroic death--he is "caught round the neck"[6] by the harpoon line and strangled or hanged like a villain. His inglorious end is similar to King Ahab's: as Ishmael has previously reminded Peleg, "When that wicked king was slain, the dogs, did they not lick his blood?"[7]

Thus, Moby Dick is a strange tragedy. Because Melville has been manipulating the reader's sympathies toward the morbidly great Ahab, and because Ahab's ending is described in so few words, the reader hardly notices and does not feel that wickedness has received its due in Ahab's unheroic end. Rather, what one experiences is the reduction of pretentiousness or impossible striving to a more finite or more "human" plane. Ishmael's office through _Moby Dick_ has been to guide his fellow man to this more "human", if not more unheroic plane. The coolness and calmness of the surviving Ishmael stands contrasted to the former throbbing heat of the now dead Ahab, and draws forth the cathartic release of pity and fear. In _Moby Dick_, the self reliant,

---

[6] _Moby Dick_, p. 80.

[7] _Ibid._, p. 564.

nonconforming, and impulsive Emersonian hero has at last been totally immersed in nature, and metaphysical conclusions, Ahab's diabolical transcendentalism and Emerson's optimistic transcendentalism, are shown to be untenable for mortal man.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

Aristotle. Poetics. Translated by S. H. Butcher, in James Henry Smith and Ed Winfield Parks, eds. The Great Critics. New York: Viking, 1951.

Arvin, Newton. Herman Melville. New York: Viking, 1961.

Bode, Carl, ed. Thoreau. New York: Viking, 1960.

Braswell, William. Melville's Religious Thought. New York: Pageant, 1959.

Brooks, Van. The Times of Melville and Whitman. New York: Dutton, 1947.

Cameron, Kenneth Walter. Transcendental Handbook. Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1957.

Chapman, John J. Emerson and Other Essays. New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1898.

Chase, Richard. Herman Melville. New York: Macmillan, 1949.

Chase, Richard, ed. Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962.

Ellis, Milton and others, eds. A College Book of American Literature. New York: American Book Company, 1954.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Emerson's Complete Works. 2 vols. London: George Bell and Sons, 1879.

--------. Five Essays on Man and Nature. Edited by Robert Ernest Spiller. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954.

--------. Representative Men. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1883.

Feidelson, Charles, Jr. Symbolism and American Literature. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.

James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience. New York: New American Library, 1958.

Krieger, Murray. The Tragic Vision. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1960.

Lawrence, D. H. Studies in Classic American Literature. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1951.

Levin, Harry. The Power of Blackness. London: Faber and Faber, 1958.

Lewis, R. W. B. The American Adam. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.

Leyda, Jay, ed. The Melville Log. vol. I. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951.

Mayoux, Jean Jacques. Melville. Translated by John Ashbery. New York: Grove Press, 1960.

Melville, Herman. "Benito Cereno", Howard Mumford Jones, Ernest E. Leisy and Richard M. Ludwig, eds. Major American Writers. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1952.

----------------. Billy Budd. New York: New American Library, 1961.

----------------. Moby Dick. New York: Modern Library, 1950.

----------------. Omoo. London: Jonathan Cape, 1923.

----------------. Typee. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938.

----------------. White Jacket. New York: Grove, n.d.

Park, John. "Seven Moby Dicks", in Charles Feidelson, Jr. and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., eds. Interpretations of American Literature. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.

Paul, Sherman. Emerson's Angle of Vision. Cambridge: Howard University Press, 1959.

Reever, James Russel. Emerson as Myth Maker. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1954.

Spiller, Robert E., and all, eds. Literary History of the United States. New York: Macmillan, 1962.

Vincent, Howard Paton. The Trying Out of Moby Dick. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949.

Articles

Bell, Millicent. "The Irreducible Moby Dick", Emerson Society Quarterly, XXVIII (1962), 4-6.

Braswell, William. "Melville as a Critic of Emerson", American Literature, IX (1937), 317-334.

------------------. "The Main Theme of Moby Dick", Emerson Society Quarterly, XXVIII (1962), 15-17.

Miller, Perry. "Melville and Transcendentalism", Virginia Quarterly Review, XXIX (1953), 556-575.

Roper, Gordon. "On Teaching of Moby Dick", Emerson Society Quarterly, XXVIII (1962), 2-4.

Sealts, Morton M. "Approaching Melville Through Hawthorne and his Mosses", Emerson Society Quarterly, XXVIII (1962), 12-15.

Watters, R. E. "The Meanings of the White Whale", University of Toronto Quarterly, XX (1951), 155-168.