

THE TWO-FACED WHALE: NAMING AS MISDIRECTION
IN MOBY-DICK

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Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is not only the greatest whale in literature, it is also literature's largest red herring. The use of the whale as a decoy to take the casual reader's attention from the significance of the voyage itself is, like the use of Biblical names and references, a technique for misdirecting the attention of all but the most careful reader. But Melville has gone beyond the mere use of subterfuge, of those cardboard masks of reality which Captain Ahab wanted to strike through in order to learn the greater reality behind them, by using names and references to serve at least five distinct purposes, three of them intended to lead on a false scent that "skimmer of pages" for whom Melville had such contempt.

First it must be noted that Melville was artist enough to know that his message would be far more widely read and have greater chance of surviving the passage of time if presented in the form of a rousing adventure with superficial mass appeal. Given this and Melville's knowledge of whaling, it is not surprising that the legend of *Moby-Dick*, or Mocha

Dick, as the earlier legendary white whale was called, was his selection as the basis of his own narrative.

However, such a whaling story could all too easily be taken as nothing more and the symbolism overlooked unless the reader, that is the careful reader, be given some clues which would make him consider the metaphysical and theological significance involved. To provide the key, Melville selected Biblical names for his major characters and included such frequent references, direct and indirect, to the Judaeo-Christian Bible that only the most indifferent reader could neglect Melville's deeper intent.

The second use of names and references is a continuation of the first as well as an artistic device similar to the condensation technique of the Symbolist school of poetry. That is, having drawn the reader's attention to the metaphysical substance of his book, Melville then provided the reader with clues to the scope of his work by indicating a usage of a broad range of religious myth including that which pre-dates the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Thus, to the names Ahab and Ishmael from the Old Testament, Melville mentions that of Narcissus from Graeco-Roman myth, that of Queequeg, the pagan from the South Seas, and tells us that the name of the ill-fated ship is the Pequod, the name of a New England Indian tribe which was decimated and then eradicated by the arrival

of the Christian settlers in New England.

These two functions of the naming are, in effect, of service to the interested reader, though the use of reference to Narcissus and the Pequod tribe seems to have gone generally unnoticed. Even so, useful though they are in directing the reader's attention, these uses of names lead to the third use, a trap for the reader. Melville, as indicated in several letters to Hawthorne, was fully aware that the ubiquitous "skimmer of pages" could be misled and was deliberately doing so. He knew that only the most careful reader would strike through the masks of his technique to the thought behind; others would accept the story as a Christian narrative no matter how little they understood it, and this is what he wanted. He did this not only because he held such casual readers in contempt, but because he was also promulgating a message opposed to the accepted, conventional Judaeo-Christian convictions of his day and had no illusions about how these would be received if they were recognized. His letters, especially those to Hawthorne, indicate how much he delighted in his literary deception.

Much has been made critically about Melville's statement that he baptized his book not "in nomine pater, sed in nomine diaboli," not in the name of the Father but in the name of the Devil, and this alone would be sufficient ex-

planation why Melville used names and references to give his book the camouflage of Biblical allegory. But the indications are that even this was only one more of those "little lower layers" and that there was a fourth level of the use of names and references. The fourth indicates that Melville is suggesting, or perhaps following, a Hermetic tradition rather than any form of Judaeo-Christian thought. This is particularly important in that it indicates that Melville is not following Blake and Milton and others of what Blake termed "the Devil's School" but is actually outside such considerations and in a totally different context.

This leads to consideration of Melville's fifth use of names which is to force the would-be seeker of answers to meditate on the ambiguities involved, including Melville's choice of names and possible reasons for those choices. Thus does method become message, form become content, for the underlying thrust of Moby-Dick is that of the night sea voyage of mythology, with significant differences in stress because Moby-Dick is a work extolling the value of the meditative, internal path to the understanding of existence as opposed to the external, authoritative, arbitrary path subsumed in the prevailing concept of the Judaeo-Christian godhead. Even more subtly important, Melville is rejecting the conceptual approach entirely and insisting on the primacy of feeling,

of intuition and heart, just as does Hawthorne. Conceptual religious thought is, for Melville, a dead end. Only the internal road of meditation can lead man to that white whale of understanding.

In fact, Melville says as much in the very opening passages of Moby-Dick, though he says it in such a way that it can be easily overlooked. During Ishmael's soliloquy on his reasons for going to sea, he remarks on the importance of water and of the sea and says:

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.

But why should Melville bother with the mythological references, especially the reference to Narcissus? The evidence suggests that Melville wanted to show that the problem of trying to grasp the ungraspable (Moby-Dick) is as old as man's recorded myth, much older than the Judaeo-Christian tradition, a reference which serves to condense the history of religious myth even as it serves to point out that Melville's description of the Narcissus myth as "still deeper" indicates that it is the Narcissistic search for the "phantom of life" which is the key. The drowning

of Narcissus is the mythological equivalent of drowning the Self in the Id, that reservoir of psychic energy, or, in Jungian terms, the return of the Self to the Collective Unconscious, into the non-differentiated state of the communal collective. It is therefore the voyage, that type of night-sea voyage, which is the subject matter of Moby-Dick, and the correlation with the Narcissus myth and its advice to "Know thyself" indicates that Melville's conviction is that self-knowledge, the internal road, is the only way to grasp Moby-Dick, the "ungraspable phantom of life."

In fact, just prior to the passage quoted above, Ishmael says, "Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever," and there are reminders throughout the book of the process of meditation, particularly in regard to its importance in non-Christian religions, though few if any so direct and pervasive as that in the discussion of the doubloon as a mandala and navel of the ship.

But there is even more to the Narcissus reference than this. One of the more overlooked facets of the Narcissus myth is that the punishment which led to his death was brought on because he was a cruel, heartless individual who loved no one and felt no compassion. The relationship between Narcissus and the early Captain Ahab is obvious. Narcissus is egocentric, with an inflated idea of his power and position, and is cold and compassionless toward those who try to touch

his emotions. Therefore, Ahab, like Narcissus, must drown, that is, must undergo a psychological transformation, in order to progress beyond the frustrating limits of his externalized existence. He must turn inward through the collective unconscious waters of meditation in order to learn of love and thereby to know himself.

This is a distinctly different process from the externalizing process of worshipping an external, anthropomorphic godhead, for the former puts mankind in harmony with all existence rather than in opposition to it. Such a philosophy does not admonish "Go forth and conquer Nature" but "Go forth and cooperate with Nature," a lesson which Narcissus and Ahab learn only after severe torment.

Ahab's personality gives further clues to Melville's resolution of the external-internal dichotomy in mankind's quest for knowledge of God and existence. Ahab, a king of Israel during the ninth century before Christ and a traitor to the covenant with Yahweh, permitted worship of Baal and Astarte, the matriarchal religion pre-dating the Judaeo-Christian. Thus, like Melville, he opposed the conventional, orthodox religion of his time.

That Melville prefers a religious tradition based on natural and intuitive experience is evident in the passage on orthodoxy in Chapter 69:

There's your law of precedents; there's your utility of tradition; there's the story of your obstinate survival of old beliefs never bottomed on the earth, and now not even hovering in the air! There's orthodoxy!

Clearly, this passage reveals Ahab's (Melville's) conviction that orthodox Christianity has lost all its force and meaning, currently "not even hovering in the air."

And the Biblical Ahab too, as noted earlier, is a rebel against orthodoxy and supporter of an earlier religion. But the Biblical Ahab is a consistent personality, whereas Melville's Ahab is opposed to the orthodox Christian persuasion of his time, but his opposition is based on the failure of that religion as he perceives it. He is not opposed to the intellectual processes of "right reason" for he still follows his egotistical pride in his rivalry with nature and the god-head even though he speaks of a need for religion to be "bottomed on the earth."

Moreover, the Biblical Ahab is spoken of as an "abomination of god," which he is to the conventional Hebrew god of his time, Yahweh, though he is not to the goddess Astarte whose religion he supports. But Melville's Ahab is both anathema and devotee to this Hebrew concept of god. because, on the one hand, he supports the conceptual, authoritative, arbitrary approach to existence while, on the other

hand, he rebels against such authority much as had Satan.

Herein lies the subtlety of Melville's use of names. Captain Ahab's name should reveal to the reader that he is a man rebelling against the contemporary conventional religious belief in favor of an earlier one. This can be openly stated about the Biblical Ahab, but Melville is not so explicit. He does, however, provide abundant clues to Ahab's pre-Judaeo-Christian antecedents. Ahab's scarred face and lost leg identify him as a pre-Christian Fishing and Sun God, a wounded king whose lack of fertility is a threat to his kingdom even as his sterile approach to existence is a threat to the Pequod and all aboard her. But Melville's Ahab will undergo a return to the earlier religion of Astarte and Baal, or to its equivalent, as does the Biblical Ahab, because this is the religion of intuition and acceptance, the internalized religion of compassion and feeling. Melville's Ahab will finally undergo the transformation into an internalized man which will make him susceptible to feeling. Meanwhile, like Yahweh, he is mechanical, intellectual, externalized and vengeful.

When Melville says in his letter to Hawthorne,

I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool with a heart, than Jupiter Olympus with his head. The reason the mass of man fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is be-

cause they rather distrust His heart
and fancy Him all brain like a watch,

he is opting for that intuitive component which is weak in him, as it is in Ahab who, though he has an excess of fervor, is deficient in feeling of the proper type. In the beginning this fervor is mistaken by him for feeling and leads him, in Chapter 135, to declaim that

Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels. . . . 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.

But neither Ahab nor Melville is basically a feeling man in the proper sense. They are both emotional, as religious fanatics, but both have used their reason to serve their emotions, their dislike of the conventional interpretation of God. It is only after both have undergone the purgation of their experience of the voyage that they become true men of heart. Before that point, both represent the mind-without-heart conceptualizing of some external deity not integrated with the primordial forces of Nature and the natural.

This is again stressed in the narrator's name Ishmael, for Ishmael is a bastard, the son of Abraham by his wife Sarah's handmaiden Hagar. He is alienated, an outcast, and would not have been accepted, as Melville surely knew,

for the ritual symbolism of baptism into the Christian faith. It is appropriate that Moby-Dick be narrated by Ishmael about Ahab because both of them represent different aspects of Melville's personality in quest of the meaning of God and existence. Ishmael, whose name is probably from the Hebrew Yishma-el (God hears), is the archetypal scapegoat survivor figure, an outcast through the accident of birth. Moreover, Melville may have been aware of the earlier role and significance of Ishmael as the "beloved man" of the matriarchal goddess worshipped in the earlier confederacy of thirteen tribes. This possible condensation of the history of religious myth need not be developed here, but it relates to both the origins of much Judaeo-Christian symbolism in the fish-fertility cults and the use of the fish as an early Christian sign of identification and to the frequent uses of and references to the order Cetacea or whales and other sea mammals in the Bible.

And of course, in accord with this, Ahab's name is related to that of Rahab, a harlot in the Bible but earlier a Sea-goddess in the matriarchal hierarchy and known in Babylonian mythology as Tiamat who, in the form of a whale, annually swallows up the Spirit of the Solar Year in its Ark or Moon-ship. The voyage of the Pequod is such a solar

voyage, just as Ahab is a Solar deity, and it is not without reason that Melville refers to the Pequod as a "whale" and a "cannibal of a craft." The Pequod, as mentioned earlier, was named after a New England Indian tribe which was decimated and exterminated by the incoming Christian settlers. Melville says the Indians are "now as extinct as the ancient Medes," and the Medes were a Mediterranean tribe claiming descent from the Pelasgian goddess Medea, a very possible parallel to indicate that both were conquered and supplanted by the Judaeo-Christian believers.

It is now possible, without delving further into naming and terminology, to grasp the multiple deception practiced on the unwary reader by Melville. How does one grasp the ungraspable image of life? By the process of meditation and internalizing, as Ishmael tells us in the opening chapter. Not through the dogmatic, externalized doctrines as represented by Father Mapple but through a return to the earlier whole religions before God and man were separated. When faced with such problems as death, man must, as Ishmael, go to sea. He must dive back into his Id, into the Collective Unconscious, where "man's madness may be heaven's sense," where the intuitions of the heart provide answers which Ahab's externalized rationalizing cannot. The key is in the Narcissus myth, in the

need to drown one's individualized and externalized Ego-centricity in the larger Self of primordial psychic energy in order to transcend the prohibiting limitations of the conceptualizing process.

To understand this is to understand the seminal note which Melville made concerning magic and madness. He wrote that

Madness is undefinable--It & right
reason [are] extremes of one.
Not the (Black Art) Goetic but
Theurgic magic--seeks converse with the
Intelligence, Power and Angel.

For Melville, madness and right reason are the same in that the "right reason" of the conventional Judaeo-Christian religious approach which leads man to externalizing is "mad" in being a perversion of the true path. And what such a society terms "mad" will be, of course, precisely that introspective, internalized voyage which Melville believes to be the right road. This "madness" is intuitive, creative and free of the bonds of external dogma. But the superficial "skimmer of pages" will not understand that, nor will those who, in believing Melville of "the Devil's party" like Blake and Milton, persist in treating Melville's vision in conventional conceptual terms.

Similarly, the remainder of the above quotation must

also be understood in Melvillean terms. It is theurgic or white magic (religion) which seeks converse with mechanistic Intelligence or rationalization, with Power, and with the Angel because such intelligence is devoid of spiritual feeling even though it may involve fervor, as in Ahab's case, Power is not to be sought after by the truly spiritual, and the Angel whom Melville includes seems to be the avenging Angel of the Old Testament. All three in fact seem to represent the religion of Yahweh, Yahweh as the jealous, arbitrary and vengeful god of the Book of Job. For Melville, this sort of god seemed more like a devil, as it did to Blake. But Blake and others of his persuasion remained within the Judaeo-Christian context, maintaining that God and Lucifer had had their respective roles reversed through the Judaeo-Christian teachings. Melville did not. The evidence of Moby-Dick is that he rejected the Judaeo-Christian frame of reference completely and went back to a pre-Biblical religion, possibly Orphism or one of the Hermetic schools. The discussion in Chapter 99 which treats the doubloon as a mandala suggests that he may have turned to the oriental schools for a non-apocalyptic religion of completion.

But this was certainly not a message he could openly disclose to the reading public, particularly of his day,

if he expected to be read and his work to survive. Moreover, Melville was sufficiently versed in mystery religions to know that the exoteric teachings were given to the uninitiated public while the esoteric teachings were reserved for those sufficiently interested and disciplined to become initiates. So he, like Hawthorne whom he applauded for using literary devices "directly calculated to deceive . . . the superficial skimmer of pages," turned to his own devices to clothe his own parable in ambiguity. Not only did he mislead the general public into reading Moby-Dick as a whaling yarn or a Christian allegory, he deceived most of his critics into believing that even if he had baptized the book in the name of the Devil and made an artist's pact with Satan he was still following the lead of such writers as Blake and Milton. But he was not, for they still remained in the Christian persuasion even though they may have believed that God and Satan had had their identities reversed. Melville went beyond that to suggest that the Judaeo-Christian persuasion is externalized and alienating and that the road to true knowledge is via that earlier type of natural religion in which man recognizes that God dwells within and that the road to knowledge of the ultimate is through meditation and self-knowledge, through that voyage

of sea-change known variously as the Id, the Collective Unconscious, the ocean or the Self.

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