



The Function of the Cetological Chapters in *Moby-Dick*

Author(s): J. A. Ward

Source: *American Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (May, 1956), pp. 164-183

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2922047>

Accessed: 18/06/2014 14:04

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Function of the Cetological Chapters in MOBY-DICK

J. A. WARD
Tulane University

ONE OF THE MAJOR FACTORS in retarding the reputation of Melville's *Moby-Dick* was the unpopularity of the chapters that methodically describe the appearance and activity of the whale and the various processes involved in whaling. Both the reading public and the literary critics¹ found it difficult to accept what appeared to them an incongruous blend of formal exposition and traditional narration, a partial novel that could also serve as a handbook or treatise on whaling, a chaotic melange of adventure, metaphysics, and amateur scientific investigation. Today, however, with the increasing tendency to examine Melville's fiction as *sui generis* and rather outside the main stream of the English, or, for that matter, the American novel, it is no longer orthodox even to consider Melville as an artless genius. Newton Arvin and Yvor Winters, who have strongly defended Melville's technical skill, account for the looseness and digressiveness of *Moby-Dick* by associating it with the form of the epic poem. Arvin states that "There is no doubt that [the form] is in part the result of a conscious and artful process."² Winters is even more affirmative: *Moby-Dick* "is beyond a cavil one of the most carefully and successfully constructed of all

¹ Willard Thorp, ed., *Herman Melville: Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes* (New York, 1938), p. cxxiii, writes, "The reviewers who tried to justify their dislike of [*Moby-Dick*] show in common their dismay in trying to make it fit into any category of fiction-writing then acknowledged."

Luther S. Manfield and Howard P. Vincent, eds., *Moby-Dick* (New York, 1952), p. xvi, point out that both the favorable and the unfavorable reviews emphasized that the book was unclassifiable. Those who defended it generally took the point of view of Evert Duyckinck, who wrote that it was of no importance that it was "quite impossible to submit such books to a distinct classification as fact, fiction, or essay."

John Freeman, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1926), represents what was until recently the typical twentieth-century attitude towards the cetological chapters. "Melville's characteristic faults, his digressions and his delays, are found in *Moby-Dick*, and are hardly less frequent than in most of his books; but they have little power to retard the reader. Even when he suspends the action, in order to discourse upon the technicalities of whaling, the suspension is not fatal. . ." (p. 114).

² Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1950), p. 154.

the major works of literature. . . .”³ Since recent criticism⁴ consistently defends Melville’s inclusion of the unorthodox cetological chapters in *Moby-Dick*, my approach in discussing the function, techniques, and effects of the whaling passages will be analytical rather than apologetic.

In all of the novels before *Moby-Dick*, Melville reveals his interest in detailed description of things, of places, and of processes. Undoubtedly a good deal of the early expository writing stemmed from Melville’s intention of satisfying a reading public with an interest in travel literature. The heavily detailed descriptions of the processes of tappa-weaving and breadfruit preparation in *Typee*, like the nearly documentary report of life on a man-of-war in *White-Jacket*, proved interesting as ends in themselves to a mid-nineteenth century reading public with a stronger relish for the remote and the exotic than for technical excellence in fiction.⁵ But to accept the taste of Melville’s audience as the only explanation for the non-narrative digressions is obviously to underestimate the early fiction. For there is at least a partial thematic significance in all of the digressive passages. In *Typee* Tommo’s effort to understand his environment and the nature of his captivity provides not only the suspense of the novel but also its underlying thematic movement. Tommo finds a discrepancy between the apparently tranquil existence of the Typees and their alleged cannibalism; there is a dichotomy between what he observes and what he dimly knows, and his major problem is one of total comprehension of both environment and situation. Not only does this basic problem give a thematic motive for the narrator’s extensive descriptions of the way of life he encounters, but it also serves as a legitimate artistic motive for the apparent digressions.

³ Yvor Winters, “Herman Melville and the Problems of Moral Navigation,” *Maule’s Curse* (Norfolk, Conn., 1938), p. 73.

⁴ See also F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York, 1941), p. 416; William Ellery Sedgwick, *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1944), p. 134; Richard Chase, *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York, 1949), p. 102; and Howard P. Vincent, *The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick* (Boston, 1949), pp. 121-126.

⁵ Leon Howard, *Herman Melville* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951), p. 97, writes, “While Melville was writing the greater part of *Typee* he probably gave no particular thought to the publisher’s classification into which it should fit. The book was something between fiction and fact—a good story based upon personal experience which combined the freshness and episodic quality of an oral narrative with the conventional amount of description expected by readers of the printed page. Its appearance among the more purely factual narratives in Murray’s House and Colonial Library had forced him to change its tone and make it more informative and plausible by introducing new chapters and revising portions of the original manuscript.”

But such an analysis may seem factitious to the reader who may be bored—and understandably so—by reading such tedious sections as those on tappa-weaving. Melville himself apparently felt some dissatisfaction with his digressions, but, after his failure with *Mardi*, a failure which can be traced to an overnebulousness, a too extreme neglect of appearance for reality,⁶ he returned to his old methods and apparently attempted to remedy his fault by achieving a tighter unity between exposition and narration, a closer relationship between digression and theme.

In *Typee* the processes of converting tappa into cloth and the fruit of the breadfruit tree into food are not universally significant in themselves; the search for deeper meaning is valuable, but the actual results of the search are negligible. In other words, there are philosophical and psychological reasons for the extensive analyses, but such reasons do not make artistically valid essentially uninteresting material.

With *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, however, we find Melville imbuing the details of the city of Liverpool and the structure of the *Neversink* with symbolic value. Though the expository sections in these novels are often tedious, they are not so digressive as in *Typee*. In *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, a common element, and an element which relates all of Melville's fiction, is the hero's quest for truth. When he explores Liverpool, Redburn realizes that his childhood conceptions of the city were erroneous. More than in *Typee*, the expository sections of *Redburn* are told from the rather strict point of view of the first person narrator. As Redburn describes the squalor of Liverpool, his own disillusionment colors the writing and links the descriptive and narrative parts of the novel. There is a tighter and more significant unity in *White-Jacket*, a novel in which the digressive sections are more numerous than in any novel before *Moby-Dick*. In *White-Jacket* Melville extends the metaphysical boundaries of the hero's search for truth by treating the *Neversink* as a microcosm of the universe. As White-Jacket tries to understand the ship, he is symbolically trying to understand the very nature of reality; as he tries to achieve a *modus vivendi* with his shipmates and superior officers, he is symbolically involved in the parallel process of

⁶ Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 285, writes, "In *Mardi* . . . the voyage [Melville] recounted . . . sprang from the social and religious systems he had thought about, hardly at all from what he had apprehended through his senses."

finding his role as a social and spiritual being. *White-Jacket* is not a carefully developed allegory, nor is Melville entirely successful in controlling his digressiveness; but on the whole his method is far sounder than it was in *Mardi*. By making the world a ship on its passage out and adhering strictly to the actuality of ship life, he eliminates the danger of overstepping the bounds of reality.

In *White-Jacket*, however, Melville still had somewhat the same problem he had in *Typee*. Though the expository passages in *White-Jacket* are much more obviously and significantly linked with the theme, there is no real balance between fact and meaning; the ship and its officers and crew are much more complex than the reality they stand for: the physical reality Melville describes outweighs its symbolic equivalent because there is a great deal of description of ship life that can be accepted only on the literal level.

By the time he had written *White-Jacket*, Melville found the fundamental method that he was to use with most success in *Moby-Dick*. In all of the early novels there is an attempt to include everything and a developing awareness that such completeness can best be achieved by using the ship as a microcosm of the universe and by enlarging the meaning of concrete fact by metaphor and by literary, historical, and mythological allusion. Melville constantly attempted to arrive at an understanding of spiritual reality through an understanding of physical reality. It was possible for him—though he had not yet fully utilized his capabilities—to link all reality with one reality, to manufacture a network of relationships which would enable him to know everything by knowing one thing fully. He found that the material he had selected to treat in *Moby-Dick* would be ideal for metaphorical treatment, especially since the quest motif would be dominant and the object of the quest, the white whale, would serve as the object of both physical and metaphysical capture. Never before in Melville's fiction had there been such a complete union between physical object and spiritual truth; with the whale as object, as the central force and symbol in the universe from the point of view of both Ahab and Ishmael, it was possible for Melville to explore the physical dimensions and spiritual implications of the whale without hindering the movement or digressing from the theme of the book.

I

Moby-Dick is a book much more suitable for digressions than any of the earlier novels. Clearly Melville had to find some artistically satisfactory method to inject variety in his story. He had to give the effect of a long voyage, but he had to face the obvious fact that on a long whaling voyage very little happens. To concentrate entirely on action would be to multiply the Ahab scenes and thereby create an unendurable intensity; to concentrate on the trivia, on the day-to-day activity of the seamen or on the capture of every whale, would be both repetitious and monotonous. Melville chose to solve this artistic problem by punctuating the Ahab scenes and the whaling incidents with a series of expository chapters on whales and whaling.⁷ The whale is the common denominator, both object of exposition and object of quest.

The digressions are also functional in that they provide a body of facts for a reading public totally ignorant of whales and whaling life. As Howard P. Vincent writes, “. . . in any book of adventure built on such a special area of life, as philately, campanology, or baseball, there are always certain necessary details of the methods and manner peculiar to them, which require expository treatment before the narrative may effectively proceed.”⁸ Clearly the narrative sections of the novel would be nearly incomprehensible without the extensive descriptions of the whale and whaling processes. The whaling manual serves to make the culminating engagement with Moby Dick thoroughly clear; also, of course, it functions as a means of stimulating the reader's interest in the eventual engagement, for both Ahab and Moby Dick are alternately developed as antagonists of heroic proportions. By the time the *Pequod* meets Moby Dick, Melville can describe the extended action without relaxing the narrative pace, for he can take for granted that the reader has an understanding of terminology and methods, as well as a basis for accepting what otherwise would be the incredible strength and maliciousness of the white whale.

The factual chapters also support other dramatic incidents in

⁷ See Arvin, *op. cit.*, p. 158: “. . . the principle of variety is observed and its effect achieved not in pitch only but in pace and key also. For surely what the descriptive and expository chapters on whales and whaling do is partly to slow down the tempo and partly to provide for a change in key. They suggest the passages of deliberate quietness and even dullness in all very large poems. . . .”

⁸ Vincent, *The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick*, p. 123.

Moby-Dick. Throughout the novel there is a careful interrelation between exposition and narrative, so that the material dealt with in a cetological chapter frequently serves as the concrete basis for an adjacent dramatic scene. For example, the incident in which Tashtego falls into the well of a sperm whale's head directly follows the chapter entitled "The Great Heidelburgh Tun," which describes the size and composition of the whale's head and the method used in extracting the precious spermaceti from it. The two chapters function as a unit, each giving significance to the other.

Melville is undoubtedly on safe technical grounds in adding variety to the story and in providing the reader with the necessary body of information. But there are also thematic and aesthetic purposes served by "the cetological center"⁹ that make the chapters not merely unfortunate necessities, but positive artistic achievements. Most Melville critics¹⁰ have justified and generally praised the unorthodox expository sections by maintaining that their sheer weight of fact keeps the metaphysical and spiritual meaning of *Moby-Dick* solidly anchored to matter-of-fact reality.¹¹ Melville was undoubtedly right in implicitly following Coleridge's dictum that one of the "cardinal points of poetry" is "the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature. . . ."¹² Though the Melville of *Moby-Dick* may have few apparent resemblances to the Wordsworth of the *Lyrical Ballads*, he nevertheless adheres to the essential element of that poet's intention as it is stated by Coleridge: "Mr. Wordsworth . . . was to propose to himself as his object [in the *Lyrical Ballads*], to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us. . . ."¹³ The sperm whale is not, of course, "a thing of every day," and was even more removed from the lives of Melville's contemporaries than it is from ours.¹⁴ However, in his

⁹ The phrase is Vincent's (*Trying-Out*).

¹⁰ See especially Arvin, *op. cit.*, p. 168, and Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 416.

¹¹ Melville's own deprecation of overelaborate symbolism as "monstrous allegory" indicates that he perceived that the failure of *Mardi* resulted from a violation of the truth of surface reality by symbolism mechanically imposed rather than organic and natural.

¹² S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (London, 1907), II, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II, 6.

¹⁴ See Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 123. "In 1850, Americans as a whole were not familiar with whaling, much less with whales; their ignorance was probably even greater than that of twentieth-century Americans."

treatment of the whale, in his analysis of its anatomy, its bone structure, its eating and breeding habits, and its every physical detail, he makes the whale a familiar object, comprehensible to the reader. Melville's task was more difficult than Wordsworth's: it was necessary for him to reveal the whale as a part of "the world before us," and simultaneously to "excite a feeling" in the reader "analogous to the supernatural" by revealing transcendental meaning in the whale.

In every aspect of the novel, Melville's effort to balance the extraordinary with the ordinary is evident. For example, we notice in the microcosm of the *Pequod* a variety of attitudes toward the white whale, a variety of attitudes toward reality and man's place in the universe. Ahab's quest for the absolute and Ishmael's acute awareness of ultimate problems are balanced by the common sense of Starbuck, the indifference of Stubb, and the mediocrity of Flask. Melville does not allow Ahab's force to damage the stability of the novel; similarly it was one of Shakespeare's greatest powers that he never allows a single point of view to determine the point of view of his plays: Mercutio and the nurse keep *Romeo and Juliet* from lapsing into sentimentality. Melville lacks the objectivity of Shakespeare, but he clearly avoids the excessive subjectivity of, say, Whitman, by allowing contrary points of view to offset (but ultimately strengthen) the spiritual and cosmic points of view of the main characters and of the novel itself.

In the same way, the cetological chapters give the illusion of objectivity and the effect of a wide view of life. As Stubb is contrasted with Ahab, the physical reality of the whale is contrasted with the metaphorical and mythological references in such a chapter as "The Whiteness of the Whale," which establishes *Moby Dick* as a creature of spiritual as well as physical dimensions. Melville creates a world cosmic in scope and spiritual at its center, but his starting point is earthly and physical. "The imagination," Coleridge writes, "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities. . . ; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; . . . the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; . . . and while it blends and harmonizes the natural with the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the

matter. . . .”¹⁵ When the principles of this famous passage are applied to *Moby-Dick*, it becomes obvious that Melville was basically in accordance with the best of Romantic thought and literature in paying strict attention to “the matter” of the whale, in using what is “concrete,” “familiar,” and “usual” as a substratum, to which he added implications that make the whale spiritually meaningful yet physically, even scientifically, credible.

This artistic process helps to explain Melville’s success not only in his general plan, but also in his handling of such particular improbabilities as Fedallah and the Spirit Spout, figures which have a far more tenuous basis in apparent reality than the whale itself. Though Melville makes some effort to account naturalistically for the origin of Fedallah and the physical existence of the Spirit Spout, the demonism of the former and the ghostlikeness of the latter are the principal impressions that we derive from them. But the intense literalness of the denotative chapters serves to weight down not only the connotative significance of the whale, but also to give the whole story such a steady foundation in fact that Melville can afford to violate the canon of realism with impunity.

Melville’s cetological chapters, on the surface scientific and formal in approach, but in essence metaphorical, examine the whale in such a way as to relate the whale and whaling to virtually every field of human endeavor. As Howard P. Vincent observes, “Melville [discusses] the whale in almost every aspect: biological, sociological, phrenological, paleontological, historical, anatomical, and economical.”¹⁶ Besides using the various arts and sciences as means to comment on the whale, Melville also uses the physical dimensions of the whale as a frame of reference for observations on man and his world.

There are countless broad metaphorical and symbolic references to man’s condition: man is as liable to be seized by death as the whaleman is liable to be seized by the whale-line; man is not a totally free creature but is dependent on his fellows as Ishmael is dependent on Queequeg at the other end of the monkey rope; evil is as present in the world as the sharks that snap about the whale lashed to the *Pequod*. Besides such observations on man’s metaphysical state, there are also a number of allusions to man’s role as

¹⁵ Coleridge, *op. cit.*, II, 12.

¹⁶ Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

a social being: in "The Gam" we have not only an indictment of Ahab's self-reliance, but also a whimsical commentary on the nature of human intercourse and communication; the series of chapters on the pictures of whales is from one point of view a masterful survey of the relative values of different kinds of art, from scientific illustration, to primitive carvings, to the "linked analogies" formed by nature itself; in "Jonah Historically Regarded" Melville discusses the problem of literal interpretation of the Bible; in "Fast Fish and Loose Fish" Melville jocularly ridicules the absurdity of some aspects of jurisprudence. Since the general observations of man's spiritual and social conditions stem organically from the material at hand, there is a reciprocal tension between the whaling matter and the extended associations, so that the two serve to reinforce each other.

All human means are used to examine the whale: science, legend, art, history, literature, and religion are but the most obvious; the examination of the whale leads to an examination of all humanity and the entire universe. In the center is the whale itself, and behind every reference there is the concrete physical detail of the whale. For Melville, the metaphor, the symbol, the allusion, and the analogy—all fundamental poetic methods to establish relationships and extend meaning—are genuine ways of understanding. For in the monistic universe that Melville implicitly accepts but cannot ultimately comprehend,¹⁷ all things are vitally related to all other things, and differences of basic category are for him negligible. For Melville one time is ultimately related to all time, one place is ultimately related to all places, one object is ultimately related to all objects, one man is ultimately related to all men: any element, regardless of what it may be, bears an essential relationship with everything else because it is physically or spiritually a part of reality. In Melville's quest for absolute truth, no knowledge is adequate that stops at what the scientist considers the discernible limits of an

¹⁷ See Sedgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 7: "Melville . . . in addition to extraordinary scope, was gifted with . . . intensity of being. The most disparate things and considerations associated freely in his mind. . . . Opposites . . . came together and by their association took on new dimensions of meaning and gained a greater currency for expression in all directions."

Richard H. Fogle, "The Unity of Melville's 'The Encantadas,'" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, X, 38 (June, 1955), writes: "To Melville reality is one, indivisible, and complex. He accepts its unity as an unchallengeable first premise. Reality is indivisible in that no single element of it can be extricated from its relationships and used to explain the whole."

object. To Melville's metaphysically oriented mind, all things are limitless. To know one thing completely is to know all.

Thus the incredibly intense study of the whale is a search for total knowledge. There is hardly a detail in the cetological chapters that does not have meaning that extends beyond itself. Melville is not satisfied with Emerson's statement that "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact."¹⁸ Melville's approach to knowledge may implicitly accept the Emersonian doctrine of correspondence, but it is more inclusive and complex, less simply dualistic; there can be no end to the amount of and the kinds of relationships established. The natural fact of the sperm whale will not completely serve Melville until his transcendental perception can realize in all its implications and manifestations the profound truth of reality itself.

II

In this effort to achieve all knowledge through a knowledge of the whale, Melville employs a complex pattern that resembles metaphysical poetry in its elaborate and often extravagant use of the conceit.¹⁹ He begins with the literal, but he seldom remains on that level very long. Like the seventeenth-century poets, he is fond of the kind of wit that creates a unity by linking unlike objects. The metaphor and the allusion are his principal methods; he is able to extend the metaphorical meaning of the object into remote spheres of time and space without violating concrete fact. When we have read and unconsciously assimilated the metaphorical detail that richly impenetrates the cetological passages, we realize that Melville has created a myth. With each analysis of each part of the whale, with each description of each operation in whaling, the scientific framework reveals itself to contain meanings that establish the whale as a creature immeasurable by science. Melville's frequent apologies for his (and science's) inability to describe the whale adequately, and his method of emphasizing the size of the creature by emphasizing the size of its parts are his most obvious means of giving credence to the enormous significance that the whale has in the novel. But Melville's direct statements are less functional than the countless metaphors that illustrate them.

¹⁸ *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Standard Library Edition (Boston, 1883), I, 32.

¹⁹ For an excellent analysis of Melville's resemblances to the metaphysical poets, see Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-132. I am especially indebted to Matthiessen, Arvin, and Vincent in my discussion of Melville's use of metaphor in the cetological passages.

Few of the cetological chapters follow exactly the same pattern. Some, like "The Battering Ram," have as their main purpose to prepare the reader to accept the power and apparent malignity of *Moby Dick*, which will be observed when it destroys the *Pequod*. But in "The Battering Ram" Melville transcends, as he does in all of the chapters, mere surface description of the whale. His method is to associate the concrete physical appearance with metaphorical and metaphysical meaning; a quasi-scientific treatise unobtrusively merges into a philosophic observation on the hidden nature of reality itself, as expository prose becomes, in the broadest sense, metaphysical poetry. Using the inductive method, Melville gradually associates the mouthless, noseless, eyeless, and earless head ("a dead, blind wall"²⁰) of the whale, which he carefully describes, with the attitude held by Ahab and Ishmael: sheer description implicitly reveals the whale to be inscrutable and ambiguous; possibly malicious, possibly indifferent; possibly a "pasteboard mask" (p. 161), possibly the central object of the universe itself. Factual description reaches the same conclusion as symbolic penetration. In *Moby-Dick*, fact, action, and symbol effectively combine to reveal the appearance, the activity, and the meaning of *Moby Dick* to be inter-related and inseparable.

In many of the chapters Melville's purpose is somewhat different, for he frequently uses the physical structure or habits of the whale as metaphorical means to extend his observations beyond the limits of the whale to some aspect of reality that is but dimly related to it. The chapter called "Brit" is far less scientific in method than "The Battering Ram"; in it Melville develops a brief opening paragraph that describes a school of whales feeding on brit. The central conceit here is the comparison of the vast areas of brit with "meadows" (p. 272), with "boundless fields of ripe and golden wheat" (p. 272). The imagery is appropriate and natural; yet Melville's mind, ever sensitive to the possibilities of metaphorical development, uses the brief scene as the basis for one of his most powerful extensions of the central symbolism of *Moby-Dick*: the antithesis of land and sea. The sea here is shown to resemble the land; the beginning of the chapter stresses the sameness and the conclusion stresses the dif-

²⁰ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, ed. Luther S. Manfield and Howard P. Vincent (New York, 1952), p. 335. All subsequent references to *Moby-Dick* are to this edition.

ference. A simple concrete observation develops into a revelation of "the universal cannibalism of the sea" (p. 274) and the inscrutable existence of blind, evil force in the universe.

Even in the chapters that do not have such elaborate metaphorical extensions, there are always individual comparisons which relate some aspect of the whale to far removed places, things, and events. The marks on the sperm whale's surface

are hieroglyphical; that is, if you call those mysterious cyphers on the walls of pyramids hieroglyphics, then that is the proper word to use in the present connexion. By my retentive memory of the hieroglyphics upon one Sperm Whale in particular, I was much struck with a plate representing the old Indian characters chiselled on the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi. Like those mystic rocks, too, the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable. (p. 305)

The range of associations which links the whale to the elemental pyramids and rocks not only reinforces the whale's inscrutability, but also gives it added dignity and significance.

Most of the metaphors emphasize the hugeness of the whale: "the great Kentucky Mammoth Cave of his stomach" (p. 330); "his windpipe solely opens into the tube of his spouting canal . . . like the grand Erie Canal . . ." (p. 369); "the mightiest elephant is but a terrier to Leviathan . . ." (p. 376). Different aspects of the whale cause Melville to allude to Biblical, historical, mythological, and literary material. When so thoroughly accumulated and interwoven in the fabric of the novel, the many allusions associate the whale with all reality and in doing so make it an object of mythological dimensions.

Newton Arvin writes that "There are the metaphors that, like some of the similes, ennoble and aggrandize the texture of the narrative, and there are those that, like others, diminish or subdue it or even make it humorous."²¹ Sometimes Melville discusses the whale's size with broad humor: in order to describe the whale adequately, he asks of "Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand" (p. 452); the old woman who lived in a shoe may comfortably be lodged with all her children in the sperm whale's head. There are touches of humor throughout *Moby-Dick*.²² Melville's humor saves the whal-

²¹ Arvin, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

²² For an analysis of the folk roots of Melville's humor, see Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (New York, 1953), pp. 154-160. Richard Chase, *Herman Melville*, pp. 43-

ing passages from the dullness of a scientific treatise, but it is perhaps more significant that, in F. O. Matthiessen's words, "The effect of that burlesque is to magnify rather than to lessen [Melville's] theme, not to blaspheme Jehovah, but to add majesty to the whale."²³ For, as Shakespeare's porter and gravedigger create an unendurable tension by jesting in the face of tragedy, Melville paradoxically ennobles the whale by mocking it. Melville faced the danger of the ludicrous in his attempt to use the sperm whale as a "mighty theme." To treat his subject in purely heroic terms would probably have been disastrous. The undercurrent mock-heroic tone serves to make his material more acceptable to a skeptical audience. The sullen and aloof Ishmael treats most of his experience with mild cynicism. Even when ennobling the whale he ridicules his own effort. His "forced high spirits"²⁴ and his tone that wavers between deprecation and praise are functional in that they allow Melville to build the whale to heroic proportions without appearing to falsify it.

Perhaps the main reason, however, why the periodic light mockery does not deflate the theme is that it is not directed at the whale so much as it is at the narrator's method: the scientific approach. It is interesting to note the variations of tone with which the quasi-scientific whaling chapters are written. None are written in such total mockery as the very first, "Cetology," in which Melville, or Ishmael, describes the methods he intends to use in analyzing the whale and establishes an arbitrary standard of classification: he will discuss the various kinds of whales under the headings of Folio, Octavo, and Duodecimo. A good deal of this kind of humor extends through the later chapters, usually at their beginnings and frequently in internal similes and analogies, but the burlesque is mainly in the early cetological chapters; once Melville has created in the reader's mind a sufficient respect for the whale, he can afford to relax his humor. But he never entirely forgets it. Whereas in "Cetology" he roundly ridicules his own attempts at a scientific account of the whale, in such a late chapter as "Measurement of the

102, places great emphasis in his discussion of *Moby-Dick* on its relationship with native American humor.

²³ Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 431.

²⁴ Ronald Mason, *The Spirit Above the Dust: A Study of Herman Melville* (London, 1950), p. 112.

Whale's Skeleton" he takes the role of the pompous pedant and with heavy irony ridicules those who attempt to understand reality with the measuring rule:

The skeleton dimensions I shall now proceed to set down are copied verbatim from my right arm, where I had them tattooed; as in my wild wanderings at that period, there was no other secure way of preserving such valuable statistics. But as I was crowded for space, and wished the other parts of my body to remain a blank page for a poem I was then composing—at least, what untattooed parts might remain—I did not trouble myself with the odd inches; nor, indeed, should inches at all enter into a congenial admeasurement of the whale. (pp. 448-449)

The burlesque of the scientific method is entirely consistent with the theme of the book. For, if *Moby-Dick* is on the surface a quest for the white whale, it is symbolically and essentially a quest for a knowledge of the secrets of the universe. Ahab is unsuccessful in his effort to kill the whale and Melville is unsuccessful in grasping the deep truths he seeks for. The quest itself is all-important, and through it Melville reveals his own deep interest in solving the eternal problems. In *Moby-Dick* we find a variety of attitudes toward the relationship of God and man, extending from those of Father Mapple to those of the lunatic on the *Jereboam*; we find a variety of attempts toward attaining the deepest knowledge, most noticeably the efforts of Ahab, Ishmael, and Bulkington; we also find a variety of more subtle commentaries on the value of different ways of understanding. Moby Dick himself is symbolically and actually the prime figure in the cosmos; the whale, with its great size and power, its ambiguity that can be interpreted as malice or indifference, its malignity and beneficence, is the central force in the world and symbol of all the power of nonhuman nature. William Ellery Sedgwick writes that "Ahab's great heart is stretched to bursting under the ceaseless effort of his mind to lay hold of [the truth],"²⁵ and that "Ahab pursues the truth as the champion of man, leaving behind him all traditional conclusions, all common assumptions, all codes and creeds and articles of faith."²⁶ In terms of the novel, to "strike through the mask" (pp. 161-162) is to lift the veil of ambiguity that disguises the purpose, meaning, and value of life

²⁵ Sedgwick, *op. cit.*, 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

itself. Ishmael, less defiant but more contemplative than Ahab, seeks also to find in the sea and more directly in the white whale the ultimate meaning of things. His various meditations in such chapters as "The Mat-Maker," "The Monkey-Rope," and "The Try-Works" are milestones in his quest for understanding.

But the less dramatic chapters, in which Ahab is silent and Ishmael assumes the role of a third-person narrator, are also directly related to the theme of the quest for knowledge. The central symbolism of the novel, principally established in such non-narrative chapters as "The Lee Shore," "The Blanket," and "Brit," develops the essential distinction between land and sea and stresses the necessity of going to sea in order to achieve any kind of understanding of reality. Yvor Winters writes:

The relationship of man to the known and to the half known . . . is not a simple and static one; he cannot merely stay on land, or he will perish of imperception, but must venture on the sea, without losing his relationship to the land; we have, in brief, the relationship of principle to perception, or, in other words, the problem of judgment.²⁷

Bulkington, who rejects the safety of the lee shore, achieves his apotheosis: Bulkington may receive glimpses of "that mortally intolerable truth" (p. 105); he knows that "all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore" (p. 105). Winters states that Melville praises Bulkington and condemns Ahab because the former is a helmsman, one who ascertains his position in relation to the land, thus able to plunge into the deepest truths without losing his objectivity. Ahab, whose sin is one of monomaniac pride, totally lacks "perception trained in principle, in abstraction . . . able to find its way amid the chaos of the specific."²⁸ In the chapters in which Ahab does not appear, Melville obliquely condemns his false view, an oversubjectivism that distorts reality. In "The Mast-Head" Ishmael ridicules the subjectivism of transcendentalism: "lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity;

²⁷ Winters, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature . . ." (pp. 156-157). The youthful "Pantheist," who allows his dreams to give him a false picture of reality, mistakes the appearance of things for the truth of things. The masthead transcendentalist denies the existence of evil because from his shallow point of view he cannot see it. In the chapter following "The Mast-Head," Ahab addresses his crew and reveals that in his world view there is no room for good. Melville's own awareness of the insufficiency of private vision is made clear in "The Doubloon," in which Ahab, Starbuck, Stubb, Flask, the old Manxman, Queequeg, and Pip contemplate and analyze the symbolic meaning of the doubloon that Ahab has nailed to the mast. None of their interpretations correspond, for they are colored by the personalities of the observers. As if to emphasize the difficulty of private comprehension, Melville allows only the insane Pip to interpret the coin correctly.

In "The Try-Works" Melville illustrates that private vision is not only inadequate, but also extremely dangerous. When Ishmael allows his pride to create an illusory vision, his moral superiority to Ahab is threatened. Though it is difficult, even impossible, to know all, Melville says, we can perceive dim hints, as do Bulkington and Ishmael. But for there to be any wisdom at all, man must "Look not too long in the face of the fire . . ." (p. 422). Reality must not be seen in the light of subjective preconception, which creates illusion, but "in the natural sun. . . ; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp—all others but liars" (p. 422). The sun reveals the existence of both good and evil; man must form his judgment on the basis of things as they are.

If Melville indicates the dangers of subjectivism as a means to knowledge, he is even more scornful of empirical science, which he associates with the land, the known side of reality: the knowledge that science gives is only of the surface of things; the deep, inner nature of reality lies beyond its power. And it is certain that the main impression we receive of the scientific method is of its futility as a means of measuring the whale. Melville does not attack science for murdering to dissect the whale; rather he ridicules it for the futility of its attempt. Ishmael constantly laments his inability to apply his tools to the sperm whale. His attempt at understanding is

even more futile than Ahab's. Ishmael begins his massive undertaking with a mock apology: "But it is a ponderous task; no ordinary letter-sorter in the Post-office is equal to it. To grope down into the bottom of the sea after them; to have one's hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing. What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this leviathan (p. 131)! When the scientist goes to sea and invades the realm of the unknown, he finds his method pitifully insufficient. Ishmael laments the lack of evidence at hand: the various pictures of whales he has seen are all more-or-less "monstrous" (p. 261); when seen from a ship the whale is almost entirely under water; "his skeleton gives very little idea of his general shape" (p. 265); actually, "there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like" (p. 265).

As Melville reveals the inability of science to comprehend even the surface of the whale, he succeeds not only in establishing the superiority of the creature to man, but also in showing the insufficiencies of empirical knowledge. Science can give a knowledge quite adequate in its own field, but it is powerless in the most important respects. In the chapter called "The Prairie," the narrator, attempting to apply the skill of the physiognomist to the head of the whale, candidly admits that all of his efforts are ultimately in vain. "I try all things; I achieve what I can" (p. 343), he says, but as he begins his analysis he must abandon his scientific methods and terminology to eulogize the whale in poetic language. The whale is "sublime"; "you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature"; "his great genius is declared . . . in his pyramidal silence" (pp. 344-345). Finally, aware that his approach is nonscientific, he rejects his science: "Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable. . . . how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I put that brow before you. Read it if you can" (p. 345).

In Ahab's illusory views of reality, in the transcendentalist in the masthead, in the gathering around the doubloon, and in Ishmael at the tryworks, we see the danger of the unrestrained imagination that loses its grasp on objective reality; in the cetological chapters, the quasi-scientist Ishmael demonstrates the futility of his empirical

approach to reality. At one point in *Moby-Dick* Melville describes the method by which the head of the right whale is used to balance a sperm whale's head. He uses this physical circumstance to comment on the mutually inadequate ways of knowing:

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. (p. 326)

The philosophy of Locke would be that of Ishmael as cetologist; the philosophy of Kant would be that of Ishmael at the tryworks or Ahab on the quarterdeck. If both the reason and the understanding, as Melville interprets them, are inadequate means of knowledge, what, we may properly ask, does Melville accept? Clearly no Lockean-Kantian synthesis can be profitable; the whalehead illustration shows that such a combination puts one in a "poor plight." Actually, it seems that the wisdom of "The Whiteness of the Whale" is the most comprehensive and penetrating as well as the most objectively true. Melville's method in the chapter is like the cetologist's in that it makes full use of a wealth of evidence and that, unlike that of the transcendentalist or Ahab, it sees things in the clear light of day. But its techniques are not those of the scientist, but rather those of the poet, and the method is symbolism. Melville's symbolism, perhaps most masterfully handled in "The Whiteness of the Whale," but interwoven throughout the texture of the entire novel in the various elaborations on the meaning of the land and the sea, and in symbolic developments of such objects as Ishmael's ball of yarn and Ahab's harpoon, gives perhaps a vaguer and less logical knowledge than does science, but the truth that the symbol evokes is, at least in terms of the novel, both penetrative to and consistent with the essential truth of nature because the symbol and the thing symbolized are inseparable. Melville's symbolism is a truer knowledge than that of the transcendentalist or of Ishmael at the tryworks because it does not superimpose meaning on concrete reality, but draws out the truth latent in reality.

Melville's symbolism finds significant meaning in the appearance of things. Thus, the Spirit Spout, Fedallah, Queequeg's coffin, and the whale-boat line are concrete items whose symbolic meanings are organically developed from their apparent nature. But with the central symbolism of *Moby-Dick*, the inadequate security of the land and the hidden cannibalism of the sea, we are involved in the problem of appearance and reality. To the lad in the masthead and to Ishmael observing the "meadows" of brit, the sea is deceptively peaceful. When the *Pequod* enters the Pacific, shortly before it is to encounter Moby Dick, Ishmael is deceived by the serenity of the sea. In dealing with the problem of the true meaning of things as opposed to their illusory appearances, the two antipodal means of knowledge are insufficient. The transcendentalist will detect a false reality beneath the surface and the scientist will not attempt to penetrate the surface. It is one of the functions of the whaling chapters to indicate that an understanding of surfaces, especially the surface of the inscrutable whale, is a feeble knowledge, if not a positively wrong one. We are constantly reminded that the whole of the whale is greater than its parts, as each of its parts is greater than the science that attempts to know it. The cetologist finds it impossible to gain an adequate picture of even the appearance of the whale. Unlike the sea, the whale does not present a surface that disguises its essential nature; rather it presents an inscrutable surface that symbolizes its inscrutable nature. "Dissect him how I may, then, I go but skin deep; I know him not, and never will" (p. 376). The true meaning of the whale, as established symbolically in such a section as "The Whiteness of the Whale," is achieved when surface meaning is related to essential truth. The scientist's knowledge does not transcend the object studied and can record its conclusions only in abstractions. The scientist's thoroughness and literalness are therefore useless (in any but a practical sense), for science can create no meaning and achieve no truth larger than that with which it begins. Poetry, however, based on metaphor and symbol, relates the thing observed to other realities and thereby creates a meaning larger than that originally apparent in the object.

In his double role as scientist and poet, Ishmael-Melville seeks truth simultaneously from two antithetical points of view. But there is neither conflict nor incongruity, for, if the fact of the scientist

is meaningless in itself, it is an approach to all meaning for the poet.²⁹ The scientist must stop his investigations when he finds his equipment inadequate. The poet's method is sound, but complete success eludes him as well. He can begin to establish a network of relationships that relates all things and makes every fact significant, but the over-all pattern can be discerned but dimly, for all things can ultimately lead only to the center and therefore to the inscrutability of *Moby Dick*.³⁰

²⁹ Wordsworth's statement is significant: ". . . the Poet . . . will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science, . . . carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself" (*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart [London, 1876], II, 91).

³⁰ I wish to express my thanks to Professor Richard H. Fogle for his assistance in the preparation of this paper.