

ISHMAEL: NARRATOR AND CREATOR

by

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ABSTRACT

As the title implies, this thesis, following Bezanson and others, approaches Moby-Dick by way of the controlling consciousness of its narrator, Ishmael. And further, the thesis explores the implications of treating Ishmael as the 'creator' of the novel, both for the material he has added subsequent to the presumed events he is dealing with, and for the manipulation and magnification of those events which occurs in the retelling or re-creation of the story of Ahab and the White Whale.

The thesis makes the assumption that Ishmael's survival is fortuitous, being the last and most catastrophic of the accidents he encounters. His narrative is, therefore, retrospective--a point which is emphasized for its importance to an understanding that Ishmael's narrative is produced in the light of his knowledge of the ultimate catastrophe. Ishmael, because of his fortuitous survival, conceives very 'metaphysically' of his situation which, in the years following his rescue by the Rachel, leads him to ponder the meaning of the events in which he was involved and to consider the fundamental problems of human existence which were presented to him so forcibly during his voyage on the

Pequod. Ishmael's difficulty in even establishing the facts about many aspects of his story (let alone the meaning) is accompanied by a similar difficulty in arriving at any conclusions about the nature of human existence. The thesis maintains, therefore, that the story of Ahab and the White Whale becomes for Ishmael a paradigm (as it were) revealing all the inadequacies of human knowledge and understanding and illustrating the impossibility of penetrating through the inscrutable appearances of the external world to that 'certain significance' for which men persistently hanker.

The thesis is divided into four parts which are not designated as chapters partly because of their length and partly because of their internal divisions. The thesis attempts to follow the processes of Ishmael's narrative and creative efforts and it seemed appropriate to use as flexible a structure as possible for this purpose.

Part I is entitled 'Ishmael as Creator' and seeks to show that Ishmael is creative both in the sense of being the 'creator' of Moby-Dick through the elaboration and magnification of characters and events, and also in the sense of having an active and imaginative mind.

Part II, entitled 'What Ishmael's Language Reveals,' starts from the assumption that Ishmael's problems and

concerns will be revealed not only explicitly in his language but also implicitly by various stylistic mannerisms, and by what he cannot say as well as by what he does say.

Part III, entitled 'The Search for Some Certain Significance,' develops the concerns of Ishmael referred to in Part II and seeks to make evident the ontological and epistemological (to use shorthand) nature of the problems confronting him.

Part IV, 'Conclusions,' sums up Ishmael's final position (which is seen as basically existential) and links the discussion to Melville in order to complete the framework within which the thesis is constructed. The thesis recognizes that Melville encompasses everything in the novel, including the narrator. In effect, therefore, the approach taken by the thesis becomes a device to make possible an exploration of the novel as a self-contained, self-sustaining 'world' operating according to its own (hopefully) discoverable laws.

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And perhaps, after all, there is no secret. We incline to think that the Problem of the Universe is like the Freemason's mighty secret, so terrible to all children. It turns out, at last, to consist in a triangle, a mallet, and an apron,--nothing more! We incline to think that God cannot explain His own secrets, and that He would like a little information upon certain points Himself.

Herman Melville, Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne,
16? April? 1851

INTRODUCTION

If excuse is needed for adding a mite to the mountain of criticism which Moby-Dick has already provoked, it lies in this--that the sheer volume of work produced is in itself evidence of a novel so challenging and fascinating that new readers are continually tempted to have their say. Moby-Dick is one of those works--Hamlet is another--which seems to contain a provoking mystery, which if one could only penetrate to.... The principle implied in Pip's 'crazy-witty' statement about the doubloon--'I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look'--is one that may be applied to the book itself. But to read the 'hieroglyphics' of so complex and lavish a work as Moby-Dick is perhaps not much easier than to decipher the mystery of the Sperm Whale's brow. 'Read it if you can.'¹

In a curious way, the reader's problem is rather like that of Ishmael and Ahab. Just as they are plagued by the thought that there must be 'some certain significance' lurking behind the outward appearances of the external world, so the reader is nagged by the thought that the novel must have some underlying meaning waiting to be unlocked if he can only find the key. D. H. Lawrence said of Moby Dick: 'Of course he is a symbol. Of what?

I doubt if even Melville knew exactly. That's the best of it!² So perhaps it is a mistake to plunge headlong after some central 'Truth' in the book like a maddened whale, which, having its eyes at the side of its head, cannot see where it is going. I propose to work by indirection, first of all considering the narrator and his methods of telling his story. I also propose to examine closely the language that the narrator uses on the assumption that in so doing certain attitudes and habits of mind may be revealed that will offer a clue to some final conclusion about the book. Perhaps we shall find, too, that the troubling metaphysical problems with which the novel deals are to some extent problems with language.

Briefly, it is my thesis that Ishmael is not only the narrator of Moby-Dick but its 'creator' too. This is not the logical absurdity that it seems for, although there is an obvious sense in which Melville is the creator of the work, in so far as he has assigned to his narrator, Ishmael, the task of surrogate author, then we may with propriety refer to Ishmael as 'creator' too. Of course, this reasoning arises quite simply out of regarding 'author' and 'creator' as synonymous.³ However, I regard Ishmael as being the 'creator' of the book in another more special sense. For the purposes of examining and

and discussing the novel, it is quite reasonable to make the assumption that, as narrator, Ishmael is recounting certain events which 'really' happened to him--at least this is what he is purporting to do. The question then becomes, is Ishmael giving a faithful account of these (hypothetical) events or is he adding his own inventions and elaborations? It is my contention that the latter is the case and I propose to examine the question more fully in Parts I and II.

There is plenty of precedent, of course, for regarding Ishmael as the focus of the novel. Walter Bezanson, in his interesting and suggestive essay entitled "Moby-Dick: Work of Art," says: 'This story, this fiction, is not so much about Ahab or the White Whale as it is about Ishmael, and I propose that it is he who is the real center of meaning and the defining force of the novel.'⁴ I accept this proposition and indeed it forms one of the assumptions on which this thesis is founded and which hopefully it will illustrate. Bezanson goes on to elaborate his assertion when he says:

The point becomes clearer when one realizes that in Moby-Dick there are two Ishmael's, not one. The first Ishmael is the enfolding sensibility of the novel, the hand that writes the tale, the imagination through which all matters of the book pass. He is the narrator. But who then is the other Ishmael? The second Ishmael is not the narrator, not the informing presence, but is the young man of whom, among others, narrator Ishmael tells us in his story.⁵

but he guards against too pat a distinction between 'narrator Ishmael' and 'forecastle Ishmael' by saying that although 'the function of the two Ishmael's is clear ...it would be a mistake to separate them too far in temperament.'⁶ I think Bezanson's distinction is useful because it clarifies our view of the narrator and also emphasizes the fact that the narrative is retrospective, which has certain consequences as I propose later to show.

More recently, in Melville's Thematics of Form, published in 1968, Edgar A. Dryden has taken up the investigation of Melville's narrators. Dryden says:

For the Melvilleian narrator memory is an imaginative act which makes the present a moment of creative understanding of a past adventure that was experienced initially as an unintelligible and frightening chaos of sensations. At time of writing--often years after the original experience--the mature writer fictionalizes his earlier experience in an attempt to define its truth or meaning to himself and to his reader. It is the creative remembering in the present which gives meaning to the past.⁷

In this passage Dryden expresses very well the view on which I had decided to operate before reading his book and I quote him for emphasis rather than to acknowledge a prior indebtedness. However, I question his assertion that the 'past adventure' was 'experienced

initially as an unintelligible and frightening chaos of sensations.' In fact it is impossible to state definitely what was 'actually' the case during the narrator's experiencing of the events because the events themselves cannot be separated from the narrator's highly subjective account of them. As Dryden himself says, 'the mature writer fictionalizes.' But again the retrospective nature of the narrative is emphasized as well as the creative function of the narrator and all this is most relevant to my discussion of Ishmael.

Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., in Ishmael's White World, also makes the narrator of Moby-Dick the centre of his attention. In the Introduction to his book Brodtkorb announces his intentions thus:

The first step in interpreting such a book [Moby-Dick] would seem to be to fix the dimensions of its phenomena. This I shall try to do by means of a descriptive analysis of the Ishmaeleian consciousness; a consciousness which we, as readers, cannot escape.⁸

I, too, propose to explore Ishmael's consciousness, though often in different directions from Brodtkorb, for I shall be concerned to show how it is manifested in Ishmael's artistic and creative endeavours.

Another work which it is appropriate for me to acknowledge here is James Guetti's The Limits of Metaphor. Guetti also assumes that it is through Ishmael that

Moby-Dick may most profitably be approached. In the chapter entitled "The Languages of Moby-Dick," he discusses, as the title indicates, the various kinds of languages used by the narrator.⁹ Although, as later discussion will reveal, I do not agree with all of Guetti's conclusions, I found his method of approach congenial and a confirmation of my own. I hope, therefore, that through a close examination of Ishmael's use of language, I can provide some illuminating readings of the text, which in itself will offer at least a partial justification for the method.

Because the examination of the language in particular requires the setting up of a number of categories to be dealt with at varying lengths, I could not see the thesis in terms of an appropriate number of 'chapters.' Accordingly, I have taken a statement of Ishmael's as my guide--'There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method.' Following this Introduction, the thesis is divided into four parts, which lack the internal coherence of chapters, but within which are clustered related topics under separate headings. Adhering to the organic principle, I trust that the thesis will yield its meaning through the juxtaposition of its constituent elements and its development from Part to Part.

However, before proceeding to this plan, I wish to make some remarks about the relationship between Melville and his narrator. Investigating Ishmael and talking about his methods of narration and regarding him as the creator of Moby-Dick can be of great critical value for one is able to approach the book entirely upon its own terms treating it as a unified, fully developed world in itself, functioning according to (hopefully) discoverable laws. But there is a suppressed assumption in all this, which is that Melville is a great writer who is fully capable of bringing such a world into being complete with narrator. One can then reject as misguided and unsophisticated such views as Marcus Cunliffe's in the Penguin, The Literature of the United States, where these comments are to be found:

It is as though Melville finds Ishmael a nuisance. For twenty-eight chapters he relates the story. Then for three chapters (beginning with 'Enter Ahab; to Him, Stubb') it is clearly not Ishmael's story--he cannot be aware of the soliloquies of others--and though the novel reverts to Ishmael's narration, it frequently dispenses with him. Melville, it would appear, is undecided who is--so to speak--in charge of the book, or what kind of book it is to be.¹⁰

Clearly Cunliffe is not aware of Ishmael's creative role, which accounts for the soliloquies, nor does he detect Ishmael's consciousness and sensibility throughout

the entire book and not least in those scenes where Ishmael as a character is not present. What Cunliffe regards as defects can be referred back to the narrator's method and thus assimilated into the novel. As Brodtkorb usefully says:

There is, first of all, no necessity to blame Melville for the book's inconsistencies, because most of them are storyteller's mistakes, and Ishmael is pervasively characterized as a storyteller; the mistakes, therefore, with only minimal good will on our part, might be understood as his, and their meaning explored in that context.¹¹

Nevertheless, it would be absurd to excuse any or all defects a book might have simply because it possesses a first-person narrator. If a book is tedious, ill-written and trivial it makes nonsense to say 'well, it's appropriate to the kind of person the narrator is.' Finally the author must accept responsibility. So, as I say, underlying the discussion is the assumption that Melville knows what he is about, and that if, for example, Ishmael is sometimes tiresomely longwinded, or if he recounts something that logically he could not know, we can, nevertheless, seek a narrative justification for these apparent defects.

A qualifying point that needs to be made is that although examination of the narrator in the way I have suggested is a valuable organizing principle for the

purposes of studying and understanding Moby-Dick, it also has some limitations as a method. The reader who approaches the book in this way is restricted to the particular world which the narrator inhabits, although he knows that the author has created other worlds and other narrators (still, 'restricted' is perhaps the wrong word to use in the case of Moby-Dick). The reader is aware that the author encompasses the narrator and indeed everything in the book but, as it were, suspends his knowledge because of the usefulness of the method. However, anything emerging from this thesis which indicates the richness, complexity, and fascination of Moby-Dick should be taken, if only indirectly, as rightfully a tribute to Melville.

In considering this relationship of author to narrator, Bezanson asked: 'But this Ishmael is only Melville under another name, is he not?'¹² It is tempting to answer "yes", especially when one detects similarities between Ishmael's jocular, ironic tone, which is so evident in Moby-Dick, and the tone of some of Melville's letters. Moreover, Melville has assigned to Ishmael his own time and date of writing and critics are fond of pointing out autobiographical tidbits and noting comments (such as those referring to money) which seem surely to be Melville's own. However, I

agree with Bezanson when he says:

My suggestion is that we resist any one-to-one equation of Melville and Ishmael. Even the "Melville-Ishmael" phrase, which one encounters in critical discussions, though presumably granting a distinction between autobiography and fiction, would seem to be only a more insistent confusion of the point at stake unless the phrase is defined to mean either Melville or Ishmael, not both.¹³

Autobiographical details have no special significance as autobiography and may be ignored unless they violate Ishmael's character and create, as it were, a secondary narrator. Again Brodtkorb deals helpfully with the matter when he claims that,

...if we assert that at any point Melville rather than Ishmael is speaking, we are positing a second "fictional" narrator. For the I of any writing, even autobiography, is necessarily fictional, in the sense that it is a limited, selective abstraction from the total self of reality. We are positing a second fictional narrator called "Melville" whom we do not need unless, in good faith, we have tried and failed to account for the apparently Melvillean voice in terms of "Ishmael."¹⁴

Furthermore, if one is, indeed, looking for Melville in Moby-Dick, then doubtless one can find him in Ahab as well as Ishmael but this is an undertaking which requires tact and care even in biographical, let alone, critical studies. As Bezanson also says, amplifying

a point touched on by Brodtkorb above: '...in the process of composition, even when the artist knowingly begins with his own experience, there are crucial interventions between the act that was experience and the re-enactment that is art--intrusions of time, of intention, and especially of form, to name only a few.'¹⁵

However, I think it is appropriate to comment on the usefulness of the narrator to Melville, for through Ishmael he can recount the saga of the whale and explore problems of meaning and truth without seeming to commit himself to a single point of view. Third-person narration of Moby-Dick would require a greater degree of apparent certitude by the author. On the other hand, a first-person narrator is indispensable for the expression of scepticism and doubt, especially if the author is concerned to present a process, an activity of mind, as I think Melville is. So perhaps Ishmael is Melville's probe. He is set in motion and given coherence through pressure of the author's mind but in the very process of creation acquires his own independence. It is then to an examination of this independent, self-sustaining narrator, within the context of the world that he creates and inhabits, that we must now turn.

PART I
ISHMAEL AS CREATOR

Every reader of Moby-Dick can and will want to enlarge and subtilize the multiple attributes of Ishmael.

Walter E. Bezanson

The Retrospective View

The first sentence of Moby-Dick has come in for some critical attention--Charles Olson took it for the title of his study of Melville¹⁶ and Paul Brodtkorb has pointed out that the narrator does not say his name is Ishmael but merely tells the reader to call him that.¹⁷ However, the second sentence is worth some consideration too. Apart from drawing attention to Ishmael's rootlessness and lack of money, it immediately emphasizes the retrospective character of the narrative--'Some years ago,' says Ishmael. It is interesting that not only does Ishmael apparently wish to conceal his 'real' name but he also does not wish to locate the exact time in the past when the events he is about to narrate took place. He adds, 'never mind how long precisely.' By these acts of concealment Ishmael is preserving a certain freedom from his own past history (about which he tells us little) and from the demands of strict chronology. By refusing to set a precise time for the events Ishmael provides himself with some latitude to elaborate, embroider and invent--in a word to create.

Still, it should be noted that from internal evidence some time limits can be set for the events.

In 'The Fountain' chapter Ishmael records the time of writing down to the second--'fifteen and a quarter minutes past one o'clock p.m. of this sixteenth day of December, A. D. 1850.'¹⁸ Earlier, in the chapter entitled 'The Chapel,' he records the dates he has seen on some tombstones and although he warns the reader that he does 'not pretend to quote,' the latest date given, December 31st, 1839, at least tentatively establishes a time limit for us unless we assume that he deliberately set the dates forward. If Ishmael is looking back from December 1850 to events which occurred after December 1839, then his comment 'Some years ago' is an appropriate one, for the phrase would not be as suitable to events that had taken place in the far distant past.

Again, it is interesting that Ishmael should not be reluctant to give a precise date to the time of writing when he is generally vague about the passage of time so far as the recording of events is concerned. We know that the voyage began at Christmas and that Ahab intended to be on the Line for the whaling season the following Christmas so the events all fall within a twelve-month period. However, within this time scale Ishmael tends to make remarks like 'Some days elapsed' (p. 111) or 'Days, weeks passed' (p. 199). Of course,

as Ishmael tells us, a strict schedule was not important to a whaling ship which would cruise back and forth quite slowly over the hunting grounds. Still, Ishmael's concealment concerning the time of events serves to emphasize the imaginative nature of the narrative he is creating. He requires a freedom that a too scrupulously documentary approach would deny him.

The retrospective view is therefore inextricably bound up with Ishmael's role as creator and indeed is perhaps the main determining characteristic of the narrative. Ishmael is looking back at a completed set of events and is attempting to make sense of them and to give meaning to them. He says that he cannot tell why 'those stage managers, the Fates' put him down for 'this shabby part of a whaling voyage' but he goes on, 'though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did,...' (p. 16, my underlining). It is also significant that Ishmael sees himself as having played a role (also implied in his assumption of the name Ishmael), a role which he will with hindsight create for the reader.

His concern with the dramatic is very apparent, not only in this concept of role playing, but also in the dramatic devices and rhetoric that he uses.

Ishmael does not survive the final catastrophe which overwhelms the Pequod because of any special virtue that he acquires during the voyage. His survival is fortuitous but having occurred becomes the vital factor in the learning and experiencing process that helps to shape the retrospective narrative. This process was no doubt begun in childhood at the untender hands of his stepmother (where, in a sense, he first became the orphan the Rachel was later to find) and it continues through all the vicissitudes of the voyage. There is great emphasis in the narrative on the accidents common to the whaling industry, and on the response of the characters to them--Ahab received an intolerable injury from Moby Dick, Pip goes mad after being spilled out of a boat and temporarily abandoned, Queequeg twice rescues men from drowning, Starbuck's carefulness is frequently alluded to--and Ishmael's own attitudes are shaped by these confrontations with human mortality. The evidence is to be found first of all in the great number of accidents Ishmael has chosen to record, but also more directly in such episodes as the stranding of his boat

overnight, which prompts him to talk humorously about making his will. Ishmael's jocularly in this scene is a means of learning to cope with disaster and danger. Out of Ishmael's responses to the vicissitudes of his life, and particularly to the dangers on board the Pequod, and most particularly to his survival after the sinking of the ship, come the attitudes and the characteristic tone of the narrator, which find retrospective expression in the novel. Ishmael does not survive because of what he has learned, he learns because of what he has survived.

Ishmael's Magnification of Theme

At times, as he tells us, Ishmael had a very metaphysical appreciation of his situation, and in looking back to the events in which he participated he wishes to assign some powerful meaning to them. In order to do so he has to engage in a little 'stage-managing' himself. There are a number of direct comments in the book (as well as other indirect evidence) touching on Ishmael's magnification of his material. In 'The Fossil Whale' chapter, Ishmael jocularly discusses his

approach:

One often hears of writers that rise and swell with their subject, though it may seem but an ordinary one. How, then, with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensive-ness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk.

(p. 379)

The rhetorical flights of this passage, particularly the sentence beginning 'For in the mere act...', humorously illustrate the point that Ishmael is trying to make. In this particular case, of course, Ishmael's theme is the whale and he takes his cue from 'Leviathan's' immense size. As he says, 'From his mighty bulk the whale affords a most congenial theme whereon to enlarge, amplify, and generally expatiate' (p. 378). And expatiate Ishmael certainly does, adducing all kinds of cetological lore, so that it seems as if he has overlooked no reference, however small, which will help to amplify his mighty theme.

However, it is not solely the whale theme that Ishmael seeks to magnify but the whale himself, as well. Ian McTaggart Cowan, in The Mammals of British Columbia, tells us that male sperm whales are 'rarely longer than 60 feet' in length while the females are 'rarely longer than 38 feet.'¹⁹ Ishmael, on the other hand, has them growing up to eighty and ninety feet long. In the chapter 'Measurement of the Whale's Skeleton' he refers to 'a Sperm Whale of the largest magnitude' (not that his 'chirography' really does expand into 'placard capitals'!) as being 'between eighty-five and ninety feet in length ' and further claims that, 'In length, the Sperm Whale's skeleton at Tranque measured seventy-two feet; so that when fully invested and extended in life, he must have been ninety feet long' (p. 377). In 'Cistern and Bucket' Ishmael sets down a length of 'eighty feet for a good sized whale' and, significantly, also notes that the head of a sperm whale 'embraces one third of the whole length of the creature' (p. 287).

Well, one may say, perhaps sperm whales grew bigger in the nineteenth century, and perhaps being so ruthlessly hunted in the twentieth they have little opportunity to attain their full length. There doesn't seem to be any evidence to support this view; but more

importantly for our purposes, Ishmael's figures can be shown to be suspect by a close examination of his own evidence. His claim that the head of a sperm whale comprises one third of its total length is accurate and is confirmed by contemporary authorities.²⁰ Accordingly, when Ishmael says of the skeleton at Tranque that its 'skull and jaw comprised some twenty feet' (p. 377), by simple arithmetic we can see, that even allowing for some extension in life, the whale would have been closer to the sixty feet claimed by McTaggart Cowan for sperm whales than the ninety feet claimed by Ishmael in this particular instance.

Throughout Moby-Dick Ishmael displays a preoccupation with size, as if he expects his theme to become more weighty and bulky²¹ by being surrounded with objects of great magnitude. A clue to his particular intention in managing the facts about the length of the sperm whale can be found in the 'Cetology' chapter where he claims that the sperm whale 'is, without doubt the largest inhabitant of the globe' (p. 120). In fact, the sperm whale is about the same size as the Greenland or right whale, which Ishmael rather despises, and smaller than the fin-back, which Ishmael says is no bigger than the right whale. Because of its speed the blue whale was not hunted until powered whale boats

were developed, so perhaps Ishmael can be forgiven for not knowing that it, in fact, is the largest inhabitant of the globe. However, as Scoresby was one of his sources, he should certainly have known more about the razor-back which Scoresby claims grows to one hundred feet in length. Four pages are devoted by Scoresby to the razor-back, which he maintains 'is the largest animal of the whale tribe; and, probably, the most powerful and bulky of created beings.'²² Ishmael, then, is being more than disingenuous when he says of the razor-back: 'Let him go. I know little more of him, nor does anybody else' (p. 123).²³ It seems that Ishmael is trying to conceal, or at least blur, the fact that several species of whalebone or baleen whales, like the fin-back and the razor-back which he regards as being inferior to the sperm whale (rightly in some respects), are rather inconveniently larger in size, and that even the right whale (also a baleen whale) is about as big. Unfortunately Ishmael's misrepresentations lack consistency. For example, it is evident that he had to know of the extreme size of some whalebone whales from an examination of his own 'Extracts' where he quotes Sibbald's Fife and Kinross: 'Several whales have come in upon this coast (Fife). Anno 1652, one eighty feet in length of the whale-bone kind came

in,...' (p. 5). As in so many other cases, Ishmael gives his own game away. Because the sperm whale constitutes part of his great theme he wishes to make it pre-eminent among living creatures, but even while he misrepresents he simultaneously alerts the reader to what he is doing. In this way the self-consciously created and subjective nature of the narrative is again emphasized. As we shall see again later, Ishmael is often disrespectful towards mere facts--he is seeking not so much the truth of fact but truth of impression and feeling. He feels that the sperm whale ought to be the largest living creature so he strives to make it so, but the inconsistencies indicate the lack of real conviction with which he does so, for although subjective truths may to him be the most important kind he knows that they are nevertheless suspect, partial, incomplete, or distorted.

However, Ishmael also has other important themes to amplify--most significantly the whole account of Ahab and his desperate metaphysical struggle with the malignant forces of the universe that he believes embodied in Moby Dick. In another of those frequent and usually revealing references to his narrative method, Ishmael reveals Ahab in a new light when he

remarks:

But Ahab, my Captain, still moves before me in all his Nantucket grimness and shagginess; and in this episode touching Emperors and Kings, I must not conceal that I have only to do with a poor old whale-hunter like him; and, therefore, all outward majestic trappings and housings are denied me. (p. 130)

Ishmael is being disingenuous, of course, for he borrows 'majestical trappings,' rhetorically at least, for Ahab when he wishes to build up the image of his 'poor old whale-hunter.' Only sixteen pages prior to the passage just quoted Ishmael refers to Ahab in very different terms:

In old Norse, the thrones of the sea-loving Danish kings were fabricated, saith tradition, of the tusks of the narwhale. How could one look at Ahab then, seated on that tripod of bones [his ivory stool], without bethinking him of the royalty it symbolized? For a Khan of the plank, and a king of the sea, and a great lord of Leviathans was Ahab. (p.114)

Of course, the association of Ahab with the trappings of ancient kings is made in Ishmael's mind--he 'bethinks' him of that royalty. There is a great deal more of this rhetorical building up of Ahab and I propose to examine the question in some detail in Part II. For the moment all I wish to emphasize is, again, Ishmael's creative

activity--when he refers to Ahab as 'my Captain' he is being accurate in more senses than one. The imaginative nature of Ishmael's creation is indicated in some further words which are attached to those lines above quoted from p. 130: 'Oh, Ahab! what shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air!' Notice that Ishmael says 'what shall be grand'--not what was or what is. He is making a promise to the reader (rather than to Ahab) about the creative effort he will undertake. Ahab's grandeur is not given, Ishmael must look for it in the skies, in the deep and in the 'unbodied air,' that is, in his imagination, and the implication is that the reality of Ahab was somehow otherwise.

However, if Ahab is to be a 'Khan of the plank, and a king of the sea' he needs a suitable setting and a cast of supporting characters and these too must be built up in the same way. And so we find that again Ishmael discusses his creative task openly with the reader. The 'Specksynder' chapter in which Ishmael makes reference to Ahab as a 'poor old whale-hunter' connects back to the two 'Knights and Squires' chapters where Ishmael discusses the Pequod's officers ('The Specksynder' resumes with these words, 'Concerning

the officers of the whale-craft...'). In the first of the 'Knights and Squires' chapters these lines occur, and again they refer to method:

If, then to meanest mariners, and renegades
and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe
high qualities, though dark; weave round
them tragic graces; if even the most mourn-
ful, perchance the most abased, among them
all, shall at times lift himself to the
exalted mounts; if I shall touch that work-
man's arm with some ethereal light; if I
shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous
set of sun; then against all mortal critics
bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of
Equality,... (pp. 104-5)

Again the implication is that the reality Ishmael experienced was something other and distinctly less 'grand' than the creative, fictionalized account he later gives of it. Thus, in two connected chapters, Ishmael briefly draws back the veil and discourses on his method, using somewhat similar romantic imagery in both cases--'skies,' 'unbodied air,' 'ethereal light,' and 'rainbow'--in order to give expression to his creative and imaginative endeavours. The assumption left for the reader to make is that Ishmael is working to 'exalt' his commonplace materials. At this point it is tempting to ask then what were Ahab and the crew 'really' like? --were they really 'meanest mariners'?-- and without too much difficulty one could start asking absurd questions of the 'how many children had Lady Macbeth?' kind. I confess that I investigated the

possibility of establishing some conjectural 'facts' about events and characters on which Ishmael 'must have' based his later account, but soon gave up the attempt. It might seem safe to assert that Ahab must have been a remarkable and impressive man, a 'natural genius' (as Ishmael called him) at the very least and one whom it might very well have been appropriate to magnify into tragic dimensions. Consider the verdict of so many other characters besides Ishmael and consider, too, Ahab's own demonic actions, forging his harpoon in blood and defying the elements themselves. And yet I don't think it is necessary or productive to follow up this line of investigation. It is impossible at any given moment to isolate some hypothetical 'real' events and 'actual' characters from Ishmael's presentation of them, especially bearing in mind that Ishmael controls all the material in the book and there is often good reason to question his truthfulness and be suspicious of the language he uses. What is important is to realize that Ishmael simultaneously presents contrary views of characters and events, with the clear indication that one view is magnified or inflated for purposes of his own, while the reality is somewhat more commonplace, though it is impossible to assert in just what precise respect. Ahab is probably called crazy nearly as often

as he is called (or implied as being) great. Yet to say that Ahab is 'really' a grim but crazy old Nantucket sea-captain is to be absurdly reductionist and denies the very real power with which Ishmael presents him. The point to focus on is not the extent to which Ahab is really otherwise than he is presented, but the fact that he is a creation of the narrator. The meaning of the book will not be revealed by looking for some other supposed nature for Ahab but at the motives of the narrator in so building up his demonic character. I have already suggested that one of Ishmael's motives was, having continually confronted danger and imminent death, to treat the metaphysical questions that forcibly presented themselves to him in these circumstances in a suitably lofty and powerful manner. I think he had other reasons connected with this first one, but discussion of them properly belongs to Part III.

There has been some ambiguity in the use I have been making of the word 'creative' in regard to Ishmael. Partly it has been intended to signify that Ishmael is a 'creator,' but it is also appropriate to describe his active, enquiring, imaginative and productive mind. In the next three sections I wish to consider these characteristic attributes more closely.

Ishmael's Enquiring Mind

Ishmael's curiosity, his intense spirit of enquiry and thirst to know, are among his most persistent and important habits of mind. Indeed one could say that without them there could be no book for much of it, in fact, is a record of Ishmael's wrestlings with the obscure, the mysterious and the undecipherable. I use the word 'wrestling' with deliberation for Ishmael is no passive observer or detached recorder of men, objects and events--he is always intensely involved with what he contemplates.

The entire book is, of course, the best evidence one could adduce to illustrate the point being made but some few fragments must suffice. Ishmael's curiosity is established early on as he makes his way among strange places and faces in New Bedford and Nantucket. Here we need suspect no discrepancy between what the character once was and what the narrator is. The most significant element of continuity between the young Ishmael and the later narrator is surely this same curiosity. When Ishmael entered the Spouter-Inn, the first thing he noted was an old oil painting so thoroughly begrimed and defaced that it was almost undecipherable. Ishmael's

efforts to make sense of the picture constitute a model of his method of enquiry. 'It was,' he says, 'only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful enquiry of the neighbours, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose, (p. 20). Before arriving at any conclusion about the picture Ishmael has to engage in 'much and earnest contemplation, and oft repeated ponderings' which lead to the formulation of his 'final theory.' Here we discover Ishmael using his eyes--he is always wanting to see--but observation is never enough and must always be accompanied by contemplation, an activity of mind, before some conclusion can be reached. And it is significant that Ishmael can only form a theory about what the picture illustrates, although one might expect an evidently representational painting above all things to yield to simple visual examination. But no, in his interpretation Ishmael must take into account 'the aggregated opinions of many aged persons'--in other words to arrive at understanding he engages not only in observation and contemplation but also research.

way of knowing
process

Later on in the 'Spouter-Inn' chapter there is a long episode devoted to Ishmael's surreptitious observation of his strange roommate who, of course, turns out to be the amiable Queequeg. However, before

that "knows"

the introductions are made, Ishmael finds himself both fascinated and afraid of the strange harpooner:

I am no coward, but what to make of this head-peddling purple rascal altogether passed my comprehension. Ignorance is the parent of fear, and being completely non-plussed and confounded about the stranger, I confess I was now as much afraid of him as if it was the devil himself who had thus broken into my room at the dead of night. In fact, I was so afraid of him that I was not game enough just then to address him, and demand a satisfactory answer concerning what seemed inexplicable in him. (p. 29)

Ignorance produces fear and fear prevents the investigation and understanding that will dispel fear--this is Ishmael's dilemma and it is one that he must continually overcome. At the end of 'Loomings' he says, '--I am quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it--would they let me--since it is well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in.' The reference to lodging makes it very appropriate to consider this passage in conjunction with the one previously quoted. Although 'the place one lodges in' refers metaphorically to the whole world and not specifically to the Spouter-Inn, yet the latter is part of the world too. If Ishmael is to be 'social' with horrors, be it a 'head-peddling purple rascal' at dead of night or a white whale in

which he can see 'naught...but the deadliest ill'; if he is to overcome fear and bear up in the face of imminent danger; if he is to come to terms with the fundamental problems of human existence, then he must continually endeavour to know and to understand. In Moby-Dick Ishmael begins with simple mysteries like the picture and Queequeg's identity but he soon proceeds to more profound ones. After signing the papers and becoming a member of the Pequod's crew Ishmael decides that he wants to see Captain Ahab on the grounds that when taking ship 'it is always as well to have a look at [the Captain] before irrevocably committing yourself into his hands' (p. 76). But he is disappointed, for Ahab keeps close inside his house, and so Ishmael leaves the ship experiencing a mixture of emotions, some of which he can't exactly describe, together with, as he says, 'impatience at what seemed like mystery in him, so imperfectly as he was known to me then.' As events move forward so the mysteries deepen and enlarge until the central mystery--the nature of the universe and man's place in it--informs the whole book. Critics have complained that Ishmael as a character disappears leaving the story to some other narrator. However, Ishmael's later method of enquiry is essentially the same as that of Ishmael the character and establishes

an obvious link between them. Ishmael does not disappear from the narrative, he writes himself more deeply into it so that the more commonplace problems which the character confronts within the context of the novel are superceded by the problems which the narrator still faces and which the novel itself is an attempt to come to grips with. However, I propose to examine the narrator's later methods of enquiry separately under the next heading.

Ishmael's Researches

Although it is correct to emphasize the continuity of outlook and of methods of enquiry between character and narrator some significant differences in the state of their knowledge and experience must also be noted. When Ishmael signs on to sail with the Pequod he has had no previous experience of whaling and is most ignorant about it. His naivete is revealed by the practical joke that the landlord of the Spouter-Inn plays on him in persuading him to share Queequeg's room without explanation of who his bed-companion is to be. The fact that the landlord regards him as a suitable butt for his joke is in itself significant. Ishmael insists to the landlord, 'I'm not green,' although after receiving the landlord's explanation

about Queequeg he finally says naively: 'This account cleared up the otherwise unaccountable mystery, and showed that the landlord, after all, had no idea of fooling me' (p. 26). He is amazed when Queequeg uses his harpoon for a razor²⁴ but adds: 'Afterwards I wondered less at this operation when I came to know of what fine steel the head of a harpoon is made' (p. 35). Later Peleg is able to make fun of Ishmael's expressed desire to go whaling in order to see the world by instructing him to look out to sea, that being the portion of the world that whalers chiefly see while cruising about the globe. So Ishmael indeed has need of Queequeg as friend and companion for as he frankly confesses, 'besides the affection I now felt for Queequeg, he was an experienced harpooner, and as such, could not fail to be of great usefulness to one, who, like me, was wholly ignorant of the mysteries of whaling' (pp. 57-8).

Nevertheless, shortly after the point in the narrative where the Pequod plunges 'like fate into the lone Atlantic' ('Merry Christmas,' p. 97) Ishmael, although still a novice according to the chronology of events, turns advocate and discourses learnedly on whaling.

He says at the beginning of 'The Advocate':

As Queequeg and I are now fairly embarked in this business of whaling; and as this business of whaling has somehow come to be regarded among landsmen as a rather unpoetical and disreputable pursuit; therefore, I am all anxiety to convince ye, ye landsmen, of the injustice hereby done to us hunters of whales.

(p. 98)

In this passage we are involved once again with the retrospective narration. Ishmael's 'now' refers to a point in the narration and not to the time of the events. The narrator's retrospective view of his 'green' and inexperienced self is accompanied by the fruits of the research and investigation which he has done in the intervening years between the sinking of the Pequod and his time of writing.

Edgar Dryden in discussing Ishmael's researches, notes that 'his investigations...from the beginning, are literary rather than scientific.'²⁵ In 'The Decanter' Ishmael refers to his 'numerous fish-documents' and adds: 'Nor have I been at all sparing of historical whale research, when it has seemed needed' (p. 371). Indeed he claims to have swum through libraries. 'Etymology' and 'Extracts' which preface the text are a kind of model of Ishmael's research technique. In the former he sets out all the ways he knows of

naming the whale (trying to name it into being, so to speak) and in the latter he seeks to provide, as he says, 'a glancing bird's eye view of what has been promiscuously said, thought, fancied, and sung of Leviathan, by many nations and generations, including our own' (p. 2). In other words he amasses information and comment on the whale ('promiscuously' is his word) in the hope that out of a welter of material the figure of the whale itself will emerge in comprehensible fashion. Ishmael projects onto the 'poor devil' of a 'sub-sub-librarian' his own methods of investigation. Perhaps this is another of Ishmael's roles for he too has 'gone through the long Vaticans and street-stalls of the earth, picking up whatever random allusions to whales he could anyways find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane' (p. 2). In fact, Ishmael ransacks his whale sources in search of some clue that will unlock the mystery of the undecipherable Leviathan. The task is a hopeless one for mere human knowledge is hard put to explain the mysteries of the visible, natural world, of which whales are the mightiest symbols, and is quite inadequate to explain the mysteries of the invisible, spiritual world. Ishmael is immensely concerned about the validity of the statements he makes and the sources he refers to, to the extent of undermining the reader's confidence in

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what he says. In his introduction to the 'Extracts,' Ishmael actually warns the reader against accepting too readily the whale research he sets before us: 'Therefore you must not, in every case at least, take the higgledy-piggledy whale statements, however authentic, in these extracts, for veritable gospel cetology' (p. 2).

The warning has some point, especially as at least one of the whale statements has been tampered with. A quotation from Scoresby alleges that 'Sometimes the whale shakes its tremendous tail in the air, which, cracking like a whip, resounds to the distance of three or four miles' (p. 8). Actually Scoresby wrote 'two or three miles'²⁶ and not three or four. I take this to be another example of Ishmael's desire to magnify the theme of the whale. What it also indicates is that the reader must treat Ishmael's researches with some caution and even scepticism. Just as in his presentation of Ahab and the crew Ishmael simultaneously suggests that the reality was somehow otherwise, so in the presentation of his researches about whaling he also simultaneously suggests that the reality is unapproachable and undiscoverable. However, I wish to reserve further discussion of this point until later. Here I simply want to draw attention to the fact that, by my count,

thirty-four chapters of Moby-Dick are devoted by Ishmael to the superadding of facts, information, research, historical and literary material and so on, besides all the similar material added to a greater or lesser extent to the other chapters.²⁷ This material is a product of Ishmael's own intellectual activity, much of it subsequent to the voyage of the Pequod and therefore an addition to the narrative suggested by the events themselves. Ishmael is as much a 'creator' in this as in the elaboration of the events and characters previously discussed.

Ishmael's Imaginative Sensibility

In the Spouter-Inn, apart from the painting already referred to, Ishmael discovered also a 'heathenish array of monstrous clubs and spears' (p. 21). His response to one of these weapons, as it is recorded, reveals the impressionable and suggestible nature of Ishmael's mind: 'You shuddered as you gazed, and wondered what monstrous cannibal and savage could ever have gone a death-harvesting with such a hacking, horrifying implement.' This is but an early example of a persistent trait exhibited both by the young Ishmael in the narrative and the later Ishmael responsible for

the narrative. Ahab, in particular, had a profound effect on the young Ishmael: '...what had been revealed to me of Captain Ahab, filled me with a certain wild vagueness of painfulness concerning him' (p. 77).

So 'powerfully' did the 'whole grim aspect of Ahab' affect him that, when taking the oath to hunt down Moby Dick, Ishmael says:

...and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. (p. 155)

The passionate nature of Ishmael's response to Ahab is measured by his use of the word 'wild' twice in the passages quoted above. Ishmael possesses that Romantic faculty referred to by M. H. Abrams in his discussion of Shelley's idea of a 'sympathetic imagination by which man puts himself "in the place of another and of many others."²⁸ Inevitably any discussion of Ishmael's imagination will recall the Romantic theory made current in the first half of the nineteenth century by Shelley among others but particularly by Coleridge, of course. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to make any detailed analysis of how these theories are reflected in Moby-Dick. However, in 'The Whiteness of the Whale' chapter, Ishmael himself makes reference

to the imagination so perhaps some few words on the subject are in order. In this chapter, character and narrator are again directly linked. Ishmael records that 'It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me' (p. 163), and then, as narrator, goes on to try to indicate the source of the horror of whiteness on impressionable minds, although he regards the whole question as fundamentally beyond analysis. Moreover, Ishmael makes clear the highly subjective nature of the whole problem, for individuals respond to the sense impressions of the world according to their own sensibilities. Imagination is necessary for one individual to be in sympathetic accord with another's response. As Ishmael says, '...in a matter like this [the problem of whiteness], subtlety appeals to subtlety, and without imagination no man can follow another into these halls' (p. 167).

Although Ishmael tends to use the terms 'imagination' and 'fancy' interchangeably, he does apparently see some distinction between them (but not a Coleridgean one), as when he says: '...to choose a wholly unsubstantial instance, purely addressed to the fancy, why, in reading the old fairy tales of Central Europe...' (p. 167). The term 'fancy' seems to be applied here to the responses to imaginary objects, while 'imagination' is reserved

for objects having a real existence in the world.

Despite some inconsistency in Ishmael's usage, therefore, his overall view seems to be that imagination is that subjective quality which permits an individual to respond powerfully to the appearances of the external world, as well as to the imaginary constructions of the mind, such as fairy tales. There is a strong implication that Ishmael regards the ordinary run of men as essentially unimaginative and therefore incapable of this response:

I know that, to the common apprehension, this phenomenon of whiteness is confessed to be the prime agent in exaggerating the terror of objects otherwise terrible; nor to the unimaginative mind is there aught of terror in those appearances whose awfulness to another mind almost solely consists in this one phenomenon,... (p. 168)

In this account, Ishmael's is clearly the 'other mind' that perceives the terror. Indeed, so much so that he is anxious to refute a charge (which he himself raises) that in his response to whiteness he is surrendering to a 'hypo.'

I think that in the receptivity of Ishmael's imagination is to be found one of the mainsprings of his creative activity. Coleridge said that, 'Events and images, the lively and spirit-stirring machinery

of the external world, are like light, and air, and moisture, to the seed of the Mind, which would else rot and perish.'²⁹ So Ishmael's spirit was stirred and his mind brought into activity by the events of the Pequod's fateful voyage and through his imagination he was moved from response ultimately to the desire to re-create.

Ishmael and the Organic Process

The metaphor of organic growth contained in the quotation from Coleridge above is also very relevant to Ishmael's creative method. The quotation continues: 'In all processes of mental evolution the objects of the senses must stimulate the Mind; and the Mind must in turn assimilate and digest the food which it thus receives from without.'³⁰ Or, to quote Abram's gloss on this statement, 'In Coleridge's organic theory, images of sense become merely materials on which the mind feeds--materials which quite lose their identity in being assimilated to a new whole.'³¹ The underlining is mine because I wished to draw attention to a general proposition which supports the particular view of Moby-Dick I have put forward--namely that Ishmael has creatively transformed the characters and events that were originally presented to him.

However, Coleridge's theory of the organic imagination also usefully accounts for how Ishmael is able to control the mass of diverse material which Moby-Dick contains.³² Like Coleridge's poet, Ishmael 'diffuses a tone and spirit of unity' and through the 'esemplastic' power of imagination shapes his material into one according to a principle of growth analogous to that in living things.³³ In a well-known passage Ishmael implicitly acknowledges his debt to the organic theory: 'Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters' (p. 246). Walter Bezanson, no doubt taking his cue from F. O. Matthiessen, has discussed the organic structure of Moby-Dick at some length, noting for example the relationships between groups of chapters like 'The Chapel,' 'The Pulpit' and 'The Sermon,' and the fact that 'in each case a killing provokes either a chapter sequence or a chapter cluster of cetological lore growing out of the circumstances of the particular killing.'³⁴ However, I don't intend to cover this ground again in detail but rather would refer to what Bezanson somewhat floridly calls 'the organic mind-world of Ishmael whose sensibility rhythmically agitates the flux of experience'³⁵--this, says Bezanson, is the dynamic of Moby-Dick. In other words, the true focus

of the novel is not the events supposedly taking place in the external world, but the active, shaping mind that controls and re-creates them as it controls and re-creates all the material it acquires. Moreover, the comments on method in the novel, of which a number have already been quoted, are not mere digressions or irrelevancies but evidence of a mind contemplating its own activity in the very moment of creation. So although the book may grow according to what appear to be natural laws, the self-conscious artist-narrator, Ishmael, is nevertheless very much in charge of the whole process. This emphasis on the importance of the narrator's activity of mind also helps to account for the disappearance of Ishmael the character. What could be more 'natural' than for a narrator to begin his account with his own physical actions (to get going, as it were) and then through a process of growth and change in the creative act itself, to gradually phase them out as his mental operations become more and more important to his artistic purpose?

Before concluding Part I, I wish to comment on some other aspects of Ishmael's active, creative mind --not as central, perhaps, but significant, I think, nevertheless. The first of these introduces a topic which will be dealt with more fully in its implications

in Part III. Here I simply wish to take note of:

Ishmael's Analogizing Mind

In his essay 'Nature' Emerson articulated in very pure form the transcendentalist³⁶ position with regard to the relationship between language, nature, and spirit:

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.³⁷

In Emerson's view, 'man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects.'³⁸ Emerson would have found confirmation for this view if he had ever met the crew of the Pequod, who are all, with the exception of the astonishingly unimaginative Flask, given to analogising. Even Stubb, who carefully cultivates his unthinking attitude behind the terrific smokescreen of his pipe, is not immune to reasoning from analogy and symbol. As he says in 'The Doubloon' chapter: 'Pity if there is nothing wonderful in signs, and significant in wonders' (p. 361). Ahab, of course, is the most notorious transcendentalist in this respect. Emerson says, 'Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind'³⁹ --to which Ahab utters his assent: 'O Nature, and O soul

of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! not the smallest atom stirs or lives in matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind' (p. 264). This belief is the philosophical basis for Ahab's quest, for to him Moby Dick is a monstrous (literally and figuratively) natural symbol.

Ishmael, like the rest, is also an analogizer (but with some significant differences). An example of Ishmael's analogizing is his disquisition on Free Will and Necessity in 'The Matmaker.' His account of 'fast-fish' and 'loose-fish' also gives rise to analogizing, and moralizing too (this is usually the next step).

What are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish? What all men's minds and opinions but Loose-Fish? What is the principle of religious belief in them but a Loose-Fish? What to the ostentatious smuggling verbalists are the thoughts of thinkers but Loose-Fish? What is the great globe itself but a Loose-Fish? And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too? (p. 334)

As well as illustrating Ishmael's analogizing tendencies, this passage also reveals his habit of speaking directly to the reader. He does not often say 'you, reader' but nevertheless much of Moby-Dick consists of a direct communication between Ishmael and the reader, unmediated by the narrative. The relationship between the narrator and the author and between the narrator and his created

characters have already been considered, but it is this relationship between narrator and reader which is really at the heart of the book. If Moby-Dick is not simply about Ahab and the Pequod, then neither is it simply about Ishmael, but rather it is about how Ishmael's consciousness impinges itself upon the reader through his use of language and tone, the offspring of language. This is a truism, of course--every narrator establishes a relationship with his reader--but it is particularly important to bear in mind with Moby-Dick in order to preserve a proper view of the novel.

However, to return to the subject of this section, I wish to link Ishmael's analogizing tendencies with another characteristic habit--his frequent punning and verbal play. An early example occurs in his response to Bildad's humbug about 'the seven hundred and seventy-seventh' lay when Ishmael's remuneration is being considered:

Lay, indeed, thought I, and such a lay! the seven hundred and seventy-seventh! Well, old Bildad, you are determined that I, for one, shall not lay up many lays here below, where moth and rust do corrupt. It was an exceedingly long lay that, indeed,...

(p. 74, Ishmael's emphasis)

A well-known example of Ishmael's punning is the phallic

joke contained in his use of the word 'archbishoprick' in 'The Cassock' chapter dealing with the curious grab of the mincer. I see both the analogizing and the punning as persistent traits of an exceptionally active mind which is continually working over the materials presented to it. The point may seem obvious but it again serves to emphasize the importance for the novel of what is going on in Ishmael's mind. Again it is a question of focus. Both punning and analogizing depend upon the ability to perceive correspondences--the pun is not a low form of wit at all but requires the ability to make connections among things (and words) discrete. For Ishmael, both activities are a kind of creative play whereby he tests their ability to yield insights. In this respect the analogizing is much the more important activity since it bears directly on one of the fundamental problems dealt with by the novel--which is, how can men acquire certain knowledge about the world they inhabit?

It is of great significance, therefore, that Ishmael's analogizing carries with it an implicit criticism of the activity. I propose to examine this matter in Part III, however. For the moment I wish to recapitulate briefly the aims of Part I.

I have tried to show that Ishmael is creative both in the sense of being the 'creator' of Moby-Dick through the elaboration and magnification of characters and events, and also in the sense of having an active and imaginative mind. Such conclusions both illustrate and follow from the premises outlined in the Introduction and therefore they only help to clear the ground a little further. The next stage in the ground clearing is to proceed to an examination of certain aspects of Ishmael's use of language. Some hints have already been given of the way in which Ishmael, while saying one thing, can simultaneously suggest its opposite. However, apart from the explicit indications of this tendency that we have already looked at, there are other equally important indications implicit in the language itself. It is to this matter, and others, that I now wish to turn.

PART II

WHAT ISHMAEL'S LANGUAGE REVEALS

"If you're writing a book about a whaling expedition," said my good friend the senior whaling inspector, "don't tell the exact truth. If you do, nobody ashore will believe you, and nobody in the whaling world will recognize you as a whaleman; for no whaleman author ever has told the exact truth since Herman Melville set the standard of whaling mendacity."

R. B. Robertson, Of Whales and Men

Part II is founded first of all on the obvious fact that it is in the language of the novel that the activity of Ishmael's mind is manifested and secondly on the assumption that the language will have embedded in it tokens, as it were, of Ishmael's attitudes, preoccupations and problems. Many of these tokens will be implicit in the language, although, as I shall try to show, Ishmael frequently makes his concerns explicit too. The language is therefore all of a piece, inner and outer meanings being complementary.

Again in Part II separate but related topics are clustered together under their respective headings. They all have to do with how Ishmael controls his material and most try to show the subtlety and complexity of his use of language, especially where he holds opposite meanings in suspension in the language. To this extent Part II moves closer to the problems of meaning. Ishmael's language is treacherous, it seems to me, and its tone often puzzling or disturbing. The reader must beware. Still, as Ishmael says, 'we can hypothesize, even if we cannot prove and establish.'

The Language of Equivocation

In The Wake of the Gods, Bruce Franklin, noting the 'double negatives, the passive voice, involuted syntax, and ... hesitant wording' of a typically equivocal passage from Moby-Dick, says, 'If this asserts anything positively, it asserts positive doubt.'⁴⁰ Such a paradoxical statement is quite suitable to describe a persistent effect of Ishmael's language. Numerous examples of his equivocation are to be found throughout the book but one or two must serve as models. At the beginning of the chapter appropriately entitled 'Surmises,' we find this passage which I quote in full to show the length to which Ishmael's convoluted, hesitant language can sometimes run:

Though, consumed with the hot fire of his purpose, Ahab in all his thoughts and actions ever had in view the ultimate capture of Moby Dick; though he seemed ready to sacrifice all mortal interests to that one passion; nevertheless it may have been that he was by nature and long habituation far too wedded to a fiery whalerman's ways, altogether to abandon the collateral prosecution of the voyage. Or at least if this were otherwise there were not wanting other motives much more influential with him. It would be refining too much, perhaps, even considering his monomania, to hint that his vindictiveness towards the White Whale might have possibly extended itself in some degree to all sperm whales, and that the more monsters he slew by so much the more he multiplied the chances that each subsequently encountered whale would prove to be the hated

one he hunted. But if such an hypothesis be indeed exceptionable, there were still additional considerations which, though not so strictly according with the wildness of his ruling passion, yet were by no means incapable of swaying him. (pp. 182-3)

In this passage, the subordinate qualifying clauses and phrases, the use of conditional constructions, and the double negatives, all announce that here is a narrator who does not claim certain knowledge in human affairs. Ishmael does not assert his omniscience but writes in carefully hedged phrases which confess his fallibility. It is all the more interesting that he should do so considering what has already been said about his role as creator. However, just as Ishmael's creative role is a consequence of the inescapably subjective nature of any account of men and events, so his qualified language is an implicit acknowledgement of that same fact. Ishmael can only present things as (in retrospect) they seem to him to have been. That 'seem to him' is important for it encompasses both the magnification ('creation') of character and theme that we have already examined and the acknowledgement that the narrative contains one man's subjective, fallible account.

The word 'seem' occurs in the passage quoted above, and beyond that it occurs as a kind of refrain throughout the entire book, in the various different forms of

the verb.⁴¹ To illustrate, I quote from a page on which the word appears eight times (and four more times on the following page):

But when three or four days had slid by, after meeting the children-seeking Rachel; and no spout had yet been seen; the monomaniac old man seemed distrustful of his crew's fidelity; at least, of nearly all except the Pagan harpooners; he seemed to doubt, even, whether Stubb and Flask might not willingly overlook the sight he sought. But if these suspicions were really his, he sagaciously refrained from verbally expressing them, however his actions might seem to hint them. (p. 439, emphasis added)

Again the word occurs in a context of other qualified language and again the effect is to emphasize the narrator's subjective and therefore potentially fallible stance. The word 'seem' is often used in regard to Ahab, as the two previous quotations indicate. Indeed, it is the second word used in Ishmael's account of his first view of Ahab: 'Captain Ahab stood upon his quarter-deck. There seemed no sign of common bodily illness about him,....' (p. 109). However, Ahab rarely uses the word himself--he is much too certain about what he knows to hedge with 'seems.' The word also disappears at other significant points in the narrative. For example, it does not occur in Father Mapple's sermon. Like Ahab the old preacher is much too sure of his own understanding to qualify his statements. 'Seems' is essentially the

narrator's word and denotes a qualitative difference between his language and that ascribed to the other characters, which, in turn, indicates Ishmael's more tentative way of apprehending the world. 'Seeming' is not an attribute of an object but refers to a mode of perception pertaining to a subjective consciousness. Whenever, one says 'seems' one can, with greater accuracy and point, say 'seems to me' as, in fact, Ishmael often does. To refer back for a moment to a point made in the Introduction, the use of 'seems' also underlines the indispensability to Melville of a first-person narrator. The word would be inappropriate if used extensively by a third-person narrator, who is commonly expected to possess a greater degree of omniscience--a degree of omniscience that Melville in fact does not want to invest in any kind of narrator.

The effect of Ishmael's equivocation is to make language do double duty. He is able to suggest certain interpretations of motivations and events while simultaneously calling them in question by means of the hedging and doubt-laden language that he uses. This too may be described as an activity of Ishmael's mind embedded in and revealed through his language. What we have here is a process by which Ishmael, implicitly at any rate, tests the limits of his own knowledge and

understanding. There are many passages in the book, most notably, of course, the descriptive action passages, where Ishmael's language is direct, bold and assertive. However, there are also many passages where he retreats into the kind of tortuous prose already quoted, and where he has a kind of nagging awareness of the difficulty of making definite statements, particularly in matters of human motivation and behaviour. The equivocal language surrounds Ahab, as we have seen, but it envelops Moby Dick too, and pervades the chapter which bears his name.

*narrative =
fact*

*to look means
to think*

It is hardly to be doubted, that several vessels reported to have encountered, at such or such a time, or on such or such a meridian, a Sperm Whale of uncommon magnitude and malignity, which whale, after doing great mischief to his assailants, had completely escaped them; to some minds it was not an unfair presumption, I say, that the whale in question must have been no other than Moby Dick. (p. 155)

This is one of the 'wilder suggestions about Moby Dick' which, as Franklin remarks, 'although they prove extremely important to understanding the book are qualified and equivocated even more.'⁴² Franklin claims, justly I think, that 'This equivocation lies at the heart of Moby-Dick, partly because the heart of Moby Dick is the central mystery in a world of mysteries.'⁴³

Ishmael is thus able to exploit the superstitious rumours about Moby Dick for their full suggestive value while at the same time undermining them by equivocation.

However, there are other very important kinds of equivocal language which Ishmael uses. For example, some significant ambiguities can be found even in passages where he appears to be making assertive statements. (One of the difficulties in approaching Moby-Dick is that much of the language requires the same kind of detailed attention that one would give to a dozen lines of poetry.) This point can be illustrated by reference to a well-known passage from 'The Doubloon' chapter: 'And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cart-load, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way' (p. 358). At first glance this appears to be a piece of Emersonian transcendentalism; however, the circularity of the argument should also be noted. It is necessary to assume the thing to be proved in order to make the assertion. The world is an 'empty cipher' unless there is 'some certain significance' in all things. True. Or rather a truism. What Ishmael is saying is that there is no significance in things unless things have some significance. Yet,

as we have already seen and will further see, a great part of Moby-Dick is devoted to showing the uncertainty of knowledge, understanding and 'significance.' There is even an ambiguity in the word 'certain' for although it can mean 'established as true' and 'placed beyond doubt,' it can also mean 'indefinite in the sense of not being specifically named' and 'undefined as to kind, number, quantity, duration, etc.'⁴⁴ The outcome of these considerations is that Ishmael's statement has an import quite contrary to its ostensible one. It provides another example of how he can say one thing and simultaneously convey its opposite, and I think it is noteworthy that this particular example concerns a statement dealing with the 'significance' of the world and therefore of human knowledge and existence.

A further example of Ishmaelelean ambiguity, also having to do with the problem of human knowledge, occurs as the narrator with deep irony considers the story of Jonah as history:

Now some Nantucketers rather distrust this historical story of Jonah and the whale. But then there were some sceptical Greeks and Romans, who, standing out from the orthodox pagans of their times, equally doubted the story of Hercules and the whale, and Arion and the dolphin; and yet their doubting those traditions did not make those traditions one whit the less facts, for all that. (pp. 306-7)

Apparently Ishmael is asking us to believe that the stories about Hercules and Arion are true, an eventuality so inherently unlikely as to alert the reader to the possibilities of ambiguity. In fact there is a very pleasant double ambiguity in the last line.

On one reading, Ishmael could be saying that of course the traditions could not be any the less factual than they are, considering that they are not factual at all, so it is hardly surprising that the scepticism of the unorthodox made no difference. Or he could also be saying that the doubts of the sceptics did not mean that the traditions themselves were not facts--indeed they persisted in spite of the doubters.

A passage such as this contains a complex of elements, therefore. The theme deals with problems of knowledge and belief, which so concern the narrator, but the ostensible meaning of the passage must be re-considered in light of the pervasive irony and the ambiguity which bring about a reversal of meaning. Irony is one of Ishmael's most distinctive modes of expression and being, in itself, a form of equivocation deserves some examination at this point. The pervasive ironical tone of the novel is central to both method and meaning. / As Lawrence Thompson maintains, the total meaning of Moby-Dick is 'shaped and controlled and illuminated...

by means of sustained irony.⁴⁵ Conventional meanings are satirized, he says, within the larger context that controls them. For Thompson, the larger context is presumably Melville's *Quarrel With God*, which indicates to me that he has not read clearly the message that the irony has to offer. Paul Brodtkorb has, I think, read the message more clearly and more rigorously when he refers to,

...the problematics of Ishmaeleian irony, wherein no firm standpoint is offered the reader, and his wishes tend to be projected into the material to provide one, the reader thereby being forced to become part of what he reads. Such irony reflects--just as the implicit rationale of lying does--the attitude of a man who knows he does not know. It is the attitude of negative intellectual freedom that allows all standpoints to be playfully adopted for the moment. Committed to nothing, the Ishmaeleian ironist can mockingly play with everything, as a result of which everything he touches is eerily tinged with the color of mere possibility: his ironies, like his lies, are "white."⁴⁶

I think, however, that Ishmael is committed to something--for one, his irony, indeed his whole negative methodology which is finally assimilated into the ultimate commitment which is the artistic endeavour that produced the book. The language of Moby-Dick is indeed treacherous and the persistently ironical tone should alert the reader to the possibility that at any given point in the novel the ostensible meaning is being reversed or negated or undermined. Once we

understand this we must then trust the narrator's untrustworthiness, for his self-critical method and constant challenge to his own material are evidence of an exceptional honesty of mind. Ironically, however, Ishmael's honesty of mind is not always accompanied by strict accuracy as the next section reveals.

Ishmael's Truthfulness

Ishmael's creative role has already been sufficiently discussed. However, a particular consequence of it is of interest here. If Ishmael is indeed, as he hints, magnifying and elaborating his themes, adding invention to observation and interpretation, then it would not be surprising to find him concerned about the validity and believability of his statements. And, in fact, this is precisely the case.

Again illustrations abound, but the chapter entitled 'The Affidavit' is of particular interest. The Century Dictionary defines an affidavit as 'a written declaration upon oath; a statement of facts in writing signed by the affiant, and sworn to or confirmed by a declaration before a notary public, a magistrate, or other authorized officer.' We may assume, therefore, that in this chapter Ishmael is attesting to the accuracy of the facts he is placing before us. Indeed, the first two paragraphs are specifically concerned with the problem of believa-

bility. In the first, he refers back to the previous chapter in which he has discussed the migratory behaviour of whales and says, '...but the leading matter of it requires to be still further and more familiarly enlarged upon, in order to be adequately understood, and moreover to take away any incredulity which a profound ignorance of the entire subject may induce in some minds, as to the natural veracity of the main point of this affair' (p. 175). In view of this concern with veracity it is all the more surprising that 'The Affidavit' should therefore contain a glaring error of fact. Ishmael refers to a harpooner who goes ashore in Africa and in his wanderings in the interior of that continent encounters among other things tigers, which are exclusively Asiatic beasts and are unknown elsewhere outside of zoos and circuses. Of course, the reference to tigers may simply be an oversight, but even this would cause one to question the reliability of a narrator who would commit a schoolboy howler in a chapter where the facts have, as it were, been attested to under oath. On the other hand, the reference may be the result of a studied carelessness on Ishmael's part--a hint to the reader not to take this matter of truthfulness too seriously. It isn't possible to build on this point with any certainty. Fortunately, however, the language of the

chapter offers us some further clues.

In the long third paragraph Ishmael recounts examples of whales which were struck, escaped, and later were struck again and killed by the same harpooner. The passage is too long to quote in full but I will extract from it the strangely insistent language with which the narrator tries to convince the reader of the truth of what he is saying:

I have personally known three instances where a whale, after receiving a harpoon, has effected a complete escape; and after an interval (in one instance of three years), has again been struck by the same hand, and slain; ...In the instance where three years intervened between the flinging of the two harpoons; and I think it may have been something more than that; ...I say I, myself, have known three instances similar to this; that is in two of them I saw the whales struck;In the three-year instance, it so fell out that I was in the boat both times,....I say three years, but I am pretty sure it was more than that. Here are three instances, then, which I personally know the truth of; but I have heard of many other instances from persons whose veracity in the matter there is no good ground to impeach.

(pp. 175-6)

Note the repetitions of 'three instances' and 'three years' and 'I personally' and 'I say I' and so on. It seems to me that the nagging insistence of the language rather causes the reader to question Ishmael's believability than making him assent to it readily.

Ishmael seems to go out of his way to stake his integrity on the validity of the facts recounted. Yet it is in precisely this passage that the reference to tigers in Africa occurs!

Ishmael hints freely at the importance to his narrative of the point he is trying to make about the chances of meeting up with a particular whale somewhere in the oceans of the world. 'The Chart' chapter, which first deals with this problem, is, says Ishmael, 'as important a one as will be found in this volume' (p. 175). If it is not possible to hunt down one particular whale then Ahab's quest is ludicrous. Similarly, in regard to the other point Ishmael is anxious to establish, if a whale can't sink a ship (or never has done so) then the catastrophe is also far-fetched. In this 'Affidavit' chapter Ishmael says:

I do not know where I can find a better place than just here, to make mention of one or two other things, which to me seem important, as in printed form establishing in all respects the reasonableness of the whole story of the White Whale, more especially the catastrophe. For this is one of those disheartening instances where truth requires full as much bolstering as error. (p. 177)

Incidentally, this passage contains one of the more direct examples of the foreshadowing references which Ishmael plants in the narrative. Note, too, the remark

about the necessity of bolstering the truth which enlarges the context and universalizes the narrator's problem. However, Ishmael continues:

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. (p. 177)

The merely symbolic is anathema to Ishmael. It is from visible, verifiable events that his meaning must spring. Yet even before the question of meaning can be considered he has this problem of simply establishing the facts. It is no more possible to separate out what is 'fact' from what is 'fiction' concerning Moby Dick than it is to separate out what Ahab was 'really' like from Ishmael's presentation of him--and I don't intend to try. What is more important here is that Ishmael fears that he won't be believed and therefore attempts desperately to establish his credibility but in such an insistent way as to draw the reader's attention to the problem he is seeking to overcome. For Ishmael, trying to establish the facts becomes a kind of self-defeating activity and raises doubts about the possibility of establishing the truth of anything.

It is not only the reader who questions Ishmael's truthfulness, however. Don Sebastian, after hearing the wild and violent story of the Town-Ho, asks of its narrator, Ishmael: 'Then I entreat you, tell me if to the best of your own convictions, this your story is in substance really true? ... Did you get it from an unquestionable source?' (p. 224). Ishmael, again sensitive to any expression of doubt about his veracity, calls for a Bible so that this time he may literally swear an oath attesting to the accuracy of the facts recounted. This oath he backs by claims to have personally verified the story:

So help me Heaven, and on my honor, the story I have told ye, gentlemen, is in substance and its great items, true. I know it to be true; it happened on this ball; I trod the ship; I knew the crew; I have seen and talked with Steelkilt since the death of Radney. (p. 224)

Ishmael's last statement recalls similar statements from 'The Affidavit' where he seeks to verify information by appeals to his first-hand knowledge of events. After telling the story of the sinking of the Essex by a sperm whale he says: 'I have seen Owen Chase, who was chief mate of the Essex at the time of the tragedy; I have read his plain and faithful narrative; I have conversed with his son; and all this within a

few miles of the scene of the catastrophe' (pp. 178-9). In order to substantiate a reference to Langsdorff's Voyages Ishmael claims to be related to the captain of the ship concerned--Captain D'Wolf, that is: 'I have the honor of being a nephew of his. I have particularly questioned him concerning this passage in Langsdorff. He substantiates every word' (p. 180). In each case the form of Ishmael's statements is similar--it is short and direct and contains repetition of the word 'I'. Out of context and alone, the statements are frank, open and believable. In context and in relation to each other, the statements again testify to Ishmael's extreme sensitivity concerning his veracity. Again and again he tries to anticipate the reader's disbelief but in so doing raises the questions he is apparently seeking to quell. Nor does Ishmael help his case when, in calling for a Bible to swear to the truth of the Town-Ho's story, he jocularly says, 'may I also beg that you will be particular in procuring the largest sized Evangelists you can' (p. 224). This is not the only occasion on which Ishmael seems to think that sheer size is persuasive. This idea is implicit in what he says about magnifying the theme of the whale (already quoted). Indeed, he says that when dealing

with Leviathan:

Fain am I to stagger to this emprise under the weightiest words of the dictionary. And here be it said, that whenever it has been convenient to consult one in the course of these dissertations, I have invariably used a huge quarto edition of Johnson, expressly purchased for that purpose; because that famous lexicographer's uncommon personal bulk more fitted him to compile a lexicon to be used by a whale author like me. (p. 379)

Dictionaries are commonly used for purposes of verification but the reader may be forgiven for doubting whether the size of the volume or of its author has much to do with the matter, any more than the size of a Bible is significant for its meaning and content. A collateral thought which these speculations produce is to wonder whether the size of the sperm whale itself, which as we have seen is exaggerated, is as germane to his theme as Ishmael would have us believe.

In view of the personal reliance which Ishmael requires the reader to place in him regarding the truth of events, it is hardly reassuring to find in 'The Fossil Whale' chapter, that he presents his 'credentials' as a geologist, 'by stating that in my miscellaneous time I have been a stone-mason, and also a great digger of ditches, canals and wells, wine-vaults, cellars, and cisterns of all sorts' (p. 379). Again, Ishmael's

comments do not necessarily invalidate the information he subsequently supplies, but they do draw attention to the difficulty of validating facts. 'What is truth?' jesting Ishmael seems to be saying.

Thus far we have been dealing with material of a factual nature concerning particular events and particular kinds of physical information about whales--the kind of material, that is, that should be most readily subject to verification. However, Ishmael, being well versed in myth, is also concerned to present us with some less verifiable kinds of information. In 'The Honor and Glory of Whaling' he says that his 'researches' have uncovered many associations between whaling and the 'great demi-gods and heroes' and 'prophets' of antiquity (p. 304). Ishmael bolsters his findings with such comments as 'and let no man doubt this Arkite story' (p. 304), and 'placed before the strict and piercing truth ...' (p. 305). Yet the reasoning with which he establishes his connections, though cast in a pseudo-logical form, presumably in order to convince the reader, is in fact deliberately absurd. Ishmael claims St. George as a whaleman on the ground that it would have been much more glorious for him to have done battle with 'the great monster of the deep' rather than with 'a crawling reptile of the land' (p. 305). By

similar specious reasoning Hercules is claimed for the honor-role of whaling: '... at any rate the whale caught him, if he did not the whale' (p. 306). Although, in this chapter, Ishmael makes remarks touching on the believability of his statements and although the pseudo-logical form apparently carries with it an effort at validation, yet he is not nearly so concerned here about whether he will be believed. With regard to the statements from 'The Affidavit,' Ishmael seemed to fear that he would not be believed but wanted to be. In such chapters as 'The Honor and Glory of Whaling' and 'Jonah Historically Regarded' Ishmael does not expect to be believed but does not care. Much of Moby-Dick deals with the problem of acquiring and establishing certain knowledge and with the various methods available for so doing. In the passages quoted in this section, Ishmael conveys the difficulty of establishing the validity of factual information and the absurdity of trying to establish the validity of myth and legend.

However, Ishmael's difficulties do not rest simply with the problem of convincing the reader that he is telling the truth, for there is a further problem inherent in much of the very material that he is dealing with, and it is this matter that I wish to consider next.

Ishmael's Communication Problem

In his discussion of Fedallah, who in himself contains one of the impenetrable mysteries of the book, Ishmael refers to 'earth's primal generations, when the memory of the first man was a distinct recollection, and all men his descendants, unknowing whence he came, eyed each other as real phantoms, and asked of the sun and the moon why they were created and to what end' (p. 199). Although the problems articulated in this passage (again problems of knowledge and understanding), doubtless in these modern days find a more sophisticated expression, they nevertheless lie at the heart of Moby-Dick. They constitute its metaphysical centre. There are a number of key words to be considered in this section--'phantom,' used in the quotation above, is one of them. Because the world is unsourced, because the ground of existence cannot be verified, the world and man's existence in it become unreal like a phantom--or, as The Century Dictionary defines phantom, 'appearance merely; illusion; unreality; fancy; delusion; deception; deceit.' Ishmael has a continual apprehension of the world as mere deceitful appearance, as the chapter on 'The Whiteness of the Whale' makes clear when he says that 'all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements

cover nothing but the charnel-house within' (p. 170). The aptly named 'Gilder' chapter, with its suggestion of an outward, alluring veneer, is also devoted to this idea. The problem is to penetrate to the reality which lies behind the appearance, if indeed reality there be. On the third page of his narrative Ishmael invites us to ponder the meaning of 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.

(p. 14, my underlining)

Narcissus did not understand that the image he saw was himself and so he died because he tried to grasp the ungraspable. Similarly, many men do not understand that what they perceive in the universe are reflections of themselves, constructs of their own subjectivities. Ahab does not understand this and so he dies too.

There is a remarkable coherence and consistency in the metaphor that Ishmael is using. Just prior to the passage quoted above, he tells us that 'meditation and water are wedded for ever' (p. 13). So 'all rivers and oceans' invite the speculation which conjures up the 'ungraspable phantom.' Ishmael himself goes to sea and out of his speculation creates an embodiment

of the phantom (if such a thing is possible!)--the White Whale himself. Moby Dick, like the image of Narcissus, is the ungraspable phantom in the water. This association is suggested in the 'Whiteness' chapter, 'nor even in our superstitions do we fail to throw the same snowy mantle round our phantoms' (p. 166), in the chapter on the whale's spout, which recalls Ishmael's reference to the Narcissus myth in its title, 'The Fountain,' and in 'The Spirit-Spout' where Ishmael recounts the sailors' superstitious fears that Moby Dick himself was responsible for 'this flitting apparition' the 'unnearable spout' (p. 201). More specifically the connection is also made in the 'Moby Dick' chapter, by the references to sperm whales as 'apparitions' and to Moby Dick's supernatural attributes. Finally, there is the curious, oblique, foreshadowing reference to Moby Dick at the end of the first chapter, where Ishmael says, 'two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air' (p. 16).

I do not propose Moby Dick as the 'ungraspable phantom' in order to settle any argument about what he signifies. He can be different things to different people both within the novel and without. And this is really the point--associating the White Whale with

Ishmael's use of the Narcissus myth emphasizes the essentially subjective way in which the various images of Moby Dick are produced. Because he is ungraspable all that we can know of his attributes and powers and significance is created out of speculations prompted by superstitious fear and imaginative dread. Man, as Emerson says, is essentially and always an analogist and the language of the 'Moby Dick' chapter, where Ishmael ascribes many of the beliefs about the White Whale to the notorious superstitiousness of sailors, re-emphasizes this point.

However, Moby Dick is not merely ungraspable in his attributes and in his significance, in his symbolic form, so to speak, but also in his physical form. The whale is literally as well as metaphorically unknowable. And this, of course, constitutes the heart of Ishmael's problem--how to speak about the unspeakable. Ishmael is at some pains to point out how erroneous are the current representations of whales known to him and he concludes that 'there is no earthly [note the ambiguity] way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like' (p. 228). In regard to the whale's spout, Ishmael says, 'no absolute certainty can as yet be arrived at on this head' (p. 312). The head of the whale is a 'dead, blind wall,' its brow is unreadable to 'unlettered'

Ishmael for the whale 'like all things that are mighty, wears a false brow to the common world' (p. 293). Again the phantom. Not only may he not be read, neither may he be heard for he maintains 'his pyramidical silence.' Of the whale's tail Ishmael remarks, 'I deplore my inability to express it' (p. 317) and summing up he says:

Dissect him how I may, then, I go but skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face. (p. 318)

Ishmael, then, has the impossible task of trying to express the inexpressible. The most that he can do is, as he says, to 'hypothesize' even if he 'cannot prove and establish' (p. 313). Not surprisingly he also tries to meet the difficulty by taking inexpressibility for his theme, as some of the passages already quoted indicate. This theme is denoted by certain key words of which Ishmael makes extensive use. 'Seem' which signifies the presence of the fallible, subjective observer has already been dealt with. Others are 'hint' which indicates the oblique way in which meaning is often presented; 'perhaps' which is the fallible narrator's

common qualifying word; 'speechless' and 'unspeakable' which imply the impossibility of communication; 'nameless' which indicates the impossibility of identification; 'unaccountable' which conveys the difficulty of explanation; and 'mystic' which is used to denote the incomprehensible. To illustrate something of Ishmael's use of these words I will quote a short passage arbitrarily and out of context: 'Though neither knows where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints; yet with me, as with the colt, somewhere those things must exist' (p. 169). Apart from illustrating certain aspects of his use of language, this statement also reveals Ishmael's apparent wish to believe in realities that lie behind the shifting, deceptive appearances of the world. Yet he cannot say that these 'nameless things' do exist, but that for him they must exist, which suggests that the will to believe has to assert itself in the face of the incomprehensible. But, as we shall see, Ishmael cannot long sustain the will to believe for his scepticism is all pervasive and undermines any fixed position.

James Guetti, in The Limits of Metaphor, discusses Ishmael's communication problem at some length. As he sees it, the problem is to render in language what he describes as the 'ineffable.'⁴⁶ For Guetti, the

suggestion of an 'ineffable' reality in Moby-Dick depends upon the recognition of the insufficiency of language but is communicated largely by means of this insufficiency. Ishmael, he claims, exploits special and artificial kinds of language that draw attention to the limitations of such language and so communicate in both a positive and a negative way.⁴⁷ Guetti diagnoses Ishmael's problem accurately and he is quite right to lay such emphasis on the function of special languages in Moby-Dick. However, although his arguments are sophisticated and full of insight, he takes them one step too far, I think. He says that the failure of all the languages in Moby-Dick to yield insight into the nature of the ineffable, together with Ahab's failure to achieve the 'ultimate perception,' constitute the success of the novel.⁴⁸ And further that the very evidence of impenetrability itself suggests a 'vague significance.'⁴⁹ But to equate the failure of the languages with the success of the novel is to mix categories, while saying, as he does, that the ineffable is impenetrable is true but tautological. To go beyond that and say that there is significance in the ineffable because of its impenetrability is perverse and illogical. As Wittgenstein said in the Tractatus, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'⁵⁰ However,

Wittgenstein was speaking philosophically rather than artistically and fortunately for us Ishmael did not remain silent or we should not have the book. It seems to me that Guetti has confused two factors. Man has, in Ishmael's words, 'intuitions of things heavenly,' or to reverse the field, and again in Ishmael's words, man has an 'instinct of the knowledge of the demonism in the world.' I take intuition and instinct to be synonymous in these cases (intuition in the sense of 'instinctive knowledge,' The Century Dictionary) so the problem is to match the intuitions of the ineffable with verifiable knowledge and information taken from man's observation of the world. Here is the dilemma. Man is stuck with intuitions for which he cannot find an adequate language, and a world which will yield only to the most superficial kind of analysis, and with no ascertainable correspondence between the two. One can try to bridge the gap by sheer force of will and be destroyed like Ahab or make art out of the dilemma like Ishmael. But unfortunately neither the presence of the intuitions themselves, however desirable they may be, nor the existence of an inscrutable universe, however tantalizing, is evidence of a reality beyond these things themselves. And if impenetrability suggests significance it is only because some men will have it so, which brings us back to

subjectivities again. No more than any other man can Ishmael find a solution to the 'Problem of the Universe,' and he is obliged to wrestle unavailingly with the task of presenting and discussing it. However, if he cannot solve the problem he can learn to live with it and at least out of his labours achieve an artistic success.

Having dealt in these first three sections of Part II with related topics all having to do, in a sense, with the problem of verification, I propose now to turn to other less related but nevertheless important aspects of the language of Moby-Dick. I have already referred in Part I to Ishmael's hints about the magnification of his material; I now want to look to the language itself for further evidence of a rhetorical building up of character and theme.

The Rhetorical Magnification of Ahab

It has already been suggested that part of Ishmael's method is to set forth opposed ideas simultaneously. Therefore, together with the building up of Ahab contained in, 'For a Khan of the plank, and a king of the sea, and a great lord of Leviathans was Ahab' (p. 114), there is also an undermining process at work in the suggestion that he is 'really' only a 'poor old whale-

hunter.' But as well as in the language used about Ahab, this building up and undermining process can also be seen in the language used by Ahab. In order to create a character of sufficiently grand and tragic stature to match his theme, Ishmael turned for help to a fully developed, potent and evocative rhetoric, already existing, that carried with it many of the lofty and tragical associations that he wanted. So not only does Ishmael borrow 'majestical trappings' for Ahab, he borrows a rhetoric for him too.

Much has already been said by critics about Ahab's Shakespearean language. Lewis Mumford and F. O. Matthiessen, among others, have noted that sometimes Ahab even speaks in what is basically blank verse:⁵¹

I leave a white and turbid wake;
Pale waters, paler cheeks, where'er I sail.
The envious billows sidelong swell to whelm
My track; let them; but first I pass. (p. 146)

It has become customary to refer, as indeed does Ishmael, to Ahab's soliloquies. Much fascinating evidence of the Shakespearean influence on Moby-Dick has also been presented by Charles Olson in Call Me Ishmael, so the point has been amply made⁵² and to establish the connection further seems needless. However, two points are worth noting here. The first is that the characteristic use by Ahab of what Ishmael calls the 'stately

dramatic, thee and thou of the Quaker idiom' (p. 71), is a genuine linguistic survival that fits very well with the narrator's revival of Shakespearean rhetoric. Secondly, it isn't only Ahab who uses the Shakespearean language, for Ishmael uses it, too, occasionally, as when he refers to young whales 'prematurely cut off in the warm flush and May of life' (p. 303) which picks up from Macbeth's 'way of life' which is 'fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf.'⁵³ This point serves to reinforce the assumption--already made and underlying this whole section--that Ishmael is the 'creator' of Ahab and therefore is responsible for his language. Furthermore, on this view, we don't need to ask how Ishmael could possibly know what Ahab was saying during his soliloquies, anymore than we need to ask how he managed to get down Father Mapple's sermon verbatim, for it is Ishmael who puts the words into the mouths of his characters.

However, although Ishmael uses the Shakespearean rhetoric with undeniable power, creating a literally terrific stature for Ahab, we must not overlook those effects which run in the opposite direction. Ahab's Lear-like⁵⁴ qualities are evident in his defiance of the elements contained in an appropriately short, dramatic, Shakespearean chapter that has a stage

direction for a title--'The Deck Towards the End of the First Night Watch':

Loftiest trucks were made for wildest winds, and this brain-truck of mine now sails amid the cloud-scud. Shall I strike that? Oh, none but cowards send down their brain-trucks in tempest time. What a hooroosh aloft there! I would e'en take it for sublime, did I not know that the colic is a noisy malady. Oh, take medicine, take medicine. (p. 419)

And yet it seems to me that, although impressive, such passages reveal the consciously 'created' nature of Ahab and tend to work against the effect ostensibly desired. There is, in fact, something absurd about Ahab's rhetoric. He is rhetorical in the pejorative sense of the word; he protests too much. This may sound like mere assertion on my part--one reader's response--however, there is some direct evidence in the text to support this view. For example, in the 'Quarter-deck' chapter, when Ahab is arousing the crew for the hunting of Moby Dick, he cries:

"Aye, Starbuck; aye, my hearties all round; it was Moby Dick that dismasted me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now. Aye, aye," he shouted with a terrific, loud, animal sob, like that of a heart-stricken moose;... (p. 143)

Ishmael's moose simile completely deflates Ahab's ranting, or rather shows up the ranting for what it is.

The responses of Starbuck⁵⁵ and Stubb to Ahab in this scene are rather revealing. Starbuck is chary of the evidences of excess in his captain: 'To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous' (p. 144). But it is Stubb, who is not usually presented as being at all perceptive, who realizes that there is a false note in Ahab when he whispers, 'He smites his chest,... what's that for? methinks it rings most vast, but hollow' (p. 144). 'Vast but hollow' sums up Ahab and his rhetoric in three words.

It is impossible to discuss the rhetoric, however, without reference to the dramatic aspects and devices of Moby-Dick, as all the comments about Shakespearean influence suggest. These dramatic devices are not mere appendages but are integral and deserve separate treatment.

Ishmael the Dramatist

As with the Shakespearean influences, the dramatic aspects of Moby-Dick hardly need to be emphasized here, so apparent are they. The soliloquies, the Shakespearean echoes themselves, the 'stage directions' used as chapter titles, such as 'Enter Ahab; to him Stubb,' the cutting from scene to scene, all testify to this point. The 'Midnight, Forecastle' chapter is given a completely

dramatic rendering with dialogue assigned to a cast of dramatis personae. Charles Olson called this chapter 'balletic' but it might be more accurate to call it a masque.⁵⁶ It is partly, at least, an entertainment, with singing and dancing, and could very readily be staged as such. Moreover, it is stylized to a large extent, with a few lines being assigned to a cross-section of the Pequod's crew, representing more than a dozen different nationalities, none of whom speak with any significant indication of an appropriate dialect or accent. In that sense the scene or chapter is highly unrealistic, which again serves to emphasize the consciously and openly 'creative' activity of the narrator.

It is precisely this conscious attempt by the narrator to cast his material into dramatic form that makes the form so integral to Moby-Dick. Ishmael does try to retire behind the facade of an objective and realistic account of events, nor does he try to pretend that it is the events themselves that control the narrative. On the contrary, it is clear that it is the narrator who controls all the material of the novel by means of the dramatic devices and forms that he employs. Of course, the narrator has other important ways of controlling his material but the dramatic method is particularly appropriate given the nature of the material he is

presenting and the view of Ahab's character, especially, that he wishes to set before us. The dramatic form fits very well the Ahab rhetoric we have already examined. Therefore, although superficially the dramatic forms, as manifested in the unrealistic 'Midnight, Forecastle' chapter particularly, may seem artificial and imposed on the narrative, they are nevertheless most appropriate to the material that they control.

However, there is still another sense in which the dramatic rendering of character and events is of fundamental importance to the narrative. Ishmael does not merely present a dramatized view of Ahab and his actions, he presents Ahab as being self-dramatizing. This point can be linked very directly to the discussion in which I claimed that Ahab's rhetoric was excessive and overblown. The soliloquies show Ahab dramatizing himself to himself: 'I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks, where'r I sail' (p. 146), while many of the other scenes in which he appears reveal him dramatizing himself to the crew. Ahab initiates several ritualistic, and therefore, in a sense, dramatic performances--the swearing of the oath, 'Death to Moby Dick,' his defiance of the lightning in 'The Candles' chapter and the forging of his harpoon, to mention only three. By such performances

Ahab gains and maintains a moral ascendancy over his crew so that he may bend them to his purpose. Early on in 'The Quarter-Deck' chapter we see him using his dramatic arts:

When the entire ship's company were assembled, and with curious and not wholly unapprehensive faces, were eyeing him, for he looked not unlike the weather horizon when a storm is coming up, Ahab, after rapidly glancing over the bulwarks, and then darting his eyes among the crew, started from his stand-point; and as though not a soul were nigh him resumed his heavy turns upon the deck. With bent head and half-slouched hat he continued to pace, unmindful of the wondering whispering among the men; till Stubb cautiously whispered to Flask, that Ahab must have summoned them there for the purpose of witnessing a pedestrian feat. But this did not last long. Vehemently pausing, he cried:-
 "What do ye do when ye see a whale, men?"

(p. 141)

It is difficult to tell from this passage alone whether Ahab is aware of the arts he is employing--the narrator's use of the word 'unmindful' might suggest that he is not, though the glance he darts at the crew could indicate that he is checking to see what effect his performance is having. Nevertheless, the summoning of the crew only to ignore them, the pacing up and down, the 'half-slouched hat' and the 'vehement pause' all reveal a dramatic projection of self, whether conscious or not. Doubtless many men in command of others, use such methods but in Ahab the tendency is most marked,

indeed exaggerated. I have already noted that Ishmael sees himself as having played a role during his voyage aboard the Pequod, so it is doubly interesting to see him presenting Ahab as a role-player too. If this point needs additional support it can be found by direct appeal to the narrator's comments. In 'The Specksynder' chapter, Ishmael notes that Ahab sometimes addressed the crew 'in unusual terms' but further notes that he also 'masked himself' behind the forms and usages of the sea. In other words, Ahab was accustomed to dissembling and playing a role. More importantly for our present purposes, however, Ishmael then goes on to say this of the 'irresistible dictatorship' that Ahab established:

For be a man's intellectual superiority what it will, it can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other men, without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments, always, in themselves, more or less paltry and base. (p. 129)

Ahab's capacity for self-dramatization constitutes one of the most potent of his external arts. During the fashioning of a new compass to replace the one whose poles were reversed by the electrical storm, Ahab again seeks to impress his crew: 'Then going through some small strange motions with it [the iron rod]--whether indispensable to the magnetizing of the steel, or merely

intended to augment the awe of the crew, is uncertain - he called for linen thread;...' (p. 425). And later he cries 'Look ye, for yourselves, if Ahab be not lord of the level loadstone!' and the crew mastered again, slink away. Only the pagan harpooners are unimpressed by Ahab's performances but their savage hearts are his anyway. It is the Christian members of the crew who, despite the moral and spiritual assurances of their religion, are undone by fear of Ahab.

According to Ishmael (again in 'The Specksynder' chapter) it is just such 'paltry and base' arts that keep 'God's true princes of the Empire from the world's hustings; and leaves the highest honors that this air can give, to those men who become famous more through their infinite inferiority to the choice hidden handful * of the Divine Inert, than through their undoubted superiority over the dead level of the mass' (p. 129). Thus the narrator's own comment again supports the double view we have of Ahab as being something less than what he at times appears to be. We have seen how his stature is undermined by the very rhetoric that builds it up. Here Ishmael is saying that Ahab betrays himself, that his dominating stature is also undermined and flawed by the very 'arts and entrenchments' that he employs to create it, of which the rhetoric is but one manifes-

tation.

However, Ahab is not alone in his self-dramatizing tendencies. Father Mapple also shares them. These two have already been linked by their certainties through the examination of the word 'seems,' which neither of them care to qualify their language with. Now they are linked again by the arts they employ to predominate over their fellow men. Father Mapple stands as indomitably as Ahab on the deck of his pulpit ship to win over his congregation of 'shipmates.' When he pulls up the rope ladder (described as a 'contrivance') behind him into the pulpit, Ishmael is provoked to various reflections. His analogising tendency finally prevails and he claims to perceive spiritual significances in Father Mapple's action, but a very different thought crosses his mind when he says ironically: 'Father Mapple enjoyed such a wide reputation for sincerity and sanctity, that I could not suspect him of courting notoriety by any mere tricks of the stage' (p. 43). Apart from the irony, simply uttering the thought, even to dismiss it, raises a doubt about Father Mapple in the reader's mind. Moreover, Ishmael's presentation of the old preacher, reveals similar devices to those used by Ahab--gestures, pauses, and silences

among them:

He paused a little; then kneeling in the pulpit's bows, folded his large brown hands across his chest, uplifted his closed eyes, and offered a prayer so deeply devout that he seemed kneeling and praying at the bottom of the sea. (p. 44)

At the end of the sermon he takes a final curtain, as it were: 'He said no more, but slowly waving a benediction, covered his face with his hands, and so remained, kneeling, till all the people had departed, and he was left alone in the place' (p. 51). Father Mapple's nautical rhetoric, applied to the story of Jonah, is impressive like Ahab's but it too is somewhat absurd. The elaborations on the Jonah story, the continual addressing of the congregation as 'ship-mates', the very certainty of the language itself, denote an intrusive ego which again tends to undermine what is professed. Of course, what Father Mapple professes is a rigid Christianity apparently the complete opposite of Ahab's Satanic creed. Yet Father Mapple shows some of Ahab's willingness for violence in conferring 'delight' on him who 'kills, burns, and destroys all sin' (p. 51). The sceptical Ishmael presents them both in their certainties as impressive, even awe-inspiring, but simultaneously absurd actors in self-dramatizing roles. The implication is that neither

of them despite, or perhaps because of, his certainties has any real clue to the dilemma of human existence.

The drama, then, is intrinsically important to Moby-Dick, providing not only a structural but also a metaphorical framework for the novel. Men are seen as actors in their own subjective, self-created, self-creating dramas. Their actions and speeches and gestures may in some cases overawe and impress but they contain no solution to the ultimate problems, which are seen to be still inscrutable and ungraspable. Within the sceptical context of the novel the certainties of Ahab and Father Mapple cannot help but seem absurd even if, at the same time, heroic or steadfast. And finally what fatally compromises them is that consciously or unconsciously, they must act their roles. To do so, in this context, is by implication to admit a pretense of knowledge, an illusion of truth, both of which in fact are hollow. Ahab at times seems to have some awareness of the arts and contrivances that he uses, but only Ishmael is fully conscious both of his role-playing and of its implications. Whereas Ahab and Father Mapple both employ their histrionic abilities for their own immediate purposes, Ishmael sees his own role-playing as an inescapable consequence of the larger existential situation in which he finds himself.

It operates at the deepest level and therefore does not require the theatrical flourishes that win converts and influence people. Ishmael defines his own role by adopting the name of the Biblical outcast and by references to his 'splintered heart' and 'maddened hand' (p. 53), although outwardly there is really nothing in the book to support this view of him. The important thing is to understand that this is the role for which Ishmael feels he has been cast, based on his own inner sense of himself. And, in fact, in an inward and indirect rather than literal and overt way, his role of outcast does have some substance. His persistent jocularitas, for example, is evidence of a role-playing designed to cope with the desperate situations in which he finds himself, as the next section seeks to make clear.

Ishmael's Humour

In 'The Hyena' chapter Ishmael records a scene in which, after having spent a miserable, dangerous night adrift in an open boat, he approaches Queequeg, Stubb and Flask in turn and enquires with mock gravity whether this sort of thing is usual in the whale fishery. On being told that it is, he goes off to make his will, saying 'Queequeg, ...come along, you shall be my lawyer, executor,

and legatee' (p. 196). Queequeg is, of course, illiterate. Beneath the humour one senses a real seriousness here. Ishmael himself says that 'After the ceremony [of making the will]..., I felt all the easier.' He compares himself to Lazarus after his resurrection, saying: 'I survived myself; my death and burial were locked up in my chest' (p. 197). This line contains some significant ambiguities--the first three words foreshadow the final catastrophe, while the chest can be taken to refer to Ishmael's own person as well as to the trunk containing his belongings. Merely making a will denotes a readiness to face the prospect of death but Ishmael has done more, for he has reached an inward acceptance of his mortality, signified by the jocularly which outstares 'death and destruction.' His humour has an intrinsic self-awareness that constitutes a saving grace. It is the kind of humour that is a token of high seriousness--without being any the less entertaining for that.

The 'Hyena' chapter is suitably named after the savage carnivore with its mad laughter. The hyena is a nocturnal animal and therefore habitually inhabits the dark side of the earth. Moreover, it allegedly has a 'propensity for robbing graves,' according to The Century Dictionary, and this too seems appropriate in the context. At the beginning of the chapter, which,

as Edward Rosenberry points out,⁵⁷ is of major importance for an understanding of Ishmael's humorous attitudes, we find this passage:

There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own. However, nothing dispirits, and nothing seems worth while disputing. (p. 195)

Ahab would find such a perception intolerable but Ishmael cannot only see the joke but can take it, too, and is not dispirited. As he says, 'the man that has anything bountifully laughable, about him, be sure there is more in that man than you perhaps think for' (p. 35), which is a hint to the reader about Ishmael's own character. This ability to 'take a joke' can be seen in the jests which Ishmael records at his own expense. A notable example is the practical joke played on him by the landlord of the Spouter-Inn, but more significant even than that are the examples of Ishmael's own self-humour. He can make as well as record jokes at his own expense. For example, he reveals himself to be comically and incorrigibly long-winded. The landlord of the Spouter-Inn after being harangued at some length by Ishmael, replies 'Well,...that's a purty long sermon for a chap that rips a little now

and then' (p. 26). In 'The Hyena' chapter itself, Ishmael says to Flask with humorous pomposity: 'Will you tell me whether it is an unalterable law in this fishery, Mr. Flask, for an oarsman to break his own back pulling himself back-foremast into death's jaws,' and Flask replies, 'Can't you twist that smaller?' (p. 196). I suppose there is a double joke here with Flask chiding Ishmael for a pomposity he is affecting.

Examples such as these are evidence of a humorous view of world and self that, as Rosenberry has noted amounts to a kind of philosophical principle.⁵⁸

Ishmael himself refers to 'that odd sort of wayward mood' that 'comes over a man only in some time of extreme tribulation; it comes in the very midst of his earnestness, so that what just before might have seemed to him a thing most momentous, now seems but a part of the general joke' (p. 195). It is just this 'free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy' which helps Ishmael to maintain his equilibrium and his good spirits, and which reveals his sanity and resilience of mind. He has a mind which converts all its materials, even the most painful, into humour so that he is able to confront the most unpleasant facts and to retain a full awareness of his situation.⁵⁹

His humour is, therefore, much more serviceable to him.

than 'the inflexible levity of Stubb' or 'the inflexible irreverence of Ahab'--to quote Rosenberry.⁶⁰ An early example of it may be seen in the bitter jest he makes about his stepmother, who frequently whipped him. On the occasion he recalls, however, his stepmother had banished him to his bedroom instead, for sixteen hours! Unable to stand the inactivity and solitude the young Ishmael pleaded for a slippering instead, but as he says, 'she was the best and most conscientious of stepmothers, and back I had to go to my room' (p. 33). Here surely we find the origin of the later Ishmael who felt himself to be an outcast. In assuming this outcast's role he also assumed the style of wry, ironic humour well suited to coping with painful and disturbing memories. I do not mean to imply a deliberate and calculated role-playing by Ishmael--he behaved as he had to. But having conceived of himself as playing a role, the humour, and particularly the self-humour, becomes a kind of monitoring device which provides a constant measurement of Ishmael's self-awareness, self-irony, and consciousness of role. As I indicated at the end of the previous section, I think much of Ishmael's humour is fundamentally existential. It is one of the basic human resources which enables him to endure and bear up in an inscrutable world, at best indifferent, and removed from any

transcendental hope. Ishmael fulfills the essential existentialist requirement that he be conscious of the situation he is in and like Sisyphus, in Camus' retelling of the myth, he can even be happy.

Ishmael's humorous language also has other important and artistic functions to perform. It is used by him very skillfully, often in the form of irony and satire, to control and qualify his material, particularly the non-narrative material. We can see in Ishmael's satire the same challenge to method and material that his use of irony contains. For example, in his references to 'Captain Sleet' (p. 137) and 'Fritz Swackhammer' (p. 371) and through his parodies of a pedantic style, Ishmael amiably satirizes one of his most authoritative sources, Scoresby. In 'The Honor and Glory of Whaling,' the satirical tone derides men's myth-making and legend-creating tendencies even while Ishmael is engaged in the same activity himself. Irony and satire are two of the sharpest of the cutting-in tools with which Ishmael lays open the folly of human pretensions to knowledge and understanding. Still, I think it is to the narrator's incorrigible long-windedness and clownishness that we can ascribe the presence of so much non-narrative matter. As in the Extracts, so in the text, he insists on including everything he has ever read or heard about

whales and the whale-fishery. As Guetti says, 'He surrounds the elements of the story with special or technical languages, with superstitious reports, allusions, and with figures of great imaginative intensity.'⁶¹ Now, quite simply, if this mass of material were presented in a solemn and didactic manner it would be intolerably wearisome to the reader.⁶² Presented in a humorous, satirical or ironical way the material is acceptable and enjoyable to the reader. This last point is obvious enough, I suppose; however, Ishmael's humour accomplishes some less obvious purposes too. As with some of the other forms of language examined, Ishmael's humorous, ironical language is used to undermine the material presented, in the very act of presentation. As we have noted, in 'The Honor and Glory of Whaling' chapter, the narrator is able to introduce all kinds of mythological and legendary material to surround his theme, while the tone is subtly undermining. In this way the theme of whaling is built up and magnified but simultaneously undercut. In the 'Cetology' chapter Ishmael comically classifies whales according to book sizes, while in discussing the nature of the whale he says, 'Be it known that, waiving all argument, I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish and call upon holy Jonah to back me' (p. 119), and this after citing a mass of learned

authorities. So much for science and scientific classification.

Ishmael's humour, then, is an integral part both of his character and of his method of writing. It is fundamental to his existential attitude to life as well as to his ironically sceptical approach to the problems of human knowledge and understanding. Necessarily, therefore, his humour is also integral to the artistic expression of his attitudes as they are to be found in the novel. However, while stressing the artistic and philosophical functions of the narrator's humour and noting the ironical character of much of it, we should not overlook the fact that sheer exuberance can account for a good deal of the humour, too. The bawdy jokes, for example, are evidence of a mind that possesses a strongly Rabelaisian strain. Still, Ishmael does, at times, straighten his face and speak to the reader in direct, thoughtful passages which do not carry a burden of humour and irony, and it is to these that I now turn.

Ishmael's Reflective Language

Remembering the sharp, satirical edge to Ishmael's mind, it is hard to picture him as the 'dreamy meditative man' that he refers to in 'The Mast-head' chapter. But

there are many facets to his mind, as I have tried to show, and from time to time he does indulge in a meditative and reflective language. For Ishmael, the mast-head possesses the solitude and 'thought-engendering altitude' conducive to meditation. Moreover the mast-head also commands a wide and unobstructed view of those waters which Ishmael says are forever 'wedded' to meditation. He admits candidly that 'with the problem of the universe revolving' in him he kept but 'sorry guard' (p. 139) at his lonely look-out post.

Nevertheless, in spite of its thought-provoking influences, Ishmael's reflective excursions do not take place at the mast-head but rather during quiet, temporary interludes in the bustling activity of the ship. For example, it was on a 'cloudy, sultry afternoon' when the seamen were 'lazily lounging about the decks' that Ishmael yielded to the 'incantation of revery' in the air, while he and Queequeg were 'mildly employed' weaving a sword-mat for their boat.

...I say so strange a dreaminess did there then reign all over the ship and all over the sea, only broken by the intermitting dull sound of the sword, that it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates....This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable

threads....this savage's sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance--aye, chance, free will, and necessity --no wise incompatible--all interweavingly working together. (p. 185)

No doubt the thought of this passage is compatible with Ishmael's earlier sense of being directed by those police-officers, the Fates, not forgetting, too, the independence manifested by his enquiring mind and his determination to confront danger and death with a resilient spirit. And yet I think we should not build too much on such passages. It seems to me there is something glib about the language Ishmael uses here. The repetition of 'seemed' and 'thought I' emphasize that these reflections are subjective responses to a temporary mood. Paul Brodtkorb, who has pointed out the extent to which Ishmael's attitudes and observations are dependent on mood, says of this passage:

The harmonious loom is the appearance of an extraordinary moment. If it is to be an accurate metaphor of the over-all working of causality, at the very least the peaceful complacency in which it is founded must be destroyed; and in the next moment exactly that happens, as the "preluding" atmosphere is fulfilled when whales are sighted and the "ball of free will" drops out of the self-sufficient mechanical pattern as well as out of Ishmael's hand.⁶³

Peaceful, harmonious interludes are a rarity of the Pequod and there is a feeling of artificiality about

them which is enhanced by the sudden intrusion of the call to action. Ishmael knows that the mind never runs so freely as when the body is performing some unexacting, mechanical, physical activity in pleasant, preferably warm, surroundings. However, in these cases, the danger is that the thought will take on something of a pleasant mechanical nature too.

The loom metaphor reappears later, in 'The Gilder' chapter, in another passage of Ishmael's reflections undertaken in response to very similar circumstances. The Pequod is on the Japanese cruising grounds, the weather is 'mild' and 'pleasant' and Ishmael says:

At such times, under an abated sun; afloat all day upon smooth slow heaving swells; seated in his boat, light as a birch canoe; and so sociably mixing with the soft waves themselves, that like heath-stone cats they purr against the gunwale; these are 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;... (p. 405)

Here again the warm, pleasant weather (the sun has 'abated' its customary power) and the gentle, mechanical rocking of the boat produces a dreamy 'mystic' mood. But again there is the suggestion that such moods are not to be trusted for they deceive the unwary by concealing the true nature of the world. And here again the deceptive, meditative calm weather is abruptly

shattered for 'in these resplendant Japanese seas the mariner encounters the direst of all storms, the Typhoon' (p. 413). So the calm 'Gilder' chapter is quickly followed by the violence of 'The Candles.'

Nevertheless, Ishmael regrets the passing of these quiet interludes (and here the loom reappears):

Would to God these blessed calms would last. But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm. (p. 406)

and so proceeds to a curious passage of reflection:

There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause: -through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally.

(p. 406)

Here Ishmael seems to be saying that the growth of consciousness necessarily implies the growth of questioning and doubt and that belief is childish. Yet doubt is an adolescent trait, and being 'the common doom' is hardly desirable. Only 'manhood's pondering repose of If' seems, by the language to receive any endorsement by the narrator (we recall his frequent use

of the conditional tense) but even here there is no real repose but only an endless circular route through childish belief to adult hypotheses. Ishmael seems sceptical even about scepticism and his view of the human situation is a bleak one which the gentle language induced by the memory of calm ocean cannot quite conceal. Like the 'tiger heart' beneath the brilliant ocean's skin, the menace shows through. Ishmael asks:

Where lies the final harbour, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling's father hidden?

and his answer follows in gentle melancholy and pessimism:

Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it. (p. 406)

The inscrutability of the world remains--there are no answers to its riddle this side of the grave. Again, the thought of the passage is compatible with that revealed in our examination of other kinds of language in the novel, but again we have to note that the particular tone of the passage arises out of the narrator's memory of a particular mood and a particular occasion.

These reflective passages are useful in that they

may offer direct statements to elucidate attitudes and thoughts implicit elsewhere in the narrator's language. However, no one of them should be regarded as an ultimate key to the novel. They always have to be set in their own special backgrounds and considered against the wider context of the narrator's other languages.

Expending some amiable satire, Ishmael himself gives warning against taking too seriously the 'romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the carking cares of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber' (p. 139). More significantly he also warns against those very moods, already discussed, in which the meditative thoughts arise:

...but lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thought, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature;... (p. 140)

This passage not only argues against transcendentalism but it also provides a qualification to the meditation and water theme which underlies the whole book. By all means let the ocean induce speculations in the thoughtful man but let him also retain his separate identity--the world and the individual are two not one.

To merge with the external world is to try and solve the problem it poses by becoming a part of that which one cannot understand. By entering into the mystery the need to understand it disappears. Only the separate individual consciousness which perceives the world as other has this itch to probe and learn. But even if this endeavour is doomed to failure the other way must be rejected for to merge is to destroy the self, and therefore to sell short one's humanity. Thus we find Ishmael offering words of caution about the very state into which he is occasionally tempted. Again we find a self-critical gloss by the narrator which tends to undermine or qualify what he has said elsewhere.

In summing up this examination of Ishmael's language I would say that it is the persistent undermining effect in the language which should be especially noted. Ishmael's problem of how to know the unknowable and speak about the unspeakable is revealed in the language, but the thoroughgoing scepticism which the problem induces in him extends to the language in which he seeks to convey it and understand it, so that, finally, the capacity of language itself to tackle the problem is questioned. The implications of this point for an understanding of the novel are considerable. As I have already noted, for Guetti, the failure of Ishmael's

languages constitutes the success of the book for it is by the very inadequacy of language to comprehend the ineffable that the existence of the ineffable is confirmed. I, too, think that the necessary failure of Ishmael's languages constitutes an ultimate success for the book but in a rather different fashion. It is this point and others that I now propose to consider.

PART III

THE SEARCH FOR SOME CERTAIN SIGNIFICANCE

Question. How many parts are there in a Sacrament?

Answer. There are two parts in a Sacrament: the outward visible sign, and the inward spiritual grace.

A Catechism

Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of this great allegory--the world?

Herman Melville, Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne,
Nov. 17, 1851

But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion.

Herman Melville, Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne,
June 1?, 1851

When Ishmael says rather desperately that 'some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world but an empty cipher' he is uttering a thought to which Ahab would readily have given assent. As Guetti says, 'Ahab's doctrine of masks, if we may call it that, resembles Ishmael's in its assertion of a split universe, of a disparity between the apparent and the real....'⁶⁴ To Ahab, 'All visible objects...are but as pasteboard masks' behind which hides 'some unknown but still reasoning thing' (p. 144). It is the unknown, 'that inscrutable thing,' that he chiefly hates because it maddens and torments him. I suppose that, as Matthiessen suggests, we can trace back to Plato the transcendentalist utterances of both Ahab and Ishmael.⁶⁵ But whereas Ahab chooses a 'fiery hunt' with harpoon and line to pierce the mask, to launch a missile across the intolerable gap between the appearances of the world and the suspected reality that lies beyond, Ishmael chooses the way of the artist and intellectual. Apart from dealing with the problems and questions raised by Ahab's way, Ishmael also considers many of the existing methods by which men have sought to comprehend the world they live in. They may take the form of institutions, observances and systems of thought and they include in Moby-Dick,

religion, ritual, science, philosophy, myth, symbolism and analogy, and intuition. Explicitly, or more often implicitly, Ishmael comments on the ability of all of them to yield knowledge and understanding of the nature of the world. His conclusions are pessimistic.

Religion

A good deal of Ishmaeleian satire and irony are expended in swipes at religion and the religious, from the portrait of the hypocritical Bildad--'Don't whale it too much 'a Lord's days, men; but don't miss a fair chance either, that's rejecting Heaven's good gifts' (p. 96)--to the gentle mocking of Father Mapple and his sermon. Queequeg also offers Ishmael some excellent opportunities to poke fun at conventional religion and its observances. He, too, attended Father Mapple's sermon, but as Ishmael dryly notes, 'he left the Chapel before the benediction some time' (p. 51). When Ishmael returned to the Spouter-Inn he found Queequeg whittling away at the nose of his little idol, Yojo, literally shaping his own deity, in fact. Later Ishmael is invited to join in the worship of Yojo in an episode that follows ironically close on the heels of his Christian devotions. Ishmael is thus able to indulge in a passage of humorous irony and

typically specious reasoning.

I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church. How then could I unite with this wild idolator in worshipping his piece of wood? ...But what is worship?--to do the will of God--that is worship. And what is the will of God--to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me--that is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently I must then unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolator. So I kindled the shavings; helped prop up the innocent little idol; offered him burnt biscuit with Queequeg; salaamed before him twice or thrice; kissed his nose; and that done, we undressed and went to bed, at peace with our own consciences and all the world.

(p. 54)

Having done a 'wicked' thing Ishmael goes to bed feeling 'spotless as the lamb.'⁶⁶ The tone and attitude revealed in this passage can most accurately be described as irreverent, I suppose. No wonder Evert Duyckinck, in his review of Moby-Dick, rather pompously said: 'We do not like to see what, under any view, must be to the world the most sacred associations of life violated and defaced.' Doubtless Duyckinck would also not have been deceived by Ishmael's ironic disclaimer at the beginning of the following passage in which he comprehensively attacks both the absurdity and the servility as well as the grandiose claims of religious

observances and institutions, and covertly launches an assault on Christianity in particular:

...I cherish the greatest respect towards everybody's religious obligations, never mind how comical, and could not find it in my heart to undervalue even a congregation of ants worshipping a toadstool; or those other creatures in certain parts of our earth, who, with a degree of footmanism quite unprecedented in other planets, bow down before the torso of a deceased landed proprietor merely on account of the inordinate possessions yet owned and rented in his name. (p. 78)

By ironically tending his respect to all 'obligations' indiscriminately (note the sting in 'never mind how comical') Ishmael conveys his actual respect for none.

However, there is a further irony which follows the episode with Queequeg and Yojo. At the Nantucket inn, the Try Pots, Queequeg retreats into his 'Ramadan, or Fasting and Humiliation,' as Ishmael calls it. At first Ishmael, with his tolerant good-nature, is content to 'let him be' but as the Ramadan goes on and on he becomes alarmed enough to break down the door of Queequeg's room. Ishmael's tolerance is strained by evidence of excess in others. He says:

Now, as I before hinted, I have no objection to any person's religion, be it what it may, so long as that person does not kill or insult any other person, because that other person don't believe it also. But when a man's religion

becomes really frantic; when it is a positive torment to him; and, in fine, makes this earth of ours an uncomfortable inn to lodge in; then I think it high time to take that individual aside and argue the point with him. (p. 81)

So long as a man's religion is a kind of harmless eccentricity Ishmael has no objections--indeed he will join him in it--but as soon as that religion begins to be assertive and make excessive demands on its devotees then for Ishmael it becomes 'stark nonsense.' And so the religiosity of Queequeg is shown to be as foolish as the religiosity of Father Mapple, and indeed the religious intensity of Ahab.

Ishmael's attitude is not, I think, born out of contempt for the problems which all religions attempt to grapple with--he is thoroughly familiar with man's metaphysical predicament. Rather his mockery is directed at the pretensions of religions in their claims to be repositories of ultimate truth, and at the unwholesome zeal attendant on such claims. If religion has no answers then treat it lightly for comfort's sake if for no other. Ishmael, in attempting to 'argue the point' with Queequeg, delivers a potted history of religion in which he tries to show the folly of penitential observances. 'I told him, too,' says Ishmael, 'that he being in other things such an extremely sensible and sagacious savage, it pained me, very much pained me, to see him now so

deplorably foolish about this ridiculous Ramadan of his' (p. 81). The tone here, as in the whole passage from which it comes, is as much a product of Ishmael's mockery of his former earnestness as of Queequeg's religious zeal. The later Ishmael has good reason to know that men are not easily diverted from their folly in these matters. Queequeg is not to be diverted either, of course, and with delightful irony Ishmael records Queequeg's response to his exhortations: 'He looked at me with a sort of condescending concern and compassion, as though he thought it a great pity that such a sensible young man should be so hopelessly lost to evangelical pagan piety' (p. 82). Ishmael is as much a heathen to Queequeg as he would have been to Father Mapple. Although ostensibly in 'The Ramadan' chapter it is Queequeg's religion that is under examination, references to Lent as well as to Ramadan itself, and Ishmael's history of religion indicate that a wider context is being aimed at. Under cover of concern for pagan folly, Ishmael can take pot shots at Christian folly too.

Ritual

There is, of course, a strongly ritualistic element in the religious observances referred to in the previous section. Father Mapple's sermon and Queequeg's mani-

pulations with Yojo contain obvious examples and enough has already been said to indicate that Ishmael presents these rituals in a mocking and satiric light. However, there are other ritualistic ceremonies enacted or described in Moby-Dick, and indeed it is partly because of their numbers that I include ritual in this present group. Chiefly, however, I include ritual because of its function as a ceremonial embodiment and visible manifestation of analogical meaning and significance. Or, in religious terms, the outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace, as the Prayer Book says of sacraments.

It would be tiresome to list all the examples of ritual in the novel. However, some powerful and obvious ones will occur to any reader--the oath-taking ceremony in 'The Quarter-deck' chapter, the forging of Ahab's harpoon with the assistance of the black arts, as well as his defiance of the thunderbolts in 'The Candles' chapter. It is no coincidence that all three examples involve Ahab. His flair for the theatrical has already been discussed, and as rituals contain a substantial dramatic element, it is not surprising to find Ahab exploiting them to help him acquire his ascendancy over his crew. However, Ahab's rituals are not merely stage devices. Although he does indeed exploit them, their

recurrence also signifies that Ahab has essentially a sacramental attitude to life, of which his doctrine of masks is a natural part. In 'The Candles' chapter he cries to the corpusants:

Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom
on these seas I as Persian once did worship,
till in the sacramental act 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. (p. 416)

Everywhere Ahab sees outward visible signs but instead of the inward spiritual grace finds only torment. His torment may be observed again in the perverted sacrament of baptism he enacted to temper his harpoon, when he 'deliriously howled,' the incantation, 'Ego non baptizo, etc.' (p. 404). But as the narrator's words 'deliriously howled' indicate, the theatricality of Ahab's performances cannot be overlooked. Ishmael, we recall, says ironically that he has respect for everyone's religious obligations 'never mind how comical' and his satiric hand has indeed fatally introduced a 'comical' touch to Ahab's extravagant rituals. The rhetoric which follows Ahab's speech quoted above is very revealing:

No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own
thy speechless, placeless power; but to the
last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute
its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me.
In the midst of the personified impersonal,
a personality stands here. Though but a point
at best; whencesoe'er I came; whencesoe'er I

go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly
 personality lives in me, and feels her
 royal rights. (p. 417)

The insistent alliteration--note the f's, the s's, the p's, the m's, the l's and the r's--signal an absurd excess in Ahab. His rituals are overplayed and hollow; they bring out the charlatanism in Ahab, of which he has a generous measure.

So Ahab's sound and fury as well as the various religious rituals, in the end signify nothing. However, as a parting shot from Ishmael's capacious locker I would like to refer to an account of a seemingly trivial ritual that took place outside the main events of the narrative. In the 'Wheelbarrow' chapter Ishmael records a story told him by Queequeg about his sister's marriage. At the marriage feast, according to Queequeg, the High Priest opened the proceedings 'by the immemorial ceremony of the island; that is, dipping his consecrated and consecrating fingers into the bowl' (p. 59). A visiting sea captain attending the wedding notices this action, and 'thinking himself--being Captain of a ship --as having plain precedence over a mere island King, especially in the King's own house--the Captain coolly proceeds to wash his hands in the punch bowl.' And, said Queequeg, 'Didn't our people laugh?' The story is prompted originally by the incident with the wheel-

barrow which revealed Queequeg's ignorance of a particular aspect of American life. What it signifies is that one man's ceremonial libation may be another man's finger bowl. Just as there is an individual subjectivity in interpreting the signs and portents in the world, so there is a kind of cultural relativity with regard to rituals and ceremonies. A ritual can have only a localized meaning and may signify nothing to one who does not already share the meaning collectively assigned to it. So ritual, too, cannot yield the ultimate truths that men seek.

Science

A sure way, one would think, of learning something significant about the nature of the world would be by recourse to scientific method--rigorous enquiry, proper classification and controlled experimentation. Ishmael does indeed dabble with scientific method but in a typically sceptical and satirical manner. His most sustained attempt at scientific, or perhaps more accurately, pseudo-scientific enquiry occurs in the 'Cetology' chapter--its very title is curt, business-like, scientific. Ishmael's early comments in the chapter are similarly brisk and to the point: 'It is some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera, that

I would fain put before you' (p. 116). 'Listen to what the best and latest authorities have laid down' (p. 117). But at once he also begins to qualify his intention by pointing out the difficulty of his task. He quotes learned authorities to establish the confused state of cetological studies and adds his own personal disclaimers: 'I promise nothing complete.... I shall not pretend to a minute anatomical description of the various species...' (p. 118). But still, in spite of all the hedging and qualification, Ishmael observes the proprieties of scientific enquiry, only to shatter them the moment he considers his first problem (is the whale a fish?). He says, 'Be it known that, waiving all argument, I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish, and call upon holy Jonah to back me' (p. 119). Again, so much for scientific method and the painstaking enquiries of learned authorities! Discussion gives way to assertion. Next follows the classification of whales according to book sizes which takes Ishmael the whole distance from his deceptively business-like beginning into outright satire on scientific method and classification.

The satire originates, I believe, in Ishmael's awareness that any system of classification is by its very nature arbitrary and limited. He says: '...any

human thing supposed to be complete must for that very reason infallibly be faulty' (p. 118). Even the redoubtable Century Dictionary says that 'a genus has no natural, much less necessary, definition, its meaning being at best a matter of expert opinion.' This being the case why should not a bibliographical system of classification for whales be as good as any other (if size is the criterion being considered, it really is not a bad system!)? Indeed, given the highly literary nature of most of Ishmael's researches it is, in a sense, a very appropriate system for him to use. Moreover, to a layman, Ishmael's suspicion of classification based on minute distinctions might seem well founded. As he says, 'It is by endless subdivisions based upon the most inconclusive differences, that some departments of natural history become so repellingly intricate' (p. 121) and clearly he regards cetology as being in this category. However, I don't really want to make out a case for Ishmael's system. It is sufficient that the bibliographical system satirically draws attention to the arbitrary nature of classification and the specialized and limited kind of knowledge that the scientific method yields.

For further evidence of Ishmael's view of scientific method we can note the interesting fact that this chapter

on cetology is one of the most jocular chapters in the book. It contains, among others, two phallic jokes on the subject of horns,⁶⁷ and a carelessness of tone and attitude that reveals a lack of respect for the classificatory method. 'Where any name happens to be vague or inexpressive, I shall say so, and suggest another. I do so now, touching the Black Fish,... So, call him the Hyena Whale, if you please' (p. 124). Lawrance Thompson, who regards all concern for whaling in Moby-Dick as allegorically some form of God-concern and who would read 'theology' for 'cetology,' takes Ishmael's disrespectful tone as being evidence of Melville's quarrel with God.⁶⁸ This idea, though interesting, seems to me perverse because it ignores the plainer meaning of the chapter--the attack on classification--which is supportable by reference to the text. Even if the plain meaning is also admitted, to perceive theology in cetology's place is to regard the book with Thompson's eyes rather than Ishmael's. To say that concern for whaling is God-concern is an unsupported intuition which ignores the evidence of the book itself. Ishmael's concern, as I have tried to show, is with how one can know and with what one can know. To construe a quarrel with God must assume some prior belief in and supposed knowledge of the deity, but

this is conspicuously lacking in Moby-Dick with its tortuous, equivocal language and sceptical tone. Ishmael is not even prepared to concede to science the ability to yield important truths about the nature of the world. What science can do is limited to the world of appearances and finally is insignificant --in fact it cannot even comprehend the whale. And if men cannot know the whale whom they have seen, how can they know God whom they havenot seen? To this extent I will admit Thompson's proposition, although to 'God' we could add other transcendentalist terms like 'spirit' or 'ultimate reality' or 'invisible realm' or some such.

However, before moving on to new categories, it is worth noting that Ishmael himself carries out some practical first-hand scientific research (or so he says) in addition to his secondary researches into other men's work. For example, in the chapter entitled 'A Bower in the Arsacides' where he introduces the question of the sperm whale's anatomy, Ishmael intimates that he has actually dissected a small cub sperm whale, although, suspiciously, he doesn't actually say so, quite. Instead he asks rhetorically: 'Think you I let that chance go, without using my boat-hatchet and jack-knife, and breaking the seal and reading all the contents of that young cub?' (p. 373). Knowing Ishmael's enquiring mind

no doubt we reply 'no,' yet it is curious that he does not then present us with the results of his anatomical dissections. Moreover, what follows is not reassuring. Ishmael offers as his 'exact knowledge of the bones of the leviathan in their gigantic, full grown development' (p. 373) the results of his alleged measurement of a sperm whale skeleton which the people of Tranque had assembled and used as a place of worship (here is more God-concern!). Once more Ishmael has a curious fear that he will not be believed. He says rather defensively, even truculently, 'but first, be it recorded, that, in this matter, I am not free to utter any fancied measurement I please. Because there are skeleton authorities you can refer to, to test my accuracy' (p. 375). Yet in referring to these authorities he uses phrases like 'they tell me' and 'I have heard,' which means that they are by no means unequivocally established. Furthermore Ishmael undercuts the whole business of scientific measurement with a whimsical passage which again raises doubts about his veracity:

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 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. (p. 376)

It seems that one function of Ishmael's scepticism is to induce scepticism in the reader also! In this case the reader's scepticism is well founded for, as I indicated in the section on Ishmael's magnification of his theme, the valuable statistics that he claims he so painstakingly had tattooed on his arm are considerably exaggerated. Therefore some, at least, of Ishmael's scientific observations fail the test that all such observations must pass--the appeal to verification. His approach to scientific method is as sceptical and cavalier as his approach to other modes of human knowledge. He says of 'physiognomy' that it, 'like every other human science, is but a passing fable' (p. 292). But in the quest for truth no possibility should be ignored so let us move on.

Philosophy

Ishmael's flirtation with transcendentalist views has already been noted in the comparison of his thought with Ahab's. However, most often the thrust of his mind is sceptical. More accurately, perhaps, he is

tempted by a transcendentalist interpretation of the problem of existence--something must lie beyond--but it is accompanied by the pervasive scepticism that his actual experience and observation of the world induce in him. Again we find opposites being held simultaneously in Ishmael's mind.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Ishmael directs his irony against Plato who fathered the transcendentalist theory by his assertion that there is an invisible, ultimate world of ideal forms, of which the objects and appearances of this world are but dim and imperfect copies. After recounting Tashtego's astonishing rescue from the sperm whale's head, Ishmael says, 'how many, think ye, have likewise fallen into Plato's honey head, and sweetly perished there?' (p. 290). Ishmael himself resists the sweet allurements of Plato although the philosophical problem that besets him is in essence a Platonic one. In his exegesis of Plato's theory of ideas in the History of Western Philosophy, Bertrand Russell says: 'Thus we arrive at the conclusion that opinion is of the world presented to the senses, whereas knowledge is of a super-sensible eternal world.'⁶⁹ Ishmael's equivocal, qualified language, and his continual use of 'seems,' all confine him to this realm of opinion, which is partial and fallible. The super-

sensible realm of infallible knowledge is forever elusive. Ishmael's stance remains obstinately this-worldly and, however much an other-worldly solution may tempt him, he cannot quite bring himself to trust it.

Ishmael's position can be further defined by Russell's comments on Plato, however. In Plato's view, according to Russell, opinion must be of what both is and is not.

But how is this possible? The answer is that particular things always partake of opposite characters: what is beautiful is also, in some respects, ugly; what is just is, in some respects, unjust, and so on. All particular sensible objects, so Plato contends, have this contradictory character....⁷⁰

As we have had occasion to note frequently, Ishmael is accustomed to perceiving his world in terms of opposites which he holds simultaneously in the same context. This mode of perception belongs to the realm of contingencies and subjectivities--in short of opinion, and again places Ishmael on the this-worldly side of Plato's argument.

In 'The Decanter' chapter Ishmael attaches, in a parody of Scoresby, a list of whale-ship provisions allegedly found in a 'Low Dutch' treatise on the commerce of Holland. However, the joke is at Plato's expense

as well as Scoresby's for Ishmael adds: '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;...' (p. 372). The irony is unmistakable and there is more than a hint that transcendental and Platonic philosophizing produces indigestion. This same metaphor occurs earlier in 'A Bosom Friend' where Ishmael comments satirically that, 'so soon as I hear that such or such a man gives himself out for a philosopher, I conclude that, like the dyspeptic old woman, he must have "broken his digester"' (p. 53). Rather than the mental flatulence brought about by self-conscious philosophizing, Ishmael prefers the unconscious, unaffected, 'natural' philosophy of Queequeg, in whose simplicity he perceives a true wisdom. As he says, 'perhaps, to be true philosophers, we mortals should not be conscious of so living or so striving' (p. 52). If a man adheres to systems of philosophy he will find himself tugged back and forth by contending schools. The recollection of the whale heads suspended on each side of the Pequod provokes this thought in Ishmael:

...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 thunderheads overboard, and then you will float light and right. (p. 277)

Inescapably, the conclusion is that philosophy offers no insight into the 'problem of the universe.' Its rival systems are so much useless dead weight that rob a man of his freedom of thought and natural simplicity. Like religion and science, philosophy generates stipulative definitions and explanations of material and spiritual things and because stipulative therefore also restrictive and incomplete. Better to stay open to all possibilities, free and buoyant. Or, to change the image, one's soul must be free to soar like the 'Catskill eagle' which, buoyed up on the currents of the air, 'can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces' (p. 355).

Having considered some of the grand systems which men employ in their search for a way to acquire and enclose knowledge and truth, I now propose to turn to some other less systematic, less disciplined but nevertheless significant and persistent methods. These are myth, symbol and analogy, and intuition.

Myth

In all the discussions of Moby-Dick no more dangerous topic exists than myth. In the twinkling of an eye the novel may be transformed into 'an Egyptian myth incarnate'⁷¹ and Ahab may become Prometheus or Faust or Job or Satan and so on. I don't propose to investigate these associations, which undoubtedly are in the book--I merely wish to insist on their relative rather than their absolute value. To say that Ahab is Osiris is to say at least as much about Ishmael's way of perceiving him as it does about Ahab himself, and maybe more. I have already examined the way in which Ishmael 'creates' Ahab, and among the materials that he uses is myth. Ishmael, the former school-teacher, the researcher, is a man of wide reading and active mind. He has, as I shall shortly indicate more fully, an analogizing mind which works by seeking out comparisons and correspondences, and in myth he finds a fertile and potent source of them.

Ishmael is always seeking to reify. In his efforts to give substance to the values he perceives in his experience of Ahab and the White Whale, as well as to the facts themselves, he draws upon the sum total of his own knowledge of the world and its contents including

myth and legend. But as earlier discussions have tried to show, Ishmael is well aware of the dangers and difficulties of trying to express what is essentially inexpressible and of seeking to give shape and meaning to one subjective and fallible view of events. He has no choice but use the materials which the world supplies, so he does indeed draw upon Egyptian references (among many others) to build his theme, as 'The Sphynx' chapter and Ahab's 'Egyptian' heart and Moby Dick's pyramidical hump testify. However, it would be a mistake to overlook the characteristic irreverence of a line like this: 'It is out of the idolatrous dotings of the old Egyptians upon broiled ibis and roasted river horse, that you see the mummies of those creatures in their huge bake-houses the pyramids' (p. 14). As the earlier discussion of Ishmael's language indicated, his typical method is to undercut that which he most confidently puts forward. The whole of 'The Honor and Glory of Whaling' constitutes a satire on this business of mythological reference. There, by far-fetched allusions and absurd logic, Ishmael tries to appropriate a mixed bag of mythological and legendary heroes for the greater glory of the whaling industry. 'Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnoo! there's a member-roll for you! What club but the whaleman's can head off like that?' (p. 306). In

fact, while he exploits the mythological value of the references, he is also drawing attention to the forced nature of such associations. If the human mind perceives a correspondence human ingenuity will do its best to substantiate it.

Ishmael does not simply make use of myth, however, he also creates it, partly out of existing myths and partly by his own creative effort. Such is the imaginative force and vigour of language with which the narrative is presented, and so powerful are the associations woven round them, that Ahab and the White Whale achieve a status that makes them, in a sense, independent of the work that gave them life.⁷² Their mythic status transmits Ishmael's theme to us most powerfully even while, at the same time, he cannot forebear to reveal the limitations of the myth-making activity. On the other hand, Bruce Franklin is of the opinion that 'ridicule of other myths has often been mistaken for an identification of the whale with the ridiculed mythic gods',⁷³ and he postulates instead a 'serious central myth',⁷⁴ which he claims is intensified by the comic parallels. But my point is that it is not so much the myths that are ridiculed but mythologising. 'The Honor and Glory of Whaling' ridicules the activity of mind which continually seeks to make mythic associations and correspondences. Moby Dick, of course, acquires his mythic status through the

activity of mind of Ishmael, Ahab, and the superstitious crew of the Pequod. As Franklin himself says, 'because Ahab succeeds in defining him [Moby Dick] psychologically, metaphysically, and morally as the Dragon, the Leviathan, the Typhon, the whale becomes in mythic fact that great demon.'⁷⁵ But Ahab's mythologising can be seen as absurd, mistaken, and arbitrary when considered in the light of Ishmael's obviously ludicrous mythologising in 'The Honor and Glory of Whaling.' This chapter alerts us to the folly and the danger involved as it undermines the mythologising process which produces the myth of the White Whale. John Seelye sees all the whaling material, mythological or otherwise, as having this same undermining effect. As he rightly observes: '...the cetology chapters act to negate the validity of Ahab's hunt.... This direction is mock heroic, mock epical, and qualifies the validity of Ahab's heroic character and the epical nature of his quest.'⁷⁶ These comments apply particularly, I think, to the 'Honor and Glory of Whaling' chapter, which conveys to us that Ishmael, as narrator, is well aware of the folly of mythologising, for he knows that it has led Ahab through his wilful and arbitrary definitions to destruction. Again the retrospective view is important.

However, the reader must beware, too. If mythologising cannot solve the riddle of the whale, and if

laying arbitrary definitions on him is foolish and dangerous, then the mythologising critic should take the hint. Moby-Dick illustrates that, in their quest for 'significance,' men are incorrigible myth-makers; but, as Ishmael's satire makes clear, one should not confuse the need for or the satisfaction to be gained from the activity with the actual possibility of securing real insight into the mysteries of the world.

Symbol and Analogy

I link symbol and analogy in this section not indeed because I consider them as identical but because both arise from the same process of mind that perceives meaning and significance in what is given in the external world. The difference between them lies in this, that the perceiver must do more work and engage perhaps in extended reflection to derive meaning from a symbol, whereas with an analogy both sides of the equation are given, as it were, and therefore the process of reflection is much simplified.

I take it as axiomatic that Moby-Dick is fundamentally a symbolist work, and the text for this view is, of course, Charles Feidelson's Symbolism and American

Literature. Feidelson says of Melville that,

He postulated a world where "matter and mind...unite," where "fact and fancy, half-way meeting, interpenetrate, and form one seamless whole." He was concerned with what he called "significance"--"things infinite in the finite; and dualities in unities." He was drawn to the "deeper meanings" of Hawthorne's tales and to the "deeper and deeper and unspeakable meanings" of Solomon.⁷⁷

This passage describes that search for 'some certain significance' which I take to be the motive underlying the various kinds of intellectual activity and belief that I have dealt with in Part III. Feidelson perhaps too easily ascribes to Melville the words and thoughts of his narrators and characters--however, he outlines the symbolist approach very clearly. He also quotes, as a statement of Melville's aesthetic doctrine, the well-known letter to Sophia Hawthorne:

But, then, since you, with your spiritualizing nature, see more things than other people, and by the same process, refine all you see, so that they are not the same things that other people see, but things which while you think you but humbly discover them, you do in fact create them for yourself--therefore, upon the whole, I do not so much marvel at your expressions concerning Moby Dick. At any rate, your allusion to the "Spirit Spout" first showed to me that there was a subtle significance in that thing--but I did not, in that case, mean it. I had some vague idea while writing it, that the whole book was susceptible of an allegoric construction, & also that parts of it were--but the speciality

of many of the particular subordinate allegories, were first revealed to me, after reading Mr Hawthorne's letter, which, without citing any particular examples, yet intimated the part-&-parcel allegoricalness of the whole.⁷⁸

The letter reveals, as Feidelson points out, that 'Melville regarded the book as a body of potential meaning, and for him there was nothing binding in his own preconceptions.'⁷⁹ However, the ideas expressed in the letter are capable of further extension into the book. It is a nicely ironic point that the first sentence quoted above could, with the exception of the word 'humbly,' as well be addressed to Ahab as to Sophia Hawthorne. The letter supports what the book repeatedly emphasizes, that the symbolic vision is essentially subjective and individual. Ahab has a 'spiritualizing nature' (albeit an infernal one); he sees more than other men and what he sees are decidedly not the same things as Starbuck or Stubb or Flask or Ishmael; he too, in fact, creates these things (read Moby Dick as demon here), so indeed the reader should not 'much marvel' at Ahab's 'expressions concerning Moby Dick.' The problem implicit here is obvious--what validity can be assigned to one man's subjective, symbolic vision of the world? As Feidelson says, though he does not really apply the point closely to Moby-Dick, 'the theme of

the book is an unresolved question--doubly unresolved, since the question is precisely the validity of the method.'⁸⁰ The question, in other words, is not, simply, what is the meaning of the universe, but also what use are the methods we employ to try to discover that meaning?

It is my contention that the book shows that all methods fail, indeed must fail for by definition the question is unanswerable, the problem ungraspable. In Moby-Dick, the symbolist method is no exception for it leads Ahab precipitately to his doom. It can be linked to the philosophical dualism traceable to Plato and to the mythologizing tendency, discussed previously, both of which are satirized by Ishmael. Nor does the symbolist method itself escape Ishmael's ironic glance. I have already referred to the equivocation in the well-known words from 'The Doubloon' chapter: 'And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth,....' (emphasis added). The reader's confidence in the existence of 'some certain significance' is not increased by the widely diverging interpretations subsequently given of the symbols on the doubloon. The interpretations in fact correspond to the individual personalities making the assessment. Ahab runs to his usual absurd excess: 'The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous,

the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab' (p. 359), but then restates the whole problem in succinct terms, 'and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self.' The symbolist method cannot penetrate the mysteries of the world but throws men back on their own resources.

What I have been saying about symbolising also applies to the extensive analogising which goes on in Moby-Dick. Ishmael's analogising mind seeks to illuminate character and event by a complex system of correspondences. However, the analogising yields no more than the symbolising and at times it is suspiciously facile, as if Ishmael is acknowledging the limitations of the method even as his mind runs on with it. When he is roped to Queequeg while the latter is over the side attaching the blubber-hook, Ishmael reflects upon his situation:

And yet still further pondering--while I jerked him now and then from between the whale and the ship, which would threaten to jam him--still further pondering, I say, I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills you die. (p. 271)

The tone here is suspect, the clauses in apposition add a touch of pomposity which betrays the fundamental lack of seriousness of the thought, which seems too easily produced. Similarly, the lengthy analogising reflections of the 'Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish' chapter also possess a humorously pompous facility:

But ploughed up to the primary rock of the matter the two great principles laid down in the twin whaling laws previously quoted, and applied and elucidated by Lord Ellenborough in the above cited case; these two laws touching Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish, I say, will, on reflection, be found the fundamentals of all human jurisprudence; for notwithstanding its complicated tracery of sculpture, the Temple of the Law, like the Temple of the Philistines, has but two props to stand on. (p. 333)

Admittedly the tone of this passage can in part be accounted for by Ishmael's irony at the expense of an unjust legal system. Still, again we find the subordinate clauses and the 'I say' where the long-winded Ishmael draws breath to complete his sentence, as well as a too neat and comprehensive solution to a complex question. Analogising can yield insights only about externals--the deeper problems remain unplumbed. In this, symbolising and analogising are no different from the other methods considered which similarly can deal only with externals, appearances and superficialities

(at least in terms of the ultimate problem put forward). Is there then no instrument with which to probe the mystery? Yes, there is one, but it, too, is fatally flawed, as we shall see.

Intuition

'The Fountain' chapter, after some hypothesizing on the nature of the whale's spout, concludes with this reflection which arises characteristically out of the material that has gone before:

And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for 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.

(p. 314)

The fundamental problem is again restated in this passage. On the one hand is the world which will yield to only the most superficial scrutiny and analysis, but on the other the intuition that something lies beyond. Ishmael's intuitions are of 'things heavenly' and he thanks God for them, unlike Ahab who is enraged by his intuitions of an implacable malice and hostility.

But it is in the nature of intuition as a kind of instinctive knowledge, that it may not be subject to verification. In fact, neither Ishmael nor Ahab can turn to the world to bear out their intuitions. Nevertheless, where Ishmael is content to rest with the intuition itself, Ahab is determined to act upon it even though it is not constant and he sometimes suspects that 'there's naught beyond' (p. 144). Moreover, as Ishmael says, although many doubt few men have intuitions --they are a special gift to any individual who possesses them, and we find ourselves, therefore, back in a subjective world where one man's intuition may look like madness to another. And indeed Ahab does appear mad to Ishmael as he must to anyone who does not share his intuition. To us he seems doubly mad in his insistence on trying to act upon his intuition, though in fact he is simply acting according to his own logic within the limits of his own particular perception. But to attempt to act on an intangible apprehension of an inscrutable force must fail and does and Ahab's death is the measure of his failure.

Ishmael and Ahab are not alone in their intuitions, however. Pip, left behind in the sea by Stubb, figuratively and literally plunges into the ocean that more than anything typifies the immense, lonely, inscrutable world.

Ishmael says of him:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. 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 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. (p. 347)

Pip's vision or intuition of the foundation of the earth is so private, so essentially incommunicable that when he tries to utter it he is regarded as mad. But is he mad? Well, yes and no--intuitions of spiritual things are ambiguous in this respect. As Ishmael says, 'man's insanity is heaven's sense' but that in itself is an intuitive remark based on an immediate perception rather than a supportable position. So the ambiguity remains. Intuition holds no certain, communicable knowledge but only the unverifiable wisdom that men are liable to call insane.

Ishmael, then, displays a profound scepticism, indeed disrespect, towards the systems of thought and belief and the methods of enquiry that men have created in order to explain the world and their unaccountable presence in it. At best the systems and

methods can yield only a limited and fragmentary knowledge about the appearances of the world; at worst they encumber men with useless dogmas that can do nothing to appease their sense of a profounder reality. Appearance or reality?--what is true?--what is actually the case? --what is the explanation for these phenomena?--these are questions that continually plague Ishmael. It is difficult enough for him to provide answers even in respect of the world of appearances to which he does have access, impossible when dealing with the problems of ultimate meaning and significance. In the next and final Part I propose to examine some of the consequences of this state of affairs for Ishmael and Ahab, and for Melville, too.

PART IV
CONCLUSIONS

Still, we can hypothesize, even if we cannot prove
and establish. Ishmael, p. 313

To state the matter briefly, if ponderously, there is an epistemological problem underlying the whole of Moby-Dick. Ishmael is continually concerned with the question of what it is possible to have certain knowledge about. The answer, implicit in his equivocation, irony, satire, and pervasive scepticism, is that there is little indeed that a man can be sure of. Such an answer, while failing to meet one problem, creates another--an ontological problem. What, in a world lacking all certainties, may be the state of a man's being?--what his existential situation? These are the questions.

Ishmael and Ahab: The Existential Situation

Ishmael and Ahab have much in common. They both perceive what Ishmael refers to in his discussion of the carpenter as 'the general stolidity discernible in the whole visible world; which while pauselessly active in uncounted modes, still eternally holds its peace, and ignores you, though you dig foundations for cathedrals' (p. 388). Both have intuitions of something lying behind the stolid face of the world, and both are aware of the subjective nature of the meanings men derive from the world. Indeed, as I noted earlier, it is Ahab who, in 'The Doubloon' chapter, articulates the problem of subjectivity most succinctly

when he talks of the 'globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self' (p. 359). In a world where so little that is certain is given to a man he has only his resources of self to fall back on. More than that, under such circumstances there is a continual threat to the self--a man must struggle to preserve his identity in the face of the lack of meaning that always seems about to overwhelm him. Moby-Dick contains a record of Ahab's struggle to overwhelm the inscrutable world, which he feels is nonetheless malicious, before it overwhelms him, and it is a record of Ishmael's own struggle to come to grips with meaninglessness.

In The Divided Self, an existential study of schizophrenics, R. D. Laing sets up some definitions which may be of assistance in understanding Ishmael and Ahab. He refers to what he calls 'primary ontological security' using 'ontological,' as he says, as a simple adverbial or adjectival derivative of 'being.'⁸¹ According to Laing, 'a basically ontologically secure person will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity.'⁸² An ontologically insecure person, on the other hand, will find in the external world a threat to his identity.

If the individual cannot take the realness, aliveness, autonomy, and identity of himself and others for granted, then he has to become absorbed in contriving ways of trying to be real, of keeping himself or others alive, of preserving his identity, in efforts, as he will often put it, to prevent himself losing his self. What are to most people everyday happenings, which are hardly noticed because they have no special significance, may become deeply significant in so far as they either contribute to the sustenance of the individual's being or threaten him with non-being. Such an individual, for whom the elements of the world are coming to have, or have come to have, a different hierarchy of significance from that of the ordinary person, is beginning, as we say, to 'live in a world of his own,' or has already come to do so. ... External events no longer affect him in the same way as they do others: it is not that they affect him less; on the contrary, frequently they affect him more.⁸³

I do not wish to commit some egregious reductionist blunder by writing Ahab off as simply mad, nor do I think he can be called schizophrenic, though perhaps he does, to some extent fit Laing's description of the schizoid, who 'is not able to experience himself "together with" others or "at home in" the world, but, on the contrary, ...experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation;' and moreover 'does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as "split" in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so on.'⁸⁴ However, my real concern is to use Laing's description

and definitions to illuminate the existential position of those who like Ahab, and like Ishmael, too, are faced with an identity crisis brought about by their particular perceptions of the world. It does seem to me that Laing's definition of an ontologically insecure person is suggestive for an understanding of Ahab. The phrase 'different hierarchy of significance' is particularly relevant and the external events involving Moby Dick certainly affect Ahab much more than anyone else. Although the crew of the Pequod have superstitious forebodings about Moby Dick, the significance Ahab assigns to him, according to Ishmael, is peculiarly his own:

All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it. (p. 160)

We have seen elsewhere the element of absurdity in Ahab and here again there is something grotesque, exaggerated, even paranoid, about Ahab's response to a situation which, in Ishmael's terms, all men have to face. That more

'ordinary' responses are possible to Ahab's particular situation is indicated by the case of Captain Boomer. He, too, was mutilated by Moby Dick, but for that very reason he realistically and honestly resolved to keep clear of him in the future. 'No more White Whales for me; I've lowered for him once, and that has satisfied me' (p. 368). Of course, Ahab's conception of Moby Dick as the representative of the malicious, invisible powers of the universe is far beyond the imaginative capability of Captain Boomer, who risks less and therefore suffers less. Ahab's world is highly subjective and owes little to the contributions of the rest of the crew whom Ahab sees merely as the agents of his will. Ahab's self, as we see it in the novel, is created and held together by his hatred of the white whale and his lust for revenge, without which this self could not exist. It is difficult for the reader to imagine Ahab existing in different circumstances. In Melville: The Ironic Diagram, John Seelye points out how Ahab is frequently associated with straight lines, which reveals his firmness, fortitude and unswerving aims.⁸⁵ Yet it seems to me there is a brittle rigidity about Ahab--his firmness and fortitude are only maintained by a continual effort of will. He seems incomplete and not fully human (he is at once more than human and less). Because he cannot bend he must

break.

Ahab has his humanities, however, as the intimate episodes with Starbuck and Pip testify. Nevertheless, finally Ahab rejects them both. When Pip pleads to go with Ahab at the commencement of the final hunt, the old man replies: 'If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab's purpose keels up in him. I tell thee no; it cannot be' (p. 436). Ahab cannot surrender his purpose for to do so would be to surrender the self he has so painstakingly and agonizingly constructed. A satisfying human relationship would constitute a threat to this self and must be denied. In cutting off Pip and Starbuck Ahab is guilty of what Laing calls 'depersonalization,' which is a technique for dealing with another person 'when he becomes too tiresome or disturbing.' As Laing says, 'one no longer allows oneself to be responsive to his feelings and may be prepared to regard him and treat him as though he had no feelings.'⁸⁶ Typically Ahab does not regard or treat his crew as human beings but as functionaries of his purpose. Often he is contemptuous of them as his attitude to Stubb, whom he calls 'mechanical' and addresses as 'dog' on one occasion, indicates. Significantly Ahab and Ishmael are never recorded as meeting in a human encounter, although at the end Ishmael forms part of Ahab's boat crew.

I feel some diffidence in pressing Laing's definitions too hard upon Ahab (though as he is widely and frequently described as 'crazy' perhaps the scruple is unnecessary). Nevertheless, when Laing describes the paranoid as feeling 'persecuted by reality itself' (his emphasis) the relevance to Ahab seems clear. Interestingly enough Laing says that there are many images which may be used to reveal ways in which identity is threatened and among them 'the image of fire recurs repeatedly.' 'Fire may be the uncertain flickering of the individual's own inner aliveness. It may be a destructive alien power which will devastate him. Some psychotics say in the acute phase that they are on fire, that their bodies are being burned up.'⁸⁷ The association of Ahab with fire is made most powerfully and suggestively by Ishmael in 'The Chart' where he describes Ahab's metaphysical anguish saying,

...when, as was sometimes the case, these spiritual throes in him heaved his being up from its base, and a chasm seemed opening in him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them; when this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship; and with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from his state room, as though escaping from a bed that was on fire. (p. 174)

That Ishmael regards Ahab's problem as essentially

ontological is made clear by his reference to Ahab's 'spiritual throes' which 'heaved his being up from its base.' The continual iteration of 'in him' in the passage above denotes the identity crisis which is consuming Ahab like a flame and which he hopes to quench with the blood of Moby Dick. Ishmael even refers to a chasm opening up in Ahab's self, and it is tempting to see some kind of a schizophrenic split in him. However, not surprisingly perhaps, Ishmael encounters some difficulty and falls into some confusion in attempting to describe the state of Ahab's being. In a passage which connects with the one above, Ishmael attempts to account for the split in Ahab, which it transpires, is only temporary and occurs in sleep when Ahab is no longer able to hold his conflicting elements of self together.

Yet these, perhaps, instead of being the unsuppressable symptoms of some latent weakness, or fright at his own resolve, were but plainest tokens of its intensity. For, at such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the white whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle of soul in him; and 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.

But as the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul, therefore it must have been that, in Ahab's case, yielding up all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose; that purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own. Nay, could grimly live and burn, while the common vitality to which it was conjoined, fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth. (pp. 174-5)

Ishmael is obviously trying to express a sense of Ahab's defective self and employs traditional categories like mind and soul in so doing, but assigns some varying specialized meanings to them. Presumably the 'characterizing mind' is here the chief agent of identity and it is this that has gone wrong. 'Soul' in this context is not a spiritual entity but the animating, vital principle which supplies necessary energy but which in itself is incapable of determination. However, earlier Ishmael had claimed that Ahab's madness stemmed from the fact that 'his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another' (p. 160). Here the soul itself is apparently defective rather than being a healthful principle seeking to escape the dominating will of the mind. Soul would seem here to be more or less synonymous with self--the injury and insult to Ahab's body having produced a like effect on his self. Moreover, the body-soul dichotomy is re-introduced by Ahab himself on the second day of the chase

where he says:

Ye see an old man cut down to the stump;
 leaning on a shivered lance; propped up on
 a lonely foot. 'Tis Ahab--his body's part;
 but Ahab's soul's a centipede, that moves
 upon a hundred legs. I feel strained, half
 stranded, as ropes that tow dismasted fri-
 gates in a gale; and I may look so. But
 ere I break, ye'll hear me crack;... (p. 459)

Here again soul seems to be equivalent to self (note also the absurd inappropriateness of Ahab's centipede metaphor). Furthermore, as Laing says of ontologically insecure people, he seems to feel his self as 'partially divorced from his body.'⁸⁸ Laing maintains that the unembodied self acts as a mere onlooker at all the body does and engages in nothing directly itself. With Ahab the situation is reversed. It is his self that is profoundly engaged in an effort to assert and preserve itself by taking the offensive against a malicious world symbolized for him by Moby Dick, while it is his poor old battered body that is ready to give up. This further split in him is also evidenced by his persistent habit of referring to himself in the third person as though his voice is somehow detached from himself.

I have probably laboured the point enough. I have not been trying to diagnose mental illness in Ahab but to define his existential situation. However confusing

Ishmael's use of the traditional terminology--mind, body and soul--may be, it seems clear that he is seeking to convey a profound malaise in Ahab's identity--a malaise which may be traced back to the epistemological and ontological problems that are so extensively outlined by Ishmael in the book, and with which he too must contend.

It would be very neat, but only partly true, to suggest that Ishmael is ontologically secure where Ahab is insecure. To recall Laing's definition, I think it is the case, to a large extent, that Ishmael is able to encounter all the hazards of life from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity. There are one or two passages in the book where Ishmael seeks to articulate a sense of spiritual well-being at the centre of self, which can be linked to his claim to have 'intuitions of some things heavenly' along with his 'doubts of all things earthly' (though it must be admitted that it is his scepticism that is most in evidence). In 'The Grand Armada' chapter he says, 'amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself 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' (p. 326). The 'tornadoed Atlantic'

of his being can be associated with Ishmael's reference in 'A Bosom Friend' to his 'splintered heart' and 'maddened hand.' These aspects of Ishmael are never really in evidence, but what is important is his feeling of being an outcast, which thus prompts him to adopt what seems to him an appropriate name. But even while he believed himself turned against the 'wolfish world' the ability to achieve a satisfying human relationship with Queequeg 'redeemed' him. So later, although he still has a sense of being beset by the world, an internal resilience remains. His insistent words, 'I myself still forever centrally disport in mute calm' (emphasis added) express his ongoing sense of an inviolable self. Bearing in mind the treacherous nature of Ishmael's language and assertions in Moby-Dick, perhaps we should not accept this claim without corroboration. The calm itself is 'mute,' is contained deep within, and therefore cannot be expressed directly, but I think there is ample indirect evidence of Ishmael's spiritual balance and health in the humour which pervades the book. Although sometimes desperate, Ishmael's ever-flowing well-spring of humour testifies to his essential resilience of mind, body and spirit.

I have said that Ahab's view of the world and existence is not really so very different from Ishmael's.

Ahab feels the inscrutability of the world and assumes that something malignant lies behind it. Although he says that sometimes he thinks 'there's naught beyond,' this to him is an intolerable thought which he overwhelms with his hatred for the White Whale. Ishmael, too, perceives the inscrutability of the world and knows that he can never know if there is anything beyond; the difference between them being that Ishmael can live with a lack of certain knowledge whereas Ahab cannot (literally). On the third day of the chase Ahab says, 'Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels.'⁸⁹ This statement underlines the lack of balance in Ahab --he has no reflective powers capable of withstanding the torrent of feeling. Ishmael, on the other hand, is reflective, he does think, and additionally his comic sense of the absurdity of life is a saving grace, a safety valve perhaps that Ahab, with his grim jibes, dismally lacks. Ishmael possesses what Keats called 'Negative Capability,' meaning that he is, in Keats's words, 'capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'⁹⁰ Of course, Ishmael is very much concerned with the uncertainties and mysteries--indeed they form a good deal of the substance of Moby-Dick--but, as we have seen, Ishmael regards fact and reason as incapable.

of providing an answer to the mysteries of being. Ishmael's stance has much in common with that of the modern existentialists. In the face of danger and death and uncertainty he preserves his identity, keeps his open independence, and, in a word, survives. Although drawn to Ahab at times, he rejects his savage faith as he also rejects as inadequate Starbuck's pallid orthodoxy, Stubb's inane defensive jollity and Flask's unimaginative indifference to the fundamental problems.

John Seelye, who noted Ahab's association with straight lines, also points out that Ishmael is frequently associated with a circular motion--for example, the vortex around which he swirls in the final scene or the circular motion about his calm centre already referred to. Ishmael perceives life as a flux--the world is figuratively fluid as his Pequod world is literally fluid. In going to sea he symbolically enters the flux, lives in it, and, as Seelye notes, is the only member of the crew to make the 'round' trip.⁹¹ Whereas Ahab is in a particular (and unhappy) state of being, Ishmael in the novel is still in process of becoming as the world of flux also is. In the early chapters, particularly those devoted to his relationship with Queequeg (whom he at first regards as an 'abominable savage'), we see

Ishmael learning to be less conventional, less prejudiced, and more tolerant and more capable of taking a joke against himself. What Ishmael experiences on the Pequod is in many ways a learning process, which subsequently through an artistic process (which is also organic, as we have seen) is translated imaginatively and creatively into the book where the process itself is embodied. Ishmael is able to survive and function in a world that has no fixed points unlike Ahab who obstinately sets out to track down one moving point on the face of the globe and seize it and fix it forever.

However, having said all, it must be noted that while Ahab's course of action costs him his life, Ishmael also has to pay a price for the way he chooses to take. The double view of Ahab that Ishmael presents is perhaps traceable to his ambivalence about the old man. He is fascinated by Ahab but also repelled by the alarming intensity in him. Ishmael tends to shy away from such intensity as his agitation over Queequeg's Ramadan also indicates. He undoubtedly, as I have tried to show, regards religious observances as being incapable of plumbing the mysteries of being but his concern over Queequeg goes beyond simple belief. Queequeg's trance-like condition represents a temporary state of non-being and Ishmael's agitation and concern stem from the threat

to the self that he perceives in it. He is alarmed by the attempt at transcendence revealed in a small way in Queequeg's Ramadan and in a grand way by Ahab's effort to confront the powers of the universe. He specifically warns against playing with the fire that Ahab is so persistently associated with:

Look not too long in the face of the fire,
 O man! Never dream with thy hand on the
 helm! Turn not thy back to the compass;
 accept the first hint of the hitching
 tiller; believe not the artificial fire,
 when its redness makes all things look
 ghastly. (p. 354)

In other words, take no chances, go along with things as they are, accept the world as it is and don't try to go beyond it.

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! (p. 354)

Accept the light that is given, shun the lurid self-created light of men like Ahab. I believe that Ishmael's alarm is based upon the same kind of identity problem that so inflames Ahab. Early on, in 'The Mast-head' chapter, Ishmael cautions against the Pantheistic attempt to merge with 'all-deified Nature,' that new source of

religious feeling and hope for men of the nineteenth century. He also warns, as he does in the first passage quoted above, against dreaming, that alluring but to him dangerous loss of consciousness and self.

But while this sleep, this dream is on ye,
 move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold
 [at the mast-head] at all; and your identity
 comes back in horror. Over Cartesian 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! (p. 140)

Ishmael feels a threat to his own self, to his identity, in any actual or potential loss of consciousness or control. He feels the same threat in any abandonment of self to an intense transcendent vision such as that possessed by Ahab. Believing that it is impossible to obtain certain knowledge about the nature of man's existence Ishmael prefers to accept and cope with the world as it is. In an earlier discussion we noted the important function of his humour in helping him to confront the dangers and vicissitudes of his life as a whaleman. Existentially speaking, Ishmael's jocular, ironic, sceptical attitude to life, his own personal resource, constitutes his philosophy and his religion. He travels light and stays free and bouyant. As William Ellery Sedgwick puts it, Ishmael is a loose-fish whereas

Ahab is a fast-fish, having impaled himself on the exasperating inscrutability of things.⁹² But Ishmael's preservation of self is achieved by a calculated acceptance of certain limitations. As he says in 'A Squeeze of the Hand': 'For now, ... by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country' (p. 349). Remembering that the narrative is retrospective, perhaps the attitude revealed in it is only realistic, given that Ishmael came near to drowning because of Ahab's frantic attempt to strike a blow at the ungraspable phantom of life. Perhaps, too, it is hardly surprising that retrospectively Ishmael should re-create Ahab to reveal what in Ishmael's terms was his absurdity and folly. Ishmael betrays some ambivalence about Ahab and it is precisely this that prevents Ahab from attaining the tragic stature that some critics have claimed for him. At times Ishmael the character was drawn to Ahab and clearly Ishmael the narrator is fascinated and challenged by the enigma that Ahab presents him with. On the other hand, having undergone a chastening experience aboard the Pequod, and having lowered his

own conceit of attainable felicity, Ishmael, being in control of the narrative cannot forebear to bias the reader's view of his old captain, enhancing the 'common-sense realism' of his own course while demonstrating the folly of Ahab's.

And yet there is something more in Ishmael than mere prudent acceptance of the world. If there were not one would be tempted to approve Ahab's defiance as an heroic contrast, and say with Stubb, 'damn me, Ahab, but thou actest right; live in the game, and die in it!' (p. 413). But Ahab's defiance is violent and destructive and kills not only himself but all his crew (but one) as well. Ishmael, on the other hand, has his own less grandiose kind of defiance. He sets his personal creation against the inscrutable Creation which surrounds him. He does not, however, like Ahab, seek to impose his own single-minded order on the world. If any kind of order emerges from his words it is the complex, shifting, and ambiguous order of simultaneously held opposites which persistently undermine any single view of the world and existence. But in the face of ambiguity, inscrutability, nothingness, Ishmael's human persistence and resilience are expressed in the urge to create, to assert a human value against the indifferent universe. As this study has tried to show, much of Moby-Dick

acknowledges the inadequacy of systems of thought and belief, as well as the inadequacy of language itself to comprehend the 'problem of the universe.' But the emphasis on negatives should not obscure the positive value of Ishmael's creative act which takes the limitations of human knowledge and understanding as its very materials. Ishmael constructs his own world, explores it, examines it, and uses it to reveal unflinchingly the nature of the human situation as he sees it. Moby Dick serves as a kind of model, fully operating, to illustrate Nature's impenetrability, and the world of Ahab and the Pequod, created dramatically and set in motion by Ishmael, discloses the troublesome questions concerning the nature of existence, reveals a range of possible responses to them and also reveals Ishmael's view of the consequences of those responses. The Pequod is Ishmael's microcosm. The story of Ahab and the White Whale provokes him to his creative endeavour and thereafter becomes for him an illustration of what he has come to understand about the world. But apart from Ishmael's understanding of the existential situation, what is important is his example. If the world is irreducible to any single system then one must remain open to all possibilities and all experiences. Despite, or perhaps because of, Ishmael's acceptance of limitations

on 'intellect' and 'fancy,' his jocular scepticism, in the incomprehensible flux of life, is a kind of gallantry, and his creative activity contains an assertion of the human values of independence, endurance, tolerance and humour. Ahab makes war; Ishmael makes art. Ahab dies in the game; Ishmael lives in it. He survives.

Melville

Guetti claims that Ahab's death dissolves the detachment, the imaginative gap between author and narrator and that, in the end, the difference between Melville and Ishmael is only nominal.⁹³ That is misconstruing the case, I think. Clearly the choice of a narrator by any author is a crucial matter and it would be reasonable to expect that a special relationship would develop between them. In the case of Melville and Ishmael the relationship involves a considerable degree of identification--I noted in the Introduction that Melville assigns to Ishmael his own time of writing and that the tone of many of Ishmael's utterances recalls the tone of letters written by Melville especially during the period he was writing Moby-Dick. However, Walter Bezanson's warning is still valid--we should avoid any 'one-to-one equation'

of Melville with Ishmael. Some, at least, of Ishmael's characteristics can be accounted for on the grounds that they are attributes of a good narrator, among them his spirit of enquiry and his intense desire to see everything that is going on. These qualities function within the novel which is Ishmael's domain whereas Melville functions from outside the novel and in so far as he transmits qualities and materials from the outside to the inside they become by that very process different and independent.

I prefer to think of Ishmael as a probe, a vehicle for sending back messages from the unknown. When Ishmael launches himself upon the deep he is undertaking a journey of investigation (literal and symbolic) for himself but also on behalf of Melville. If the novel is truly processive the results of the exploration, in terms of attitudes held, positions taken, will not be known ahead of time by the author but will be discovered for him with the passage of time by his narrator and will be valid only for the period of time in which the discovery takes place. If Ishmael learns and changes both as character and narrator so, too, surely will Melville have done as author. The matter is further complicated by the fact that some of the attitudes and positions will be unconsciously adopted and may be apparent only by a later

reader and not to the author at all. As Melville wrote to Sophia Hawthorne, he did not 'mean' the 'subtle significance' which she subsequently read into the account of the Spirit Spout.

In 'Hawthorne and His Mosses' Melville himself touches on this question of what may be attributable to an author. He writes:

I know not what would be the right name to put on the title-page of an excellent book, but this I feel, that the names of all fine authors are fictitious ones, far more so than that of Junius,--simply standing, as they do, for the mystical, ever-eluding Spirit of all Beauty, which ubiquitously possesses men of genius. Purely imaginative as this fancy may appear, it nevertheless seems to receive some warranty from the fact, that on a personal interview no great author has ever come up to the idea of his reader.

Thus Melville also seems to envisage that literary creation somehow achieves a status independent of the man who produced it. The author vanishes--all that we can know is the book. Accordingly, I have chosen to talk about how the narrator functions on behalf of his author rather than talking about what the author means by the book. It is tempting to try to find approval for Ahab in Melville's comment to Hawthorne about the man 'who, like Russia or the British Empire, declares himself a sovereign nature (in himself) amid the powers of heaven,

hell, and earth'⁹⁴ or to see in Melville's long period of domestic oblivion a fulfilment of Ishmael's claim that it is better to lower or at least shift ones' 'conceit of attainable felicity.' However, though doubtless Melville worked his own ambivalences into Moby-Dick, to make assertions about the author's meaning is to attempt the hazardous task of biography where assertions are notoriously difficult to substantiate--biography being but a lightly disguised form of fiction. At least with a novel the facts are all in, so to speak --the book is there and may be appealed to in order to support claims made about character or narrator in contrast to an author's life, where in the nature of things much cannot be known and indeed, where the facts may be very sketchy. To make sense of Moby-Dick, therefore, one must turn to Ishmael and examine him in his context--his responses, his behaviour, his ambivalences, his language, his enquiring creative mind. Melville is deus absconditus, without whom Ishmael's world could not exist, and to whom proper homage must be paid, but who cannot now intervene in his own creation.

FOOTNOTES

¹Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York, 1967), p. 293. All subsequent page references within the thesis refer to this text.

²Studies in Classic American Literature (New York, 1961), p. 145.

³All first person narrators are, of course, artists. As one critic has remarked, "this is at once true and tautological." Edgar A. Dryden, Melville's Thematics of Form (Baltimore, 1968), p. 27. Dryden's quotation is from Joseph Riddel, "F. Scott Fitzgerald, the Jamesian Inheritance, and the Morality of Fiction," Modern Fiction Studies (Winter, 1965-66), 11:335.

⁴"Moby-Dick: Work of Art" in Moby-Dick, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York, 1967), p. 655.

⁵Ibid., pp. 655-656.

⁶Ibid., p. 657.

⁷Baltimore, 1968, p. 35.

⁸New Haven, 1965, p. 3.

⁹New York, 1967.

¹⁰Harmondsworth, 1954, p. 115.

¹¹Ishmael's White World, p. 5.

¹²Moby-Dick, eds. Hayford and Parker, p. 659.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ishmael's White World, p. 8.

¹⁵Moby-Dick, eds. Hayford and Parker, p. 659.

¹⁶Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael (San Francisco, 1947).

¹⁷Ishmael's White World, p. 123.

¹⁸As Manfield and Vincent point out in the notes to their edition of Moby-Dick, 1850 was the date given in the first English edition, whereas the first American edition gave the date as 1851. However, when considering Ishmael as the 'creator' of Moby-Dick, either date will do equally well.

¹⁹British Columbia, 1965, p. 252.

²⁰The Encyclopedia Britannica --(Chicago, 1958), V 171-- describes the sperm whale thus: 'size gigantic; head immense, about one-third the total length.'

²¹Perhaps Ishmael's concern with size helps to explain his interest in the bulky Bulkington, whose name has a heavy earthbound ring in spite of his honorific title of 'demi-god.'

²²William Scoresby, Jr., An Account of the Arctic Regions, with a History and Description of the Northern Whale-Fishery (Edinburgh, 1820), Vol. 1, p. 478.

²³However, the proliferation of whale names and the possibility of confusion between the razor-back and the fin-back perhaps make Ishmael's remark more explicable.

²⁴It is interesting that Queequeg uses his harpoon for a razor while Ahab uses his razors to make a harpoon.

²⁵Melville's Thematics of Form, p. 95.

²⁶Scoresby, Vol. 1, p. 468.

²⁷L. E. C. Bruce's edition, Moby Dick (sic) or The White Whale (sic) by Hermann (sic) Melville, apparently designed for children, includes only narrative sections of the book and thus manages to reduce it from a hundred and thirty-five chapters to thirty-eight.

²⁸The Mirror and the Lamp (New York, 1958), p. 130.

²⁹Quoted by Abrams in The Mirror and the Lamp, p. 172.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Abrams, p. 172.

³² Musical metaphors also seem appropriate to the structure of Moby-Dick. Lewis Mumford described it as a 'symphony'--in Herman Melville (New York, 1929), p. 182--but it seems to me that Scholes' definition of the fugue in The Oxford Companion to Music --(Oxford, 1955), Ninth ed., p. 376--provides an equally appropriate analogy: 'The idea seems to be that the opening of a composition of this sort gives the idea of each "voice" as it enters chasing the preceding one, which flies before it.

'All the voices having thus made their appearance with the subject (the portion of the fugue to this point being called its Exposition), they wander off to the discussion of something else, or (more likely) of some motif or motifs already heard. The passage in which this occurs is called an Episode, and one of its functions is to effect a modulation to some related key, in which again the voices (or some of them) enter with the subject.'

³³ Biographia Literaria, ed. George Watson (London, 1906), p. 174.

³⁴ Moby-Dick, eds. Hayford and Parker, p. 667.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 669.

³⁶ In American Renaissance (New York, 1941), p. 243, F. O. Matthiessen discusses the background of American transcendentalism in these terms: 'The tendency of American idealism to see a spiritual significance in every natural fact was far more broadly diffused than transcendentalism. Loosely Platonic, it came specifically from the common background that lay behind Emerson and Hawthorne, from the Christian habit of mind that saw the hand of God in all manifestations of life, and which, in the intensity of the New England seventeenth century, had gone to the extreme of finding 'remarkable providences' even in the smallest phenomena, tokens of divine displeasure in every capsized dory or runaway cow.' I have quoted his words in place of a discussion of Emersonian transcendentalism, which would have required too long a digression.

³⁷ Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York, 1943), p. 343.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 344.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶Call Me Ishmael, p. 22.

⁵⁷Melville and the Comic Spirit (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1955), p. 122.

⁵⁸As Rosenberry implies by his comment that 'Ishmael's laughter is thus a psychological symbol of a philosophical acceptance'--ibid., p. 123.

⁵⁹I am reminded of the narrator of Don Juan--another sceptical, satirical, jocular, symbol-doubting narrator, allusion hunter, and voyager over strange seas of thought. Byron, of course, was one of Melville's favourite poets.

⁶⁰Comic Spirit, p. 123.

⁶¹Limits of Metaphor, p. 27.

⁶²As the Bruce edition in fact suggests!--its blurb states: 'Many would-be readers have been deterred from the complete work by its lengthy sections on the history and methods of whaling.'

⁶³Ishmael's White World, p. 84.

⁶⁴Limits, p. 33.

⁶⁵See quotation in note 36.

⁶⁶Like his creator, having written Moby-Dick. See Melville's letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Nov. 17, 1851.

⁶⁷One of Ishmael's jokes refers to the presentation of a narwhale's horn to Queen Elizabeth I. Curiously enough a narwhale's horn was also presented to Queen Elizabeth II on her recent visit to northern Canada (but presumably without phallic implication!).

⁶⁸Melville's Quarrel With God, p. 148.

⁶⁹London, 1946, p. 142.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Franklin, Wake of the Gods.

⁷²Moby Dick has passed into popular mythology. A whale of the same name appeared in a children's cartoon series on television. Similarly, humorous sketches about Ahab's hunt for the White Whale appeared recently, without background explanation, on 'Laugh-In,' a television comedy show.

⁷³Wake, p. 67.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 66.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 98.

⁷⁶Melville: The Ironic Diagram (Evanston, 1970), p. 63.

⁷⁷Chicago, 1953, p. 176.

⁷⁸Dated Jan. 8, 1852.

⁷⁹Symbolism and American Literature, p. 176.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 185.

⁸¹Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 39.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid., pp. 42-3.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 17.

⁸⁵Ironic Diagram, p. 66.

⁸⁶Divided Self, p. 46.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 45.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 42.

⁸⁹Ahab's words recall Horace Walpole's comment that life is a tragedy for those who feel, a comedy for those who think.

⁹⁰Letter to George and Thomas Keats, Dec. 21, 1817.

⁹¹Ironic Diagram, p. 66.

⁹²Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (New York, 1962), p. 120.

⁹³Limits, p. 45.

⁹⁴Letter to Hawthorne, April 16, 1851.

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⁴⁰Stanford, 1963, p. 55.

⁴¹A check during reading (not a painstaking search, therefore) revealed about three hundred and fifty occurrences of the word throughout the book.

⁴²The Wake of the Gods, p. 55.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴The Century Dictionary (New York, 1904).

⁴⁵Melville's Quarrel With God (Princeton, 1952), p. 151.

⁴⁶Ishmael's White World, p. 136.

⁴⁷New York, 1967, p. 29.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (London, 1922), p. 189.

⁵¹As Mumford says, in Herman Melville, p. 181, 'one might garner a whole book of verse from Moby-Dick.' Matthiessen, in American Renaissance, p. 426, goes a step further and actually sets out the lines from Moby-Dick in blank verse form, as I have copied them.

⁵²See especially Part II, 'Source: Shakespeare.'

⁵³Ishmael's phrase, of course, reproduces Johnson's brilliant emendation, 'May of life.' One wonders whether Melville was familiar with it.

⁵⁴One tends to think of Ahab as being, like Lear, immensely old, yet the evidence of the novel is that he is fifty-eight (see p. 443), which makes him younger than Captain Boomer (according to Ishmael's estimate of the latter's age). However, Ahab is old in spirit.

⁵⁵It is pleasantly appropriate that there is a Starbuck Island, in the Line Islands group, just south of the equator and not remarkably far from where Ahab expected to meet Moby Dick on the 'Line.' No doubt Melville would have been aware of this fact.

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