

John Lauber

Sultan of the *Pequod*: Ahab as Hero

Criticism of *Moby Dick* has been primarily thematic and symbolic; purely literary studies dealing with the effects which Melville achieves and the methods by which he achieves them are comparatively rare. In particular, a rich confusion of meanings has been discovered in, or projected upon, the White Whale. At times one feels that, like Ahab, every critic has gazed at that inscrutably blank brow and found his own obsession there! Ahab offers less scope for interpretation, yet widely differing, often incompatible, views of his character have been proposed. To some critics he has seemed a heroic rebel, an American Prometheus; "Ahab pursues the truth as the champion of man."¹ To others he represents the romantic exaltation of the individual will carried to its farthest, destructive extreme: "he is a gigantic symbol of the sickness of the self."² Such a conflict can be resolved, if at all, only by a close attention to the text, to the detailed presentation of Ahab, whether through his words, his actions, his recorded thoughts, or the responses of other characters to him, and through the explicit commentary of Ishmael-Melville. This analysis, I believe, will reveal that the character of Ahab undergoes more development than has generally been assumed, and that a sequence of actions takes place which alters and conditions our attitudes towards him in such a way that we are prepared to accept not only the inevitability but the rightness of the final catastrophe.

Although no mention of Ahab occurs until chapter XVI, the introductory chapters establish a context within which he can be placed. A mood of expectation is created, a vague sense that great issues will be involved in Ishmael's voyage. Ishmael himself offers a way of perceiving and responding to the world which can provide a standard of comparison for Ahab's. Most noticeable are his flexibility of mind and openness to new impressions, combined with a humor that prevents him from ever taking himself or his troubles with fatal seriousness. Looking outward rather than exclusively inward, he is therefore able to establish meaningful

relationships with other men and even to bridge the gulf between civilized American and pagan cannibal. Thanks to this ability, Ishmael's problem is really solved before the voyage begins, by his friendship with Queequeg: "No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it" (Chapter X). Ahab will be given a similar opportunity by Pip and will deliberately reject it.

Chapter XVI, "The Ship", introduces Ahab and the *Pequod* and powerfully conditions our attitudes toward both. The *Pequod*, with her age, her melancholy, and her still robust strength, is a symbol of her commander. The name itself, of an extinct tribe of Indians notorious for cruelty and hostility toward the early settlers of New England, is ominous. The first fact that we learn of Ahab is critical—the loss of his leg; the second, that it was lost in no ordinary way but was "devoured, chewed up, crunched by the monstrousest parmacetty that ever chipped a boat!" The meaning of Ahab's name is crucial, and Melville does not rely on his readers' presumed familiarity with the Old Testament, but carefully points out the most important implications: that Ahab was a crowned king, a wicked king, and that when he died the dogs licked his blood. If Ahab has been raised to heroic stature by Peleg's praise—"a grand, ungodly, godlike man"—his greatness is promptly qualified.

Peleg's adjectives, we may note, are more carefully chosen than the reader is yet able to recognize. Ahab is "grand" in his personal qualities, "godlike" in his pride and isolation ("Here I am, proud as a Greek god") and perhaps in his indifference to men. "Ungodly, godlike" poses a seeming paradox that can easily be resolved. For man to place himself, or aspire to a place, on a level with the gods, is "ungodly" by either Christian or classical standards. In spite of the loss of his leg, Ahab has the prowess essential to a hero—his lance is "the keenest and the surest. . . out of all our isle," says Peleg. But if Ahab has many of the traditional attributes of heroism, he is nevertheless a hero of his own time, the romantic era, as Ishmael has already pointed out: "a man of greatly superior natural force . . . who has . . . been led to think untraditionally and independently; receiving all nature's sweet or savage impressions fresh from her own virgin voluntary and confiding breast, and thereby chiefly. . . to learn a bold and nervous lofty language. . . a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies. Nor will it at all detract from him, dramatically regarded, if. . . he have what seems a half wilful over-ruling morbidness at the bottom of his nature" (XVI). The passage attempts to create plausibility for Ahab's unconventional thoughts and exalted diction, but its more important function is to

establish his eligibility for the role of hero, as that role was conceived by the Romantics. Unhappiness, or "morbidness", is an essential ingredient of the heroic nature, nearly enough in itself to demonstrate profundity of thought and feeling. Ahab may seem almost an Emersonian figure, an American Adam learning not from books or schools but from Nature herself—but the conclusions he draws are exactly the opposite of Emerson's.

Ahab's character has been outlined by the end of this chapter. Even the precise form taken by his "half-wilful overruling morbidness" has been hinted at by Peleg's account of his injury, and of his desperate moodiness and savagery since then. He is already "dark Ahab" to Ishmael, and "dark Ahab" he remains. Peleg's reassurance that "stricken, blasted if he be, Ahab has his humanities!" fails to qualify significantly the impression made (nor is it supported in the remainder of the book).

Chapter XIX, "The Prophet", develops further this "darkness" of Ahab's character and the connotations of his name. The appearance of Elijah reminds us of the contest between King Ahab and the prophet Elijah (a false lead, since this Elijah is entirely ineffectual) and reminds us too that the Biblical Ahab's wickedness consisted of worshipping false gods. Elijah's cryptic references to certain exploits of Ahab, "that deadly skrimmage with the Spaniard afore the altar in Santa" and spitting in the silver calabash (presumably a sacred vessel), suggest not only violence but blasphemy. It is clear by this time that basic metaphysical or religious issues are to be acted out, probably through some kind of cosmic rebellion on the part of Ahab.

During the bustle of preparation and of sailing, Ahab disappears except for casual references. Perhaps the most important is one in which he is not even named, Ishmael's comments on the limits of Starbuck's courage. Starbuck, while firm enough against physical dangers, "yet cannot withstand those more terrific, because more spiritual terrors, which sometimes menace you for the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man" (XXVI). Ahab, by clear implication, is able both to resist spiritual terrors and to inspire them in others. The description of the mates serves another function in relation to Ahab: not one of them can possibly be considered a serious antagonist to him if occasion should arise. As for the crew, a set of savage "Isolatoos", they are ripe for despotism. The only member of the ship's company who might be Ahab's intellectual and spiritual match is that "demigod", Bulkington, and as James Miller has suggested, it may be for just this reason that Bulkington must vanish.³

Ahab's physical presence, when he at last appears on deck, satisfies our expectations. His body, like his mind, is "shaped in an unalterable mould" (XXVIII). The "livid brand" which marks his face, and presumably his body, indicates that he is, literally and metaphorically, a "marked man", and recalls significantly Milton's Satan: ". . . but his face / Deep scars of Thunder had intrencht" (*Paradise Lost*, I, 600-601). Equally symbolic is his characteristic posture, standing on the quarterdeck, his bone leg planted in its hole, his gaze fixed ahead. This is the position in which one imagines him whenever he is not specifically involved in any action. The moral significance is stated explicitly: "firmest fortitude . . . unsunderable wilfulness . . . fixed and fearless, forward dedication." Ahab's physical appearance, in short, is appropriate to the heroic role that we realize he is to play, and to the moral nature that has already been developed.

The way has been carefully prepared, and it is time to present Ahab in action. The first episode, his quarrel with Stubb, is thoroughly characteristic and perhaps more important than it seems. The ease with which Ahab establishes his superiority, after outrageous provocation of Stubb, demonstrates that no effective opposition can be expected from his underlings. The conclusion of his first speech is intensely revealing: "Below to thy nightly grave; where such as ye sleep between shrouds, to use ye to the filling one at last. —Down, dog, and kennel!" (XXIX). His misery (in this case his sleeplessness) is cherished as a proof of superiority. "Down, dog, and kennel!" displays not only his "Shakespearean" diction, but his pride which will allow for no pride in others. Realistically, the language is unthinkable in a Nantucket whaleman, and a recent critic asks whether Ahab "really" said it, "Or is Ishmael by the majestic trappings and housings of Shakespearean diction trying to make clear something about what kind of status he thinks Ahab platonically has?"⁴ Such a criticism overlooks the fact that *Moby Dick* is a work of fiction and that Ahab "really" said nothing at all, because he has no real existence. Ishmael has been given every token of reliability that an author can give his narrator, and if we doubt him here, we may as well doubt that the *Pequod* ever left harbour.

By direct commentary too, Melville exalts his hero: "For a Khan of the plank and a king of the sea and a great lord of Leviathans was Ahab" (XXX). But the exaltation is qualified by the inevitable connotations—barbarism, cruelty, overbearing tyranny—of "Khan". The suggestion is developed, after a cetological interlude, in "The Speck-synder". "That certain sultanism of his brain" reinforces the implications of despotic tyranny in "Khan" and recalls Satan again, the "great Sultan" of the fallen angels (*Paradise Lost*, I, 348).

The statement that follows seems to have been largely overlooked: "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. . . always, in themselves, more or less paltry and base." Ahab aims at such a supremacy, beyond the legitimate authority of his rank, and therefore he necessarily establishes it through the use of these arts. "This it is," the passage continues, "that for ever keeps God's true princes of the Empire from the world's hustings." Consequently Ahab cannot be "one of God's true princes of the Empire." He must instead belong to the class of 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."

The ideal quietism suggested by "the Divine Inert" in itself implies a condemnation of the whole furious action of the novel as evil or at least futile. It so strikingly anticipates Melville's late "Fragments of a Lost Gnostic Poem of the 12th Century" that we may quote two lines to comment further:

Indolence is heaven's ally here,
And energy the child of hell.

Ahab is the incarnation of energy.

"The Cabin-Table" gives us our only view of Ahab's social relations with his officers. The tone is prevalingly comic, but is abruptly qualified by a powerful phrase, particularly striking in its context: the "nameless invisible domineerings of the captain's table" (XXIV). After this, Melville really does not need to tell us that "Socially, Ahab was inaccessible." For a romantic hero, constantly engaged in the assertion of his own will or the expression of his own will or the expression of his agony, social life must be impossible.

"The Quarter-Deck" is decisive in the action of *Moby Dick* because it commits the crew to Ahab's revenge. It also demonstrates the "paltry and base" arts by which, as Melville has told us, supremacy is gained, and establishes Ahab's mastery of them. The series of questions—"What do ye do when see a whale, men?", "And what do ye do next, men?", "And what tune is it ye pull to men?"—build up the necessary emotional intensity, submerging both fear and reason. They unite the crew on the lowest level, turning it into a mass or mob. Ahab will appeal to the most primitive emotions, and a mob is more susceptible than individuals to such an appeal. Curiosity, greed, pity and hate are invoked.

The ritualistic drinking with which the scene concludes solemnizes the adherence of the crew and also publicly commits the officers, the only source from which Ahab could expect opposition.

Ahab's reply to Starbuck's remonstrance that "To be enraged with a dumb brute . . . seems monstrous" is so important that it must be closely examined. "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks"—the sentence is Emersonian; indeed Ahab may reasonably be considered as a kind of inverted Transcendentalist, differing principally in his belief about what one might find if one could "strike through the mask." "How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall?" A Melville character's reaction to the "wall" is often decisive, determining his fate or revealing his innermost nature. Stubb chooses to ignore the wall, Starbuck accepts on faith that there is something good beyond (overlooking whatever might shake his belief), Ahab strikes. "To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond." Such a thought would lead to a purely materialistic conception of the universe, a conception that Ahab (or Melville, for that matter) was unable to hold for long. "I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it." The strength is real, but we have only Ahab's word for the "inscrutable malice." Unless we are swept away by his own passionate rhetoric, it seems more reasonable to believe that Ahab has projected his own malice upon the whale (and Moby Dick's actions support this view). "That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate." Ahab demands certainty where certainty is unattainable, a one-to-one equivalence of symbol and meaning which necessarily overlooks many, and perhaps the most important, aspects of the whale. As Charles Cook has pointed out in an important article, it is Ahab who turns Moby Dick into a "hideous and intolerable allegory",⁵ and we already have evidence enough that his judgment and insight are likely to be warped by hatred.

Ahab's soliloquy which follows offers an obvious formal problem—where was Ishmael eavesdropping, that he could report it so fully? Very likely Melville had changed from the narrative to the dramatic convention, introduced by the stage direction "Enter Ahab: Then, all," without fully realizing the incompatibility of the two techniques. In any case, the need for an "inside view" of Ahab probably outweighed the need for consistency in point of view.

The soliloquy tells us in effect that Ahab is in hell—what else can it be to have lost forever the "low, enjoying power?" Like Milton's Satan, he is "damned in the midst of Paradise." As that significant adjective "low" reveals, he considers his misery as a badge of superiority. We also

learn that he sees himself as the irresistible instrument of Fate. Ahab states his belief in a striking image, developed from the new technology of his age: "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, unerringly I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!" (XXXVII). The image foreshadows his ruthless dismissal of all claims that might impede his revenge, as is kept in our minds by the adjective "iron", so frequently applied to Ahab throughout *Moby Dick*. When he later taunts Stubb with being "mechanical" (CXXXIV), most critics have accepted the sneer as justified, forgetting that Ahab is in no position to make it.

The soliloquies of Starbuck and Stubb parallel Ahab's and are appropriate to their status on the ship. Primarily they characterize the mates, but they indicate the supremacy that Ahab has achieved. One comment of Starbuck's, however, is directly relevant: "Who's over him, he cries;—aye, he would be a democrat to all above; look how he lords it over all below!" Here is the paradox of Ahab; assertion of his individuality is for him the supreme value, yet to assert it he must crush the individualities of all those he commands.

The analysis of Ahab's madness in chapter XLI, "Moby Dick", is too well known and too explicit to require examination, but it is worth noting how the essential point, that he is really mad, is driven home by repetition. He suffers from a "frantic morbidness", he "deliriously" transforms the White Whale into a symbol of evil, "his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad," his "full lunacy subsided not, but deepeningly contracted." The emphasis seems incompatible with any view of Ahab as a Promethean hero or as the possessor of a tragic wisdom. "All evil, to crazy Ahab," was personified by Moby Dick, but the reader should not accept crazy Ahab's conception. Melville has been careful to say, in describing the loss of Ahab's leg to the White Whale, "No turbaned Turk . . . could have smote him with more *seeming* malice" (although malice would have been justifiable enough under the circumstances). Melville then assures us that Ahab's "larger, darker, deeper part remains unhinted." But the celebrated image that follows—"those vast Roman halls of Thermes; where far beneath the fantastic towers of man's upper earth, his root of grandeur, his whole awful essence sits in bearded state"—merely reasserts, in different terms, that such a "deeper part" exists. It is easy to mistake Melville's professed intention for actual accomplishment, but in fact we have learned nothing more of Ahab.

Ahab's purpose may be mad, but his means are sane, and chapter XLIV, "The Chart", displays his sanity. It establishes the rational possibility of Ahab's reaching his goal (or at least persuades the reader to suspend his total disbelief), and it presents the captain who successfully commanded the *Pequod* until the final disaster. But his sanity is superficial, his madness radical in the literal sense of the word, and the chapter reverts to its effects. Like Macbeth, Ahab has murdered sleep, and the description of his torments and sudden wakings, though obscure and difficult, is important. A different division of his personality from that between reason and madness is now suggested—a dissociation between his truest, innermost self or "soul" and his purpose, which through his obsession has achieved an independent existence. Ahab may be a kind of Prometheus whose heart is devoured by a vulture, but "that vulture the very creature he creates."

"The Mat-Maker" (Chapter XLVII) has often been admired for its brilliant symbolic reconciliation of Change, Free Will, and Necessity, "no wise incompatibly—all interweavingly working together." The analogy is directly relevant to Ahab's increasingly frequent assertions that he is fated to pursue the White Whale. At the moment when, under the influence of Starbuck, the Pacific, and his own memories, he is on the point of abandoning the hunt and turning the *Pequod* towards home, he falls back on the plea of Necessity, expressed in an image that is characteristically over-simplified: "By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the hand-spike" (CXXXV). The same view is plain in his images of himself, like that of his soul as a kind of locomotive "grooved to run" on "iron rails" (XXXVII). But we have only Ahab's word. Fate is his last self-justification, but the reader need not accept it, although many have. If he really is unchangeable, then we must add that he has cooperated in his fate. (Consider, for example, his careful avoidance of all potentially healing influences.) "The serious claim that an inhuman Fate rules the acts of men comes to us. . . largely through Ahab's late soliloquies and can be understood as a delusion of his monomania."⁶

The sudden, almost magical appearance of Fedallah and his crew of "dusky phantoms" reinforces our belief that the hunt somehow constitutes an enormous impiety or blasphemy. For Fedallah is quickly shown to be unmistakably evil, tempting Ahab to the destruction of soul and body. He is associated by explicit statement with the devil, and by his lying prophecies with the witches of Macbeth, as well as the "lying spirit" who deceived the Biblical Ahab and sent him to his death. We gradually realize the ghastly irony of Ahab's mistake—pure evil is

represented not by Moby Dick, whom he hunts, but by Fedallah, who encourages the hunt.

In the long sequence of chapters between "The First Lowering" (XLVIII) and "The Doubloon" (XCIX), Ahab enters only occasionally. To see him performing the daily duties of a whaling captain might divest him of the awe and mystery which surround him. Probably, too, such a character would be incompatible with the solid and detailed realism of the whaling chapters. There is much that is relevant to Ahab, but often its relevance is indirect. The monkey-rope connecting Ishmael and Queequeg is a strong symbol of the human interdependency that Ahab denies. (His largely self-imposed isolation is necessary if he is to maintain his fixed purpose.) "Fast Fish and Loose Fish" suggests that the *Pequod* and its crew are loose fish which Ahab has harpooned (he is guilty of usurpation in diverting the voyage to his own private purpose, and has lost his legitimate authority), while Moby Dick is a loose fish that not Ahab or any man will ever make fast. Pip's madness complements Ahab's: "one daft with strength, the other daft with weakness" (CX-XV). It also imposes isolation (and no doubt is intensified by that isolation), and it too results from a vision of ultimate things which is denied to the ordinary humanity of the crew—"he saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" (XCIII).

In the description of whales the most significant passages, relative to Ahab, are those emphasizing the whale's incomprehensibility. It is a phenomenon too vast and alien for man to understand, it is *inscrutable*—a word as essential to *Moby Dick* as "ambiguity" to *Pierre*. Its forehead presents a "dead, blind wall" (LXXVI), perhaps the wall that Ahab wished to thrust through. "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" (LXXXVI). To see the face of God is death, and Ishmael is closely paraphrasing the words of Jehovah to Moses (*Exodus* 33:23). The whale is not God, but it represents or embodies a forbidden knowledge. Ahab has presumed to see and interpret its face, and his presumption, we must expect, will be punished. (Whether or not he has truly seen or correctly understood is irrelevant; the intention is blasphemous).

Ahab's address to the right whale's head (LXX) follows the Elizabethan dramatic convention of the address to the skull, and is appropriately theatrical (in the pejorative sense). The images that he evokes, of "locked lovers" leaping from their flaming ship and drowning heart to heart, of the murdered mate "tossed by pirates from the mid-

night deck", the "swift lightnings" that shiver "the neighboring ship that would have borne a righteous husband to outstretched, longing arms", are the images of melodrama, expressed in the language of melodrama. The whole speech corroborates Blackmur's observations that the "Elizabethanism" of *Moby Dick* is really a Gothicism heightened by Melville's intentions.⁷ It is tempting to speculate that the falsity or exaggeration of Ahab's language in some of his soliloquies is meant as a characterizing device, but as *Pierre* indicates, Melville's taste in rhetoric was very different from our own. Ahab is making his case against the universe, and although for the modern reader that case may be invalidated by the mode of its presentation, I suspect that Melville had no such intention but in this instance gave his full approval to Ahab.

Of the other whalers encountered, the *Jeroboam* and the *Town-Ho* offer significant parallels to Ahab's situation. Gabriel, the cracked prophet of the *Jeroboam*, is a mirror image of Ahab. Both control their ships through magic and superstition, both are monomaniacs, both find a sinister supernatural meaning in the White Whale. Only the practical consequences differ, for Gabriel fears and worships what Ahab fears and hunts. "The *Town-Ho's* Story" (LIV) offers a warning, which never reaches Ahab. The mate Radney, like Ahab, was "doomed and made mad" by hatred, directed toward the sailor Steerkilt. Steerkilt (who is described as "a tall and noble animal"), resembles Moby Dick—formidable when aroused, but dangerous only to those who are attacking him. Moby Dick functions as an agent of retribution, inflicting just punishment on Radney and saving Steerkilt from the crime of murder. Here is not only a warning of Ahab's fate, but a suggestion that his interpretation of Moby Dick's nature cannot be entirely correct.

"The Try-Works" (XCVI) is notable for its series of striking images, explicitly or implicitly symbolic of Ahab. "The rushing *Pequod*, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness," Melville states directly, "seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul." The savages represent the savagery in himself to which Ahab has surrendered, the fire the "red hell" of hatred within him, the "blackness of darkness" into which the ship plunges suggests his "blackness" of spirit and intimates the doom that awaits captain, ship and crew. The burning corpse may be Ahab's own body, consumed by his madness.

The second symbol is more general. As Ishmael suddenly awakens from drowsing at the wheel, "Uppermost was the impression that whatever swift, rushing thing I stood on was not so much bound to any

haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern". Ahab is seen now as the archetypal Romantic hero engaged in an endless quest. The concluding image of the Catskill eagle again implicitly refers to Ahab. The eagle in his soul can indeed "dive down into the blackest gorges", but it can never "soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces". Yet "even if he forever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains", and because Ahab's soul contains such an eagle he is superior to the mates and other "birds upon the plain". But the highest heroism would be to soar as well as to dive, and this Ahab cannot do.

The images qualify each other, and the total effect is complex and ambiguous. The first arouses awe, wonder, and fear; the second, awe and wonder; the third, admiring sympathy. The response evoked contains the tragic elements of pity and fear, and hasty, over-simplified reactions of complete identification or condemnation are to be avoided. The final effect, however, must depend in part on the degree of romanticism existing in each reader, on whether he sees the romantic quest-hero as truly heroic, or blasphemous, or merely foolish.

With "Stowing Down and Clearing Up", Melville's presentation of the craft of whaling is complete, and the narrative should be free to move directly to its catastrophe (in fact it is briefly interrupted by five short cetological chapters). Consequently Ahab again dominates the action. In general, we may say that these final episodes offer alternative methods of accepting misfortune (which Ahab cannot or will not understand), allow him opportunities to save himself and his ship (which he consciously rejects), and display the full development of his mania, with its moral, intellectual and practical consequences.

The meeting with the *Samuel Enderby* shows that rage and hate are not the only possible responses to disaster. It is clear from the tone of Ishmael's comment—"they were all trumps, every soul on board" (CI)—that Captain Boomer's decision that *Moby Dick* is "best let alone" (C) should not be taken as ignoble or cowardly. If Boomer's loss is comparable to Ahab's (even more crippling, in fact), the blacksmith Perth's is more serious and results wholly from his own actions, thus making it even harder to bear. His patient resignation is simply incomprehensible to Ahab, who knows only one way of meeting misfortune: "I am impatient of all misery in others that is not mad. Thou should'st go mad, blacksmith; say, why dost thou not go mad?" (CX-III).

The companionship of Pip, whom he cannot despise as he does his officers and crew, provides Ahab with an opportunity of rejoining humanity. Recognizing the danger to his mania, he deliberately rejects the

chance: "For this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health" (XCCIX). In befriending Pip, Ahab asserts his own moral superiority over the "frozen heavens" (CXXV)—but he finally destroys Pip along with the rest of the crew. In "The Symphony" he resists the softening influences of Starbuck, the calm sea, and his own memories with the plea of Fate. Even on the third day of the hunt it is not too late. Starbuck's cry is true: "Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!" (CXXXV). In the conflict between Ahab and the White Whale, Ahab has always been the aggressor.

An important sequence of events dramatizes the growth of Ahab's "fatal pride" (CXXIV). In "The Doubloon" we find him verging on solipsism as he gazes at the figures of the complicated design and exclaims "all are Ahab" (XCIX). Delusions of omnipotence appear in the quarrel with Starbuck, when Ahab points a musket at the mate and cries "There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain who is lord over the *Pequod*" (CIX). Ahab at least half-seriously claims godhood for himself: "Here I am, proud as Greek god" (CVIII). But at the climax of his egotism he will not accept even divinity: "Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors! Cold, cold—I shiver!" (CXXXIII). It is a monstrous assertion of superiority based on individual singularity. The final words indicate that Ahab has begun to realize the cost of his pride to himself. Its cost to others will soon be revealed.

Ahab's pride no longer allows him to accept human limitations, and under the influence of Fedallah he practices black magic. The blasphemous "baptism" of the harpoons parallels the ceremonial drinking from their sockets in "The Quarter-Deck" and dramatizes the moral consequences of the hunt for Moby Dick. When Ahab "deliriously howled" "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli" (CXIII), we should take him at his word. There is no Blakean transformation of values here—the devil is really the devil. Ahab dedicates his harpoon, and by implication himself, his ship and his crew, to evil—that is, if pride, hatred and vengefulness are evil. That Melville intended such a reading seems indicated by the frenzy of Ahab's words and actions, and by the significant adjective "malignant": "The malignant iron scorchingly devoured the baptismal blood."

Ahab tramples on the quadrant not out of humility but impatience: "Science! Curse thee, thou vain toy" (CXVIII). Science cannot help him to his revenge, therefore its physical symbol, the quadrant, is a "paltry thing" that "feebly pointest on high". The episode is reminiscent of Macbeth's anger at the physician's negative reply to his question,

"Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased?" and his resulting outcry "Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it." (In the chapter immediately preceding, Ahab has been associated with Macbeth through the prophecies of Fedallah.)

Even in his frenzy, however, Ahab calculates the effects of his actions on the crew and resorts to those "external arts . . . more or less paltry and base" by which supremacy is established and maintained. This is conspicuously the case in his repair of the compass, performed in such a way as to impress the crew with his almost magical powers. Having reduced them to a state of "servile wonder", he despises them, as Melville shows in his most powerful statement of Ahab's *hubris*: "In his fiery eyes of scorn and triumph, you then saw Ahab in all his fatal pride" (CXXIV).

His speech to the "clear spirit of clear fire" (CXIX), is rhetorically impressive but metaphysically confused and inconsistent with his own behaviour. What is the nature of the "unsuffusing thing behind thee. . . to whom all thy eternity is but time"? Since this power permits all the evils which make up Ahab's indictment of the divine, why should it be more acceptable to him? Why not assume another power beyond it, and so on through an infinite regression? Ahab has not solved the problem of evil by removing it one step. (The confusion may be Melville's own.) The declaration that "war is pain and hate is woe. Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee" is contradicted by all of Ahab's past behaviour. We have no reason to believe that he would recognize such a coming, and we can be sure that he would not accept it. In fact it does come, in the form of Pip's devotion, and Ahab rejects it by continuing the hunt.

The last important event before the hunt begins is the encounter with the *Rachel* (the meeting with the mis-named *Delight* merely provides further evidence of Moby Dick's power, thereby increasing our anticipation and fear.) When Ahab refuses to join in the search for the missing boat, only because "even now I lose time" (CXXVIII), he finally rejects the human solidarity and inter-relatedness which have irked him so long, and with them he is rejecting the basis of all morality. This rejection is the inevitable consequence of his mania, with its resulting "fatal pride" and sense of isolation from both gods and men. No consideration can influence him; Ahab has *become* his mania and is now ripe for destruction, which immediately follows.

The hunt fails to support his conception of Moby Dick as an incarnation of evil. The White Whale is beautiful (which we had not expected) and hideous both; his anger is deadly, but he is harmless unless pro-

voked. He has always been discriminating in his choice of victims, and the destruction of the *Pequod* and all its men is justified and necessary. What Ahab tells his own boat's crew, "Ye are not other men, but my arms and legs!" (CXXXV) applies equally to all (except, apparently, Ishmael). They have allowed themselves to become mere extensions of Ahab's personality, and so their doom is inevitable (and at least more justified than the fate of the Ancient Mariner's shipmates).

The *Pequod* too is an extension of Ahab, and the language which he applies to it as it goes down is almost identical to that which he uses for himself; "thou uncracked keel; and only god-bullied hull; thou firm deck, and haughty helm, and Pole pointed prow" (CXXXV). That striking compound, "god-bullied", requires close attention; knowing that he is about to die, Ahab pronounces an epitaph on himself as well as his ship. The phrase asserts an enormous pride—how important Ahab and his ship must be if God finds it necessary to bully them! Implicit is the suggestion that he can be bullied only by divinity; all natural forces he can resist. (Just so Ahab must deify or diabolize Moby Dick; he cannot admit that he has been defeated and crippled by a mere natural whale.) The assertion, outrageous to the orthodox, that God *does* bully justifies Ahab's defiance and imputes to him the moral superiority that the victim of a bully possesses over his tormentor (it is essential to Ahab's rationalization of his hate that he should be an innocent victim, although the claim is obviously false). "Only god-bullied hull"—Ahab's image of Ahab is summed up in those words.

Ahab "dies in the game" as Stubb had predicted (CXIX). His last speech—"from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. . . Thus I give up the spear!" (CXXXV)—gives no sign of any final enlightenment. We may admire his courage, but not unduly; no more than we admire the courage of Macbeth, when, knowing that defeat is certain, he cries "Lay on Macduff, / and damned be him that first cries 'Hold, enough!'" Neither has any real alternative.

The episodes in this final section, up to and including the hunt, have exhibited the full nature of Ahab's mania and its consequences for himself and others and so have reconciled us to his death. Similarly, we retain a degree of sympathy for Macbeth to the end, yet we are finally brought not only to accept but to approve his defeat. Ahab's rhetoric is powerful, however, and doubtless there will always be readers to take his side, just as there have been readers to find Satan the real hero of *Paradise Lost*. There is more justification for such a reading in *Moby Dick*, because Melville does not present his heroic rebel with Milton's firmness. As Leon Howard has observed, "Intellectually he condemned

him. Emotionally he identified himself with him."⁸ Melville's rendering of Ahab is liable to the weaknesses of melodrama and sentimentality, both resulting from a momentary identification, or, to put it differently, from seeing Ahab as he sees himself. When the author appears to adopt Ahab's own self-conscious diabolism, the consequence is melodrama: "Only the infidel sharks in the audacious seas may give ear to such words, when, with tornado brow, and eyes of red murder, and foamed lips, Ahab leaped after his prey" (XLVIII). One suspects that Melville had not really imagined what those terrific words might have been. Sentimentality is likely to occur when Ahab is seen as helplessly driven by an unrelenting Fate:

"Starbuck, I am old;—shake hands with me, man."
 Their hands met; their eyes fastened; Starbuck's tears the glue.
 "Oh, my captain, my captain!—noble heart—go not—go not!" (CXX-XV).

Language signals the loss of control. The diction of the passages cited is close to that of *Pierre* and suggests the kind of book that *Moby Dick* might easily have become. Fortunately, owing perhaps to the constant pressure towards reality and the world of fact exerted by the whaling material, Melville's intellectual judgement predominates, and he usually maintains a distance between himself and his protagonist. It is important also that Ahab, unlike *Pierre*, is ordinarily presented externally, that we do not consistently view the world of the novel through his eyes. Melville's control is never entirely secure, however, and Ahab, unlike Shakespeare's tragic heroes, frequently verges on the ridiculous.

Ahab is undeniably a hero of a kind. He displays qualities—strength, courage, determination against hopeless odds—which we admire, as we admire them in *Satan* and *Macbeth*. Admiration is necessary if we are to be moved by his fate; but it must be limited or we will be shocked instead. If we admire too much, the explanation may be found partly in Melville's ambivalence and partly in our own values. In theory at least we are still romantics, and we are likely to exalt the rebel without inquiring into the justification or the consequences of his rebellion.

NOTES

1. William E. Sedgewick, *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1944), p. 109.
2. James Baird, *Ishmael: A Study of the Symbolic Mode* (New York, 1962), p. 108.

3. James E. Miller, Jr., *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville* (New York, 1962), p. 108.
4. Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., *Ishmael's White World* (New Haven, 1965), p. 7.
5. Charles H. Cook, Jr., "Ahab's Intolerable Allegory," *Boston University Studies in English*, I (1955-56), pp. 45-52.
6. Warner Berthoff, *The Example of Melville* (Princeton, 1962), p. 87.
7. R.P. Blakmur, "The Craft of Herman Melville: A Putative Statement," in *The Expense of Greatness* (New York, 1940), p. 162.
8. Leon Howard, *Herman Melville* (Berkeley, 1951), p. 178.