"LIKE ALL THINGS THAT ARE MIGHTY" – MELVILLE'S WHITE WHALE AS AN INSPIRED REALITY

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Abstract: *The Melvillean Whale emerges as a spiritual configuration constructed along mystically-charged lines of thought. The transition from the philological excursus (encapsulated in the opening cetological chapters of the novel) to metaphysics is effected as the story advances, the elusive monster gradually revealing his "inspired" nature – "inspired" in the Emersonian sense of the word. The present paper undertakes to bring into relief the spiritual dimension of the Whale by decoding a number of key symbols in the text through an interpretive grid with esoteric overtones (the whale decoded as the indivisible Principle, the center, the seventh region of space). Projecting this symbolic structure upon the story, it becomes apparent that the whale progresses from its status as a lexical entry into a spirit-filled reality, for, as Saint Paul, the brilliant Christian esotericist, writes: "The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth Life"(2 Corinthians 3:6, The King James Version of The Holy Bible).*

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The theme of piercing the husks of appearances, of penetrating the opacity of the visible to gaze upon the beyond lies at the thematic core of "Melville's most difficult and perplexing narrative" as Cristopher Sten describes *Moby Dick.*

Melville artistically articulates his intuition of what is beyond the mask in the monologs and dramatic exchanges of his characters: when Starbuck overtly condemns Ahab for his hatred of "a dumb brute" (161), the latter gives him a remarkable answer which testifies to his advanced level of awareness and knowledge of the Invisible realm:

> All visible objects are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event-in the living act, the undoubted deed-there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask (…). That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate (161).

Ahab's words seem to echo Emerson's initiatory adage which represents a faithful illustration of the Swedenborgian theory of correspondences: "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (9).

"Moby Dick" may be interpreted as performing the role of a mystic "mystery name" (Gaskell, 522) which represents a name whose function is to obscure the meaning of a symbol from the lower personality but which serves to identify the individuality signified - in this case, the "unknown, reasoning thing" - to the higher mind.

The real opening chapter of *Moby Dick* foregrounds etymological - cetological concerns, "supplied by a late consumptive usher to a grammar school" (xxxvii). Steven Wasserstrom astutely observes that "philological research" can be used as a means of disguise in order to "reduce the character of the metaphysician to that of the scientist. Thus, the secret metaphysician dresses as an exact scientist" (59). Therefore, etymological research may be most successfully used as a tool for deflecting the

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readers' attention from the esoteric core of the whale's story, allowing it to unfold "under the cloak of secrecy" (Wasserstrom S. 155).

A similar function is discharged by the explicitly cetological chapters, which bridge the gap between science and metaphysics, or as James Barbour most insightfully contends,

> In writing about the whale, Melville had gone from cetology to theology and had arrived at the hieroglyph that God used as a self-symbol of his otherness in speaking to Job out of the whirlwind (32).

A significant amount of criticism has been devoted to the etymological section which prefaces the leviathanic epic. The etymological *excursus* starts off with a quote from Hackluyt which draws the reader's attention to the H in the word "whale":

> While you take in hand to school others, and to teach them by what name a whale - fish is to be called in our tongue, leaving out, through ignorance, the letter H, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true.
>
> Hackluyt (xxxviii)

Gordon Boudreau surveys various critical opinions which center upon Melville's individual spelling of the Hebraic term for "whale". For instance, Dorothee Metlitzki assesses that Melville's use of the letter 'H' in Melville's transcription of the Hebrew and Greek words for the whale is "visibly important", an "open secret" through which Melville invested the H with the status of a "hieroglyphic" representation of YAHWEH, the "ineffable name of God":

> the first letter of the word for whale in Hebrew (t - `tan,' a singular form of the biblical plural `tanim') and in Greek (k in `kytos') are mistakenly mined into `h,' resulting in Melville's inaccurate forms of `han' and `hytos' (9).

Along the same lines of thought runs Ben Rogers's contention that Melville's transcription of the Hebrew for *whale* is nothing but "a calculated error", the 'H' standing for a "sign of divine covenant" just as in the Biblical examples of name-changes: Abram to Abraham and Sara to Sarah, which signaled God's special favor:

> Melville gave his Greek and Hebrew whale an `H' a symbol of the cetacean's divinity and the nature of his prophesied struggle with Ahab (prophesied both by Elijah and the connotations of Ahab's name) (5).

Gordon Boudreau reaches a thought-provoking conclusion which emphasizes the in-spired character of the whale. He contends that the letter 'H' - which Melville knowingly and purposefully incorporated into the original word - possesses life-giving attributes, turning the *whale* from a lexical entry into a spirit-filled reality:

> Considered phonetically, [the word whale], is animated, inspired, in the radical Emersonian sense-that is, through wind, breath, currents of air. This is because the letter "H" is an aspirate letter (...) Thus, in the word *whale*, the H is the spirit and principle of its animation (...). As such, it is also a similitude of the living whale's sign and expression of its animation (12).
>
> The letter "H" in "whale" suggests inspiration in the Emersonian sense of 'spirit' as wind (...) (10).

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> In *Moby-Dick*, "whale" was not a dead word in a dusty library's antiquated lexicons, but a living word articulated by aspiration, by the breath of life (15).

All these glimpses into the spiritual quality of the white whale are in consonance with its mystery-laden value in the constellation of esoteric knowledge for, as Saint Paul, the brilliant Christian esotericist, writes: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives Life"(2 Corinthians 3:6).

Intricately connected with the esoteric symbolism of the whale are "the mysteries of the letter *nūn* ن" to which René Guénon devotes an in-depth analysis in his seminal book *Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée* (Chapter XXIII).

Guénon points out that in Arabic this letter represents the whale, a fact which dovetails perfectly with the original meaning of the word *nūn* which means "whale" as well as "fish". This double significance may be related to the vaster context of the symbolism of the fish as Savior both in the Christian and the Hindu thought.

Traditionally, the two zodiacal gates corresponding to the summer solstice and the winter solstice, respectively, represent the entrance into and the exit out of "the cosmic grotto" (Guénon, 1962: 161). Guénon insists upon the idea that the whale corresponds to the zodiacal sign of the Capricorn which contains the solstice gate leading up to the "ascending way", also known as "the gate of the gods" (Guénon, 1962: 28). "The cosmic grotto" stands for the place where the human being dwells and unfolds their temporary existence. After completing their sojourn in "the cosmic grotto", the human being exits through one of these two gates, according to the degree of their spiritual realization, the ultimate goal being the irreversible exit through "the gate of the gods". The two ways of the manifested world are "the bright" way and the "dark" way. Those following the bright path progress from the manifest to the non-manifest. The bright path corresponds to the process of spiritual realization while the dark way leads back to the visible dimension of being.

Projecting this symbolism into the story of Moby-Dick, it becomes apparent that the whale functions as the Savior-Fish, the Redeemer, opening the path to illumination. According to Francoise Bonardel, the defining moment of the Great Work, the moment when transmutation is effected, corresponds to the point of transition from *nigredo* symbolized by the winter darkness to *albedo* expressed in the triumph of light (345). The significance of transmutation can therefore be corroborated with the whale's association with "the gate of gods" (Guénon, 1962: 162), that is, the winter solstice, the very moment of transition from darkness to light. These symbolically rich connections cast a new light upon the esoteric role played by Moby Dick: the object of the "the fiery hunt" (Melville, 194) is equivalent to the realization of the Great Work.

Corroborated with the mystical dimension of the whale is its "whiteness" interpreted as something "ineffable", "elusive", "indefinite" and "inscrutable" suggestive of "the heartless voids and immensities of the Universe" (Melville,193). The narrator, the "unlettered Ishmael" (*ibidem* 345), establishes some striking correspondences. He equates the whiteness of the whale with "the great principle of light [which] forever remains white or colorless in itself". In other words, the whale is equated with the Principle, the One and the Potential as opposed to the manifest world of generation and destruction.

Moby-Dick's elusiveness is enhanced by its hieroglyphic character. The inexpressible veils itself in its inaccessibility: "The whale, like all things that are mighty, wears a false brow to the common world" (*ibidem* 346) writes Ishmael. He testifies to the "pyramidical silence" (*ibidem* 345) and "the blankness full of meaning" (*ibidem* 193)

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displayed by the whale. Moreover, what triggers the quest for meaning is "the forehead pleated with riddles" (*ibidem* 345).

The "pyramidical silence", as well as the richness of enciphered significance, are the defining attributes of the Supreme Center, Agarttha (Guénon, 1958:15) which in Sanskrit means "the Inviolate". "The head of this Leviathan is an entire delusion" (Melville, 346) declares the narrating voice; this amounts to saying that the Leviathan is a hieroglyph between the visible and the invisible, an expression of the Absolute. Its intensity consists in its inaccessibility: the more fiery Ahab's passion is, the farther the ineffable retreats beyond the horizon.

Moby Dick's color or "visible absence of color" (*ibidem* 193) is the very synthesis of the colors of the rainbow. White is associated with the supreme spiritual authority, with the immutability of the Center, which is the same as the White Island or the White Mountain upon which all the positive spiritual efforts are focused.

The function of the White Whale is that of the Center, traditionally defined and interpreted as "the seventh region of space" (Guénon, 1962: 225) which coincides with the Principle.

Ishmael's insightful remarks on "the whiteness of the whale" (Melville, 185) invite a closer analysis of the attributes of this so-called color and its esoteric significance. René Guénon advances a subtle discussion of the symbol of the rainbow exploring its hidden facets. He reveals that the rainbow contains six colors only - three fundamental and three complementary colors - an idea which runs counter to the commonly held seven-color theory. The other elements of the chromatic spectrum, inappropriately referred to as "colors", are only intermediary shades - as is the case of indigo. Besides, introducing an extra color in the chromatic set would completely ruin their harmonious distribution which is usually represented according to a very simple geometrical figure: each fundamental color can be placed in each angle of a triangle while each complementary can be placed in each angle of another triangle inversely positioned in relation to the "fundamental" triangle so that each color and its complementary are diametrically opposed. This display yields the six-pointed figure known as "Solomon's Seal" (Guénon, 1962: 338).

The seventh term of the color septenary can be identified by referring to the geometrical construction of the seventh ray. This can be derived from the symbolic representation of the three-dimension cosmic cross made up of the six directions of space and their center taken together.

The seventh element of the rainbow can be revealed by analogically superposing the color septenary represented in Solomon's Seal and the cross of space. The function of the seventh chromatic term in relation to the other six colors will be similar to the role of the center related to the six space directions. The seventh color will be positioned at the center of the six-pointed star, namely, the point where all apparent oppositions, which are in fact complementary to each other, fuse together and merge into oneness. In other words, the seventh term is not properly a color, just as the center is not a direction per se. The center is the very origin of the six space directions. Therefore, the seventh color must be the principle out of which the six are generated and in which they are synthetically contained. This is none other than white itself which is "colorless"- to quote Ishmael - just as the point is a-dimensional. Or, to quote Ishmael once more, "whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color and at the same time the concrete of all colors" (193).

The whale, in its immutable "visible absence" (193), is situated at the center of the chromatic hexagon. Above all else, Solomon's Seal symbolizes the hierogamy, the

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sacred union of complementary elements which coincides with the realization of the hermetic and Masonic *Magnum Opus*, the completion of any initiation, encapsulated in the whiteness of the whale. Perhaps this is one of the riddles which the Leviathan poses to "the common world".

White is not made manifest in the rainbow just as the seventh ray is not represented geometrically. The six colors are the result of the polarization of white light just as the six directions stand for the unfolding of the potentialities comprised in the primordial point.

Therefore, René Guénon concludes, each septenary consists of an indivisible foundational unit accompanied by another six elements generated out of it, the unit corresponding to the un-manifested principle while the six terms represent the totality of the manifest. The seventh ray, the counterpart of whiteness, represents the way along which a being returns to the non-manifest after completing a journey in the visible dimension of existence.

In the light of this analysis, Moby Dick emerges as the symbol of the liberating way, corresponding to the ritualistic straight path at the end of which illumination awaits.

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