

The Hidden Artist and the Art of Hiding in Moby-Dick

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Moby-Dick is a book about whaling, the voyage of the Pequod under Captain Ahab, and his utter defeat by a whale, as related by a sailor/teller who calls himself Ishmael. It is simultaneously a book about writing, the construction of a novel by a writer/artist, and his ambiguous success, which may be read in a series of self-references throughout the book.¹ As the tale explores the whale, its history, its anatomy, and its "psychology," the text indirectly explores the writer/artist, his trials, his anxieties, and his exhilarations. Within this complex narrative is a serious, sometimes horrifying, meditation upon the nature and meaning of the act of writing, and on what it means to be a writer. Both explicitly and implicitly, the novel "foregrounds" many works of "art" as well as Ishmael, the "genial" teller of a long (and tall) tale. It also "backgrounds" another side of the writer, hidden below decks. Taking seriously the reflexive nature of the novel, this paper is a pursuit of that other artist, hidden behind the literal "pasteboard mask": the white paper, black letters, and pasteboard covers of Moby-Dick.

The novel suggests in many ways the study of itself as art.² It is a novel full of art objects, from tiny skrimshands to that cannibal-craft, the Pequod. It includes a painting, books, stories, a carved tooth, a coin, a cathedral, bodies that are in themselves art (Queequeg's, Ishmael's, the whales'). Yet the artists themselves are, significantly, usually hidden. There are two exceptions: the carpenter manufactures a bone leg for Ahab and Queequeg copies the hieroglyphics of his own personal work of art, his body, onto his coffin. This coffin, as well as most of the aforementioned artifacts, is specifically compared to a literary production; it becomes a miniature, in some sense, of the gigantic work which contains it. The doubloon, the skrimshands, the whales, and Queequeg are all covered with writing, "hieroglyphics," which seem as difficult to

interpret as the novel. Ishmael, too, presents his body as art object, preserving a part of it "for a poem [he] was then composing" (376).

How do we discover the artist behind the objects? Ishmael presents himself as artist, as well as his body as artifact. The figure of Ishmael as a "portrait of the artist" has been well-established in criticism. Writers such as Marjorie Pryse, Edgar Dryden, Murray Krieger, Ronald Mason, John Irwin, and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. use the figure of Ishmael, sometimes Ishmael/Melville, as representative of the artist, "compelled to report and create meaning in what happened to him both despite, and because of, his sense of the uncertainty of meanings available to temporal man" (Brodtkorb 138). This is the artist standing on the masthead, surveying all possible points of view, linking, communicating, teaching, learning. Much of the time, the artist seen is an Ishmael: a comic playing with every possible sexual pun, the writer in need of money (playing on two meanings of "draughts"), the writer who says that "the perils of whaling . . . breed [a] free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy" (196).

But the issue is more complex. A telling piece of external evidence is Melville's "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in which he calls for a great American literature, and in which Melville acknowledges the projection of some sort of artist into each work of art:

And if you rightly look for it, you will almost always find that the author himself has somewhere furnished you with his own picture. For poets (whether in prose or verse), being painters of Nature, are like their brethren of the pencil, the true portrait painters, who, in the multitude of likenesses to be sketched, do not invariably omit their own; and in all high instances, they paint them without any vanity, though, at times, with a lurking something, that would take several pages to properly define. (415-416)

The issue of portraiture is significant here, for it reminds us of Pierre, with its double portraits of the father, the public portrait and the secret one, kept in a closet. The "lurking something" is what I shall "take several pages to define."

In order to open the closet to discover the complex artist in this complex narrative, I shall turn to a "key": the analogy between books and whales in Moby-Dick. This has been a standard sign of the textuality of the novel. It is a dynamic analogy which cuts both ways: if books are like whales, so whales are like books. Ishmael asks the reader to "take hold of the whales bodily, in their

entire liberal volume" (123); he speaks of "breaking the seal and reading all the contents of that young [whale] cub" (373).

Melville particularizes the whales/books analogy further, setting up the equivalence of the unique White Whale and the thick white book. He modestly hints in "The Whale as a Dish" that size is a fundamental similarity: "[T]he whale would . . . be considered a noble dish, were there not so much of him; but when you come to sit down before a meat-pie nearly one hundred feet long, it takes away your appetite" (254). The pun on tale/tail relates the striving of the two: "Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven" (317). Sharon Cameron implies that Melville has succeeded in capturing the whale where Ahab failed:

In the context of the novel's issues, the title does not simply serve as frontispiece for the story of Moby-Dick. It rather insists that the thing itself has been captured in and as narrative. Melville spells it out twice: Moby-Dick; Or, The Whale, suggesting that the novel's mythic title has got possession of the thing about which it is trying to tell--has got it inside its body, has got it as its body. (44)

If Moby Dick is a "monster," as Cameron suggests, then the novel, too, is a monster, participant in the "universal cannibalism of the sea" (235). Melville, himself, in writing to Hawthorne about this book, said, "I'm going to take him by his jaw, however, before long, and finish him up in some fashion or other" (Leyda 410).

The logical extension of these analogies would be the proposition: If books are analogous to whales, then writing is analogous to whaling. Again, what we learn about whaling may be construed to also apply to writing, and writing itself may reflect back on the art of whaling. Melville takes upon himself the glorification of both pursuits at once. To write the "unwritten life" (118) of the whale is equal in difficulty to the terrifying work of whaling:

To grope down into the bottom of the sea after [whales]; to have one's hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing. What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this leviathan! (118)

Melville's expansiveness here forces the analogy out even beyond whaling and writing to world creation (books and whales as worlds, Moby-Dick and Moby Dick as circling the globe), but the essential task of the book has been set up as (at least) double: to record the "capture" of the whale in its true greatness, and to

record the process of writing that "capture."

Watching the act of writing disguised as whaling is one of the exhilarating delights of a close reading of *Moby-Dick*. Richard Chase compares the book to "the cathedral with the crane on its tower," which "allows us to see--in fact insists that we shall see--some of the machinery by which it was built, some of the processes of construction" (51). In a sense, using the expansive analogies of the previous paragraph, it is, in an indirect way, to watch the process of "world" construction.

We turn now to observe the builder, or "architect" of worlds, the writer behind the writing, the whaler hunting whales. Using these "linked analogies" sketched above, we see beyond the figure of Ishmael. A more complex, more "wicked" artist is revealed. "Come see," as Emerson says in "The Snowstorm," "the fierce artificer" by taking a close look at two chapters: "Moby Dick" and "The Chart."

"Moby Dick" is an obvious point of departure for a close textual study of the novel because it mimics in small the title (albeit the second one) of the novel. It is also a crucial point at which the Ishmael persona admits a loss of individuality:

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; . . . I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. . . . Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. (155)

In other words, the "I" of the book has become absorbed not only into whaling, which he has been doing before, but also into "Ahab's quenchless feud," the chase after the great White Whale. Stepping back into analogies, the formerly clear and unique Ishmael character is losing his perspective and equanimity in trying to write the great novel. The intensity of research into accounts of great whales is reflected in the next sentence: "With greedy ears, I learned the history of that murderous monster . . ." (155). We begin to hear another voice of the artist, and it is neither relaxed nor jovial. It is a point of trauma, with complex results for the narrative.

If "whalers" are "writers," the second paragraph describes the loneliness of the profession, and the difficulty of writing a truly great book--the "great ferocity, cunning, and malice in the monster attacked" (155). "[T]he number," Melville writes, "who as yet had actually and knowingly given battle to him, was

small indeed" (155), an accurate assessment of the scarcity of serious American authors. The calamities, "not restricted to sprained wrists . . . but fatal to the last degree of fatality" (156), focus attention on the work of the hand, while hinting at the enormous difficulty in trying to live by writing.

The next paragraphs are filled with "the story of the White Whale," "true histories," "fabulous rumors," "wild rumors," and praise of the "whale fishery" as surpassing the land for these stories. We watch whaling transformed into storytelling and writing of the most awesome sort. The whalemens who "hand to jaw, give battle to them" recall Melville's words to Hawthorne above. Finally, after a good deal of pushing, "the whaleman is wrapped by influences all tending to make his fancy pregnant with many a mighty birth" (156), delivering, so to speak, this novel. Not only is it evident that the whaleman has turned into a storyteller, but that the story itself is mighty indeed, Moby Dick or Moby-Dick himself. As if to cap the analogy with a laugh at his own pun, the next sentence speaks of that "ever gathering volume," which is, of course, the "outblown rumors of the White Whale."

Not only is this whale (novel) lauded as great in its own fishery; the following paragraph contrasts it (as specifically "American") to all other whales, and slyly brings Melville's review of Hawthorne's "Mosses" to mind by lauding in particular the "wild, strange tales of Southern whaling" (157). The cannibalistic monstrosity of Moby Dick is recalled by the report that whales are "continually . . . athirst for human blood" (157).

The chapter now turns and "give[s] chase to Moby Dick" by expounding a catechism of the qualities of the White Whale, words which not accidentally often apply to the book as well. If Moby Dick, for example, is ubiquitous, so are novels which can be "encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time" (158). The novel as well as the whale are "immortal," "intelligent," and "malign" ("I have written a wicked book"). The "peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead" may be analogous to the whiteness of the pages of the book. If the whale is but a "pasteboard mask," so, of course, is this novel, literally covered in pasteboard and just as much a mask. The act of reading as whaling may be suggested in this section, as many readers may feel that the novel is "beneath the surface, in a great part, unaccountable."

Reading this "malign" chapter, we suddenly come face to face with the artist.

We discover the captain, "seizing the line-knife," the "Arkansas duellist . . . blindly seeking with a six inch blade to reach the fathom-deep life of the whale" (159). We may read the duellist/dualist pun as a possible comment on the "dual" nature of the writing as well as the Manichaeian disposition of Ahab. Then the six-inch blade carries a triple pun on instruments of power: knife/penis (and it recalls as well the "six-inch chapter," "The Lee Shore," which functions as a "stoneless grave['s]" epitaph).

Momentarily leaving Ahab stabbing at the whale, or the artist reaching for the "life" in the whale, let the knife recall the other writings and knives that are observed in the book, as if the author were watching his projected self stabbing with his six inch . . . pen. Recall the "storied weapons" piled around the entrance to the Spouter-Inn, the steel pens replacing quills in "The Whale As a Dish," the pen and jackknife of Peleg, and Peleg's remark that Ahab had "fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales" (76). Recall the quill that is the only object which can fit in a whale's ear, and only a sperm whale's at that ("The Sperm Whale's Head"). That quill connects the "wooden pin or skewer the size of a common quill" (240), which controls the whaling line (and the line of writing) which is tied to the harpoon. The weapon as writing instrument remains constant, for whalers are literal as well as figurative writers, scarring the whales into enormous hieroglyphs. Extending the knife/pen analogy out, recall the plea for harpooners: "To insure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must start to their feet from out of idleness, and not from out of toil" (246). The (d)art of writing requires leisure for its harpooning. The book as act of watching the writing of itself culminates in "The Fossil Whale" in which the author pleases:

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. . . . To produce a mighty book, you must
choose a mighty theme. (379)

But who is this duellist with a six-inch blade? "That captain was Ahab" (159). The artist projected into the book in this chapter is not Ishmael at all, but a man who "cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale" (160). We can now see these sections as a portrait of an obsession seizing the writer:

[H]e at last came to identify with [the White Whale] . . . all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. . . . [H]e pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. . . . 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. (160)

These few lines suffice to tell the tale of an artist putting all his feelings into one work, a work that nearly kills him. The next paragraph makes this seem possible, for it mentions the "months of days and weeks" of isolation that might effect this "delirium," and also that the passion was concealed: "to mankind he did long dissemble" (161). The "thousand fold more potency than ever he had sanely brought to bear" (161), be it in writing, in whaling, or in insemination, is a result of this obsession. The artist here is not only "mad" with "rage bolted up," but is also secretly hunting the white novel, not bent on "profit to be counted in dollars," but on his own personal object. Further, Ahab's control of the crew mirrors the artist/writer's control of the fictional characters.

The sentence almost at the end of this lengthy, tremendously weighty whale of a chapter ("Who does not feel the irresistible arm drag?" [163]) again pulls attention back to the act of writing. It is linked to the call (previously quoted) "Friends, hold my arms!" Like the "six-inch blade," the image of arms tired from writing resonates through all the "arm" images of the book, especially the "Squeeze of the Hand." We recall the hands groping into the "bottom of the sea" and the "sprained wrists," cited above. In "The Cassock," we see the hands of the mincer cutting "bible leaves," and "the minced pieces drop, fast as the sheets from a rapt orator's desk" (351). And finally, near the end of the book, Ahab himself asks: "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (445).

Before proceeding to an examination of "The Chart," which provides a different type of evidence about the nature of Moby-Dick's hidden artist, I pause to note some implications of this Ahabian artist hidden within the words of the novel. Ahab appears as a figurative artist, obsessed with his private analogies and his secret mission. This sort of artist is mentioned in Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful," in lines triple-scored by Herman Melville:

It is requisite for the ideal artist to possess a force of character that seems hardly compatible with its delicacy; he must keep faith in himself, while the incredulous world assails him with its utter

disbelief; he must stand up against mankind and be his own sole disciple, both as respects his genius, and the objects to which it is directed. (Leyda 381)

In addition, biographically, Melville's projection of himself into Ahab has been mentioned by critics such as Henry Nash Smith, Leslie Fiedler, and Ronald Mason. As Howard P. Vincent said, "Melville the artist was just as vigilant in strategy as was Ahab the hunter of Moby Dick" (195). But Ahab is not only a figurative writer. He writes "literally" as well.

Going below decks, following Ahab down into his cabin and his thoughts in "The Chart," we find the writer at work. The evidence for Ahab as a writer/artist of the book is focussed here, where Ahab writes on his charts: "[A]lmost every night some pencil marks were effaced, and others were substituted" (171). And it is even said directly that Ahab "could, by his art, so place and time himself" as to meet Moby Dick (172, my emphasis).

Reading the chapter carefully, taking seriously the Ahab/artist analogy, "The Chart" yields agonizing details about the work of the writer. In the first paragraph, "with slow but steady pencil" he completes the work, referring to "old log-books" that sound very much like Melville's own source materials: Beale, Scoresby, Browne, and so on. The remark that "while he himself was marking out lines and courses on the wrinkled charts, some invisible pencil was also tracing lines and courses upon the deeply marked chart of his forehead" refers back, I believe, to the authorial depiction of Ahab as character, being "drawn" by the writer. We see the obsession of the work, "with a view to the more certain accomplishment of that monomaniac thought of his soul" (171). (This section may also refer forward to the loop of the whaling [and written] line which, in the end, catches Ahab round the neck, cutting off words. It may refer to the whale drawing the whaleboat that is attached to it by the harpoon. "My line! my line?" exclaims Ahab (458). For finally, Ahab is fused to the whale by the line in death.)

A few paragraphs later, we read of the "cautious comprehensiveness and unloitering vigilance with which Ahab threw his brooding soul into this unfaltering hunt" (173). "And have I not tallied the whale, Ahab would mutter to himself, as after poring over his charts till long after midnight he would throw himself back in reveries--tallied him, and shall he escape?" (174). The pain of

the writer is reflected here, the artist in chains to his own creation. Yielding to his obsession, he finds a "hell in himself" and races out of the cabin in torment.

The portrait of the artist here is not a happy one. It is an artist lonely as "the last of the Grisly Bears . . . sucking his own paws" (134). It is an artist driven beyond human limits, grappling with thunderbolts, visioning utter blankness. It is the artist who is self-crucified, martyred, birthmarked, holding on to the death shrouds.

The relationship between this visioned artist and the "genial desperado" Ishmael is complex, perhaps reflecting the complexity of the narrative itself.³ Moby-Dick is a split narrative, but the boundaries are not clear: the Ishmael narrator blends confusingly into the omniscient narrator who can go behind closed doors. In some ways, perhaps not altogether by chance, the artist seems also split: a benign, bawdy punster who sees words as double, and double (or more) meanings in all things, over against the obsessive artist, self-propelled on a private quest, who projects his single meaning, and sees only himself, in everything.⁴

Like "Moby Dick," "The Chart" is "veined" with sexual imagery throughout. Melville's use of this imagery may reveal some structure in the scheme of the split artist. We are confronted with two womb-images (holding secrets) in the first sentence, the cabin under the decks and the locker, as well as a seemingly impotent phallic "wrinkled roll of yellowish sea charts," all on a suggestively "screwed-down table" (171). This happens "almost every night," as Ahab goes in search of sperm. The imagery is more explicitly sexual as one reads of the whales swimming in "veins" which may be "straight as a surveyor's parallel," and the "vein is presumed to expand or contract" (172).

The artist's quest is linked to the sexual quest, and the puzzle, at mid-chapter, lies unsolved. Is this "unachieved revengeful desire" impotent, self-seductive, or is there some sort of fruitful result? It is, in a way, all three. The impotence connects, I believe, not with the artistic quest, but with the philosophic one, the quest for truth, for what Nina Baym calls "non-fiction." Her "Melville's Quarrel With Fiction" persuasively details her reading of Melville's increasing dissatisfaction with fiction as a route to truth. Ishmael's side of the artistic quest seems self-seductive here. In the same way

that Ahab the character absorbs the personality of Ishmael the character, until Ishmael disappears, so we see the encyclopedic, epistemological, effervescent Ishmael's writing gradually disappear in the course of the book in favor of single-minded pursuit of the plot, the chase after the whale.

The Ahabian side of the artistic quest seems "fruitful," but at great expense. In the last long paragraph of "The Chart," the sexual imagery is clearly that of a most horrible generation, a birth of a fiend, a child of death. There is no phallus in this fury; instead the images are a "chasm [that] seemed opening in him," "this hell in himself [which] yawned beneath him." The idea that Ahab "fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth" recalls the earlier remark of Ahab going down into his cabin, "It feels like going down into one's tomb . . . to go to my grave-dug berth" (112), and the line in "Moby Dick" about "influences all tending to make his fancy pregnant with many a mighty birth" (156). The tremendous "conception" of Moby-Dick has been delivered inside Ahab's cabin, and it is imaged as a monster/devil. We recall Queequeg's coffin in this context as well, another "womb" shape which gives new life, both to Queequeg and to Ishmael, yet is of and for death, and is also a major work of art, covered with hieroglyphics.

The text in this passage speaks of Ahab himself split in two: divided between the "eternal, living principle or soul" (later defined as will) and the "characterizing mind"--"it was no longer an integral." He has created, as the chapter closes, a "vulture [that] feeds upon [his] heart for ever" (175).

To return to the image of writing, the act of writing in this chapter manifests itself as eminently sexual in desire, but generates life only at the cost of death, the "grave-dug berth." The artist seems to have split and then to have killed off part of himself (the self-crucifixion image of the bloody nails) in order to give birth to (to deliver) the novel. He must become a "tormented spirit," fleeing from himself. For the writer, the cabin is a womb as well as a tomb, and the pen is a phallus, but the product of that unnatural union is most fearsomely unnatural itself. It is, precisely, not Nature, but Art.⁵

An alternative way to articulate the vision of the artist here would be to say that we are allowed to see the artist in the process of becoming divided against himself. Furthermore, we see that it is the very act of writing, the artistic process itself, which engenders, uncovers, and forces out that very part

of the artistic process which has been hidden. We are far indeed from the blissful vision of natural birth and infancy of the whales in the center of "The Grand Armada." At the same time, we are closer to an understanding of this multiple artist.

Pausing once again to assess the reliability of this "portrait," we note the similarity of the structure of this section to a crucial section in Pierre, the book of Melville's in which the hero is most explicitly a writer. Pierre is writing his book, "religiously locked up while at work . . . resolved to battle it out in his own solitary closet" (337). The most interesting and relevant comment is that

two books are being writ; of which the world shall only see one, and that the bungled one. The larger book, and the infinitely better, is for Pierre's own private shelf. That it is, whose unfathomable cravings drink his blood; the other only demands his ink [recall the bloodthirsty whales]. But circumstances have so decreed, that the one can not be composed on the paper, but only as the other is writ down in his soul. . . . Thus Pierre is fastened on by two leeches;--how then can the life of Pierre last? . . . He is learning how to live, by rehearsing the part of death. (344)

If Pierre is in some way a report about the writing of Moby-Dick, this study suggests that both books were written, and the one written "on the paper," with "ink," is only a cover, mask, or "locker," for that written by the hidden artist, "in his soul," with "blood," down below the decks.⁶

What does this reading suggest about the Ahab/Ishmael artist projected into the book? What do we discover about being an artist/writer? What do we discover about art? The evidence discussed in this paper suggests that the artist is split in a complex way. It is an artist who is intent on poetry and words, and at the same time is, in Brodtkorb's translation of Blanchot, "trying to compete with the forces of the universe . . . trying by [the book's] flashing variety, its torrential composition, its obscurities and ellipses, to reproduce the effect of a world grappling with the thunderbolt" (147). Echoing the double vision of the sperm whale and the double heads of two different whales on the Pequod, we find an artist with double, but not equal vision; seeing multiplicities of meaning with one eye and near meaninglessness with the other fixated eye. We see an artist in some ways suggesting himself as a leader ("Knights and Squires"), and an artist who aims to turn the world upside down, just as Ahab overturned the harpoons in his Satanic communion.

The artist watching himself in the mirror as he writes "The Fountain" is Ishmael, the benign side of the writer who sees himself in every symbol on the doubloon. Ahab has an even larger mirror than the doubloon, however: Moby Dick, reflecting back to him "all the general rage and hate felt by his own race from Adam down" (160). And finally, for Ahab, the whole world is but a mirror: "This round gold [the doubloon] 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" (359). The book itself, a world and a whale, mirrors back to the artist his own self. The Ahabian side of the artist, if truly analogous to Ahab, obsessively sees himself reflected back whenever he looks into the book. The watching of himself writing is as much an obsession as the writing.

The act of writing in Moby-Dick, the hand, the pen, the ink, the paper, are not incidental, but central to the book. Like the black and white images continually opposed in Moby-Dick, like the black ink on the white pages, there is a dark side and a light side to the artist, as Melville said of Hawthorne: "For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side--like the dark half of the physical sphere--is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black" ("Mosses" 406). The "Indian-summer" half of the artist is the teller, the artist who succeeds in communicating. Just as Ishmael opens up communication with Queequeg through use of the large book (53), so the goal of this side of the artist is, by telling the story, to link himself to other human beings. It is this linkage through communication that symbolically saves Ishmael's life. As Edgar Dryden says: "Only when he comes to regard his life as a story he is telling does he discover and communicate with other men. In this sense, language is the very basis of his existence" (Thematics 106).

But the other side of communication is hiding: the hiding of self, of secrets and subjectivity. "Shrouded in blackness" is an apt phrase for that side of the artist, linking him to death and to hiding, to using words not to communicate but to cover. Ahab's hiding of his chart within the locker, of the act of writing within the cabin, of his crew within the hold, and of his own purposes from his partners is analogous to the hiding through writing of many things within the book. Some of those secrets have been suggested already: the obsession of the quest, the true quest itself (to write the great American novel/to capture Moby Dick), the "unnatural" monstrous birth that is so like a death, the hidden

artist, hidden within the text as Ahab is hidden beneath the decks for much of the voyage. The subjectivity of the artist is protected, is kept secret, locked away within the writing. And we never are allowed to see what Ahab actually wrote.

We should not be surprised by this hiding. As is often the case, hidden away in the blubber of the cetology chapters were the clues. "The Nut," (the brain of the whale) itself "is hidden away behind its vast outworks, like the innermost citadel within the amplified fortifications of Quebec. So like a choice casket is it secreted in him" (293). Further, this celebrated tale (tail) was purposely contrived to hide the artist/thinker behind it all: "how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail. . . . But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face" (318).

This mysterious hiding of the Ahabian side of the artist is, it seems to me, linked to silence, the unvoiced manifestation of secrets. There are silences hidden within this book of words, white pages behind the black letters. It is, itself, the mask. The silence is what is not said when Ishmael communicates, when he survives. The sperm whale is itself a silent whale; Ahab himself near the end is reduced to "nameless wails" (1) (451), and finally is strangled, "voicelessly" (468), as the line tightens into its last loops. James Guetti suggests that Ahab's death signals the final triumph in this book of silence over language itself (42). "Yes," as Ishmael said in "The Chapel," "there is death in this business of whaling--a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity" (41), into the ultimate hiding of death. The harpoon seems an ever-closer analogue to the pen, for we discover that both are instruments of silence and death. To write is to encrypt. For Melville, writes Edgar Dryden, "implied in the voice of culture is the silence of the tomb" ("Entangled Text" 163).

The silences and hidings gesture in another direction as well: toward absence, the "blank" aspect of whiteness. This absence is clearly the absence of the White Whale himself for most of the book, and it is figured at the end by the vortex, created by the whale, which sucks down the entire talking crew and the Pequod as well, to its "smallest chip." The final absence of the whale suggests that Sharon Cameron is telling only part of the story when she says that Melville

has "captured" the whale, that the novel "has got possession of the thing about which it is trying to tell--has got it inside its body, has got it as its body" (44). The silences, the hidings, the lockers of the book, the vortex where the whale has been, reveal the other side of possession: that Moby Dick has escaped, that writing fails to communicate as well as succeeds, and yet that the book is about desire for the absent whale just as much as it is about the whale.

Like the voyage of the Pequod, which had both a spoken purpose and an unspoken (silent) purpose, art for Melville is both communication and hiding, both revelation and destruction, birth and death. The split narrative is a necessity for exploring these contradictions and paradoxes, revealing not in abstractions but in story the unspoken agony of the art of writing.⁷

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Notes

¹ I have Ishmael a "teller" because of the role he enacts in "The Town-Ho's Story." He is, however, presented in "The Fountain" as a writer as well. I would like to sidestep the issue of telling (speech) versus writing, admitting that Ishmael does both. Jonathan Arac defines Ishmael's role as writer: "Ishmael's narrative, although writers often use the first person to pretend to be speakers, is not set in any speaking context, such, for example, as Conrad always uses. . . . The Carlylean theme of writing as heroic labor . . . [is] raised here to the level of program and fulfilled in the rest of the work" (156-157).

² One reader of this paper complained of my insistence on the doubleness of Melville's whale imagery. I admit that I have exaggerated the point for purposes of clarity. However, since writing this peice, I have read John Irwin's American Hieroglyphics, which makes my analogies seem timid by comparison. Irwin's discussion of Melville's "continuing image of the whale's body as a book" (304) is one of many places at which Irwin's argument augments my own. I have added illuminating quotations from American Hieroglyphics as notes. Another relevant critical piece is A. Robert Lee's article "Moby-Dick: The Tale and the Telling," which employs quantities of evidence to show that "as much as Moby-Dick offers itself as high epic, it also functions as a wonderfully canny piece of self-knowing narration . . . [and] calls attention, throughout its length, to its own conception and modes of self-realization" (91).

³ The complexities of narrative structure are elucidated in Greenberg (91-98).

⁴ Irwin suggestively writes that "Hawthorne suggests that the narcissism that lies at the core of any self-reflective art--an art preoccupied with veiled self-portraiture, the artist forever contemplating his own illusory image in a variety of masks--is as much responsible for the artist's estrangement from society as any action of society's. It is as if the artist's narcissistic bond with the illusory image of himself is so complete that it precludes any merely social bond with another living body or with the communal body" (272).

⁵ Irwin ignores this particular scene in *Moby-Dick*, but envisions a similar scenario for Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*: "[I]f such a symbolic castration evokes the figure of the feminized male as representative of the artist's feminine role, this figure should, in a scenario of death and resurrection, give birth to the reborn literary man recovered from the creative impotence of the customhouse and wielding once more the phallic pen" (280).

⁶ Irwin: "For the author in the act of writing, the opposition writing self/written self is an opposition between living subject and dead object. The writing self is progressively sacrificed to, devoured by, the written self as living, subjective experience is transformed into lifeless, objective print. But that cannibalization of the writer's life is a self-sacrifice meant to slay death, for at the writer's death the polarity writing self/written self considered as life/death, spirit/letter, is reversed" (150).

⁷ Melville's silences and hidings will prove fruitful for much further thinking from different critical perspectives. To suggest a few, these chapters bear striking affinities to the work of Maurice Blanchot (the obsession with writing, the hand, and death), that of Jacques Derrida (writing as the "Pharmakon"), and that of Roland Barthes ("The Death of the Author," for example). There is much to be done.

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