

TWO

Platonic and Nietzschean Themes of Transformation in *Moby-Dick*

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MELVILLE AND ISHMAEL

In the spring of 1849, one year before he began work on *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville was in good health and high spirits. His first two novels had been popular with critics as well as the general reading public, and these successes provided the security he felt he needed to marry Elizabeth Shaw.¹ The two had wed two years earlier, and although their lives were cramped and hectic from sharing a house in New York City with several members of Melville's family, they were by all appearances genuinely happy. Melville had recently completed his third novel, *Mardi*, a sprawling philosophical romance full of "poetry and wildness."² Reviews of the book had yet to appear, but as far as Melville was concerned he had accomplished something remarkable, having produced a work in which he broke decisively with the adventure tales of his first two novels to establish himself as a writer of serious literary fiction. Moreover, to surpass even everything else, his first child had been born in February. Hershel Parker sums up this period of Melville's life with the apt words, "everything was going his way."³

Melville's psychological-spiritual and physiological condition in and around the time he wrote *Moby-Dick* is noteworthy because the novel is a literary-intellectual objectification of that condition.⁴ Common as it is to read the work as Ahab's story, or the whale's, as I read *Moby-Dick* the true protagonist of the book is Ishmael, and through Ishmael, *Melville himself*. Walter Bezanson, who also put Ishmael at the center of the novel,

was right to warn against "any one-to-one equation of Melville and Ishmael."⁵ Yet one may well accept this caveat while nevertheless insisting that in writing of Ishmael Melville was writing very much about himself. The two men do after all share much in common. The substance and formulation of their interests and ideas are identical, as both are consumed by "the problem of the universe" and are keen to explore "the blackness of darkness."⁶ They both consider Solomon "the truest" of all men, specifically with reference to the insight that all is vanity.⁷ The details of their biographies are strikingly similar, as both spent time at sea, during which each man read Owen Chase's account of a whale's sinking of the whaleship *Essex*, and even met and spoke with Chase's son near the scene of the accident.⁸ Even the dates and times of their writing overlap, as we know from Ishmael's noting the time while composing his narrative as "this blessed minute (fifteen and a quarter minutes past one o'clock P.M. on this sixteenth day of December, AD 1850)," which is within three days of Melville's describing in a letter of his own writing of *Moby-Dick*, including the fact that he would have been writing at the same time as Ishmael, and reporting also that "I have a sort of sea-feeling here in the country, now that the ground is all covered in snow. I look out of my window in the morning when I rise as I would out of a port-hole of a ship in the Atlantic."⁹

Melville himself once observed that "No man can read a fine author, and relish him to his very bones, while he reads, without subsequently fancying to himself some ideal image of the man and his mind." And to this he added that "if you rightly look for it, you will almost always find that the author himself has somewhere furnished you with his own picture."¹⁰ True to this insight himself, in and through his masterwork Melville furnished a figurative image of his own self and soul, not just with respect to the specific similarities to Ishmael itemized above, but also respecting the deeper matter of his philosophical, psychological, and spiritual development.

Attentive readers who approach *Moby-Dick* as a work of philosophical fiction, especially those attuned to Platonic and Nietzschean philosophical themes, must be struck by the existential transformation implied by the contrast between Ishmael as a melancholy sailor and Ishmael as the novel's exuberant narrator. This theme is never explicitly mentioned, but it is often on display; and the phenomenon, once noticed, stands out as so remarkable that one is tempted to regard it as the philosophical heart of the book. Consider, for instance, that whereas Ishmael is moved to go to sea as a cure for suicidal malaise, the Ishmael who relates this autobiographical detail exhibits no indications of melancholy or despair. To the contrary, as narrator, Ishmael is ebullient, jocosely ironic, and cheerful; he is simultaneously playful and profound. He explores in thought every obscure enigma of animal and vegetable life, and he has moreover "the problem of the universe revolving" within him, yet the "blackness of

darkness" through which he wanders neither terrifies nor dispirits him.¹¹ As "quick" as he is "to perceive a horror," he is just as ready to "be social with it."¹² In the course of his narrative Ishmael speaks in some detail of a personal rebirth, a resurrection even, and we may take this as an indication that he attributes his transformation to his time aboard the *Pequod* socializing with those horrors that inspire reflective individuals to engage the accursed questions, particularly as provoked by the "ungodly" Ahab and the "grand god" Moby Dick. In all this, Ishmael is similar to Melville in and around the period he composed *Moby-Dick*. By nature a "pondering man," through his time at sea, and later through expansive reading and long, thoughtful reflecting, Melville attained to a condition of vigorous joyfulness that enabled him to regard the accursed questions without regarding them *as* accursed, which is to say without suffering from them.¹³ In *Moby-Dick* he provides an account of his own intellectual-existential development, which makes of the work something like a spiritual autobiography.¹⁴

MELVILLE AND PLATO

On April 5 of his high-spirited spring, while vacationing with his in-laws in Boston, Melville wrote excitedly to Evert Duyckinck that he intended to read Plato's *Phaedo* later that summer.¹⁵ That he had read Plato previous to this, the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* in particular, is clear from allusions to these dialogues in *Mardi*.¹⁶ But of all the Plato that Melville had read, and would later read, the *Phaedo* had the deepest and most lasting impact. The dialogue turns up explicitly in one, and possibly by way of allusion in the other, of the two novels he wrote during the summer he intended to read it. The "fancy" of "the glorious Greek of old" that the soul is "essentially a harmony," noted in *Redburn*, may well have been inspired by the *Phaedo*.¹⁷ Unquestionably inspired by that dialogue is the clergyman in *White-Jacket* who "had drank at the mystic fountain of Plato," and who "learnedly alluded to the Phædon of Plato."¹⁸ These references suggest at a minimum that Plato's *Phaedo* was on Melville's mind as he wrote *White-Jacket*, and probably also that he had followed through on his intention to read the dialogue. He had pursued his interest in Platonic philosophy even further by the time he began to write *Moby-Dick*, for from evidence internal to the novel we may conclude that Melville was overflowing with Plato and Platonism, and that he was still quite enamored of the *Phaedo* in particular.¹⁹

Ishmael's mention of Cato's suicide in the first chapter of the novel is likely the result of Melville's interest in the *Phaedo*, for the fact that Cato studied the dialogue prior to taking his own life is the subject of the first end-note of the edition of the *Phaedo* that Melville read, and it is recorded as well by Thomas Browne, whom Melville in his letter to Duyckinck