

“Thou, Nature, Art My Goddess” : *King Lear* and *Moby-Dick*

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(Received December 9, 1991)

Melville's anonymous essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850) suggests how deeply he was conscious of the world of Shakespeare in evaluating Hawthorne. He finds in Hawthorne the "great power of blackness" (243)¹, and it is this very "blackness" that furnishes "the infinite obscure of his back-ground - that back-ground, against which Shakespeare plays his grandest conceits, the things that have made for Shakespeare his loftiest, but most circumscribed renown, as the profoundest of thinkers" (244).

This Shakespearean blackness seems to have been very impressive for young Melville. For an aspiring young writer, who was impatient of America being inferior to the Old World in producing a literary genius like Shakespeare, the example of Hawthorne as a senior American writer may have been a very encouraging one. In praising Hawthorne, Melville declared: "Believe me, my friends, that Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio" (245).

The repeated references to Shakespeare would indicate Melville's intimacy at that time with the world of Shakespeare. Indeed it seems to have been the case. Melville lived in Pittsfield as a neighbor of Hawthorne when the essay was written in the summer of 1850. But in the winter of 1849 he stayed in his wife's house in Boston, and during this stay he seems to have found the world of Shakespeare. According to his letter to Duyckinck, his friend in New York, here in Boston he "made close acquaintance with the divine William" :

I have been passing my time very pleasantly here. But chiefly in lounging

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on a sofa (a la the poet Gray) & reading Shakespeare. It is an edition in glorious great type, every letter thereof is a soldier, & the top of every "t" like a musket barrel. Dolt & ass that I am I have lived more than 29 years, & until a few days ago, never made close acquaintance with the divine William. Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired. I fancy that this moment Shakespeare in heaven ranks with Gabriel Raphael and Michael. And if another Messiah ever comes twill be in Shakespeare's person. —I am mad to think how minute a cause has prevented me hitherto from reading Shakespeare. But until now, any copy that was come-atable to me, happened to be in a vile small print unendurable to my eyes which are tender as young sparrows. But chancing to fall in with this glorious edition, I now exult over it, page after page.²

This letter gives a very vivid picture of how Melville plunged into the world of Shakespeare. He exults over the glorious edition of Shakespeare and finds there even another Jesus or Messiah. Another letter to Duyckinck reconfirms the exulted state of mind over the newly discovered world of Shakespeare:

I would to God Shakespeare had lived later, & promenaded in Broadway. Not that I might have had the pleasure of leaving my card for him at the Astor, or made merry with him over a bowl of the fine Duyckinck punch; but that the muzzle which all men wore on their souls in the Elizabethan day, might not have intercepted Shakespeare from articulation. Now I hold it a verity, that even Shakespeare, was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant universe is, or can be? But the Declaration of Independence makes a difference.³

Melville's essay on Hawthorne can be read as an indication of his intimacy with the world of Shakespeare. His sixth book *Moby-Dick* can also be read as another indication. Through his encounter with Hawthorne, which brought him "one shock of recognition,"⁴ he greatly revised the story of sea adventure which he had been writing, and its outcome was *Moby-Dick*. In *Moby-Dick*, we find again the indication of his intimacy, almost to the degree of influence, with the

world of Shakespeare, particularly of *King Lear*.

I

Melville's original conception of the sea story was that of a romance. He wrote to Richard Bentley that the book he was writing was "a romance of adventure, founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries, and illustrated by the author's own personal experience, of two years & more, as a harpooneer."⁵ It is impossible to know now what the original story of the sea adventure was like. It is certain, however, that the final product was a romance after all. It was a story of heroic captain who chases a gigantic great whale over the seven seas, and his heroic struggle with the whale is somewhat suggestive of the romantic world of knights and chivalry.

One of the characteristics of this sea romance is its dramaticalness. Captain Ahab, hero and protagonist, appears on the whaler just as if he were a hero of a Greek tragedy. With his image of Adam or Christ or Satan, he stands before us either as a sort of Christian hero or as an anti-hero, that is, as an embodiment of Satanism or sin of pride in Christianity. But at the same time he also stands as a symbol of hubris in Greek tragedy. There is something in Captain Ahab of Prometheus, of Agamemnon, or of Oedipus.⁶

The structural framework also invites the dramatic quality of *Moby-Dick*. *Moby-Dick* is not written as a drama to be played on the stage, but the dramatic framework is no less evident. Of all the 135 chapters, ten of them are presented with dramatic styles, with the mere marshalling presentation of conversations by the characters as well as with the explanatory words of directions inserted just like the stage directions. This takes *Moby-Dick* close to drama.

Shakespeare, particularly his *King Lear*, perhaps characterizes this dramatic quality. In his essay on Hawthorne Melville writes that Shakespeare insinuates the terrible truth through the mouths of the dark characters such as Hamlet, Lear, and Iago. He writes that "tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth" (244). Shakespeare's influence on Melville is hard to be traced out in clear detail so

long as it is an influence. But much of what Melville finds in Lear is what we find in Captain Ahab.

As a "grand, ungodly, godlike man" (Chap. 16)⁷ Captain Ahab is no less grand a character than Lear, king of Britain. They both have something in common, and madness is undoubtedly one of the common denominators. Lear is driven to the verge of madness through the ingratitude of his two daughters, and he speaks to heaven:

O! let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven;

Keep me in temper; I would not be mad! (I, v, 51-2)⁸

Captain Ahab also lives on the very verge of madness. Sitting alone in the cabin and gazing out towards the setting sun, he meditates:

They think me mad—Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened!

That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself! (chap. 37)

Whether they admit their own madness or not, it is sure they both are deeply conscious of being on the verge of madness. Of course Lear is not the only character in Shakespeare's works that is characterized by madness. Hamlet, for example, is a hero tinged with it. When his mother speaks of his "ecstasy" seeing his conversation with the invisible ghost, Hamlet speaks:

Ecstasy!

My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,

And makes as healthful music. It is not madness

That I have utter'd: bring me to the test,

And I the matter will re-word, which madness

Would gambol from. (III, iv, 139-44)

It is possible to see in Hamlet the same kind of responses as are seen in Lear and Ahab. Like Hamlet, Lear and Ahab are not pleased to be taken as being in a state of madness. Lear yearns to be "in temper" and Ahab regards himself

as being only "demoniac." But Lear and Ahab bear a close parallel when they cry in the storm almost in the same way. Wandering through the storming heath, Lear cries to howling thunder and lightning:

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain!
 Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:
 I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
 I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
 You owe me no subscription: then, let fall
 Your horrible pleasure; here I stand, your slave,
 A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man.
 But yet I call you servile ministers,
 That have with two pernicious daughters join'd
 Your high-engender'd battles 'gainst a head
 So old and white as this. O! O! 'tis foul. (III, ii, 14-24)

Lear's protest against the elements foreruns Ahab's. When the Pequod is struck by the typhoon in the mid Pacific and the pallid fire of the corposants appears on all the yard-arms, Ahab cries under thunder and lightning:

Oh! thou clea spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best; whencesoe'er I came; whencesoe'er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. But war is pain, and hate is woe. Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee; but at thy highest, come as mere supernal power; and though thou launchest navies of full-freighted worlds, there's

that in here that still remains indifferent. Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee. (Chap.119)

The role of a fool in both works is another indication of parallelism. Lear is strongly attached to the Fool who faithfully supports him, and he speaks of his sympathy with him: "Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart/That's sorry yet for thee" (III, ii, 72-3). Ahab, on the other hand, shows a strong attachment to Pip, an idiotic Negro boy gone mad by being left alone on the sea: "Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings" (Chap.125). Ahab admits even his role as a healer of his life: "There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady" (Chap. 129).

Pip's words are sometimes "too crazy-witty" (Chap.99), but their message links him again to the Fool in *King Lear*. Looking at the doubloon nailed on the mainmast, Pip says to himself: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (Chap.99). The inigmatic monologue seems suggestive of our destiny as a being doomed to look at various things. The Fool's words in *King Lear*, spoken also with repetitive phrases, seem suggestive again of our way of living:

Have more than thou showest,
 Speak less than thou knowest,
 Lend less than thou owest,
 Ride more than thou goest,
 Learn more than thou trowest,
 Set less than thou throwest;
 Leave thy drink and thy whore,
 And keep in-a-door,
 And thou shalt have more
 Than two tens to a score. (I, iv, 132-41)

The similarities above are just a few of many. Some others can easily be pointed out. The monster living in the sea is referred to twice in *King Lear* (I,

iv, 285/IV, ii, 50), and in *Moby-Dick* this creature is the major figure as the very antagonist of Captain Ahab. The deceptiveness of whiteness and of the gilded butterflies pointed out in *King Lear* (IV, vi, 121/V, iii, 13) can be seen analyzed in *Moby-Dick* (Chap. 42). Moreover, Lear is at a loss in his own identification (I, iv, 252) and Ahab too is at a loss on the final stage (Chap. 132). Furthermore, Lear speaks about "walled prison" (V, iii, 18), while Ahab tells Starbuck: "How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me" (Chap. 36).

Thus it is no wonder that Charles Olson is stunned by the possible influence of Shakespeare on *Moby-Dick*. "It was *Lear*," Olson notes, "that had the deep creative impact. In *Moby-Dick* the use is pervasive."⁹ The use of *King Lear* seems indeed pervasive, and behind all these similarities seems to lurk the strong impact given to Melville in Boston through the glorious edition of Shakespeare.

II

Lear tells a story of an old king betrayed by his own daughters and led to his final death through his own blindness. In this sense this is a drama of betrayal, of mistaken love, of agedness, and of innocence. But in the wider sense it is a drama that tells about Nature. Of course the word "Nature" implies a wide range of meaning, with its historical variations, and it is very difficult to give a specific definition. Nevertheless *King Lear* can be looked at as a drama about Nature. John F. Danby writes:

King Lear can be regarded as a play dramatizing the meanings of the single word 'Nature'. When looked at in this way it becomes obvious at once that *King Lear* is a drama of ideas—such a drama of ideas not as the Morality play had been, a drama of abstractions; nor such a drama of amusing talk about theses as Bernard Shaw's is; a drama of ideas, however, none the less, and Shakespeare's own creation: the real *Novum Organum* of Elizabethan thought.¹⁰

The repeated references to Nature in *King Lear* can give substance to Danby's words. The words "Nature (nature)," "natural," or "unnatural" occur over forty times in *King Lear*, and this far outnumbers twenty-eight times in *Macbeth* or twenty-five times in *Timon of Athens*.¹¹ To quote some instances from these references would be relevant here to the confirmation of Shakespeare's use of the words.

Lear, for example, cries to Nature in response to merciless treatment from his daughters:

Hear, *Nature*, hear! dear goddess, hear!
 Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
 To make this creature fruitful!
 Into her womb convey sterility!
 Dry up in her the organs of increase,
 And from her derogate body never spring
 A babe to honour her! (I, iv, 299-305)

As the first line indicates, the word "Nature" is used here as an equivalent of "goddess," and in this case the word "goddess" is read as an equivalent of a creator that creates such creatures as Goneril and Regan. Such is also the case with Lear's words spoken to the raging elements on the storming heath. The "nature" referred to here is something like "goddess" that creates "moulds" with her "germens" :

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!

Crack *nature's* moulds, all germens spill at once,
 That make ingrateful man! (III, ii, 1-9)

But this is not the only implication of the word "Nature" or "nature" in *Lear*. Exchanging words with his two daughters about the number of the attending

knights, Lear refers to "nature" again. But here the word "nature" is used not so much in the sense of "goddess" or "creator" as in the sense of "the created" or "fresh" or "body." To his daughter Regan, who is unwilling to accept one hundred attendants of her father, Lear speaks out, thrice referring to "nature" :

O! reason not the need; our basest beggars
 Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
 Allow not *nature* more than *nature* needs,
 Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady;
 If only to go warm were gorgeous,
 Why, *nature* needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
 Which scarcely keeps thee warm. (II, iv, 267-73)

Edmund's speech also testifies the rich implication contained in the word "Nature" or "nature." As bastard son to Earl of Gloucester, he tries to take the place of his brother Edgar, son to Gloucester, and finally dies a tragic death with Lear and others. In his first speech on the stage he first "refers to Nature" and then to "nature." Here he seems to use them respectively in the meanings of "creator" or "goddess," or of "instinct." His concept of "Nature" seems a little different from Lear's. Unlike Lear, he seems to take it as something malicious. However, the very references to the words testify that "Nature" or "nature" is after all his great concerns:

Thou, *Nature*, art my goddess; to thy law
 My services are bound. Wherefore should I
 stand in the plague of custom, and permit
 The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
 For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
 Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
 When my dimentions are as well compact,
 My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
 As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us

With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
 Who in the lusty stealth of *nature* take
 More composition and fierce quality
 Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
 Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
 Got 'tween asleep and wake? (I, ii, 1-15)

Other testaments would be found in words of Gloucester and Cordelia. Gloucester, for example, appears on the stage soon after Edmund has spoken the above monologue, and speaks to Edmund, also referring to "nature." In this case the word "nature" seems to be used in the meanings of "the creator" or "the created" :

These last eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of *nature* can reason it thus and thus, yet *nature* finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked between son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there's son against father: the king falls from bias of *nature*; there's father against child. (I, ii, 115-25)

Cordelia, on the other hand, refers to "nature" in speaking to gods about her stricken father. Just like Gloucester, who, at the sight of blinded Lear, cries "O ruin'd piece of *nature*! This great world /Shall so wear out to nought?" (IV, vi, 138-9), Cordelia cries to gods with full sympathy with the "abused nature" of her father:

O you kind gods,
 Cure this great breach in his abused *nature*!
 The untun'd and jarring senses, O! wind up
 Of this child-changed father! (IV, vii, 14-7)

All these instances can be read as instances that suggest different meanings

in the word "Nature" or "nature" in *King Lear*. According to Peter Milward we can read here the reflection of the traditional concept of Nature in Medieval literature, such as is seen in Boccaccio's *Decamolon* or Chaucer's *Canterberry Tales*.¹² Or we can see here Shakespeare's reaction to the Neo-Platonic concept of Nature, which was prevalent in Renaissance Italy and is considered to have been influential in the Elizabethan England.¹³ Or again, we can find here Shakespeare's responses to a series of new views on Nature such as Copernicus's cosmology, Machiavelli's politics, Montaigne's Pyrrhonism, or Hooker's theology.¹⁴ If so, *King Lear* can be read indeed as a drama that dramatizes the single word "Nature".

III

If *Moby-Dick* is produced under the influence of Shakespeare, particularly of his *King Lear*, it is quite natural that Nature should become its very subject. Ahab's monologue on the fore-castle, at the sight of the sail of the Jeroboam in the far distance, perhaps testifies this. Just like Lear or Edmund on the stage, Ahab speaks:

O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind. (Chap. 70)

Ahab links "Nature" with "soul of man." This is very suggestive. It seems possible to see here even Ahab's affinity with Emerson, who was interested in Nature and wrote, "Nature is the symbol of spirit."¹⁵ Indeed *Moby Dick* is a story that tells about Nature. The white whale, which Ahab chases with all the crew on the Pequod, is the very symbol of Nature. It is symbolic of its cosmological or theological meanings. According to Ishmael, the white whale is symbolic of the "intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the world" and Ahab piles upon its white hump "the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down" (Chap. 41). Ahab himself gives a more precise

account of the nature of this symbolic whale. He speaks to Starbuck: "If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me" (Chap. 36).

Ahab does not use the word Nature here. But it is almost certain that the "visible objects" or the "mask" or the "wall" is symbolic of something analogous to Nature. According to Ishmael, the whiteness, which is the attribute of the whale, is a sort of incantation to be solved, and this incantation does not exist independently of Nature. In his analysis, the whiteness found in the natural phenomena around us is symbolic of "spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian Deity" and it is "God's great, unflattering laureate, Nature" (Chap. 42) that throws spell over the whiteness of the albatros. In his view, it is nothing but "all deified Nature" (Chap. 42) that is absolutely painted like the harlot. Thus Ahab's struggle with the white whale is just the struggle with Nature, and what Ishmael should do as a narrator is to narrate all about it.

IV

It has been pointed out that Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism were two basic concepts of Nature in the time of Renaissance. In the former, humanity or man's place in Nature was valued low, while his Free Will was viewed as limited. In the latter, on the contrary, the distance between man and Nature was shortened, and his place in Nature and his Free Will were both highly valued.¹⁶

It is said that in Shakespeare's time there were in England basically two different concepts of Nature: one was of Bacon's or Hooker's, which took Nature as basically benignant, and the other was of Hobbs's, which took Nature as basically malignant.¹⁷ It would be possible to classify the former as Neo-Platonic and the latter as Aristotelian.

Nature in *King Lear* can be interpreted in the light of these concepts. It seems possible, for example, to see a reflection of Neo-Platonic or Baconian or Hookersian view of Nature in Lear's words quoted above: "Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear! /Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend/To make this creature fruitful!" (I, ii, 299-301). Though raging, Lear does not seem to be in

doubt of the essential goodness of Goddess as the creator of Nature. The same can be said of his words about gods: "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us" (V, iii, 170-1).

Cordelia too does not seem to take Nature as something malignant. Indeed at the sight of her distracted father she speaks about "false fortune's frown" (V, iii, 6), but she nevertheless does not seem in doubt of the essential goodness of gods:

O you kind gods,
Cure this great breach in his abused *nature*!
The untun'd and jarring senses, O! wind up
Of this child-changed father! (IV, vii, 14-17)

Such is not the case with Edmund. Edmund is born as a bastard and feels resentment at his misfortune. For him the creator should be something malignant, something which Aristotelian or Hobbsian view of Nature suggests, but he is willing to accept it as it is: "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law/ My services are bound" (I, ii, 1-2). Gloucester, his father, stands perhaps in the same position. Gods, in his view, are far from being benignant:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport. (IV, i, 37-38)

Such contrast is seen again in the references to Fortune. On one hand we have words for smiling Fortune, such as Earl of Kent's: "Fortune, good night, smile once more; turn thy wheel!" (II, ii, 180). But on the other hand, we have Fool's song which takes Fortune as "that arrant whore":

Fathers that wear rags
Do make their children blind,
But fathers that bear bags
Shall see their children kind.
Fortune, that arrant whore,

Ne'er turns the key to the poor. (II, iv, 48-53)

The question here is which of these two concepts is the more conspicuous or dominant in *King Lear*. This is of course a difficult question to answer. But according to John F. Danby, of the two trends in Shakespeare's time, Shakespeare is the more sympathetic with the Baconian or Hookersian view of Nature, which is reflected in Lear and Cordelia than the Hobbsian one, which is seen in Edmund, Goneril, and Regan.¹⁸

Such view, however, does not seem completely invulnerable. Cordelia, for example, appears in the play as a symbol of Christian Love and Patience and lives out to the very last with full faith in the benignant Nature.¹⁹ Even so, the fact remains that she is led to the tragic death in the final stage, and it seems difficult to accept her death as destined by the will of benignant Fortune. It seems rather the outcome of the malignant Fortune. So *King Lear*, in brief, leaves much room for opposite interpretations.

In comparison, Nature in *Moby-Dick* leaves less room for different interpretation. In *Moby-Dick* too we have two opposite views on Nature. Ahab, for example, regards the white whale, which seems to be the symbol of Nature, as something malicious. For Ahab it is a creature with the "inscrutable malice sinewing it" (Chap. 36) and it is the incarnation of "those malicious agencies" (Chap. 41). While for Starbuck, a pious Christian of Quaker descent, the whale is just a dumb brute from which to take only the economical profit. So in his eyes Ahab's chase of the whale is nothing but a blasphemous one: "Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous" (Chap. 36). This is true with the other crew. For them, in Starbuck's view, the white whale stands as something dubious: "Oh, God! to sail with such a heathen crew that have small touch of human mothers in them! Whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea. The white whale is their demigorgon" (Chap. 38). The word "demigorgon" seems to imply Demiurge of the Gnostic philosophy, which is considered to be the creator of Evil.²⁰ Thus it would be possible to say that we have here, roughly speaking, the opposition of Starbuck's Baconian view of Nature and the Hobbsian one of Ahab's.

Looked at like this, *Moby-Dick* presents us another example in which the

opposite views of Nature are dramatized. But what characterizes *Moby-Dick* is the fact that Captain Ahab, who reminds us of the Hobbsian view of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan, is the hero of drama, and that it is not Starbuck, who reminds us of the Baconian view of King Lear or Cordelia, that is the hero of the drama. Indeed the despotism of Captain Ahab so overpowers all the crew on the Pequod that all that willy-nilly Starbuck can do is to obey him: "I think I see his impious end," Starbuck says, "but feel I must help him to it" (Chap.38).

Ishmael's view of Nature seems also to be under the influence of Captain Ahab. Like Ahab, who watches the whale as "the mask" (Chap.36) with malignity behind, Ishmael sees Nature as "the harlot" or "the charnel house" (Chap.41) with full of cheat under the beautiful appearance. Fate too is viewed with doubt. Just like the Fool in *King Lear* who speaks "Fortune, that arrant whore, / Ne'er turns the key to the poor" (II, iv, 52-3), Ishmael throws a perverse glance toward Fate. In his view "the Fates" is "the invisible police officer...who has the constant surveillance of me, and secretly dogs me, and influences me in some unaccountable way" (Chap.1). This is what anticipates Ahab's words to Starbuck on the final stage. Meditating over his life as a sailor and trying to identify his own self, he speaks to Starbuck: "By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike" (Chap. 132). Ahab's struggle with the whale is after all the struggle with this Fate, and here Ahab and Ishmael stand united.

V

The world of Shakespeare, particularly of *King Lear* is conspicuous in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and both *King Lear* and *Moby-Dick* can be read as works dramatizing the view of Nature. But looked at in terms of Nature, they seem to suggest differences more than similarities. Indeed Lear and Ahab are both protagonists, but each stands before Nature with different attitudes: Lear accepts it as benignant while Ahab doubts it as malicious.

It is true that dual aspects are found in Ahab. Unlike Lear, who does not necessarily remind us of Christ or Satan, Ahab appears before us both as Christ and as Satan. On one hand he appears as a captain with "a crucifixion in his

face" (Chap.28) and walks as "Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise" (Chap.132). On the other hand, he sinks into Satanic meditation:

"There's something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here,—three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab" (Chap.99).

Ahab's Satanic drive is indeed so strong that it seems to bear on the consciousness of every crew on the *Pequod*, including Ishmael. This is perhaps what most distinguishes Ahab from Lear as well as *Moby-Dick* from *King Lear*. Edmund in *King Lear* seems to have something in common with Ahab. Like Ahab, he takes Nature as something malignant. But the protagonist of the drama is King Lear, and it is difficult to find in him the Satanic aspect of Captain Ahab. Indeed Ahab's Satanism is such that even Ishmael the narrator seems to come under his influence. Meditating over the whiteness of the whale, Ishmael is led to think even of "the colorless, all-color of atheism" (Chap.41).

Melville's essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" and his sixth book *Moby-Dick* both suggest his deep immersion in the world of Shakespeare, particularly in the world of *King Lear*. But the outcome of the immersion was not the mere reproduction of the Shakespearean world. Unlike Shakespeare, Melville emphasized the Satanic stature of Captain Ahab, and he was more inclined to the Hobbsian view of Nature which is seen in *King Lear* through such malignant characters as Edmund, Goneril, or Regan. His confession to Hawthorne that in writing *Moby-Dick* he had written "a wicked book"²¹ was in this sense a quite natural one.

Notes

1 Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," *The Piazza Tales and Other Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Heyford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University and the Newberry Library, 1987), p.244. Page references hereafter are to this edition.

2 Eleanor Melville Metcalf, *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970), pp.57-8.

- 3 Ibid., p.59.
- 4 "Hawthorne and His Mosses," p.249.
- 5 Metcalf, p.77.
- 6 Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972), p.179.
- 7 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*, ed. Harrison Heyford, Hershel Parker, G.Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University and the Newberry Library, 1988), Chap.16, p.79. Chapter references hereafter are to this edition.
- 8 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. W.J. Craig (Oxford University Press, 1976), p.917. References to Shakespeare hereafter, including *Hamlet*, are to this edition.
- 9 Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*(City Lights Books: 1947), p.47.
- 10 John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p.15.
- 11 Ibid., p.19.
- 12 Peter Milward and Tetsuo Anzai, eds., *Nature in King Lear* (Tokyo:Aratake Publishing, 1985), pp.5-7.
- 13 Ibid., pp.61-2.
- 14 Ibid., pp.95-106, 139-41.
- 15 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Nature, Addresses and Lectures*, Vol.I of *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: AMS Press, 1979), p.25.
- 16 Milward, pp.101-2.
- 17 Danby, pp.20-43.
- 18 Ibid., pp.20, 195, 205.
- 19 Milward, pp.5, 11, 32-47.
- 20 The word "demiurge" is defined in *Webster's New World Dictionary* as follows:
"[often D-] a) in Plato's philosophy, the deity as creator of the material world b)in Gnostic philosophy, a deity subordinate to the supreme deity, sometimes considered the creator of evil. "See also "Commentary" to *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harold Beaver (Penguin Books, 1972), pp.771-2.
- 21 Metcalf, p.129.