The Kinship between "Moby Dick" and "The Divine Comedy"

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THE KINSHIP BETWEEN MOBY DICK
AND THE DIVINE COMEDY

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Lynne Elizabeth Thornton
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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of my essay is to explore the kinship or affinity between Dante and Melville as illustrated in the Divine Comedy and Moby Dick. Other critics have recognized a kinship between the two authors in these works, but none of them has gone much beyond suggesting its existence.

My study does not attempt to establish particular sources from the Divine Comedy in Moby Dick. It focuses instead on the striking similarities between the two in characters, symbolic imagery, philosophical motifs, structural devices, and pattern or figura. The figura for both the Divine Comedy and Moby Dick is the quest for divine knowledge. There are two quests in Moby Dick—Ahab's and Ishmael's—instead of one as in the Divine Comedy. I have concentrated on Ahab's rather than Ishmael's, for Ahab's offers the clearest parallel to the pilgrim Dante's quest.

There is no absolute proof that Melville read Dante, although he bought a copy of the Divine Comedy in 1848. However, Melville was familiar with such romantic intermediaries as Byron and Carlyle, who presented an image of Dante and ideas about his poem. Moreover, the numerous allusions to the Divine Comedy that appear in most of Melville's work after 1848 persuasively suggest he knew Dante's poem.

Although my study is therefore conjectural as to any direct influence of the Divine Comedy on Moby Dick, it offers new insights in the reading of Moby Dick and helps to establish the relation of Dante to nineteenth century American literature and to establish Melville as an author in the cultural mainstream of nineteenth century Romanticism.
THE KINSHIP BETWEEN MOBY DICK
AND THE DIVINE COMEDY
INTRODUCTION

After first reading Dante's Divine Comedy I was struck by its basic analogy with Melville's Moby Dick, for both of them are cosmic visions which focus on a man's quest for God's truth. When I began to explore this parallel, I discovered two critics who also had sensed a close relationship between Dante and Melville. In his discussion of Moby Dick in Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind William Ellery Sedgwick makes this provocative statement: "Melville felt a kinship with Dante, if not in the substance, at any rate in the process of his unfolding vision."¹ And Glauco Cambon in his book Dante's Craft also mentions an "elective affinity"² between Dante and Melville as illustrated in the Divine Comedy and Moby Dick. Neither W.E. Sedgwick or Cambon, however, explores the possibilities of their statements; each mentions only a few minor similarities in structure or character between the two works.

My thesis, therefore, is to consider at some depth the nature of this "kinship" or "elective affinity" between the Divine Comedy and Moby Dick. My study focuses not on establishing particular sources from the Divine Comedy in Moby Dick, but on discussing what could be called a congeniality in design. It is almost as if Melville carefully selected characters, philosophical motifs, and structural and dramatic devices in the Divine Comedy and incorporated them into Moby Dick. Like the Divine Comedy, Moby Dick is a metaphysical quest for a theophanic reality; although Ahab's final insight into the nature of God and man's
relation to Him is diametrically opposed to the pilgrim Dante's view, analogous devices and ideas are used in both journeys. The congeniality in design actually becomes a congeniality of quests. My essay will focus on Ahab's quest, for reasons to be discussed later, as the closest parallel to the pilgrim Dante's quest. I will explore my sense of a kinship between the two authors as illustrated in the *Divine Comedy* and *Moby Dick* by discussing the similar design of unfolding vision in the pilgrim Dante's and Ahab's quests.

Although such standard annotated editions of *Moby Dick* as Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent's or Charles Feidelson's make only negligible references to the *Divine Comedy*, we do know that Melville actually owned a copy of the *Divine Comedy*, which was purchased for him on June 22, 1848. This was the Reverend Henry Francis Cary's translation entitled *The Vision, or Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, of Dante Alighieri*. It was by far the most popular early nineteenth century translation. More important than the fact of Melville's ownership of the poem in establishing a connection between Dante and Melville are the numerous references in most of Melville's work after 1848. These will be discussed later, but they are proof of Melville's awareness and interest in the Italian poet.

Of course, Melville's knowledge of Dante and his interest in him was not extraordinary in nineteenth century America. Interest in Dante during the nineteenth century was a major cultural phenomena in both America and England. Some of this interest in Dante can be attributed to nineteenth century romantic writers, such as Lord Byron, who found in Dante a dark response to life similar to their own. The nineteenth century romantics transformed Dante from a medieval Christian
into a brooding romantic rebel. They saw nearly all aspects of their
own outlook prefigured in Dante. To them he was the ardent nationalist,
the solitary alienated wanderer, the symbol or emblem maker who perceived
the spiritual depths beyond material reality, the tragic love poet of
Paolo and Francesca, and above all the melancholy heroic rebel full
of dark brooding pride.

Two romantic writers who perhaps did much to foster this romantic
conception of Dante were Thomas Carlyle and Lord Byron. Melville was
familiar with both authors and it is probable their writings not only
added to his knowledge of Dante, but also influenced his conception of
Dante as a proud romantic quester—a sympathetic conception for Melville.

The more important of these two writers in influencing Melville's
view of Dante was probably Carlyle. In the summer of 1850 while
Melville was writing *Moby Dick*, he borrowed a copy of Carlyle's *On
Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* from Evert Duyckinck.
The third of Carlyle's lectures was entitled "The Hero as Poet. Dante;
Shakespeare," and given Melville's avid interest in Shakespeare it
seems probable that he read this lecture. In the lecture Carlyle
stresses two points which may have influenced Melville. The first of
these is Dante's function as a revealer of mystery: "he is to reveal
that to us,—that sacred mystery which he more than others lives ever
present with. While others forget it, he knows it;—I might say, he
has been driven to know it; without consent asked of him, he finds
himself living in it, bound to live in it." 4 Although Carlyle is
speaking of Dante, he could also be speaking of Ahab and the White
Whale. The second point is Carlyle's insistent characterization of
Dante as a "sorrowstricken," "lonely" man, with a "proud hopeless pain." 5
Withal it is a silent pain too, a silent scornful one: the lip is curled in a kind of godlike disdain of the thing that is eating-out his heart,—as if it were withal a mean insignificant thing, as if he whom it had power to torture and strangle were greater than it. The face of one wholly in protest, and life-long unsurrendering battle, against the world. Affection all converted into indignation; slow, equable, silent, like that of a god.6

Carlyle also speaks of Dante's depth: "His greatness has, in all senses, concentered itself into fiery emphasis and depth."7 "Dante," says Carlyle, is "deep, fierce as the central fire of the world..."8 Again, Carlyle's Dante seems a prototype of Melville's Ahab.

In addition to Carlyle, Melville owned the complete works of Byron, with which he was well acquainted. Byron's references to Dante are numerous, appearing in such works as Childe Harold, The Age of Bronze, and Don Juan. Byron also wrote a "Francesca of Rimini," which he took from the fifth canto of the Inferno, and a major poem in four cantos entitled The Prophecy of Dante. In the Prophecy he emphasizes the pride and isolation of Dante: "For mine is not a nature to be bent," (I. 34)9 says Dante, even though he has been

Ripp'd from all kindred, from all home, all things
That make communion sweet, and soften pain—
To feel me in the solitude of kings. (I. 164-66)10

"Despair and Genius are too oft connected," (IV. 39)11 concludes Dante, sounding much like Ahab who comes to learn his greatness lies in his grief. Melville remarks on Dante's genius in Moby Dick when he calls him a "ponderous" and "profound" being (480).12 Werner Friederich in his book Dante's Fame Abroad says, "The aspect Byron underscored most in his description of Dante was the hardy and undaunted courage of a man of action—a romantic rebel."13 This is the aspect of Dante that Melville most emphasizes.
Besides Carlyle and Byron, Melville could also have been acquainted with Dante through such journals as the Edinburgh Review, the Quarterly Review, and especially the North American Review. Professor Merton Sealts, in his excellent book Melville's Reading: A Check-list of Books Owned and Borrowed, has established that Melville had access to these journals by 1848 in the home of his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw. As Professor Angelina La Piana has shown in her book, Dante's American Pilgrimage, each of these journals printed numerous articles on Dante. "Throughout the nineteenth century," Professor La Piana says, "essays on Dante appeared constantly in American periodicals."\(^{14}\) It is probable that a voracious reader like Melville would have been aware of this scholarship.

J. Chesley Mathews points out in his study "Melville's Reading of Dante," that Melville marked this passage in his copy of Schopenhauer:

\begin{quote}
Where did Dante find the material for his Inferno if not from the world; and yet is not his picture exhaustively satisfactory? But look at his Paradiso; when he attempted to describe it he had nothing to guide him, this pleasant world could not offer a single suggestion.\(^{15}\)
\end{quote}

Although Melville did not purchase his copy of Schopenhauer until 1891, the passage he marks indicates his sense of Dante's grim view of the world. This is the same dark pessimistic view that romantics such as Carlyle and Byron presented of Dante and their influence, which represented the popular nineteenth century conception of Dante, is perhaps why the infernal aspects of Dante are so much stronger in Melville than the purgatorial or paradisal.

There are other minor connections between Melville and Dante such as Melville's possession of a French edition of John Flaxman's drawings, which included illustrations of the Divine Comedy,\(^{16}\) but
remarks, "The books that Pierre Glendinning admired are the books that influenced Melville himself . . . the Inferno and Hamlet are conspicuous."²¹ It is interesting that Melville says in Pierre, that Dante "had first opened to his shuddering eyes the infinite cliffs and gulf of human mystery and misery" (74);²² that "Dante had made him fierce" (237), "Dante had taught him that he had bitter cause of quarrel" (237). These aspects of the "blistered Florentine" (57) are strikingly seen in the "blasted" (120, Moby-Dick) Ahab. These quotations also convincingly illustrate Melville's romantic view of Dante.

Before proceeding I wish to note the several critics who have compared Melville and Dante. Many of their comparisons are confined to merely cursory remarks, such as Newton Arvin in Herman Melville, Ernest E. Leisy in "Fatalism in Moby-Dick," F.O. Matthiessen in The American Renaissance, Charles Olson in Call Me Ishmael, and Howard P. Vincent in The Trying-out of Moby-Dick.

Other critics have traced in more extensive studies particular sources from Dante in Melville's works. These include: Marius Bewley, "Melville and the Democratic Experience;" Glauco Cambon, Dante's Craft; Richard Chase, Herman Melville; A Critical Study; Merrell R. Davis, Mardi: A Chartless Voyage; G. Giovannini, "Melville's Pierre and Dante's Inferno," "Melville and Dante;" Rita Gollin, "Pierre's Metamorphosis of Dante's Inferno;" Tyrus Hillway, Herman Melville; J. Chesley Mathews, "Melville's Reading of Dante;" Arnold Rampersad, Melville's Israel Potter: A Pilgrimage and Progress; Howard H. Schless, "Flaxman, Dante, and Melville's Pierre;" Howard H. Schless, "Moby Dick and Dante: A Critique and Time Scheme;" W.E. Sedgwick, Herman Melville; The Tragedy of Mind, and Nathalia Wright, "Herman Melville's Inferno." Bewley,
the most important links as mentioned before are found in Melville's own writing. These links have lead some critics such as Glauco Cambon to conclude that at least "the evidence available confirms that Melville had read the Inferno..."17 Dante is not mentioned in the Melville letters that survive, but he is mentioned in two of Melville's journals. In the Journal of a Visit to London and the Continent 1849-1850, Melville mentions Dante and the city of Dis:

> While on one of the Bridges, the thought struck me again that a fine thing might be written about a Blue Monday in November London—a city of Dis (Dante's)—clouds of smoke—the damned &c.—coal barges—coaly waters, cast-iron Duke &c.—its marks are left upon you &c. &c. &c.18

In the Journal up the Straits October 11, 1856—May 5, 1857 Melville mentions visiting Dante's tomb on March 25, 1857. Melville's remark on the city of Dis is evidence that he was acquainted with Dante before writing Moby Dick. Moreover, Melville's review, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," published in the summer of 1850, clearly shows that Dante was in his thoughts during the time he wrote Moby Dick. In the review, which primarily emphasizes Hawthorne's power of darkness, Melville comments that "Young Goodman Brown" is "deep as Dante."19

Besides these minor references to Dante, there are numerous others in Melville's fiction. G. Giovannini in "Melville's Pierre and Dante's Inferno,"20 and J. Chesley Mathews in his aforementioned article have carefully recorded as many as they could find. A brief summary is helpful in essaying Dante's relation to the entirety of Melville's work. Allusions to or quotations from the Divine Comedy appear in Mardi, Redburn, White Jacket, Moby Dick, Pierre, Israel Potter, "The Tartarus of Maids," and Clarel. Of these, Pierre has the most direct references to the Divine Comedy, primarily the Inferno. John Freeman
Cambon, Leisy, Mathews, Schless, Sedgwick, and Vincent are the only ones to connect the Divine Comedy and Moby Dick. Among these Schless alone gives a detailed account based on his premise.23

My thesis, which discusses a kinship in the design or process of the unfolding vision between the Divine Comedy and Moby Dick rather than a particular source, differs from these other accounts in its scope. It centers on the parallels of the unfolding vision in the quest for God. W.E. Sedgwick correctly observes:

In the Divine Comedy the vision focusses ultimately on the will of God in his creation. In Moby Dick the vision focusses on the mysteries of creation, the chief emblem of which is the terrible White Whale. However, just as in Dante's poem all men are classified as they stand in relation to the will of God, so in Moby Dick the characters are classified in relation to the Whale—according to whether they fear him, worship him, or ignore him.24

Several different views toward the White Whale are presented in Moby Dick, but this study focusses on Ahab's, for to me Ahab and his quest offer the clearest parallel to the pilgrim Dante and his quest. Ishmael, the narrator of Moby Dick, has parallels with the Divine Comedy, but these are primarily artistic rather than dramatic like Ahab's. There are two Dantes in the Divine Comedy--Dante the narrator, who is telling the story after its occurrence--giving it artistic form, and Dante the pilgrim, who remains in the present, carrying forward the actual quest. In Moby Dick there is also a split between the narrator and the main protagonist, but these are two different people--Ishmael and Ahab. Ishmael, though he begins with a "November" (23) in his soul like Dante's beginning in the Dark Wood, does not parallel the pilgrim Dante, who commits himself to the ultimate mystery
beyond life as Ahab does. Ishmael, who is more a Carlylean figure than a Dantean, corresponds to Dante the artist not the protagonist. W.E. Sedgwick has beautifully pointed this out:

In Dante each incident, each observation that adds to his comprehension gains from the next; each shares in the accruing interest of his unfolding vision, and each participates by undergoing a transfiguration in the completion of the whole. It is much the same in point of action with Ishmael. His every realization gains from the next and each is more realized by the completion of his comprehension of things.

It is Ahab and his quest that parallel the pilgrim Dante and his quest. It is Ahab with his religious sense, which as W.E. Sedgwick says, makes it "almost impossible for him not to see all things as the manifestation of a divine will at work in creation," who comes closest to the pilgrim Dante's religious fervor. Just as Dante was deep for Melville, so Ahab is a man who dives deep like an eagle, and as Melville said in a famous letter to Evert Duyckinck, "I love all men who dive." One need not feel as John Bernstein does that "Ahab has the most profound vision of life of any character in the novel, and his vision of the whale, while oversimplified, is the best single evaluation of Moby Dick," to agree that Ahab's vision of Moby Dick forms the center of the novel, just as the pilgrim Dante's vision is the Divine Comedy. In his cosmic vision Dante uses himself as a representative of Everyman, just as Melville uses Ahab, who W.E. Sedgwick says, "was a projection of the strongest propensities in Melville's human-make-up." Therefore, Ahab, his quest and his vision is the focal point in my comparison of Moby Dick and the Divine Comedy. Ahab can be viewed as a Dantesque character and his quest can be compared to Dante's in its similar use of symbolic imagery, motifs, structural
devices, and parallel scenes or moments of awareness.
NOTES FOR THE INTRODUCTION


2 Glauco Cambon, Dante's Craft; Studies in Language and Style (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 121.

3 See these excellent studies by Werner P. Friederich, Dante's Fame Abroad 1350-1850 and Angelina La Piana, Dante's American Pilgrimage, for a full exploration of Dante's reputation in the nineteenth century.


5 Carlyle, p. 319.

6 Ibid., p. 319.

7 Ibid., p. 325.

8 Ibid., p. 333.


10 Byron, p. 363.

11 Byron, p. 367.

12 Herman Melville, Moby-Dick or The Whale, ed. Charles Feidelson (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964), p. 480. All subsequent references to Moby Dick will be to this edition and will be noted by page in the text.


[NOTES FOR THE INTRODUCTION]

17 Cambon, p. 121.


20 For complete bibliographical information on this article and all others in the text, see the Bibliography.


22 Herman Melville, Pierre or, The Ambiguities, Standard Edition Volume 9 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 74. All subsequent references to Pierre will be to this edition and will be noted by page in the text.

23 Schless's article "Moby Dick and Dante: A Critique and Time Scheme," is excellent in its isolated discussion of Moby Dick. Moreover, I agree with Schless when he points out a similarity between Ahab's and Dante's desires for ultimate knowledge. However, Schless's primary argument is that Moby Dick exhibits an anagogical time-scheme in connection with a Christ "imago" and that this may be a borrowing by Melville from the Divine Comedy. This appears to me an unrealistic reading of Moby Dick. Schless's wishful thinking far more than the text of Moby Dick supports this premise. His premise rests on three points: one, Ahab is a Christ imago and like Christ begins his journey on Christmas; two, the Manxman's comment on the doubloon about the roaring and devouring lion is a direct reference to Christian iconography representing Christ's resurrection and means that Ahab's quest for Moby Dick will end like Christ's at Easter, and third, the stories of Jonah and Steelkilt are also Christ stories in relation to a time-scheme. There is evidence in the text to support the theory of Ahab as a Christ figure and he does begin his voyage at Christmas. However, using the Manxman's words-as proof that the voyage ends at Easter seems to me far fetched. It is, of course, possible, but it distorts the purpose of the doubloon as a mirror image by giving the Manxman's words a validity beyond his own personal perception. Jonah and Steelkilt are Christ-like figures, but their stories do not focus on this resemblance. Jonah's story emphasizes his disobedience and Steelkilt's stresses Moby Dick as an instrument of divine justice. In relation to the bulk of Moby Dick these points do not seem to support Schless's premise that Melville, influenced by the Divine Comedy, attempted a deliberate anagogical time-scheme in Moby Dick.

24 Sedgwick, p. 87.

25 Ibid., p. 88.

26 Ibid., p. 103.


29 Sedgwick, p. 130-131.
CHAPTER I

AHAB AS A DANTESQUE CHARACTER

Ahab is most often viewed as a Byronic hero or a Carlylean Nay-Sayer, but he also bears a striking resemblance to several Dantesque characters. His resemblance to the pilgrim Dante will be discussed later, but to me Ahab also resembles three figures in the Inferno. Given Ahab’s personality, it is natural these figures come from the Inferno; it is also important to note that they are all great or heroic infernal figures. The first of these is Farinata, whose dominant feature, like Ahab’s, is pride. Also, like Ahab, he is isolated emotionally from his fellow man. He pays no attention to Cavalcanti’s suffering, even though Cavalcanti’s son was Farinata’s son-in-law. He is, like Ahab, alone "nor gods nor men his neighbors" (697). Yet even Farinata cannot match Ahab’s inhumanity when he refuses to help the captain of the Rachel search for the lost boat with the captain’s twelve year old son. I see a strong parallel: Ahab cannot be interrupted in his pursuit of the whale, just as Farinata cannot be diverted from his discussion with Dante. For both Farinata and Ahab, their self-centered pride makes them much more than merely insensitive—it makes them majestic. Dante describes Farinata as, "Erect, he rose above the flame, great chest, great brow;/ he seemed to hold all Hell in disrespect" (Inf. X. 34-36). Melville seems almost to echo this line in a description of Ahab: "In his fiery eyes of scorn and triumph, you then saw Ahab in all his fatal pride" (656). Despite Farinata’s pride and
egotism, Dante calls him "magnanimo," or majestic spirit. How to interpret this word is a difficult critical question. J.A. Scott, in his article "Inferno X Farinata as Magnanimo," studies the etymology of the word and says: "We may therefore conclude that, during the ancient period, magnanimus acquired a variety of meanings, whereby it might mean, inter alia, 'spirit of fortitude' or 'ambitious pride.'" He therefore says the word stresses the connection between Farinata's greatness and his pride. Irma Brandeis presents a logical interpretation:

> Clearly it cannot signify large-souled generosity, for Farinata has stood stiff-necked, his face concentrated on his interrupted argument all during the sad father's appearance. And yet, there is something else in Farinata—an ability to stand up unflinchingly before the pain he brings on himself . . . to which Dante pays its due in the word magnanimo.3

No less than Farinata does Ahab realize his painful situation when he says, "all loveliness is anguish to me, since I can ne'er enjoy" (226)—"damned, most subtly and most malignantly" (226). No less does Ahab flinch: "I will not say as schoolboys do to bullies,—Take some one of your own size; don't pommel me! No, ye've knocked me down and I am up again . . ." (227).

Though Farinata exemplifies Ahab's pride and its inhumanity, it is Capaneus who seems another Ahab in his scorn and defiance. Like Farinata and Ahab, he is also isolated from his fellow man, and, like the others, he is therefore singled out as someone special. Dante asks Virgil:

> who is that wraith who lies along the rim and sets his face against the fire in scorn, so that the rain seems not to mellow him? (Inf. XIV. 43-45)
Capaneus, as befits his nature, answers the question himself, saying, "What I was living, the same am I now, dead" (Inf. XIV. 48)—a blasphemer. Ahab, too, as Glaucob Cambon says is a "blaspheming hero of hatred like Capaneus"—"a well of blasphemy and defiance, of scorn and mockery for the god 'cricket-players and pugilists' in his eyes." "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man," he tells Starbuck; "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other . . . Who's over me?" (221). Capaneus dies by a thunderbolt from Jove with "his blasphemy still on his lips." Ahab dies with his defiance on his lips:

Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee . . . Thus, I give up the spear! (721)

Ahab is, of course, far more complex than Capaneus, and unlike him, questions the validity of his blasphemies. For Ahab, however, there can be no other view.

If Ahab's pride and defiance are embodied in Farinata and Capaneus, his glory and majesty are seen in Ulysses. Glaucob Cambon suggests:

Melville would have conceived his Faustian Ahab even if he had never heard of Dante's Ulysses, but having met that quite Faustian figure certainly made a difference to the author of Moby Dick, who with his gift for mythical analogies, can only have found a spurring similarity in the metaphysical catastrophe of Ahab's medieval forerunner.

Ahab and Ulysses correspond at every point except one. Both are "Heaven-defying seekers of experience, of knowledge at any cost," as Glaucob Cambon says. Each sets out on a sea voyage in quest of this forbidden knowledge. In contrast to Dante, neither Ahab nor Ulysses stop to
question their worth in undertaking this voyage, and neither of them have divine approval. Both forsake their families. "Dante is aware," says Terence Logan, "of Ulysses's failure to respect and fulfill his familial obligations." 9

not fondness for my son, nor reverence for my aged father, nor Penelope's claim
to the joys of love, could drive out of my mind the lust to experience the far-flung world
(Inf. XXVI. 89-92)
says Ulysses, and Ahab equally realizes his own desertion:

that young girl-wife I wedded past fifty, and sailed for Cape Horn the next day, leaving her one dent in my marriage pillow--wife? wife?--rather a widow with her husband alive! (683)

Eventually both men forsake their crews, leading them to total destruction. In this sense they are evil counselors, and their success lies in their great powers of speech and persuasion. "You were not born to live like brutes,/ but to press on toward manhood and recognition!" (Inf. XXVI. 110-11) says Ulysses to his crew: Ahab's speech to his men is perhaps one of the greatest pep talks in literature.

"Aye, aye!" says Ahab speaking to his men of Moby Dick:

and I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out. What say ye, men, will ye splice hands on it, now? I think ye do look brave.

'Aye, aye!'; shouted the harpooners and seamen, running closer to the excited old man. (219-20)

Ulysses's words could easily have been Ahab's: "I made my crew/ so eager
for the voyage I could hardly/ have held them back from it when I was through . . ." (Inf. XXVI. 112-14). However, if one agrees with Anna Hatcher that Ulysses is not an evil counselor, but is punished instead for abuse of exceptional talents and gifts, the similarity between the two men ends. Given Ahab's perception of reality, he is not abusing his gifts, only his crew.

Both Ulysses and Ahab have aspirations beyond the human world. They reject their limitations and the "limited, concrete, human, quotidian world." The pilgrim Dante, of course, also has aspirations beyond the human world. As Charles Dinsmore says:

His thoughts swept beyond all these . . .
even to a superhuman exaltation in which
the soul, above the limitations of the
flesh and escaping its bondage, should
habitually dwell in the presence of
eternal realities, illumined by the
divine light . . ."

His journey, however, has divine approval—he is acting in accordance with God's will. Bent on one purpose, Ahab and Ulysses exhibit instead what Edward Hood Calls "the self-asserting energy of the human mind of man as the measure of all things." Dante the author's view of this approach is clear in his single phrase "folle voile." Ahab, himself, is referred to as mad or crazy. It is clear that Melville understood Dante the author's view of Ulysses's voyage as a quest after illicit knowledge—illicit because it was a journey without God's guidance. This is shown by an examination of Melville's copy of the Odyssey, where he "ran a line alongside Proteus' warning to Menelaus, indicative of the dangerous nature of the venture:

Cease
To ask so far; It fits not to be
So cunning in thine own calamity.
Nor seek to learn what learned thou shouldst forget.
Men's knowledges have proper limits set
And should not press into the mind of God."  

(IV. 657)

Both voyages ultimately end in shipwreck and Glauco Cambon persuasively suggests that Ahab's shipwreck is an echo of Ulysses's:

a storm rose and struck the fore part of the ship. Three times it whirled her round with all the waters, the fourth time lifted the poop aloft and plunged the prow below, as One willed, until the sea closed again over us.

(Inf. XXVI. 138-42)

and now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight... then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago. (722-23)

The most important similarity between Ulysses and Ahab is their heroism, reminiscent, says Logan, of Farinata's:

Ulysses is damned, but again like Farinata, he possesses tragic grandeur and an aura of misdirected noblesse which set him aside from the lesser souls who surround him.

Just so is Ahab set aside. Both men choose to reject and defy reality as they find it, and both are glorified in their assertions—though Ulysses is damned. These words applied to Ahab would aptly fit both men:

And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar. (543)
All three of Dante's heroic sinners, like Ahab, exhibit traits of pride, defiance, courage, egotism, and majesty. It is noteworthy that each of these sinners is punished by fire: Farinata is in the fiery tomb; Capaneus lies under a continual shower of fire, and Ulysses, whom Ahab most resembles, is entirely enveloped in flame. Each burns in a fire that does not consume. We may remember the initial description of Ahab in *Moby Dick*:

*He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness.* (168)
NOTES FOR CHAPTER I

1 Dante Alighieri, The Inferno, trans. John Ciardi (New York: The New American Library, 1954), p. 97. All subsequent references will be to the Divine Comedy translated by John Ciardi, unless otherwise noted. These will be numbered by canto and lines in the text.


4 Cambon, p. 122.


6 Ciardi, Inferno, p. 133, n. 43.

7 Cambon, p. 121.

8 Ibid., p. 122.


11 Charles Allen Dinsmore, The Teachings of Dante (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1901), p. 120.

12 Hood, p. 15.


14 Cambon, p. 121.


16 Logan, p. 43.
CHAPTER II
SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

Not only can Ahab be seen in terms of Dantesque characters, but his quest invites comparison with Dante the pilgrim's because of parallels in the symbols chosen. The metaphor for Ahab's quest is a sea voyage; the first two parts of Dante's quest are terrestrial and the third celestial. Nevertheless, Dante as an author makes extensive use of the sea voyage as a trope. He uses the sea voyage as a metaphor for his poem; the sea voyage becomes the poetic voyage of his metaphysical exploration. Thus, at the beginning of the *Purgatorio* Dante writes:

> For better waters now the little bark of my indwelling powers raises her sails, and leaves behind that sea so cruel and dark.

(T. 1-3)

And at the beginning of the *Paradiso* he addresses the reader:

> O you who in your wish to hear these things have followed thus far in your little skiffs the wake of my great ship that sails and sings, turn back and make your way to your own coast. Do not commit yourself to the main deep for losing me, all may perhaps be lost.

> My course is set for an uncharted sea.

(II. 1-7)

Finally, as Dante is recalling his vision of God, he compares the wonder of his vision with the wonder of an archetypal sea voyage:

> Twenty-five centuries since Neptune saw the Argo's keel have not moved all mankind, recalling that adventure, to such awe
as I felt in an instant. (Par. XXXIII. 94-97)

Dante also uses the sea voyage as a metaphor for his pilgrim's actual quest. John Freccero has observed that the entire Divine Comedy resembles a sea voyage: "In Dante's reading . . . the voyage was an allegory for the flight of the soul to transcendent truth,"¹ and Francis Fergusson points out "there are the journeys of the making of the canticles, which are likened to sea-voyages . . . ."² There is also a series of lesser but notable water passages in the Divine Comedy: the crossing of the Acheron; the crossing of the Styx, and Ulysses's attempted voyage to the Purgatorial Mountain. All souls, of course, except the pilgrim Dante who has climbed to purgatory from hell, take this water passage to purgatory. Dante must also cross the rivers Lethe and Eunoe in the Earthly Paradise. The Empyrean first appears to him as a river of light.

Ahab's entire quest is an actual sea voyage, but he also has set his course "for an uncharted sea," "to lay the world's grievances before that bar from which not very many . . . ever come back" (166). He even speaks of himself as a ship:

I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks, wher'er I sail.
The envious billows sidelong swell to whelm my track; let them; but first I pass. (225)

The purpose of his voyage is, like Dante's, an encounter with God, or at least, for Ahab, with His symbol. "Ahab had purposely sailed upon the present voyage with the one only and all engrossing object of hunting the White Whale" (251).

However, both authors use the sea as much more than a mere narrative device for movement. In the Divine Comedy and Moby Dick the sea is
used to represent both the comprehensiveness of life and divine wisdom. In the *Paradiso* Beatrice tells Dante that the soul of each man moves "across the tide/ of the great sea of being to its own port" (Par. I. 112-13), making the sea not only a method of journey but the being of life's journey itself. The sea is also a symbol of comprehensiveness when it is compared to divine justice:

> In the eternal justice, consequently, the understanding granted to mankind is lost as the eye is within the sea:

> it can make out the bottom near the shore but not on the main deep; and still it is there, though at a depth your eye cannot explore.  
> (Par. XIX. 58-63)

Finally, the sea is identified with the will of God itself:

> In His will is our peace. It is that sea to which all moves, all that Itself creates and Nature bears through all Eternity.  
> (Par. III. 85-87)

In *Moby Dick* the sea plays a major symbolic role. It primarily represents the comprehensiveness of life, and for Melville this is specifically the duality of good and evil. "Consider the subtletness of the sea," says Ishmael, "how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure" (364). "That unsounded ocean [which] is Life" (418), contains both "beauty and brillancy" and a "tiger heart" (623). However, the sea is also associated with death, for death "is but the first salutation to the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored . . ." (617). The sea is more often associated with evil than good for it "is the dark side of this earth" (542). In addition the sea is used to represent the soul of man: man "takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image
of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature" (214). God, too, is linked to the sea with his "inscrutable tides" (214). As in the Divine Comedy the sea stands for the "infinite" (209)—"the highest truth" (149).

However, in Moby Dick the sea is more important than in the Divine Comedy for it is the entire setting of the novel; it takes the place of Dante's highly structured Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. Just as these are Dante's conceptions of universal truth, the chaotic, evil, beautiful, infinite sea is Melville's conception. In Moby Dick the sea, as the three realms in the Divine Comedy is the home of "millions of mixed shades and shadows, drowned dreams, somnambulisms, reveries; all that we call lives and souls . . ." (613). In Melville's anti-Commedia, the everchanging inscrutable sea is the antithetical counterpart to the symmetry and stability of Dante's mystic rose.

To view a quest for God as a sea voyage and the sea as a symbol of life or divinity is to set up a dichotomy between the land and the sea; Dante the author and Melville use this dichotomy in similar ways. For Dante, land is the temporal earthly world—a world corrupt politically and ecclesiastically. As it is used in contrast to the sea land assumes a pejorative meaning. The pilgrim Dante constantly refers to this temporal world in critical outbursts such as the one in Canto VI of the Purgatorio, beginning "Ah servile Italy" (79), or his two references to the earth as a "threshing floor." The first of these occurs in the Paradiso Canto XXII when Beatrice asks the pilgrim Dante to look back and mark his progress in space.

My eyes went back through the seven spheres below, and I saw this globe, so small so lost in space, I had to smile at such a sorry show.
Who thinks it the least pebble in the skies
I most approve. Only the mind that turns
to other things may truly be called wise.
(133-38)

And turning there with the eternal Twins,
I saw the dusty little threshing ground
that makes us ravenous for our mad sins,
(151-53)

His last image of the earth is again as a petty "little threshing floor,"
(Par. XXVII. 85) where he sees the "mad route Ulysses took," (Par. XXVII.
82-3) reminding him of how wrong reliance is in merely earthly things.
These comments indicate that symbolically man must turn from land or
earthly values and embark on his sea voyage for ultimate truth or
spiritual values.

Melville uses a similar land-sea dichotomy, but with a slightly
different twist. For him the land also represents false knowledge.
"The port," says Ishmael, "would fain give succor . . . in the port is
safety . . ." (148). But in a gale, "the port, the land, is that ship's
direst jeopardy" (148). For Melville, the land represents security in
religious dogma and unquestioning belief. If a man is searching for
ultimate truth, then, of course, unquestioning faith becomes his direst
jeopardy:

all deep, earnest thinking is but the
intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open
independence of her sea; while the wildest
winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast
her on the treacherous, slavish shore?
But as in landlessness alone resides
the highest truth, shoreless indefinite as
God--so, better is it to perish in that
howling infinite, than to be ingloriously
dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! (149)

W.E. Sedgwick perceptively observes, the sea "leads away from all defini-
tions, all traditional sanctities, all securities . . ."3 Though Ahab
sometimes has longings for the peace of the "green country" (683), he
ultimately turns from it as merely a pleasant but false illusion; "... in terms of Moby Dick itself," Bernstein comments, "any solution found to the human situation on dry land would be, ipso facto, false." Ahab stays at sea and remains independent of the "green country."

For Ahab, the land represents false values as it does for the pilgrim Dante; but Ahab's false values are Dante's truth. Ahab, like Dante, uses his sea voyage as a means to reach ultimate truth; instead of leading to a God who manifests love, power, and justice as it does for Dante, it leads to a malicious and indifferent deity--instead of leading to man's dependence on a stable ordered faith as it does for Dante, it leads to a declaration of man's independence in the midst of a chaotic disordered universe. Ahab's declaration of independence makes the meaning of his voyage very like the meaning of Ulysses's voyage. In each case the sea itself becomes a romantic proving ground for a celebration of Promethean independence in conflict with the ordered truth that both Dante the pilgrim and the artist feel man should seek to live by. Of course, in Dante's poem Ulysses is damned for his voyage, while Melville offers no such divine judgment on Ahab's quest. Melville would not agree with Dante that it is wrong for man to challenge or defy God.

If Melville's use of a land-sea dichotomy may be compared to Dante's, so his use of white to represent deity also invites comparison with Dante's. In contrast to the colorful Purgatorio, Dante's Paradiso is remarkable in its absence of color. There are a few exceptions--Mary's star burns with a blue light--but the striking impact of the Paradiso is its whiteness, a whiteness that becomes increasingly
whiter and more radiant as one approaches God. Melville also uses white in his dealings with infinity. Nathalia Wright notes that any objects which Melville makes white have "a suggestion of the infinite." The best example is, of course, Moby Dick. He, like Dante's representation of God, is pure white; he is as white, says Ishmael, as the robes worn by the twenty four elders in Revelation. White not only suggests the magnificence and sublimity that it does in Dante's deity, but there is also "an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood" (254-5). "It is," says Ishmael, "the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity," (263) and yet it contains in it a "vague, nameless horror" (252).

One solution to the horror in white, besides the nonhuman aspect that Ishmael suggests, can be seen in examining the other major embodiment of white in Moby Dick--the squid:

A vast pulpy mass, furlongs in length and breadth, of a glancing cream-color, lay floating on the water, innumerable long arms radiating from its centre, and curling and twisting like a nest of anacondas, as if blindly to clutch at any hapless object within reach. (366)

This squid is to me Melville's symbol of pure evil, like Dante's Lucifer. It is important that Ahab and his crew first mistake the squid for Moby Dick. Where Dante's white symbolizes a God of love and justice who unifies into one all the scattered leaves of existence, Melville uses white to indicate God's duality--the author of both good and evil:

They [the squid and Moby Dick] resemble each other most in their whiteness and their facelessness, and both of these attributes signify the inscrutability of the divided yet impene-trable universe in which it is so difficult to distinguish good from evil. 6
The nature of this duality will be discussed later, but the whiteness of the whale, as Melville uses it, is both angelic and demonic. Ishmael in his meditations goes even further and suggests the horror of white lies perhaps not in its duality, but in its indefiniteness, "a colorless, all-color of atheism" (264). Perhaps the whiteness represents nothing at all.

The color white is associated with light in the Divine Comedy—heaven's multitude is seen as torches, flames, candles, and suns—and, of course, God is light. Melville also uses fire and especially the sun as spiritual symbols. Joseph Mazzeo accurately comments, "In Dante, the symbol of the sun appears in its primary function as the symbol of God." Of course, Dante uses minor sun images; the doctors of the church become suns, and Virgil, Beatrice, Christ, and the Virgin Mary are referred to as suns. It is clear, however, from the use of the sun in the Purgatorio, where the travelers can only journey in the day, that the sun, as C.S. Singleton points out, is the symbol of divine grace.

Melville, on the other hand, transforms the symbol of the sun as the Christian God into an object of pagan worship. Ahab, before the novel opens, was a follower of Zoroastrianism, "one of the principal religions involving sun and fire worship." In this religion both fire and the sun are regarded as the purest symbols of the creator. This creator is, of course, a pagan deity, not Dante's Christian God. Zoroastrianism is important not only because it allowed Melville to use a symbology parallel to Dante's, but because it "conceived of a duality of light and darkness, good and evil," proceeding from the same deity. This duality, which I will discuss later, is what leads
Ahab on his quest. Paul Miller observes in his article, "Sun and Fire in Melville's Moby Dick:"

fire and sun have been taken to symbolize in Moby Dick rejection of conventional deity and acceptance of the primitive pagan life force . . .

Ahab, however, rejected this fire worship. While sacrificing to fire, he was struck by the flame, which marked him with a ghastly scar. Though this ended his Zoroastrian belief, Ahab still associates fire and later the sun with the power of God. This God, though never specifically identified as such, is best understood as a malicious Christian God. It is the concept of the Christian God, not Fedallah's Parsee deity, that Ahab challenges throughout Moby Dick. During a storm, the lightning rods on the yard arms burn "with three tapering white flames, each of the three tall masts was silently burning in that sulphurous air, like three gigantic wax tapers before an altar" (639). Melville overtly uses the number three in connection with the altar to suggest the trinity and thus strengthen the association between fire and God. Ishmael later refers to the fire as a "trinity of flames" (641). Instead of standing in awe of this scene as the others on board do, Ahab grasps the ship's lightning conductor, directing the current into his body and cries out:

I now know that thy right worship is defiance . . . 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. . . Though but a point at best; whencesoe'er I came; wheresoe'er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. (641)

It is notable that as Dante ends his voyage by gazing into God's intense sun-like light, Ahab says a few seconds before his death, "I turn my body from the sun" (721). Melville uses sun and fire symbols to repre-
sent a pagan worship, which is also partly a worship of evil. This is the opposite of Dante's use of these symbols, just as Melville's uses of the land-sea dichotomy or the color white are inversions of Dante's meanings. However, Dante does use the symbol of fire in the *Inferno*, which as Reginald French says is a "negative use of the symbol which taken positively, will identify the characters of the Paradiso as having entered into the joy of the Lord."¹¹ "Now wherever there is conflagration in the Comedy," notes Irma Brandeis, "there is love-anguish."¹² Melville, once again, especially in his use of white, may be echoing something from Dante—a negative and positive use of the same symbol.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER II


3 Sedgwick, p. 136.

4 Bernstein, p. 97.


9 Paul Miller, p. 140.

10 Ibid., p. 143.


12 Brandeis, p. 103.
In the process of his unfolding vision, Melville not only uses symbolism parallel to Dante's, but he also uses two parallel motifs—prophecy and fate. Many of the prophecies in the Divine Comedy are political and religious. An example of political prophecy is the mention in the Inferno, Canto I, of the Greyhound, who will provide political unity for Italy. Beatrice's prophecy in the Purgatorio, Canto XXXIII of the eventual triumph of the Catholic church is a good example of the poem's religious prophecy. The most important prophecies in the poem, however, are those which pertain to Dante's future. Most of these announce his future doom to exile. The first is given by Ciacco. Later Farinata tells Dante:

But the face of her who reigns in Hell shall not be fifty times rekindled in its source before you learn what griefs attend that art.

(Inf. X. 79-81)

Brunetto Latini announces another prophecy of future sufferings:

for your good works will be your enemy.
It is written in your stars, and will come to pass that your honours shall make both sides hunger for you:

(Inf. XV. 70-71)

One of the darkest of these prophecies is uttered by Vanni Fucci:

First Pistoia is emptied of the Black, then Florence changes her party and her laws. From Valdimagra the God of War brings back A fiery vapor wrapped in turbid air: then in a storm of battle at Piceno the vapor breaks apart the mist, and there
every White shall feel his wounds anew.  
And I have told you this that it may grieve you.  
(Inf. XXIV. 142-49)

These prophecies, though never again so vindictive, continue through the Divine Comedy and culminate in the Paradiso when Dante asks Cacciaguida so that he may know "what misfortune is approaching" (XVII. 26). Cacciaguida explains Dante's future banishment in great detail and in some of the most moving lines in the poem tells him:

You will come to learn how bitter as salt and stone is the bread of others, how hard the way that goes up and down stairs that never are your own.  
(XVII. 58-60)

However, Cacciaguida also prophecies Dante's fame which will outlive his enemies.

Melville also makes extensive use of prophecy. Nathalia Wright interestingly comments, "The great motif that appears in Moby Dick is prophecy."¹ In the course of the novel, Ahab lives out his prophecy, which like Dante's is one of exile and doom. Ahab's exile, however, involves not only loss of home and human society, but loss of life. Besides spoken prophecy, Melville uses omens, both psychological and natural. The opening of the book is filled with death symbols; thus, there is an innkeeper named Peter Coffin, an inn full of clubs and spears, and a chapel with marble tablets in memory of dead sailors.

At the chapel the book's first prophet is introduced--Father Mapple. He gives a very elaborate prophecy, much as Cacciaguida does, although his harsh tone is the opposite of Cacciaguida's affection for Dante. Appropriately for Father Mapple, his prophecy takes the form of a sermon. He describes in great detail the downfall of Jonah--how in disobeying God he brought near destruction on himself--how he was only saved through repentance and humility. The lesson, Father Mapple says,
is clear: "And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists" (72). The truly religious man, continues Father Mapple, will be able to say at the end of his life, and rightly so, "I have 'striven to be Thine, more than to be this world's, or mine own" (81). Is this not Dante's message? As Charles Dinsmore says, "Dante utters no truth more insistently than that the human will must be perfectly submissive to the will of God."2 Howard P. Vincent provides a brilliant summation of this point: "The individualism of Father Mapple is Christian, insisting that the personal will must submit to the will of God, personal self must be submerged in the Divine self. Father Mapple's sermon is built on the theme most memorably stated by Dante: 'In His will is our peace.'"3 Father Mapple does espouse a near Antinomian position in the independence of the individual in determining his own concept of God's will, but it is clear that whatever a man conceives God to be, his duty to Him is submission and acceptance. Ahab, however, obeys himself not God, and as Father Mapple prophesies brings about his total destruction. But Father Mapple makes two important remarks which not only explain Ahab, but ironically vindicate him: "Woe to him who would not be true, even though to be false were salvation," (80) and "Delight is to him—a far, far upward, and inward delight—who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self . . . Delight is to him, who gives no quarter in the truth . . ." (80). This is what Ahab does, though it is the exact opposite of Father Mapple's and Dante's Christian submission.

Captain Peleg is the next to supply a prophecy. He informs Ishmael that "the old squaw Tistig, at Gay-Head, said that the name would some-
how prove prophetic" (119). Ahab's name is, of course, taken from the Old Testament king, a good-bad man, both a shrewd leader and a patron of foreign gods. 'Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger', Lawrence Thompson reminds us, 'than all the kings of Israel that were before him.' King Ahab ultimately meets a tragic death through his refusal to listen to the prophet of the Lord. All his actions prove prophetic for Captain Ahab.

The next prophet is appropriately named Elijah. He throws out shadowy hints about Ahab's past, including the prophecy that he would lose his leg, and then nearly foretells the ship's doom when he says to Ishmael, "Shan't see ye again very soon, I guess; unless it's before the Grand Jury" (140). After Elijah comes Gabriel, a member of the Shaker society, who conceives himself to be the arch-angel Gabriel. When Ahab asks about the White Whale, Gabriel replies, "Think, think of thy whale-boat, stoven and sunk! Beware of the horrible tail!" (411). Gabriel pronounces Moby Dick to be the "Shaker God incarnated" (411). "Beware of the blasphemer's end!" (413) he tells Ahab, but Ahab refuses to listen.

Thoughout Moby Dick the Pequod encounters several ships; these encounters will be discussed in detail later. Many of these crews warn Ahab either through verbal warnings or psychological omens to stay away from Moby Dick. When the Pequod finally nears the White Whale a storm destroys the compass and the log and line is ruined. The crew hears wailing in the night and a sea hawk steals Ahab's hat. Each time the crew lowers to give chase, their whaling boats are destroyed. Ahab ignores all and persists in his quest. The only prophet he trusts is Fedallah, who prophecies that Ahab cannot be killed until he sees two
hearses, one made of American wood and one not made by mortal hands. He also tells Ahab that only hemp can kill him. This prophecy, like all the others portending to Ahab's doom proves true, no less than the prophecies of Dante's doom.

In addition to his parallel use of prophecy, Melville has Ahab react to his prophecies as the pilgrim Dante does to his. Once Dante understands the nature of his future exile as Cacciaguida explains it to him, he says that though he will arm himself with foresight to endure his banishment, he will *not* mute his rhymes. He will continue to tell the truth, though it "offend the taste of many alive today" (Par. XVII. 117). Ahab, though he tries to convince his crew that the strange events that are happening are not portentous—"If the gods think to speak outright to men they will honorably speak outright; not shake their heads, and give an old wives' darkling hint" (697)—clearly understands his approaching doom as he lowers the third time for Moby Dick. "My soul's ship starts upon this voyage," (712) he tells Starbuck:

Some men die at ebb tide; some at low water; some at the full of the flood;—and I feel now like a billow that's all one crested comb, Starbuck. I am old;—shake hands with me, man. (713)

And yet Ahab persists.

The use of prophecy naturally suggests the concept of fate. Just as Dante makes fate and free will central concerns in the *Divine Comedy*, Melville does the same in *Moby Dick*. I find it striking that Melville has a chapter explaining free will and fate almost in the center of his book, just as Dante has Canto XVI of the *Purgatorio* with Marco Lombardo's discourse on free will in the center of his poem.

In Canto XVI Marco Lombardo explains that though the heavenly
spheres start man's impulses, man is given reason or intellect which
allows him to choose between right and wrong:

and Free Will also, which though it be strained
in the first battles with the heavens, still
can conquer all if it is well sustained. (76-78)

Cacciaguida also reminds the pilgrim Dante that though God and therefore
all the host of heaven can foresee his future, this does not imply fate:

Contingency, whose action is confined
to the few pages of the world of matter,
is fully drawn in the Eternal Mind:

but it no more derives necessity
from being so drawn, than a ship dropping down river
derives its motion from a watcher’s eye.

(Par. XVII. 37-42)

It is clear for Dante the author that the sinners in hell and the
blessed in paradise have determined their own fate.

Melville likewise has a chapter entitled "The Mat Maker" nearly in
the center of the novel where the concepts of fate and free will are
explained. As Ishmael and Queequeg weave their mat, it reminds Ishmael
of the Faustian and Carlylean "Loom of Time" (288). The warp "seemed
necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle
and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads" (288). Meanwhile, Queequeg's sword, which hits the woof sometimes strongly, some-
times weakly--thus determining the final pattern--becomes chance. Chance,
free will, and necessity, "no wise incompatible" (288) as Ishmael says,
compose the world.

The Loom of Time, however, is not the only reference to free will
and fate in the novel and other references sometimes seem to contradict
this main image. Ishmael later says that "all men live enveloped in
whale lines. All are born with halters round their necks . . ." (372).
Ahab, too, makes numerous comments about his life being controlled by
Fate, such as, "Here some one thrusts these cards into these old hands of mine; swears that I must play them, and no others" (635). Some critics such as Charles Olson have taken images and comments such as these to convince themselves that Melville's central image of the Loom is incorrect and that man in Moby Dick has no free will. Others, like G. Giovannini and W.H. Auden, assert that man does have free will, but it is necessarily limited. It is not fatalism, but "necessitarianism" that Melville espouses. The difference, says R.E. Watters, is "fatalism implies a process towards a predestined end; necessitarianism, a process from an initial cause."6

The initial cause for Ahab is his vision of the universe which is, of course, determined by his character. Ahab is gifted with a perception, that while it makes him a great heroic figure, also destroys him. Like the poet in Shelley's Alastor, Ahab has an insight that he feels compelled to pursue. While this insight is the source of his greatness, it is also the source of his destruction. R.E. Watters perceptively comments, "If a man is constituted with the capacity of an Ahab for perceiving profound evil, that fascination can arouse rebellious hatred, and this determines necessary responses."7 It is the compelling nature of Ahab's insights that leads him to make statements such as, "This whole act's immutably decreed . . . I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders" (707). Ahab, of course, realizes he is physically free to act. During his long talk with Starbuck in the "Symphony" chapter, he acknowledges the security of the land and the love of his wife and child which he can return to as Starbuck urges. He can return to the land, but the unknown would still be unknown, and escapism is no answer for Ahab.
Ahab, therefore, partly wills his own quest. "What I've dared I've willed; and what I've willed I'll do!" he says (226). Ishmael, too, speaks of Ahab's "unsurrenderable wilfulness" (170), which as G. Giovannini says "qualifies Ahab's remarks on fatalism." Even at the end of his quest, when his leg has been splintered again, he says, "Nor white whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old 'Ahab in his own proper and inaccessible being" (705).

Ahab then is both fated and free. He cannot escape the necessity of his insight, but at the same time he never submits to it as Father Mapple does to his. The "necessities" (223) of his being drive him on, but they cannot drive him into submission. Ahab cannot change the universe as God has created it, but he can challenge it. Melville once said in a letter to Hawthorne written in April 1851 while he was at work on Moby Dick:

... the man who, like Russia or the British Empire, declares himself a sovereign nature (in himself) amid the powers of heaven, hell, and earth. He may perish; but so long as he exists he insists upon treating with all Powers upon an equal basis. If any of those other Powers choose to withhold certain secrets, let them; that does not impair my sovereignty in myself; that does not make me tributary.

Each man's character determines his fate as the chapter "The Doubloon" shows; but though a man necessarily perceives as he is--though the threads are "unalterable," he is free in weaving his response to his perception.

We must remember, of course, that both Dante the author and Dante the pilgrim are also fated and free. Though both possess the free will which Marco Lombardo explained, Dante the author is fated like all
other men to have Original Sin; Dante the pilgrim is fated to take his journey—how can he refuse Beatrice? Dante the pilgrim is, of course, free like Ahab in his reaction to what he perceives—he may accept or reject what he perceives as God. He also achieves a special freedom, for once he has passed beyond the rivers of purgatory he is as Adam once was, free from Original Sin. Once he has attained the heights of paradise he is also freed from all earthly desires. Dante the author naturally never achieves this special freedom. He may have felt he was free while having his poetic insight, but once the intensity of the vision faded, he was again subject, as all men are, to earthly desires.

Both the pilgrim Dante and Ahab are singled out for their visions; both are gifted with deep perception into the universe. It is the difference in these perceptions that causes Ahab to consider fate what Dante considers freedom. God's will is peace to Dante; it is tyranny to Ahab.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER III

1 Wright, p. 78.
2 Dinsmore, p. 184.
6 Watters, p. 177.
7 Ibid., p. 178.
CHAPTER IV

STRUCTURAL DEVICES

The more important structural devices in the *Divine Comedy* and *Moby Dick* are, like the imagery and motifs in Dante's and Melville's unfolding visions, closely similar. These are a series of meetings which form the narrative backbone of each work, and the use of guides or advisors who direct the protagonist towards different awarenesses of his quest. In the *Divine Comedy*, the pilgrim Dante has actual guides who not only offer him different awarenesses of his quest, but literally guide his footsteps to his goal. In *Moby Dick*, Ahab has no one literally guiding him to Moby Dick, but he has advisors who, like Dante's guides, offer him different awarenesses of his quest. Dante's guides, of course, all support his quest, while Ahab's guides offer insights which are not always congenial.

The successive meetings in both works have similar functions. Gradually the pilgrim Dante's and Ahab's characters are unfolded through these meetings and the human and metaphysical meanings of their journeys are illuminated through the varying situations that they encounter. The meetings structurally tie the narrative together, and they are the high points of drama in each work.

In the *Divine Comedy* the meetings extend throughout the poem. In each canticle they are directed towards different kinds of knowledge for the journeying Dante. Let us examine first one of these meetings in the *Inferno* as an illustration of how meetings in this canticle

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While crossing the Styx, Dante encounters Filippo Argenti rising out of the swamp. Giuseppe Antonio Borghese in his article "The Wrath of Dante" suggests that Argenti's approach is "as beggarly and humble as could be."

When Dante asks him who he is, he answers, "I am one who weeps" (Inf. VIII. 36). Dante then replies, "May you weep and wail to all eternity,/ for I know you, hell-dog, filthy as you are" (Inf. VIII. 37-8). It is Dante's unprovoked insult that maddens Argenti; more frightful than Argenti's behavior is "Dante's grinning thanksgiving to the justice of God." There is no justification for Dante in this scene says Borghese; God's wrath does not extenuate Dante's. "Now suddenly," Borghese says, "he promotes himself justicar and helper of God's wrath: Godlike." This meeting is not only good drama, but it shows the elementary stage in Dante's development and serves as a lesson against god-like presumption which Dante will later understand.

The other meetings in the Inferno serve similarly for drama and as lessons for Dante. Francesca is a warning against the wrong kind of love; Farinata is a lesson against willful party pride. Ulysses, who resembles Dante in his own intellectual curiosity, serves as a warning against illicit knowledge.

The meetings in the Inferno afford contrasting occasions to exemplify types of misdirected love and passion. The meetings in the Purgatorio, such as those with Casella, Sordello, and Guinizelli, have the comparable basic function to teach Dante about the right kind of love, or correctly guided passions. This right kind of love divests Dante of the faults that disturb human harmony and prepares him to live peace-
fully in human society.

The meeting with Casella is the first example of this right kind of love, and as Irma Brandeis says, "the scene begins with an embrace—the first unrestrained gesture of mutual affection between the pilgrim and any member of the otherworld." Next, Sordello's unrestrained affection for his fellow Mantuan not only exemplifies the right kind of love, but serves to correct Farinata's wrong concern with party. Sordello shows that love of a city should unite not divide its citizens. The last meeting with the poet Guinizelli presents a love which transcends the personal affection of Casella and the citizen-affiliation of Sordello. This meeting shows Dante's complete understanding of the right kind of love. His reaction is much more indirect than before. The fire prevents embrace, but here is the beginning of "the quiet poise of wisdom" to use Irma Brandeis's phrase. This is love exempt from any personal craving which would destroy perfect human harmony.

Finally, the meetings in the Paradiso have a comparable basic function to those in the Purgatorio, but they serve to prepare Dante not for the human world but for the celestial world. As Dante progresses through paradise he learns to disassociate himself from the human world and prepare to be a dweller in God's world. A good example of this is Dante's meeting with Piccarda in Canto III. Piccarda explains to Dante that souls in Heaven have no desire for rank or prestige; all wills in heaven are one with God's will and therefore all are in peace with his judgment. Dante says:

Then was it clear to me that everywhere in Heaven is Paradise, though the Perfect Grace does not rain down alike on all souls there.

(88-90)
In *Moby Dick* it is the series of meetings with the ships the *Pequod* encounters which dramatically unfold Ahab's character and illuminate the human and metaphysical meaning of his journey. In his article, "Moby-Dick--Work of Art," Walter Bezanson observes that the most important structural device in the novel "is the important series of ship meetings occurring along the time line of the voyage." These meetings are the backbone of *Moby Dick* as the meetings are in the *Divine Comedy*. Bezanson adds, "The ships the Pequod passes may be taken as a group of metaphysical parables, a series of biblical analogues, a masque of the situations confronting man, a pageant of the humors within men." This is no less than the attempt of the *Divine Comedy* itself.

Dante's goal, which is to perfectly accept God and dwell in His realm, is embodied in the poem's meetings; Ahab's goal, which is to defy God's malice and inscrutability even if this involves his destruction, is embodied in the series of ship meetings. In one way, Ahab's meetings can be seen as a reversal of Dante's *Purgatorio*--instead of teaching Ahab humanity and human compatibility, they provide opportunities for his expression of inhumanity and disregard of more normal human feelings. In another way, Ahab's meetings serve like Dante's in the *Paradiso* to show his increasing disassociation from the human world. However, Ahab moves towards a celebration of self rather than God.

The first meeting is with the ship *Albatross*. It functions primarily for dramatic suspense. The captain of the *Albatross* drops his trumpet as he attempts to tell Ahab about Moby Dick. When his ship sails on past the *Pequod*, the fish which have been following Ahab, now turn from him as he sails for Moby Dick and follow the *Albatross*. Shortly after the *Albatross* encounter, the *Pequod* meets the *Town-Ho*. The
Town-Ho has a story to tell about Moby Dick, which emphasizes the danger and malice of the whale, and also his role as an agent of divine justice. In this story Moby Dick picked up one of the sailors who had fallen from the boat and ground him to death in his teeth.

It is the meeting with the ship Jeroboam that begins the careful delineation of Ahab's growing monomania and consequent isolation. The Jeroboam also has a story to tell about Moby Dick—how with one quick motion he smote the first mate into the sea to sink forever. On board the Jeroboam is the aforementioned prophet Gabriel, who prophesies Ahab's doom if he pursues the White Whale. Although Ahab pays no attention to Gabriel, the crew is disturbed and a separation of feeling between Ahab and his men about the quest will continue to isolate Ahab until the novel's end. Ahab, of course, is able to coerce the men to his will, regardless of their fears.

The next three meetings are related in that they present psychological alternatives for Ahab's quest. The first one with the Jungfrau illustrates an impossible psychological alternative for Ahab—innocence. The captain of the Jungfrau has never heard of Moby Dick. In his article, "The Nine Gams of the Pequod," James Dean Young suggests that the next meeting with the Rosebud offers another impossible alternative for Ahab—inexperience. The captain of the Rosebud knows nothing about whales—he is a Cologne manufacturer—and it is no surprise that he has never heard of the White Whale.

The third meeting with the Samuel Enderby demands more comment because it offers the most important alternative for Ahab. In addition, this meeting further develops the growth of Ahab's separation from his fellow man and what his metaphysical goal means in human terms. The
alternative offered is indifference, and the importance of this alternative is emphasized by Ahab's boarding the ship. This is the only time he does this, for the captain of the *Enderby* has literally more in common with Ahab than any other captain Ahab encounters. The captain of the *Enderby* has also met Moby Dick and has lost an arm, as Ahab has his leg. But his reaction to misfortune is the opposite of Ahab's. "He's welcome to the arm he has," says the captain, "since I can't help it and didn't know him then; but not to another one. No more White Whales for me" (564). Ahab only replies, "How long since thou saw'st him last? Which way heading?" (564). As James Dean Young suggestively comments, "Understanding does not lessen Ahab's monomania; it makes it tragic."^9

The meeting with the *Bachelor* provides another heavy contrast between Ahab's quest and its distance from more normal human pursuits. The *Bachelor* has met with great success, and full of oil is bound for home. On deck the men are joyously celebrating:

> and as the two ships crossed each other's wake--one all jubilations for things passed, the other all forebodings as to things to come--their two captains in themselves impersonated the whole striking contrast of the scene. 'Come aboard, come aboard,' cried the gay Bachelor's commander, lifting a glass and a bottle in the air. 'Hast seen the White Whale?' gritted Ahab in reply. (627)

The captain of the *Bachelor* is "too damned jolly" (627) for Ahab; he has no real understanding.

The final depth of Ahab's isolation is seen in the meeting with the ship *Rachel*. As mentioned earlier, the captain's twelve year old son is missing, and now the captain begs Ahab's assistance in a search. For a moment, Ahab, thinking of his own child, seems to relent, but:
then in a voice that prolonged moulded every word-'Captain Gardner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good bye, good bye, God bless ye, man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go.' (671)

The last meeting with the Delight, like the first meeting with the Albatross, serves primarily for drama. The appearance of the ship and the burial of a sailor killed by Moby Dick are clear warnings of what lies ahead for those who pursue the White Whale. James Dean Young says the meeting with the Delight is there to show that Ahab acts with "total understanding" of the course he follows. Whereas Dante gradually learns how to accept love until he is one with the whole bliss of heaven, Ahab gradually grows farther and farther away from humanity in his defiance of God, and both these movements are contained in a series of meetings.

The other structural device that both Dante and Melville use in similar ways is spiritual guides or advisors. The pilgrim Dante has three—Virgil, Beatrice, and St. Bernard. Interpretations of these guides have been endlessly discussed. A traditional reading suggested by James Wimsatt in his book Allegory and Mirror is that Virgil stands for Human Reason, Beatrice for Divine Revelation, and St. Bernard for Mystical Intuition. Each of these guides offers Dante not only support but a different awareness of his quest. Virgil, as the first guide, takes Dante through hell to the top of purgatory. Human Reason can guide man to a recognition of sin and to its renunciation, which leads to Earthly Paradise. But once at the summit of purgatory, the soul has achieved purity. It has gone beyond reason. Reason is finite and God is infinite. Therefore, Beatrice as Divine Revelation comes to Dante to lead him to the divine mysteries. However, revelation or grace
is not enough; one also must have faith or contemplation of God which is St. Bernard's Mystical Intuition. Thus, he is Dante's last guide to God. Melville also provides Ahab with three spiritual advisors—Starbuck, Pip, and Fedallah. Although none of them corresponds directly to any one of Dante's guides, they play similar roles by each offering Ahab a different awareness of his quest.

Starbuck is the only Christian among the three, but his role corresponds primarily to Virgil's. He is Ahab's active advisor until the last three chapters of the book. It is Starbuck who tries to dissuade Ahab from his unreasonable quest, who like "a good angel" gradually attempts to draw Ahab "away from his evil purpose." When Ahab first informs the men of his intentions, Starbuck alone opposes him and appeals to his reason to deter him (though Starbuck's own Christianity also comes to the fore):

'Vengeance on a dumb brute!' cried Starbuck, 'that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous.' (220)

Ahab cannot follow Starbuck, for Starbuck, as John Bernstein says, "is a man of faith, a man who when exposed to the reality of evil, can still believe that good forms the underlying foundation of the universe." For Ahab, Starbuck's philosophy is "essentially dishonest; for it is based on a false premise." Starbuck is the man who looks into the sea and says:

Loveliness unfathomable, as ever lover saw in his young bride's eye!—Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibal ways. Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory; I look deep down and do believe. (624)

Ahab doesn't follow Starbuck, but he does trust him. He puts his
life into Starbuck's hands when he allows Starbuck alone to hold the rope which keeps his crow's nest from plunging into the sea. Starbuck, however, is no match for his captain. Only once in the book does he dare to defy him, but he backs down under Ahab's wrath. Later Starbuck considers killing Ahab in order to save the crew, but fear of damning his own soul prevents him. After this consideration he makes one last attempt to stop Ahab by appealing to his reason and love of his family. This scene will be discussed in detail later; its only importance here is that after this last attempt Starbuck is replaced by Fedallah. Of course, Starbuck continues to protest Ahab's irrational quest after this scene, but Ahab only says, "But in this matter of the whale, be the front of thy face to me as the palm of this hand—a lipless, unfeatured blank" (706-7).

While Starbuck offers Ahab only a rational view of his quest, Pip offers a view beyond this simplistic one—he offers the insight Ahab is challenging. Pip, like Beatrice who leads Dante beyond Virgil to the divine mysteries, has seen God. The conception, of course, is different:

He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels, then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (530)

Because of Pip's divine insight, Ahab has a faith in his words. "I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee!" he says. "Some unknown conduits from the unknown worlds must empty into thee" (667). Pip understands that to know God is madness and this brings him into kinship with Ahab, who says:
Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here, ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him . . . Here, boy; Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings. (659)

Pip offers Ahab more than the insight of God he shares; Pip offers him love. Ahab is aware of Pip's power of love on him, just as Dante is of Beatrice's. Ahab, however, fears this power. "There is that in thee, poor lad," says Ahab, which I feel too curing to my malady" (672). Ahab is a man who has his humanities, but Ahab's humanities and his quest are incompatible. Turning towards man would necessitate his turning away from God. Pip is dangerous to Ahab because as Tyrus Hillway observes, "he makes no real protest against his fate. He is the opposite pole of Ahab's axis,"¹⁴ and therefore Ahab must reject him as a weakening influence. When Ahab lowers the third time for Moby Dick, Pip cries out, "O master, my master, come back!" (713). Ahab does not hear him.

Ahab's third advisor, Fedallah, is ultimately the most important, though he never utters a word. It is Fedallah who replaces Starbuck in the last three chapters; it is Fedallah's prophecies that lead Ahab to believe himself, though only momentarily, invincible. Fedallah has a power over Ahab that neither Pip nor Starbuck possess: "even as Ahab's eyes so awed the crew's, the inscrutable Parsee's glance awed his" (674). They gaze at one another "as if in the Parsee Ahab saw his forethrown shadows, in Ahab the Parsee his abandoned substance" (676). Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent suggest that this last line "may have owed something here to the explanation Dante put into the mouth of the fratricidal friar Alberigo, about himself and Branca Doria, Hell, Canto 32,
Fedallah represents the dark side of Ahab, while Starbuck and Pip appeal to Ahab's humanity. Only Fedallah offers the Satanic view of Ahab's quest and this is why Ahab finally follows Fedallah rather than the others. Ahab, however, in spite of his belief in Fedallah, remains his own independent lord. He is alone when he faces Moby Dick; there is no one who corresponds to St. Bernard.

This independence is the primary difference between Dante the author's and Melville's use of guides or advisors. The pilgrim Dante's come to him without his bidding. Virgil leads him through hell and purgatory. As soon as he vanishes, Beatrice enters—referred to immediately as an admiral. Even St. Bernard takes over at the end and intercedes for Dante. The guides are in command and Dante is their humble follower. This humility fits into Dante's artistic Christian framework. Conversely, Ahab is in command of his advisors, both practically and spiritually. As ship's captain he is in control of Starbuck, Pip, and Fedallah, who are ranked beneath him as first mate, cabin boy, and harpooner. Ahab is also in control spiritually, for he follows his own insights regardless of their warnings or wishes.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER IV


3 Ibid., p. 172.

4 There is an interesting scene in Moby Dick parallel to Dante's encounter with Argenti. As Ahab paces the deck late one night, the pounding of his ivory leg keeps the men below awake. Stubb goes on deck and in a manner as humble as Argenti's asks Ahab--not to stop pacing--but merely to muffle the noise. Ahab's uncalled for wrath is analogous to Dante's. "Down, dog, and kennel!" (173) he roars at Stubb. Ahab even offers to clear the world of him, but Stubb retreats. He then has a dream where he equates Ahab's wrath with the wrath of God. This also echoes Dante's presumption to play God with Argenti.

5 Brandeis, p. 77.

6 Ibid., p. 110.


8 Bezanson, p. 54.


10 Young, p. 463.


12 Bernstein, p. 104.

13 Ibid., p. 124.


CHAPTER V
DANTESQUE MOMENTS OF AWARENESS

In addition to the symbolic, thematic, and structural similarities between Moby Dick and the Divine Comedy, there are also several moments of awareness in Moby Dick which appear to me Dantesque. These moments occur in scenes which are strikingly similar to scenes in the Divine Comedy. I have approached the similarities between the two works by focusing on Ahab's quest, for it is the closest parallel to the pilgrim Dante's quest. Ishmael, however, can also be viewed as the central character, and he as well as Ahab has Dantesque moments of awareness. I should like to discuss three scenes where these moments of insight occur in Moby Dick—one moment for Ahab and two for Ishmael.

Melville's "Symphony" chapter, in its atmosphere and Ahab's awareness, has a likely source in Canto XXVIII of the Purgatorio. This canto is the first in describing the Earthly Paradise. Just as the canto begins with a description of the scene's natural beauty, "the luxuriant holy forest," (2) the "mild wind," (8) and the birds "bursting with delight," (16) so Melville begins his Eden with:

It was a clear steel-blue day. The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure . . . Hither, and thither, on high, glided the snow-white wings of small, unspeckled birds; these were the gentle thoughts of feminine air . . . (681)

Renato Poggioli suggests in his article, "Dante Poco Tempo Silvano: or A 'Pastoral Oasis,'" that Dante's Earthly Paradise is a pastoral oasis: 56
"It is with a wealth of lesser details that Dante emphasizes further this connection between the reality of the Earthly Paradise and the pastoral dream of a time or state of perfect earthly happiness."¹ The pilgrim Dante is full of joy in this scene. He does not contemplate here the divine mystery, but the perfection and beauty of God's world. The joy here, as Poggioli observes, "is simply the sense of happiness that man feels in recognizing himself as part of the Lord's creation, as a creature who may serve God's ends even by fulfilling the highest demands of his own nature."²

However, besides the joy there is also a sense of lament or loss in the Earthly Paradise. C.S. Singleton in Journey to Beatrice suggests that the lament is represented in Matelda. Matelda is, of course, the beautiful maiden that Dante first encounters in the Earthly Paradise. Though he longs to be with her, he is unable to cross the stream which separates them. This inability is not physical but symbolic. Matelda is the "living embodiment of man's original condition,"³ of man before the knowledge of good and evil. Man has lost this state of innocence forever, and therefore, Dante cannot cross the stream to Matelda. C.S. Singleton says:

Thus Matelda, figuring as she does that perfection of human nature which man enjoyed in Eden before his fall, is presented by the poet as figuring a perfection of nature not to be enjoyed again by any living man; even as four beautiful stars shining in that southern sky can be enjoyed by the living no more.⁴

Melville's "Symphony" chapter is also an oasis for Ahab—a moment of calm and beauty in the midst of his torment. It is a moment of purgation for him as he tries to forget his quest in contemplating the beauties of the earth. However, contemplation of his place in the
Lord's creation is his source of despair not joy. In the midst of this beauty, sorrow overtakes him as he thinks of the joys he has left behind on land. As in Dante's Eden there is a sense of loss. Ahab remembers his earlier innocence—"On such a day—very much such a sweetness as this— I struck my first whale—a boy—harpooner of eighteen! Forty—forty—forty years ago!—ago!" (683). However, Ahab is not the same as he was forty years ago, for he now possesses the knowledge of evil, a knowledge which makes him feel like "Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since paradise" (684). Nathalia Wright comments that in all Melville's work, "the story of the Garden of Eden appears as the story of the essentially inward transition of the individual from innocence to experience."5 In both Moby Dick and the Divine Comedy there is the structure of the Christian fall; Ahab cannot think as he did when he was eighteen, any more than Dante can cross the stream to Matelda. Ahab realizes, of course, that this oasis cannot last, but because of the beauty of this one day—balanced as he is between the land and Moby Dick, as Dante is between hell and heaven—for this "poco tempo" he turns from his accustomed despair and thinks of the beautiful "far-away meadow" (685). For a moment he achieves earthly happiness; but it is only for a moment. Ahab's Eden, in contrast to Dante's which is solid reality, is as temporary as the weather on which it depends.

For the journeying Dante, the Earthly Paradise is also only a temporary happiness, a pause in the quest. "Like any other, the 'pastoral oasis' of the Commedia cannot be but an interval or an interlude."6 Neither man stops, for both of them desire the ultimate vision of God, the ultimate reality. Earthly happiness is not enough. The difference,
of course, is that purgation for Dante leads to God, while purgation for Ahab would lead to giving up his quest. One might apply Father Mapple's words to Ahab in this situation: "Woe to him who would not be true, even though to be false were salvation!" (80). At the end of the Earthly Paradise scene, the pilgrim Dante loses Virgil and gains Beatrice as his guide. At the end of the "Symphony" chapter, Starbuck is replaced by Fedallah. Both scenes prefigure the end of each work: for Dante it is the eternal happiness of heaven; for Ahab it is strength in despair. Ahab does not have a Lethe to wash away his memory or his sins.

A scene where Ishmael seems to have a Dantesque experience is "The Try-Works" chapter, when the men boil whale blubber at night; it appears indeed a moment straight out of the Inferno. First there is the smoke which the burning oil makes. It is "horrible to inhale, and inhale it you must, and not only that, but you must live in it for the time" (539) says Ishmael. "If is an argument for the pit" (539). One is reminded of Dante and Virgil pausing before descending into lower hell, to let their noses become accustomed to the horrible stench. A most likely source of "The Try-Works" chapter, however, is Cantos XXI and XXII, the comic cantos of the Inferno. These cantos describe bolgia five where grafters lie in boiling pitch, surrounded by demons armed with grappling hooks. These hooks are used to rake the sinners if they raise their bodies out of the pitch. When a new sinner arrives, they dip

him down into that pitch exactly
as a chef makes scullery boys dip meat in a boiler,
holding it with their hooks from floating free.

(XXI. 58-60)
Melville uses harpooners armed with forks rather than demons and boiling whale blubber instead of pitch, but the visual impact is the same.

Ishmael observes:

The hatch removed from the top of the works, now afforded a wide hearth in front of them. Standing on this were the Tartarean shapes of the whale-ship's stokers. With huge pronged poles they pitched hissing masses of blubber into the scalding pots, or stirred up the fires beneath, till the snaky flames darted, curling, out of the doors to catch them by the feet. (540)

Melville also echoes the grotesque society of the demons in Ishmael's following description:

As they [the watch] narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them, like flames from the furnace; as to and fro, in their front, the harpooners wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dippers; as the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea . . . .(540)

Howard P. Vincent suggests that another possible source for this chapter is J. Ross Browne's Etchings of a Whaling Cruise where he describes a trying-out scene. It is important to note that Browne mentions Dante in his description:

. . . A trying-out scene has something peculiarly wild and savage in it; a kind of indescribable uncouthness, which renders it difficult to describe with anything like accuracy. There is a murderous appearance about the blood-stained decks, and the huge masses of flesh and blubber lying here and there, and a ferocity in the looks of the men, heightened by the red, fierce glare of the fires, which inspire in the mind of the novice feelings of mingled disgust and awe. But one soon becomes accustomed to such scenes and regards them with the indifference of a veteran in the field of battle. I know of nothing to which this part of
the whaling business can be more appropriately compared than to Dante's pictures of the infernal regions. It requires but little stretch of the imagination to suppose the smoke, the hissing boilers, the savage-looking crew, and the waves of flame that burst now and then from the flues of the furnace, part of the paraphernalia of a scene in the lower regions.\(^7\)

Vincent convincingly observes that Melville "deepened his description by developing the Dantesque associations suggested in *Etchings*.\(^8\)

A second scene where I feel Ishmael has a Dantesque moment, both visually and spiritually, occurs in "The Grand Armada" chapter. The possible source for this scene in the *Divine Comedy* is Canto XXVII of the *Paradiso*. This echo is pointed out by Marius Bewley in his essay, "Melville and the Democratic Experience." In Canto XXVIII Dante has a vision of God as a point of light ringed by nine concentric circles representing the angelic hierarchy. These wheels of fire whirl round and round their center, throwing out sparks as they spin.

In Melville's "The Grand Armada" chapter, the lookout first sights a "great semicircle" of spouting whales—"a continuous chain of whale-jets . . . up-playing and sparkling in the noonday air" (490). After the crew sets sail for these whales, one of the small boats is dragged by a whale they have harpooned into the center of a large group of whales. Ishmael beautifully describes the scene:

> And still in the distracted distance we beheld the tumults of the outer concentric circles, and saw successive pods of whales, eight or ten in each, swiftly going round and round, like multiplied spans of horses in a ring. (496)

The men are in reality surrounded by a vast circle of spouting jets.

"It seems obvious to me," says Bewley, "that the source (though probably the unconscious source) of this vision of circling whales is Canto XXVIII of the *Paradiso*.\(^9\) Dante's angelic wheels of fire shoot forth
sparkles, and to Bewley

the circles of whales present a startling similar image to the imagination as their water-spouts catch the light of the sun in great concentric rings that are enclosed by the horizon only. The visual similarity is enhanced by the water imagery in which Dante describes the revolving angelic orders.¹⁰

The similarity between the two scenes is also enhanced by what Ishmael and the sailors find at the center of this whale group. They seem, like Dante, to receive a glimpse of heaven: "But far beneath this wondrous world upon the surface," says Ishmael, "another and still stranger world met our eyes as we gazed over the side" (497). The men see nursing mother whales and their babies. They see "young Leviathan amours in the deep" (498). "Some of the subtlest secrets of the seas seemed divulged to us in this enchanted pond," (498) Ishmael says. Beatrice refers to the center of light that Dante sees and says, "From that one point/ are hung the heavens and all nature's law" (Par. XXVIII. 41-2). The mysteries that Ishmael and the whalemen view seem no less. "What we have here," says Bewley, "is a vision of the world in its primal innocence, an image of the life principle presented in an intuition so profound that it seems a part of God's being."¹¹ Although the parallels of this scene with the scene in the Divine Comedy did not occur to me, it would be difficult for anyone familiar with both passages not to see the resemblance Bewley so convincingly points out.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER V


2 Poggioli, p. 9.


4 Singleton, Journey to Beatrice, p. 218.

5 Wright, p. 17.

6 Poggioli, p. 16.


8 Ibid., p. 332

9 Bewley, p. 103.

10 Ibid., p. 104.

11 Ibid., p. 104.
CHAPTER VI

THE QUESTS

To conclude my examination of the kinship between the Divine Comedy and Moby Dick I will consider the similarity between the pilgrim Dante's and Ahab's quests for God. The imagery, the prophecies, the guides, and the meetings are merely a part of their quests. Both these journeys begin with the focus on man, not God. Dante finds himself "alone in a dark wood" (Inf. I. 3)—what Francis Fergusson aptly calls "a recognizable moment of terror and bewilderment." Ahab, too, suffers a dark night of the soul with the loss of his leg. For weeks on the voyage home, "Ahab and anguish lay stretched in one hammock" (248). Melville's identification of Ahab with anguish compells one to perceive it as all-inclusive, and not merely physical pain. Dante's dark wood is purposely indefinite—"If we ask ourselves what the famous wood looks like," says Kenneth A. Bleeth, "we may be startled to realize that the text provides us with only a single word 'oscura' ..." We also never directly see Ahab's amputation. We only hear about it from Elijah and Peleg. This mysterious indefiniteness serves the same purpose in both works. The events are not important as physical realities, but as psychological or spiritual moments.

After their dark nights both men turn to God for the ultimate truth of their situations, Dante in submission and Ahab in defiance. C.S. Singleton has suggested that the figura for the Divine Comedy is the Exodus pattern of conversion and redemption. The first attempt at
Exodus is a failure—the second a success. When Dante first tries to reach God by climbing the hill, he is beaten back by the three beasts. However, in his second attempt when he follows Virgil through hell and then up through purgatory, he achieves his goal. Ahab's first attempt to reach God through Parsee worship is likewise a failure. When he is branded by the flame during his religious sacrifice, and then later attacked by Moby Dick, he decides that the "right worship is defiance" (641) not acceptance. His second attempt through defiance succeeds.

Singleton also suggests that Dante follows Christ's pattern of atonement in first descending to hell before ascending to God. John Freccero correctly comments, "Dante's descent into Hell enables him to reach the shore which Ulysses was able only to make out in the distance." Ulysses failed because he did not descend first. An understanding of sin and evil is necessary for an understanding of God. This is why Ahab succeeds as Dante does, but as Ulysses does not. Ahab makes that descent to hell; he confronts the evil of the universe as fully as Dante. In the already mentioned "Try-Works" chapter, after Ishmael has described the ship as hell, he adds that it is merely "the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul" (540). Ahab is as much in hell as any of Dante's sinners, because just as Dante's sinners, he creates and contains his own hell within him:

> these spiritual throes in him heaved his being up from its base, and a chasm seemed opening in him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them: when this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship . . . (271)

A comment made by Babbalanja in Chapter clxxx of Mardi (1849), when he apparently is speaking of Dante and his Divine Comedy, strongly suggests
that Melville had Dante's descent to hell in mind when he wrote about
Ahab's experience.  

Woe it is that reveals these things. He knows
himself, and all that's in him, who knows ad­
versity. To scale great heights, we must come
out of lower depths. The way to heaven is
through hell. We need fiery baptisms in the
fiercest flames of our own bosoms. (365)  

Ernest Leisy accurately comments, "Melville, like Dante, makes a very
proper hell from earthly woes." However, once Ahab has perceived the
blackness of the universe he cannot forget it. His problem is not
descending into hell, but ever ascending out of it. We might here
aptly remember the earlier quoted sections from Pierre. I should also
mention that some critics have seen Ahab as a Christ figure. He is
a man "with a crucifixion in his face" (170), a man challenging the
evil in existence for all men--sacrificing his own life in an attempt
to destroy this evil. I agree that Ahab may follow Christ's pattern,
but we must remember that his quest is a solitary journey, lacking
Christ's love for all humanity.

The structure of the quests can also be seen in terms of a comment
Melville wrote in 1849 in his Shakespeare text: "It (madness) and right
reason extremes of one . . . seeks converse with the Intelligence, Power,
the Angel."Madness and right reason are two ways to approach God.
Dante obviously uses right reason, following Virgil, who leads him to
Beatrice, and she leads him to God. Ahab, who is constantly referred
to in the novel as crazy or mad, takes the madness approach which leads
him to Moby Dick. However, the approach really takes Ahab as much as
he does the approach. Like Pip, he realizes that to know God's truth,
to know his indifference and his malice, is to be mad. We must remember,
however, the special significance Melville gave to the term madness. He
viewed madness as a necessary cover for a character's uttering the real truth of the universe. This view is best expressed in his review "Hawthorne and His Mosses" when he speaks of Shakespeare's use of madness:

> But it is those deep far-away things in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality; these are the things that make Shakespeare Shakespeare. Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates, the things which we feel to be so terrifically true that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic king tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth.  

Lear, we must remember, is a primary model for Ahab. The very difference between a man like Ahab, with a "globular brain" and a "ponderous heart" (111), and someone mechanical like Perth is Ahab's madness. "Thou should'st go mad, blacksmith," says Ahab; "say why dost thou not go mad? How can'st thou endure without being mad?" (619).

Moby Dick has been viewed as an allegory, despite Ishmael's warning that the book is not an "intolerable allegory" (276). This allegorical reading of Moby Dick makes the book analogous with the Divine Comedy which is a fully elaborate allegory. Melville naturally was aware of the novel's allegorical potential, and in a letter to Hawthorne in November 1851 he said, "Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of this great allegory--the world? Then we pygmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended." However, another comment of Melville's in a letter written in January 1852 to Hawthorne's wife must also be remembered: "I had some vague idea while writing it (Moby Dick), that the whole book was susceptible of an allegoric construction & also that parts of it were--but the speciality of many of the
particular subordinate allegories, were first revealed to me, after reading Mr. Hawthorne's letter, which, without citing any particular examples, yet intimated the part-and-parcel allegoricalness of the whole.  

Some critics, such as Percy H. Boynton, see the entire novel as allegorical, though only parts of it as Hawthorne says should be viewed as such. Boynton comments, "It *Moby Dick* is not merely a discernible allegory, but in Melville's procedure it was as definitely and avowedly an allegory as The Divine Comedy or Paradise Lost . . ." Ahab's quest, which I have isolated to discuss, is indeed allegorical and therefore is very similar to Dante's. The meaning of Ahab's allegorical journey is, of course, quite different from the meaning of Dante's; it (Ahab's) "declares allegorically . . . total independence of subservience to any established religious or philosophical explanation of man's role in the universal order."  

The problem for Ahab exists not merely inside himself, as it does for Dante, but outside himself as well. Charles Dinsmore suggests that "Dante might have written out of his own bitter experiences one of the world's darkest tragedies," but he did not. Dante considers his dark night of the soul a result of something within himself. He never tells the reader exactly what this is, but he is clear that he alone has brought about his downfall. Ahab's dark night of the soul is caused both by his "high" perception (this was previously discussed in Chapter III) and by Moby Dick's malicious attack. Ahab's perception creates Ahab's hell, but the inscrutability of God is not Ahab's creation, and it exists whether Ahab perceives it or not.  

It is in their conceptions of the universe, then, and the nature of the deity behind it, that Ahab and the pilgrim Dante differ. It is
not in their quests, but in the answers to their quests that they diverge. Both of them see the divine will as the force behind all things. I must repeat W.E. Sedgwick's perceptive comment on Ahab, "it is almost impossible for him not to see all things as the manifestation of a divine will at work in creation." Dante, too, perceives God behind all things. To Dante, God is not only power and justice, but He is love and the source of all good in the universe. There is evil in the world, but that is due to man, who chooses to love the wrong things. Even evil is based on love for Dante, as the motto of the Inferno's entrance makes explicit. To Ahab, God, whom Ahab conceives as malicious and indifferent, is the source of both good and evil. Shelley provides a concise statement of this in his notes to Queen Mab:

if God is the author of good, he is also the author of evil; that, if he is entitled to our gratitude for the one, he is entitled to our hatred for the other. . . . It is plain that the same arguments which prove that God is the author of food, light, and life, prove him also to be the author of poison, darkness, and death. . . .

Ahab perceives beauty and goodness in the world, but he cannot reconcile this with the evil he also perceives. As Queequeg says, "Queequeg no care what god made him shark . . . but de god wat made him shark must be one dam Ingin" (396). It is the dual nature of creation that confounds Ahab, and he comes to represent this inscrutable duality in the "demoniac indifference" (674) of the White Whale, who, though majestic and beautiful, tears "his hunters, whether sinning or sinned against:" (674)

he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies . . . (246)
Ahab does not understand how beauty and goodness can stem from a malicious God, or why God created the ugliness and evil of the world, as well as its beauty. The symbol of the whale is not perhaps as fantastic as it seems. Clergy in Melville's day agreed "that God used the image of the whale to serve as a symbol of God's own indomitable and inscrutable attributes."\textsuperscript{15}

Dante the artist writes his poem in the same way Melville writes about the whale. Things are not things merely. Things in the created universe are both things and signs. John Ciardi convincingly says of the \textit{Divine Comedy}:

\begin{quote}
The details are there not as revealed truth but as a guide to truth. They are the mask truth must put on in order to be partly visible to the feeble understanding of mankind. But it follows that the same mask that makes truth partly visible, must also partly obscure it.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

So Ahab says:

\begin{quote}
All visible objects, man, 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 mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If a 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. Sometimes, I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (221)
\end{quote}

Ahab's statement is actually an expansion of Carlyle's statement in \textit{Sartor Resartus}: "All visible things are emblems; what thou seest is not there at all: Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea, and body it forth."\textsuperscript{17}
Ahab would have liked to have Dante's faith. "Would now St. Paul would come along that way, and to my breezelessness bring his breeze," (406) he says. He would like to have a God of love like Dante's. "Come in thy lowest form of love and I will kneel and kiss thee," (641) he says. "He is still ready," observes Merlin Bowen, "to forget his anger and to answer with love." But even if God were all love instead of the creator of evil as well, He would still be inscrutable. Ahab is not only challenging God for His evil nature, but he is also challenging Him for the unfairness of His mysteries. Constantly throughout Moby Dick Ahab comments on the impossibility of understanding God, of fathoming His nature. Several underscorings and markings in Melville's Bibles are illuminating for an understanding of Ahab's feelings. In a copy of the New Testament which Melville received in 1846 he wrote on the back fly leaf:

> Who well considers the Christian religion, would think that God meant to keep it in the dark from our understandings, and make it turn upon the motions of our hearts. St. Evremont.

In a Bible he acquired in 1850 Melville underscored in Job, chapter eleven:

> 7 Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?  
> 8 It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know?

Ahab doesn't like shipping out in life without knowing God any more than Ishmael liked shipping on the Pequod without seeing "the man who was to be the absolute dictator of it" (138). This inscrutability is chiefly what Ahab hates. He is willing to admit a God—"I own thy speechless, placeless power" (641) he says—but he wants to be on equal terms with
Him. Ahab is an "ungodly, god-like man" (119). Melville's markings in his Bibles are again helpful. In the copy received in 1850 he scored and underscored part of verse 15 from Job chapter eleven:

"Though he slay me, yet will I trust him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him." However, the best expression of Ahab's desire for equality with God is a comment Melville wrote in the New Testament he received in 1846:

In Life he appears as a true Philosopher--as a wise man in the highest sense. He stands firm to his point; he goes on his own way inflexibly;.... he in no wise conceals his divine origin; he dares to equal himself with God; nay, to declare that he himself is God.

(Ahab does virtually become the god of the Pequod. In Dante's heaven men's wills become God's will; on the Pequod all men's wills become Ahab's will in the chase scene. "They were one man, not thirty" (700).) Looking at the carcass of a slain whale roped next to the boat, Ahab says, "Speak thou vast and venerable head .... and tell us the secret thing that is in thee .... O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!" (406). The secrets of the universe are in front of Ahab. They are tattooed on the body of Queequeg, where a prophet of his island "had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" (612)--a walking Divine Comedy. "Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!" (612) says Ahab. His quest is a "quest for absolute knowledge of the ethical structure of the universe." Adam gave Ahab the knowledge of good and evil; what he wants is the understanding.

While Ahab is challenging the order of the universe, Dante is busy
explaining it. Yet it is clear that the pilgrim Dante no more than Ahab is granted God's ultimate wisdom. One can be filled with as much beatitude as one is capable of, but that for Dante is never equated with God's insight. Virgil refers to God in the *Purgatorio* as the One who "does not will that all Its ways be told" (III. 32-33). God is He "who hides His primal cause/ so deep that none may ever know His ways" (Pur. VIII. 68-69). Dante, like the souls in paradise, accepts this. W. Boyd Carpenter expresses this well: "By searching out he could not fathom the measureless depths of the Divine Nature, but by drawing near to God, he could become partaker of the Divine Nature, which is love."24 "His will is our peace" (Par. III. 185). The blessed are content to sit in tiers in the mystical rose—content to be a part of the "Love that moves the Sun and the other stars" (Par. XXXIII. 146)—content to accept what they can never ultimately comprehend. Ahab is not.

As the pilgrim Dante and Ahab near the end of their journeys, the workings of each man's soul become more intense as they approach God. They begin to prepare for their final encounter. Most of Dante's preparation is visual, as he strengthens his eyes to bear God's intensity. Yet, throughout paradise, he also is instructed in the mysteries of the church and finally tested on his faith, hope, and love. Ahab equally prepares, though naturally in a more physical manner. He has a special boat built for him to chase Moby Dick; he forges his own harpoon, which he baptizes in pagan blood in the name of the devil—"ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" (621). (Melville in a letter to Hawthorne in June 1851 told him, "This is the book's motto (the secret one).... ."25) Ahab also destroys the quadrant, refusing to be guided by anything but himself; and he becomes nearly a religious fanatic as he refuses to sleep, sup, or shave until he encounters
Moby Dick.

The nearer the pilgrim Dante and Ahab are to God, the more they become like Him, according to their perceptions. Dante is filled with ineffable love and happiness as he becomes a member of the heavenly community. Ahab is filled with vindictive hate as he draws farther and farther away from feelings of humanity. Finally both men reach the presence of God, or perhaps for Ahab his "agent," the "mask and expression of the Divinity:"26 the presence of the truth they have been searching for throughout their quests. This is the moment that the stories have been moving towards; in both cases it is brief. Dante looks into God and sees as far as man can see the "scattered leaves" (Par. XXXIII. 87) of the universe bound into the universal form by love. It is a supreme moment of triumph and fulfillment. Ahab comes face to face with Moby Dick and understands that he cannot understand the chaos and the "eternal malice" (720)—cannot understand the mystery of creation; and yet he comes to understand what man can understand—himself. "Oh, now," he cries, "I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief" (721). Ahab refuses to submit and dies in defiance of God's inscrutability. It is a supreme moment of triumph and fulfillment:

the heroism of thought itself as it rises above its seeming insignificance and proclaims, in the very teeth of a seemingly hostile and malevolent creation, that man's voice is heard for something against the watery waste and the deep, that man's thought has a echo in the universe.27

We must remember that a medieval quester's triumph was defined in terms of his actually achieving his goal; a nineteenth century romantic hero's triumph was defined not so much in terms of actual success, but in the
heroism—the struggle—of the quest itself. Ahab, of course, does 
pierce through the white mask, just as the ship plunges through the 
"creamy pool" (724). However, we are not witness to any further insights 
beyond the mask. For Melville, as for Dante, the only way to go beyond 
man's understanding is through death. Melville only writes about this 
world, however, because what lay beyond it was merely conjectural for 

Both works give an impression of the actual and potential great-
ness of man. Dante glorifies man through God; Melville glorifies man 
through man. Both the pilgrim Dante and Ahab sought freedom and truth 
and both men found it (as much as man can): Dante found it in God's 
will—Ahab found it in defiance of that will. The quests end with the 
total union of the protagonists with God. Dante is one with the whole 
motion of the universe and God; Ahab moves with Moby Dick, tied to his 
body with the rope of his own harpoon.

Moby Dick and the Divine Comedy both present universal patterns of 
man's quest for God. Their messages are, of course, different. "Melville 
was the antithesis of Dante,"28 Charles Olson rightly comments. Olson 
believes that a Christian framework was as creatively stifling for 
Melville, as it was creatively inspiring for Dante. Melville, says 
Olson, had to write an anti-Christian book. Although their messages 
are different, their purposes are the same. Both Dante and Melville 
were writing with universal intentions. Dante tells Can Grande "that 
his purpose was 'to remove those living in this life from the state of 
misery, and lead them to the state of felicity.'"29 Dante shows, as 
he conceives it, how man becomes liable to punishment or reward. He 
is clearly writing for the edification and benefit of man.
Melville does no less. "What Melville wanted, of course, was to teach, to deal with moral and philosophical ideas," Tyrus Hillway says. Raymond Weaver perceptively comments, "Like Dante, Melville set himself up against the world as a party of one," also with the purpose of edification. Richard Chase in his following statement agrees with these critics:

He thought it the prophetic duty of the moralist and the artist to assert the value of human life against its enemies, whether they were the celestial Adversary or the conventionalists, and pharisaical liberals who did his work on earth.

In his copy of William Rounseville Alger's *Solitudes* Melville underscored these words quoted from Beethoven: "I was nigh taking my life with my own hands. But *Art* held me back. I could not leave the world until *I had revealed what lay within me.* What Melville reveals in *Moby Dick* is what Dante reveals in the *Divine Comedy*—a vision of man's relationship to God.

The *Divine Comedy* and *Moby Dick*, then address the same metaphysical question of man's relationship to God. Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick* and the pilgrim Dante's in the *Divine Comedy* are congenial in process if not in vision. My study, though conjectural, is useful I feel in offering not only some insight into the reading of *Moby Dick*, but a reading of the *Divine Comedy* may also help to establish Melville in the main cultural stream of nineteenth century romanticism. Melville's polysemous and allegorical motifs and symbology are both romantic and Dantesque; these strategies are, of course, one of the reasons Dante appealed so to the Romantics.

New evidence such as recovery of Melville's lost copy of the *Divine Comedy* may be discovered which will offer concrete proof to my thesis
and establish Dante's influence on Melville. Whether or not such evidence is found, I am persuaded that Melville had the formal structure of the Divine Comedy in mind as he wrote Moby Dick. After a careful reading of both works, several passages in Moby Dick impressed me, as they have impressed some others, as strikingly parallel to passages in the Divine Comedy. These specific scenes in Moby Dick suggest to me a real possibility that they are conscious echoes of scenes in the Divine Comedy. Glauco Cambon has pointed out the echo of the sinking of Ulysses's ship in the sinking of the Pequod. I found a convincing number of similarities between Ulysses and Ahab that persuade me to agree with Cambon that Melville had Dante's Ulysses in mind when he conceived Ahab. The description of the men in "The Try-Works" chapter seems to me an obvious echo of the "comic cantos" of the Inferno, and I am not surprised that a Melville scholar like Howard P. Vincent also noticed the scene's Dantesque elements. Marius Bewley's insightful reading of the circling whale scene in "The Grand Armada" chapter as a parallel to the pilgrim Dante's vision of the angelic hierarchy has convinced me that the Divine Comedy is the source for this passage. I also feel "The Symphony" chapter is clearly parallel in structure, theme, and mood to the Divine Comedy's Earthly Paradise.

Even though there may not be more specific borrowings from the Divine Comedy than the ones I note, there are areas of kinship between the two works which make it helpful for a reader of Moby Dick to have the Divine Comedy in mind. The evidence from Melville's journals and written comments which show the extent of his reading of Dante is limited. However, Melville's kinship with Dante is based on large concepts which would not depend on a close reading of the Divine Comedy. The large
concepts which Melville shares with Dante, at least in *Moby Dick*—the philosophical themes, the world as symbol, the metaphysical approach to man's relationships—could have reached him through intermediary sources such as Byron and Carlyle. Melville appears conscious of the romantic image of Dante especially in connection with the *Inferno* and it is possible that such a work as Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship* gave Melville this consciousness rather than his reading of the *Inferno*.

The kinship between Melville and Dante as illustrated in *Moby Dick* and the *Divine Comedy* does not depend on concrete proof that Melville read Dante's poem; it is a kinship, as I said, based on a similar symbolic and metaphysical approach to man and his world. This kinship is perhaps most readily discernible in the conscious design or patterning of the meetings discussed in chapter IV. It is this conscious design in both the *Divine Comedy* and *Moby Dick* which make them so different from picaresque novels, like *Don Quixote*, which are also structured on a series of meetings or adventures. There is no sense in the *Divine Comedy* or *Moby Dick* of the fortuitous encounters of the picaresque novel: (in the *Divine Comedy* and *Moby Dick*) there is instead a sense of finality, of a carefully controlled pattern leading towards a goal—toward God. The pilgrim Dante's and Ahab's relationships are metaphysical rather than social. They live in the same world—they have the same references. Dante is able to accept the ultimate inscrutability of these references while Ahab is not.

Reading the *Divine Comedy* has given a new dimension to my understanding and enjoyment of *Moby Dick*. I feel this added dimension has made the work I put into this project both interesting and rewarding.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER VI


4. Critics, who I have found, that see a connection between Lombardo and Dante are Tyrus Hillway, W.E. Sedgwick, and Merrell R. Davis. There are others, of course, who see Dantesque elements in Mardi in structure and theme.


13. Dinsmore, p. 73.


15. Ibid., p. 148.

17 Carlyle, p. 54.


21 Ibid., p. 369.

22 Ibid., p. 231.

23 Watters, p. 173.


26 Bowen, p. 146.


28 Olson, p. 103.

29 Ferguson, Dante's Drama of the Mind, p. 3.


31 Raymond M. Weaver, Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic (New York: George H. Doran, 1921), p. 343.


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