

## ISHMAEL'S LEVIATHANIC VISION: A STUDY IN WHITENESS

KHALIL HUSNI

*The Lebanese University*

And of all these things the Albino  
whale was the symbol. Wonder ye  
then at the fiery hunt?

("The whiteness of the whale")<sup>1</sup>

"With the problem of the universe revolving in" him (35 : 139), Ishmael goes whaling to meditate the self and its Oceanic life motivated by "the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself":

... the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air (1 : 16).

Whether the sailor's actual whaling voyage aboard Ahab's Pequod, relentlessly pursuing the White Whale round the globe, accounts for the narrator's literary voyage, or literary whaling for the actual voyage, the intricate relationship between sailor-narrator, sea-library, fact-fancy, reality-fiction leaves the reader with the "seamless whole" of a "Whaling voyage by one Ishmael" (1 : 16) — a journey into "the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored" (112 : 402) "wonder world" of the antediluvian, pre-Adamite, primordially eternal Whale as experienced, envisioned, dramatized and reported by the one and all Ishmael.

Underlying the metaphysics of Ishmael's narration is his emphasis on the significance of not only the angle of vision in the reflective study of "the image of the ungraspable phantom of life" (1 : 14) — "as you come nearer ... it begins to assume different aspects, according to your point of view" (75 : 282)

---

<sup>1</sup> Melville, H. 1967 [1851], *Moby-Dick*. Ed. by H. Hayford and H. Parker. New York: W. W. Norton, Ch. 42, p. 170. All subsequent chapter and page references to *Moby-Dick* in the text are to this edition.

— but also the visionary mood which directs and moulds noumenal perception — “But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the arch-angels” (86 : 317).<sup>2</sup> Related to this is the consequential deduction that the emerging vision, the interaction between the “I” and what it sees, is only partially and relatively true at a definite period of time, under specific conditions, and to that particular observer; the vision changes either with the change of the surrounding circumstances or the observing eye. Since Ishmael is the all-perceiving and all-revealing narrative omni-prevalent “I” of the novel, there is the implication that he has lived the various moods, experienced the numerous approaches, and seen all the narrated visions of the “they”.

This narrative capacity is elucidated through a study of the “I”’s psyche — Ishmael’s susceptibility to be enchanted, entranced, bound to particular spells. Though Ishmael abandons his borrowed identity-no-identity to the captivating spell and lives its absorbing life, this abandonment is momentary, else the surrendered self is lost “no more to rise forever” (35 : 140). Ishmael always manages to break the experienced binding spell, and “with a shock” comes “back to life” (61 : 242) to undergo another spell to avoid the emptiness and boredom of a soul always in search of an identifying image.<sup>3</sup> The emerging revelations narrated by Ishmael correspond to this extraordinary ability of living the psychic phase of every spell and surviving it. Since these psychic phases are in endless rotation — “through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’ doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally” (114 : 406) — then Ishmael’s visions of the White Whale which form the “Doublloon” of perception in *Moby-Dick* are inevitably

---

<sup>2</sup> The sentence preceding the quoted one — “So in dreams, have I seen majestic Satan thrusting forth his tormented colossal claw from the flame Baltic of Hell” — indicates that Melville may have been drawing on the implications of Satan’s statement in *Paradise lost*:

The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n.  
(Book I: 254—255)

(Le Comte, E. (ed.). 1961. *Paradise lost and other poems*. New York: The New American Library, Mentor.)

<sup>3</sup> In “Ishmael’s godly gamesomeness: solftaste and rhetoric in *Moby-Dick*”, Warwick Wadlington convincingly demonstrates (1972 : 315) how “On the one hand one must be able to escape the emptiness of the soul by enthusiastic commitment to an experience through a warmhearted capacity for wonder and sympathy; on the other, one must be able to disengage oneself from the exclusive demands of the moment’s mood and its partial vision of truth”.

conflicting and contradictory at various points of the circumference of whaling, though, quite naturally, he strives to persuade us to share the perceived moment of truth of each of them. As the fictive "I" experiences, sees, and reveals, so it does try to make us believe.<sup>4</sup> Of prominent ascendancy in these visions is that of the hero whose hunt of the White Whale he is dramatizing.

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.

(Ahab to his crew on the quarter-deck (36 : 143)).

"... wholly ignorant of the mysteries of whaling" (12 : 58), Ishmael joins the Pequod's crew. When he hears that Ahab's leg "was devoured, chewed up, crunched by the monstrousest parmacetty", he rationally comments: "how could I know there was any peculiar ferocity in that particular whale, though indeed I might have inferred as much from the simple fact of the accident". Despite this apparent calm, what Ishmael learns from Peleg about the "grand, ungodly, god-like man"'s encounter with the White Whale — the loss of leg, the tormenting pains, the desperate mood and raving spell — (18 : 69—77), fills him with an incomprehensible sympathy and sorrow for Ahab tinged with a mysterious strange awe of him. This haunting vague emotion finds full expression when Ahab declares his purpose, displays his ritualistic performance, intoxicates and mesmerizes<sup>5</sup> his crew on the quarter-deck to take the binding oath:

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and olinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine (41 : 155).

Totally infected and entranced, Ishmael endeavours to comprehend as well as convey the cognizability of Ahab's hunt which appears at the moment of hypnosis his. In his succeeding account of the history "of that murderous monster" against whom he has taken an oath of "violence and revenge", Ishmael surveys the rumours and superstitions which declare Moby Dick to be ferocious, ubiquitous, and immortal, invested with an "unexampled intelligent malignity". Even "stripped of these supernatural surmisings", what strikes "the imagination with unwonted power" is the feature already highlighted by Ahab in his quarter-deck initiation — "a peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead, and a high, pyramidical white hump". On the quarter-deck, Ahab reiterates the whiteness of the Whale more than fourteen times; he

<sup>4</sup> See Wayne C. Booth (1969:151—152) and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. (1965:1—4).

<sup>5</sup> For Melville's dramatic use of the art of mesmerism, which became widely spread and acclaimed in the United States during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, see Herbert Rothschild, Jr. (1972:235—238).

only refers to the White Whale as Moby Dick after Tashtego's realization, "that white whale must be the same that some call Moby Dick" (36 : 142). And it is "upon the whale's white hump" that Ahab piles "the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down": "All that maddens and torments ... all truth with malice in it ... all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick" (41 : 155—160).

Before proceeding with Ishmael's analysis of the whiteness of the Whale, it is essential to trace back Ahab's hunt to see why he discerns in the White Whale the incarnation of evil. The portrait of the Quaker's voyaging hero — "a man of greatly superior natural force, with a globular brain and a ponderous heart; who has also by the stillness and seclusion of many long night-watches in the remotest waters, and beneath constellations never seen here at the north, been led to think untraditionally and independently; receiving all nature's sweet or savage impressions fresh from her own virgin, voluntary, and confiding breast" (16 : 71) — suggests why Ahab of the book went whaling. Probing the enigmatic universal mysteries, of the essence and destiny of the self, of non-being, being, mortality, eternity, of the eternal principle and nature of life and death, good and evil, of the "All", dissatisfied with the "land" surface interpretations which do not satiate "a mighty pageant creature"'s thirst for "the open independence of his soul", Ahab goes whaling, the inference is, in pursuit of the "landlessness", "highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God ..." (23 : 97). As the hunt for the sperm whale is the celebrated outlet for the exploration of virgin territories and the discoveries of the unknown wonders and terrors of the deep (see "The advocate", 24 : 98—101), then the timeless, shapeless, most majestic, most formidable, largest inhabitant of the globe — providential source of light (spermaceti) and life (sperm)<sup>6</sup> is "the key to it all".

In his drive to thrust through "the pasteboard masks" of existence (36 : 144) and perceive the fathomless naked truth beyond, Ahab encounters the White Whale. The harpoon rebounds: instead of capturing the meditated eternal source of life, he loses his own life-source (groin incident resulting from reaping of leg);<sup>7</sup> in that "serene, exasperating sunlight, that smiled on, as if it at

<sup>6</sup> Most of the cetological passages in *Moby-Dick* mark the symbolic significance of the sperm whale, providing an organic correlative which substantiates Ahab's quest.

<sup>7</sup> See "Ahab's leg": "For it had not been very long prior to the Pequod's sailing from Nantucket, that he had been found one night lying prone upon the ground, and insensible; by some unknown, and seemingly inexplicable, unimaginable casualty, his ivory limb having been so violently displaced, that it had stake-wise smitten, and all but pierced his groin ... Nor, at the time, had it failed to enter his monomaniac mind, that all the anguish of that then present suffering was but the direct issue of a former woe ..." (106 : 385).

birth or a bridal" (41 : 159),<sup>8</sup> he does not see light but darkness, not creation but destruction, not life but death, for to Ahab, universal noumena is "like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self" (99 : 359). Truncated, pierced, and darkened, the pursuing self perceives in the elusive elemental principle of life and light "death and devils" (36 : 143). Hence Ahab's monomaniac infernal vision of the Whale and his vindictive supernatural hunt. It is this vision of the Whale that the spell-bound Ishmael metaphorically elaborates in "The whiteness of the whale":

For once, I gave myself up to the abandonment of the time and the place; but while yet all a-rush to encounter the whale, could see naught in that brute but the deadliest ill (41 : 163).

It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught.

In his endeavour to verbalize in a "comprehensible form" the "rather vague nameless horror" which so intensely gripped his infuriated soul, Ishmael composes his inexhaustible compendium of the metaphor of whiteness. Since ancient times, in numerous mythologies, rituals, and creeds — Greek, Persian, Roman, Christian — the colour white has been a symbol of purity, chastity, innocence, benignity, honesty, nobility, royalty, etc., signifying in its superior manifestation the Creator's "divine spotlessness and power" of whom all the good in life partakes; "yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime", the argument proceeds, "there ... lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue" which possesses the soul with an overwhelming panic.

It is this lurking elusiveness of whiteness that the possessed Ishmael ponders. Since to "analyze it, would seem impossible", in his hyper-emotive state, Ishmael gathers and piles examples from here and there<sup>9</sup> illustrating

<sup>8</sup> The leviathanic source of light is related to the elements of light; in the novel, the Whale is associated with the sun (equator) as well as lightning and fire. For a detailed analysis, see Janez Stanonik (1962 : 86—67, 110—111, 149) and Charles Child Walcutt (1944:304—310).

<sup>9</sup> Taken from various mythologies, traditions, and observations, from literary, historical, zoological, and other sources (see Harold Beaver's detailed notes to the Penguin Edition of *Moby-Dick*, Harmondsworth, 1972, "Commentary", pp. 784—788), some of these examples were modified by Melville to the demands of Ishmael's white vision. For instance, Jay Leyda documents (1969:402) that "Allan Melville gives M volume 10 (The Class Pisces) of *The Animal Kingdom* ... by the Baron Cuvier ... (London, 1834), in which M checks, for immediate use as a footnote in Chapter XLII, 'The Whiteness of the Whale', a passage in 'Supplement on the Chondropterygii [Sharks]'. Through reading the passage referred to, one notes that Cuvier merely hints at the white shark's whiteness in accounting for its French name: "The French name this terrible animal

the horror, the dread, the fright which whiteness imparts to and heightens in the whitened object. In these "white" citations there loom two correspondingly predominant features. Firstly, one notes the inter-relationship between the physical and "transcendent horrors", the terrestrial and celestial frights of whiteness, culminating in the "pen-ultimate" fear of death which it shrouds and the ultimate supernatural dread of the "eternal frosted desolateness" which it foreshadows, "if indeed that pallor were as much the badge of consternation in the other world, as of mortal trepidation here". As the white colour of death and supernaturalism is "the very veil of the Christian Deity", of God, of the supernatural Creator of all natural forms, then the emerging revelation is that though "in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright"; the apparently most divine symbol of life and the known is the most appalling symbol of death and the unknown. "Therefore, in his other moods, symbolize whatever grand or gracious thing he will by whiteness, no man can deny that in its profoundest idealized significance it calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul".

Secondly, the citations which the appalled Ishmael heaps in his attempt to spear this evasive apparition of the incantation of whiteness are self-defeating, for they speak of the awful silence, the dreadful universal muteness, the frightful indefinite blankness of the heart of whiteness; the deeper he drives through the realm of the visible world and its phenomenal forms in this pursuit, the more paradoxical and less penetrative his language becomes, until he is struck, like Ahab, with a frustrating impotence — in Ishmael's case linguistic, for what is beyond the realm of existence is also beyond the alphabetical capacities of the existing language; the pursued white unknowable unknown that is the principle of life is beyond it, formless to its forms, invisible in its hues, for "in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors... a dumb blankness full of meaning... a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?"

'Requin', for requiem, the rest or stillness of death, in allusion to the deadly character of its habits; and when we consider its enormous size and powers, the strength and number of its teeth, the rapidity of its movements, its frequent appearance during all the turmoil and horrors of a tempest, with death and destruction apparent in every blast and every wave, to add to the horror of the scene by the phosphoric light emitted from its huge body near the surface of the troubled waters, with its open mouth and throat ready to swallow entire the despairing sailor, we must admit the propriety of a name, which connects this cruel monster of the deep with death". (London: Whitaker, 1834, V. 10: 632—633). Melville's literary capitalization of his source is evident in his footnote where he emphasizes the whiteness of the shark as the main reason for its French name: "Now in allusion to the white, silent stillness of death in this shark, and the mild deadliness of his habits, the French call him 'Requin'" (42 : 164, n.).

If the essence of whiteness, colourfulness, the ALL is not colour but colourlessness, not being but absence, not light but darkness, then the piercer through the projected forms of life will inevitably perceive not the benign Creator of life but the horrid nothingness of death, not the universal source of benevolence but that "of demonism in the world", not Yillah but Hautia, not God but the devil. It is Melville's fictive modification of the Newtonian theory of light (whiteness) which pulls the webs of Ishmael's argument together:

And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him (42 : 163—170).

The scientific theory that white light is a no-colour, all-colour, was first observed by Newton in his *Optiks* (1704).<sup>10</sup> In his reference to "that other theory of the natural philosophers", it seems Melville was capitalizing on Newton's theory. The allusion to "the illustrious Newton"'s treatment of "the subject of curvilinear motion" in *White-Jacket* (1850)<sup>11</sup> indicates that Melville was not a stranger to Newton's theories at the time of writing *Moby-Dick*. Indeed Melville's rendering of the theory which bears traces of Newton's phraseology encourages the reader to dig for the stones of Melville's charnel-house through the lines of *Optiks* which might have been particularly suggestive to a mind like Melville's, making a further consideration of the hitherto

---

<sup>10</sup> "There was no red, no yellow, no green, no blue, nor purple to be seen any longer, but from a Confusion of them all arouse one uniform white Colour. Of the Light which now by the Mixture of all the Colours appeared white, there was no Part really white". "From what has been said it is also evident, that the Whiteness of the Sun's Light is compounded of all the Colours wherewith the several sorts of Rays whereof that Light consists, when by their several Refrangibilities they are separated from one another, do tinge Paper or any other white Body whereon they fall". "For whiteness is a mean between all Colours, having itself indifferently to them all, so as with equal facility to be tinged with any of them" (New York: Dover Publications, 1952, based on 1730 ed., pp. 134—161).

<sup>11</sup> Hayford, H., Parker, H. and G. T. Tansolle. (eds). 1970. *The writings of Herman Melville*. Vol. V: *White-Jacket*. Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, Ch. 83, pp. 348—349.

unobserved possible impact that Newton's theories appear to have had on Melville's fiction desirable. Another engaging matter which arises from Melville's adoption of the Newtonian theory is his apparent disagreement with the counter-theory wielded by his German contemporary, Goethe. In his *Theory of colours*, which appeared in English in 1840 (John Murray's firm), Goethe maintains "That all colours mixed together produce white, is an absurdity which people have credulously been accustomed to repeat for a century, in opposition to the evidence of their senses".<sup>12</sup>

As Ishmael prepares the reader for the fusion between his Captain's magnet and his captivated soul, in his narrative "careful disorderliness" (82:304), he simultaneously contrives the emerging vision. Through his revelations in the icy, barren December New Bedford world — the "palsied" "Spouter-Inn" and its "boggy, soggy, squitchy picture" which bears a faint resemblance to "the great leviathan himself" and seems "to delineate chaos bewitched", involuntarily driving "a nervous man" to take an oath to decipher its meaning (2:18—19, 3:20); the bleak marbles of the perished whalemén, those white "bitter blanks" which in the very temple of God arouse an awful feeling of hopelessness and despair: "What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrections to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave" (7:39—41) — Ishmael gradually builds from the introductory hypo of the "drizzly November" of the soul which breeds suicidal despair (1:12) to the terminating hypo of atheistical negation which he, under Ahab's spell, eventually surrenders to and advances its appalling insight in "The whiteness of the whale".

Towards the advancement of the negation of the apparent all-good and the affirmation of the inherent all-evil in whiteness and its leviathanic representative, the spell-bound Ishmael drives in the chapter. However, this spell must be broken to avoid the eternal risks which lurk in absolute self-abandonment; it is only temporary, enough to let him perceive and narrate his hero's vision of the White Whale. That is why the corresponding colourless vision of whiteness is emphatically "at times".

The "wretched infidel" who "gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him" is Ahab and not Ishmael. In his monomaniac vision of the White Whale, Ahab can no longer enjoy the "earthly hues" of "the great principle of light", for he has been struck with the appalling revelation that all created forms are "subtile deceits" counterfeiting elemental death and evil. Contemplating the projected world of colours — "Yonder, by the ever-brimming goblet's rim, the warm waves blush like wine. The gold brown plumbs the blue" — Ahab murmurs:

<sup>12</sup> Goethe, W. 1970. *Theory of colours*. Translated by Charles Lock Eastlake. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, p. 225.



Oh! time was, when as the sunrise nobly spurred me, so the sunset soothed. No more. This lovely light, it lights not me; all loveliness is anguish to me, since I can no'er enjoy. Gifted with the high perception, I lack the low, enjoying power; damned, most subtly and most malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise! (37 : 147).

Ahab's damnation is his "high perception" of the deadly creative mechanism beneath the apparent Paradisiacal world of colours — the invisible shroud of the silk-worm which lurks in the spun colours of the butterfly (127:432). Not only does this tarnish the visible colourful reflections of creation, it, in turn, reflects the perceiver's consequential shrinking from embracing the created hues eroded by his own penetration (114:405—406). If Ahab feels like "Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise" (132:444), his tormenting irrevocable alienation is due to the piercing self-consciousness of the demoniac elusiveness, the darkness and death inherent in the once worshipped meditated light-source of life (colours), now so vindictively, blasphemously, and desperately hunted in its white leviathanic impersonal personification.

Ahab's "audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge" (41:162) is explored through the intricate correlation between *Moby Dick* and the elements of light. As the vital loss of leg is marked by Ahab's "lividly whitish" scar (28:110), so Ahab's drive against the subtle malignity of the White Whale is reciprocated by his burning defiance of the once revered white flame of fire which has scarred him in the sacramental act of communion;<sup>13</sup> the emerging revelation of the intrinsic all-evil in the White Whale corresponds to Ahab's insight into the white spirit of light — "Light though thou be, thou leapest out of darkness" (119:417) — eventually culminating in his atheistical vindictiveness against "the great principle of light". That is why, when approached by Starbuck on the quarter-deck: "To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous", Ahab replies, not merely for oratorical effect: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (36:144), for Ahab's hunt of the White Whale is that of the colourless apparition in the deceitful colourfulness of the celestial source of light; the *Pequod* chasing the Whale round the globe is Ahab's "sea-chariot of the sun" (124:423).

The climactic irretraceable straddle which precipitates Ahab's fatal encounter with the White Whale is the suicidal crushing of his quadrant "furnished with colored glasses, through which to take sight of that solar fire" — an act signifying Ahab's mortal rejection of the "earthly hues" and stamping

<sup>13</sup> "Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance" (119: 416). See "The whiteness of the whale": "... by the Persian fire worshippers, the white forked flame being held the holiest on the altar ..." (42 : 164).

his Laplandish fate. To confront the "nakedness of unrelieved radiance" (118:411—412), the elemental colourless principle, one has to take off the humanly requisite "colored and coloring glasses"; to do that is to face eternally the void, the blankness, the blinding hell of colourlessness which Ahab's "white wake" drives into. In his blinding confrontation with the White Whale's "bland forehead" — "I grow blind; hands! stretch out before me that I may yet grope my way" (135:466—467)<sup>14</sup>—Ahab plunges through the shroud of whiteness into the subterranean abyss of non-being after that absorbingly perceived colourless apparition of being.

Unlike the converted whaleman's religious model who, to be saved the entombing "belly of hell" and to enjoy "the warm and pleasant sun, and all the delights of air and earth", gives up his "wilful disobedience", reveres the merciless punishing elemental anger, and leaves eternity to God, stricken Ahab persists in his atheistical defiance driving into the very "blackness of doom" which the helplessly devout Starbuck warns against (119:414), and Father Mapple's introductory hymn illustrates:

The ribs and terrors in the whale,  
 Arched over me & dismal *gloom*,  
 While all God's sun-lit waves rolled by,  
 And left me deepening down to *doom*.  
 I saw the open maw of hell,  
 With endless pains and sorrows there;  
 Which none but they that feel can tell—  
 Oh, I was plunging to despair.  
 In *black* distress, I called my God,  
 When I could scarce believe him mine,  
 He bowed his ear to my complaints—  
 No more the whale did me confine.  
 With speed he flew to my relief,  
 As on a radiant dolphin borne;  
 Awful, yet bright, as lightning shone  
 The face of my Deliverer God.

...

(9 : 44, italics added)

David H. Battenfeld (1955) has revealed that Melville's "source is the rhymed version of the first part of Psalm 18, as found in the psalms and hymns of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, the Church in which Melville was brought up". The stanzas of the original hymn, called "Deliverance from despair" differ slightly from Melville's:

<sup>14</sup> Ahab's address to the white spirit foreshadows his suicidal doom: "Thou canst blind; but I can then grope. Thou canst consume; but I can then be ashes"; "I burn with thee; would fain be welded with thee; defyingly I worship thee!" (119 : 417).

Death, and the terrors of the grave,  
 Spread over me their dismal shade;  
 While floods of high temptations rose,  
 And made my sinking soul afraid.  
 I saw the opening gates of hell,  
 With endless pains and sorrows there,  
 Which none but they that feel, can tell;  
 While I was hurried to despair.  
 In my distress I call'd my God,  
 When I could scarce believe him mine;  
 He bow'd his ear to my complaints;  
 Then did his grace appear divine.  
 With speed he flew to my relief,  
 As on a cherub's wings he rode:  
 Awful and bright as lightning shone  
 The face of my deliv'rer, God.

Besides a few stylistic modifications and the inclusion of the whaling terminology which Battenfeld has observed, another relevant feature in Melville's adaptation is his insertion of terms like "gloom", "doom", and "black" relating to the Biblical hell<sup>15</sup> and reciprocating the philosophic presentation of the infidel's fate whose hell is the annihilating confrontation with the colourlessness of colour, the darkness of light, the blackness of whiteness.

Into the meditated leviathanic gulf of darkness and death, Ahab's "white wake" drives. To escape the sucking vortex of whiteness, Ishmael's spell of atheistical negation must be broken; to perceive the redeeming "earthly hues", his vision must swerve: "man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country..." While squeezing the crystallized sperm lumps "back into fluid", "as they richly broke... and discharged all their opulence, like fully ripe grapes their wine", as he "snuffed up that uncontaminated aroma... like the smell of spring violets", lulled into a warm sensuously sensual mood, Ishmael's appalling perception of the deadly colourlessness is replaced by the tranquilizing colourful shootings of the leviathanic life-essence which dissolve his binding oath:

I declared to you, that for the time I lived as in a musky meadow: I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it ... while bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever (94 : 348—349).

In the chapter entitled "The try-works", Ishmael dramatizes his disengagement from Ahab's "white wake", and advances the corresponding vision. Amidst the choking fumes, the "hissing masses of blubber", the darting,

<sup>15</sup> See "The carpet-bag": "and the preacher's text was about the blackness of darkness ..." (2:18).

snaky, infernal flames, meditating this leviathanic Inferno while steering the "remorselessly commissioned" "fire-ship" into the "blackness of darkness", Ishmael's "stark bewildered feeling, as of death", his horrid nightmarish perception of nothing "but a jet gloom, now and then made ghastly by flashes of redness" is a vivid foreshadowing of the fatal consequences of such a revelation which he shrinks from in fright. To avoid the self-destruction of the monomaniac subterranean perception which finally consumes his Captain, Ishmael shifts his vision:

Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! ... believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp—all others but liars! (96 : 351—355)

To the relieved Ishmael, "the great principle of light" appears "glorious, golden, glad" and "true", not demoniacally elusive as the appalled Ishmael so feverishly argues in "The whiteness of the whale". As the spell-bound Ishmael wears Ahab's colourless glasses of atheistical negation, experiences the horror of whiteness, and maintains "that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within", the released Ishmael steps back from the maddening woe, puts on the colourful glasses essential to the positive perception of the created "earthly hues", and pledges that the sun is "the only true lamp". Gamesome though it may be,<sup>16</sup> through this vital swinging between the absorbing vortex

---

<sup>16</sup> "There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though ... the joke is at nobody's expense but his own". "There is nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy; and with it I now regarded this whole voyage of the Pequod, and the great White Whale its object" (49 : 195—196). Ishmael's narration of "the Town-Ho's story" "at Lima, to a lounging circle of ... Spanish friends, one saint's eve, smoking upon the thick-gilt tiled piazza of the Golden Inn" provides a good example of this gamesomeness. Not only does Ishmael maintain an amazingly pleasant, sociable mood, reflected in his facetiously humorous approach, in the very city the appalling whiteness of which he cites in "The whiteness of the whale" — "For Lima has taken the white veil; and there is a higher horror in this whiteness of her woe" (42 : 168); he also, surprisingly enough, refers to the great White Whale as a fool — "But, gentlemen, a fool saved the would-be murderer from the bloody deed he had planned". To share the felicities of the Golden Inn, to enjoy the company of the Dons, to participate in the "saint's eve", Ishmael has to lower his vision and overlook the appalling whiteness of Lima and the Whale (this is in line with the relatively positive presentation of Moby Dick in the story). The fact that the "vigorous" Ishmael "looks faint", just for a moment, when he is pressed to rehearse the story of the "very white, and famous, and most deadly immortal monster" is a reminder of the obverse side of whiteness as well as a justification of this gamesomeness (54 : 208—224).

of whiteness and its redeeming hues, Ishmael's visionary power encompasses the colourless-colourful paradox, the blinding leviathanic "snowy sparkling mist" which radiates the glorifying heavenly "rainbow", making "neither believer nor infidel, but ... a man who regards them both with equal eye" (85:313—314).

This double perceptiveness elucidates Ishmael's concept of reading "about whales through their own spectacles..." (68:259). Like the sperm whale whom he is contemplating, Ishmael displays "divided and diametrically opposite powers of vision" (74:280), the combination of which fuses the two obverse sides of whiteness: "amid the green, life-restless loom of that Arsicidean wood, the great, white, worshipped skeleton lay lounging — a gigantic idler! Yet, as the ever-woven verdant warp and woof intermixed and hummed around him, the mighty idler seemed the cunning weaver; himself all woven over with the vines; every month assuming greener, fresher verdure; but himself a skeleton. Life folded Death; Death trellised Life..." (102:374—375). It is this all-inclusive revelation of the divine, life-generating woven colourfulness that his blasphemous Captain becomes blind to — "As they neared him, the ocean grew still more smooth; seemed drawing a carpet over its waves; seemed a noon-meadow, so serenely it spread... his entire dazzling hump was distinctly visible, sliding along the sea as if an isolated thing, and continually set in a revolving ring of finest, fleecy, greenish foam" — as well as that of the infernal life-sucking colourlessness that absorbs Ahab — "The glittering mouth yawned... like an open-doored marble tomb" — which Ishmael's White Whale reflects at the end (133:447—448), and of which his coffin-lifebuoy survival is the demonstration.

If Ishmael survives alone the drama to relate it, his survival is fictive. Only the Ishmael who has perceived light as well as darkness, colour as well as colourlessness, life as well as death in the whiteness of the Whale could have narrated the story of the White Whale.

#### REFERENCES

- Battenfeld, D. H. 1955. "The source for the hymn in *Moby-Dick*". *American literature* XXVII. 393—396.
- Booth, W. C. 1969 [1961]. *The rhetoric of fiction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Brodtkorb, P., Jr. 1965. *Ishmael's white world: a phenomenological reading of Moby-Dick*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Leyda, J. 1969 [1951]. *The Melville log: a documentary life of Herman Melville, 1819—1891*. Vol. 1. New York: Gordian Press.
- Rothschild, H., Jr. 1972. "The language of mesmerism in 'the quarter-deck scene' in *Moby-Dick*". *English studies* LIII. 235—238.

- Stanonik, J. 1962. *Moby-Dick: the myth and the symbol*. Ljubljana: Ljubljana University Press.
- Wadlington, W. 1972. "Ishmael's godly gamesomeness: selftaste and rhetoric in *Moby-Dick*". *ELH XXXIX*. 309—331.
- Walcutt, C. C. 1944. "The fire symbolism in *Moby-Dick*". *Modern language notes LIX*. 304—310.