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On Humanity in Herman Melville —An Essay on *Moby-Dick*

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I Is All This Agony So Vain?

Where is Bulkington? He disappears from the sight of the readers of *Moby-Dick* after 'The Lee Shore' and becomes nothing but a sleeping partner to the Pequod crew. Obviously he dies, sinking deep into the sea at the last catastrophe of Ahab and his crew. However, Ishmael's enthusiastic encouragement to Bulkington never ceases to echo to us. When he cheers, "Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!" (p.98)¹⁾, we cannot but feel we are hearing Melville's true voice. Bulkington is the man who deserves to be deified after his perish. Ishmael asks a rhetorical question, supporting his intrepid strife definitely, "Is all this agony so vain?" (p.98) No, it can never be! Thus at least in this respect we can discover undeniable significance and relief in the overwhelmingly tragic world of *Moby-Dick*.

Then, like Ishmael, we will repeat the same question on the mortal combat with Moby Dick of Ahab, who, as Bulkington, has, for forty years, kept rejecting 'the lee shore' of warmth and affection, and rushing 'windward' to meet his doom. Is all his agony so vain? Has Ahab died for nothing? Is *Moby-Dick* full of Melville's sound and fury, signifying nothing?

In this short essay, we will explore the meaning of Ahab's annihilation in the light of the typical aspect of humanity in the book, and eventually evaluate the significance of *Moby-Dick* for Melville.

II Humanity, or What Is Man?

When we consult *The Oxford English Dictionary* with reference to 'humanity', there

are two major divisions of definitions: "I. Connected with *human*. II. Connected with *humane*". The dictionary informs that 'humane' was just a spelling variant of 'human', but that since the 18th century the former was used for a group of restricted meanings, which are connected with considerate feelings and attitudes to others and animals. 'Human' has more abstract and generalized implications of a human being. Therefore, 'humanity' can be interpreted as what man is. From the section of 'human', let us quote the most noteworthy explanation for the humanity in *Moby-Dick*.

3. Belonging or relative to man as distinguished from God or superhuman beings; pertaining to the sphere or faculties of man (with implication of limitation or inferiority); mundane; secular (Often opposed to *divine*).

With this definition, we can say that a human being is what is not God. And it is death, one of the most decisive phenomena, that draws a line between man and God. What Melville and Ahab see beyond death is difficult to infer, but it is certain that Melville was profoundly conscious of death in creating *Moby-Dick*. We have elsewhere demonstrated that Moby Dick is the concentrated expression of death²⁾, and besides, the White Whale is typically interpreted as God's agent³⁾.

Though in his powerful sermon, Father Mapple dramatizes Jonah's whale as the executioner and deliverer dispatched by God, Ahab declares that it does not matter to him whether Moby Dick is agent or principal. He, however, is keenly aware of what forces him to stick to such a frantic pursuit of Moby Dick:

Ahab is for ever Ahab, man. This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders. (p. 459)

Again, Ishmael's meditation on his going on board a whaleship reveals his deep consciousness of what charts out and imposes his voyage:

But wherefore it was that after having repeatedly smelt the sea as a merchant sailor, I should now take it into my head to go on a whaling voyage; this the invisible police officer of the Fates, who has the constant surveillance of me, and secretly dogs me, and influences me in some unaccountable way—he can better answer than any one else. (p. 15)

Both Ahab and Ishmael think that a human being is such a helpless creature as to be fooled by the Fates. Thus, these passages show us that Melville seemed to be possessed by the essential problem of what is dominating man's fate. In connection with man's reactions and behaviors to this dominating 'transcendental being', we will bring 'humanity'

in *Moby-Dick* into bold relief.

III ... And Ifs Eternally

The dominant views of human life in the book are the following two. One is the observation: the eternal repetition of the same process of history as stated in 'The Ecclesiastes', "Verily there is nothing new under the sun" (p.181). The other is: the continuity of intolerable agonies as symbolized in the Myth of Sisyphus⁴⁾. These views are woven into one expression in the book.

In New Bedford Ishmael sees the continuation of earthly, unendurable toils in the whale fishery :

All betokening that new cruises were on the start; that one most perilous and long voyage ended, only begins a second; and a second ended, only begins a third, and so on, for ever and for aye. Such is the endlessness, yea, the intolerableness of all earthly effort. (p. 59)

Besides, Ishmael asserts that history only repeats the identical life cycle :

There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause: —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. (p. 406)

Thus, man engages himself endlessly in the mass production of Ifs with regard to what burdens him with enigmatic and irresistible hardship. The variety of Ifs are symbolically shown in the individual interpretations of the Doubloon and in the case of Pip, he shouts, "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (p. 362), which represents the variety itself.

However, sad to say, it is impossible for anyone to verify his hypothesis and reach the ultimate truth. The scientific approach is useless in order to get to it as Ahab disdains, "Science! Curse thee, thou vain toy" (p. 412), and even if the Creator of the Universe existed, none could hear His voice; "The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we, too, who look on the loom are deafened" (p. 374). God keeps silent as Terada asserts⁵⁾, and only nothingness awaits man after his insupportable search as Suyama maintains⁶⁾.

Yet, we are not deafened to the groans of man in the book, who longs in vain to hear

the words from an ultimate being. For example, Ishmael sees in the labyrinth of tattoo inscribed on Queequeg, an analogy to the inscrutableness of existential truth :

And this tattooing had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, 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; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last. (p. 399)

In chapter 1, Ishmael introduces the Narcissus Myth, which, he says, stands for "the ungraspable phantom of life" (p. 14). Here life itself is considered as a riddle and finally turns out to be a closed book, with all the earnest efforts to solve the riddle. Ahab, too, appeals to the head of a sperm whale in profound silence :

"Speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid this world's foundations. Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned." (p. 264)

Hence, for Ahab the sperm whale is the bearer of the truth of death, but of course "only an author from the dead could adequately tell" it. (p. 396)

Thus, from the considerations so far, the typical aspect of humanity recognized in the book is to produce interminable *Ifs* with no verification, questing for the ultimate being or truth, behind the visible world, and give a groan with anguish, based on the thorough doubt, 'life is for nothing'.

Then, what has brought an individual to such anguish and nihilistic recognition? Why can life become meaningless for him? There must be a vital moment for such a stage of individual mentality. We have to clarify the internalizing process of such metaphysical pains through the individual experience.

IV A Wisdom That Is Woe; A Woe That Is Madness

Needless to say, 'the experience' we will take up here is Ahab's first fatal encounter with Moby Dick. Ishmael describes the scene to us as if he had been present there :

That captain was Ahab. And then it was, that suddenly sweeping his sickle-shaped

lower jaw beneath him, Moby Dick had reaped away Ahab's leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the field. No turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him with more seeming malice. Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidity he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. (pp. 159-160)

Hence, through 'the bodily woes' caused by Moby Dick, Ahab must feel to the marrow, "the unexampled, intelligent malignity" (p. 159) of the Whale, well known among the whale hunters who had essayed to lance it. Moreover, Moby Dick, with its malice, surely made Ahab quite conscious of the existence of "malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them" (p. 160), though they do not know their origins at all. In other words, Ahab, with this as a momentum, has come to perceive that even though this world is covered superficially with love, yet just under the surface, it is saturated with unfathomable malice. Besides, Ahab has got convinced that human life is scythed any time without any reason by Death as his leg was reaped by Moby Dick. Now Ahab feels that there is a certain malicious superhuman being prescribing his fate, which, at its own judgment, can let him fall into hell. Ahab has learned from the experience that such is his being. This is metaphorically represented in Moby Dick itself: Clothed in white signifying "the very veil of the Christian's Deity" (p. 169), Moby Dick appears godly before whalers, but "to attempt it (to chase and point lance at Moby Dick), would be inevitably to be torn into a quick eternity" (p. 157), with the "infernal aforethought of ferocity." (p. 159)

All these things, Ahab had internalized through the calamity brought about by Moby Dick. Thus, in Ahab's thought, the metaphysical idea of "that intangible malignity which has been from the beginning" (p. 160) in this world was now incarnated in the practically assailable White Whale, which means the internalization of the idea in his mentality. Then, "deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it." (p. 160)

"Gnawed within and scorched without, with the infixed, unrelenting fangs of some incurable idea" (p. 162), Ahab stands before the Pequod crew, domineering them with his moodiness :

And not only that, but moody stricken Ahab stood before them with a crucifixion in his face ; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe. (p. 111)

Here Ishmael detects 'some mighty woe' stamped in Ahab's figure. According to our discussion, this 'woe' unmistakably originates from the first fatal encounter and the ensuing recognition, or 'wisdom', on man's life-and-death situation under the sovereignty of the intangible malignity. The word 'woe' seems to typify the humanity in *Moby-Dick*, so let us consider some usages of the word in the text.

Describing the serene sea as the last battle field of Ahab vs. Moby Dick, Ishmael exclaims, "how oblivious were ye of old Ahab's close-coiled woe!" (p.442). Even if the visible surface is wrapped in the blessing atmosphere, Ahab's 'close-coiled woe' will never be relieved at all unless he succeeds in taking his revenge on Moby Dick. For the 'wisdom' as to the human incompetence in governing his own destiny had been acquired by Ahab in his dismemberment, and as a result, had got loaded with unendurable woe deserving thousands of deaths in the middle of life. Ahab acknowledges his inconsolable grief:

Gifted with the high perception, I lack the low, enjoying power; damned, most subtly and most malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise! (p.147)

Hence, Ahab is the man who has the wisdom that is woe, and whose soul is in hell in the seemingly earthly Paradise.

By comparing 'grief' (or 'woe') with 'joy', Ishmael is able to make more explicit the significance of the former: "Yea, more than equally, thought Ahab; since both the ancestry and posterity of Grief go further than the ancestry and posterity of Joy" (p.385). Thus, Joy is futile and temporal, but on the other hand, Grief has the everlasting genealogy penetrating through history. And Ahab evaluates himself as nobler than the man of mundane bliss:

For, thought Ahab, while even the highest earthly felicities ever have a certain unsignifying pettiness lurking in them, but, at bottom, all heart-woes, a mystic significance, and, in some men, an archangelic grandeur. (p.386)

As Captain Peleg depicts Ahab as "a grand, ungodly, god-like man" (p.76), Ahab's wisdom of woe has the mystic sphere covering both earth and heaven. Lastly, let us quote Ishmael's definitive statement on it:

So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true—not true, or undeveloped. With books the same. The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. "All is vanity". ALL. (p.355)

Here 'the Man of Sorrows' seems to imply Jesus Christ. However, in our context Ahab

himself becomes 'the Man of Sorrows' with 'the fine hammered steel of woe'. The truest of all wisdoms that man could learn is the wisdom that is woe, which necessarily renders the learner mad: "There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is woe that is madness" (p. 355).

Makino names Ahab's madness 'sane madness'⁷⁾, which Ahab comprehends: "They think me mad—Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened!" (p. 147) A mad man never knows that he is mad, but Ahab grasps his madness sanely. His madness is, so to speak, the one multiplied by itself and so it has double faces of both sanity and madness. Concerning this, Ahab confesses rationally: "All my means are sane, my motive and my object mad" (p. 161). That is, what he mobilizes in order to revenge himself on Moby Dick is sane but all of what motivates and purposes him is mad. Starbuck criticizes Ahab, condemning, "To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous" (p. 144). However, Ahab's madness transcends his criticism, and consists in challenging the eternal existence, which has the three famous attributes of 'immortality', 'ubiquity' and 'intelligent malignity', and therefore, brings the challenger to instant death. Even if the challenge is regarded as mad, once Ahab has got 'the wisdom', he cannot but pursue the target as long as he exists, denying Father Mapple's saying: "I leave eternity to Thee; for what is man that he should live out the lifetime of his God?" (p. 51)

Therefore, humanity, or what man is in *Moby-Dick* has become clear to us through the discussions so far. That is, revealed is the type of man: based on the individual and original experience of such an unbearable disaster as observed in Ahab's case, he has acquired the wisdom that is woe that this human world is subject to some malicious superhuman being, to whose mercy man's fate is left, and has been struggling to quest for and challenge what the super being is really, which looks like a madness to mundane people. It is specifically this aspect of humanity that Melville embodies condensedly in Ahab.

In his proclamation of war with Moby Dick, Ahab declares: "I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one" (p. 147). It is true that Ahab could not become the fulfiller of his prophecy in the literal meaning, and his goal has proved to be unattainable for him, but his drama is quite opposite to the futile satisfaction with 'petty felicity' and is most impressive in tenaciously striving to quest for the eternal existence and fulfill his life at his own will. Thus, his duel with Moby Dick is not a suicide in despair. On the contrary, we can conclude his life and death wins the genuine approval from the author, as Melville praises Hunilla, the

heroin in 'SKETCH EIGHTH' of "The Encantadas; or, Enchanted Islands": "Humanity, thou strong thing, I worship thee, not in the laureled victor, but in this vanquished one"⁸⁾.

V "The Tower of Babel"

As we have considered, Melville strews, throughout the book, his fundamentally skeptical views on the world and human existence. Ahab's strife with Moby Dick is regarded as an individual's intrepid efforts to unmask the malignant super being behind the visible world. But Ahab and his crew except Ishmael goes down to the bottom of the ocean, so *Moby-Dick* becomes a grand book of eternal Ifs. However, Melville does not just show the gallery of hypotheses, but he pictures how those hypotheses forever remain hypothetical in multiple artistic expressions. We can hear Melville utter decisively, "No!", throughout the book. Melville seems to moan in distress, "Never do I comprehend! Never do I realize!" everywhere.

And yet Melville seems to have reached the conclusion that with remaining in the process of life, or without getting out of this world, man cannot grasp the truths concerning the ultimate being which has dictatorship over man's life and death, as we have already observed. However, even if he has a strong conviction that the ultimate truths stay unrevealed, Melville can neither consider the objects of his struggling as nothingness, nor attain *satori* or spiritual awakening like a Buddhist. Moreover, far from that stage, Melville, a thorough skeptical man, seems to have been determined to stick to this tormenting life to the last moment, and bequeath his existential testimony in this world to the coming generations.

In his fascinating introduction to *Moby-Dick*, Kin'ya Abe, a scholar on medieval German history, has once made the comparison of the book to Bruegel's painting, *The Tower of Babel*⁹⁾. As he explains, when we look at the painting close at hand, we find that there are painted such vivid details as from working people or masons to cranes or instruments, so that the work itself as a whole depicts the grandeur of the lofty architecture scraping the heaven. Likewise, Melville, as piling up bricks one by one, describes in *Moby-Dick* all of what the whale and whale fishery is, to the limitation of his artistic representation, as a result to build up a grand cathedral of language.

At the opening of 'Cetology', Ishmael frankly professes his intention: "I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty" (p.118). Here we should listen, not to Melville's resignation, but to his determination of perseverance to hold on in this torturing world and to erect

his own Tower of Babel with language as the vindication of his existence to quest for what conditions human being. Hence, the concluding words for 'Cetology', one of the most moving messages in the book, sounds like the manifestation of what is really at the bottom of his heart:

But I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience! (pp.127-128)

True, *Moby-Dick* is 'the draught of a draught' and forever under construction with Melville's unremitting endeavor to break through the wall of human conditions ('Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!'), in order to reach heaven or what is eternal. Thus, unlike the biblical Babel, Melville's linguistic Tower, the indestructible monument of his existence, will be soaring forever for us, his posterity.

Notes

1. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale*, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967). All references to *Moby-Dick* will cite this edition by page, and notes will be incorporated parenthetically in the text.
2. Kurashi Hamada, "The Symphony of Life and Death" in *Sky-Hawk* No. 4 (Tokyo: Melville Study Center, Meiji Univ., 1988), pp. 27-41.
3. Lawrence Thompson, in *Melville's Quarrel With God* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), pp. 145-243, offers a representative framework of the great quarrel between God and an anti-christian hero.
4. The most extensive discussion in the light of Greek Myth, especially the Promethean element, is developed in Richard Chase, *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1949).
5. Takehiko Terada, *The Silence of God: The Essence of Herman Melville* (Tokyo: Chusekisha, 1982), p. 25.
6. Shizuo Suyama, "From *Moby-Dick* to *Pierre*" in *Studies in Literature* No. 8 (Tokyo: Literary Department, Meiji Univ., 1961), pp. 36-63.
7. Arimichi Makino, "The Sane Madness" in *American Literature* No. 34 (Tokyo: Tokyo Branch, The Japan American Literature Society, 1977), p. 26.
8. Herman Melville, "The Encantadas; or, Enchanted Islands" in *Piazza Tales* (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), p. 187.
9. Kin'ya Abe, "*Moby-Dick*" in *Masterpieces 52: Reading, Watching, Listening* Part II, ed. The Asahi Shimbun (Tokyo: The Asahi Shimbun, 1986), pp. 253-257.