

Herman Melville, Albert Camus

Herman Melville

Back in the days when Nantucket whalers stayed at sea for several years at a stretch, Melville, at twenty-two, signed on one, and later on a man-of-war, to sail the seven seas. Home again in America, his travel tales enjoyed a certain success while the great books he published later were received with indifference and incomprehension.<sup>1</sup>

Discouraged after the publication and failure of *The Confidence Man* (1857), Melville "accepted annihilation." Having become a custom's officer and the father of a family, he began an almost complete silence (except for a few infrequent poems) which was to last some thirty years. Then one day he hurriedly wrote a masterpiece, *Billy Budd* (completed in April 1891), and died, a few months later, forgotten (with a three-line obituary in *The New York Times*). He had to wait until our own time for America and Europe to finally give him his place among the greatest geniuses of the West.

It is scarcely easier to describe in a few pages a work that has the tumultuous dimensions of the oceans where it was born than to summarize the Bible or condense Shakespeare. But in judging Melville's genius, if nothing else, it must be recognized that his works trace a spiritual experience of unequalled intensity, and that they are to some extent symbolic.

Certain critics<sup>2</sup> have discussed this obvious fact, which now hardly seems open anymore to question. His admirable books are among those exceptional works that can be read in different ways, which are at the same time both obvious and obscure, as dark as the noonday sun and as clear as deep water. The wise man and the child can both draw sustenance from them.

The story of captain Ahab, for example, flying from the southern to the northern seas in pursuit of Moby Dick, the white whale who has taken off his leg, can doubtless be read as the fatal passion of a character gone mad with grief and loneliness. But it can also be seen as one of the most overwhelming myths ever invented on the subject of the struggle of man against evil, depicting the irresistible logic that finally leads the just man to take up arms first against creation and the creator, then against his fellows and against himself.<sup>3</sup>

Let us have no doubt about it: if it is true that talent recreates life, while genius has the additional gift of crowning it with myths, Melville is first and foremost a creator of myths.

I will add that these myths, contrary to what people say of them, are clear. They are obscure only insofar as the root of all suffering and all greatness lies buried in the darkness of the earth. They are no more obscure than Phèdre's cries, Hamlet's silences, or the triumphant songs of Don Giovanni. But it seems to me (and this would deserve detailed development) that Melville never wrote anything but the same book, which he began again and again. This single book is the story of a voyage, inspired first of all solely by the joyful curiosity of youth (*Typee*, *Omoo*, etc.), then later inhabited by an increasingly wild and burning anguish.

*Mardi* is the first magnificent story in which Melville begins the quest that nothing can appease, and in which, finally, "pursuers and pursued fly across a boundless ocean." It is in this work that Melville becomes aware of the fascinating call that forever echoes in him: "I have undertaken a journey without maps." And again: "I am the restless hunter, the one who has no home." *Moby Dick* simply carries the great themes of *Mardi* to perfection.

But since artistic perfection is also inadequate to quench the kind of thirst with which we are confronted here, Melville will start once again, in *Pierre*: or *the Ambiguities*, that unsuccessful masterpiece, to depict the quest of genius

and misfortune whose sneering failure he will consecrate in the course of a long journey on the Mississippi that forms the theme of *The Confidence Man*. This constantly rewritten book, this unwearying peregrination in the archipelago of dreams and bodies, on an ocean "whose every wave is a soul," this *Odyssey* beneath an empty sky, makes Melville the Homer of the Pacific. But we must add immediately that his *Ulysses* never returns to Ithaca.

The country in which Melville approaches death, that he immortalizes in *Billy Budd*, is a desert island. In allowing the young sailor, a figure of beauty and Innocence whom he dearly loves, to be condemned to death, Captain Vere submits his heart to the law. And at the same time, with this flawless story that can be ranked with certain Greek tragedies, the aging Melville tells us of his acceptance for the first time of the sacrifice of beauty and innocence so that order may be maintained and the ship of men may continue to move forward toward an unknown horizon. Has he truly found the peace and final resting place that earlier he had said could not be found in the *Mardi* archipelago?

Or are we, on the contrary, faced with a final shipwreck that Melville in his despair asked of the gods? "One cannot blaspheme and live," he had cried out. At the height of consent, isn't *Billy Budd* the worst blasphemy? This we can never know, any more than we can know whether Melville did finally accept a terrible order, or whether, in quest of the spirit, he allowed himself to be led, as he had asked, "beyond the reefs, in sunless seas, into night and death" But no one, in any case, measuring the long anguish that runs through his life and work, will fail to acknowledge the greatness, all the more anguished in being the fruit of self-conquest, of his reply.

But this, although it had to be said, should not mislead anyone as to Melville's real genius and the sovereignty of his art. It bursts with health, strength, explosions of humor, and human laughter. It is not he who opened the storehouse of sombre allegories that today hold sad Europe spellbound. As a creator, Melville is, for example, at the furthest possible remove from Kafka, and he makes us aware of this writer's artistic limitations. However irreplaceable it may be, the spiritual experience in Kafka's work exceeds the modes of expression and invention, which remain monotonous.

In Melville, spiritual experience is balanced by expression and invention, and constantly finds flesh and blood in them. Like the greatest artists, Melville constructed his symbols out of concrete things, not from the material of dreams. The creator of myths partakes of genius only insofar as he inscribes these myths in the denseness of reality and not in the fleeting clouds of the imagination. In Kafka, the reality that he describes is created by the symbol, the fact stems from the image, whereas in Melville the symbol emerges from reality, the image is born of what is seen.<sup>4</sup>

This is why Melville never cut himself off from flesh or nature, which are barely perceptible in Kafka's work. On the contrary, Melville's lyricism, which reminds us of Shakespeare's, makes use of the four elements. He mingles the Bible with the sea, the music of the waves with that of the spheres, the poetry of the days with the grandeur of the Atlantic. He is inexhaustible, like the winds that blow for thousands of miles across empty oceans and that, when they reach the coast, still have strength enough to flatten whole villages.

He rages, like Lear's madness, over the wild seas where *Moby Dick* and the spirit of evil crouch among the waves. When the storm and total destruction have passed, a strange calm rises from the primitive waters, the silent pity that transfigures tragedies. Above the speechless crew, the perfect body of *Billy Budd* turns gently at the end of its rope in the pink and grey light of the approaching day.

T. E. Lawrence ranked *Moby Dick* alongside *The Possessed* or *War and Peace*. Without hesitation, one can add to these *Billy Budd*, *Mardi*, *Benito Cereno*, and a few others. These anguished books in which man is overwhelmed, but in which life is exalted on each page, are inexhaustible sources of strength and pity. We find

in them revolt and acceptance, unconquerable and endless love, the passion for beauty, language of the highest order in short, genius.

"To perpetuate one's name," Melville said, "one must carve it on a heavy stone and sink it to the bottom of the sea; depths last longer than heights." Depths do indeed have their painful virtue, as did the unjust silence in which Melville lived and died, and the ancient ocean he unceasingly ploughed. From their endless darkness he brought forth his works, those visages of foam and night, carved by the waters, whose mysterious royalty has scarcely begun to shine upon us, though already they help us to emerge effortlessly from our continent of shadows to go down at last toward the sea, the fight, and its secret.

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1 For a long time, *Moby Dick* was thought of as an adventure story suitable for school prizes.

2 In passing, let me advise critics to read page 449 of *Mardi* in the French translation.

3 As an indication, here are some of the obviously symbolic pages of *Moby Dick*. (French translation, Gallimard): pp. 120, 121, 123, 129, 173-7, 191-3, 203, 209, 241, 310, 313, 339, 373, 415, 421, 452, 457, 460, 472, 485, 499, 503, 517, 520, 522. Camus probably read *Moby Dick* in the French translation by Lucien Jacques, Joan Smith, and Jean Giono, which was published by Gallimard in 1941. If this is the case, then the page numbers correspond to these page numbers in the *Everyman* edition and refer more or less to the following episodes:

120-p. 114: of chapter XXX. Ahab's leg.

121-p. 115: beginning of chapter XXXI.

123-p. 117. Whether a whale be a fish.

129-pp. 122-3. Black Fish-Narwhal.

173-7-pp. 163-7: chapter XLI. The Whiteness of the Whale.

203-p. 192. "Now the advent of these outlandish strangers ..."

209-p. 197. Queequeg as the standard bearer "hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair."

241-p. 227: chapter LIII. The Town-Ho's story of how the mate Radney was eaten by *Moby Dick*.

310-p. 290. The Right Whale's Head.

313-end of chapter LXXIV. Resolution in facing death.

339-pp. 317-18: end of chapter LXXXII, beginning of chapter LXXXIII.

373-p. 350: chapter XC. The smell of the Rosebud.

415-pp. 393-4: chapter CIII.

452-p. 420: chapter CXXII. The tempering of the harpoon.

457-p. 425. The meeting with the Bachelor.

460-p. 248: beginning of chapter CXVI.

472-pp. 438-9: chapter CXX.

485-p. 451: end of chapter CXXV.

499-p. 463: beginning of chapter CXXX, "The Symphony." Ahab weeps into the sea.

503-p. 480. *Moby Dick* breaks Ahab's ivory leg.

520-end of chapter CXXXIII.

522-p. 482. "I meet thee, this third time, *Moby Dick*." It should be noted that there is a difference in the chapter numberings between the French translation and the *Everyman* edition referred to here. Thus, the French edition is consistently one chapter number ahead, so that chapter CXXXIV in the *Everyman* edition is chapter CXXXV in the French edition. The chapter headings here refer to the *Everyman* edition. -P.T.

4 In Melville, the metaphor suggests the dream, but from a concrete, physical starting point. In *Mardi*, for example, the hero comes across "huts of flame." They are built, simply, of red tropical creepers, whose leaves are momentarily lifted by the wind.

The end